“SOMEBWHERE IN BETWEEN HERE AND HEAVEN”: TRANSCENDENCE AND SINGING IN THE SPIRIT IN TWO PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCHES

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ABSTRACT

EDDIE L. HUFFMAN: “Somewhere in Between Here and Heaven”: Transcendence and Singing in the Spirit in Two Primitive Baptist Churches
(Under the direction of William Ferris)

This thesis is concerned with the bridges forged between a spiritual realm and the everyday—the experience of transcendence. This bridging is explored within the particular experiences of members of Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Churches in Caldwell County, North Carolina, who gather each Sunday for song, prayer, and the Word. Entering the church building as individuals, they become a spiritual group, bound through their individual and collective spiritual and worship experiences. The goal is unity in the Spirit, through the Spirit as it dwells within each congregant. It is communication with God and communication with one another through God—spiritual knowledge and understanding, eyes to see and ears to hear, a soul-soothing foretaste of eternal salvation and immortal glory in Jesus Christ. It is a brief experience in the sacred realm of the Holy Spirit. This, while often resisting description through mere words, is the nature of experiences explored herein.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, my debt is to the members and friends at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Churches. Their investments of time in this work have been more than generous. Their wonderful words, to which I have tried to remain true, have expanded my understanding of the complexities of their beliefs and the ways in which they practice them. For fear of leaving one out, I will not attempt to name them all. In addition to these folks, I want to thank Elder Jack McGinnis who initially introduced me to the churches and who was my first mentor and teacher of Primitive Baptist belief. My love, Sarah Poteete, deserves more gratitude than I am capable of for enduring me in this process, constantly pulling me out of the depths of doubt and self deprecation in which I am so prone to sink myself, constantly providing her expertise as an ethnographer in editing my often far-flung ideas into readable text. I want to thank my advisory committee—William Ferris, Beverly Patterson, and James Peacock—who have challenged me and asked the tough questions, as well as provided their years of experience in this type of work as they helped guide me in constructing this ethnographic account.

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GUIDE TO TRANSCRIPTIONS

In my transcriptions of interviews and sermons, I have attempted to transfer spoken language (including my own in interviews) as accurately as possible into the rigid structure of a form of written English language that has, at least in academic writing, become fairly standard—or more precisely, my version of it. While I do not adhere to notions of a standard form of any language, relegating other ways of speaking as “dialects” or “deviations” from a supposed “correct” form (from grammar and sentence structure to pronunciation), I nonetheless am constrained to some extent by such notions. My effort through transcription is to convey both referent material of speech and a sense of the flow as it was spoken. Since the 1970s folkloristic and anthropological writers have experimented with various conventions—under the umbrella term “ethnopoetics”—for representing the spoken word in textual form.¹ The main objective of such a practices has been—with good intention—to restore to transcripts of speech the performative structure and paralinguistic characteristics that imbue speech with important information regarding its interpretation and the speakers’ meaning or intentions.²

My effort is to employ a tempered ethnopoetic technique; I want my texts to evoke—not mimic or reconstruct—a sense of the flow, cadences, and emphases of the speech. I view these

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² However, as this technique blossomed (or exploded), transcripts became so cryptic that the referent material of what was actually said was lost in the muck of special symbols (denoting characteristics such as tempo, volume, ascending and descending pitch, intonation, etc.) and the scattering of letters, words, and phrases across the page. In other words, the technique has a tendency to become overly creative and is often used without a clear purpose—other than being pretty. What use is all that work when readers, bogged down in deciphering conventions, miss what is said?
transcriptions as my sense of the direction and form of the speech, represented as near as I am able within the confines of typographic symbols.

I draw inspiration for my technique from Henry Glassie, who describes his thusly: “It is no longer acceptable to change what people say, and it is no longer acceptable—consider the political implications—to present what others say in black blocks, squashed into a type size smaller than the one used for our own words. Their words should stand as equal to ours. Squashed blocks do not invite readers in, but cause [or maybe, invite] them to skip forward…. My base form is the paragraph, usually a short one that starts with a linking word, then, attending to silence and emphasis, sound and significance, I let the paragraphs break into lines that shift to the right as they descend in tone.”

I have taken the block paragraph text of my initial transcriptions and inserted line-breaks where I sense a pause, a shift in emphasis, or a rhythmic cycle (especially recurrent in sermons). First lines of each paragraph (new lines) are indented per the typical textual process to allow a distinction between lines that wrap around and those that represent a new line. Further indentation to the right represents the descending tone, as in Glassie’s method. The length of the lines (or paragraphs) indicates the length of fluid speech. A space between lines represents an extended pause, but does not represent any approximation of its length. One deviation I have made from Glassie’s line structure is that while the general text of this thesis is in double-spaced format, I have chosen to render transcriptions in single-spaced format for clarity—to prohibit confusion among line spacings.

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3 2006: 505. I have found that utilizing the mode of poetry along with that of prose, nearly in line with Glassie’s method, serves to temper and hopefully destabilize both forms. This sort of “in and out” of form—which is especially significant to transcriptions of sermons where verbal momentum ebbs and flows through(out) a given discourse, but also in regard to interview conversation where “talk” builds to “narrative”—allows, I think, for a sense of development or direction in speech, as well a sense of purpose(s). Again, these functions relate to my perception of the speech, both during live performance and later through repetitive listening to (and viewing) recordings of speech. Thus, I do not offer these transcriptions as authoritative textual replicas of spoken words, but merely my sense of them, informed by the knowledge my interlocutors have attempted to impart to me.

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Words that seem heavily stressed are in *italics* to evoke the push behind them as they were delivered. Although the gradations of volume employed by speakers is too nuanced to really capture, I employ CAPITAL type to represent marked increases in volume. Words or phrases that I cannot be certain about are presented thusly: [word or phrase?]. Those that are completely indeterminate: [?] for a word, and [-?-?] for a phrase. Additionally, I include a few bracketed statements describing paralinguistic actions, such as gesturing (e.g. [points to picture on the wall]), where they seem important. Speaker overlap is indicated with a hyphenated break and the point of overlap thusly:

Speaker A: That’s when I went down-

Speaker B: -To the grocery store.

I have made no attempts to edit content or grammar. Transcripts are presented word for word as best I can transcribe them. I make no attempts to capture “dialect,” such as changing spellings or shortening contractions. If I were to attempt to spell someone’s pronunciation, then I should type this thesis in mine.

These efforts to somewhat open textual structure to the spoken can be instructive and at least give a sense of the flow of speech. A long pause during a sermon often serves to allow listeners to process and briefly meditate upon what has been said, highlighting the importance of the previous words and allow preparation for those forthcoming.
“Young man going to Vietnam in the war.

“Thought of the singing back home in the old Primitive Baptist church.

“Sound of the dove,
“And it was beckoning.
   And it was,
   “Oh it was just the sort of thing that,
   “That made you think, you know, God get me through this, and I'll go back home,
     I'll go back home.
   “And he wasn't talking about going back to his parents necessarily,
   “He was talking about home in the spiritual sense.”

Elder John Jackson, pastor at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Churches, uttered this brief vignette to describe the “fellowship” and “closeness” that he experiences in worship among other Primitive Baptists. He gives song a central place and suggests that singing is the form of worship in which people can achieve harmony among themselves and unity in the Holy Spirit. Through singing, they can transcend the doldrums of the everyday. Elder Jackson described “closeness” in a symbolic interpretation of the first Primitive Baptist church he pastored:

“Pilgrims’ Rest?
   That little place in and out of the storms,
      away from the rest of the world,
   “Separate and apart,
      among one another,

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4 Elder John Jackson, Interview, October 9, 2004.
That you don’t find any other place.”

In worship, he believes, it is possible to span the gap between the everyday and the sacred worlds, to be lifted from the cares and woes of this existence, if only for a moment, and returned with hope renewed.

In this thesis, I am concerned with the bridges forged between a spiritual realm and the everyday—the experience of transcendence. I am not concerned with any false positing of a firm grasp on an all-encompassing general picture of the nature of such bridges and the experiences through which they manifest. Rather, I am concerned with the particular experiences of a small group of people—members of Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Churches in Caldwell County, North Carolina, who gather each Sunday for song, prayer, and the Word. Entering the church building as individuals, they become a spiritual group, bound through their individual and collective spiritual and worship experiences. The goal is unity in the Spirit, through the Spirit as it dwells within each congregant. It is communication with God and communication with one another through God—spiritual knowledge and understanding, eyes to see and ears to hear, a soul-soothing foretaste of eternal salvation and immortal glory in Jesus Christ. It is the salve for an anguishing heart hardened by a hard world. It is the eruption of tearful jubilation in a “lively hope” for comfort in the bosom of the Lord. It is the humility of the fallen sinner who has been lifted out of the pit. It is a brief experience

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5 Ibid.

6 Elder Jackson invokes this phrase frequently—for example, in prayer: “Lord, would it please thee this morning that you might come and open our hearts, give us eyes to see, and ears to hear” (Prayer, September 19, 2004). However, these are not physical eyes and ears, but spiritual sensory organs of the heart, as in “Give them each a hearing heart, Lord: a heart that hears, a heart that receives, a heart that stores up, a heart that feeds upon the eternal truth” (Prayer, September 18, 2005).

7 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (Peter 1:3).

8 Sermon by Elder Jackson on “the pit” as a symbolic type of the human condition, September 19, 2004.
in the sacred realm of the Holy Spirit. This, while often resisting description through mere words, is the nature of experiences explored herein.

**Primitive Baptists**

Historical overviews of religion in America typically situate the emergence of the Primitive Baptist denomination within the first thirty to fifty years of the nineteenth century and describe it as a reaction to the institutionalization and mission-mindedness born out of the revivalist movement that reached across denominational affiliations. The doctrines and practices that Primitive Baptists hold reach back much further, beyond the Reformation in Europe and on to the church of the Apostles. What emerged in the nineteenth century was not a belief system, but a social community. More correctly, as Primitive Baptists eschew a singular organizational structure and maintain ultimate local church autonomy, what emerged were social communities. Rather than viewing this community building solely as a “reaction,” the perspective here is one in which believers who would eventually dub themselves Primitive Baptists were continuing the same community building efforts that characterized the spread of Baptists first throughout Europe, then to the New World colonies, and finally across the United States.

Primitive Baptists began to emerge after the Second Great Awakening (or Great Revival), which ushered in the American Benevolence movement with an emphasis on organized mission work and the conversion of sinners and a concomitant Arminian doctrine of general atonement.⁹ While this movement was not a particularly Baptist phenomenon, among the Baptists the more Calvinistic believers, emphasizing predestinated and limited atonement,

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“...The word “pit”—this image, this analogy of the pit there—is something that you’ll find from cover to cover in the bible…. Blessed be the name of the almighty God that has brought us forth from a horrible pit, stood us up on the firm foundation of a rock, established our goings, put a new song in our heart, giving praise unto him so that people could see and understand and realize this: the magnificence and the glory and the greatness and the power of God who did all these things for a lowly worm like one of us. Praise be to God…”

resisted the transfiguration of their doctrine and worship practice, complete with mission societies, tract societies, Sunday Schools, seminaries, and other organized efforts to save lost souls. Such responsibilities placed on the church implied a role for human will in salvation and, correspondingly, a tarnish upon the omniscience and almighty power of God. Of course, the more Calvinistic believers were not opposed to evangelism, as the spreading of the Word, but they resisted the use of the church as an organ of support for such efforts. The emphasis on the church as a place of worship, rather than a place for saving sinners, has been the main line towed by most Primitive Baptists as the denomination evolved, however many differences and inconsistencies exist among individual churches and associations.

Two Views of Primitive Baptists

“They call us a dying breed, but I don’t think so,” said Verna Walker, member at Hollow Springs Church. “We’re getting fewer in numbers, but there will always be some of us.” Sister Walker is described by Elder Jackson as the “matriarch” of the churches. She was referencing an article on Primitive Baptists in a 1992 issue of The State magazine titled “Dying Breed: Like Old Soldiers, Primitive Baptists are Slowly Fading Away.” In the first paragraph of the article, the author repeats the subtitle and continues, “Their austere meeting houses, decaying with age and lack of use, attract few modern-day worshippers.”10 The aging and death metaphors continue throughout the article to place Primitive Baptists in the past, having little or no relevance for the present.

Sister Walker continued talking about why Primitive Baptists might be perceived as “old soldiers.” “This article says [it is] because we don’t have Sunday school and because of predestination,” which the article characterizes as absolute predestination, implying that all

human action was predetermined by God. Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Churches follow a more tempered strain of predestination that concerns what is termed one’s “spiritual journey” from death in trespasses and sin to salvation, or not, in heaven and immortal glory. They do not believe that all human action, including sin and evil, was predestinated by God. While Sister Walker agreed that some Primitive Baptists believe in “the predestination of everything,” she added that they are much fewer in number than those who do not and are mostly found in eastern North Carolina. In a somewhat final statement on the issue, she said,

“We had a member who left Hollow Springs and went down there,
And she believed that her husband, who was a drunkard,
Could not control his actions
because they were predestined.

“So we’re not absoluters, not around here.”

Unimpressed by the written description of the article, Sister Walker concluded,

“But I want to give you this magazine.
It’s [the article] got three pages.
It’s mostly about the eastern
Primitive Baptists, but
There is a beautiful old church.”

While the article emphasizes austerity and decay, Sister Walker emphasizes beauty that has deep roots in Primitive Baptist identity and belief. The simplicity of the “beautiful old church” offers a contrast to the audacious size and ornamentation of many mainline Baptist and Protestant churches. It reflects a view of the church as a functional building for believers rather than an enticement to non-believers. For Sister Walker and her fellow Primitive Baptists, the

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11 Sermon at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, December 11, 2005.

12 Peacock and Tyson estimate that there are 250,000 African American Primitive Baptists (affiliated with the National Primitive Baptist Convention of the United States of America, and African American organization) and roughly 70,000 white Primitive Baptists (not affiliated with any official organization). Of this number, they estimate 7000 as holding a belief in absolute predestination (1989:265-266).

13 In reviewing the article after out interview I noticed that she had underlined the phrase “predestination of every single thing” on the last page and had written “False” in her cursive handwriting out in the margin.
church is a place for believers to look inward and upward—inward through their souls and upward to God and heaven—and contrivances that redirect this attention outward into the world weight worship with the futile toiling for something that has already been taken care of.

Belief and Practice in Worship

Primitive Baptists hold that the church is for believers to sing praises and learn of the Word, not for convincing others to do so. Two elders have told me that the Bible is written to the believer, and that it will not make sense—spiritual sense—to the non-believer. Thus they emphasize the Word as spiritual nourishment for the sinner who has hope, rather than as a means “to bring in the young people.” Likewise, the church is a place for worship rather than for conversion. Primitive Baptists believe the Spirit can convert the non-believer at any time and any place, whether in the church or walking down the sidewalk. Along with their rejection of Sunday schools, Primitive Baptists have eschewed any efforts to build the church into a duty-oriented organization. They have no mission boards, foreign or domestic, or other organized outreach programs. The churches sponsor no seminaries for the training of pastors, believing that the Word should be preached with the aid and guidance of the Holy Spirit rather than with notes or written sermon texts. Elders receive the same spiritual education as congregation members—conviction by the Holy Spirit—and are not viewed as leaders by the sheer status as elder. There are no organized Vacation Bible Schools or Wednesday and Sunday evening Bible studies, which I witnessed during the brief skirmishes in my youth with various mainline denomination churches (Methodist, Southern Baptist, and Presbyterian). Primitive Baptists view all of these—Sunday Schools, Mission Boards, Seminaries, Vacations Bible Schools, and Bible


15 To be sure, there have indeed been quite influential elders who were strong leaders through their command of scripture and their personalities. See Peacock and Tyson 1989.
Studies—as additions that clutter the vision and purpose of the original church that Christ set up among the Apostles as set forth in the New Testament.

Sister Ruth Sinclair, member at Philadelphia Church, told me as we sat in the microfilms room at the Alexander County library where she works, “In the church that Christ set up, it was preaching, praying and singing.” Guided by the New Testament pattern of worship, Primitive Baptists allow no use of musical instruments in their services. While the New Testament does not explicitly forbid musical instruments, it does not include them either. Primitive Baptists do not form choirs to lead their song services. Choirs set a select group apart, which believers feel leads to apathy and a drop in congregational participation. Additionally, their musical practice typically includes no special songs or solo singing.

For believers at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia, worship is not a means to an end, nor a duty to be performed in the expectation of gaining salvation. Their belief in predestinated and particular election, established by God before the foundation of the world, denies any notion of earning one’s way into heaven. Rather, worship is a means of communication and experience. Prior to his sermon at the communion service at Philadelphia in July 2005, Elder Jackson spoke on the communicative nature of the ritual in which believers symbolically partake of the body of Christ (represented by unleavened bread) and the blood (represented by homemade muscadine wine) before kneeling in an act of humility to wash one another’s feet as Christ had done for the Apostles.

“It speaks to the world of your belief and your faith in Jesus Christ, the son of the living God, but it also expresses to others around you

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16 Interview, February 26, 2005.

17 This is not an absolute mandate but a typical practice. Special church events, such as the dedication of a church discussed in the next chapter, may have a solo singer perform a song or two.

18 Peacock and Tyson note this as “the premier doctrine” of Primitive Baptist theology (1989:27). At Hollow Springs and Philadelphia churches, as will be covered in a subsequent chapter, Elder John Jackson goes underneath election to link it to a human condition of total depravity as even more foundational.
your innermost feelings.

“...And above all,

“I trust and I pray, I earnestly pray that you will feel the presence of God this morning in your heart like you have never felt before.

“I pray that God would be so close to you that you could reach out as it was and just simply touch him.

“And I pray that he will speak to you in a most magnificent, wonderful, prayerful, and compassionate way.”

This description referred to the specific act of communion, but the appeal to the senses—the communication—extends to worship in a broad sense and to singing in the more specific sense of concern in this thesis. Although experiencing communication and closeness with God is not an assurance of salvation, it is powerful evidence of salvation that becomes even more powerful when one’s experiences are shared with others.

A worship service marks the nexus between the sacred and secular realms of existence. The believer experiences divine communication, a state of transcendence beyond the natural world, and emerges with a hope of salvation. Through preaching, praying, and singing, connections, however fleeting or momentary, are established between worshipers and the sacred world of divine inspiration. These connections are perceived in the hearts of living individuals.

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in ways that are as distinct as the individuals themselves, and yet the experience binds them in
the harmony of a common hope of being among God’s elect.

While worship in general and singing in particular are certainly not relegated to Sunday
services held within a church building, these services are the important religious events on
believers’ calendars. Members of both churches, friends, and other visitors meet at Hollow
Springs on the first and second Sundays and at Philadelphia on the third and fourth Sundays.20
These “regular” services follow a relatively simple pattern of song, prayer, sermon, song and the
hand of fellowship, and a closing prayer. Services do not include offertories or the “passing of
the plate,” although members typically bring their donations to the church clerk after service is
over. Nor is there the pronounced altar call as performed in other churches, although Elder
Jackson “publish[es] the open doors of the church” at the end of each service to accept new
members.

At 10:30 the first hymn is called, and the congregation sings for approximately a half-
hour, believers calling out hymns as they feel moved. “138,” says Sister Shirley Anderson on a
number of occasions. “Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed,” number 138 in the eleventh edition of
the Old School Hymnal, is a favorite of hers. Singing binds believers together through the
expression of a common language set out in poetic lines and matched with tunes of the same
metric structure. The singing in these churches is rich in harmonies. Hymns are chosen
spontaneously. There is no printed order of worship listing pre-selected hymns. Rather,
believers flip through their hymnals, sometimes looking for particular songs, other times more
freely browsing the contents.

20 In months with a fifth Sunday, service is not held at either church. Members either attend another Primitive
Baptist church, often one that Elder Jackson serves in Ashe County, North Carolina, or they sometimes attend a
church of another denomination with family members or friends.
After all stand and sing a final hymn, often referred to as an “opener,” Elder Jackson turns and shakes hands with Brother Alfred Jenkins and Elder Gene Watson, then walks from his position in front of the first pew to the pulpit. He pours himself a glass of ice-water from the pitcher, which was filled and placed on the preacher’s stand earlier by Sister Watson, and begins his introductory welcome and remarks.

Elder Jackson then asks for prayer requests: “I’ll ask at this time if there might be something or someone in your hearts at this time.” Believers often request prayerful thoughts for infirmed loved ones or young adults serving in areas of military conflict around the globe. Elder Jackson then kneels beside the preacher’s stand, in front of the congregation, eyes closed and prays,

“Our most heavenly precious Father, as we come before thee, Lord,
“We’re so thankful for this opportunity that we may bow our heads
“And lift our hearts heavenward, Lord,
toward thee,
“Praying merciful
heavenly Father that you might hear these petitions that we offer up unto thee…”

Following his prayer, Elder Jackson stands and introduces the focus of his sermon for the day, usually with a personal anecdote or some theological insight gleaned from his study of scripture and reflection during the week between services. His introduction flows into sermon. Primitive Baptists do not write or compose sermons prior to preaching, but rely on spiritual guidance and improvisation. The path of Elder Jackson’s sermon may cling close to his intended focus or may evolve into something different entirely. Sometimes his fingers nimbly play his King James Bible like a piano, gliding from chapter to chapter and verse to verse with an almost unconscious comfort, connecting Old Testament prophesies to their New Testament

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fruitions. Other times, the opened Bible lies still, and Elder Jackson’s sermonic discourse blooms from a scriptural seed as the layers of symbolic richness grow, peel back, and lay open.

Elder Jackson concludes, “I thank you so much for your very kind attention. May God bless you and be with you. What number?” Someone in the congregation calls out a hymn number (often for “Amazing Grace”) and all partake in the extended hand of fellowship during the singing. After the first verse, Elder Jackson steps from the pulpit and stands beside Brother Jenkins and Elder Watson, and the congregation begins shaking hands and embracing one another as they proceed to the front to greet the three men. The closeness felt through singing often becomes manifest in the roll of tears and beaming smiles on believers’ faces. Returning to their pews and reaching for a few hands missed in the procession to the front, all remain standing as they finish the hymn. Elder Jackson then closes the service with a prayer.

Within this cycle of weekly services, believers look forward to the special annual services—Communion at each church in the summer, the Annual Old Time Singing held the third Sunday in August, and the Association Meeting held the first weekend in September. Communion services—held the second Sunday in June at Hollow Springs and the third Sunday in July at Philadelphia—is a most precious occasion for believers. They humble themselves before the Lord and their fellow believers by partaking of the bread and wine, symbolic of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and through kneeling, in loving tears, to wash the feet of another.

After the regular service on Communion Sunday, Elder Jackson dismisses the congregation and instructs them to return for the communion service “when you hear the sound of singing.” A few members remain to make preparations, adorning a table in front of the preacher’s stand with a white cloth, two plates, a portion of unleavened bread wrapped in foil, a crystal carafe filled with homemade muscadine wine, and two crystal gold-rimmed glasses. On
each side of the table is placed a large white basin with water and a large ladle for filling the smaller basins to be used in footwashing. Long, narrow towels of white linen lie neatly folded and stacked next to the basins.

A hymn is started by those who have been making preparation, as well as a few who have preemptively returned to the church building. As more return the singing thickens, most taking a seat in the front two rows of pews on each side, while a handful of visitors—welcomed to watch—sit further back and separate from those who will participate in the service. The typically mixed-gendered seating during regular services is divided with men sitting on the right and women on the left, for a woman and a man do not wash one another’s feet.

When the hymn is finished Elder Jackson offers a brief introduction to the service with a general overview of the symbolic richness of communion. He then reads a scripture, often from the Gospel of Matthew, on the significance of the bread and prays. Subsequently, he and Elder Watson break the unleavened bread into small pieces on two white saucer plates. Elder Watson offers one plate of bread to the men, and Elder Jackson carries the other to the women. All take one piece and consume it upon taking it. After administering the bread to the congregation, the elders return to their places in front of the communion table and take a piece of bread from Elder Watson’s plate.

Elder Jackson reads again from the scripture he selected for that particular service, now focusing on the communion wine. After a prayer, he fills each of the two crystal glasses (one for women and one for men) slightly more than half full and hands one to Elder Watson. The men carry the glasses to the participants, each one taking a small sip and handing the glass back to the elder who then moves to the next participant. The elders return once again to the front of the communion table and take a sip of wine from Elder Watson’s glass.

22 There is no synchronization or special invocation that must be given before participants consume the bread.
The partaking of the bread and wine is followed by further scripture reading and a prayer before half of the communion participants move toward the wash basins and towels to prepare for footwashing. They loop the towels around their waists, allowing the excess length to drape down the fronts of their legs, and fill one of the small basins. Each returns to kneel in front his or her “partner” for the service, gently grasping his or her partner’s bare foot in one hand while cupping and pouring water over it with the other hand, caressing the foot as this is repeated until each foot has been washed and dried. Partners rise and embrace, often in tears, and change places. The water is often changed between turns, but not always.

Due to their administrative duties in the service, Elder Jackson and Elder Watson—who always wash one another’s feet—are typically still engaged in the process as others finish up. Sister St. Clair begins a hymn while the two elders are finishing, and gradually other participants join in. The singing is strikingly different than the usual congregational singing in that the women’s voices more markedly dominate while the two most prominent male voices are remain silenced in the humility of footwashing.

Subsequently, Elder Jackson makes a few remarks before believers sing a final hymn during the hand of fellowship. Elder Jackson then closes the service with a prayer.

The Annual Old Time Singing, which began in 1897 as a “reunion” of sorts after a singing school held at Hollow Springs the previous year, has been held consecutively since its origination and takes place every third Sunday in August. While it is always held at Hollow Springs, both churches are involved in hosting the event. It is a worship service, indeed, but one that breaks from the form of regular services in that there is no sermon and there are many visitors. While the majority of attendees are Primitive Baptists, the service is viewed more as a community event than a Primitive Baptist worship service. Congregants arrive by 10:30, as
usual, and open with song. Elder Jackson then makes a few brief introductory comments and offers a prayer, typically seeking guidance in singing praises that morning:

“I have just a
few words I would like to say here this morning, and let me bid you all welcome.
“To tell you the truth I’ve forgotten what number this is. It’s over a hundred isn’t it?”

Someone offered, “Is it the hundred and sixth?” Elder Gene Watson then clarified,

“Hundred and eighth.”

“Hundred and eighth?
    Hundred and eighth Annual Old-Time Singing here at Hollow Springs Church.
    “Time has a way of slipping up on us.
    “I come this morning with mixed emotions. I guess the most pervading one, the one
    over rules all of them, is
        a sense of thankfulness
            for the grace, the love, and the power
                of almighty God.

    “Of course, it’s a joy to see each and every one of you, but this week has been a very
    special week—one of the most joyous weeks in my life.
    “A host of fervent prayers were answered.
    “There’s one among us who we thought might have been seriously ill,
        and things have turned out very, very well.
        And we are all so thankful.
    “God’s grace, God’s love, God’s strength, God’s power
        is overwhelming,
            And we come this morning, I’m sure all of us, with great gratitude that God has touched our lives and the life of one we that love so much in such a profound way.

    “We have a host of others to pray for, and that is our responsibility and our job, our task, our joy
        to do so.
    “But let me share this with you, if I may, before we start.

    “This is psalm one hundred.
    “Here, the psalmist says, ‘Make a joyful noise unto the Lord
        all ye lands.
    “‘Serve the Lord with gladness. Come before his presence with singing.
    “‘Know ye that the Lord, he is God.
    “‘It is he that hath made us, and not we our selves.
    “‘We are his people,
        and the sheep
            of his pasture.
We’re so happy that you could come this morning. Brother Jack and his precious wife, we always bid them welcome, and glad that they could come and help in this service.

“You visitors, we bid you all welcome.

“Thank you so much for coming. We hope that some more will come in as time passes.

“This is a tradition that we, with the grace of God and with God’s help, we hope will endure for another 108 years.

We want to turn now to the Lord in Prayer…”

From then on, one after another, songs roll forth. In addition to being a worship service, the Old Time Singing also serves an effort to continue tradition. There is a much wider variety of hymns selected than during regular services, including the use of multiple books, many more minor keyed tunes, and a few formal presentations of shaped note singing (i.e. employing the practice of singing the notes—fa, so, la, etc.—before singing the hymn text). A recording of the fiftieth occasion of the event contains multiple solos by Jim Swanson, a local historian and Missionary Baptist. Now, the singing is almost entirely congregational, but one Old Time Singing I attended a solo was sung at the end of the service. Elder Jack McGinnis, a long-time friend of Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Churches who has attended the service since 1960, usually leads the singing, although multiple song leaders are not infrequent. The congregation sings for about two hours before breaking for dinner in the small fellowship hall behind the church. Afterwards, congregants reconvene in the church and sing for another hour and a half to two hours, often extending beyond 2:00 PM.


24 C.H. Cayce’s The Good Old Songs is the main text used, but the Old School Hymnal, their songbook for regular services, is also used and occasionally Goble’s Primitive Baptist Hymnbook.
The Association meeting, held annually the first Saturday and Sunday of September, rotates among the three churches that currently comprise the Re-Organized Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association: Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Churches along with Mountain Home Primitive Baptist Church in Asheville, North Carolina. The most recent session (2006) was held at Hollow Springs Church. These two-day meetings are an opportunity for members at Philadelphia and Hollow Springs to worship and fellowship with the members of their sister church at Mountain Home. The Association meeting is a weekend of song, sermon, and prayer, stretching from 10:30 AM Saturday morning to almost 9:00 PM that evening and reconvening Sunday morning for a “regular” service. Believers cherish these meetings for the opportunities to sing with other Primitive Baptists. Several believers commented in interviews how they love to sing with the members of Mountain Home church. They also enjoy hearing the other Elders who attend these meeting. In addition to Elder Jackson and the elder at Mountain Home, called “home ministers,” three visiting elders from the Senter Association attended the meeting this past fall.

The events of the Association meeting are the same as during regular services except for the addition of visiting elders, whom Elder Jackson says he feels he should let preach. The schedule of events resembles a succession of services. At 10:30 believers begin singing, which continues for the typical half-hour. Elder Jackson then introduces the Annual Session of the Re-Organized Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association. Typically, but not always, the elder of the hosting church serves as moderator for the session, and thus Elder Jackson assigns an order of preaching for the day, as well as an order for praying which can include “lay speakers” in addition to ordained elders. After Elder Jackson’s introduction, a prayer is asked, and the first

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25 However, believer from the two Caldwell County churches sometimes make the trip to Asheville on other occasions, and vice-versa.
elder begins his sermon. After two or three elders have preached, the service is ended with song and a prayer, and everyone gathers for dinner on the grounds.

Two more services are held that day, one after lunch and one that evening following another meal at the church. Then on Sunday, service is held once more, again with dinner on the grounds following to end that year’s Association meeting. Most members of the hosting church 26 attend for the entire weekend, returning home only to prepare for the evening meal after Saturday’s afternoon service and later that evening to sleep. Many of those who have to travel, either from Asheville to Caldwell County or vice-versa, attend only Saturday although several did attend both days for the Association meeting I went to. Some even travel a considerable distance for the meeting, as was the case for a 92-year-old member of Mountain Home church—with her tape recorder in hand—who now lives in South Carolina with her daughter.

An Exploration of Spiritual Experience

While drawing on all facets of the worship experience, this exploration of spiritual experience primarily focuses upon singing as a mode of communication. Preaching and hearing the Word are perhaps the ostensible purposes of regular Sunday services, but singing opens the religious discourse to all voices in attendance—elders, members, friends, visitors, men and women. Singing, as a form that invites and indeed relies upon active group participation through the voice of each congregant, binds individual creativities and experiences of worshipful expression in the presence of the Holy Spirit—belief set in motion through the emergence of the spirit. Belief is at the core of this focus, the root from which explorations into experiences of transcendence must begin. My aim is to construct a description of belief put to practice, a

26 When Hollow Springs or Philadelphia Church host, this includes most of both churches.
processual analysis of the active doing of believing—the emergence of belief from the inertia of an idea to the kinesis of experienced realities and the ascertainment of harmony among them.

To explore this process, I have organized this thesis in eight chapters, plus a brief conclusion. As this text is concerned with experiences of transcending space and time through spiritual communication with the divine, the first three chapters, including this introduction, focus on setting the scene in which believers live and worship, while the final chapters explore more directly the content, form, and process of belief as practiced and experienced.

Chapter two describes my methodological approach and the need to negotiate academic and local theoretical paradigms in contexts of religion and belief. The first part of the chapter is concerned with my approach to ethnographic writing. The second part of the chapter looks at the theoretical basis from which to consider sacred singing as a process of transcendent communication that connects individuals with one another and the divine in moments of musical and spiritual harmony. A final section concerns the role of belief and experience as explanatory tools for cultural performance in a religious context.

Chapter three explores the setting in which believers live and worship with brief descriptions of Caldwell County and its geography, the historical context of the churches, and finally a physical description of the church buildings that believers fill with worshipful praises.

Chapter four begins the more in depth exploration of the form, content and meaning of worship among this group of Primitive Baptists and is dedicated to the interpretive moorings of believers—the doctrines that serve as a foundation for their constructions of interpretive and pragmatic perspectives on theology and lived experiences. In this chapter I particularize the delineation of Primitive Baptist doctrine and practice to the understandings and explications heard by the congregations at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia. This text is primarily constructed from sermons I have recorded that outline the main points of doctrine. However,
sermons comprise only part, perhaps the foundation, for Primitive Baptists’ theoretical orientations. The conception of local interpretive frames is made more full and complex by the understandings held by the church members. Thus, doctrinal explications from sermons are juxtaposed with believers’ processing of the basic points within their lives to begin to highlight the development of belief into a dynamic process within the lived realities of believers around which they construct social community and through which they experience the sacred.

Chapter five, then, looks at the notions of social and sacred community in the churches. While Primitive Baptists are often viewed as a group that diverged from the mainstream path of Baptist evolution, the chapter takes a counter perspective arguing that these believers were, rather than diverging, continuing a tradition of strong locally focused community building. This social community coalesces around believers’ shared identities with the doctrines of their faith. These doctrines, in turn, articulate a spiritual community, “a home in heaven and immortal glory,” which believers experience a hope of through performance in worship.

Chapter six is a short photographic essay that serves as a pause in the textual representation of this ethnography to show through images certain aspects that words miss.

Chapter seven discusses song as a communicative form resting on the doctrinal foundations discussed in the previous chapter. Perhaps exhibiting a somewhat functionalist perspective, this chapter is focused on singing as a mode through which all believers communicate in worship. One of the primary concerns is the inclusive nature of the practice and how it relates to doctrinal understandings. Building from a discussion of a dialectic between form and meaning, this chapter explores the role singing plays in the construction of social community.

Chapter eight explores the movement from the everyday into sacred experience through the practice of singing—putting belief in motion. Singing unites the group through individual
experiences of relationship with God. As church members downplay the abilities of their desires to put these experiences in motion, the communal fellowship achieved through singing is not guaranteed simply by the act of singing. The spirit must enter each of the singers. Though there is still individuality and differential experience at work, singing in the spirit binds the congregations through the sharing of lived and spiritual experiences carried along through the harmony of tones and poetic words. Singers invest themselves in song, and with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, they experience the sacred community of God’s church.

My Connections

Caldwell County, the physical setting for these churches, is familiar territory for me. My grandfather moved from western Wilkes County to Lenoir as a small child, and my grandmother arrived from Ashe County in the early 1940s following her older brother’s search for work in the furniture industry. My great-uncle introduced my grandmother to my grandfather, and after marriage the two raised my father and his two siblings in the nearby town of Hudson and then moved over to Cajah’s mountain in the 1960s where they resided until the summer before my sixteenth birthday in 1990.

I made the trip from my childhood home in Hickory into Caldwell innumerable times, and about fifteen years later I found myself driving it again to Philadelphia and Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Churches, places with an accompanying belief system that was unheard of to me as a boy. I drove up Highway 321 with all its billboards, furniture outlets (of course, I wonder about the “Amishness” of the advertised “Amish Oak and Cherry” at one establishment), used car lots, various small industrial shops, a smattering of houses, Caldwell Community College, the Broyhill Convention Center, past a golf course, and many other small businesses or outcroppings of larger ones. Then, off this main throughway of the county,
where the dense roadside onslaught of corporate fastfood eating, convenience store gas houses, big-box store shopping, and strip malls that adorn most cities and towns these days gives way to more pastoral scenery of a small farms, private residences, small community churches.

Driving to Philadelphia and nearly passing the front steps of my grandparents’ former residence triggered nostalgic longing for my childhood—playing hide-and-seek with my sisters and cousins at what seemed like all hours of the night while the adults visited inside, helping my grandmother tend her garden and snap beans in the summers, being allowed to ride my grandfather’s Murray riding mower by myself, and pilfering through his workshop down below the house where restored late model cars—his 1940-something Plymouth was and still is one of the most beautiful pieces of machinery I have ever seen with its smooth pewter-gray paint and deep maroon cloth interior.

How did I return to this place so familiar to me as a child, but placed distantly back in my mind as my grandparents moved over to Catawba County and I left home? I could begin several years ago as I sat in my gray cubicle amidst many other gray cubicles in a large office with gray walls, gray carpet, and no windows at now-defunct telecommunications equipment manufacturer in Raleigh, North Carolina. Yet while important to me, those details are too broad to cover here. Rather, I begin with my first fieldwork.

As student in the Appalachian Studies graduate program at Appalachian State University, I began fieldwork with my grandmother’s first cousin Jack McGinnis, a traditional banjo player from Ashe County, North Carolina now living in Wilkes. I met Jack the summer before entering graduate school at the Hartzog family reunion at my grandmother’s homeplace along the South Fork of the New River in Ashe County. Knowing that I was interested in traditional music, an uncle of mine introduced me to Jack. We spoke briefly, exchanging sentiments for the music, as he and wife were about to leave. The following Spring my grandmother and I visited Jack—she
wanting to catch up with her cousin with whom she has been very close since childhood, and I wanting to hear some of his music and possibly record some. From that first visit, others developed, and I tried to elicit information about his playing—who he learned from and what other songs he knew—with a focus primarily on my interest in the documentation of “traditional” Appalachian stringband music. One Saturday afternoon I arrived at Jack’s house, and he was singing a hymn and accompanying himself on guitar as I entered. I asked him about the hymn, which led our discussion to the Primitive Baptist church beside his home and to a stark shift in my research.

I mark this occasion as the shift in our work because this is when I first realized how personally invested he was in hymns, singing, and spirituality. Although I knew that he preached among Primitive Baptists for many years, and he often incorporated comments on sacred music in earlier interview and recording sessions, up to that point I remained focused on his secular music. From then on we began to explore Jack’s 40-year tenure as an elder among Primitive Baptists, hymn singing and how this sacred singing related to his secular instrumental music. Along with his knowledge of banjo tunes and music in general, Elder McGinnis is also a remarkable hymn singer of unaccompanied Old Baptist hymnody. While not neglecting Elder McGinnis’ secular music, our work veered more and more in the direction of the sacred material.

In the spring of 2003, Elder McGinnis lent me several cassette tapes to copy and reference. Among the recordings of sermons, church services, and commercially available hymn collections were nested recordings of the 1995 and 1996 Annual Old Time Singing at Hollow Springs. After my inquiry into the tapes of the event, Elder McGinnis told me that he has attended every year for over forty years and that the event was still being held. Although he is no longer “officially” affiliated with any Primitive Baptist churches (at least not in terms of
membership), he has close relationships with many members at Hollow Springs and
Philadelphia, especially Sister and Elder Watson. As he has told me many times, “the church is
not an organization. The true church of God’s people extends beyond any denomination.”

Through working with Elder McGinnis, my interest in Primitive Baptist singing grew
and began encouraging me to attend the Annual Old Time Singing at Hollow Springs. After
missing the 2003 event due to some miscommunication between Elder McGinnis and myself,
when the 2004 event came up, I drove up from Carrboro where I had recently moved to begin
study in the Curriculum in Folklore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and
preparing for a new fieldwork project.

While working with Elder McGinnis was the direct link that guided me towards Hollow
Springs and Philadelphia churches, my connections to this group of people is more complex. I
have already indicated a familial connection to Elder McGinnis, he being my grandmother’s first
cousin. I also have familial ties to some members of Philadelphia church (and in turn to Hollow
Springs), although these connections did not have a large impact on my initial interest in the
church community. Discussing my work with Elder McGinnis with my aunt (my father’s sister),
I mentioned that we focused on theological concerns and his preaching and singing among
Primitive Baptists. She shared that her husband’s maternal grandfather, Henry McMillon, had
been pastor at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia churches. Her husband’s father, two sisters, and
at least one aunt still hold membership at Philadelphia. But these are not connections I grew up
with.

My aunt and uncle divorced several years before my birth and remained separate for
about thirty years, during which time my uncle resided in Atlanta, Georgia. Although I had
heard his name growing up, being that he is the father of two of my cousins, we did not meet
until he and my aunt reunited in Fall 2000. I did not meet his family until I first arrived at
Hollow Springs in August 2004. So it seemed odd to me the first time his father and one of his sisters asked how my mother was doing.
2 ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF BELIEF AND PERFORMANCE

“Brother Eddie is back up again today with his camera, and we welcome him. And we are so glad that he could come.

“I don’t view the camera as a threat; I don’t feel like it’s something to be afraid of, and to tell the truth, I would want the world to know the good things about the Primitive Baptist church and what this old gospel and what this old doctrine has to offer.

“I’m not in the least bit ashamed of it…”

About a week or so before the Old Time Singing in August, 2004, I called Elder Jackson and told him about the work I was doing with Jack McGinnis, that I was interested in learning more about the singing at Hollow Springs church and wanted to video record the upcoming singing event. He encouraged me to attend and record the event, which he did each subsequent time I called about attending church services.

Thus, I began field research for this project with singing. Using a broadcast-quality MiniDV camcorder and an external stereo microphone, I recorded church services and interviews with church members from August 2004 through September 2006, with the most intensive period being roughly from February 2005 to December 2005. My trips to Caldwell

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27 Introductory Remarks, Service at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, February 12, 2005.

28 I did not know about Philadelphia church at that point.

29 Eventually, I learned that I did not have to call each time before attending service at either church—perhaps my first sense that what I was thinking of as research or “work,” Elder Jackson thought of more as church attendance.
County were typically short—two to three days scheduled around a church service. I tried to schedule interviews as often as possible on these trips, which worked out to about one interview for every two trips. My main goal in field research was to engage the process before hammering out a strictly defined focus or topic—to investigate a bit. Though I began with an interest in singing, I put that focus away for some time and entertained other aspects of worship and church life among the congregations. Singing had initially sparked my interest in Primitive Baptists due to its artistry, but having veered off in other directions, I began to see singing as such a profound process through which individuals connect with the collective spiritual experience of worship, integrating other facets of church life.

My documentary recordings include twenty-three services—fourteen “regular” Sunday services, three Annual Old Time Singings, four Communions, one Association Meeting, and a dedication service for Presnell’s Chapel Primitive Baptist Church in Avery County, North Carolina (sixty-one one-hour tapes).\(^{30}\) I interviewed ten church members, most of them on multiple occasions and some together on a single occasion, in twelve different interview contexts—mostly in the homes of church members, but occasionally in the church buildings after a service. In all, we recorded about twenty hours of interview conversation together.\(^{31}\) I composed a set of questions for each interview (no less than ten, but usually between fifteen and twenty-five). I tried to let the interviews progress in a conversational manner in which questions served as starting points for discussion. The results varied from conversation that barely

\(^{30}\) I plan to archive these in the Southern Folklife Collection (SFC) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and have DVD copies made for the churches. As there is a general perception, in some instances accurate and in others overblown, of Primitive Baptists being somewhat suspicious of recording devices—video, audio, and even textual in at least one case I am familiar with—I note that (at least overtly) I was welcomed from the beginning to bring my recording equipment and to setup wherever I needed or wished to.

\(^{31}\) These tapes, like those of the worship services, will be archived at the SFC. However, because these recordings are personal conversations with individuals, I will not have copies made for general use by the congregations (as in the case of the recordings of services). Where individuals request copies of their own interviews, I will provide them.
touched upon the specific questions I devised to more structured interviews that more-or-less progressed from question to question.

**Ethnographic Research**

James Clifford, in his introduction to *Writing Culture*, says of ethnography: “It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders [and I would add belief systems]...decod[ing] and recod[ing], telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion...and is itself a part of these processes.”

Ideally at least, ethnography is a means for attempting to build a bridge of understanding across a gulf of apparent difference. On one level, in constructing an ethnography of singing among Primitive Baptists, I am attempting a bridge between two ways of knowing the world: Primitive Baptist belief, founded upon sacred scripture and their doctrinal interpretations, and secular cultural theory. Through this, on a deeper level, I am attempting to understand the process of bridging worldly and sacred experience, or transcendence, among a particular group of Primitive Baptists.

As this text is an ethnography of experience, the experiential base of this text must include my own as a visiting ethnographer with video recorder and interview questions in hand, as well as a visiting human subject as susceptible to the hand of the Holy Spirit as are the members of each church. My first step over the threshold of the door at Hollow Springs Church on August 15, 2004, may have involved more than my desire to record hymns and begin a research project of delineating others’ religious experiences. My approach is reflexive in


33 While heeding James Peacock’s admonition for “tempered reflexivity” in anthropological research, maintaining that “the experience researched is of higher priority than the research experience, [where] the methodological issues of reflexivity are subsumed within...the larger substantive questions addressed by the [ethnography] of religion” (2001: 225), my emphasis on the negotiation between ways of knowing forces me to be somewhat overtly reflexive in this text.

34 The occasion of the 107th Annual Old Time Singing, my first visit to either Hollow Springs or Philadelphia.
that I view it as an effort to engage believers at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia churches in collaborative constructions of meaning. For example, church members’ interpretations of my presence among them vary considerably, from archivist to friend to Old Baptist who does not yet know it. Through the ethnographic project, I am involved in complex relationships with church members that are important in disarming the hegemony of distanced academic observation and in accepting analytic contributions from Primitive Baptists’ interpretive paradigms.

The umbrella term “reflexive” points to myriad forms of ethnographic writing that attempt to reconnect the ethnographer with interlocutors in the text. The author writes herself or himself into the observations of culture in which she or he participated. If taken to an extreme, the text can veer toward an “invention of the cult of the author,” for reflexive writing carries—rightly or wrongly—the potential to over emphasize the role of the researcher to the point of denying any sense of agency social actors have in carrying on their lives amidst something new or otherwise not normally there (i.e. the young man from Chapel Hill). The desired emphasis on “a dialectical invention of culture” becomes displaced by the one-sided perspective of the researcher that reflexivity is intended to keep in check. Thus, the following description of my methodological approach is fairly brief and is not intended to highlight my impact on worship services at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia churches. It does, however, include the effects of those services on me and subsequently on how I constructed the text of this thesis.

Anthropologist Johannes Fabian wrote, “[U]sually theories of ethnographic knowledge are built on models of information transfer, of transmission of (somehow preexisting) messages

35 Feld 1990:239.

36 Ibid.
via signs, symbols, or codes. Perhaps they are descriptively useful; epistemologically they are deficient because they fail to account for historically contingent creation of information in and through the events in which messages are said to be transmitted [emphasis in original].” 37 In this sense, not only is the ethnographic project concerned with performance as a means of cultural enactment and production, but also is itself performance. The “messages” that come through this text certainly could not be classified as “preexisting” if I have followed my own advice for engaging in interpretive collaboration. Rather, they emerged “in and through the events” of ethnographic research, reflecting (during and afterwards) on these events, reviewing recordings of services and interviews, reading, and imagining a direction for this research. Just as sermons and singing are not “preexisting” fixed messages but are emergent processes of meaning construction and reception, connecting the past to future through present experience, interviews are not arrangements of “preexisting” queries and responses but are similar communicative processes in time between participants.

My approach to interviewing was to allow our conversations to be as collaborative as possible, where the questions ran in both directions, from “interviewer” to “interviewee” and from “interviewee” to “interviewer.” This flow of questioning varied from interview to interview. For example, Sister Anderson initiated an extended line of questioning into the impacts of my experiences over the two years I had been attending Primitive Baptist services:

“Well, let me ask you again, Eddie.
“You’ve been going to a Primitive Baptist church now, off and on, for two years.”

“Yeah,” I acknowledged.

“You always bring your camera and your microphone.
“Have you ever got up on Sunday morning and thought,

37 Fabian 1990:11.
‘I’m going to Philadelphia or Hollow Springs, and I’m just going to sit and listen?’ ”

“I did, I did once.
I went to Hollow Springs,

“It was the end of March.
“Because I hadn’t been up here in a while. Me and Sarah just came, and sat, well, I guess over at Hollow Springs it was on this side.
“Sat up there, and actually got to sing.
“You know usually
I have to sit over there and just lip sync, you know? Because I’m too close to the, it’s all you could hear, so I have to be quiet.
“But it was quite a different—like you know, I was, I have a question kind of about that because it was very different for me

“Actually, you know, feeling the words rather than just [mouthing silent syllables] you know, moving my mouth, but the actual feeling of the making of the sounds of the words. The actual singing was quite a bit different to me.”

“Well now, how was your spiritual feeling at this time,” Sister Anderson pressed further.

“At that time?
“That was,
It was quite a bit heightened. I mean,

I can’t say that I can make sense of it, but it was,

“It was more heightened when I got to sing. I don’t remember what song we’re singing, but the last,
the last note, and everyone just held on it. And all the voices together, you could feel the,

“I don’t know. To me I felt like I could feel the other voice vibrating, or resonating, I guess.”

“Well, have you ever felt like you wanted to come to the church for the singing and for the preaching and visiting with friends just for your spiritual self?”

I hesitated, contemplating my difficulty in answering.

“Sure, I think so. I mean well, that’s why I came the one time.
“But a lot of times I don’t like to bring this stuff [recording equipment] in here. I feel—
I don’t like to sit over here [referring to the side of the church opposite of where the congregation sits].

I would rather just sit there…

“And I also think it’s important to record the singing and the services.”

“Well, has your mind, has your spirit, thoughts, has it changed over the last two years?” continued Sister Anderson, searching for new ways to bring me out of my researcher’s shell.

“Over the last

“Four years

because it was about four years ago when I met Jack McGinnis, and I had never heard of any of this, you know, even though this is right in my neck of woods, you know…

“I had never heard of it.”

“Well, before that, did you have any connection with Baptists, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal.”

“Well, my mother goes to a Presbyterian church, so I went to that some but was never too involved.

I don’t know it just wasn’t ever—

“And—”

“Well, do you feel like you’ve ever had a personal relationship with God?”

Again, I take a lengthy amount of time to try to compose some answer, which ultimately fails to come together:

“Not, not, I have had moments, but nothing sustained, you know, nothing that I felt like,

“Well, there have been things that I don’t really understand,

“My only experience with Baptists, prior to finding out about Primitive Baptists, was with Southern Baptists, and that wasn’t a good experience at all [laughs].

“I mean, I know, I know they’re not bad people, but it wasn’t,

“But I don’t know.

“Maybe if I had grown up coming to small church like this, I’d have [a different personal perspective on religion].
“Before I met Jack McGinnis, if you would have told me that I would be sitting here right now, I’d say, ‘You’re crazy.’

“Now, I’m not going to say, you know, that I’m Old Baptist, or anything.

“You know, I can’t say that I won’t ever be.

“You know, I don’t know.

“I’m not going to say, ‘Oh, I won’t ever do that.’ I don’t know.”

Sister Anderson then asked, “Do you know why you don’t know?”

“I don’t know why I don’t know,” and I went on to talk about how Primitive Baptists’ non-evangelical tendencies resonate with my personal views, after which Sister Anderson said:

“When I asked you that question,

that you don’t know,

“When you don’t know, to me that means that your heart is very susceptible to God’s way,

and that he in his own time will show you.”

“I’m not,

I wouldn’t disagree with that.

“I used to would have.

“I mean, and that’s been,

“The biggest change in me has

been opening to really give real consideration other peoples beliefs and thoughts

rather than thinking I’ve got it all figured out.”

“That’s a big step, that’s a very big step,” Sister Anderson concluded.

Far from being concerned with mere data acquisition, I am concerned with interaction—how the interview is constructed by all parties involved. While I was asking Sister Anderson about her experiences in the church, she was asking me about mine. How have I been affected by attending services? I am not suggesting that I desired, or was even prepared for, such a line of questioning. Certainly, my discomfort is apparent in the transcription above as I seem to

38 Interview, July 16, 2006.
never quite answer Sister Anderson’s questions, starting a thought but shifting to another before finishing. This is even more blatant when listening to the recording of our conversation, the hesitations and quiver in my voice. The point is that the two of us were working out together an interpretation of my presence among the congregations—I approaching from the position of research and Sister Anderson approaching from the position of worship. Nor am I suggesting that I, in a move of socio-cultural savvy, “allowed” participants to simply ask me questions, whereby I would endure, but only endure, such sequences in interviews. Sister Pansy Watson called it turning the tables on me, and their interpretations of my presence inform my methodology and approach in important ways.

Most significant among these, “my work” of recording and then writing is removed from my interpretive control and is imbued with believers’ interpretations. “My work,” then, becomes “my search” for spirituality from such a perspective, and I cannot flatly deny such simply on the grounds that I do not yet perceive it in that way. This sort of relinquishing of an interpretive monopoly—although not relinquishing my interpretations (of “my work” or otherwise)—is paramount to my methodological approach in that my effort is to employ such a collaborative construction of meaning as exemplified in the above interview excerpt more deeply within the construction of “knowledge of cultural knowledge” represented in this ethnographic text. Simply, if I cannot be open-minded enough to accept that I may not have the “eyes to see and ears to hear”—that I need interpretive assistance from church members—then I have missed one of the essential characteristics that has surfaced throughout my experiences with the congregations—humility.

39 As Johannes Fabian refers to ethnographies (See Fabian 1990).

40 “The words of Solomon” as often cited by Elder Jackson.
Yet, I am creating this text. Quoting, no matter how extensive, is strategic. I can share cooperative constructions of discourse in interviews, as I have above, but I am still the one sharing. Additionally, as Fabian has noted on such interview exchanges, “No matter how far away I got from a positivistic conception of research, no matter how communicative my approach had become, I still acted as an investigator. As long as one participant asks questions and the other is expected to respond with information (irrespective of how much grammatical or rhetorical questioning occurs in their dialogue) the situation will remain asymmetrical, to say the least.” Of course, in my example, Sister Anderson’s questions are far beyond the mere “grammatical or rhetorical” sort. Her questions were serious efforts to locate me within the world from her perspective, and I considered them as serious inquiry. Sister Watson “turn[ed] the tables” on me with similar serious questions. Yet the fact still remains that such in depth episodes were atypical within the entire corpus of interviews. Fabian was concerned with the invocation of the terms “dialogic,” “communicative,” and I might add “collaborative” among others, as hedges against the power dynamics of cultural interaction, in effect as attempts to lend a sense of “authenticity” or “authority” to the ethnographic text.

I use these terms—“dialogue,” “communication,” and “collaboration”—but not with intentions of authenticating my writing. All three terms imply the coming together of multiplicity in some sort of unity (not meaning “sameness”). Far from removing the unbalanced power dynamic in such interaction, as I hold ultimate control of what is printed on the page, I am faced with the responsibility to allow a diversity of perspectives through.

Writing an ethnographic text from such material should operate in a manner that allows these perspectives to emerge in a performative creation. Here is where the “break from reality”


42 My implication is not that all who use such terms directly or indirectly attempt such an erasure of contingency, only that the tendency is present.
The notion of performance theory comes in most frustratingly. If worship as a cultural process involves the collaborative construction of experience among worshippers and the divine, and interviews as processes of conversation involve the negotiating of self-other positioning, then the actual writing becomes performative in that I must “rescue the ‘said’ of…discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms,” but then evoke the dynamics of such “occasions”—the momentary processes that they are—within the confines of these “perusable terms.” In short, ethnographic writing is fictive, often a “this is what I think about all of that” disguised as “this is what is.”

**Performance Theory**

The term *performance* often connotes entertainment or show, which was the first thing that came to Elder Jackson’s mind when I mentioned performance as my theoretical framing. “Well, I’ve never even heard anyone say, ‘That was a good performance you just did,’ ” he said.

“But I have heard people say, you know, ‘That’s me. That song reflects how I feel. I can identify with that song. ‘You know, that’s just the way we Primitive Baptists feel, isn’t it.’”

This sense of identity and personal investment in cultural production is precisely my reason for employing performance theory. My overall task here is to explain my use of the term with particular attention to shearing away the sense of a “break from reality” that so often piggybacks on general notions of performance and its application to the study of expressive culture. I am not attempting to re-explain believers’ spiritual experiences through singing as performance. Rather, my effort is to negotiate performance theory with the theological paradigms of believers in a way that allows the useful concepts from performance theory to filter through without

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44 Interview, June 12, 2006.
denying the spiritual realities founding experiences with the sacred. Essentially, my argument is: metaphysical glimpses of the sacred are imparted by the grace of God, and they are embodied and given meaning in the actions of believers, or performance.

*Performance*, as I employ the term, derives from scholarship in folklore, anthropology, and linguistics, as approaches to the study of culture began to turn from being object-oriented to being process-oriented, what folklorist Richard Bauman characterized as “a fundamental reorientation from folklore-as-materials to folklore-as-communication.”45 In essence the change was from a focus on the *products* of culture to the *production*, situated in the social milieu of everyday life.46 Thus, performance has been employed as a way of orienting the mind toward cultural processes with an emphasis on action emerging in a particular time and place. Bauman describes performance as “a mode of speaking…convey[ing] a dual sense of artistic *action*—the doing of folklore—and artistic *event*—the performance situation, involving performer, art form, audience, and setting.”47 This limitation of performance to speaking is too narrow, but the point is to conceptualize cultural action as communication.

I invoke performance in a more general sense of active communication. Bauman and Briggs describe this framing as a shift “away from study of formal patterning and symbolic content of texts to the emergence of verbal art in the social interaction between performers and audiences.”48 In the field of ethnomusicology, Steven Feld and Anthony Fox described a shift “from asking how sound reflects social structure to how musical performance embodies and articulates social imagination and practices, how sonic organizations are total social facts,


46 *The social milieu of everyday life* is an expansive and ambiguous concept that has no firm or unitary definition but is comprised of all those forces, perceptible and imperceptible, created and experienced by people with people in their lives.

47 1977: 3-4.

48 1990: 59-60.
saturated with messages about time, place, feeling, style, belonging, and identity.”⁴⁹ Hymn singing is not merely a reflection of the structuring theological principles as represented in doctrine. Rather, through performance and religious experience, these structuring principles are engaged and interpreted.

This is not to say that formal patterns (or cultural norms) that bear in some way upon communication and the content of that communication are now to be ignored in an effort to isolate and consider communication in terms of pure individual processes—or action within a vacuum. Rather, in Pierre Bourdieu’s way of thinking, communication as performance reunites actors with the formal patterns of their society and the symbolic content they produce within their social milieu.⁵⁰ That is, meaning is produced through the active and communicative interaction between social structure and individual creativity. One is not to be derived from the other, but both are produced and re-produced by the constant interaction between them. Further, “symbolic content” is the textual or visual representation of sounds in the form of words as references or pointers to some object or idea. The problem with such a conception is that it assumes that meaning exists in fixed form on a plane of ultimate stability and only needs to be discovered.⁵¹ Performance approaches meaning from a perspective that understands meaning-making as a process of expanding, reducing, refiguring, reversing, or otherwise shaping previous meaning in the creation of new meanings, not implying that this new meaning is necessarily estranged from or otherwise incompatible with the past, but only that it is different in some way.

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⁵⁰ 1977.

⁵¹ Feld 1984.
Derived from dramaturgical (or theatrical) models, however, performance theory, or certain aspects of it, becomes problematic in the context of Primitive Baptist worship, which downplays human ability to effect (or affect) the sacred. The term “performance” is a double-edged sword. I use the sword metaphor to evoke the cutting and slicing that imposing any theoretical frame inherently inflicts upon any subject of study. Swung in one direction performance connotes the doing of belief. Doing is predicated by believing. Swung in the other direction, performance implies fallacy—a break from reality or simple entertainment. Believing is predicated by doing. These antithetical concepts contend, clash, and diverge, but are equally likely to be present even within a religious context. It is certainly possible that one may attend church and simply go through the motions. I am not implying that believers at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia approach their faith in this manner, only that the possibility exists. One person might be spiritual and another of the world—one is worshipping while another is merely singing a song.

Even within the more narrow usage in the field of folklore, performance is viewed as resting on the fulcrum of the display of competence. Success of a given performance is then determined by the evaluation of a performer’s competence by an audience. Any notion of successfully displaying competence, however, is counter to the large part of Primitive Baptist thought. As a depraved being, for example, an individual cannot take credit for any performance in a spiritual sense; the sincere praise and humility in the presence of God becomes lie and a false profession when under the guise of show. Referring to the “theatricality” that comes bound with a term like performance, Glenn Hinson suggests that performance and accompanying terms of act, play, and show all imply a “clear distance between speaker and
hearer” and “pose the performer’s primary concern as pleasing the audience.”

Sisters Ruth St. Clair and Isla Wood were explicit in stating that such was not a concern in their churches:

“Well, there’s nothing in our church that’s there for entertainment.” Said Sister St. Clair as she sat next to Sister Wood on the loveseat in her living room. “You go solely because you want to worship.

“And if all the entertainment and the extra stuff that has been added to the church—
“When the church was set up, it was set up for singing praying, and preaching.

“And if all this other additives were taken out of the churches, these other churches wouldn’t have anymore than we do.
“But we’re not there for entertainment.

We’re just there to worship.”

Sister Wood conjoined,

“We’re there for a peaceful quiet hour and a half, I’d say, for worship.”

Distance is precisely what believers hope, with the aid of the Spirit, to overcome during a service. Closeness is the goal, not displays of competence or show.

Deborah Kapchan writes, “There is an agentive quality to performance, a force, a playing out of identities and histories… To perform is to act in the fullest sense of the word.” In this sense, performance is not necessarily a show in terms of entertainment, but can be the expression of belief—or believing. It can be, as many describe it, a break from the ordinary or mundane.

Experience with the sacred is certainly a break from the ordinary or mundane in that it is

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52 2001: 237.

53 Interview, November 6, 2005.

54 2003:121.

55 Such as is put forth by Bauman 1977 and Hymes 1981.
momentary transcendence beyond the confines and constraints of this world to glimpse the eternal and immortal glory that awaits the child of God. Yet most scholars of performance studies are embedded within dramaturgical metaphors, conceptualizing a break from the ordinary of mundane as a break from reality. Believers, in contrast, do not see any break in reality when their experience transcends the confines of this world.

Charles Briggs in his work on Mexicano verbal art in New Mexico cites Dell Hymes’ definition of performance “as cultural behavior for which a person assumes responsibility to an audience.” This definition, while appropriate for some contexts, is less useful here because it is too specifically oriented to a one-way flow of communication from pre-established performer to pre-established audience. At Hollow Springs and Philadelphia there is no demarcation of performer and audience. All congregants are simultaneously both. The flow of communication originates from multiple points, conjoins in a thickness of melody and harmony, and spreads out in all directions. Perhaps if they formed choirs that sat in specially designated seating from which to sing to the remainder of the congregation, this physical separation of choir and congregation might accommodate the notion of communication from performer to audience. Yet this is precisely why they do not form choirs. Communication through singing is open to all and is multi-directional—it is directed to the self, to others, and to God.

The concepts of performer and audience are muddied further by attempting to answer the question, who is performing? The singers produce sounds from their bodies, they sing hymns of praise. To whom? Consider Psalm 100, which Elder Jackson used in his opening comments to the 108th Annual Old Time Singing at Hollow Springs.

Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing. Know ye that the Lord, he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter into his gates with thanksgiving.

and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him and, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations.\textsuperscript{57}

One interpretation of this passage is that believers are the performers and God is their audience, receiving the praises of thankful believers. Believers, in fact, do sing their praises to God, offers and demonstrations of humble thanks for what God has done in their lives. But if they are successful in attaining the sacred experience of transcendence, of experiencing that “closeness” with the Holy Spirit and with one another, God must be performing as well. Such a point is wrapped in song as in the opening stanza of the opening hymn of the 108\textsuperscript{th} Annual Old Time Singing at Hollow Springs:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Come, thou almighty king, \\
Help us thy name to sing, \\
Help us to praise!
Father all glorious, \\
Over all victorious, \\
Come and reign over us, \\
Ancient of days.}\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

The sense of performance I invoke in this work is oriented toward the multiplex flow of communication and meaning construction across the gulf of experience between this world and the sacred. Singers are simultaneously givers and receivers. While believers offer their praises in song from their pews in this world, they also receive from God the spiritual power to understand and experience those praises as sacred.

Dell Hymes described the moment of invoking a frame outside the mundane as the “breakthrough to performance.”\textsuperscript{59} Employing special cues or gestures, such as the verbal marker in narrative, “Once upon a time,” the performer signifies to others when a particular performance frame is invoked. An example in Primitive Baptist worship is when Elder Jackson

\textsuperscript{57} Psalm 100. \\
\textsuperscript{58} Text sung as printed in Cayce, \textit{The Good Old Songs}. \\
\textsuperscript{59} 1975.
asked amid the small talk as believers enter the church and greet one another, “Does anyone
have a number?” or when Sister Watson announced, “We’re going to sing four-eighty-seven.”
Such cues mark the shift from conversational small talk to spiritually minded worship.

Frames as Erving Goffman establishes the concept in *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the
Organization of Experience* are “definitions of a situation [that] are built up in accordance with
principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective
involvement in them.” **60** This definition implies a set of norms or conventions that imbue
particular events with an interpretive sphere. While believers certainly invoke or assume a
particular frame when entering church for worship, their theological philosophy and faith are
not stepped into and out of like an actor playing a role and then living her of his life outside of
it. Their belief pervades all spheres of social and private life. On the other hand, when they
enter church, they do not simply by walking through the door enter the realm of the sacred.
The sacred church is not a building at all but is a group of people. The church building, for
believers, is merely that—a building. There they sit in this building in this world, worshiping a
God residing in another.

**A Few Words on Belief and the Study of Culture**

Performance straddles the area of ambiguity between the “show” and the “real,” and
distinctions between them reside in interpretation. I am not attempting to reconstruct ongoing
cultural processes as distinct performances. Rather, I am performing anew, communicating my
sense of the collaborative participatory and conversational exploration of experiences of
transcendence through hymn singing. If communicating such a collaborative effort is to be
successful beyond a smoke and mirror “show,” I must accept belief as real—not as a mere

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**60** 1986: 10-11.
function of one’s self-deception or psychological trickery in response to the world.\textsuperscript{61} Glenn Hinson argues that typical studies of belief tend to invoke a “denial, disregard, [or] assimilation” of extra-worldly experience, (explicitly or implicitly) labeling believers as naïve, confined by limits of tradition as it shapes the “world of dialogue” from which narrative accounts emerge, hallucinatory, or plain and simply wrong.\textsuperscript{62} It is the assumption that people live and operate within the rigid limits of some unified “tradition,” where traditions are conceived of as concrete sets of rules rather than the creative processes of building the future from lessons of the past that they are,\textsuperscript{63} that is a most dangerous reification of the researcher’s own belief system—essentially, the implication is that “if they knew what I know, they would think like I think.” Belief is removed from experience and deposited in the safe (for outside researchers) area of narrative tradition. In other words, belief is ripped from reality and sewn into rhetoric.

Further, this idea of a defining tradition is no more than imagined isolationism, pretending that the people folklorists (or anthropologists, or any of the other –ists) work with live in a vacuum. What about, then, Elder Jackson’s comment in his extended reply to my question, “What would you like to see come out of all this?”

“[W]hat are those things that make us distinctively different, even in a modern world, where a fast-paced social change, even spiritual change, seems to come so automatically. “And we’re all in the mainstream, so to speak, but yet here is this little island, separate and apart.”\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{61} Although the phrase “if they be not deceived” seems to leave open the possibility for the operation of psychological processes in regard to perceptions of salvation. See Peacock and Tyson 1989:89.

\textsuperscript{62} 2001. See Appendix: Stepping Around Experience and the Supernatural, pp. 327-34.

\textsuperscript{63} See Glassie 2003 for a thorough discussion of shifting from and object-oriented to a process-oriented conception of tradition.

\textsuperscript{64} Interview, June 12, 2006.
Rather than explaining away experience and belief as a function of an isolated world of discourse, Elder Jackson’s words point to the power of experience and belief amidst a conglomeration of narrative discourses. Sister Watson, similarly, touched on this when telling me about a conversation she had with her grandson:

“And I said, ‘Have you ever thought about joining the Old Baptist church?’ And he said, ‘Grandma,’

“He said, ‘They’s some things that I don’t agree with the Old Baptist.’

“And I said,

‘I agree with that;
there’s some things I don’t agree with.’
“I said, ‘But I haven’t found anything that’s any closer to the truth than this is.’”

I am not arguing that traditions of narrative discourse do not factor into relationships between experience, belief, and their expressions. Rather, I suggest that, first, these traditions are not preexisting rhetorical forms, isolated from other traditions, but are processes of interaction, and, second, narrative discourse is not, or does not define, experience but rather points to it. Believers thoughtfully and actively assess their experiences and belief amidst the push and pull of the past and future and construct their expressions through confluences of collective representation and individual creativity.

Studies that banish belief to tradition and experience to oblivion limit the possibilities for “the enlargement of the universe of human discourse” through which cultural understanding emerges. The lines around explanation and the explained are boldly drawn with no room for overlap. “Other” beliefs are deflated and shaped into a benign form that does little more than attempt to establish the efficacy of the writers’ beliefs, thus providing the writer with a self-deception of his or her own—the removal of indeterminacy from his or her conception of existence. In this study, I make room for belief as a way of knowing that removes

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65 Interview, March 15, 2005.

indeterminacy, or at least, I admit that belief is no more indeterminate than conceptions of objective science.

I close this chapter with one personal experience that changed the way I think about the relationship between belief and experience. Elder Jackson and a group of Primitive Baptist believers in the Beech Mountain community of Avery and Watauga counties, with the help of members of Hollow Springs and Philadelphia churches, finished construction on a new church building in Winter 2006. To mark the establishment of the new church—named Presnell’s Chapel in remembrance of Ed and Nettie Presnell, devout believers in the community—a dedication service was held on May 7, 2006. The church, built on the side of Beech Mountain, is beautifully constructed with a generous use of hardwood in the interior. A mountainscape mural painted by one of the local members in the back-right corner—half on the back wall and half on the right wall—evokes the roundness of the horizon. In front is a slightly elevated pulpit platform, and by the front entrance, a table with guest book and photos of the Presnells. Above, on the wall, is a dulcimer played by Nettie and built by Ed couched between the painted inscription of the first three verses of the 100th Psalm and a portrait of the Presnells.

Attendance was particularly large for this occasion with standing room only, and there was not much of that by the time service got underway. I set up the recording equipment in the

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67 Members at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia that I talk with often emphasize the materials of building construction, beyond aesthetics, as important to singing. The acoustic space of their church buildings are often compared, with hard surfaces, especially natural wood, being most sonically pleasing. More on this in a later chapter.

68 “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing. Know ye that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”

69 These features, particularly the mural and the sort of “monument”—for lack of a better term—to the Presnells, are interesting in themselves, but in terms of a general conception of Primitive Baptists’ eschewing ornament in church buildings, a discussion of these features might be of interest. But then I think of the portraits of Elders that adorn the walls of Pond Mountain Primitive Baptist Church in Ashe County, North Carolina. Maybe my initial surprise was a bit excessive.

70 The church has less than ten members, although attendance at services is slightly larger on most occasions.
back left corner. The weather outside was rainy and unusually cold for May. The church was full; the sounds of church were full. As wonderful and beautiful as the singing was that morning, the experience that most affected my research approach came in the form of the spoken word—after singing, before the sermon.

After the son of one member sang a solo71 “Angel Band,” the dim murmer of an infant emerged, and then the faint sound of weeping. Elder Gene Watson, who had been pastor at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia prior to a stroke, took the stand—the only time I have seen him do so:

“It’s been seven years since I

tried to speak.

“Thirty-five years,

I have spoken.

For years.”

As I focused intensely on Elder Watson and his words—not through the view finder of my video recorder, but with my naked eyes—I was stunned by the impact and the weight carried by this most parsimonious introduction. My vision became obscured by the saltiness of tears.

Sarah, by my side, wept also. My ears tuned to the weeping of others. My tears discomforted me, and I looked away when Elder Jackson’s tear-filled eyes met my own.

“Psalms,

Number four

Twenty-three:

71 As I have indicated previously, solo singing is not typical in these churches, or most Primitive Baptist churches. For special occasions such as this, however, some liberty is taken with the general tendency. In addition to this occasion, I witnessed solo singing at Hollow Springs Church twice. Once, my aunt sang an accompanied version of one hymn at the end of the Annual Old Time Singing. On another occasion, prior to a “regular” service,” Sister Watson sang a song she had learned among a group of singers and musicians that she and Elder Watson perform with at their local Hardee’s restaurant. Both solo performances during a service were by people who do not belong to Primitive Baptist churches.
As Elder Watson read this familiar psalm, my vision cleared amidst the steady flow of tears. I saw the tears of others, though their backs were to me. I saw the tears of others, though they had long ceased to produce them. I saw the tears of others, though they had not yet shed them. As I was explaining this to Sister Anderson, “You know, it was almost like I could, not see with me eyes, but,” she finished my thought, “With your heart and your spirit.” I experienced perhaps the closest thing I have to the words of Solomon, often spoken by believers and better that any I can muster, “Eyes to see and ears to hear.”

Before I had described my experience to Sister Anderson, in a phone conversation with me she referred to the dedication service as a “moment out of time.” She was speaking to the uniqueness of experience and the unifying power of the Spirit, across belief systems, a story I will pick up later in a chapter.

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\[\text{72 This description should not be confused with explanation or analysis. While I am aware that many, particularly in the world of cemented academics, will disparage my inclusion of such an experience, I include it because it shifted my understanding of the nature of experience.}\]
My point in sharing this personal experience is not to construe (or miscontrue) it as an “authentic” religious experience. I am not a Primitive Baptist, nor even a Christian. However, what I experienced was real and beyond my ability to explain. I cannot offer a concrete analysis of what it means. Was it God? Was I saved? Did I only want to be saved? Was I tricked by Primitive Baptist rhetoric? Was it sentimental longing to see Elder Watson in the pulpit (his gifted eloquence, which I have heard about)? Was this merely an instance of academic longing for “authenticity?” Whatever the answers to these subjective questions may be, I feel like I experienced some form of the “closeness” that Elder Jackson spoke of, or “the whole gamut of emotions,” as Sister Revonda Swanson described. I felt that unity and force.

While I had been asking questions about “experiences,” I lacked the experiential maturity to realize the difficult terrain of disjuncture between experience and reflection that believers crossed in order to respond to my questions. My experience at Presnell’s Chapel changed the way I perceived believers’ experiences. While their words remain the same, they no longer seem so abstract and difficult to understand. Instead of seeing worship as rituals of repetition that inculcate believers’ with a pattern of religious experience, I now understand that worship is new each occasion. There may be cultural patterns or templates, but they are not of experience. Rather these patterns are of expression that believers use in reflecting upon unique experience. These expressions are unified not through the cultural patterns that serve as a base template for expression, but through the shared recognition of their uniqueness.

73 Although as an infant, I did have water splashed in my face at the Methodist church that my parents (well, mostly my mother) were attending when I was born.

74 By including this experience, I am aware that I run the possibility of being harangued for being overly subjective or for being overly imaginative in reflecting upon my research. However, such accusations only reinforce Hinson’s argument (which I discussed above) that extra-worldly experience related by believers is often dismissed by academic writers as rhetoric that conditions and produces experience. Or related to this, Edith Turner was “warn[ed]…that not every anthropologist can have such an experience [witnessing “a visible spirit” during a Ndembu Iamba curing ritual] and that [writing about] it would make other anthropologists anxious about whether they should try to have such an experience…, that [she] should keep quiet” (1994:86).
The communicative process of ethnography, then, requires a collaboration of ideas. Just as culture is the collaborative effort of individuals acting in the world, so too is the study thereof. Sacred Scripture, or more precisely, the interpretations of such that form the doctrinal or knowledge base of Primitive Baptist belief, and Secular Theory, or more precisely the interpretations of such that form the paradigmatic or knowledge base of ethnographic study, constitute the primary bodies—as vast as they may be—of philosophical understandings that connect, in some way or another, throughout this text in the construction of a processual analysis of singing at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Churches.

A processual analysis, rather than describing the structural mechanisms—the rules and norms—that order a society and then predict a nominal cultural experience from those, seeks to investigate the interaction between social structure and human agency and improvisation to understand actual, particular cultural experience—in essence, to understand cultural experience as a product of people acting in the world as they find themselves.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{75} Rosaldo 1989.
3 Physical Context

Caldwell County

Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Churches are located in Caldwell County, North Carolina, near the city of Lenoir. Hollow Springs sits thirteen miles to the northeast along Highway 18, or Wilkesboro Road, near the community of Boomer\textsuperscript{76} and the Wilkes County line, and Philadelphia is about five miles to the south in the community of Cajah’s Mountain. While this area lies within the region of Appalachia as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission, most church members often distinguish their worship from that of “churches up in the mountains.” This area is geologically part of the foothills leading to the eastern escarpment of the Blue Ridge along the northwestern edge of the county.

Resting just below the face of the Blue Ridge, most of the county experiences much milder winters than do the neighboring western and northern counties. Snow one county to the west is often rain in Caldwell. Likewise, the area is much warmer in summer, as much as fifteen degrees Fahrenheit on some days, along with higher humidity. Slightly less than a third of the county in the west forms the northeast corner of Pisgah National Forest, which stretches westward to the Tennessee state line and southward to the Great Smokey Mountains and includes parts of nine other North Carolina counties.

The county is watered by three main rivers—the Catawba, in the form of Lake Rhodhiss and then Lake Hickory, along the southern border with Burke County; the Yadkin as it elbows

\textsuperscript{76} While Boomer when represented as a dot on a map is located in Wilkes County, addresses in the area of Hollow Springs Church are Boomer rather than nearby Kings Creek.
into the northern portion of the county on its way from the southeastern corner of Watauga County and into Wilkes; and the Johns River, which heads near Globe in the western third of Caldwell in Pisgah National Forest and eventually joins the Catawba. The two largest rivers, the Catawba in the south and the Yadkin in the north, each cut a swath of lowland that dominates the heart of the county, in which both churches and the county seat of Lenoir are located, between the Blue Ridge in the west and the tail end of the smaller Brushy Mountains along the eastern edge of the county.

The county is comprised of several small townships, in addition to the city of Lenoir, with more densely populated communities lying near Lenoir to the south and east in small residential and commercial districts amidst the county’s industrial center. North of Lenoir, the commercial and industrial development to the south gives way to a more sparsely populated and somewhat agrarian landscape.
While the county has a notable farming industry, 400 working farms and $52 million annual income, the local economy and job market is dominated by the manufacturing industry. Since the late nineteenth century and the arrival of a rail line, Lenoir has been a major furniture manufacturing center for Broyhill, Thomasville, Bernhardt, among others, feeding a global market for fine furniture. This industrial growth and change within the county also attracted in-migration from nearby mountainous counties (such as Watauga, Ashe, and Avery) as well as other areas in the state and beyond. While the majority of southern migration of the first half of the twentieth century (especially during war time production increases) was to large northern industrial centers in Baltimore, Washington D.C., Detroit, and Chicago, some found opportunities closer to home among the furniture and smaller industries in Lenoir and Caldwell County. Yet more recent (especially within the past ten years) global market changes and increased U.S. manufacture outsourcing has impacted the area significantly, as Sister Ava Connelly remarked during a church service in November 2005.

Concluding his introductory remarks before kneeling to pray, Elder Jackson said, “So I hope and pray that God might be with us this morning. Who and what might be on your hearts?” Sister Connelly then spoke up:

“Pray for all these people who are going to be losing their jobs when these next two Broyhill plants close at the end of the year.”

“Ah,” Elder Jackson paused to contemplate such an all too frequent trend in the county’s economic situation before continuing:

“Sister Ava, that is not a thing we want to think about much, is it?”

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77 North Carolina Cooperative Extension at North Carolina State University.

78 Williams 2002.
“-No-” she replied.
“-It’s bad, it really is.
That’s bad.

“We certainly want to do that.
“And our hearts are with each and every one, their families, that will be affected by this.

“I appreciate your faith, and your wanting to approach the Lord in that regard,
I really do.”

I sat and talked with Sister Connelly as we partook of the generous meal after service that Sunday. She was one of those losing her job in the plant closings. However, being close to retirement age, she was not too concerned for herself but for her younger colleagues. These year-end closings were merely two more in the chain reaction of closing doors among the county’s furniture plants. A few months earlier in August, Thomasville locked the gates on 400 employees. In December 2006, the Daily Record in nearby Hickory reported:

Broyhill Furniture, which said in June it would close one of its plants in Lenoir, announced Friday that it will also close the Lenoir Furniture Corp. plant in February. The Lenoir Furniture closing will mean the elimination of 390 jobs, while the earlier announcement of the Pacemaker plant’s closing involved nearly 700 jobs…Friday’s announcement means Broyhill will have closed 11 plants and one supply facility in North Carolina since 2001, displacing about 5,590 workers…79

In a changing socio-economic context in which agriculture gave way to industry, which is now giving way to somewhat uncertain but developing replacements such as tourism and the technology industry80 among others, the church serves as a “steadying force” for believers, spiritually and socially. Amidst shifting economies, church members at Philadelphia and Hollow Springs have taken on a variety of means of sustenance.

79 2006.
80 Plans for Google, Inc. to open a facility in the county are currently being negotiated.
Some of the churches’ members who made their livings in the counties’ furniture plants have been retired for several years, and thus have not been directly affected by the rash of plant closings since 2000. Elder Watson worked as a supervisor at a local plant, which since his retirement has “gone with the way of the world.” Brother Alfred Jenkins, too, worked for many years in furniture after arriving in Caldwell in the 1940s. Others who are still working, such as Sister Shirley and Brother David Anderson and Sister Janelle Miller, found work in plants in Hickory to the southeast and other locales outside the county.

Several church members do not work in the manufacturing sector. Sister Revonda Swanson is a nurse, working with a local general practitioner. Sister St. Clair, having worked some manufacturing jobs in the past, is now employed by the public library in Alexander County to the east. Sister Verna Walker (Sister Connelly’s mother) worked some in the furniture industry before going back to school at the local community college in the mid 1960s. At age 53, Sister Walker was among the first graduating class at the college and obtained a degree in library technology. Subsequently, she went to work as a library media specialist in the local school system before retiring early to care for her parents.

While the furniture and other manufacturers are not the sole basis of local economy, they certainly comprise the largest sector. Thus, even those not directly affected by the upsurge in outsourcing likely have a family member, friend, neighbor, or all three who have been.

The Churches

The religious landscape in the county, like many in North Carolina, is dominated by Baptists. Most of these are missionary churches that affiliate with the Southern Baptist Convention. Locally, these churches are organized under the Caldwell Baptists Association, Inc.
“that cooperate together in order to fulfill the Great Commission.” This association was organized in 1885 with sixteen churches and now includes seventy-five in the county. One member church, Globe, had been Primitive Baptist and affiliated with Hollow Springs and Philadelphia until sometime between 1927 and 1948, a period for which I have not found church records. The second largest denomination in the county is Methodist, and others include Presbyterian, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Episcopal, A.M.E., Church of God, Church of Christ, Seventh-Day Adventist, as well as several smaller denominational and non-denominational churches. Hollow Springs and Philadelphia are the only Primitive Baptist Churches in the County, having at one time affiliated with more than ten in Caldwell and neighboring counties.

Engraved in Old-English lettering at the bottom of the church sign by the edge of Clarke’s Chapel Road in front of Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Church reads: “Est. 1733,” establishing it as one of the oldest currently active churches in North Carolina. As early as 1695, William Screven established a Baptist church in Charleston, South Carolina, and by 1727, Elder Paul Palmer had established the first Baptist church in North Carolina at Chowan (or nearby at Cisco), along the Chowan River and the western edge of the Great Dismal Swamp in the northeastern corner of the state. While Shubal Stearns and the Sandy Creek Church he founded in 1755 in present-day Randolph County is often noted as the as the first significant push of Baptists into western North Carolina, the efforts of Screven, Palmer, and others point to a more polyphyletic spread of Baptists. Early history of Philadelphia church is not recorded,

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81 Caldwell Baptist Association.
83 McCauley refers to this church as specifically Separate Baptist, as opposed to the other major body at the time, the Regular Baptists (1995:203). Miles Richardson goes a step further to call Sandy Creek the “first Baptist church in the South” (2003:82n.7). Howard Dorgan, citing Robert Baylor Semple (whom McCauley also consulted) and Maloy Alton Huggins, also indicated Sandy Creek as the well spring of Baptists in the South, although not as explicitly: “By 1755—in what is now Randolph County, North Carolina—Stearns and [Daniel] Marshall had established Sandy Creek Church, from which Separate Baptists would…move deeper into the Carolinas…” (1999:119). He indicates that the Regular Baptists made inroads about ten years later (Ibid:121).
and because the substantial majority of current members did not arrive in Caldwell County until the late 1940s, oral documentation through narrative is unavailable. By 1856, however, the church established itself as Primitive Baptist as a founding church of the Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association.

Hollow Springs Church was established in a manner that echoes the familiar tale of splits and disputes over missions, Sunday Schools, and other institutions of the Second Great Awakening that began to flourish among Baptists in the first half of the nineteenth century.\(^84\) While the Kehukee Declaration of 1828 and the Black Rock Address of 1832 are often cited as the major beginnings, the actual splits came gradually throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. For Hollow Springs Church, this happened in 1852, which Sister Verna Walker described to me:

“It was formed by a split. There was another church on the other side of the road, Meadow Hill, and it was a Primitive Baptist church. But some of the people began to lean to the Missionary side. And we believe in home missions, and any kind of mission, if you’re going for the good and going on your own. But to have to be supported by somebody else or the church, we just don’t believe in that. And we believe that pastors don’t have to be a burden, a financial burden, to their church. But it was foreign mission that split Pleasant Hill\(^85\) [Meadow Hill]. And the two factions agreed that neither would use the name Meadow Hill. And Hollow Springs built across the road, and there is a little spring just behind the church in that little hollow. And the other faction went down in Wilkes County. You’ve seen the Little Rock church? Well, they

\(^84\) Dorgan notes “the great ‘Antimission Split’ during which Primitive Baptists began to emerge as a group occurred between 1825 and 1845 (1987:9). Yet, which he also notes, this development was more complex and extended throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, while it is beyond the scope here, such fissures over “mission” work continue in the present among some Primitive Baptists.

\(^85\) Pleasant Hill is another Missionary Baptist Church in the county.
couldn’t decide what to call it, and one fellow picked up a little rock and said, ‘Let’s call it Little Rock.’ And the difference between the two factions was missions and Sunday school.”

Hollow Springs, too, would become a founding church in the Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association.

**Re-Organized Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association**

On February 15, 1856 representatives from Hollow Springs, Philadelphia, Silver Creek, Globe, Montford’s Cove, and Ebenezer Churches gathered at Silver Creek Church in southern Burke County, North Carolina to form the Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association. Reasons for creating such an association of churches were stated in the minutes recorded at the meeting:

As the communion of the saints so the communion of the churches is a desirable blessing…There ought to be a coalescing or unity of several churches in one body…Such a conformation of churches is not expressly commanded in scripture, yet it receives a sufficient countenance and authority from the [light?] of [nature?] and the general laws of society. But more especially from a precedent established by the Apostolic authority recorded in Acts 15th…

Our Association [thus formed as?] a reputable body, it represents not a city, county, or nation, but the Churches of Christ Jesus. She is by no means deemed a superior judicature vested with coercive power or authority over churches. She presumes not to impose her sentiments on her constituents under [fain?] of excommunication; nor does she anathematize those who do not implicitly [subordinate?] to her determinations, which would be nothing less than tyranny…”

From its origins, then, the association viewed itself not as a hierarchical organization to oversee the business of its constituent churches, but rather, using the terms “communion” and

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86 Interview February 12, 2005.

87 Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association Minutes, 1856-1927. Philadelphia and Globe located in Caldwell County, Hollow Springs in Wilkes (present-day Caldwell), Silver Creek in Burke, Montford’s Cove in Rutherford, and Ebenezer in either Burke or Caldwell (the record is unclear).

88 Ibid.
“unity,” the statement of establishment emphasizes spiritual fellowship among constituent churches, and the reference to the “general laws of society” underscores that the association is a human construct, thus holding no authority in sacred matters. Simply put, the association established a social community of like-minded Primitive Baptists reaching across the four adjacent counties of Burke, Caldwell, Rutherford, and Wilkes.\(^9^9\)

Perhaps the statements in the minutes are a bit idealized in that the histories of Primitive Baptist Associations are full of instances of conflict and coercion, division and excommunication. However, the intention was to foster community among believers. Examining the available minutes of the Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association, a cyclical pattern of growth and redraw seems apparent. From 1856 until 1878 the association grew to over ten churches in six counties,\(^9^0\) adding Cross Anchor, Crooked Creek, and Reedy Patch Churches in Henderson County; Crossroads Church in Buncombe; South Creek Church in Burke, and Mountain Page Church.\(^9^1\) This was not merely a reactionary buttressing of the lines of defense against an emerging mainstream Baptist ideology of institutionalization, but a concerted effort to proliferate. Of the churches mentioned above, several were newly constituted. However, the bright-eyed vision at the organization of the Silver Creek Association in 1856 and its subsequent growth were relatively short lived.

Subsequent to the twenty-third meeting of the Silver Creek Association in 1878, a six-year gap in the minute book appears.\(^9^2\) When meeting resumed in 1884, the association was

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\(^9^9\) County boundaries in 1856 situated Hollow Springs (at the same location it is currently located) within Wilkes County. Since, Caldwell was expanded to encompass the location of the church.

\(^9^0\) As constituted in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

\(^9^1\) Location not identified.

\(^9^2\) The Globe Baptist Church Record, 1797-1911 indicates that that church nominated delegates to the Silver Creek Association in August 1879 in anticipation of the meeting in September, although there is not indication of one
renamed the Re-Organized Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association. The meeting was held at Philadelphia Church and moderating the session was Elder William Lundy from the Mountain District Primitive Baptist Association. Of the six founding churches of the Silver Creek Association, only the three Caldwell Churches—Hollow Springs, Philadelphia, and Globe—remained. Thus what had grown into a large association reaching into several counties condensed by this time. While there is no clear indication in the minutes of what caused the apparent disbanding and reorganization, and the details of the events have passed from current memory, the rebuilding effort of the association is evidenced in the minutes of the first meeting. The writer, presumably P. Carlton, the clerk for this “inaugural” session, included a recommendation made at the meeting, urging “churches composing [conforming?] the Silver Creek Association to use all lawful means to procure preachers to attend them.”

Three local congregations came together to renew their associational bond of fellowship, seeking assistance from nearby associations in the Blue Ridge, and thus transforming their network of fellowship. Prior to this point there had been no indication of correspondence with the Mountain District Association. Within a few years correspondence had been set up with other nearby mountain associations, Senter in Ashe County and Roaring River in Wilkes, and with the Bear Creek Association based in the Piedmont counties of Anson, Stanly, and Union.

By 1885 the Re-Organized Silver Creek Association began expanding its constituent churches, as had the first incarnation. Received by letter were Baptist Valley Church located near Foscoe and Shull’s Mill, Watauga County (1885), Zion Church of Watauga County (1888),

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actually being held. Additionally, the following year several members were excluded from the church for “departing and organising themselves together from the faith.”

93 Churches comprising this association are located mostly in Allegheny County, North Carolina and Grayson and Carroll Counties in Virginia.

94 Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association Minutes, 1856-1927.
Ebenezer (1891),\textsuperscript{95} Philadelphia-Rutherford\textsuperscript{96} on dismissal from the Bear Creek Association (1893), and a newly constituted Trades Fork Church (1896). In 1901 another church, Happy Home in Burke County, appears as the site of that year’s association meeting. Within ten years the association seems to have condensed to include the following churches: Hollow Springs, Philadelphia, Globe, Baptist Valley, and Zion, with Philadelphia-Rutherford requesting a letter of dismissal in 1912 and Ebenezer and Trades Fork no longer mentioned in the minutes. The record ends in 1927.

That same year, Mountain Home Primitive Baptist Church was established in West Asheville (Buncombe County), and soon was received into the Re-Organized Silver Creek Association.\textsuperscript{97} By 1949, when the available association minutes resume, Globe, Baptist Valley, and Zion Churches had all left the association, and Reddies River of Wilkes County had been received. Thus, the Re-Organized Silver Creek Association had undergone another significant reorganization, now constituted by Hollow Springs, Philadelphia, Mountain Home, and Reddies River.

By this time, Elder Henry Clay McMillon, who brought with him a significant portion of the current membership at Philadelphia, had moved from Cosby, Tennessee to pastor Hollow Springs, Philadelphia, and Reddies River Churches. Elder McMillon relinquished his duties as pastor of Reddies River by 1959, and Elder W.E. Snyder was listed as that church’s pastor in the minutes. The Association continued as composed of these four churches for the next forty years. Toward the end of the twentieth century, Reddies River, reduced to only three elderly

\textsuperscript{95} Whether or not this Ebenezer Church is the same Ebenezer that helped found the original association is unclear as no indication of either church is given and such a name is quite common among Baptist churches.

\textsuperscript{96} Designated as “Philadelphia-Rutherford” in the minutes so as not to be confused with “Philadelphia-Caldwell.”

\textsuperscript{97} The minutes for the 1927 meeting of the Re-Organized Silver Creek Association do not mention Mountain Home as joining at that time, but Sister and Elder Watson indicated that the church joined just after its establishment (Interview, March 15, 2005).
members who were no longer able to attend services, disbanded, leaving the Association in its current form with Hollow Springs, Philadelphia, and Mountain Home.

Because of the long drive between Asheville and Lenoir, and because of conflicting meeting schedules, members at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia do not visit Mountain Home as often as they would like, making their Association meeting when all three churches gather every September a much anticipated event. Instead, because the two Caldwell churches share a pastor, the cycle of worship service attendance remains centered at the two churches.

While it may be tempting to view the current state of the association as a lull and a redraw, there remains active community development. As mentioned prior, Elder Jackson and a group of believers on Beech Mountain along the Avery-Watuaga County line have recently established Presnell’s Chapel Primitive Baptist Church, which Elder Jackson hopes will join the Silver Creek Association. Contemplating the closing of some of the Primitive Baptist churches in northwestern North Carolina, Elder Jackson said, “I have a board that I picked up from the rubble from South Fork [Church, which his mother grew up attending].”

“I tell you one thing I would like to do. I’d like to open a Primitive Baptist church in Boone.

“I bet I could probably get a half dozen college kids, maybe one or two elderly people.

“Shucks, we wouldn’t need many. [laughs]

“I’d love to do that.

Maybe one day God will want me too,
I don’t know.”98

In addition to “official” affiliation in the form of the Re-Organized Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association, which extends to Asheville, a geography of ties extends through Elders to embrace other churches they are affiliated through pastoral duties. The network is

98 Interview, June 12, 2006.
widened further by connections individual church members have established with other areas. Until somewhat more recent years the churches’ lines of affiliation and fellowship among other churches typically stretched southward to Asheville and further to western South Carolina and eastward to the Bear Creek Association, concentrated in the south-central North Carolina counties of Union, Anson, and Stanly but extending north to Forsyth and Guilford Counties and south into South Carolina.

While Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Churches have had connections with the Senter District Primitive Baptist Association in Ashe County and other churches in that area and Southwestern Virginia, affiliations with churches in Senter have been bolstered in the last ten years since Elder Jackson’s arrival. He shares pastoring duties at North Fork Primitive Baptist Church in that association. Along with affiliations to the northwest into Ashe County, with the establishment of Presnell’s Chapel Primitive Baptist Church that Elder Jackson pastors near the Avery-Watauga County line, Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Churches lines of fellowship now extend westward.

The Church Buildings

Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church is perched upon a hillside, facing in a westerly direction not quite perpendicular to Highway 18. A long, circular gravel driveway stretches up the hill, passes by the front doors of the church building where patches of grass attempt to reclaim formerly held territory, and back down the hill to meet the highway several hundred yards later. The church site is bordered in back by woods (mostly pine, it seems), in a configuration roughly concentric with the driveway.

Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Church sits about a hundred yards up a set of parallel gravel tracks from the road and just to the right, past a small cluster of cedar trees, atop a slight
grade. The contour of the land is flatter here than at Hollow Springs, which is situated at the foot of the western slope of the small Brush Mountains that line the eastern edge of the county. The grounds at Philadelphia are enclosed by a chain-linked fence and gate. Along the fence are planted various trees and shrubbery that bloom with red, pink, and white flowers in spring—that disguise the chain links and bolster the border between the grounds and the neighborhood that sits on the other side. Brother David Anderson told me they installed the fence because they were finding garbage and horse tracks littering the church grounds on Sunday mornings when opening the church building for service.

Each church building is a one-room rectangular meetinghouse of solid red-brick construction. One set of double doors, recessed in a front portico that extends five or six feet out from the front façade, serves as the main entrance. At Philadelphia this is the only entrance to the building. Hollow Springs has a door on each side near the back, which are used by some entering for worship on Sundays. Flanking the portico of each church building are two small bushes. There are no windows or adornments on the front of either church. The sides of each building are outfitted with several large windows, but there is no use of stained glass as in the more elaborate churches of other denominations. Additionally, neither church has a steeple nor other superfluous architectural features. The brick structures in their simplicity demonstrate Primitive Baptists’ belief that “God furnished the church with everything she needs” and that decorative additions and elaborations contribute nothing beneficial to worship.

The cemetery lies to the right of the church building at Philadelphia and spreads across the grounds nearly to the edge of the property. The cemetery is sectioned off from the rest of the ground by a wall or gate. The cemetery at Hollow Springs lies to the left of the church.

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99 Historically, many Primitive Baptist church buildings had separate single-door entrances for women and men, one on the left and one on the right. However, those were the main (usually, the only) entrances in the front of the buildings. These side doors are not for that purpose, and Sister Verna Walker did not remember ever having separate doors to the four or five buildings Hollow Springs used during her lifetime.
building, and a little hidden when approaching from the east. The lay of the cemetery follows the contour of the hill, but it appears to rise about three feet above the shelf carved and leveled to accommodate the placement of the church building, the earth being retained by a wall constructed of rectangular cinders and topped with a layer of red brick. Two boxwoods flank a set of three recessed steps that serves as an entry up to the cemetery. The cemeteries have long been maintained by church members, with donations from those (members and other family) who have relatives buried there. Burial used to be offered free, but recently the churches have had to begin charging for burials due to diminishing space and difficulties in gathering enough donations to cover the costs of upkeep.

Behind the church building at Philadelphia, and slightly to the left sits the fellowship arboretum—a concrete slab with a wooden table extending the length of it down the center and a narrow shelf on each side built into supports that hold up the roof. A few old pews and chairs line the sides for some seating. After service meals are served here, with various covered dishes laid out along the table and people gathered around, some sitting and some standing, enjoying the always bountiful feast prepared by the women of both churches. The fellowship arboretum at Hollow Springs, also located behind the church building, was converted some years back to a fully enclosed hall with funds willed to the church by Ruth McGee, a longtime attendee and friend of the congregation with a long family legacy at Hollow Springs, plus the labor of (mostly) church members.

The grounds at both churches are kept neat and clean and feel comfortably in harmony with the natural environment. There are no large paved parking lots, no playgrounds or jungle gyms, no paved side walks. Landscape adornment is minimal. The only other feature in addition to the main architectural structures is the church sign at each site.
Inside the “U” formed by the driveway at Hollow Springs is a large, sloping lawn in which stands the church sign, reading, “Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, Orig. Sept. 7, 1852.” The sign is situated close to the church, with a gravel driveway passing between it and the church building. At Philadelphia the sign is by the edge of the road, just inside the fence. It reads, “Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Church, Est. 1733.”

These signs are for designation and make no attempts to serve as the roadside evangelism common among churches of other denominations. As Elder Gene Watson said in comments during the 1995 occasion of the Old Time Singing at Hollow Springs:

“I know the sign out there doesn’t say ‘Welcome.’
‘It says ‘Hollow Springs Church,’
but we say welcome.”

Peering in from the opened front doors, the churches appear generally similar—plain white walls, no choir stand, no piano or organ, functional lighting, two sections of pews and a pulpit, no lobbies or foyers with mysterious stairways leading down to who knows where. Yet I note—so as not to portray the extremely romanticized image of the rustic meetinghouse with puncheon floors, pot-bellied stove, no electricity, and outhouse in back—the carpeted floors, the hum of centralized air conditioning (in summer, of course), P.A. system, upholstered chairs behind the preacher’s stand (sometimes called the “book-board,” but typically not “the podium”) in the pulpit. None of these additions are new to Primitive Baptist churches.

The center aisle is flanked by two sets of pews, nine rows in each at Philadelphia and twelve at Hollow Springs. The pews at Hollow Springs were donated to the church by the Broyhill family of Lenoir (a prominent furniture manufacturing and political family in the county and state) and manufactured locally at one of the furniture plants in the county. They resemble those in many other protestant churches with machine-hewed trim and decorative accents along

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100 Annual Old Time Singing at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, August 1995.
with the small racks mounted on their backs for holding hymnals. Along the seat of each pew stretches a mauve cushion. On the right side of the aisle, where worshipers sit, the small bookracks hold *The Old School Hymnal* (eleventh edition). Pews at Philadelphia are simpler in appearance, without the subtle ornaments of pews at Hollow Springs, and are constructed with narrow wood planks that creak and pop when congregants sit or stand, as when everyone rises to sing the opening hymn before Elder Jackson’s sermon. There are no custom-made seat cushions, although there are few small pillows on each row. Copies of the *Old School Hymnal* are stacked in a corner of each pew row, these pews not having the bookracks mounted on their backs. No bibles are kept in either church; believers bring their own.

In front of the main pew sections, the center aisle opens to what might considered the cross aisle. At each end of the cross aisle at Hollow Springs, there is a side door leading outside. This cross-aisle area in front of the pulpit is where Elder Jackson, Elder Watson, and Brother Jenkins meet congregants and one another in the extended hand of fellowship following preaching. Against the side walls and abutting the back wall on each side of the building, are two rows of shorter pews positioned perpendicular to the main seating sections. These pews are rarely used, except at Hollow Springs where Elder Watson always sits on the front side-pew on the right side of the church. During the two communions I attended at Philadelphia, on the left side the women rearranged the front side pew to face the one behind it to facilitate the footwashing service.

The pulpit area is an arch-shaped alcove, the floor of which is elevated about six inches. The preacher’s stand, of wooden construction about four feet tall by two-and-a-half or three feet wide, is equipped with a microphone and a pitcher of iced water and drinking glass for Elder Jackson. Behind the stand are cushioned armchairs, two at Philadelphia and three at Hollow
Springs (typically only used when visiting elders are present, such as at the Association meeting).

At Hollow Springs a beige jacquard curtain hangs in the back, covering the baptismal font.\footnote{A baptismal font is not a typical feature of most Primitive Baptist churches. Scripture designates that baptisms are to be conducted in \textit{living} water, and thus most try to perform their baptisms in creeks, rivers, ponds, lakes, etc. Patterson reports one church in Kentucky making use of an above ground swimming pool after flood damage to their usual site (1995:202n5). Hollow Springs and Philadelphia had used a small livestock watering pond called Crump’s Pond that, in Sister Anderson’s opinion, was a less than suitable site. But the main impetus for installing the baptismal font rested in access, or a lack of, to \textit{living} water. “We were running out of places to go where there was free-running water that would allow you in to baptize,” said Sister Anderson. “It got to where people wouldn’t let you use their pond…” (Interview, September 18, 2005). When the current building at Hollow Springs was built in the 1960s, the congregation decided to add the baptismal font to secure a reliable site for the use of both churches. Occasionally, a baptism will be held elsewhere, such as in the swimming pool of a church member as describe by Patterson in Kentucky.}

Outside the pulpit at each church a small table sits adorned with a bouquet of flowers. Another set of hymnals is shelved under the small table—reprints of D.H. Goble’s \textit{Primitive Baptist Hymnbook}, originally published in 1887. This hymnal, containing no music notation, nor any of the more modern hymns, is not used in regular church service. The short pews to the left of the pulpit at Hollow Springs hold a third set of hymnals, stacked in the corner of the back pew, against the wall. These are C.H. Cayce’s \textit{The Good Old Songs}, originally published in 1913, containing shaped notation and a preface on the rudiments of reading such notation. Like Goble’s hymnal, these books are not typically used in regular services, but do have their pages turned at the Annual Old-Time Singing—a service devoted wholly to singing praises and celebrating the a cappella tradition.

Lighting is provided by a series of fluorescent-tubes that contend with the natural light streaming in through the large windows along each sidewall of both churches. At Philadelphia the windows displace a significant portion of wall space, beginning about a foot above the floor and extending to about a foot below where the ceiling takes over, angling inward about forty-five degrees and leveling out. Mounted at the top of each window frame is a small brass plaque of memoriam to deceased brothers and sisters, reading “In Loving Memory of…” The plaque I first noticed was dedicated to Edgar and Daisy Carlton, Sister Watson’s maternal grandparents.
Sister Watson told me that although Edgar did not join either church, Daisy had been a member at Hollow Springs. The plaque bearing their names in Philadelphia Church signifies the close connections of the congregations.

At Hollow Springs, wood-paneling on the walls extends from the floor up about three feet. Beyond that, they are painted flat white with four light-diffusing windows. Rather than reaching perpendicular to the ceiling, the walls at both churches angle in at roughly forty-five degrees about two feet from the top and blend with the ceiling. At Hollow Springs the ceiling is constructed of dimpled, sound-absorbing panels. Philadelphia, in contrast, has smooth wooden panels with the seams between them sealed with painted wooden molding.

These interior details of building construction may seem superfluous to readers. Yet there are connections with singing, or more precisely the physical experience of the sound of singing. While believers find their churches, and other older ones, aesthetically pleasing, recalling Sister Walker’s comment from the introduction on the “beautiful old church” in that article on Primitive Baptists, this beauty is not contained within mere physical appearances, but extends to connections between material construction and spiritual production, or worship.

Members of both churches comment on the construction of their buildings relative to the acoustic properties of each. Sister Watson, in one of our recorded conversations, described the sound of singing as “just like heaven’s doors open up.” Connecting sound to the sacred, she then brought her description back to production in the world.

“We was down at North Fork last Sunday,
and they have good acoustics, you know.
And it just resounded.

“Sang out of that little Goble book, and John knows that I like that one song, that
‘There is a House Not Made with Hands,’
and he called that out.
“And when we got through, I said, ‘That is so beautiful.’
“And John said, ‘It just echoes, don’t it?’
“I said, ‘Yes,
It’s beautiful.’ ”

Elder Watson added, “It’s up.”

“The ceiling’s high,” Sister Watson clarified.

“It’s all wood.”

Sister Watson continued:

“See that’s the reason ours don’t have—

“And the thing about it is, when they built it, they put stuff up on the ceiling that would absorb the sound,

and it don’t echo back.”

Believers comment on the construction of the churches at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia as well. While not the wooden construction they feel to be optimal in creating that “echo” that Sister Watson described, the smooth, unadorned walls as they angle inward to meet the ceiling do not disturb the circulation of sound. However, they point to differences in the ceilings most often when talking about sound in the churches.

Sister Anderson, after a service at Hollow Springs, continued a brief discussion on the acoustic properties of the churches she had begun while I was setting up my recording equipment:

“[The acoustics at Philadelphia] are so much better that they are here at Hollow Springs.

“You see they have soundproof tiles up here,
and at Philadelphia we don’t have,
and at Philadelphia the floor is slanted.
And the acoustics is so much more round over there.”

As she spoke she made a rounding motion with both arms, beginning above her head and resting in her lap.

“But you listen in Philadelphia sometimes at the resounding sound.
“*It* does like this.”

Sister Anderson made a forward rolling motion with her right hand.

102 Interview, November 5, 2005.
“And like this.”

She swirled her right arm in the air.

“But here?

“It goes up and in the, in the,”

Sister Anderson raised her hand, palm down, drew her fingers in a loose fist, and released them toward the ceiling.

Seating

“When I was a young girl growing up, both sides were full.

“And over the years it has just died away, dwindled down that there’s not that many people. And just whoever comes in first and sits down on whichever side, that’s just where we sit.”

“And I guess after a while, it just becomes a habit.”

The “habit” Sister Ruth St. Clair is referring to is the way believers gather themselves together on one side of the church each Sunday. Believers desire to be close to one another in worship, spiritually and physically, and as attendance has dropped over the years the seating arrangements have condensed. At Philadelphia all sit on the left side (from the perspective of entering through the main entrance) and at Hollow Springs they fill the right side pews.

Believers do not dwell on why, but Sister St. Clair offered one explanation:

“Well, I’ll tell you the little comedy side of it that my brother-in-law mentioned.

“He said at Hollow Springs the cemetery is on the left-hand side, so everyone sits on the right side.

“And at Philadelphia the cemetery is on the right side, so everybody sits on the left side.”

Many church members have their customary seats in both churches. Typically the arrangement in one mirrors that in the other. Elder Gene Watson sits in the front of the two

103 Interview, June 11, 2006.

104 Interview, February 26, 2005.
pews to the right of the pulpit and perpendicular to the main seating area. Brother Alfred Jenkins sits on the end, next to the center aisle, of the first pew in the main section. Elder Jackson typically sits beside him when he is not in the pulpit, but other than Elder Jackson and the occasional visiting elder, the front pew belongs to Brother Jenkins. From the center aisle to the wall in the second pew sits Sister Ava Connelly (for more than 60 years, church matriarch Verna Walker—mother of Sister Connelley—sat here as well.) and Sister Pansy Watson. Both of Brother Jenkins’ daughters, Sister Janelle Miller and Sister Shirley Anderson, sit with their husbands, Brother Larry and Brother David in the third pew. Sister Ruth St. Clair usually sits on the fourth row with Sister Isla Wood, and Sister Revonda Swanson often sits somewhere between rows four and six. Additional members and visitors\(^{105}\) fill in the middle rows, and then the seating becomes more sparse toward the back.

This seating arrangement is not inflexible; my description is simply a rough sketch. While choices for seats may be habitual, they are not mandated and there is no clear gender separation as was historically the practice among Primitive Baptists (and others).\(^{106}\) At Hollow Springs and Philadelphia men and women once sat separately. Sister Verna Walker remembered women and men sitting on different sides of the church:

“They used to sit on the other side, the women did, and tend to the kids on the other side. They always, the old women sat on the other side.

“I don’t know when they started sitting all on one side.”\(^{107}\)

Younger members, such as Sister Shirley Anderson who began attending service from her childhood in the late 1940s, also remember separate seating, but not on separate sides:

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\(^{105}\) A group of five to ten visitors from a Primitive Baptist Church in Statesville (two counties to the east in Iredell) attend Hollow Springs fairly regularly on the second Sunday of each month, as their home church does not hold service that day.

\(^{106}\) Peacock and Tyson 1989, Patterson 1995. Beverly Patterson found gender division in seating to some extent among some of the churches in Ashe and Allegheny Counties to the north, as well as some in southwestern Virginia. However, even among those churches this pattern was not practiced by all members.

\(^{107}\) Interview, February 12, 2005.
“They didn’t sit one on one side and one on the other in the 50s and 60s when I joined the church.
“The men would sit up front. They’d sit along here [gesturing to the front pew where she and Sister Miller were sitting]… and us ladies, you know, the ladies would sit in the back.”

Neither of these women point to any controversies over the more integrated seating arrangement, but rather offered their own experiences. Sister Walker said, “My husband and I always sat together. You had to when you had six children,” and Sister Anderson said, “When we all came along, the men always sat with us.”

Now some, such as Sister and Elder Watson, continue to sit separately while others sit with their spouses. The only overt separation of seating by gender comes during communion at each church. Preceding communion, the worship service follows the typical pattern of “regular” services, and believers sit according to their typical arrangement—all on one side of the church. After a short break for preparing for the communion, believers return, women sitting on the left side of the church and men sitting on the right.

The church buildings, rather than being adorned with surface prettiness to attract the non-believers, are considered more in there relation to active worship. Once a service begins, the sparseness of ornamentation of their buildings gives way to the raising of a multitude of voices in song, decorated with rich harmonies and spiritual expressions followed by the preaching of the Word.

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108 Interview, September 18, 2005.
“…I’ve often thought, you know, ‘Why aren’t more people Primitive Baptist?’ Then I run into the fact that a lot of people don’t know what a Primitive Baptist is.

“Well now, I’ve heard of the Missionary Baptists
and the Southern Baptists
and this sort of Baptist
and that sort of Baptist,
and truthfully there are a good number of Baptists,
but just what is a Primitive Baptist?
“Primitive Baptist—the word “primitive” means old or, uh,

primitive as it so speaks, but when we go to an antique shop,
and we see a sign that says, “Antiques and Primitives?”

“What would be the difference between an antique and a primitive?

“Well, sometimes we can buy an antique that’s very old, but nonetheless has been tampered with and restored to some extent.

“A primitive is something that is in its original form,
and that’s the difference.

“We are Primitive Baptist.
“We believe that

“Jesus Christ came to earth to institute His church.
“It’s the simple New Testament church
no frills,
nothing added to it,

“Just simple
New Testament
doctrine
that Jesus Christ came to earth to preach and to teach.

“And uh, therefore we are Primitive in that sense, in that it’s—we believe it’s unauthored, it’s the original Christ-given church.

“Again, we extend [to all?] who are with us this morning
a hearty welcome. We are glad that you could come and be with us.”

Elder Jackson included these comments before his sermon the first time I attended a “regular” worship service among the congregations at Philadelphia and Hollow Springs. This visit happened to fall on the third Sunday in September, so we met at Philadelphia Church. These comments were perhaps intended for my ears as a new body in the pews and one, no less, toting recording equipment. Elder Jackson preached on the muck and mire of the pit, symbolic of the human condition in sin, before being lifted out and set upon the rock, symbolic of Christ elevating the sinner to a place upon the solidity of the church, and how this symbolic imagery foreshadows the “simple, New Testament doctrine” that Primitive Baptists ascribe to. I would discover that Elder Jackson often asks this sort of rhetorical question—“What is a Primitive Baptist?”—in various forms as a way to separate Primitive Baptist doctrine from the world of carnal knowledge and root it firmly within Holy Scripture.

“The hearing ear, and the seeing eye, the Lord hath made even both of these,” words of Solomon, is a phrase often invoked by Elder Jackson and other church members to denote a particular interpretive frame believers invoke in understanding themselves in relation to the sacred. The ability to see and hear through this lens does not come through theological instruction and study, per se, although those are important activities for honing one’s interpretive skills. It is an apparently ambiguous phrase that siphons sacred authority from a preacher-congregation relationship and urges believers to rely upon a God-Children relationship. The phrase cuts to the foundation of one of the principle structuring dichotomies of Primitive


110 His opening scripture came from Psalms 40: “I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord” (Psalm 40:1-3).

111 Proverbs 20:12
Baptist doctrine as pointed out by Peacock and Tyson: “A great divide…between the world of history and the world of sacred action… This view implicates a view of human history that does not impute to any historical event constitutive meanings or purposes of salvation. Human history is the history of human will, intention, action, mistakes, sin, and carnality.”\(^{112}\) Rather, a perception of this way of seeing and hearing, of knowing, comes through personal spiritual experience and reflection. It is never fully grasped, but is continually emerging and developing throughout believers’ lives.

A body of literature on the tenets of Primitive Baptists’ beliefs, their doctrines and practices, written by distinguished scholars from the disciplines of folklore, anthropology, history, Appalachian studies, and others, is available and much of it is quite thorough in providing a general idea of what believers gathering themselves under such a denominational rubric might be expected to believe. Particularly, James Peacock and Ruel Tyson’s *Pilgrims of Paradox* and Beverly Patterson’s *Sound of the Dove* are resources that I continually return to for insight. Howard Dorgan does especially well to situate the denomination within a broader scope of Baptists, including Old Regular, Regular, Union, and Freewill groups among others. Two others, Deborah McCauley and Loyal Jones, extend their coverage to a wider look at religious activity within an entire region of the South.

However, I am primarily concerned with the particular case of Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Churches. My aim is to particularize the delineation of Primitive Baptist Doctrine to the understandings and explications as heard by the members of these churches—to establish the foundations around and within which they build their interpretive frames.

Believers look to sermons for an explication of doctrine, as an avenue to learn more about what it means in a historical sense to be a Primitive Baptist. The spiritual sense they have

\(^{112}\) 1989:89.
learned through their experiences and personal relationship with God. The conception of local interpretive frames is made more full and complex by the interactions of the historical and the spiritual within the lives and experiences of individuals who hold them, inside the church and out in the world.

Considering doctrine as the instructional and reflective toolset for making sense of spiritual experience and the sermon as the primary genre through which doctrine is explored in worship services, I focus the remainder of this chapter on doctrine as delivered by Elder Jackson to the congregations at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia. Believing that Elder Jackson’s sermons explain and apply the main points of doctrine in their own right, my purpose here is not to summarize but to allow Elder Jackson’s theological discussions to unfold for readers as they did for me when I heard them. Of course, to do this in a comprehensive way would require more textual space than is feasible for this thesis. Thus, I was forced to edit and condense word-for-word transcriptions while trying to maintain the essence and logical development of Elder Jackson’s words. As some subjects are explored in more depth than others (based on the corpus of sermons I recorded), some topics are covered here in more depth. While I preferred to present each topic from one sermon, in some cases I was forced to draw smaller excerpts from multiple sermons to convey a sense of discussion of such topics. I have tried as sparingly as possible to connect subjects with a few comments so as to emphasize their theological integration. Elder Jackson, when speaking on a particular subject, often implicitly incorporates or alludes to multiple doctrinal points within his sermons. Thus, my inter-excerpt comments attempt to make some of the connections more obvious. Along with my comments, I also include relevant commentaries from interviews with church members that evoke application of or clarify the preceding or forthcoming subject. There are many more complexly textured
applications of doctrine than I am able to include here, for the primary purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview, a base, of the particular theology believers draw from.

My main impetus for approaching a discussion of doctrine in this way rests in my belief that if doctrine allows some ambiguity within its structuring, as a base from which believers construct their own interpretive frames, this should be maintained to the extent possible. Elder Jackson has already filled some of that ambiguity with his interpretations as they emerged in his unscripted sermons. Believers trust in his delivery of the Word, and I am not qualified myself to re-interpret or re-deploy in service of a theoretical point. Read and try to listen as Elder Jackson begins by constructing a theological identity separate from the mainstream of Protestant thought before delving into the particulars of this way of perception. The subjects covered include a general discussion of grace and works in relation to salvation, the human condition in total depravity, particular election, predestination, and the effectual call into the church of believers.

**Grace and Works**

_Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, December 11, 2005_

“You know what I was thinking of today as I came down the mountain?

“How the Primitive Baptist church differs from a lot of other orders and societies.

“You know what it all depends upon?

How we see God.

“Do you look out there, do you see a God that just hopes that he will get you?

Or he will _try_, but he might not be able to.

“It’s a possibility,

but that’s more or less left up to you.

“To me, I don’t see God that way.

“I’ve known God to haunt people

in a _loving_ way and to track them down and to follow them every footstep of their life, and make it so miserable that they thought that they were going _insane._

And then they realized it was the love of God,

and then they underwent an effectual call…”

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113 Sermon at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, December 11, 2005.
“…You realize, now, that I’ll say this from a biased standpoint. Ok?
Which I’ll make no apologies for.
Of course, I can only speak from a Methodist standpoint.114
“The Baptist churches I’ve been in, the Missionary Baptist churches I have gone to,
I’ve been in a few.
“And the Missionary Baptists with whom I am acquainted
are very similar to the Methodists.
At least this was a rural Methodist church.
It wasn’t an urban, but a rural Methodist church.
“Sometimes the rural Methodists tend to be more conservative than the urban. But
“Anyway, one is the antithesis of the other [Calvinist and Arminian theologies],
the complete opposite.
“The Methodist Church, for example is Arminian in belief.
“It’s a works oriented sort of
theology.
“You get out of your spiritual life what you put in it.
“More or less, you earn your way through,
“And if you want to go to heaven, it’s there
for the taking if you want it. And you’ll have to work to get it,
and you’ll have to do certain things, follow the rules, the regulations, and
everything will be fine.
“In the Primitive Baptist Church,
“Works has absolutely no place in the Primitive Baptist Church, other than that they are
evidences
“Of a far greater work
that God has done first and foremost in you.
“You work because God
has first wrought a work in you.
“And we believe in grace. Now a lot of churches say they believe in salvation by grace—and
and we say that also.
“But if you mix any sort of human endeavor—
whether it be mental or physical or a combination of the two—
it ceases to be grace.
“It’s something al-
-together
completely different.
It’s neither works nor grace when you mix the two.
“You can’t mix oil and water…”115

114 Elder Jackson belonged to a Methodist church for many years before joining the Primitive Baptists.

115 Interview, October 9, 2004.
“...But there are two main divergent points of view—
grace and works.
“We—we believe in grace, don’t we?
“We believe that before the foundation of the world,
almighty God
and I say almighty—
“Almighty God chose a particular people unto himself whose number cannot be numbered,
cannot be calculated.
“He did this before he even created human beings. He chose particular people unto himself.
“In time he would regenerate them.
“He chose them unconditionally. There weren’t any strings attached.
“It’s unconditionally election.
“He elected them unconditionally.
“In time he would regenerate them, he would bring them into a newness in life.
“In time he would save them.
“He plotted their course in life.
We call it predestination.
“He made a spiritual road map, so to speak, for them to follow,
and the ultimate destination’s heaven and immortal glory.
“We believe in salvation by the grace of God, and grace means literally what it is: a free
and unmerited gift,
a gift from God.

“ ‘Every last one, all that the Father giveth me shall come to me.’ Every last one that the Father gave the Son will come to him.

“And no man can come to him except the Father, which hath sent him,
draw that individual to Jesus Christ.
“Every last one that has been compelled by the Holy Spirit and touched by the power of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit will come. Not a single one will be missed.
It’s all of God.
I’m talking about salvation here.
“Every last particle, every last bit of it,
it’s all of God.
“You can take salvation, and you can lay it squarely at the feet of God, a hundred percent of it.
That’s the interpretation of grace.
“ ‘For by grace [Elder Jackson bounces with emphasis]
are ye saved,
“Through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is a gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast…””

116 Sermon at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, April 3, 2005.
“If I stand up here and make the first inkling of sense, if you say that I preached a sermon,

then it is God who helped me
and God giving the strength to do it. I don’t know how this will come out. I really don’t.

I pray that it will be acceptable in the sight of God and in the hearing of God, but if god would take these words and my words and weave a sermon from them, it will make a beautiful patchwork.

That is my prayer. I don’t know how I’ll do, but if the Lord would bless us this morning,

I want to try to speak on total depravity,
and I want to refer to a little bit, again, this concept of the dead and alien sinner…

“…One thing about total depravity, if you were to fill this church with a number of Primitive Baptist Elders, and you were to ask them as a group, as a whole, now, ‘What do you as Primitive Baptists believe in?’

“You know what they would probably start out with?

“Now, ‘What are the doctrines, what are the concepts of your faith? What do you believe in?’

“You know what they’d probably start out with?

Total depravity.

“They’d probably start with total depravity, then they’d probably move up to unconditional election.

Then they’d go probably to effectual calling, and there, from there to particular redemption, and finally end up with eternal security.

“They would talk about those subjects. Those are the basic tenets, the basic doctrines, that we believe in. But they STARTED with total depravity! Why would they want to start with total depravity?

Because it’s basic and fundamental.
It’s a building block, so to speak.

“I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again:

“You can never understand, you can never accept, you can never have peace

with all those other doctrines unless first and foremost you understand total depravity.

“You can’t handle unconditional election.
That is strong, strong doctrine.

“Well, now I don’t believe those things in the Bible because about election because, [you know, that’s?] way to strong. Let’s go over there to something that will tickle your ears.’ [laughs] You know, talk about the love of God, or something, something like that.
“YOU’LL NEVER UNDERSTAND election or particular redemption or some of those things unless you first and foremost get a grasp, get a handle on total depravity.
It’s fundamental. It’s basic…

“…The first thing I want you to understand about total depravity is the meaning and the application of the word ‘total.’
“We say that mankind is totally depraved.
“I did not say that mankind was utterly depraved.
There’s a difference.
“There’s a difference between total depravity and utter depravity. Have you ever heard the word ‘utter’? ‘He’s utterly depraved.’
“There’s a difference.

“Utter depravity is when every single human being on this earth is as mean and sinful as they possibly can be.
“That’s utter depravity.

“That is not true.
“We all are effected by sin.
“And we’re all affected by total depravity…

“…BUT I CAN LOOK OUT THERE, AND I CAN SEE EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU,
I can see some redeeming good in all of us.
“AND KNOWING YOU AS I KNOW YOU,
I’ve seen you do good.
I’ve seen you do well,
and I’ve seen you touch the hearts of you fellow men and brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus in a way that I know you’re not utterly depraved.
I know that you’re not utterly depraved.

“Well, what does total depravity mean?
“It means this:
“IT MEANS EVERY LAST HUMAN BEING THAT HAS LIVED,
IS LIVING,
OR WILL LIVE
will be affected by sin to some degree.

“Some will be OUTLAWS
“AND DRUG SMUGGLERS
“AND MURDERS.
“SOME WILL BE THAT FAR ON THE END OF THE CONTINUUM as those who will be like Mother Teresa
or some person that we equate with righteousness.

“But every last individual who has EVER LIVED, IS LIVING, OR WILL LIVE upon
this earth will be
touched in some degree,
as being depraved.
In other words, completely.

“UTTER depravity speaks of the-the degree
of depravity,
and no one is utterly depraved. I guess there’s always room that we
could be worse than we are.
“But total depravity speaks of the scope.
“One speaks of the degree of depravity,
“and the other one speaks of the scope.
“IT PERMEATES THE WHOLE HUMAN POPULATION!...

“…And also, it does this: it permeates everything about us.
“The Apostle Paul uses the word “conversation” in the Bible. He’s not speaking of
our conversation one to the other—
we are speaking one to the other, we address one [another?]—that’s not what he’s talking about.
He’s talking about our style of living, our lifestyle.
“Our conversation is, our lifestyle is permeated,
everything we do is touched in some degree by sin.
“And that’s what [we?] mean by total depravity. None of us are immune. How did we
get this way?...

“…We’re all descendents of Adam.
“And he handed it down to us.
“We INHERITED it, so to speak.
“IT CAME TO US NATURALLY!
“WE DIDN’T SAY, ‘HERE ADAM, GIVE ME THIS!’

“It came with the genes, so to speak.
“Adam was the first man, wasn’t he? God, as it were, scooped up the dirt of the earth
and blew the breath into the nostrils of man, and he became a living soul.

And God created Adam. God created man.
“ADAM WAS OUR REPRESENTATIVE! ADAM SPOKE FOR US!
And Adam acted for us…

“…HE ACTED FOR US WHEN WE WERE NOT THERE!

And you know how he acted,
and you know what he did.
“And when he did that, he plunged all of mankind,
he plunged all of mankind into a state of-of-of, this depraved state of which we cannot
ourselves overcome.
“We can do pretty good sometimes.
“We can handle the things that we do physically.
“There are a lot of things, I say, ‘Well, I’m not going to do that anymore.’ And guess what, I conquered those things.
“But I cannot conquer the mean and the idle thoughts
that come over me sometimes.
“And sometimes I want to slap myself on the face and say, ‘WHY DID I THINK OF
SOMETHING LIKE THAT?!
“Why did I do that?’
Well, that’s part of my Adam nature.
“AND EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE THAT ADAM NATURE WILL RISE UP, and
it will be like two wrestlers.
I was talking about the other day.
“One will wrestle the other, and you know how one will never throw the other. They
just kind of stand there and hug one another for a long long while,
“And none will seem to get the upper hand.
“That’s that old Adamic, that old Adam nature that
rises up within you.
and it comes in waves.

“YOU HAVE GOOD TIMES WITH THE LORD, AND YOU FEEL THE
PRESENCE OF THE LORD IN SUCH A GREAT AND ALAR/ELIOUS WAY! AND YOU
WANT TO PRAISE HIS NAME, AND IT’S WONDERFUL!
And then sometimes you just spend a whole season
in the darkest and deepest valleys it seems like.
And Satan is there at every hand to wrestle with you.

“AND THAT OLD ADAMIC NATURE JUST RISES UP, AND IT SEEMS TO
TEMPORARILY CONQUER YOU.
And you might say, ‘Well, I’m not even going to pray [good Lord?]
because I know you won’t answer it.’

We get it from Adam.

“So let’s look here at these verses just a minute…

“‘As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one.’
“‘As it is written’ means this:
“The Apostle Paul has taken a lot of these words from the fourteenth psalm…
“…And ‘There is none righteous, no, not one.’
That means this, again we are speaking of total depravity:
“The total human population.
“There is not a single person that has ever lived, is living, or will live,
except Jesus Christ,
that can be judged righteous when they stand before God.

“There is not a single person, except for Jesus Christ,

117 Romans 3:10-12.: “As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one. There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.”
who can stand before the judgment of God
and call themselves righteous.

" 'There is none righteous, no, not one.'
" 'There is none that understandeth.'
   We don't even understand what righteousness really involves.
   It's too far above us.
   It's too high up on a higher spiritual plane…

"Now, here he's talking about a dead and alien sinner, but he is also talking about those
who are depraved.
"That includes us.
"Who was it?
"It was the old prophet Isaiah who spoke of our righteousnesses.
"Plural.
"WHAT DID HE COMPARE THEM TO? TELL ME!
   Filthy
   rags.
   Filthy rags.

"Have we all not felt
   good about something we might have done,
   with an elderly person, a sick person, a friend?
"Have we all not felt, 'Well, you know, I'm glad I did that.'
"As much as we would like to feel good, the goodness, the warmth,
"As much as we would like to receive some gratification for those things,
   will you when you compare that to the righteousness of God?
   What is it like?
   A filthy rag,
       a filthy rag.

" 'There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.'

 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God,'
 'Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things will be added unto
you,'\textsuperscript{118}

 'Seek, and ye shall find.'\textsuperscript{119} Those are the words of Jesus Christ.

"But yet Paul says, 'There is none that seeketh
   after God.' He's speaking of the natural man there, isn't he,
   the dead and alien sinner.

"But let me put it this way to you: have you always sought after God like you should
have?

\textsuperscript{118} Matthew 6:33. "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all things shall be added unto you."

\textsuperscript{119} Mathew 7:7. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:" Luke 11:9. "And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."
“I'M NOT SAYING THIS, I AM NOT SAYING THIS! I’m not saying you have to seek after God twenty-four hours a day!
    Because that’s humanly impossible.

“But the times that you could have and times that you should have,
did you seek after God?
    Ask me that question.

    My answer’s ‘no.’

Repeatedly, I’ve turned a deaf ear.
Repeatedly, I’ve turned my back and walked away,
    and I’m ashamed of it.
I wish I could give you a better report, but I can’t.

“ ‘Seek ye first God, the kingdom of God.’
    I can’t remember whether it’s ‘the kingdom of God’ or ‘the kingdom of heaven,’
but ‘Seek ye first.’

“You can never seek God, you can never find God, unless what?
    God has first what?
    Sought and found you.

“So when Jesus was saying, ‘Seek ye first,’ and things like that, when he was speaking of seeking,
    he was speaking to the believer. And I’m going to tell you something. That Bible that you’re holding in you hand, [it will not? (or) if it not?] mean a bit of sense to you because it was not written for the dead and alien sinner. It was written for whom?
    The believer, the little child of God.

    [But?] the dead and alien sinner will not seek after God.
    But sometimes, you know, in our total depravity, we don’t seek like we ought to.

    “They are all gone out of the way,
    they are together become unprofitable;
    there is none that doeth good, no, not one.’

    “All gone out of the way,
    we’ve all turned aside.
“Isaiah said, like sheep we have all gone what?
“ Astray,
    we have all gone astray.
“What we done, what we have done is unprofitable.
“It’s worthless,
    really.
“Really, we can’t count out coffer.
“We can’t count out earthly treasures and the goodness, uh, and good deeds that we’ve done.

“And I like this last statement:
‘There is none that doeth good, no, not one.’
‘Why do you like it?’

“I like it for this reason:

because there’s not the first single person

when they close their eyes in death and instantaneously stand before

almighty God

can say, ‘Now, you must save me because I’ve been a good

person.’

Not the first individual.

“I have seen men and women

that I thought were

pure saints.

“I could look at them and I could consider their lives,

and I said, ‘Surely, this must be a righteous man or righteous woman.’

“But guess what.

They drew the breath [of all?] humans.
They walked, and talked, and thought [as all?] humans,
and we’re all depraved.
We’re all affected in some way by sin.

And as saintly as they appear,
they were still sinners.

And this boils down to a very important point:

“When we stand before God, it will not be based upon the good deeds,

“Or the righteousnesses

“that we have performed in this life.

“When we stand before him, our salvation will not be based upon that.

“It is based purely

upon the sovereign grace

of an almighty God,
who would dispense the gift of salvation,
free and unencumbered,
to whom so ever he will.
All that I am or ever hope to be,
I owe to the grace of God.

“‘John, do you know you are going to heaven?’

No, I don’t,
but I pray and I hope

that I’ll get there one day.

But I’ll tell you one thing I do know:

if I get to go there, it will not be based on my righteousness.

No sir, it will not be based on what I have done.

Because I have none.

I bring no righteousness to the table.
I don’t.

“I’ll be truthful. If I did as well as some of you,
I would be very satisfied.
But I don’t.

“[Brother Paul Bowman had a] little girl named Arlene,
Arlene Bowman,
and he found her
on the creek bank. And he picked her up, and he carried her home.
And she was dead.
I think she was something like eleven or twelve.

“And he got to telling me about little Arlene
one day when I visited.
Oh, the tears came in his eyes.
“And I couldn’t figure out what to say to him.
Well, I said, ‘Brother Paul,’ you know, I was grasping for something comforting to say, said, ‘Brother Paul, you know you will see her again.’
You know what he said?

“In true Primitive Baptist fashion, you know what he said?
‘I hope.’

“I hope.

“So we have this hope, this lively hope
within our hearts
that one day
due to his grace and his love and his tender mercy,
“DESPITE OUR DEPRAVITY!

“And, if you want to label somebody a dead and alien sinner, if you want to call someone over there in the jungle who’s never been in a church in his life and never read the Bible and doesn’t even know who Jesus is, you will probably find some of those in heaven as well.”

“Amen,” replies a member of the congregation.

“And they’ll be there
due to the grace of almighty god.
And nothing else,

“Nothing else.”

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120 Sermon, Philadelphina Church, May 22, 2005.
The crescendo of Elder Jackson’s sermon, the power evidenced by the “Amen” of affirmation and agreement from a member of the congregation, hammers home an important point. If humans are depraved and our actions—our “conversation,” as Elder Jackson quoted the Apostle Paul—are inherently flawed, then no culturally constructed system of organization of categorization—nations, states, counties, cities, towns, communities, neighborhoods, networks, denominations, families, etc.—are adequate in parsing out saints and sinners.\textsuperscript{121}

“God’s people are everywhere,”\textsuperscript{122} said Sister Anderson, talking about the diverse group (of which Primitive Baptists were only a part, even if a large part) that gathered for the dedication of Presnell’s Chapel, but pointing to a larger context of human existence beyond denominational affiliations. “God’s people” are the elect.

\textbf{Particular Election}

\textit{Presnell’s Chapel Primitive Baptist Church, May 7, 2006}

“You see, there’s two ways to read the Bible, I found out.

“And both ways are equally beautiful

and equally instructive.

“There’s a literal way you can read the Bible. You can read this verse here, this 53\textsuperscript{rd} verse, and uh, King Solomon Speaks of the people of Israel, and he speaks of the fact that they are his-God’s inheritance.

“They are very special people.

“They’ve been separated from the rest of the world.

“And if you look at the history of Israel, the history of the Jewish people, you will indeed see that God operated in their midst in a very profound and a very mighty way.

\textsuperscript{121} While references are made to Calvinism, usually indirectly through variant summaries of the five points of Calvinism, no authority for doctrinal veracity is sought through personalities of history. As Elder Jackson said in sort of a side comment in discussing what makes Primitive Baptists distinctive, “Primitive Baptists say ‘We’re not Calvinistic. We came along way before Calvin. The head of our church is Jesus Christ, not Calvin’ ” (June 12, 2006). One Elder, preaching during the annual association meeting in September 2006, vehemently made the same point, calling Calvinism heresy. While Calvin may have “had some light,” the five points are found explicitly in the Book of Romans, chapter nine. Primitive Baptists’ congruence with Calvinism is viewed more as a mutual congruence with the Bible. An Elder that Peacock and Tyson spoke with used this phrase in reference to John Calvin, Martin Luther, and Roger Williams (1989: 44). They “had some light” just as many other gifted preachers had and do have.

\textsuperscript{122} Interview, July 16, 2006.
“See, God brought them out of the land of Egypt and he, he directed their journey toward the promised land, the land that flowed with milk and honey.

He did wondrous things on the way.

“He congealed the Red Sea, opened it up, and they walked dry-shod across,
and the Egyptian army that was following, of course, were drowned.
God had-had them to strike a rock and water poured out of it.
They were fed manna from heaven.
Quail came in such an abundance that they grew tired of eating it.
They were led to the promised land although they wondered in the desert for forty years.

They entered the promised land, and God divided the Jordan River, and they walked over dry-shod, and lo and behold
the stronghold of Jericho, the walls fell outwardly
and they took Jericho.

So God operated indeed in this nation, within the Jewish people, within Israelite- or within the Israelite people in a very profound way.

Surely God did do these things in a literal way.

“But there’s another way to read the Bible, as well,
and sometimes it’s more beautiful than reading it literally.
And that’s to read it symbolically. There’s symbolism here.

“There’s what the words will actually tell you, and you will have no difficulty in understanding what the message is by just reading the words, but if God gives you the opportunity, gives you that gift, you can delve more deeply between the lines and underneath the lines and get perhaps a more beautiful

“Response.

“So there’s a symbolic way to look at this, as well as a literal way.

“Symbolically, if you look at this,
consider yourself as one of God’s little children,
as one of the people of Israel.

“Abraham was called by God, instructed by God, said, “Can you tell the stars?”
which means: “can you count the stars?”

“My mother used to tell me years ago when she was a little girl she would lie in the grass of her home in Ashe County and attempt to count the stars.
You can’t count those stars.

“God said, ‘Can you tell the stars?’
And then he said,
‘So shall thy seed be.’
So shall thy seed be.

“On another occasion he says, ‘Can you count the—the grains of sand on the seashore?’
‘Can you number the dust of the earth?’
“We could go today, and we could, uh, have a census and perhaps count all the people in Israel and a good many Jews around the world, and we could get a pretty accurate figure, but you cannot count
"all the children of God.
They're innumerable.
They are impossible to count.
They are indeed as the grains of sand on the seashore,
as the stars in heaven,
as the dust of the earth.
So there's symbolic meaning here.
King Solomon says, 'For thou didst separate them from among all the people of the earth,
to be thine inheritance.'

"My precious children of God, before the foundation of the world,
"Before the foundation of the world,
God knew particular people.

"He chose them.
"He loved them.
"He wrote their names in Lamb’s Book of Life.

"It’s an immense book.
"There’s names on every page,
every crook and corner,
every portion of the cover.
"Their names are written in Lamb’s Book of Life.
"And God determined to bring them forth from the death in trespasses in sin and to give them spiritual life.
"And he determined to call them with an effectual call
and to draw them near
to him.
It’s uh, not like you were turning off and on a light switch or element on a stove.
It’s something you cannot turn down, you cannot walk away from. It’s called an effectual call.
"Knowing, however, that people were people
and people are prone to sin,
and sometimes we sin mightily and sometimes we really goof up in the worst way.
"So God sent his only begotten son to suffer, bleed, and die upon the cross at Calvary in our stead.
"It was sacrificial death.
"It was an atoning death.
It was redeeming death.
"The cross was ours,
but Christ assumed it and took it in our stead.
"And though we still be humans,
"and though we are prone to error and prone to mistakes,
"Because of all these things we will never fully nor completely fall away from God’s grace.
It’s called eternal security

“God did indeed know a particular people,
Separate and apart from the rest of the world.

“There will be those out there today somewhere, perhaps in this county or in this state, that will tell you that what you’re doing here today is just useless.

“That it’s of no good,
it’s of no account.

“They’re not interested in Jesus Christ.

“They never read their Bible,
they don’t have a prayer life.

“But what ever the denomination,
Whatever the order,
God’s people are not strictly relegated to Primitive Baptists. There are God’s people in all sorts of denominations…

“…And so indeed, God’s people are innumerable, and they are separate and apart…”

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“Separate and apart.” This chapter began with Elder Jackson’s pondering about that which separates Primitive Baptists from other protestant believers. His answer to his own question was the way Primitive Baptists’ view God. Much of this view depends on self-perception as well. Elder Jackson asked in another sermon:

“So how do you see yourself?

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123 While the elect is innumerable, it is not general. Speaking on atonement on another occasion, Elder Jackson made this point.

“…You think back to the cross. Now, here we’re starting with something that is powerfully written. Here is a type and a pattern and a shadow of the work of Jesus Christ! You think of Jesus Christ upon the cross and that blood that’s dripping from his hands and his feet and his brow and his pierced side. Is that blood going to pour out on the ground and make a puddle? That blood will drip out! And when it drips out, what will it do? It will spatter, won’t it? It will go in different directions. When that chief priest entered into the holy of holies to offer an atoning sacrifice, to bring us to a closer relationship with God, he sprinkled the blood upon the mercy seat. Do you see what I am trying to say here? God’s, the living God, Jesus Christ, when he was crucified upon the cross, his blood dripped down and spattered, and when it spattered it sprinkled. It covered the sins of a person here, the sins of a person there, the sins of one of his children over here, a sin over there, a sin over there, a little child here, a little child there. It’s a beautiful illustration of the cleansing, the redeeming, the justifying, the sanctifying, the atoning blood of Jesus Christ. It covered a multitude of sins, didn’t it? A Multitude of people…The Blood was not poured on the mercy seat; it was sprinkled!” (Sermon at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, June 11, 2006).

124 Sermon, Dedication Service at Presnell’s Chapel Primitive Baptist Church, May 7, 2006.
“YOU CAN NEVER UNDERSTAND THE BEAUTY OF PRIMITIVE BAPTIST THOUGHT UNTIL FIRST AND FOREMOST THAT YOU RECONCILE IN YOUR HEART AND KNOW FOR A FACT THAT YOU ARE A LOWLY DOWNTRODDEN SINNER, AND THROUGH AND BY THE GRACE AND GOD, THERE IS NO OTHER WAY YOU CAN GET TO HEAVEN AND IMMORTAL GLORY! SAVED BY HIS GRACE AND NO OTHER WAY!”

Thus, we began with a look at the human condition in a state of total depravity. “Separate and apart” from this condition was how Elder Jackson characterized the body of God’s elect, and that is the ultimate hope for believers—that they are among this group of saved souls. The desire for salvation does not secure salvation, but rather the desire is evidence of the possibility.

“You have to believe, but I think you believe because God gives you the ability and the desire,” said Sister Walker.

“I think that God comes first and you follow.
“I don’t think you go out seeking salvation.
“I think that when a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, begins to feel the need of salvation, they’re already saved
because that’s Christ working in them.
“And that is the satisfaction.
A satisfactory feeling,
and just a feeling of hope.
“I never have felt I knew I was going to heaven. I just have the hope because of what Christ did…”

Sister Walker employed the phrase, “what Christ did,” earlier having been more specific with “Christ had died for me.” “What Christ did” includes, of course, the event of the crucifixion to which “Christ had died for me” refers. However, there is a bit of ambiguity in the phrase, “What Christ did,” that connects the sacrifice to a broader spectrum of sacred action. Near the end of the last sermon excerpt, Elder Jackson alludes to this wider arena of God’s action: “God did indeed know a particular people…”

125 Sermon, Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, April 3, 2005.
126 Interview February 12, 2005.
Predestination

Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Church, September 19, 2004

“I’m looking at the fortieth Psalm again.
“For those of who were with us at Hollow Springs Church,
   I tried to speak last time from the fortieth Psalm,
   the eleventh verse.
“I cannot divest myself of this Psalm.
“I can’t get away from it,
   and so I’m back here again today.

“So let’s turn to the fortieth Psalm.
“You recall from Hollow Springs,
   if you were there,
“You will recall that we were speaking to the fact that the Psalms are scriptures that are,
   in many respects, very comforting,
   very consoling.

“They bring us inner peace.
“When we’re down and out, when we’re,
“Beset on all sides by enemies and we feel like that
   more-or-less that,
“We’re at the end of our road, so to speak, why all we need to do is just pick up the bible
   and
   read some of these Psalms King David has written, and
“We can step out in boldness.
   We can take another breath, so to speak.
   We can face yet another storm.

“So the Psalms are very, very comforting. They bring us comfort and strength and
   solace.
“But if you recall, the Psalms can also be highly doctrinal.
“Not only do they comfort, but they give us a good dosage of the red meat, so to speak,
   the strong meat of the bible.
   And I enjoy both aspects of the Psalms…

“…I enjoyed the comfort that’s found in the Psalms,
   but I enjoyed that-that strong meat too.
“It fortifies us.
   It makes us stronger.
“So, I have some doctrinal verses today. They’re comforting, yes they are, but they’re
   also doctrinal.
“So let’s look at Psalm 40, and we’ll read the first three verses.
“Here, King David, the Shepherd King, the psalmist, says:

“ ‘I waited patiently for the Lord;
“ ‘and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry.
“ ‘He brought me up also out of a horrible pit,
   out of the miry clay,
and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.

“‘And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God:
    many shall see it, and fear,
    and shall trust
    in the Lord.’

“…Many shall see it,
    and fear,
    and shall trust
    in the Lord.

“I look at this and I see the whole gamut. I see the whole range of doctrine there.

“I see things there that just fortify us and make us strong and give us great hope.

“For example, he says, ‘He brought me up also out of an-out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay’: well, I see there the doctrine of total depravity.

“We were, as it were, in a horrible pit. We were stuck in the miry clay, so to speak, and God has brought us up out of it. So I see the doctrine there of total depravity. We were incapable of removing ourselves, so God did it.

“‘And he set my feet upon a rock’:

“I see there the regeneration—the second birth—the rebirth that comes through the work of the Holy Spirit.

“Nicodemus was told by Jesus Christ, ‘You must be born again,’
    and those words there speak of the newness of life again in Jesus Christ.


“‘He has set me upon a rock,’ so to speak.
    You’re no longer in the clay.

“‘And established my goings’:

“I look at that and I see the Primitive Baptist doctrine of predestination. God has charted our course, our spiritual course in life—established our goings.

“‘And he hath put a new song in my mouth’: I see there the effectual call of God because not only is there newness of life, a newness in life, but there is a newness of purpose as well.

“Where once you’d never thought of giving God praise,

“Where once you never sang a hymn of praise, now you’re a different person.

“Now you’ve been called by God to come forth, and you exhibit, you show signs of it.

“I see also there the doctrine of the proper perspective of works.

“We work because we love the Lord.

“We work to serve God,
    not to earn a particular favor from him.

“But the works that we do are but evidence of a far greater work that God has first wrought in our own heart.

“We work
    because he
    first worked.

“And so we

“Sing a new song, and we have praise.

“‘Many shall see, and fear, and shall trust
“in the Lord.’
“We’re no longer ashamed of God, are we? God is something that or someone who is first and foremost in our mind and in our heart.
“And we step out in boldness,
“And we tell the world of the good things that God has done for us…

“…We’re \textit{pulled} out of the \textit{pit},
“Totally incapacitated,
“Stuck there,
“Couldn’t move,
“Couldn’t help ourselves if we wanted to—
‘\textit{PULLED OUT}
“Of a horrible pit
and placed upon what?
The solid foundation of Jesus Christ

There’s a beautiful psalm here, if I can find it.

“Turn to Psalm thirty-one, (ahem)
verse three.

Or just listen.
“Here, the psalmist says this:
“‘\textit{For thou art my rock}
and my fortress;
“‘Therefore for thy namesake,
\textit{lead} me and guide me
“‘For \textit{thou art my rock},’
“‘You can go on over to Psalm Sixty-One, I believe.

“Psalm Sixty-One, verse Two:
“‘\textit{From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee}
‘When my heart is overwhelmed,’
And I love this,
“‘\textit{Lead} me to the rock
that is higher than I.’
“Lead me to the rock
that is higher than I.
“And let’s go to the new testament,
“First Corinthians, chapter ten.

“First Corinthians, chapter ten, the first,
four verses.
First Corinthians, chapter ten, one through four:
“‘\textit{More over, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant;}
‘\textit{How that all our fathers were under the cloud and, all pass through the sea,}
‘\textit{And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea;}
‘\textit{And did all eat the same spiritual meat;}
and did all drink the same spiritual drink.

“ ‘For they drank of that spiritual rock
that followed them.’

“ ‘For they drank of that spiritual rock
that followed them,’
and I love this also,

‘And that rock was Christ.’
That rock was Christ.

“You get the picture, here?
“Dead and alien,
“The sinner,
“Incapacitated,
“Stuck in the quagmire,
“In a horrible pit
“You can’t get out yourself.
“If you can’t get out yourself, HOW IN THE WORLD DID YOU GET OUT?
“HOW IN THE WORLD HAVE YOU BEEN STANDING UPON THE ROCK,
“AND YOU CAN SEE NOW, AND UNDERSTAND NOW, YOU CAN HEAR
NOW, WHERE ONCE YOU WERE BLIND AND ONCE YOU WERE DEAF, AND YOU
WEREN’T CONCERNED WITH THINGS OF OF A SPIRITUAL NATURE, BUT YOU
WERE CONCERNED WITH THINGS OF A WORLDLY NATURE.

“WHY AND HOW DID YOU GO FROM THAT SITUATION TO WHERE YOU
ARE NOW?

I don’t think you did it;
I think someone did it for you.

“I think someone did it for you.
“Mankind, indeed, is in a pit, or was in a pit,
but now look what we have done.

“ ‘And he hath put a new song in my mouth.’

“He.

Again, this grace.

“God has put this new song there.

It is God who has done these things for us.
It is God who has pulled us out of, uh, the muck and the mire
and put us upon the rock.

“And established my goings.
I’m back up in verse 2,

“ ‘He brought me up out of the horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon
the rock,
and established my goings.’

“There are things in the Bible that—well, I’m amazed at the entirety of the Bible—but
there are things in the bible that just whisk me away, and [ha-ha] for want of a better word, just
absolutely blow my mind.

“I never cease to be intrigued by Jonah and the experience with the whale,
the great fish.
“And this tells me something about the attributes and the power of God.

“We Primitive Baptists, we believe in predestination.
“But God can do other things
that are similar to that.
“God can purpose something to happen.
“And God can ordain something to happen.
“And for want of a better word, God can just make things happen sometimes.
“And Jonah-excuse me, and God prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.
“God prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.
“God prepared a gourd.
“God prepared a [worm].
“God made a [vehement] east wind.
“God can do all sorts of things.

And then I realize that what love is, indeed, must be—
that God has foreknown us before the foundation of the world.
That God knew us,
loved us,
written our name in the lamb’s book of life
before the foundation of the world,
and therefore has established our goings,
charted our course, our spiritual course in life.
We’re going to make this turn. We’re going to stop here at this sign, and turn right, so to speak, then we’re going to go ten miles.

Of course, I’m simplifying here. What am I talking about?

“God has predetermined ahead of time where you would ultimately end up.

“And GOD HAS PREDETERMINED AHEAD OF TIME WHAT COURSE, WHAT WAY YOU GET THERE!

“What am I talking about?

That bad word that a lot of people think of as predestination!

“PREDESTINATION! GOD HAS DETERMINED, SET A COURSE FOR HIS PEOPLE!…

“…Predestination is not us coming to some tragic end on a highway.
And predestination is not getting some terrible disease and suffering and languishing, contented.

That’s not predestination.

“Predestination has to do with spiritual things,
“God given.

“God directed.
“God controlled.
It’s a wonderful thing to think about isn’t it?

“Once being in a horrible pit, 
Then being made alive in newness of life and sit upon the rock, Jesus Christ, 
and then our course, our spiritual course in life, 
has been charted for us.
That’s something truly wonderful to think about
“And although we were a new person now altogether, and he’s put a new *song* in my mouth.
“*He* put it there.
“Oh, we no longer live the way we used to live.
“I want you to know, we are different people.”

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*Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, December 11, 2005*

“…If we look for a type,
Biblically,
“That best exemplifies the doctrine of predestination, it was this man,
“This old patriarch that we know as Abraham.
“If you want to see an individual who cast a *long* and dark shadow in terms,
meaning distinct shadow,
“In terms of doctrinal predestination,
the doctrine that we believe in, then you need to look no further
than Abraham.
“Abraham is a *figure* of the glorious truth of predestination.
“And we who are Primitive Baptists, we believe in the doctrine of predestination. He
was a glorious example of this *equally* glorious doctrine
of predestination.
“A beautiful example of it,
a *powerful, powerful* example
of predestination.
“You need to look no further than the book of Genesis,
the first book in the Bible.
“*Just go* through there,
“*Start* about chapter twelve or thirteen and
“*Read* about the old patriarch, and
“*Read* how God *reached* down from heaven and just touched his life here on earth, and
more than that,
“*Count* the *shall’s* and the *will’s* of the Bible,
and you’ll have a pretty good idea of how God influenced this man’s *spiritual*
leanings,

his *spiritual* destiny,
his *spiritual* journey
in this life.

That’s exactly what predestination is:
“*God’s* ability
“*Before* hand,
“*Ahead* of time
to *chart* a person’s *spiritual* journey in this life,

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“From point A to point Z.
   “It’s like going in a map and saying, ‘Well, so and so will stop here and they’ll stop there, and their ultimate destiny will be up here.
   “‘They will begin here, they will begin their spiritual journey, their spiritual walk, here, and they’ll go there and they’ll go there and they’ll go there.’
   “In each instance God has pre determined ahead of time.
   “Pre, before.
   “Destination, DESTINY.
   “God has predestined their spiritual walk in this life.

   “Has to do with spiritual things.

   “God is not going to predestinate you to commit a sin and turn right around and chastise you for it.

   God is not going to do that.
   “God is going to predetermine ahead of time your spiritual walk in this life from point A to point Z.
   “POINT A IS WHEN YOU BEGIN! THAT IS WHEN YOU ARE BORN AGAIN!
   And point Z will be when you close your eyes in death and you enter into the portals of heaven and immortal glory.

   And God has CHARTED, he has PREDETERMINED AHEAD OF TIME EACH AND EVERY STEP THAT YOU TAKE OF A SPIRITUAL WAY!
   And he has done that for each and everyone of his little children.
   “HE DID IT FOR ABRAHAM
   “Who is the GLORIOUS EXAMPLE OF THAT.
   He will do it and has done it and is doing it for each and every one of you.

   “You just don’t
   “Happenstance come into church and happenstance accept him as your Lord and Savior.
   “You just don’t somehow,
   “Out of some stroke of luck
   or some decision of your own,
   “Join the church or
   “Call into the ministry, or
   “Something as simple, but yet as ESSENTIAL AND BEAUTIFUL as filling your own pew there.
   “You do not enter into those relationships with God
   in a haphazard, fortuitous manner.
   “It is ordained from above.
   “It is PREDESTINATED from God.

   And it’s what he does. And Abraham, again, is a beautiful example of it.

   “It’s predestination.
“I understand that when you’re scared in a very terrible way that you’re mortified.

[laughs]

“Predestination mortifies a host of people,

but it’s because they don’t understand it or they have a misconception about it.

“It’s a very beautiful doctrine.

It bespeaks of the hand and the power and the love of God,

and that God has set the course of his children.

“They are PREDESTINATED
to go from one place to another.

“This spiritual journey, this spiritual walk in life:

no two stops along the way are the same from one person to another.

“A PERSON MAY COME TO CHURCH AND LOVE THE OLD CHURCH, BUT YET FOR SOME REASON, SOME UNKNOWN REASON KNOWN ONLY TO GOD, WOULD NEVER COME AND JOIN, BUT PERHAPS IN THEIR HUMILITY THEY FEEL OUT OF PLACE, BUT YET THEYRE ONE OF GOD’S CHILDREN AND THEY WILL ULTIMATELY END UP with him in heaven and immortal glory.

“Some are called into the ministry and speak so fluently and have touched so many lives in such a powerful way.

That sure must be the hand of God because if it’s the hand man,

it would never pan out;

it would never have any strength;

it would never have any spiritual base,

and it would melt away like snow in an August sun…”\textsuperscript{128}

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As I talked with Sister Anderson and Sister Miller one Sunday after service, we were discussing the call to join the church and to be baptized. Brother Miller initially opted not to participate in our conversation but to sit in back of the church building at Philadelphia and wait for us to finish. However, his wife and sister-in-law did not hesitate to draw him to the front. About ten minutes into our conversation, to get another perspective Sister Anderson called to the back of the church, “Larry, come over here and tell us when you were Baptized.” As Brother Miller made his way up to our pew, his wife asked, “Do you remember what year?”

“1984, wasn’t it? ‘83 or ‘84.”

\textsuperscript{128}Sermon at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, December 11, 2005.
We began parsing out the time and the names of others who had been baptized with him, and as our conversation continued, a complexly textured narrative emerged in which Sister Anderson and the Millers weaved together experiences of lifetime immersion in Primitive Baptist belief around, underneath, and within Brother Miller’s experience of the misgivings he had as youth in a Southern Baptist church and his refusal to join that church:

Shirley Anderson: “Janelle and I were raised in the Primitive Baptist Church. Now, Larry he wasn’t raised in the Primitive Baptist faith, he was raised in the Baptist faith, and—”

Janelle Miller: “But he’ll say today, he’ll tell you today that he knew when he was a little boy that something just didn’t sound right to him.”

Larry Miller: “Yeah, they had a saying up on the wall that said, ‘Number of souls saved this month,’ and all this kind of stuff. And I don’t remember what all else, but I mean that just didn’t sound right to me.”

JM: “And that’s what I say, you’re born an old Baptist in your heart. You just have to find it, if you’re born an old Baptist.”

SA: “And we use that phrase, ‘you’re born an Old Baptist,’ but I think that the heart is the Lord’s. We just attach the Old Baptist word to it.”

JM: “That’s right.”

SA: “And uh, I guess we really shouldn’t do that because if you’re a child of God, as you [Janelle] say, you’ll know it. When you know it, you’ll know it.”

LM: “And I was supposed to have been baptized at that church, Union Grove, when I was like nine years old, and I didn’t go. My sister did, and I believe one of my brothers did too, at the same time. I didn’t go.”

JM: “He didn’t go.”

LM: “I just didn’t go.”

SA: “And you never were baptized?”

LM: “Not until.”

SA: “Here.”

Eddie Huffman: “Well, how come you didn’t go? I mean were you?”
LM: “I just had a feeling it wasn’t for me. It wasn’t right?”

EH: “Were your parents encouraging you to go?”

LM: “Yeah, everybody was, but I just didn’t want to go and they didn’t make me go to it. It was at Bible School, is when it was. And there was about, I’d say there was I don’t know eight or ten that went up to be saved.”

SA: “They scared [you?] into it, didn’t they?”

LM: “Yeah, they more or less just talked them into it. It wasn’t [coming out of their heart?], not when they went to church that morning. And then they sat down there, and they, more or less, they talked them into it is what they did. And that’s the truth. And that was in, I believe about 1958.”

EH: “And that was here in Caldwell County?”

LM: “Yes. Union Grove Baptist Church.”

JM: “It wasn’t North Catawba?”

LM: “No, that’s where my par-, my mother was a member there and my grandfather and all that side. But I guess they believe the same as Union Grove and all the rest of the Baptists.”

Thinking Brother Miller was finished, I turned to Sister Anderson and Sister Miller to revisit the topic of the call of the Holy Spirit:

“So well, we were kind of talking about how it kind of just comes to you real abrupt, I wonder how much an influence your grandfather might have been. What sort of influence might have come?”

SA: “Well, when you’re born in the Old Baptist Church and your grandfather and your grandmother and your mother and your father, your aunts and your uncles and your cousins, I’m sure there is some influence there as far as, um, attending church. Now as far as it having any effect on you, uh, going up and saying that you want to be a member of that church and that you want to be baptized under the water, I don’t think that has anything to do with it. Um because I’ve experienced in these churches down through the last forty-some years that people will come to this church all, all along, and they never come and say that they want to join the church. You know, Ruth Mc.”

Brother Miller, having been drawn into the conversation, was not finished and interjected a reflection on his experience of the gradual emergence of the call to join Philadelphia Church:
“-Now, it wasn’t abrupt for me. Uh, this thing worked on me from 1958 and the thing at Union Grove until I went through with it.”

SA: “-Right.-”

LM: “-at Philadelphia.”

SA: “And all of our lives had an influence on it, I’m sure, but I don’t think that our grandfather, that I would say that he had a deciding factor on it.”

JM: “Because, I mean, he never, as grandchildren, as grandchildren, he never preached to us. He preached here in the pulpit. But as grandchildren he never said, you know, anything like that.”

SA: “And I don’t think any Primitive Baptist preacher does that to young people or to any people. They uh, they tell you what, you know, what they believe in the Bible is to be the doctrine of the Old Baptists and what they feel is the Word of God and let it fall on your heart and your conscience. And they don’t look you in the eye and say, you know, ‘You’re going to hell, and you’re going to,’ uh you know, ‘go to purgatory if you don’t come up here right now and join the church.’ Just as Larry was saying about the little children that went to Sunday School, or not, Bible School.”

LM: “Well now, that, basically that’s, that’s what the Baptists do tell you, is what you just said right there.”

SA: “That you’re going to?”

JM: “That you have to decide to do it.”

LM: “If you don’t get your heart right or get saved, you’re going to hell. And that’s exactly what they tell you.”

EH: “So it was several years that you thought about all that?”

LM: “Yeah, from 1958 to 1983 or four, whichever one it was. I don’t, without looking at the book I don’t remember.”

EH: “Was that a hard thing to work out?”

LM: “Yeah, you know the more I got into the Primitive Baptists, the more I believed that was the way it’s supposed to be. And that’s just a true and natural thing to me. I mean it just seems right. I just don’t believe you can go out and earn your way to heaven.”

SA: “We’d all fall short-”

JM: “-Yeah.-”
SA: “-If we had to earn our way.”

This juxtaposition of a lifetime immersion in Primitive Baptist belief and the gradual emergence reflects variance among believers’ experiences. By no means is either end of the continuum an indication of authenticity or a more assured reflection of God’s grace. The call of the Spirit comes on its own terms and in its own time.

Elder Jackson’s sermon at Hollow Springs that began with a look at Abraham as a Biblical type, or symbol, of the doctrine of predestination flowed into his primary focus for the day—the effectual call. If one’s spiritual path is predestinated or charted by God, then one turn along the way, if the individual is among God’s elect, will be the effectual call. It may occur as with Sister Miller who attended Primitive Baptist churches from birth: “I always knew somewhere down the line, I thought, you know, ‘I’ll join the church someday,’…But at that point in time there was something drew me to join the church…but I had no control over it.” Or the call may come as with Brother Miller, who was reared outside the Primitive Baptist Church but was led to this turn and that turn before finding a home in the church.

The Effectual Call

_Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, December 11, 2005_

“But you look at Isaac, and you say, ‘Well now, he is a figure also.’
He is a type, a shadow.
He casts a long shadow.

Speaking of shadow—here in terms of something good.
“He’s symbolic.

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129 Interview with Shirley Anderson, Janelle Miller, and Larry Miller, September 18, 2005. This transcription was not rendered in a more poetic form due to the number of speakers participating and the degree of exchanges between the four of us. Such a textual representation proved too visually confusing and jumbled, over powering the referent content of the talk.
“Isaac is a type, a shadow, a glorious example of that doctrinal truth that we Primitive Baptists call effectual calling.

“We can look at the life of Isaac and we can see that he was called. He was called.

“Read over there in the eighth chapter of Romans and it will speak of The foreknowing of God: ‘God foreknew a particular people, And he predestinated them And for whom he did predestinate them,’ he also what?

“He called, didn’t he? He called.

“AND YOU CAN LOOK AT ABRAHAM, AND YOU CAN SAY WELL THERE’S THE DOCTRINE OF PREDESTINATION. AND THEN YOU CAN LOOK AT HIS SON AND SAY,

‘My goodness, there’s the effectual call of God.’ Effectual call of God.

“And I remember—I’m listening to some tapes and I enjoy them so much—and I remember what one elder saying, well, I’ll share his name. It’s elder Sonny Pyles.

“He said, ‘THERE’S A RED LIGHT THERE!’ EVERY WORD IN GOD’S BIBLE IS IMPORTANT AND IS THERE FOR A PURPOSE!

“But when God repeats himself,

“When the INSPIRED WRITER OF GOD REPEATS HIMSELF, AND HE’LL GIVE YOU SOMETHING TWICE OR THREE TIMES OR MORE THAN THAT, LO AND BEHOLD THAT’S A RED LIGHT! THAT’S A STOP SIGN! STOP! AND PAY ATTENTION! because God is going to, in the words of the youth that we know today, God is going to lay on you something that is pretty heavy. He’s going to put something heavy on you.

“There’s something there that he wants to tell you,

“That he WILL TELL YOU! And he will give you the ears and the eyes to understand, to hear it and to see it.

“There’s a doctrinal truth there.

“Just as Abraham represents predestination, Isaac represents the effectual call of God.

“There’s a red light here.

“Turn in you Bible to Genesis, chapter twenty one. I want to share with you a verse there, Genesis Chapter twenty-one, verse twelve.

Hope you brought your Bibles, hope you’ll bring them each and every time.

This is Genesis Chapter 21, Verse 12. This is not our only verse this morning.
‘And God said unto Abraham let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman,’
that’s Ishmal and Hagar.

Let Me start again:

‘And God said unto Abraham in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman;

‘In all that Sarah hath said unto thee,
‘Hearken unto her voice;
for in Isaac shall thy seed be called.’

In Isaac shall thy seed be called.

Now, if you will turn—keep your place there—but turn over to Romans, chapter nine, of course, that’s in the new testament, Romans Chapter nine, and we’ll read another verse or two there. Romans, Chapter nine, the bread and butter of the Primitive Baptists.

“This is Romans Chapter nine, verses six and seven:

‘Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect;
For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.
‘Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children:
but, in Isaac shall they seed be called.’

In Isaac shall thy seed be called.

“Turn to Hebrews, chapter eleven. Go on over a little bit further to Hebrews, near the end of the Bible. It’s not the last chapter, but it’s up there near the end.

“Here are some wonderful words by the Apostle Paul who wrote this epistle to the Hebrews,

“This is Hebrews, chapter eleven, verses seventeen through nineteen:

‘By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac:
And he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son,
Of whom it was said,
‘That in Isaac shall thy seed be called:

‘Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.’
Did you catch that last word or two there.

‘According that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.’

In a figure.

Abraham was a glorious figure of the glorious doctrine of predestination.
Isaac was a glorious figure of the glorious doctrine of effectual calling.

In Isaac shall thy seed be called.

In Isaac shall thy seed be called.
That means this, in my way of thinking:

"Just as we examine the life of this old patriarch, Isaac, and we will see that he will be called,

God has also one that to each and every one of his little children
in the same manner, the same method,
the same sort of calling.

"If we examine the life of this great patriarch, Isaac, we will see the effectual calling of God, something that he does for each and everyone of his little children.

"Here is a model.

"Here is God’s blueprint, so to speak. This is how God does it.

"You will examine the life of Isaac, and you will see God’s hand in his life, not only in a predestinating way,
but in an effectual calling way as well.

"Here is a blueprint.

"Let’s turn to Galatians. I got one more verse here for you, and then we’ll settle down.

"Turn to Galatians chapter 4.
There’s a verse there that I want you to consider, as well.

"Galatians chapter four, I think its verse twenty-eight.

"Galatians four:twenty-eight.

"Listen to what Paul says.
Now this is along the same lines as Isaac and calling:

" ‘Now we, brethren, as Isaac was,
are the children of promise.’

"Now we, brethren, as Isaac was…”
Isaac is a figure of the doctrine of effectual calling.
And “as Isaac was,”
so shall

God’s children be.

‘In Isaac shall thy seed be called.’

"In like manner as Isaac was called,
so are the children of God.
They undergo something called an effectual call, and you can examine the life of Isaac and you can see proof positive
and like manner,
and same method,
of a calling here,
and that’s something I want you to examine and think about today…

“…Before we go any further,
"If we are as Isaac was,
we have something in common with Isaac.

“Number one is this:
“If you are effectually called and you undergo the effectual calling, that means you’ve been born again.

“That is a proof. That is an evidence of a rebirth.

“You’ve been born again.

“Jesus admonished, he told Nicodaemus, he said, ‘You must be born again.’

“The effectual call that God extends to his little children is proof positive that you’re born again.

“If you want to examine the evidence of being a child of God,

“If you want to see the fruits of the-of your regeneration, your rebirth, then it’s the effectual call. What is the effectual call?

“The effectual call is whereby God draws you, or calls you, or pulls you into a closer relationship with him.

“For some odd reason you want to go to church.

“You have no idea.

“Here before, church hadn’t really meant that much to you. You know, you’d go occasionally, and so, ‘I just think I’ll go to church today.’ But for some odd reason, there a burning in your heart, a burning desire, to go to church.

“You know, that old preacher when he stands up there, you tuned him out a lot of times. He didn’t make too much sense. He was way over your head, and way over his head anyway. He was in deep water. He just didn’t make much sense.

“But for some odd reason, that preacher is preaching something that touches you!

“And you like it!

“And yes, that’s what I believe in!

“And for some odd reason, there’s an old brother there that prays a prayer that just hits the nail on the head.

“And you do something that you’ve never done before: there’s a little tear that’s dropping from the corner of your eye…

…And lo and behold, you begin to read, and you ask questions.

‘Oh, I like this part of the Bible.

“You know, that makes a lot of sense.

“‘Preacher, let me ask you this question. Right here’s something I don’t quite understand. Help me if I’m wrong.’

“Does that sound a little bit like you?

“Does that sound a whole lot like you?

“Well, those are evidences of the effectual call, and it comes hand-in-hand

with being born again.
“If you were dead in trespasses and sin, then you couldn’t here any sort of spiritual call, could you?

“Oh, you could hear it audibly.

“You could hear the preacher’s voice, but you couldn’t understand and couldn’t grasp, and didn’t want to understand and grasp the meaning of what he said.

“But when you are born again,

“You can heed that effectual call.

So we share something in common with Isaac:

“We heed and have heeded the effectual call,

“Because we can hear. We’re born again.

“WE HAVE EARS TO HEAR NOW.

“The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord hath made even both of these.” Those are the words of Solomon…

“… So we have certain things in common with Isaac here.

“We are born again, and we hear the effectual call.

“We hear the effectual call.

“Pray for me.

“Turn in you Bibles there to chapter 17 in the book of Genesis—something I want to point out to you there.

“Here is something also—now, we’re getting down to the nitty-gritty here.

“Here is something that tells us that Isaac is a figure of the effectual call.

“Did you know that Isaac, his name was known to God before Abraham or Sarah even thought of him.

“He was known of God.

“In fact, he told Abraham what to name his son.

He said, ‘Name him Isaac.’

“In other words,

“Isaac was in the mind of almighty God before he was ever born.

“He was in God’ mind. God knew who he was before he was ever born.

So too does God know the name of every little child of God who will be effectually called. He knows you before you were born.

“Before there ever was time, before there was ever Earth that was hung in heaven, he knew exactly who you were.

“HE KNOWS YOU BY NAME. I DON’T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU WILL BE CALLED IN HEAVEN AND IMMORTAL GLORY, BUT HE KNOWS YOU’RE NAME.

“He has written your name in the lamb’s book of life
“AND HE HAS PREDESTINATED YOU TO BE EFFECTUALLY CALLED! Right there’s one of those stops on your spiritual journey.

“HE HAS PREDESTINATED YOU TO BE BORN AGAIN! HE HAS PREDESTINATED TO BE EFFECTUALLY CALLED!

“AND HE DECIDED TO DO IT BEFORE TIME WAS!

“IN HIS MIND, HE ALREADY KNOWN YOU.

“...Now, here’s an important distinction: were you effectually called before the beginning of time? No.

“But he had determined in his mind to do so. You were effectually called sometime in time. Sometime before you opened your eyes-sometime between the time you opened your eyes in birth and that you’ll close them in death, if you’re one of God’s children, you will be effectually called.

“He’d already determined this in his mind and in his heart, that you would be effectually called.

“KNOW YOUR NAME!

“Already predetermined that you would be effectually called. There’s predestination and effectual calling rolled into one.

“You might have been effectually called-born again and effectually called when you were just a teenager or just a child.

“I’ve heard people say, ‘I don’t remember a single time that I didn’t love the church.’

“That’s wonderful. I’m sure that there’s some people there, some Godly people, that have undergone that. Abraha-uh David was made to hope while on his mother’s breast!

And then I’ve known some people to get up in years, you know, and fight and scratch and cuss and complain and, ‘Oh, I don’t want to go to church.’ And lo and behold, the regeneration, the rebirth comes, and there’s the effectual call...

...But it’s known by God before the portals of the doors of time ever opened.

God knew

that Abraham and Sarah were going to bring forth a son, and he knew—he had determined in his mind ahead of time

that his name would be Isaac.

God has determined ahead of time that you would be effectually called.

“Genesis chapter seventeen?

Chapter seventeen, verse fifteen:

“‘And God said unto Abraham,

“‘As for Sara-Sarai thy wife, thou shalt call her name Sarai,
but Sarah shall her name be.’

"Shall her name be.

"S\text{H}A\text{L}L her name be.

‘And I will bless her, and give thee a son
also of her:

‘Yea,

‘I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations;
kings of people
shall be of her.’

“Abraham fell on his face and laughed, didn’t he. He said, “HOW CAN A MAN THAT’S 100 YEARS OF AGE AND A WOMAN WHO’S 90 YEARS OF AGE
conceive a bear a son?”

‘And Abraham said,’ this is verse 18, ‘And Abraham said unto God,
‘O that Ishmael might live before thee!

[Hmph]
‘And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed;
and thou shalt call his name Isaac:
for I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant,
and with his seed after him.’

and thou shalt call his name Isaac.

In other words,

“It was already in God; mind and God’s purpose
that he would call this son forth.

“And it’s already in God’s mind and God’s purpose from before the foundation of the world to call you forth

“Into a newness of life,

“And to call you in an effective way
into a closer relationship with him.

“Effective, effectual calling…

“…Consider the birth of Isaac.

“Abraham was a hundred years of age.
“His wife was almost that old…

“…Abraham’s \text{b}ody was \text{d}ead
as far as his reproductive capacity was concerned.
He was \text{d}ead.

“Sarah’s \text{w}omb was dead.

“But with God, all things are possible.

“AND HERE IS AN AGING MAN AND AN AGING WOMAN WHO CONCEIVE AND BRING forth a child!
“THEY BRING FORTH LIFE OUT OF DEADNESS!
“NOW THINK ON IT, THEY BRING FORTH THAT WHICH IS LIVING FROM THAT WHICH IS DEAD!
“THEIR REPRODUCTIVE ABILITIES, THEIR ABILITIES TO CONCEIVE A CHILD
“IN A BIOLOGICAL WAY
“WERE NIL! ABSOLUTELY NON-EXISTENT!
“THEY BROUGHT—

“God brought

“Life out of death, didn’t he?
    Same way with each and every one of you,
    when you were effectually called.
“You were born again from an existence of death in trespasses and sin,
    and you are alive and now he calls you. You came forth from death into what?
    Life, just like Isaac did…
“Just what Isaac did in a physical way, you did in a spiritual way.
“YOU DIDN’T DO IT, GOD DID IT!

“You came forth from a state of deadness in trespasses and sin into a LIFE,

    where you know God and worship God and love God and seek to serve God.
    You came from death into life,
    just like Isaac did.
“HE CAME FROM DEAD PARENTS, REPRODUCTIVELY, BIOLOGICALLY,
    and you have come form a state of deadness SPIRITUALLY into a state of being alive in Jesus Christ.
“YOU ARE A NEW CREATURE; you’re just exactly like Isaac…

…Ye hath be quickened who were dead in trespasses and sin…”

…Out of deadness comes life
    and comes the ability to heed and to hear and to follow and to worship
    and to love…

“…Now, you might want to pat yourself on the back and say, ‘Well now, I sure am glad that I answered the call.’
    Yes, you answered the call alright.
“But the desire and the power and the strength and the need to do that
did not come from you.
    It came from God.
“God put that desire in your heart.
    ‘Oh, John that’s too simple—too simplistic an explanation. Isn’t there anything in there that has to do with the role of man and what man does?’ I’M HERE TO TELL YOU THIS MORNING IT’S ALL GOD! EVERY LAST BIT OF IT IS OF GOD!

“‘FOR BY GRACE ARE YE SAVED!’
Not works.
If it were works, we could pat ourselves on the back.
But it’s of God,
and it occurs at a set time—a set time.

“You weren’t born again before the foundation of the world. You were born again in time.

“You were not effectually called before the foundation of the world, you were effectually called in time.
“But it was predetermined or prearranged ahead of time that you would be born again and that you would be effectually called.
“BUT IT OCCURS IN TIME!

“One person’s time might not be another person’s time.

“You might be like that little babe hoping on your mother’s breast,
 or you might be like that soldier boy

 who’s effectually called,
 who is born again and effectually called before a bullet strikes [them?].

Nothing is impossible with God;
 it’s in his set time.

“That seventeenth chapter of Genesis, there’s another verse I want you to look at there.
“This is the twenty-first verse:
 “‘But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at
 this set time
 next year.’

“This set time.
 that you’ll be born again and that you’ll receive and hear the effectual call.
“GOD HAS SET IT! IT’S HIS SET TIME!

“It’s an appointed time,
 his set and appointed time…”130

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“The hearing ear and the seeing eye,” in the context of Hollow Springs and Philadelphia
Primitive Baptist Churches, is imbued with a particular doctrinal base that defines and yet leaves

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130 Sermon at Hollow Springs Church, December 11, 2005.
definitions somewhat ambiguous. While doctrines provide believers with some constructs within which to understand spiritual experience, these doctrines also undermine any ultimate ability to fully contain spiritual knowledge. As Sister Anderson stated above, “And we use that phrase, you’re born an Old Baptist, but I think that the heart is the Lord’s. We just attach the Old Baptist word to it…And uh, I guess we really shouldn’t do that because if you’re a child of God, as you [Sister Miller] say, you’ll know it. When you know it, you’ll know it.”

Believers’ words are pushed along by a sense of humility that at once tempers doctrinal claims to absolute truth in interpretation and is buttressed by those doctrines. Experiential knowledge of the sacred is the only way to the church, and the rhetorical call of the preacher, evangelist, or missionary, through appeals to one’s fear of damnation or enticements to a sense of assured salvation, is made in vain. There is a relinquishing of any definite claim to total comprehension of the sacred in a set program. I refer back to Sister Watson’s comment from the chapter two: “There’s some things I don’t agree with [in the Primitive Baptist Church]…[b]ut I haven’t found anything that’s any closer to the truth than this is.”

“Closer, yeah.” Sister Swanson replied when I related her mother’s statement.

“There, it’s the basic. And it is basic. Primitive says it right, you know it’s a basic religion.

“We don’t have all the bells and whistles, you know.

“I don’t, First Baptist up here they have a ping-pong table and foosball and all this stuff in the basement.

“I don’t

*go* to church for *that.*

“I don’t need that to get me there.”

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131 This ambiguity has led to myriad divisions and splits within Primitive Baptist congregations. “Sowing seeds of discord” as Elder Jackson has referred to this tendency (Sermon at Hollow Springs Church, February 6, 2005). See also Peacock and Tyson 1989.

132 Interview, September 18, 2005.

133 Interview, May 6, 2006.
What gets the believer there is the experiential call of the Spirit. However, if doctrines do not absolutely define experiences with the sacred, they nonetheless provide a contemplative outlook within which believers meditate and reflect upon their experiences.

In a sense, the particulars of “the hearing ear and the seeing eye” employed by Primitive Baptists are rooted in their doctrines, the structuring concepts of their belief. Yet such a perspective leads to the tendency to encapsulate spiritual knowledge within the confines of doctrine. In this sense, doctrine has become sacralized through its rhetorical power over centuries of belief in it. Turned around, conceiving of doctrine as emerging from complexes of spiritual knowledge experience by believers over centuries, the sacred becomes “doctrinalized.” That is, through revelations of spiritual knowledge doctrine has emerged as digestible representations of the sacred in forms perceptible by human intellects. It is through these doctrines that, as Elder Jackson said in our first interview, Primitive Baptists perceive themselves as a “particular and a peculiar people.”

Sister Anderson sat in an arm chair by the front pew at Philadelphia Church, taking pause and pondering the question I had asked.

“Well, I hit a stump, Eddie.
What does it mean to me to be a Primitive Baptist?
“Well, I’ve been a Primitive Baptist all my life. So uh, the great revelations that certain people have had in their life, I can’t tell you that I’ve had that revelation because it’s been a steadying force in my life all my life. And,

“It means that I can’t be swayed in another way.
“It means that I’m who I am and will always be who I am, and

“That’s hard to be out in the world.
“Because I work with Lutherans, I work with Presbyterians, I work with Missionary Baptists, I work with Methodists, and
“I go up against the work-faith situation everyday.
But in my own quiet way
I have to steadfastly remain what I am [pats the arm of her chair with “what I am”].
“Well, I guess that’s what being a Primitive Baptist means to me,
that they give me the strength to be what I am.

“And it’s like I said about the, the problems they’re having in the Senter Church and up into the Ohios.

“I’ve been a Primitive Baptist all my life, and someone’s not going to come along and tell me,

you know, who I can listen to and who I can’t listen to because I have it instilled in me to know what I need to hear and know what I want to hear.

“And I guess that’s what being a Primitive Baptist means to me.

“And I’m sure that you’ve heard this from other people.

“We’re scoffed at in the everyday religious world. And to hold your head high and to walk with your belief and to be able to confront other people,

“And as myself.

“My grandfather always said the Bible means what it says and says what it means.

“And I asked him one time, I said, ‘Grandpa, how can I explain to other people what my religion is and how I believe?’

“I said, ‘I know in my mind and my heart, but when I go to speak it, it don’t flow out.’ And he said, ‘Well,’ he said, ‘Some things are meant for you to understand and some things are not.’ And he said, ‘That’s when faith comes along as of a tiny grain of mustard seed.’

“And,

“I run into that in the everyday working world that I go to all the time because people, people will say you’ve got to do something.

“You’ve got to do something.

“And they condemn people to hell when they don’t know what they’re talking about. But now, they don’t want to listen to anything I have to say [laughs].

“But uh, I guess that’s what being a Primitive Baptist is:

“Knowing.

“And they want to know how you know…

“…They feel like that some great of experience should have happened or I was supposed to do something to say that I had been saved.

“And for me to say to them that I have known all my life, they can’t understand.”

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134 Interview with Shirley Anderson, Janelle Miller, and Larry Miller, September 18, 2005.
5 COMMUNITY AT HOLLOW SPRINGS AND PHILADELPHIA CHURCHES

“I feel as close to one church as I do the other one,” said Sister Pansy Watson, a thin and energetic woman in her seventies, when I asked about the close-knit relationships between Hollow Springs and Philadelphia churches. I sat with Sister Watson and her husband Gene, an elder and former pastor of both churches, in the living room of the house Sister Watson grew up in near the town of Hudson. Outside, Spring had begun to call forth the infant buds of green, purple, red, pink, and white, and as we talked I felt as welcomed as the warmer weather. This being one of my first interview conversations with believers, I was trying to understand the nature of community at the churches, specifically, why two small, apparently close-knit congregations that appeared more as one that happened to meet in two different places had not consolidated. Essentially, the same group of about fifteen or twenty worshipers gathers at each church, the first and second Sundays at Hollow Springs and the third and fourth Sundays at Philadelphia. Sister Watson continued:

“I see no difference.

“I love this church over here [Philadelphia] just the same as I do down yonder [Hollow Springs] although I don’t wash their windows over here

and clean the church like I do down yonder where I belong.

See, I’ll be buried down there, up on the hill…

“…My mama and daddy belonged down there, and all my people.”

Stemming from the doctrines of their faith, as delineated by Elder Jackson in the previous chapter, community at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia churches takes on a dual

135 Interview, March 15, 2005.
character. Believers construct their social community around these doctrines as a common frame for belief and practical guide for their pattern of worship. The conglomeration of social relationships that constitute social community is located amidst the kinship and marriage affiliations among believers as well.

On the other hand, concepts of sacred community, the *true church* of God’s elect, emerge through these doctrines and exist as a separate entity from the social. This sacred community is never realized in the social—meaning the social does not mirror the sacred—but is sensed by believers through spiritual experience in worship within their social context. Thus, through the social experience of family and worship together believers have built a strong religious community. Experiences with the sacred, in worship or otherwise, glimpses of vast sacred community of the *true church*, have also guided believers notions of community in which the social relationships of community break the constraints of this world and become spiritual bonds of communion.

Social Community

Social community at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia is no doubt rooted in unifying tendencies (or attempts at unification) that emerged as many protestant Christians began diverging in terms doctrine and practice upon the arrival of the Great Revival in the first half of the nineteenth century from those who would by the end of the century call themselves Primitive. Through the formation of the Silver Creek Primitive Baptist Association in 1856, of which Philadelphia and Hollow Springs are the only remaining founding churches, and sharing a pastor at least since Henry Clay McMillon in the 1940s, the congregations sought to strengthen fellowship amongst themselves, and through circumstance, action, and spiritual guidance they have formed a strong local community anchored in the Word and worship.
Often, Primitive Baptists are viewed as anachronistic beings and their faith as a mere reflection of this perceived status. Yet such depictions rely on a subjectively defined master narrative of linear social development. Of course, this subjectivity is disguised as objective social science. Deborah McCauley writes of works on Appalachian religion often considered as “objective” scholarship:

Given the overwhelming absence of traditional research material, most scholars and commentators on mountain religion have been unduly influenced by the accounts of “outsiders” over the past two centuries. Scholars and commentators also get caught up in the underlying ideological and political agendas of published denominational histories. As a result, Old School or anti-missionary Baptists, such as the Primitive Baptists in particular, are not portrayed as the significant social movement they developed into during the first half of the nineteenth century.

By focusing on a so-called “mainstream” of Baptist development from roots in England, which included both Calvinistic and Arminian groups, to the institutionalization of organizational hierarchy that birthed the modern mission movement in the nineteenth century, the tendency has been to view groups such as Primitive Baptists in a devaluative light in that they did not contribute to this singular path of religious development. The measure of success along this path has been membership and economic growth and geographic presence. Yet these criteria are specifically downplayed by Primitive Baptist doctrines, not to suggest that these churches purposefully seek to limit their congregational numbers or their presence.

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136 Status here is defined as “a distinct lifestyle” as opposed to “economic or psychological indicators such as class or levels of prestige” (McCauley 1995: 206).

137 In the nineteenth century, this model emerged as an extension of the biological evolution of species as put forth by Charles Darwin adapted to society by Herbert Spencer in the form of Social Darwinism (Williams 1980). In terms of historical materialism, this Darwinian model for society established the measure of value in relation to dominance and control over the natural environment, which in effect creates a distance, if artificial, of humans from it. Thus, development, in the cultural evolution model, is defined in terms of this “objective” distance: the shorter the perceived distance—the more reliance on nature—the less developed a group or society. Under these assumptions, adaptation, to use a Darwinian term, is conceived in terms of dominance, rather than harmony.

Through specific choices in belief and doctrinal understanding Primitive Baptists have continued a particular path apart from the expansionist mission of more Arminian and mainline Baptists and have coalesced into strong locally-focused communities. McCauley\textsuperscript{139} contextualizes such disputes as that over institutionalized mission work among Baptists not under a unilinear history or “progress,” rooted in early Social Darwinism and cultural evolution, in which groups like the Primitive Baptists would be affixed in a point in time before the advent of mission work. Rather, she perceives these groups, even if a bit too generalized, as active participants in ongoing efforts of self-definition.\textsuperscript{140}

This emphasis on locally-focused community development constitutes a contextual thread that continues to characterize many Primitive Baptist churches, and in particular those at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia. This community development has been a project of concerted effort as well as a product of circumstances in which the churches find themselves as the only remaining Primitive Baptist churches in Caldwell County.

Officially, the congregations at Philadelphia and Hollow Springs are distinct and autonomous. Each church handles her own finances (including donations received, small investments, utilities, and a small monthly stipend of $100 for Elder Jackson to assist with his travel expenses), building maintenance, grounds and cemetery upkeep, and individual church business in conferences (or business meetings) periodically held subsequent to worship services. Local church identity extends well beyond these officialities, and they are resultant of personal identities within each congregation.

“But even though, say, someone from Philadelphia goes to Hollow Springs.
“They support Hollow Springs, love Hollow Springs, comfortable in Hollow Springs,"

\textsuperscript{139} McCauley is perhaps too general in references to “mountain religion” as a distinct regional Appalachian brand and only sparingly touches upon the variety within that region and the connections to other regions. See Tyson, Peacock, and D. Patterson. “Introduction.” 1988 for more on overlays of fixed and generalized regionalism upon religion in the South.

\textsuperscript{140} 1995:202-237.
but their church is Philadelphia…

“…There’s a level of comfort.
There’s a level of attachment. There’s all sorts of emotional things that can arise at one church, say,
as opposed to another church.
“Maybe you first realized
that you could see and hear in spiritual way at Philadelphia rather than Hollow Springs.
See? Therefore that church would have more meaning to you.
Not that you didn’t love Hollow Springs or the people that went there,
“But there’s where you first saw the light of day, so to speak”[31]

Elder Jackson was trying to explain to me why the congregations at Hollow Springs and
Philadelphia did not merge into one. The churches have their own histories, and these histories
include the events of their formation and affiliations with one another and other churches,
which I briefly outlined in chapter two. Yet the strong sense of identity with these individual
histories emerges through their spiritual histories as some “some first realized [they] could see
and hear in a spiritual way.”

Thus, there is somewhat of a dialectic between group identity and church identity. While
believers may be close to and personally invested in both churches, there is a special attachment
to one’s home church. Certainly, family relationships and geographic locale are important to this
identity, as is apparent in believers’ accounts of joining the church below. However, identity is
situated within spiritual experience as well.

Family has been a strong force in individuals’ identity with their particular home
curch, and it has also played a role in bringing the two congregations closer together. Sister
Swanson notes family as the backbone of their Primitive Baptist community in more recent
times as the general populous has increasingly been attracted to larger mainstream
denominations. In another take on the situation, Sister Anderson pointed to the dense family as
special characteristic of these churches. “See, on one side [Philadelphia] was my family, on the

141 Interview, October 9, 2004.
other side [Hollow Springs] was David’s family, and when we got married, that made us all…connected, and that’s the way it’s been for the last 45 years.”142 Brother Anderson was baptized at and a member of Hollow Springs, and upon his marriage to Sister Anderson he moved his membership. Sister Watson said, “Now David, you know, is my brother. David Anderson, sits behind me?”

I asked, “Is that Shirley’s husband?” still meeting people and learning about their complex kinship and marriage network.

“Yeah, he’s my brother.
“But see Shirley belonged, and her people belonged, over here.
“And sometimes the women can do more for the men than the men can do for themselves. So,
“I asked him one time why he wasn’t going to buried down [at Hollow Springs], with all our family.
“And he said,
‘Well, Shirley wants to be buried over here [Philadelphia], and I want to be buried with Shirley.’”143

Dorothey Noyes perceives the notion of group as socially constructed, producing a dialectic between networks of social relationships and culturally performed identities with community.144 While believers at Philadelphia and Hollow Springs are involved in complex networks of social affiliation, these networks only become communities as individuals personally invest themselves in them through perceiving and performing identities within particular networks. For example, Sister Shirley and Brother David Anderson live in a small neighborhood of modest ranch-style brick homes between Granite Falls and Cajahs Mountain, and thus have to some extent a network of relationships there. They both work at Sherrill Furniture about twenty minutes south in Hickory, and thus are involved in the social network there. However,

142 Interview, September 18, 2005.

143 Interview, March 15, 2005.

144 2003.
as networks these complexes of social relationships are not inherently communities.

Community, according to Noyes, is a matter of personal investment in identity. As members of Philadelphia Church, the Andersons invest themselves personally in their identities as Primitive Baptists and hope for an identity among God’s elect. This identity is rooted in experiences of God’s grace and the active communication of them, explicitly through accounts or implicitly within a worship service, all framed (not prescribed) by the doctrines of their faith. These experiences shift identities within the conglomeration of social networks particular individuals are involved in, reconstituting individual identity within the local church community. Or as Elder Jackson characterized the effectual call, “You’re not the old man in a new suit of clothes. You’re the new man in an old suit of clothes.” Their investments in spiritual identity did not come as surface appearances, but began on the inside, in their hearts, and outward manifestations emerged from this locus of spiritual renewal. For some, this shift constituted a drastic turn in their spiritual journey. For others, it came so naturally or gradually as to be almost imperceptible as a specific event.

Sister Watson grew up attending Hollow Springs with her parents. Her mother, Jesse, was raised “in that section down there in Hollow Springs, and that is where she went to church.” Her father, Leonard Anderson was a deacon for forty years. Her maternal grandparents, Edgar and Daisy Carlton, also attended Hollow Springs, although only Daisy Carlton was a member. Her great grandfather George McGee, described by her and Sister Walker as “very strict” and “straight laced,” was one of the first pastors at Hollow Springs.

“You know, when I went to school, everybody went to Sunday School but me.
And the teacher would ask, ‘How many of you went to Sunday School yesterday?’ Did you know, I couldn’t raise my hand because we didn’t have no Sunday School.
And I learned to lie.

145 Sermon at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, June 11, 2006.
I raised my hand so I wouldn’t be the only one in there that didn’t raise my hand. “But I hadn’t never been in a Sunday School in my life. “But I’d raise my hand!...

“…From the very beginning, “I knew that I was not like all the rest of my school mates, that I was different, that none of them went to the Old Baptist Church. They went to the Methodist and the Lutheran down here in Hudson. “And I was just different from them… “…I felt different. “Not in my heart. I felt like I was right in my heart. “And was sort of ashamed that we didn’t do like they done for a long time, until I was about twelve years old and I took a toothache. And I got down on my knees, and I said, ‘Lord take this pain away…’ And that was the first time I ever had the desire to pray, “But the pain was terrible [laughs]. “And it went on for years, not the toothache, but I didn’t join. “I went [to church] because I was taken before I was ever born.”

Sister Watson married Elder Gene Watson, who grew up in the Wildcat community of Watauga County and was raised in a Missionary Baptist Church, in 1948, and the two began raising a family in Hudson next door to her parent’s house (in which they now currently reside). While neither were members at Hollow Springs of Philadelphia churches, they attended regularly.

“I preached for thirty-five years, and I had a stroke. And it was forty years now if I could have preached on,” said Elder Watson a few months after the 40th anniversary of his ordination into the ministry. He pastored Hollow Springs and Philadelphia churches from about 1965, after the passing of Elder Henry Clay McMillon, to about 2000.

146 Interview, March 15, 2005.
“Sometimes he can tell me,” said Sister Watson of some of the communicative difficulties they have experienced due to the aphasic effects of his stroke, “sometimes he can’t.” Elder Watson, a gifted theological thinker—his daughter Sister Swanson said, “I can remember dad preaching, and there would be certain Sundays that he would just nail me down”—now sometimes has difficulty in matching words to his thoughts. Sister Watson has become skilled in picking up his stories when he is unable to elaborate. While she narrates from her perspective, judging from his general agreement with her commentary, she is able to capture the essence.

“It's hard for me to see him sit back and not get up and preach. I don’t know why, but it is. I guess it was something that I was so used to…. I’ve seen him standing in the pulpit and tears drop off of his face because he was so touched by the power of God.”

Elder Watson moved to the area for work in the furniture industry, married Sister Watson, and the two began their family. Eventually, Elder Watson became a supervisor at the Singer Furniture plant in Hudson.

“I had a hundred and fifteen people under me,” said Elder Watson. “She’s gone with the way of the world now,” he added as several of the counties furniture production facilities have closed their doors in the last seven years.

Elder Watson was baptized in 1958 began to feel the call to preach shortly thereafter. I asked him what had led him to join then.

“I really don’t know,” he responded in a manner quite similar to answers from others to the same question, but without further elaboration. Sister Watson cued on his response and began to tell of his spiritual change.

“Something got to eating on him bad.

147 Interviews, August 20, 2005 and March 15, 2005.
“And,
“I noticed that he would cry a lot.
   Go in the bathroom and close the door, and he would cry a lot.
“He would come down here and study with Daddy, and then he’d come home
   with tears in his eyes.”

“…I knew he had a burden, and
“I said one time, ‘I really don’t know

   if you’re called or not. See, I don’t know.’
“He said, ‘Well, I’m afraid not to, and I’m afraid to…”

“…Preacher McMillon told me he thought he saw a gift in Gene.
   And he began to work with him, and my dad.
   They’d get in there at the table and
   search through the Bible
   and talk.
   They didn’t fuss or fight…”

“[W]hen he first was liberated, and Preach McMillon, that was the preacher then, would
   come over and I’d see him coming, and I knew
   that I was going to be a lonesome widow that weekend.
   “He’d take Gene off to Associations,
   and they’d stay,
   now, with anybody that would offer for them to stay with.
   And I would think,
   ‘This ain’t right. I didn’t marry a preacher. I married a gambler.’
   He was a gambler when I married him.
   And it wasn’t long till there wasn’t no gambling done there, I’ll tell you
   right now…”

“But whenever Gene joined,
   he come by.
   “Brother McMillon
   come by to see me, and I was washing dishes.
   “And he said, ‘Do you mind sitting down and talking with me for a little while?’ I said,
   ‘Of course not.’
   “And
   “He said, ‘Do you ever look out that window while you’re washing the dishes
     and think
     why you haven’t joined the church that Gene has,’ and ‘he needs you

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148 Interview, March 15, 2005.
149 Interview, August 20, 2005.
150 Interview, March 15, 2005.
151 Interview, August 20, 2005.
to be with him,
to stand behind him.’

“And I said, ‘Yes, I have.’
“And he said, ‘Well, why are you waiting.’
“I said, ‘I don’t know why I’m waiting.’ I said, ‘I’m just waiting.’
“He said, ‘Well, you know, time’s passing by,
and he needs you to stand by him.’
“So the next Sunday, or Saturday, I joined on Saturday night,
and there was five come up and joined.
“And we were baptized in Crump’s Pond.
And it was a little muddy and a little bit dirty.
But we were baptized anyhow.
“And after that I

“Just sort of followed him everywhere he went,
when he went off to associations,
“I stayed with him a lot…

“…See, I was Gene’s critic.
“I was the critic.
“If anything that I thought was out of order or, I’d tell him.”

“She’d chew me out,” clarified Elder Watson.

“I’d chew him out.
“And he started out telling things that
I had said and done, this and that and the other,
little things.
“And I told him, one day when we got home, I said,
‘You know that King James Bible you got in front of you? It’s just full of good stuff.

Don’t bring my name in there.’
I said, ‘Read it out of that book,
and go with that.’
Because
people don’t come to hear about my little troubles and trials.
They want to hear something out of that book.
“So I was his critic, bad one too…

“…That’s one of the hardest jobs I’ve ever done in my life.

“That’s one of the hardest jobs
that can be given to a person.

“You don’t always agree with them.

“But I sit back sometimes when he did preach,
“And most of the time I was praying
that he would say what God give him to say.
Not add man’s word in there
because man can do a lot, you know,
of his own.
“And I just wanted him to do
what the book said…

“…I’ve thought about writing a book
on the wife of the preacher.
“And two or three women who are preachers’ wives has said they wanted a chapter to put in. [laughs] But it’s not easy…

“…But Brother McMillon, if he hadn’t talked to me, I don’t know when I would have joined.
“Sometimes a little prodding helps, you know, just a little…

“I felt like I was doing the right thing. I felt like—
“I didn’t feel like
they did whenever they,
in the movie O Brother Where Art Thou [laughs], where they jumped up and hollered.

But I felt good, good about it.
“See, I had been an Old Baptist so long till I thought I already was one.
“There wasn’t that much difference because I felt like—
“I had always went, and
I don’t know, I just felt like a part of them…”

Sister Watson’s kinship roots at Hollow Springs run deep. Along with her mother and father and other forebears, two of the four children she and Elder Watson raised are members at Hollow Springs.

Their daughter, Sister Revonda Swanson joined the church at age thirteen because she felt “that’s what I was supposed to do.” She characterized this decision as perhaps a bit hasty and situated it within a narrative anchored in kinship. As we talked at her home a few miles from Hollow Springs Church, family was a prominent topic since her mother’s kin had deep roots in the church and her father, after having moved from neighboring Watauga County for work and marrying Sister Watson, had been pastor.

152 Interview, March 15, 2005.
“My mother commented early on that she didn’t marry a preacher, so who she married became a preacher.

“And so her kids weren’t going to be any different than anybody else’s kids.

“And she made a point when we were growing up that we weren’t treated differently, and her comment always used to be, ‘I didn’t marry a damn preacher.’

“So therefore [laughing]

that’s my mother’s comments.

“But we lived next door to my grandparents, my mother’s mom and dad,

“And my grandfather was a deacon, and there’s never been a finer man on the face of the earth. So he was—

“I miss him still sitting up there on that first pew right in the corner.

“So I was raised a preacher’s kid and my grandfather was a deacon [laughs].

“It never was really a question of, you know,

“Doing differently.

Mama made sure of it. I mean she really did.

“You go out, and you play and do just like the rest of the kids. You’re no different from the rest of the kids.

She always made a point of that…

“…But, I was grandpa’s girl.

“I was the first grand child, and for four years, I was the only grandchild.

“So I was rotten, totally and completely rotten…

“…Everything that’s on their place that’s concrete has got my name in it.

“And what ever he did, I wanted to be there doing it too…

“…You know, when you live next door, you’re going to be—I was in grandpa’s back pocket. I mean, that’s how it was.”

This made me think again of the family connections and church membership, and I asked, “Do you think your grandpa had anything to do with, or uh your feelings for him, have anything to do with you joining the church at such a young age?”

153 Interview, May 6 2006.
“Sure, I’m sure it did. Um, grandpa, grandma, all of them. It was—that’s what I was supposed to do…

“…At that time it seemed like the thing to do, you know, but a thirteen-year-old don’t know their butt from a hole in the ground.

[laughs]

“You think you do. You know all there is to know about all there is to know.”\(^\text{154}\)

Sister Swanson joined the church at age thirteen. A teen in the 1960s, she described herself in an early phone conversation as “a flower child personified.” She graduated high school, married her husband Carson, and then attended nursing school at the North Carolina Baptist Hospital School of Nursing in Winston-Salem.

“I was raised in the sixties. You know, I came through all that. [sigh].

“All that, and was raised Primitive Baptist, ok.

“And I got married very young, got married when I was nineteen, and was dumber than dirt.

“So all this stuff going on, all these little flower children doing their little thing, all this drugs and crapola out in the world and cigarettes and alcohol, and I had been raised in box [laughs], more or less.

“I didn’t know that there was any different out here [laughs].

“So you know, whenever you come across all this stuff that you find out out here: ‘Hmm, maybe I should try this.’ [laughs]

“Some of it, I did, but I was married.

“I was married before I ever tasted alcohol and I didn’t particularly care for it. [laughs]

“I thought it tasted like cough syrup. [laughs] Maybe it’s because my grandpa made cough syrup out of it."\(^\text{155}\)

\(^{154}\) Ibid.

\(^{155}\) Ibid.
She returned to Caldwell County after graduating and began her career as a nurse, working as an on-site industrial nurse among the county’s furniture manufacturers and in doctors’ offices, and she and her husband began their family.

Not until many years later did she feel and experience an identity with the church, but as she said, “there was no bolt of lightening,” referencing the common trope of conversion narratives attributed to Primitive Baptists.

“There was no
‘Ah yes, I see now.’
“No, it sort of—just gradually.

“And I guess when I was in my thirties, when I realized that
I didn’t know what I was doing then,

that yeah, yeah, ok this is making sense.
I understand.
Ok,
I believe that…

“…But it sort of gradually
snuck up on me.
“And the basic premise is that there is an
almighty, all powerful, all knowing God.
And that’s what sticks with me.”

Sister Swanson now serves as the church clerk, since taking over the job from Sister Verna Walker around 2000. She keeps meticulous records of the finances at Hollow Springs, compiling an annual financial report, and records the proceedings of services at both churches in her private journal from which she compiles the “official” minute record.

“But flower child, yes. I tried to be all of the,
I wanted to do all of it.
But I discovered that I didn’t want to do any of it. [laughs].

“I like being
old fashioned, prudish [laughs].
“Which I’m still not really a prude, but
Carson accuses me of it on occasion.”

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156 Ibid.
Verna Walker, 89 years of age when we interviewed, also grew up attending Hollow Springs Church, and she is distantly related to the Watsons and Andersons through Daisy and Edgar Carlton and Elder George McGee. Although she initially joined the Missionary Baptist church her parents were members of, she often accompanied her grandparents to Hollow Springs. Through attending with her grandparents, Sister Walker heard and experienced a sermon that compelled her join at Hollow Springs when she was about sixteen years old. Her husband, Coleman Walker, joined much later, after the two were married.

“He was brought up a Missionary Baptist, which I was too. My mother and daddy were Missionary Baptists.

“My grandfather was, and my daddy was a deacon a long time in the same church I left…

“And I was very unhappy in that church.

“I didn’t like the protracted meetings, and some of the things that they did, and I wasn’t happy being a Sunday School teacher. They made me a Sunday school teacher.

I was about 16.

“And I had the feeling that I was where I didn’t belong, and I was qualified to be a Sunday School teacher.

“And I didn’t believe in a lot of the things, the practices, that went on in that church.

“And so I was very unhappy.

“And I went with my grandparents to the association [meeting] at Hollow Springs, and Preacher Oakes got up and preached. And he enlightened me completely [a smile grew across Sister Walker’s face].

“I saw exactly where my problem was and what I needed to do about it.

“And I felt like I needed to go with the Primitive Baptists because that was the way I felt.

“And I asked Preacher McMillon

“If I needed to get Permission from Little Rock Church to join that church.

“He said no, but it would be the proper thing to do to notify them, which I did.

“And they appointed a committee to try to talk me out of leaving the church,

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157 Ibid.

158 A visiting Elder.

159 Although Elder McMillon did not relocate to Caldwell County until the mid-1940s, he had been visiting and preach there for sometime.
But my mind was made up and I was satisfied.

“And when I joined that church,
I’ve not had—I may have been maybe dissatisfied with myself, but not with my church. I’ve never had any problem with my church. I’ve been happy with it and with everything that it stands for.”

I asked Sister Walker, “Do you remember what Elder Oakes preached that day?”

“I remember what he said. He said that we could not work out our own salvation, that Christ died for us, and that we didn’t work out our own salvation. It was not of works,

but that we needed to work after we—

“After we became converted, we needed to work.
But he said works did not convert us, and that was what I was troubled about.

“I just felt being a Sunday School teacher wasn’t doing me many good.

“I was not aware,
“Didn’t realize, that Christ had died for me,
And that I was not able to qualify myself.
That was what I was trying to do. I was trying to qualify myself by my good works, and I felt like I was failing in that.

“It was just the Spirit working in me I guess.
Because after I was baptized at Hollow Springs, I didn’t have anymore of those feelings…”

“…[Coleman] said he wasn’t good enough to join the church,
and I said, ‘You don’t make yourself good enough.
You’ll never be good enough.’
Well, one day he just walked up and joined.

“And he was just as strict about being there every Sunday after that, maybe even more than I.

“When he joined it, he joined it whole-heartedly.
“He was treasurer for a long time, and when he died, they knew I had been doing this for him because he had been sick a long time.
They said, ‘Well, you just keep on doing it.’

“And I was treasurer then for—

“Well, from the time I worked with him until just a few years ago, I resigned as treasurer.
“I told them some young person needed that job. I did it twenty-nine years, I think...”

The Walkers lived on land owned by her family. Her grandparents had a house there, as did her parents, until they passed. Sister Walker, too, lived there since birth, except for a brief stint one county over in the town of Newton.

“...We farmed and had cattle, but my husband worked in the furniture factory too.
“[Coleman] was so pleased when he retired at 63, and for the next 15 years he was the happiest he’d ever been because he was in good health. He would go around to his fences and tend to his cattle, and he had a dog that followed him everywhere he went.
“And he always loved the outdoors; he never did like working inside...

“He worked for Bernhardt. He worked for Hibriten, and then they sold to Bernhardt, and he just stayed one year after Bernhardt bought it.
“And Bernhardt had a retirement plan, but Hibriten didn’t have.
“So he was just one year in the retirement plan, and when he retired, he got a pension.
“He had a choice. He could take a lower pension, and would come to me then if he died before I did.
“Or he could take a higher pension that would stop when he died.
“And he took the lower.
“He drew it for about fifteen years, and then it came to me as $20.16 a month. [laughs]
“One year was all that he was vested.
“But I worked for the school system, so I was vested.”

Sister Walker’s daughter Louise added, “She was one of the first graduates of the community college down here. Graduated with honors. She was in her fifties when she went back to school.”

“I was 53 when I went back...

“...I got my associates degree in library technology, and started work then at Gamewell...I worked in the library. I was a media center specialist...

“...I worked ten years at Gamewell Elementary. One year I was at both schools,

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160 Interview, February 12, 2005.
“I told the lady at Whitnel that she was the only one I know that could get a full week’s work out of someone who was only working two days for her. She would have plenty to do. [laughs] “But I draw a pretty good income from that. “The best part is that my insurance supplement is paid. “I got a letter from them this week that said I would not be paying anymore dues. It was their policy, when you reached you’re ninetieth year, “You didn’t pay anymore dues. “I’m a lifetime member now [laughing]… “…I’ve move three times on the old homeplace, or I’ve lived in three different houses… “…We had about 45 acres and after Coleman died, well before he died, we had planted it off and assigned sections to the children. “And after he died, I just deeded it to them because I didn’t need the responsibility. “And I saved myself a homeplace as long as I lived.”

Shirley Anderson, Janelle Miller, and Ruth St. Clair have similar familial ties to Philadelphia, although their kinship roots in the church and Caldwell County are more recent. Sister St. Clair, the youngest of eleven children, told of her family moving to North Carolina and her father, Elder Henry Clay McMillon, coming to pastor Philadelphia and Hollow Springs in the 1940s.

“The people from these churches used to visit the Tennessee-Nolachucky Association, and they met my dad and they really liked him. And they wanted him to come to Philadelphia and Hollow Springs and pastor those churches. “But he had a hundred-acre farm on Cosby, Tennessee. And of course, there were six children still at home, and he just couldn’t see making the move. “Well, our house burned. “Everything we had burned. “So, that pretty much changed his mind. We didn’t have anything there anymore, except the land, so he decided to sell the land

161 Ibid.
and come to Caldwell County and pastor the churches there.

“And when we got to Caldwell County, those two churches had found us a little house
to live in.

“And we had food,
    and we had clothing, all ready for us
    when we got there…

“…The first place we lived was in Hudson.
“...It was a little building that some of the church members owned,
    and they partitioned it off and made a little house, living quarters, until we could
find a place to live…

“…Well, my dad looked until he found a home that was suitable for us, and as soon as
the land was sold he bought the house on Blue Creek,
    which was near Hollow Springs Church.
    And that’s how we came to Caldwell County.
“But my dad said that before he ever visited Philadelphia Church
    that he had a dream about a church,
    and when he seen Philadelphia he knew that that was the church.
    And that’s how he got to be pastor there.
“So the Lord has a way of showing us things sometimes that we can’t see.”

Along with Sister St. Clair and her father, came her ten siblings and other family
members. Among them was Sister Floradelis who had married Brother Alfred Jenkins and their
children Sister Shirley Anderson and my uncle Wayne Jenkins. Sister Janelle Miller was later
born in Caldwell County.

Sister St. Clair and Sister Anderson, comparable in age (although Sister St. Clair is Sister
Anderson’s aunt), were immersed in Primitive Baptist experience, traveling with Elder McMillon
to various associations when they were young. Sister Anderson shared her memories and the
influences of this time with the longing, yet satisfied, smiles of the utmost endearment and heart-
felt sense of fortune in a blend of familial and spiritual love for her grandfather and first
preacher:

“Well, Ruth and I had traveled with my grandpa
    for years.
“We went to South Carolina with him. We went down to Gastonia to the associations
down there, and we went up into Virginia.

162 Interview, February 26, 2005.
“I traveled around with him from the time I was eight years old until I was maybe

Fourteen or fifteen.
“I moved from Blue Creek over off of Highway 18 and I went to another school, so I
didn’t travel with Ruth and Grandpa as much…

…I know that me and Ruth both
loved going with Grandpa.
“Grandpa, he, he loved for me a Ruth to go with him. And he treated us like
young girls. He never did talk down to us, or nothing like that…
“Now my mama and daddy,
they didn’t travel much. In fact, my dad, he never did go any place,
really, except back to Tennessee to see his family.
“So when Grandpa said he was going somewhere, me and Ruth always volunteered [raises
hand].
“We was ready to go.

“We sure did love going with him…

…IBy traveling with Grandpa, I met other people
that believed the way he believed.
“And my grandpa, he could carry on with anybody.
“Everybody—
Hold on a second, I’m getting a phone call.
[Sister Anderson went to answer the phone, and I paused the recorded until she returned]

“But I think traveling with my grandpa and seeing him interact with other Primitive
Baptist people
“Gave me an insight to
how good the Old Baptists were.

I don’t know, maybe, this may seem silly.
“But I loved him before I loved what he believed, and I loved what he told me from the
pulpit and I loved,
I loved the associations that we went to.
“And it just came natural…

…All my life I have been in the Old Baptist Church, and
it was a,
“It was a way of life for me.
“Now my mother belonged to the Old Baptist Church, and she joined right after we came
to North Carolina,
which we came to North Carolina in the late 40s.
And I guess maybe she joined about 50 or 51.
“And I’ve just always been in the Old Baptist Church. And
“I guess I can’t tell you exactly what made me want to join the church. It just came natural…

“…I was baptized in nineteen-

-fifty-eight, I believe.
I got married in 1960, and I'll be married 45 years in July.
“So I guess I’ve belong to the church about forty-seven, forty-eight years.”164

“And then the day I joined the church, or the day I was baptized, my daddy joined the church that day too.
“So he helped Grandpa baptize me.

“And I guess that
the two most influential men in my life were holding me up.”165

Sister Anderson made the comment that the Primitive Baptist church has been “a steadying force” throughout her life. However, she did not mean this as a necessarily static force. In our first interview conversation, as we sat on the carport of her and Brother Anderson’s home on a beautiful June afternoon, she correlated the three pastors in these churches during her life with three facets of an emergent understanding of her faith.

“My grandpa was very,
very instrumental
“In my life,
and definitely I guess you could say, in my religious life, my spiritual life. Because he was the first—
“He was first preacher that I remember hearing,
hearing the Lord’s Word preached.
“And I was telling John the other night:
“My grandfather taught me
the love of the Old Baptists,
“And Brother Gene taught me the stability of the Old Baptists,
that
you follow a certain path,
not to [vary? Or stray?] from that path.
“And then came along Brother John, and Brother John has taught me
the Bible.

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164 Interview, June 11, 2005.
165 Interview, September 18, 2005.
Do you understand what I mean by that?
“T’ve always known the Bible, to a certain extent, not very well,
“And Brother John has brought me the ability to read and to understand it much better than I was as a young woman.
“And I never cease to have interest in his subjects
because he always bring out something new.
“Now some of your other Old Baptist preachers, they can get up and they can preach the Word and they just bring the spirit out in it so well,
but I tend to lose them somewhere, sometimes.
“But Brother John can lead me in, and he leads me out.
“And I certainly appreciate what he has taught me over these last six or seven years that he’s been with us.
“But my grandpa, he was the love of my life.”166

Elder John Jackson has a different social experience than most members who were raised in these churches. He grew up in Ashe County, spending summers in Watauga on his father’s family farm. The son of a Primitive Baptist mother and a Methodist father, he said, “I’ve been on both sides of the fence and I know which side is the greener.”167 Elder Jackson was raised attending both but was baptized in and joined a Methodist church. Looking back on his life, he now perceives more of a Primitive Baptist mindset in his youth than he had before joining his first Primitive Baptist church in the early 1990s.

“I look back, do you recall?

“I’d have to look it up.
It was a long time ago maybe in the sixties, late sixties.
“We hadn’t landed a man on the moon yet,
but we were going in that direction.
“And there was a, I believe a three man crew, and they lifted off from Cape Kennedy or Cape Canaveral or wherever it was.
“And their object was to fly three days to the moon, go around it, and not land,
but come back from the other side and come back home.
“See if it was feasible to do that.

“And they were up in space. Now, I mean it was big news, you know, back then.

“My grandparents, my mother’s parents,

166 Interview, June 11, 2005.
167 Interview, October 9, 2004.
who were lock-stock-and-barrel Primitives. *Oh* my goodness [laughs].

“My grandmother was a typical
elderly mountain housewife.
Cooked on a wood stove.
Canned everything you can imagine.
Best cook that God ever created…

“…And my grandfather was a dirt farmer.
*Even* in his old age he was strikingly handsome.
And just such a hard worker and
could work a team of horses just superbly. Anyway.
“They were retired, more or less, but worked harder than I do or ever did.
“My grandmother had a canner of, I think, shelly beans on the stove, and that old canner was just rolling.
“My grandfather was sitting there in a straight-back chair. The porch faced to the east,

and the early morning sunrays were coming in through the screen on the porch,
you know.
“My grandmother said something to the effect, “You ought not go up in space.”
[laughs].
“Said, ‘I’d be afraid I couldn’t get back.’

“And I remember what I said. I said, ‘If it’s God’s will that they come back, they’ll come back.’

And my grandfather, who was reading the paper,
just dropped the paper like that [gestures with both hands],
and looked over at my grandmother.
And didn’t say a thing, but he made like
“Did you hear that? Did you hear that?”

“And that’s the first time I remember saying something that a typical Primitive Baptist would believe.
“From then on,

little things, you know. It didn’t come all at one time.
“The years passed, the years rolled along.
“Grandparents passed away.
Was married, and had children.”

Elder Jackson also attended graduate school, earning a Master of Arts in History at North Carolina State University. Upon returning home to Watauga County, feeling “there wasn’t much to do but teach,” he began his career as an elementary school teacher. He was an active member in his Methodist church, teaching Sunday School and Bible School and serving as a “lay speaker.” In the early 1990s, his religious course changed.

“And a call came,
“In the Methodist church.
 The preacher who, the pastor had preached the same sermon to another congregation about an hour before.
 “He said it went over like a thud, you know. [laughs]
 “But he preached from Isaiah, and that part of Isaiah,
 “Isaiah’s in the presence of God and God speaks to him, saying, ‘Who will come, who will go? Who will speak,’ you know, ‘who will serve me?’
 “And [snaps fingers].
 “I had been fighting it for a long while, and it was just like a searing white poker went down my throat and I knew right then.

“I had tried it for, tried my best to go the Methodist way, but my heart was just not in it.
 “Just a number of factors that told me
 That that was not the way to go.
 “So I summoned the courage to start to go to some Primitive Baptist churches.
 “And as God would have it, I happened to get into a situation
 where they welcomed me and were glad to have me
 and made me feel good about it…

“…Found a little church in Watauga County [Pilgrim’s Rest]
 and was ordained in that little church. I’m no longer there, but it’s been
 “A happy,
 but a difficult sojourn.”

Much like Sister Walker’s experience among Missionary Baptists, Elder Jackson “tried to go the Methodist way.” For Sister Walker, the snap in consciousness that occurred for at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church when Preacher Oakes delivered a sermon on the impotency of human will in salvation. She believed of her revelatory experience that “if it had been any other preacher preaching on the same subject, he would have done the same thing, I’m sure.” Elder Jackson’s experience coming through the words of a Methodist preacher loudly echoes her statement. The message, not the denominational or institutional framework within which it was heard, carried the force that led the two to worship together at Philadelphia and Hollow Springs. Of course, both having familial connections among Primitive Baptists

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168 Interview, February 12, 2005.
informed their decisions to some extent, but as both describe the understanding and the courage
to make those decisions came spiritually.

Elder Jackson believes his arrival at Philadelphia Church to be a further step along his
spiritual journey.

“Philadelphia is the first church [of the two] I went to and when I opened the door,
“The atmosphere was pervaded with love.

“I mean the spirit of God was so strong in that church you could cut it with a butter
knife.
“...I'm not saying I like it better [than Hollow Springs]. I'm just saying that I can
identify with it more and feel,

feel this association with home

more so
there than anywhere...

“...One of those February days when it was snowy up here [Boone],
and
    all the churches were cancelled,
    I wanted to go so badly somewhere.
“So I grabbed my directory. It was the third Sunday,
    and they were having church at Philadelphia.
“So I figured there was no snow in Lenoir and took off.
“Found it.

“And summoned enough courage to turn the doorknob
and go in.
“...It is one of the most rewarding times that I have ever had.
    I felt like the hand of God was in it.
    Brought me to some people that I dearly love.
    I wouldn’t trade places
    for anything.

“And

“Didn’t go back for a while.
“Started to go back some for the association,
    the Silver Creek Association,
and a time or two here, a time or two there.

“And
“Elder Watson was,

hmm,
“He had suffered some mild strokes, and

“The church at Pilgrim’s Rest.

[sighs]

“We’re all sinners and have we all sinned and come short.

“And sometimes, this is the way old Primitive Baptists work,

and still some are,

“That if you are divorced,

you have committed a sin

and you’re not qualified to be a church member.

“I don’t believe that.

“I believe that if some people would not have divorced, one would have killed the other,

and there would have been something really bad.

“I do believe that some divorces are very trivial, as some marriages are.

“But sometimes you can’t help things like that.

“And to run someone off

or to treat someone badly,

or to make them leave solely on the grounds of something like that, is not always the best thing to do because a lot of those people have come to look

for a church.

And what if God has led them there?

“Well, we had some disagreements, and I just was not comfortable at Pilgrim’s Rest, and we were having the association at Hollow Springs,

and I just grabbed Brother Gene by the hand one time after supper before service at Hollow Springs.

“And I said, ‘Would you mind if I moved my membership

down here?’

“And he said no.

“And so I moved my membership from Pilgrim’s Rest to Philadelphia,

that’s the first one I went to.”

The suggestions is not that Elder Jackson and Sister Walker felt spiritually led to join Primitive Baptist churches while most other believers simply joined because their families had. Sister Walker and Elder Jackson were raised, at least partially, in contexts outside a Primitive Baptist theological frame. Thus, the impetus to unite with the Primitive Baptist church came later in life when religious thought came more as epiphany as two modes of theology were juxtaposed upon their experiences and feelings. For believers such as Sister Watson, Sister

169 Interview, October 9, 2004.
Swanson, and Sister Anderson, these sorts of shift in heart and mind did not occur because they never felt that sort of spiritual wandering. It was natural for Sister Anderson. To Sister Watson’s thinking, she already belonged because she already believed, and joining the church, while important to her, did not carry the revelatory reordering of consciousness common to many Primitive Baptists whose early experiences were within other denominations.

Speaking about the effectual call of God, Sister Anderson countered any notion that family relationships impelled one in respect to joining a church in a general sense. Rather, her perspective was that while the familial context played a role in one’s church attendance, counter examples abound of people who attended but never joined over the forty years she has been a member. Thus, there is a complex relationship between the social and the spiritual in regard to church membership and community among the congregations at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Churches. While traditional objectivist social science would construe spiritual forces as illusory reflections of the social, such an assumption simply reinforces the social scientist’s belief in the ultimate efficacy of society. What Primitive Baptist believers understand as divine inspiration and movement become consigned to chance and circumstance. The perspective on the construction of social community taken here is one that admits the integration of circumstance, action, and spiritual guidance. Social forces of family ties are enmeshed with the spiritual inspiration and knowledge that led believers to a home within their churches and among the larger church family.

**Spiritual Community**

As the only two Primitive Baptist churches presently in Caldwell County, the community believers have built and maintained seems to be the “folk group” par excellence—a tightly

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170 See Chapter 4: “Eyes to See and Ears to Hear.”
bound small group defined by an easily discernible characteristic. The social community of believers is built around those doctrinal foundations explored in the previous chapter. The spiritual community is described within them as best the human tongue can articulate but only experienced through the touch of the Holy Spirit. Along with a personally invested identity with the church community comes a suspicion of any efficacy attributed to such. That is, community in the spiritual sense, which believers hope to experience through worship and spiritual communication, minimizes the importance of human cultural constructs, of which churches as organized by humans are a type. As regards the ultimate concern of believers—a hope of eternal salvation in Jesus Christ—classifications and differentiations among social groups (should) become moot.

Elder Jackson seemed apprehensive in trying to explain to me how controversies, such as those that played a role in his moving his church membership from his previous church in Watauga County to Philadelphia, were possible in supposed churches of God. This occurred the day before only my second visit among the congregations as we talked at his house on his family farm outside of Boone. Not being sure of my previous knowledge of Primitive Baptists, and all too aware of the stereotypes laid upon them and other people in his mountainous region of western North Carolina, he wanted to be clear.

“You must realize that
churches are not perfect.
Churches reflect humanity,
and there is no perfect human.
Never has been but one.
“And some of the most off-the-wall, un-church, non-church things
happen in churches, and people get mad and get feelings hurt over something that’s very trivial.

“But there’s been churches divided and
Killed over things that
have absolutely no business in a church.

“One church, for example,
you know, everybody had to be perfect.

“‘He’s a sinner,’ or, ‘She’s a sinner,’ and, ‘they don’t’ need to be here. They are wasting their time.’

“Well, if we ran all the sinners out of the church, I’d be the last one to close the door because I’d be going too, you know. I would be right behind them, and there wouldn’t be anybody back in there.

“I can’t think of a better place for sinners to be, myself, than the church.

“And myself among them because if the Apostle Paul’s chief among sinners, then where in the world does that put me?

“I am the chief among sinners.

“I am the worst one in Philadelphia and Hollow Springs Church.

“I’m satisfied.”\textsuperscript{171}

In contrast to Benedict Anderson’s work on “imagined communities” and nation-states, in which political and territorial imaginings are reified through constructions of group identity, the church as a social community is not attributed this sacred status. Considering the doctrine of total depravity, how could carnal human subjects create anything that approaches the divine? Whereas the nation-state is in some ways made sacred as the unifying force and “imagined as limited” to specific geographical and cultural constraints, the church as sacred entity is boundless. There is a certain “imagined” aspect among Primitive Baptists related to Anderson’s notion of the nation as “a deep, horizontal comradeship” among individuals, most of whom have never and will never actually know one another.\textsuperscript{172} For example, Sister St. Clair spoke about feeling exactly this sense of “comradeship” among Primitive Baptists she has never met—a sense that they believe as she does. However, this is the social community. As believers view denominations as constructs built around human interpretations of scripture, they do not make sacred the physical congregation of people within a particular church building or among an entire group of churches identifying under a denominational rubric. Belonging to a Primitive

\textsuperscript{171} Interview October 9, 2004.

\textsuperscript{172} 1983: 7.
Baptist Church, in itself, does not constitute any assured identity or evidence thereof among God’s elect. To bring in Sister Anderson’s words again, “God’s people are everywhere.”

Essentially, the sacred community is the group of God’s elect, predetermined before the foundation of the world, and membership among this group is granted by the grace of God through a rebirth into a newness in life, which the elect become aware of through the effectual call, or experience. As church members at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia have experienced this call, what then prohibits them from ascribing the notion of the true church upon their particular congregations? The nature of the true church, what I am calling the sacred community, evades reduction to the natural world of human beings. It does not conform to our notions of time, which we use to historically locate ourselves and others. It does not conform to our notions of geography, which we use to physically locate ourselves and others. Finally it does not conform to our notions of classification, affiliation, or differentiation, which we use to ideologically locate ourselves and others. Even descriptions of the true church of God’s elect as predetermined before time began is a temporal location within the linguistic and cultural constraints of human mental construction. Before time is still in relation to time. In a sense, the true church is pure presence, encompassing the globe, including—as Elder Jackson often notes in sermons—“an innumerable people.” Thus, experiences of communion with the true church, whether through regular worship or another individual experience, are processed through the human psyche, which has only limited capabilities to perceive it and always carries the possibility of error. As Sister Swanson noted, “I think God gave you a mind to think, and there’s more to it than we know. There’s a whole lot more to it than we know.” Likewise, her mother Sister Watson said of conceiving the sacred through the Bible, the only source believers turn to: “That Bible’s full of things that you can read it over and over and over and over, and you ain’t never

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173 Interview, May 6, 2006.
going to get it all. The half ain’t never been told.” In worship, attempts are not made to realize the *true church* at any given time on earth in accordance with cultural constructions of reality. Rather, attempts through worship—singing, praying, and preaching—are focused upon exploration of the sacred, and touches upon the ideas of the *true church* are experienced with a sense of hope that births desires for further spiritual searching. Such experiences are partial and bracketed, providing insight and hope, but never whole realizations or perceptions of the sacred. As I sit here trying to type a description of the *true church* I am constantly aware that I am failing, miserably, because words cannot contain it. Thus, when I ask believers about their experiences with the sacred, communion with the *true church*, their attempts to convey falter. Words attempt to package and make things safe and digestible. The *true church* cannot be spoken or written, but must be experienced.

Conceptually, social community and the sacred community of the *true church* are separate. One is of the world, and one is of heaven. However, experientially, they do not remain distant but brush in fleeting moments of divine inspiration. Through experiences with the sacred in worship, believers receive foretastes of heaven and glimpses at what may be their places among God’s elect, reinforcing, changing, or otherwise shaping their notions of both.

The local social community is in many ways rooted in the geographic proximity of the churches and family histories of their members, but conceptions of the sacred community of God’s elect, the *true church*, to some extent shapes notions of the social that break down rigid boundaries. The social community of the churches is open. While Elder Jackson has commented before on a defensive position some Primitive Baptist assume due to years of crude stereotyping by uninformed outsiders, lines demarcating “insider” and “outsider” are blurry at best in most instances. For example, on my first visit to Hollow Springs this became apparent.

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174 Interview, March 15, 2005.
during the extended hand of fellowship—that portion at the end of a worship service when congregants receive one another in fellowship through song and handshakes (and more often than not, warm, gripping embraces). As the procession of singing congregants made their way to the front of the building to shake hands with Elder Jackson, Elder Watson, and Brother Jenkins, I remained seated at my camcorder and tripod behind and to the side of them. Focusing on the three men up front, rather than specifically on the movement of the procession, I was somewhat startled as I looked up and Sister Walker, the 89 year-old “matriarch” of the church, was leading the flock my way with the wide smile she always wore with her right hand fully extended and expecting mine. Thus, while I was a stranger in some ways, I was not considered mere spectator. Sister Walker’s invitation into fellowship put life to Elder Jackson’s frequent comment prior to each sermon: “I’m especially gratified that we have visitors, but truthfully we don’t count you as visitors. We count you as one of our own.”

Sister Anderson and others joke with me about me being an Old Baptist but only ignorant of such, but for all anyone knows I could be.

More than simply welcoming visitors to the specific church community, they acknowledge the vastness and incomprehensible totality of the true church and try to structure their social community accordingly. The spiritual notion of community, which lays away geographic constraints, makes the notion of social community float. Just as it is not rigidly defined by the particular people who hold membership there, social community is not fully affixed geographically. Rather, it can be mobile. For example, Presnell’s Chapel—the church that Elder Jackson pastors on Beech Mountain in Watauga County—was having a dedication service for their new building on the first Sunday of May, 2006. As this date coincided with the regular Sunday service at Hollow Springs, the congregation had voted during a business meeting.  

175 Service at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, February 13, 2005.
in April to cancel services at Hollow Springs so that all could attend the dedication. A few weeks later, at the end of the Easter service at Philadelphia, Elder Jackson announced there had been some misgivings about canceling service at Hollow Springs for that first Sunday in May, and he felt obliged to address the congregation with an explanation:

“I need to share something with you. I have apparently upset some people because it was scheduled the first Sunday, and it conflicted with some other church services. One reason that—we had first talked about having it on a Saturday.

“There’s some people coming from out of town, and Sunday would be the best for them because they would be traveling Friday night and they might not be able to get there until Saturday morning. So Sunday would have been the better time.

“This was not chosen, that date was not chosen to rob any one of going to church anywhere they wanted to go.

“But I’ll be truthful with you, and I speak from the bottom of my heart. I just figured any Primitive Baptist in a fifty-mile radius ought to be happy that a new church was built. and [not?] concerned about whether they would be loyal and go unto their own.

Honestly, I can’t see a reason why someone would not want to call service off and go celebrate a victory like that for God. I’m sorry. Get me over here in the corner and brow-beat me and rawhide me if you want to, but that’s the way I see it.

“I didn’t mean to hurt anyone’s feelings, didn’t mean to make anyone mad, would never have dreamed, but, but anyway.

“Come. We’d love to have you come.

“Some special people that are in this church, paid for those pews.

“Some special people in this church, did the lighting and helped pay for the lighting.

“Some special people in this church built and nailed and constructed and [drove?] and worked. And this is as much your church as it is those folks up there on the mountain, so please come….

“You come. I’ll draw you a map, there’ll be signs on the road, follow anyone down here that’s coming, they’ll get you there.

“You know you’re welcome.

“We will have services at Hollow Springs, but Hollow Springs church will be on top of the mountain.
So come up there.”¹⁷⁶

Hollow Springs, named for the geographic location of its building, is not that locale or building, but the believers who fill it the first and second Sundays of each month. And taking the scriptural definition of the church—“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them”¹⁷⁷—the church floats and includes whosoever are gathered wherever in God’s name. When discussing experiences with the sacred, with experiential communion in the church, geographic relationships are not of ultimate significance. The emergence of social community, then, becomes more woven among individual believers’ experiences with the sacred through worship and the sharing of worship through social relationships.

Community is not affixed temporally either. While popular perceptions of Primitive Baptists typically involve the “slowly fading away” sentiments of the magazine article Sister Walker commented on in the introduction to this thesis, and while Primitive Baptists themselves sometimes lament the passing of times when “both sides of the church were full,” as Sister Walker said, “There will always be some of us.”¹⁷⁸

The revelation of the true church, which was established before the advent of time, is continuously unfolding in time. Believers receive and feel the effectual call of God, sometimes in ways immensely shifting the course of their spiritual lives and sometimes affirming that which they have felt for many years. In either case, believers are provided a hope of salvation that strengthens their identity with the social community of their church and worshiping according to Primitive Baptist doctrine and practice. The true church has its pews filled as the chosen depart from this world to reside in the next.


¹⁷⁷ Matthew 18:20.

¹⁷⁸ Interview, February 12, 2005.
The church of the Apostles was not the true church. The first Baptist church in Europe was not the true church. Primitive Baptist churches in the United States, when they were overflowing with members and other attendees, were themselves not the true church. Rather these were temporal social communities to which contemporary Primitive Baptists perceive a connection in terms of doctrine and practice as they construct their own social communities.

Elder Jackson explained:

“Well, generally, and you used the word community.

“*The church* is not a building;

“The church is a body,

a body of people

“That is spiritually perceived as the bride of Christ,

Christ’s bride.

It’s a party of people, a number of people,

an *innumerable* people,

the bride of Christ.

“The rest of the populous, more or less, are perceived

“Sometimes

in a worldly way,

the rest of the world for example.

“Sometimes they’re perceived as in a carnal way—the world is perceived as a *sinful* place.

“But the Primitive Baptists perceive themselves a particular and a peculiar people,

and those are two words found in the Bible.

God’s elect, God’s chosen people, are particular and peculiar and separate and apart

from the rest of the world.

“And when they get together there’s this feeling of community and warmness and love and fellowship that you won’t find other places.

“Therefore, they call, you would be Brother Eddie,

you know.

“And I would be Brother John, or Sister so-and-so, or this-and-that.

“You know, you don’t call your classmates at Carolina ‘Brother,’ I don’t guess, [laughs] might be a soul-mate or something like that, but anyway.

“No. there’s a closeness and there’s a *peculiarity*.

“This world—I’ve heard this saying many times—

this world is not our home…”
“...The true and original church will be somewhere on this earth when Jesus Christ comes back.
“It might not be at Philadelphia or Hollow Springs, but it'll be somewhere.
“There will be some congregation, or congregations, of people that will know the truth.”

When Primitive Baptists gather for worship, they enact personal identifications with God’s elect, carrying this indeterminacy of its composition, and thus expand the temporal boundaries of their specific social communities, experiencing a sense of timelessness. A few weeks after the dedication service at Presnell’s Chapel, I spoke with Sister Anderson on the phone about the possibility of getting together for another interview conversation after the upcoming communion service at Hollow Springs. Of course, our phone conversation turned to the dedication service, which she described as “a moment out of time” not knowing about my own sense of timelessness I felt when Elder Watson took the stand. I later asked her about this “moment out of time” in our next interview before recounting my own experience.

“I guess what I was referring to, a moment out of time, was, now that was the first time I was involved with a group of people forming a church.

“You go to certain places, this is me I’m talking about.
“Like when I was in Jamestown last week, I went in to that church that they have there. But the only thing that is standing is kind of the entrance bell tower, but to me that was a space in time.
“I could feel the spirit of those other people that had come there 400 years ago, and that was the way I felt that day on the mountain.
“That, to me, is just an awesome place up there.
“And if you’re, and I think you could back me up when I say this.
“If you’re not spiritually minded, or you’re not feeling the spirit inside when you’re down at the foot, down at Boone,
“And you go up there,
“And you go into that church,
“You’re going to feel some kind of spiritual stirring,

179 Interview October 9, 2004.
as you say, in a moment in time,
that’s where my thinking is.

“And that service, it was just awesome!
And
there were people there that weren’t Old Baptists.
There were Old Baptist there.
And there were people there that will never be Old Baptists,

“But the Spirit in time
was there,
and that’s what I was trying to say a while ago.

“It don’t,
“I guess by that service there that day, it doesn’t make any difference what your formed religion is.

“God’s in control
and God is present.
And will be,
the beginning, the middle, and the end,
and that’s what I meant by a moment in time.
Because that was just simply,
awesome.

“The service,
and then when we went over to the lady’s house.

“That brought back old memories of how it used to be fifty years ago when my grandfather McMillon was the preacher.

“And we’d have an association, and my grandmother still had children at home, especially Ruth and Joe and Gene [or Jim?].
And my Grandpa would go to an Old Baptist Association, around here, here, or down at Hollow Springs,
and there would twelve or fifteen preachers there,
and he would bring everyone home with him.

“And my grandmother would rise to the occasion,
and she would have to feed them and sometimes have to sleep them. She would have to sleep them. They were out on the floor.

“But that reminded me of that that day.

“And she [the women at Beech Mountain] was commenting today. She said, ‘I just feel so bad about you people being crowded together.’

“And I said, ‘No, that was the beauty of it.’ I said, ‘We could crowd together and fellowship together and enjoy our food together.’

“And I said, ‘There’s not many people that can say that anymore.’

“It was packed in there, but you never felt an ill spirit at all.

“You felt a good, harmony spirit.

“A that was what I meant by a moment in time,
Because that was just one moment in time that that will happen.

“And sadly so, that I will probably not see that again in my lifetime, but it was awesome when it did happen.”

180 Interview, July 16, 2006.
It may be easy to dismiss Sister Anderson’s words as nostalgia, but my contention, which I think to be inline with her sentiments, is that this was more than longing for the past. It was more than simply and experience of a vestige of traditionalism that academic folklorists are wont to invoke to move present actors to a context of the past. The gap of time between past and present collapsed into contemporary experience. It was a moment out of time, transcendent experience in which temporal realities were aligned and given meaning. “It was a moment in time” plucked out and imbued with the special efficacy of the sacred. When Sister Anderson said it will never happen again, she was emphasizing the unique character of each sacred experience. This one reinforced for her the belief in the indefinable, yet indelible, character of God’s church a few weeks after Elder Jackson was attempting to smooth over some “misgivings” about moving service from Hollow Springs up to Presnell’s Chapel. Some might say that the particular situation at Hollow Springs prompted Sister Anderson’s experience, just as Edward Schiffelin wrote of Kaluli (Papua New Guinea) ritual séance:

> The deciphering of the spirit’s message is a cooperative [among human participants] construction of reality in the guise of a search and clarification of hidden meaning; that is, as the people search for clarification of the spirit’s message, they create the meaning they discover. ¹⁸¹

I could offer a similar interpretation of Sister Anderson’s experience, that after hearing Elder Jackson’s effort to repair the moment of misgiving at Hollow Springs her desire to realize that repair in conjunction with others’ wishes concretized the rhetoric of the true church in her experience at Presnell’s Chapel. Of course, such a description may not be fully dismissed from the realm of possibilities. Most Primitive Baptists are wary of misinterpretation due to simple human emotive desire. Sister Watson made reference to such in regard to her constant

¹⁸¹ 1993:287. Schiffelin, while making many good points on performance and emergent cultural production in an otherwise fine essay, reverts back to modernist social science and its monopolizing tendency in regard to truth. His argument seems to be: while the Kaluli people believe they are experiencing contact with a spirit medium, they are unwitting fools to their own creations.
monitoring of her husband’s preaching, that she prayed he would speak the words God gave to him. “Because man can do a lot, you know, of his own.”

Of course, believers want to experience the sacred each time they worship together or with others, but the times when desire did not produce the sacred before them remind them that there is something more to it beyond chance and circumstance.

The church as a gathering of people at Hollow Springs or Philadelphia is not sacred. It is social. Believers go there to worship together, to sing praises, to communicate with God. Through divine experience believers transcend the social and experience one another and God outside the constraints of the natural world. Such experiences do not reify, say, Philadelphia as the church of God’s chosen. Rather believers, member and non-member alike, experience a temporal glimpse of Christ’s church, transcending the specific locale, time, and congregation. Writing that the church, as a collection of humans, is not sacred is not the same as suggesting that is not spiritual. Indeed, spirituality suffuses the church buildings at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia on Sundays, but it comes through the active worship and praise of those individuals who fill them rather than through any fetishization of place or object. The church as a place and group of significance becomes important for believers as a byproduct of spiritual action and experience of the sacred. Place and group become imbued with personal significance and community emerges.
Philadelphia
Primitive Baptist
Church
Est. 1733
HELP US KEEP
OUR CEMETARY
AND CHURCH
GROUND CLEAN

PLEASE TAKE ALL
OLD FLOWERS AND
CONTAINERS AS
YOU REMOVE THEM.
THANKS
“The Singing Part is My Way of Saying What is Spiritual About Me?”: Participation, Individual Expressions of Self, and Construction of Community in Song

Janelle Miller: We just sing to focus more.

Shirley Anderson: And we love it. We love singing, whether we can do it or not…. But when we sing, it’s so beautiful to me. Now, you as an outsider-

Janelle Miller: -Might not hear that.

“It might be simple in appearance, but it is very deep otherwise,” said Elder Jackson in reference to the informality of Primitive Baptist singing. It was Monday evening after Sunday’s communion service at Hollow Springs, and I had asked him, in the soft quietness of his living room, what his response would be to the term “performance” (without any further specificity) if applied to singing. The word troubled him because of its inherent reference to “entertainment” and “show” (or “competence” in the parlance of folklorists). As we talked I attempted to clarify what I meant by the term—action and putting belief into motion—upon which I faltered, unable to shirk the sense of “display” that resides within the many meanings of “performance” (vernacular or academic). For Elder Jackson, the term sheds too much light on the “appearance” of singing and leaves the depth that “otherwise” lay beneath the surface in the shadows.

I agree with Elder Jackson on this, thinking about how often popular media, journalism, and academia are prone to over-aestheticize religious action, extracting the art form from the ocean of religious meaning in which it is enacted. I do consider the singing at Hollow Springs
and Philadelphia Churches to be art without a doubt. It is creative and expressive. It evokes powerful emotion, even when only listening to it. It requires a certain amount of skill or gift—which, of course, varies among individuals. It is beautiful. Yet “art” and “performance,” in their conventional meanings, emphasize too heavily the form produced or “appearance.” The creativity, expression, emotion, skill, and beauty in singing cannot be understood, even if pleasing to the ear, with a blunt attention to form. Understanding comes through perception of the “very deep otherwise.” James Peacock, writing on sacred and secular performance—Primitive Baptists informing his work on the sacred—summed up the conundrum between form and meaning:

Take the notion of a “sacred performance.” The term is an oxymoron. Sacrality implies…a meaning rooted in a cosmic frame that transcends any immediate sensed form. The sacred cannot, therefore, be “performed.” Any reduction of meaning to form deprives that form of meaning. Yet the sacred becomes real only as embodied in form. Such a dialectical tension between the sacred locus of meaning and the profaning form…separates into mysticism on the one hand and secular art on the other—sacrality without form versus form without sacrality—but power inheres where the two tendencies struggle without splintering.

The sacred becomes sensed when “embodied in form.” Singing becomes powerful when the form is invested with spiritual meaning. It becomes sacred when meaning overtakes conscious preoccupation with form and flows out encompassing life beyond the performance moment. Thus, my invocation of “performance” is in this sense of rendering action meaningful, connecting the sacred to the life of the individual and individuals to one another through worship. In the earlier discussion of performance theory in folklore, I relieved the term “performance” of its connotations of a “display of competence,” which may be more suitable

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for performers in secular contexts, to focus on the emergence of sacred experience in time and to allow for the movement of the Holy Spirit as a participant in religious action.

To understand singing at Philadelphia and Hollow Springs in this manner, to account for the surface of form and to explore the depth beneath it, requires attention to the ways in which believers “ignite form with meaning,”184 putting the doctrines of their faith into motion, personally investing themselves in their spiritual identities, and constructing and reinvigorating the social community of believers in worshipful praises of the Holy Spirit. Sister Anderson summed up this unification of form and meaning through song:

“You feel
    that you are really participating, and you’re able to
    express how you feel about
    the words that are written down.

“And the,
    you know,

“Like in ‘Amazing Grace.’
“When you’re singing that physically,
“That puts more of a meaning to the words, I think for myself,
    than it does if you hear someone else sing it.
“But if you are singing those words,
    it means something
    spiritual to me because it’s—

“To me ‘Amazing Grace’ expresses what the Old Baptists are, what I believe in.
“And when you’re singing a song and you can express yourself through that song, to me that is expressing what I believe.”185

While Primitive Baptists often refer to scripture (including its ambiguities) to convey the logic behind their form, characteristics of singing—such as the forbiddance of the division of the congregation into choir and “lay singers,” the absence of musical instruments, and choices of hymnbooks and specific selections within them—typically point also to the importance of the singing experience. Meaning is created and perceived through the action of singing. It is not

184 Ibid:208.

185 Interview, June 11, 2006.
merely a reflection of meaning, but is a process through which believers construct their religious community. Within this process believers negotiate the singing form to allow for the fullest experience of meaning, and one of the primary concerns in accomplishing this fullness is the inclusive nature of the practice. The participation of each member in the congregation is inextricably linked with the sense of “closeness” that Elder Jackson described in the introduction of this thesis, and the most salient features of the form that distinguish Primitive Baptists’ practice from others—such as the proscription of musical instruments and the eschewing of choirs—are geared toward this end. Form is rendered “informal” in a way that opens it to meaningful possibilities rather than pursuing rigid predetermined objectives (as in many churches where songs are ideologically correlated with pre-written sermon texts). With a basis in a relatively open form, believers are able to exercise some individual control over singing. Individual abilities and preferences of hymnals, texts and tune selections from them, and the changes in song form are negotiated and incorporated into a rich and variegated tapestry. This fabric of song is woven by the personal expression of lived and spiritual experience, knowledge, and understanding. Through these negotiations, all are able to contribute their individual creativities and culturally perform their individual identities in ways that they personally invest their spiritual selves in ongoing constructions and reinforcements of the social community of believers.

“Can you not afford a piano?”: Keeping Form Open to the Voices

“For me as a woman,” said Sister Anderson, “The singing part is my way of saying what is spiritual about me.

“In the Primitive Baptist Church, you know, the women do not speak that often, and more so in the last ten to fifteen years because
it’s become necessary because we do not have that many male members anymore.

“But singing certainly gives me a chance to praise God that I do—would not take just in your congregational meeting.

“And certainly, for a woman, I would say that that’s what the music means to us, the singing means to us, or it does to me.

“And in the Old Baptist Church, I’m sure that has been the way it’s been down through the ages, that women would sing and could sing, and made the melody and the harmonizing wonderful.

“And that was a very spiritual way to express how they felt about their God and about gathering together in the church meeting.”

More than simply performing songs, believers communicate with the Holy Spirit and with one another. Primitive Baptist worship, while enacted within a communal context, is also focused on the individual’s relationship with God. Singing is the form that most directly connects the individual with the Spirit through action. Although women at Philadelphia and Hollow Springs take more prominent public roles in the church—serving as church clerks and making business decisions in conferences, along with the vast array of supporting roles they assume—than perhaps might occur in others with enough men to oversee church business, this all-inclusiveness of singing remains an “especially significant…part of the formal meetings of the church in which women may normally exert influence and find a voice.”

While Sister Anderson, and other women, may make motions in business meetings, the opportunity to contribute during worship is not taken lightly, and as the majority of members of both churches are women, singing as an expressive outlet open to all carries additional weight.

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186 Interview, July 16, 2006.


188 Sister Watson, who prefers not to speak in church, once made a motion simply by pointing to her husband in reply to Elder Jackson’s question, “Does anyone want to make a motion…?” Elder Watson obligingly raised his hand in confirmation of the motion embedded in Elder Jackson’s question.
The most salient features of Primitive Baptist singing observable by outsiders are the absence of musical instruments and choirs. While these are traditional characteristics, they are not maintained simply for the sake of upholding tradition or because they contribute to the beauty of the practice. Rather, this format of a cappella singing in a congregational format gains meaning in the relationship between expression and spirituality.

“A lot of people ask the question, ‘Why do you not have music in the church?’
“And, ‘Can you not afford an organ or piano?’ But that’s not the reason.
“In the church that Christ set up, it was preaching,
   praying
   and singing.
“And when you sing, it needs to come from within.
“And sometimes we get,
   if there’s a musical instrument, like a piano or whatever,
   whatever,
“We might be feeling the spirit from that
   and not the spirit that’s coming from within us.”

For Sister St. Clair, a fine singer and one who is often called upon to lead, the introduction of musical instruments distracts the believer’s spiritual expression, placing attention on musical form. Musical instruments abstract words, of utmost importance to conveying doctrinal and spiritual messages, into physical and emotional significations. Sung words incorporate these significations while preserving the overt communication of meanings in hymn texts. Peacock made similar observation on the act of preaching among Primitive Baptists two counties to the north of Caldwell, and then made the link to singing:

Why does spoken sermon become chant, yet chant not become speaking in tongues (as among Pentecostals)? Speech, chant, and tongues constitute a gradient based on a ratio of form to meaning. A spoken sermon gives the greatest emphasis to meaning or message, while tongues elevates form over meaning to the extent that no meaning at all is conveyed except to special persons who, in Pentecostal churches, act as interpreters…. In other ways, too, Primitive

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189 Interview February 26, 2005.
Baptists strive to prevent the elevation of form over meaning yet to recognize the power of form.... They justify their taboo on instruments by saying the instruments stimulate only the flesh, while a song may express the ‘inner man’ [and woman].

Stimulating “only the flesh,” instrumental music cannot carry along “the ‘inner man’” (and woman). Yet the inner human, the inner spirit of individuals, can carry along the tune, packing musical notes with meaning—lived experience, emotion, spirituality, humble thanks and praise to God.

Of course, aesthetic concerns are not absent, as when Elder McGinnis told me, “There’s no musical instrument that can harmonize as beautifully as the human voice.” However, this is more than aesthetic preference. Beauty in singing is created through the active spiritual expression of each voice in the congregation. As believers hold so dear this opportunity, when considering singing as the communication and emergence of meaning, the receptive side of the practice becomes important. In addition to expressing themselves, believers also partake in the expressions of others:

“We go down here [the local Hardee’s in Hudson] for breakfast in the morning time and sit around the table, have coffee and talk.

He [Elder Watson] don’t ever say anything.
But boy, Pansy lets it roll.

“They ask me about my religion down there. They ask me about it.
Why no piano, why no music?...
...I said,
‘It is.
It’s from the heart…”

“…And I told them that all I could tell them was that...they are very satisfied with hearing the voices of the people….

190 Peacock 1990:212. Elder Jackson, who by and large does not move into a chanting form when he preaches (not that his style does not elevate in other ways), has made comments that sometimes even the chanted form elevates form a little too far over meaning. Elder McGinnis, when I described the preaching style of one Elder (whom Elder McGinnis knows) who employed a very elaborate chant, said, “Well, he’s loud.”

“I think a piano drowns out the voices. “You can’t hear hardly people in other churches, you can’t hear their voices because the piano is boing-boing-boinging it out.”

The clash of metal strings and cold, ivory keys against the warm subtleties of the multiple vocal intonations obfuscates meaning. The voices drown, and spiritual communication is reduced to sound. Piano and organ music, at least most that I have heard in the various churches I attended in my youth, control rhythm and flow, structuring form in a way that downplays the human voice. Just as Sister Revonda has commented that worldly enticements, such as ping-pong and foosball tables in other churches, do not contribute anything spiritual to the worship experience, musical instruments clutter and distract the humble praise of believers. Sister St. Clair said, “Again, the singing with no music is because of the spiritual side of it. There’s nothing there to bring out something that’s not there.”

The biblical and aesthetic are not mutually exclusive. Rather the comments of church members bind them together in symbiotic reinforcement. The relationship goes beyond the simple notion of the Bible does not say so, so let us not. Church members take it further: the proscription of musical instruments is directly linked to the expression of spirituality. The introduction of a piano, to use Sister Watson’s example, smothers that expression and shifts emphasis from the living congregation to the inorganic musical instrument. Additionally, believers feel that musical instruments and choirs often relegate singing as a specialized worship form for only a few “talented” individuals.

“You know, you have a part in there, and I think if you have a choir, I couldn’t sing with a choir because my voice is not that good.” While to my ear Sister Watson’s comment on her

192 Interview, November 5, 2005.
193 Interview, November 6, 2005.
194 Interview, November 5, 2005.
voice is overly modest, her emphasis on having “a part in there” points not only to participation in singing but control over that personal expression. Beverly Patterson links the proscription of musical instruments in singing and congregational format with local control over the singing practice. In Protestant churches with choirs and music ministers or directors, “the printed order of worship offers a program of hymns selected in advance by the minister of choir director from hymnals that set every text to a harmonized tune. Musicians, often formally trained, use instruments to introduce, accompany, and thus control the singing.” Such preemptive establishment of song and tune, including pitch, focuses on how the song is “supposed” to sound, an assumption of “correctness,” rather than how the song can sound with emphasis on spiritual emergence through the conjoining and multi-layering of the voices of the congregation. Sister Watson, in trying to explain to some friends of hers at the local Hardee’s how the musical practice at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia succeeds without the structuring of musical directors or rehearsed choirs, emphasized the open environment of worship and the negotiation of pitch and key to facilitate congregation participation:

“And they said, ‘Well, how to you get one started, a song started?’
“I said, ‘Well they might get it too high. And sometimes we struggle along and sing with them, and sometimes they lower it.
“Sometimes they get it too low, and they struggle along, or they change it.’”

As frequently occurs during worship, the congregation will halt after the first line to re-pitch the tune higher or lower, depending on what best suits the voices of the singers. For example, a frequent visitor and strong singer from a church in Virginia, who is often asked to lead, called out, “Number 271.” After singing the first verse of “Nearer My God to Thee,”

196 Interview, November 5, 2005.
197 Service at Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Church, September 18, 2005.
having sensed during the third line—where the tune climbs to its highest tone—that he had pitched the song too high, the leader offered to re-pitch the song. “Let’s lower that a little. It’ll be easier to sing.” The congregation then resumed singing with the second verse at a more comfortable pitch.

In some instances, negotiation of the tune itself takes place. During the singing in one service, after finishing “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand,” Elder Jackson asked, “Did we ever, did we ever do 259? Brother Gene, did we ever do 259?”

“Yes,” answered Elder Watson, and Elder Jackson called out, “Two hundred and fifty-nine.”

He lead the first line to the tune he learned among the churches in Ashe County with Elder Watson joining in with the (slightly different) tune more familiar to the congregations at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia, when Sister Verna Walker noted, “John, we’ve got two tunes there.” “Ok. Let somebody else lead it then,” he replied amidst a few chuckles in the congregation. Sister Walker then began the song with the tune the congregation is most familiar with, but then herself faltered a bit: “No, I’ve got….” Sister Watson interjected, “Gene start that,” but Elder Watson held off, and Sister Walker found the tune, singing:

\[
\begin{align*}
O \text{ Land of rest, for thee I sigh;} \\
When will the moment come,
\end{align*}
\]

The congregation then joined in by the end of the third line:

\[
\begin{align*}
When \ I \ shall \ lay \ my \ armour \ by, \\
And dwell with Christ at home?
\end{align*}
\]

These sorts of negotiations are common in between hymns, especially as the churches do not have an officially appointed song leader. In some instances, Elder Jackson leads, but he is relatively new to these congregations (compared to most members who have been attending the churches for thirty and forty years, and longer). Elder Watson had been their song leader when
he pastored the churches, and although his singing voice remains strong, he is reticent in leading since his stroke. Rather, the two elders and, most often, Sister St. Clair share leading responsibilities. However, if others have songs they want to lead, they are typically permitted to do so. A visitor sitting in back at one service at Philadelphia called out a number that the congregation was unfamiliar with, and was thus asked to lead. Attending these services, it becomes apparent that not only the form of the singing itself is loosely structured, or “informal” as Elder Jackson describes it, but the whole singing service is informally undertaken. There is no particular order of songs or specific persons to dictate which are sung. “Most of the time your hymns are entirely spontaneous and randomly selected,” said Elder Jackson to highlight the informality of singing.198

Rather than situating text and tune, pitch and pace, to rigid assumptions of “correct” musical structure or taste, believers at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia (and other Primitive Baptists) find their voices, and the music emerges through negotiations that incorporate the vocal ranges and tune preferences of the congregation to facilitate the participation of each singer.

Primitive Baptist singing, as a genre, is not easily compartmentalized. Primitive Baptists share many characteristics in terms of style, tunes, the absence of musical instruments, and even some common texts with other Baptist sub-denominations, particularly the Old Regular Baptists, and the wider shaped-note singing communities—the shaped-note tradition being independent of any particular denominational affiliation. Doctrinal understandings somewhat serve to delimit Primitive Baptist singing from that of Old Regulars,199 but the relationship to shaped-note singing is more amorphous. There has been a vast exchange of ideas and material

198 Interview, Elder John Jackson, June 12, 2006.

199 Indeed, stylistic differences are apparent, especially as regards tempo. See Titon 2006. Additionally, Patterson notes that Old Regulars occasionally have solo or duet singing, which Primitive Baptists do not permit (1995:41).
between Primitive Baptists and the broader shaped-note movement. Yet is singing to be considered within the shaped-note tradition when the singers do not read the notes? On one hand the shaped notation is merely a system for representing tones on the page; on the other, there seems to be an aesthetic tradition attached to the notation so as to lump all a cappella sacred singing, especially in popular parlance, under the rubric of “shaped-note.” I am not necessarily arguing that the singing at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia churches should not be considered a shaped-note singing. Rather, the congregations have a strong connection to the notation system through the Annual Old-Time Singing, their longtime use of notated hymnals, and at least one song leader during the mid-twentieth century.

Churches in some areas hold a much closer relationship to the shaped-note tradition than do most congregations in North Carolina and Virginia. For example, many churches in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi employ the Sacred Harp as their hymnal, rather than one of the several published for and by Primitive Baptists, and stylistic features of their singing more closely approximate the sharp, rhythmic meter of the wider shaped-note tradition. Hymnals published by Primitive Baptists began including shaped notation at least by 1886, with the publication of Silas Durand and P.G. Lester’s Hymn and Tune Book.200 The connections of the congregations at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia to the shaped-note tradition are obvious in the hymnals used. The principle songbook used is the eleventh edition of the Old School Hymnal (1983), a publication that has printed shaped notation since its initial printing in the 1930s. A secondary hymnal, C.H. Cayce’s The Good Old Songs (1913), also contains shaped-notes.201 This

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200 Patterson, 1995:181. The first appearance of musical notation in Primitive Baptist hymnal came in 1879. “…Elders M.J. Sears and Thomas B. Ausmus published their Primitive Baptist Hymnal with standard or ‘round’ notes…” Patterson identifies this publication as the first and last to print “round” notes.

201 Additionally, a small number of D.H. Goble’s Primitive Baptist Hymnbook (1887), which contains no musical notation, are kept in each church building. However, these are rarely used—briefly at the first Old-Time Singing I attended and once by a few church members before a service at Philadelphia. Elder Jackson contributed these, as the publication is his favorite, but is reluctant to thrust them upon the congregation.
book is only used during the Old-Time singing each August but was once in regular use before the congregations switched to *The Old School Hymnal*. Yet the mere appearance of shaped-notation in hymnals does not describe the relationship with the congregations’ singing.

Patterson emphasized that the appearance of notation in Primitive Baptist hymnals was not, in itself, a significant factor in the evolution of singing among the churches she worked with.

“Most churches have chosen to abide by congregational decisions on hymnals rather than make music notation a test of fellowship. The assumption that seems to underlie their apparent acceptance of hymnals is that music notation, unlike musical instruments, has a benign influence on singing.”²⁰² Thus, singers are free to ignore the notes and only read the words of the hymns, singing tunes customary in their particular churches.

More useful in considering the relationship between the singing at Philadelphia and Hollow Springs and the shaped-note tradition are the connections that surface in church members’ comments on the subject. The origin of the Annual Old-Time Singing in a singing school is the earliest historical account of shaped-note singing in either of the churches. Verna Walker stated,

> “My mother went to a singing school.
> “We had singing schools in the churches back even when I was growing up. I went to a singing school for a week, or maybe two weeks.
> “They taught us the shape notes and things like that.
> “Well, somebody had a singing school out there when my mother was a little girl, and my mother was born in 1892.
> “And he told the children when they get through with the school, said, ‘we’re going have a little program,
> and you invite your parents and see what you’ve learned.’
> “So at the end of that singing school, they had that singing.
> “He said, ‘I’m coming back in a year and see how much you’ve forgotten.’

²⁰² 1995:181
“So the was the beginning of the old-time singing.”\textsuperscript{203}

One of the most anticipated religious events of the year for many members began, not as a creation of the congregation, but through a shaped-note singing school taught by someone outside the church. As Pansy Watson shares, “…it started as a singing school—and I think it was Jim Swanson, he didn’t belong there. He just wanted the children to come in and learn some music.”\textsuperscript{204} Actually, the singing school teacher was not Jim Swanson, although Swanson was a regular attendee at early occasions of the event. In a recording of the 1947 occasion of the event, Swanson identifies the singing school teacher as “M.J. Smith, who lived down here by the river,” a member of one of the nearby Missionary Baptist churches.\textsuperscript{205}

A later singing school was held in the 1960s, this time being taught by Carl McGee (member and song leader at Hollow Springs) and Elder Jack McGinnis (at the time, pastor of a church in the association). “We used to have music lessons down there. Carl McGee gave music lessons down there, and that was before I met Gene, I think, but we learned the notes. We had a blackboard down there, and he would, and Jack came down. And Jack knows music.”\textsuperscript{206} McGee appears to have been a strong advocate for the shaped-note system, as comments by Ruth St. Clair indicate: “Carl McGee was our song leader, and he was very strong with the notes singing. And he would always sing those notes, and he had the hand movements, you know, with the ups and the downs.”\textsuperscript{207} The up-down movement of the hand serves as a metronome to set and maintain an even rhythm to the singing, a gestured feature that the

\textsuperscript{203} Interview, February 12, 2005.
\textsuperscript{204} Interview, August 20, 2005.
\textsuperscript{205} Annual Singing at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, August 17, 1947.
\textsuperscript{206} Interview, November 5, 2005
\textsuperscript{207} Interview, November 6, 2005.
congregations no longer employ. More than employing a timing mechanism to even out the singing, McGee also lead the congregations in the singing of the notes for the tune before singing the text, perhaps the most distinguishable feature of *Sacred Harp, Christian Harmony*, and other shaped-note groups singing from other books.

“We used to sing the notes,” Said Sister St. Clair.

“Before we would say the words, we would sing the notes.”

A little surprised, I asked:

“Oh, as like Sacred Harp singing?”

I was not familiar with that practice as part of regular worship services among Primitive Baptists in western North Carolina, although I had heard about Primitive Baptists in other parts of the country doing so. Some in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi use the *Sacred Harp* as their hymnal instead of one published by and for Primitive Baptists. Sister St. Clair continued, “Right. And we’ve gotten away from that.”

I interrupted once more:

“Do you know when, or how long, when they started doing that?

“Well, I would say in the sixties we did that. And since then it’s just, we’ve just gradually, you know, gotten away from it.”

However, on the 1947 recording of the Old-Time Singing, the practice of singing the notes before the text of the hymn is minimal. Perhaps this is due to the event being geared for the wider community. Or maybe the practice had not come into regular use by the churches by

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208 However, Elder McGinnis employs a more elaborate rhythmic motion when he leads at the Old Time Singing. He alternates the up-down-up motion with a right-left-right swing that roughly creates a cross pattern.

209 Interview, November 6, 2005.
that time. In any case, the practice is not employed currently, except on rare occasions—mainly for two or three particular hymns during the Old-Time Singing.

As a regular practice among the congregations, the shaped-note system has subsided. Looking back at a transcript of an interview with Sister and Elder Watson, I was puzzled by a statement made by Sister Watson: “See we were taught by the notes, and John [Jackson] was taught by the common meter out of that Goble book. And he sings them sometimes like they sing them up at Senter.” To which, Elder Watson added, “They sing them like they hear them.” Others, while having attended the lessons offered by McGee and then McGinnis, said they did not read notes. Sister Anderson said, “I was not blessed to learn the notes like Jack McGinnis knew them, or Carl McGee knew them.”

Sister Swanson, similarly, shared:

“I can [read shaped notes], but boy it sure takes a lot out of me. [laughs]
“I have to concentrate on them.
“It doesn’t come naturally by any means, and I can’t read [really?] music.
“So whatever happens I do by ear.
“I mean, I can look up and down and see that this has got to go up here, but knowing how far up is another story [laughing].”

The period in which Carl McGee led singing with close attention to the structured treatment of tunes in shaped notation coincides with the time when many of the current members were learning to sing. Sister Watson’s statement seems to imply that the notated treatment of tunes through the performances led by McGee have been carried over to the present in the oral tradition of the congregations. Listening to the Fiftieth Annual Old-Time Singing at Hollow Springs, recorded in 1947, and then hearing the present singers, similarities in tempo, rhythm, and harmony are unmistakable. Of course, many of the same texts sung in 1947 are likely to be sung on any given Sunday as well. The earlier predilection for shaped note

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210 Interview, September 18, 2005.
211 Interview May 6, 2006.
singing, exemplified through Carl McGee’s influence, may also have played a role in the continued preference for the *Old School Hymnal* with its shaped notation, although the preference now seems to be more rooted in the familiarity believers have with the book.

A few church members at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia currently read the notes, but most now sing by ear. Yet the connections and exchanges left their mark. Sister Walker considered the singing at these churches to be concomitant with the shaped-note system “unless they use an instrument.”212 At the center of signing as sacred performance is the elevation of meaning over form, and for meaning to reach its fullest and richest expression participation must be elevated over song structure, pitch, and notated conceptions of “correctness.” To some, singing by notations contributes. To others, it does not. Their singing makes room for both perspectives as well as other individualities.

“*The book changed, the singing changed*”: Negotiating Individual Preference and Change in Song

The tunes and texts sung at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia, and the hymnals from which they draw them, are bound in this relationship. While the a cappella and congregational arrangements have held steadfast, more change is apparent in the content of the singing. These changes, and believers’ varying opinions on them, more clearly demonstrate the negotiation of singing form to maintain participation. Through this negotiation, believers strive to maintain singing as a communicative avenue for expressing themselves.

“*Now the Sacred Harp don’t mean a thing to me,*” was Sister Watson’s closer on a brief discussion we had about the tune book. I had asked what they had been singing out of in the early days of the Annual Old-Time Singing, particularly during its emergence as a singing school.

212 Interview, February 12, 2005.
“Because by the time I had come in,” she continued, “they had got that Old School Hymn.213

“They had a little blue book,

but they didn’t have many.

“Now, I think that’s when they were lining some of them

because there wasn’t enough books to go around, just a few books.

“But my dad, whenever they changed to that

old school book, the Cayce [the Good Old Songs],

“He ordered a hundred, hisself.

“He said, ‘We’re going have some books. We’re going to have singing,’

and he was a very generous man.”214

The constant negotiation of form and meaning to facilitate active participation and

expression by each singer is demonstrated by considering the individual preferences for text and

tune selections and hymnals from they are chosen. When I asked Sister St. Clair about changes

to singing in the churches, she replied, “Well, the biggest change I suppose that I see is in our

song books. At one point we only used the real old, old song book, and we have, you know,

started singing different songs.”215 Sister Watson shares her assessment, implying that the
general character or flavor of the singing has not changed so much, but when “the book
changed, the singing changed.”

“And we sang out of that old book [Cayce’s The Good Old Songs] that

they sing [out of]
at the old-time singing, and when they got that new one [the Old School Hymnal, 11th edition],

“It sort of changed our singing some.

Some of them didn’t like it,

and some of them did.

“If you took away now, you’d probably have a fight on your hands.


He said, ‘Don’t ever get rid of this book.’

213 An earlier edition of the Old School Hymnal.

214 Interview, November 5, 2005.

215 Interview, February 26, 2005.
“So we keep it, but there is some songs in there that is not in the other book.”

In asking believers about hymnals, most typically referred to “the old song book” without much specificity of its title. Correspondingly, they referred to “the one we sing out of now.” As best I can gather, the oldest members started out singing from an early version of *The Old School Hymnal*, a book with shaped music notation. At some point, Elder C.H. Cayce’s *The Good Old Songs* was introduced and used for some time before the switch was made in the 1980s to the eleventh edition of the *Old School Hymnal*, both of which also contained shaped music notation. No one I spoke to remembered ever singing out of books that printed hymn texts only, except Elder Jackson, whose first involvement with Primitive Baptists was in Ashe County where D.H. Goble’s *Primitive Baptist Hymnbook* is used by several churches.

The dialectic between form and meaning in sacred performance becomes more complex when discussing hymnal, text, and tune preferences among believers. In many ways, the hymn texts serve as the central locus of meaning, whereas the tunes, as vehicles for the message, may be thought of as more squarely in the realm of form. Peacock notes an emphasis on the doctrinal message in hymn texts as “an avowal of forms that carry verbal and therefore spiritual meaning—the word—while rejecting forms that do not carry verbal meaning and therefore express sensuality—the flesh.” The spiritual message in hymn texts indeed carries much of meaning in the views of believers at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia. For Sister Walker, songs are linked through their spiritual messages:

“These older ones all have a,

a common message

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216 Interview, November 5, 2005.

217 At least not in church services at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia. Elder and Sister Watson have several hymnbooks in their home, including Goble’s. Sister St. Clair also expressed a familiarity with the Goble book.

218 1990:212.
of salvation.

“Here’s one ‘Dripping from the Cross,’ this about the blood dripping from the cross. That’s one of my favorites. See, I’ve got a marker in there.

“‘Weeping One of Bethany,’ I’ve got a marker there.

“‘Christ Arose,’ that’s the Easter song I like.

“‘Amazing Grace.’

Everybody loves ‘Amazing Grace…’

“…Now I like ‘How Firm a Foundation,’

but it’s got about five verses, but we only know about three of them. And sometimes you’ve got a big crowd.

“I’ve got one other song in here that I love, and it’s in the Billy Graham Song Book. This is my mother’s.

“But it’s ‘Surely Goodness and Mercy,’

and it’s the 23rd Psalm.

“And it has a message too, you know.

“Like I said, a song has to have a message.”219

As Peacock notes references to “song texts as little sermons,” Elder Jackson made a similar comment: “If the preacher strikes out and you want a sermon, just open the hymnal.”220

Several other members at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia compare song to sermon when asked about the meanings and feelings behind their singing, as well. The text of the hymn is of utmost importance. I asked Sister Watson about the importance of participation in singing, which she affirmed, but then continued:

“And then the words,

the words that come out of the song, you know.

“They’re true,

“And I take a lot in out of the song

when I sing it.

Well, there are some of them songs that are sort of like jigs to me, and

219 Interview, February 12, 2005.

220 Interview, June 12, 2006.
“I sing with them, but I don’t get that feeling out of it.”

The emphasis is on the spiritual message expressed by the writer, but in contrast to sermons, songs allow the vocal expression of a multitude of interpreted messages. Through sermons believers listen and process the doctrines of their faith while through singing they offer those lessons back with their individual interpretations. The sermon has one voice; singing is multivocal. During a sermon, believers experience the Word through listening. When they sing, they experience the Word through active choices and delivery.

Sister Watson elaborates on this sense of involvement,

“If it wasn’t for the singing, I wouldn’t go.
“I think that’s my part…

“The singing to me is as important
as the preaching,
and John knows I feel that way about it. He knows I love the singing.

“And he does too. Sometimes he doesn’t even want to get up there [to preach].”

Elder Jackson may disagree with Sister Watson’s last statement, but he would agree with her broader point. Singing is personalized, and hymns provide a text through which church members can infuse their feelings, thoughts, and interpretations with the body of spiritual messages circulating within the church building on a given Sunday. They select hymns that have meaning to them—known or unknown to the rest of the congregation—and that reflect their spiritual understandings, their process of believing. Janelle Miller shares,

“But if I could pick one,
it would be ‘Who’ [No. 169 OSH]
and I had never heard the song until Verna sung it to me.

“It’s just—
“I’d never heard it sung to the tune of ‘O’ Christmas Tree.’

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221 Interview, November 5, 2005.

222 Ibid.
“And this one just talks about who God is and who we are.
‘Who flung the stars,’
‘The curtain stretched the sky,’
‘Sends the wind,’
‘Forms the seed,’

“And it says,
‘The sinner vain and wild, and makes him a little child,’
‘Subdues his will and guides his feet and draws him to the mercy seat.’

“I mean, it just says it all!
“I mean, you know, and if you could just SING IT, that’s all you’d need to know!”

This hymn text takes the work of creation, which is unfolded through almost three of the four stanzas, and juxtaposes such feats with the totally depraved human condition to position the work of salvation in the realm of the sacred rather than as a choice of the human, who is portrayed as “vain and wild,” “a little child.” Doctrines of total depravity and the effectual call are explicit in this text, and by invoking the creation of the world, salvation of the “vain and wild” is contextualized within a predestinarian frame. Three months after these comments by Sister Miller, the congregation at Hollow Springs sang this hymn prior to Elder Jackson’s sermon. After taking the stand, he commented,

“Just looking over the hymn that we just sang.
‘It is the Lord and he alone,
Man has no glory of his own.
‘We have no goodness we can claim,
So let us publish his great name.
‘Let all creation lift its voice,
And in the Lord let us rejoice.
‘Let all his works praise
and confess the glory
of his righteousness.’

“All you need to do to read a good sermon is turn to that hymn right there.
I hadn’t noticed that before.
It’s beautiful.”

223 Interview, September 18, 2005.

224 These lines are the last two of the last two stanzas.
Elder Jackson then proceeded to his sermon, stemming from Abraham as a symbol of predestination to his main focus on Isaac as a symbol of God’s effectual call—“In Isaac shall thy seed be called.”

Yet “avowal[s] of forms that carry…spiritual meaning” do not coalesce into a firm consensus on hymn text and tune choices that best achieve the conveyance of spiritual meaning. Richard Bauman and others, in the 1970s, began to challenge “the predominant view of folklore as collective representation” in considering an approach to folkloristic study that takes into account differential identities.226 While believers at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia share an identity in terms of doctrine and as Primitive Baptists, each has her own identity in a relationship with God, based on lived experiences and spiritual experiences. Thus, I view singing not so much as a “collective representation” in the sense of an expression of an inherently unified mentality. Rather, unification comes through negotiation.

Sister St. Clair correlated the most significant changes in the singing with the change in hymnals, not so much with regard to the arrangements of notated melodies and harmonies but with a focus on the hymn texts and tune selections included in the newer *Old School Hymnal*. She said,

“The old hymns were verses from the Bible.

“And the newer songs that we sing now are just written by men, just their own words, not from the Bible. It’s more like they’re feelings.

“And too, the old-time sound is gone. It’s more of a modern sound we have. Now they’re more upbeat, faster a little bit, not a great deal but some…

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225 Sermon at Hollow Springs Primitive Baptist Church, December 11, 2005.

“…They used to sing, like ‘Redeeming Love’ and,

oh what are some of the old songs?
“ ‘The House of the Lord,’

“ ‘How Firm a Foundation,’
  things like that.”

While these last two listed by Sister St. Clair have been sung in these churches since I began recording services, each was sung only once among the one hundred fifty recordings on my fieldtapes. Of course, forty-eight (or 67 percent) of the seventy-two different hymns that comprise the hundred and fifty total recordings were only sung once.

Elder Jackson, too, sees a more “Arminian tint” to some of the songs sung at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia, identifying those “from four hundred to five hundred and something” in the *Old School Hymnal* primarily as newer Gospel songs that put more emphasis on form—the “catchy tunes”—than on the message. Of the seventy-two different hymns recorded, twenty-eight (or 39 percent) fall into this category, judging by Elder Jackson’s numerical delimitation. He prefers Goble’s *Primitive Baptist Hymn Book* (1887), and Patterson estimated Gospel songs comprise less than five percent of the book opposed to forty-six percent in the eleventh edition of the *Old School Hymnal*.

“I put the Goble books in both churches,” Elder Jackson said referring to the collection of books under the table in front of the pulpit at each church. This was during our first interview conversation, and I had only witnessed the use of Goble’s book for part of Annual Old Time Singing two months prior. Why do these books sit books under the table? Why are they not used more often?

“I’m a Goble fan.

“And I wouldn’t *dare* hurt anyone’s feelings over

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227 Interview November 6, 2005.
the *Old School Hymnal* at all,
but I’m not a fan of the *Old School Hymnal*.
I’m a Goble man all the way.

“And got those books not to *persuade* or [chuckles]
anyone like that.
“Sometimes the songs in those Gobles are just absolutely beautiful,
and occasionally we’ll get them out.”

Such was an occasion several months later when I arrived one Sunday at Philadelphia Church, early as I typically do so as to have time set up my recording rig before service starts.

This Sunday, however the singing had already begun, and I frantically affixed my video camera to the tripod, plugged in the microphone, and pressed record. I waited for the next number to be called, and then flipped through the *Old School Hymnal* on my pew to find an entirely different song than that which the few early arrivals were singing. After I realized they were singing from the Goble book, I sat back an enjoyed noticing the differences in tune and text. Elder Jackson had said in our earlier interview,

> “I don’t think the folks really,
there’s a few that enjoy that,
but others do not,
“And I wouldn’t cause any rift or make anyone mad at all. I’m not in favor of changing from the *Old School Hymnal*
because if feel like more people are familiar and comfortable with it.”

As more worshipers arrived at church, and the usual 10:30 starting-time neared, the small group of early singers finished their song, and Elder Jackson collected the Goble hymnbooks.

For the next selection, singers turned to the *Old School Hymnal* and “officially” opened the singing service per their usual practice.

Yet if for some, the “catchy tunes” outweigh any depth of spiritual message in the newer Gospel songs, for other singers the shift from a predilection for tunes in minor keys to incorporate more of those in major keys has benefited the overall practice of singing in the

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228 Interview, October 9, 2004.

229 Ibid.
chuches. Sister Anderson is one who prefers these newer tunes, which she calls “harmonizing
songs.”

“Well, the singing service for me, I remember
as a young girl,
“Carl McGee, he was the leader down at Hollow Springs, and we sang out of the old
paperback
hymnal.
“And a lot of those songs were sung in the minor key.
“Now, that is the basic
“Songs from the Old Baptists,
as well as the little hymnal there [pointing to the collection of Goble Hymnals in
front of the pulpit].
“And see, in the early fifties, late fifties and early sixties, and seventies, that’s all we sung
out of.

“Now, to me, as a young girl coming up, the old minor songs…was hard.
“So I was relieved
to able to bring some of these harmonizing songs230 in,
because,
“Like with Ruth
and myself and Janelle,
“We can harmonize real good and get through and slide by.
“And it sounds pretty good.”231

These Gospel songs typically take the form of “testimony, exhortation, or narrative”232 in
contrast to the older “basic songs from the Old Baptists,” which more often take the form of
“praise, prayer, and thanksgiving.”233 Sister St. Clair confirmed this statement when she
commented on the writing of Gospel sing authors: “It’s more like their feelings.” The human
experience-oriented Gospel songs allow for expressions of personal identity in addition to the
expression of doctrinal belief through older hymns. While believers can pick out doctrinal
inconsistencies within Gospel songs, in moments of performance these meanings are not fixed

230 Patterson includes a note on Gospel songs as accompanied by “an easy-to-harmonize tune in the major mode”

231 Interview, September 18, 2005.


233 Ibid.
and believers find amidst errant assurances of salvation that hope they received from God. Interpretive freedom exists in singing. For example, Patterson writes that Primitive Baptists sing “Just as I am without one plea” with the same words and tune sung by Methodists and Missionary Baptists, but the meanings they put into and receive from their performance of the song vary considerably. “While Methodists,” writes Patterson, “may be longing for perfection, and Missionary Baptists urging sinners to repentance and salvation, Primitive Baptists are acknowledging total depravity.” While the explicit form (words and tune) may mirror that used by other denominations, in the realm of meaning Primitive Baptists smooth out inconsistencies with interpretive transfigurations. They activate the dormant ideas of doctrine in performance to render an ambiguous text meaningful.

What about texts that seem to explicitly counter Primitive Baptist doctrine? Patterson notes that most do not sing “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine” because of the explicit expression of assured salvation. The congregations at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia, however, do sing this song (on two occasions when I was in attendance). Their doctrines indeed prohibit any “assured” knowledge of salvation, and believers carry this uncertainty into a song such as “Blessed Assurance” in the form of a silent interpretive “if” that encapsulates such texts. “If” believers are among the elect, then “blessed assurance, Jesus is” theirs. Of course, the possibility always remains that some find such songs to be more like “jigs,” as Sister Watson said, that do not carry the spiritual meaning that others find in the song. Through the encouraged participation of each congregant in singing a diversity of texts, tunes, and spiritual messages and interpretations are thrown into the worship service. While some lament the introduction of

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235 When I write “dormant ideas,” this is in light of a statement in Peacock and Tyson’s Pilgrims of Paradox, wherein one of their primary consultants, Elder Walter Evans, referred to the Bible as “a dead letter” that only becomes the living word of God through spiritual inspiration in active expression (1989:124-125). Similarly, doctrines come to life through this active expression, in this particular case, through song.
some of the newer Gospel songs and a “more modern” sound, the older minor keyed hymns have not completely lost a foothold. Rather, the fabric of singing at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia is a more variegated tapestry of text and tune.

“Primitive Baptist hymn-and-tune books prescribe tunes and harmonies but they do not necessarily dictate to the singers. In singing each of these hymns, the congregation took liberties with tunes, harmonies, rhythms, and even texts. …[T]he congregation did not always feel compelled to follow the printed versions.”\textsuperscript{236} At Hollow Springs and Philadelphia singers take similar liberties with their performances of some hymns. While they typically sing hymn texts as printed in the \textit{Old School Hymnal}, occasionally they edit texts by omitting certain stanzas. For example, someone will call out the number of the hymn and then request certain stanzas (e.g. 1-4 of a 5 stanza hymn). More often this editing is done amid singing. During one service, someone requested “Star in the East” (No. 115 OSH), and as they ended the third stanza Elder Jackson called out, “Number five,” indicating to the singers to skip to the fifth and final stanza of the hymn. These editorial choices are made for multiple reasons, and repeat performances of a given hymn are not always textually identical. On one occasion, after singing the first two stanzas of “Sing thy wondrous love of Jesus” (No. 423 OSH), Elder Watson, who was leading the song, called out “four,” and the singers moved on to the fourth and final stanza. The next time I heard it, about five months later, Elder Watson again lead this hymn, but this time did not edit out the third stanza and the congregation sang the entire song. Many times the song leader will omit a stanza in the interest of time, to fit more songs into the singing service. Other times doctrinal interpretations or other personal choices are invoked in editing decisions. For some hymns, congregational edits have become customary and all singers (members and regular visitors, at least) know to sing a limited set of stanzas. Singing “Shall we gather at the river”

\textsuperscript{236} 1995:180.
(No. 400 OSH) in April 2005, the third stanza was omitted but no indication of this change was announced. Rather the congregation sang the first two stanzas and then seamlessly moved on to the fourth.

Conversely, when singing “Amazing Grace,” (No. 154 OSH) the congregation occasionally adds a stanza to the end of the version printed in their hymnal. The stanza as sung at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia churches is,

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\begin{align*}
\text{When we've been there ten thousand years,} \\
& \quad \text{Bright shining as the sun.}
\text{We've no less days to sing God's praise,} \\
& \quad \text{Than when we'd first begun.}
\end{align*}
\]

This additional stanza, which is not printed in the *Old School Hymnal* or Cayce’s *The Good Old Songs*, is added only rarely and is sung by memory. Its inclusion is likely due to running out of text before the singers are ready to stop. This desire to lengthen “Amazing Grace” is not particular to these congregations. In earlier field research, Elder McGinnis talked about singing the hymn to the tune of “I want to live a Christian here” in a church he attended as a child in Ashe County. That congregation often selected this text-and-tune combination during the hand of fellowship at the end of the meeting and added the chorus that typically accompanies the tune (not the text) to extend the singing.

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\begin{align*}
\text{I want to live a Christian here,} \\
& \quad \text{I want to die rejoicing,}
\text{I want to feel my savior's near,} \\
& \quad \text{When soul and body's parting.}^{237}
\end{align*}
\]

Typically, the congregations at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia do not approach the song in this manner (except for when Elder McGinnis visits and feels led to do so or is asked to). Rather, they keep the text in its usual setting with the tune “New Britain,” and add the stanza as noted above.

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237 See Huffman 2004 for McGinnis’ narrative. Also see Patterson 1995.
In addition to occasional and slight modifications to printed hymn texts, believers at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia also take liberties with the tunes printed in their hymnal. While most (learned to) sing by ear and do not read the shaped musical notation, they tend to sing hymns with the tunes printed. Yet this is not always the case. On communion Sunday at Hollow Springs in July 2006, Elder Jackson led off with the first hymn, “Three hundred and sixty four. Three hundred sixty four.” He turned around from his seat on the front pew, saying to Sister Watson, “this might not be by the tune you all know.” She replied, “Well, we’ll sing it anyway you want to.” Elder Jackson announced “Three sixty four” again, and began to sing in the slow, mournful minor-keyed tune he had learned singing among churches in Ashe County out of Goble’s *Primitive Baptist Hymnbook*.

“And let this feeble body fail,” he sang in solo. Slowly a few others joined in, trying to learn the tune, but judging by the sparseness of participation this appeared to be a “new” tune for the congregation. After the hymn, Elder Jackson asked for the next number when Elder Watson responded, “Let’s sing that to a different song.” Elder Watson then led the same hymn text to the tune “Hallelujah,” printed with the text in the *Old School Hymnal* with a chorus.

And I'll sing Hallelujah,
    And you'll sing Hallelujah,
And we'll all sing Hallelujah,
    When we arrive at home.

The next evening as Elder Jackson and I talked about negotiating hymnals, he brought up these two versions of the hymn.

“I always carry the Goble book with me, and I will pull it out and look at it and find what I want and then see if it is in the *Old School Hymnal*.

“Sometimes it is, but it would have choruses, and things like that that we don’t sing in the Goble, more or less….

“…I sang, you’ll notice this last Sunday at Hollow Springs I sang the first one,
had a very minor sort of sound to it, and Brother Gene said,

“‘Lets sing that the way we’re used to,’ you know,

and it sounded certainly different.

“And it sounded better too, for that matter.”238

Elder Jackson has introduced other tunes that the rest of the congregation picked up quickly and now prefer over the tune they used to sing. “Alas, and did my savoir bleed” (No. 138 OSH) one of the most oft repeated hymns I heard, has been sung for many years in the churches. However, since Elder Jackson’s arrival in the past ten years, they have changed tunes.

“We had Association at Hollow Springs Church a few years back,” began Elder Jackson,

“Anytime we have a guest minister to come, I feel like it’s my responsibility to preach him,

to let him preach.

“And this gentleman had the bad habit of taking not only his time, but mine as well.

“There were two years running, that I didn’t get to speak at the association

because of him.

“Saturday night he spoke, and Sunday morning he spoke.

“And by the time it was my turn,

it was time to break.

“And I stood up and took the,

took the podium, so to speak, and I said, ‘This is my sermon.

Turn to 138.’

And we sang that song,

in the tuning that I’m familiar with.

“And a lot of folks had never sung it like that. But they just got along fine, and we just sang that song.

“And after we had sung the song,

we went ahead and closed out the association and

“I didn’t preach, but I sang and everybody else sang and we had a good time!

“I remember that!”239

This tune change was not merely a shift in aesthetic. For Sister Anderson, the tune that Elder Jackson introduced profoundly opened up the meaning in the text. As we sat and talked

238 Interview, June 12, 2006.

239 Ibid.
in Philadelphia church after service, she read the text from a copy of the *Old School Hymnal*, savoring each word:

“138 I love, but now I’ve only learned to love that since John Jackson came here.”

Sister Miller interjected, “I never remember hearing that song until John Jackson came here.”

“We used to sing it, but we sang it by a different tune
back in those [days]. ‘Alas and did my savior bleed, and did my sovereign die;
would he devote his sacred head for such a worm as I.’

“Now, John sings that to a different *tune*, and...to me when that song is *sung* in that *tune*,
those *words* just mean so much.

“Now in the *old* way, it never registered.

“But it seems so, so, that this touches my heart every time that we sing it.

“And

I just love to hear it.

‘Was it for crimes that I have done,

‘He groaned the tree; amazing pity,

    grace unknown, and love beyond decree;

‘Well might the sun and darkness hide and shout his glories in; when Christ almighty the maker died for man the creature’s sin;

‘But drops of grief can never repay the debt I owe; Dear Lord I give myself away,

    tis all that I can do...’”

“...I don’t know. It just touched a

place in my heart
during the years.

“See, my mother was sick when John first came here,

and we started singing that song when my mom was sick. And it just struck a

note.

“And I love the harmony of it.”

While believers have varying opinions on hymnals, texts, and tunes, they do not let their individual preferences divide participation in the practice of singing. Rather, each has her or his opportunity to express individual preference through their selections, the meanings the find in them, and occasional modifications to their printed forms. The active emergence of a rich

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240 Interview, September 18, 2005.
diversity of processes of believing in singing takes precedence. Singing is so effective a form of worship because the agency to choose the spiritual message and share it with the congregation rests in each church member (or visitor, for that matter). Hymns, while the text is printed in fixed form, are processed by each church member according to their experiences. A given hymn can have as many different meaning as there are experiences. Through combinations of tune and text, believers perform themselves and partake in the performances of others. Sister Watson concluded her take on the different books by making precisely this point, “But whenever they harmonize together, to me, it doesn’t matter which book it is.”

“I can identify with that song”: Investments of Self in Singing

If sacred performance is the embodiment (and expression) of meaning in form, it is also the creation of meaning through form. Singing becomes an avenue for believers to interpret, understand, and share their spiritual selves and those doctrines that constitute the logico-meaningful structure within which they situate their processes of believing. As hymns carry doctrinal meanings and “are like little sermons,” when performed during worship they also carry individual personal meanings as well. Performance is action or doing; it is simultaneously a manner of feeling and thinking about action or doing. Victor Turner put it this way: “[P]erformance is a dialectic of ‘flow,’ that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and ‘reflexivity,’ in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen ‘in action,’ as they shape and explain behavior,” or as Charles Briggs wrote, performance is “an active and interpretive process.” That is, the active is bound with

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241 Patterson 1995:47.

242 Interview, November 5, 2005.

interpretation. There is a duality in the idea of performance. Singing invokes an understanding of lived experience through doctrine, as well as an understanding of doctrine through experience, and both become meaningful when put into motion through active expression. Thus, performing a hymn involves more than the words and music of its rendering; it involves the music of a life. Verna Walker discussed her favorite hymn, “Ninety and Nine” (No. 205 OSH):

“‘There are ninety and nine that safely lay in the shelter of the fold,
but one was out on hills away far off from the gates of gold.’”

Sister Walker, then, sang the next two lines:

“‘Away on the mountains wild and bare,
Away from the tender shepherd’s care.’”

“Then it goes on for five verses and tells how the Shepard went and found his lost sheep…

“…The message is that how Christ went and found the sheep.
The message is that he died on the cross for his people.
“It’s written like—a friend of mine said her mother used to sing that song and she would sit and cry about the little sheep that was lost.
“But the message is really about how Christ died for his people.”

The second stanza of the hymn reads,

“Lord, thou hast here thy ninety and nine;
Are they not enough for thee?”
But the Shepherd made answer: “This of mine has wandered away from me;
And although the road be rough and steep,
I go to the desert to find my sheep”

This stanza, and the message as described by Sister Walker, speaks directly to the doctrines discussed in chapter four. For example, the sheep, lost in the desert, speaks to the

244 1988: 18.

245 Interview, February 12, 2005.
human condition in a state of total depravity. The specific number, “ninety and nine” plus the one lost, symbolizes the doctrine of particular election. However, more than reflecting doctrine, the hymn is invested with Sister Walker’s conversion experience. She expressed in her narrative of joining the Primitive Baptist church (see the previous chapter) a theme of being spiritually lost, and then being found and brought into the fold by the message of the Holy Spirit. This language of “lost” is accompanied by language of Christ’s work in uniting the sheep with the flock. Christ found the lost sheep, in Sister Walker’s case through the message of sacrifice, and brought the sheep into the fold, rather than the sheep wandering back by happenstance.

“Ninety and Nine,” bespeaks this experience and the relationship between personal narrative and hymn text is entwined with doctrine and realized through active expression.

The connections of experience to song are multilayered and encompass more than specific conversion experiences.246 After talking about “Ninety and Nine” with Sister Walker, I asked if there were other hymns that had more meaning to her.

“Well, this ‘Light at the River.’
That always brings back memories of Ruth McGee.
Our husbands died just a few months apart,
And we were good friends.
She didn’t drive, but I did and we went a lot of places together.
And we sang this at her funeral.
“And there’s a lot of them more like that,
but then there’s some that have
just a private message
for me.

“I’ll Sing the Wondrous Story’, I like that one.
“But every one of them has the theme of the Christ who died for me. ‘I will sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for me,’
or saved by grace.

“And ‘Thou in Whose Presence.’

“And ‘There’ll Be No Shadows in Heaven,’ we sang that at Ruth’s funeral.”247

246 Patterson 1995.
She connected songs to the embodiment of memory, of the dearness of the social experience centered on but extending beyond the church. Those, such as Ruth McGee, whom she worshipped with in the past are brought into song and given expression though the body no longer fills the pew. She also emphasized “private message[s],” those individual reflections on life and spirituality through which believers contemplate the sacred and their relationship with God. These expressions of the social and individual are woven amidst the foundational thread of Christ’s sacrifice, that Biblical act that simultaneously subsumes within in it the pain of death and the beauty of life.

The ability to select personal songs when believers feel moved to do so is crucial to performance of personal identity in the church community. Sister Anderson shared that “Alas, and did my savior bleed,” when paired with the tune Elder Jackson introduced, became spiritually meaningful to her during her mother’s illness. When she sings this song, it carries into the present her personal trials during such a difficult time with a consolation for the grief of death and a hope for the beauty of life, some comfort for those remaining in this world. In the song she connects her personal experiences with the spiritual and doctrinal message of the hymn text, and she bridges any gap between personal identity and church identity as part of the social fabric of the community.

If for Sister Anderson a change in song form opened the avenue for such a powerful cultural performance and investment of identity, in other situations performances of identity change the singing. Such was the case for Sister Swanson after her father, Elder Watson, had another stroke. In the following narrative, she resituates song as a form, a tool, for expression rather than a reflection of church thought. My suggestion is not, nor is hers, that church

247 Interview, February 12, 2005.
thought is not carried and reflected through hymn texts, but that in performance meanings
through doctrinal message are given life with applications of personal experience.

“Some,
Some of the songs really, really hit a,
a deep emotional spot.
“And there are times whenever, you know, you can use the songs to describe
how you feel about something,

“And,
I'll cry, it’s coming, I feel it.”

Sister Swanson pauses to collect herself amidst welling tears.

“One, when my dad had had his
open heart surgery
and when he had come out,

we knew that he had had another stroke, and

we were taking turns staying with him and so Sunday morning

was my turn to stay with him.

“He was in the bed, and I was looking out the window,

and I knew that he couldn’t answer me.

“And, I just had my back to him, and I said,
“You want me to sing you a song?”
“And, he just grunted.
“And I started singing a song, ‘I Will Sing You a Song.’
[begins singing]
“I will sing you a song of the beautiful land, far away home of the soul,
which I didn’t know that I knew the words of, and I sung the whole song. And I
thought, where did that come from?
“And as long as I looked out the window and didn’t look at him, I could sing it.
“And when we got, the next time we were at church,
I hunted it in the book.
“But we couldn’t sing it.
“We have since learned it, but I don’t know where it came from.
“I don’t know where it came from.
I don’t know where I had heard it,
I don’t know why I knew all the words.
And I still don’t know.
“Because now I can try to sing it can’t go all the way through it—all the words are not
there,

but they were that morning.”

248 Interview, May 6, 2006.
Through divine inspiration a connection of personal experience to message invigorates a song text, packing it with personal meaning. Subsequent to her experience, Sister Swanson introduced the hymn to the larger congregation, and as the song took hold and they learned to sing it her personal identity became more enmeshed within the social and spiritual life of the church.

M.M. Bakhtin wrote that “language enters life through concrete utterances, and life enters language through concrete utterances as well.”\textsuperscript{249} That is, meaning is experienced through form, and experience is given meaning through form. In song believers receive and interpret spiritual messages in a given hymn text. However, they also create meaning through investments of “life” in song. Sister Walker invested her spiritual experience of conversion in “Ninety and Nine,” memory of her dear friend Sister McGee in “Light at the River,” and she invested “private messages” in others. Sister Anderson invests the experiences of coping with the loss of her mother and nurturer. Sister Swanson invests the complex of divine inspiration and caring for her father when he was ill. Songs that once had not the meaningful life within their mere words, however doctrinally sound and inspired, become powerful expressive paths through which believers connect their experiences in this world to the hereafter, wrapped like vines around a pillar of hope for salvation that anchors the community of believers.

\textsuperscript{249} 2001:122.
The previous chapter showed song form in its relationship to the construction of meaning through which believers invest themselves in and form their socio-religious community. While believers may perform their personal identities with the social community, ideas of performance falter when attempting to account for a crucial aspect of these identities. Peacock wrote that form is required to make the sacred real, to render it perceptible by the human senses. Indeed, Primitive Baptists enact specific cultural forms through which to experience the sacred. Yet for believers, action is not enough to bridge the gap between secular and sacred experience. Action cannot create spiritual experience or construct the realities thereof. Believers may agree that through action and desire they can construct mirages of the sacred, but any reality of sacred experience comes only through the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Harmony is a word used often by believers not only to describe the physical sounds of singing, but also to point to the real spiritual integration of meaning and form. Initially, I missed the spiritual sense of the word and how it describes the blending of individual experiences. Titon writes of a similar shift in perception in his work among Old Regular Baptists and his musicological question of how these singers were able to “stay together.” “Was it really metaphor when they spoke of being tuned up with the grace of God? When they spoke of how the Holy Spirit made a melody? Or was it not metaphor at all but their...quite literal belief?”

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250 2006:328.
These questions made me wonder about Elder Jackson’s aside when talking about predestination. Although predestined salvation (or not) occurred before the advent of time, he said, “God can do other things that are similar to that” in time and “God can purpose something to happen.” In other words, God can harmonize.

Harmony operates within singing on at least two integrated levels, likely more, but I focus on two: musical and spiritual harmony. Briefly, I conceive musical harmony to be the sonic dancing of vocal intonations that entangle themselves pushing and pulling against some melodic line, both formal and improvised renderings of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Further, I extend the notion of musical harmony to encompass the musical idiosyncrasies of individuals, which include the tune and text preferences discussed in the previous chapter, but more to the point here, I refer to individuals ways of singing. Of course, each singer has a personal style, but perhaps the point will be made by a discussion of three: Elder Watson’s volume, Elder Jackson’s lining out, and Sister Swanson’s preference for staggered phrasings. As the Spirit emerges, individuals express their perception and reception of it in different ways that harmonize and texture the singing. Spiritual harmony, then, is as I mentioned above the work of the Holy Spirit over the consonance and dissonance of musical harmony in a spiritual contexture of social and sacred experience. This spiritual harmony cannot so much be heard but is more concretely perceived through all the senses. Sister Watson characterized this perceptions as a feeling:

“If it’s all in harmony
    and everybody’s and singing real good,
    you get the spirit feeling,
    and it brings a tear to your eye.
    And it’s good.”


252 Interview, November 5, 2005.
Musical Harmony

Although singers at Philadelphia and Hollow Springs have been to some extent influenced by the structured tune treatments and prescribed tune-and-text parings of the shaped note tradition, particularly through the song leading of Carl McGee, they have not adopted the more formal style that is evident among other groups, such as those singing from *The Sacred Harp* or the *Christian Harmony*. The form more consistent among these mostly nondenominational groups is marked by a quick tempo and a sharp rhythm, giving a jaunt to the singing. Singers are often spatially divided by harmony part (i.e. treble, alto, tenor, and bass) in a more rigidly structured sort of division-of-labor arrangement, and their adherence to that part for the duration of the song is steadfast.

Most Primitive Baptists, however, do not employ these stylistic features, at least not to the fullest extent. The predilection of many shaped-note singing groups to reproduce the structured form of notated harmonies in performance, in physical arrangements of singers and strict timing conventions, is not manifest in the singing at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia. Rather, notions of harmony represented in form, or the aesthetic of singing, draw on the spiritual sense of the term “harmony”—preparing hearts and minds. The singing at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia is at a moderately slow tempo. Harmonies are improvised and the integrated physical arrangement of singers of different parts allows for a complex resonance in the singing, a woven musical fabric. The harmonies seem to dance around one another, momentarily hitting on the same beat, then moving slightly ahead or behind. Often this evolves throughout a song. Singers start with tight, synchronized harmonies, and as they progress the individual parts swell from that unified thread of song in which they began. The result, sonically at least, is this complex texture, tightly bound but expanding and filling previously empty sonic

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Titon wrote of a similar sense of movement in the singing among the Old Regular Baptists. “Outsiders are mistaken if they think the intent is singing with unified precision and that the result falls short; on the contrary, the singing is in step and deliberately just a bit out of phase—and this, I think, is one of its most powerful musical aspects.” While, as has been noted, the Old Regular Baptist singing cannot be conflated with that of Primitive Baptists, this same characteristic emerges quite often inside the churches at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia. The deep texture in their singing seems effaced by more structured performances of the same hymns by other groups. This textured movement is carried in sound and it is emergent. The congregation, at least for those few minutes of singing, exists on a plane of absolute cohesion as voices blend in rich resonances, swirling and rippling with mixtures of low and high tones. The sounds are fluid, drenching the ear. The fresh spring of sound emanating from within the individual singer instantly returns to the ear in the grand auditory river. But it is beyond mere auditory sensation for believers. This fullness of harmony is emergent and dependent upon the degree to which believers feel moved by the Spirit.

**Emergence of the Spirit**

Believers often speak of the practice of singing as “preparing hearts and minds” and as a process to “focus more.” They come with their individuality and their common identity as Primitive Baptists, and if they sing in the Spirit, individuals blend in a richness embodied in words and tones—spiritual harmony among the hearts and minds of the singers. However, this is not a sameness; it is not a collective representation in the strictest sense. Rather, within spiritual harmony, as with musical harmony, individual expression is preserved. Elder Watson’s booming voice retains its own unmistakable character, as he fills musical notes with almost more

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voice than they can handle without shattering. He bends, pushes, and pulls on the tunes to invest himself in song to the fullest extent. Elder McGinnis let me borrow some recordings of the singing at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia before I ever attended, and when I finally found myself among them and heard the first note I recognized Elder Watson. Sister Anderson said, “Gene was emotional [when leading], and when he would get emotional he would get louder.” When Elder Watson gets “the Spirit feeling,” as his wife put it, other singers feel it as well. Sister Anderson said,

“It affects us more today
than it did
when I was younger because
“Brother Gene can’t lead us today like he once did,
and it really affects us all.
We just appreciate the times he can sing with us
and lead us.
“Because he has for so many years.”255

Elder Jackson expresses his “Spirit feeling” through lining a verse of a hymn.256 Usually this occurs during the final hymn of the service, when believers return to their seats after the hand of fellowship to finish the hymn they began to come together sonically and spiritually before coming together physically. Often, the hymn is “Amazing Grace,” which some jokingly suggest is chosen because “it’s the only one we all know.”257 Of course, they select others, but “Amazing Grace” is the popular choice, and for Sister Anderson, the choice extends beyond the ability to “walk and talk and sing ‘Amazing Grace’ at the same time.”258 For her:

255 Interview, June 11, 2006.

256 Lining out is a practice of chanting the first line of a hymn in a somewhat minor key to which the congregation respond by singing back that line, and the process is repeated line-by-line until the song is over. Historically, this was a necessary practice among church of many denominations, as often there would be more singers than hymnbooks. Currently, the practice is carried out as a tradition and as a spiritual outlet, but is no longer an essential element of most Primitive Baptist churches.

257 Interview with Verna Walker, February 12, 2005.

258 Interview with Shirley Anderson, Janelle Miller, and Larry Miller, September 18, 2005.
‘Amazing Grace,’ every time I sing it means something to me. And it has for as long as I can remember singing in church, or as long as I can remember singing the song.

“I know you’ve noticed that we close with that song a lot.
“And that song means to me a certain completion of my spiritual seekings for that particular day.”

When other hymns are chosen for the hand of fellowship, “Amazing Grace” is appended to the end of the hymn for this closure that Sister Anderson spoke of. When I asked Elder Jackson about lining hymns, he referred directly to such occasions:

“Usually, I think you’re probably referring to after we have shaken hands and we just feel so good and some folks have been crying joy, tears of ecstasy, so to speak, and we all get back, and lo and behold, we ran out of hymn anyway, you know, and everyone is just there ready, and poised and ready to go, so we sing a verse or two of ‘Amazing Grace,’ which is probably their favorite.”

Some at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia, when asked about the intersection of the practice of lining hymns and meaning, often state a meditative affect through hearing the words as chanted and then singing them back. Sister St. Clair said,

“Well, to me in lining it,
“You pay more attention to the words, you know when the preacher says the words, you just listen more carefully,
“And maybe that causes you to sing more in the spirit than just reading the verse.”

259 Interview, September 18, 2005.

260 Interview, June 12, 2006.

261 Interview, November 6, 2005.
The repetitious reception of lines, first through the ear and then through the eye, allows singers to dwell on the meanings of the words and to get inside them before expressing them outwardly. For others, such as Sister Watson, the practice does not add to the emergence of meaning through singing. She added, “As a matter of fact, it gets me confused sometimes. You know, we’re ready to go on to the next line, and he’s lining it. But, John does it so well that I like it. I like the sound of it.”  

From this perspective, the effect is more aesthetic and contained within the form itself.

Elder Jackson, in a way that combines the meditative and aesthetic effects of the practice, feels that lining adds to the larger spiritual experience of singing that transcends the musical form.

“Oh, it adds so much to it. 
“We had a young man that came to Philadelphia Church one time. In fact, I carried him to several churches, and he was one these fellows that went to these singing schools… 
…well, they are not really singing schools. He could read notes. He didn’t need to learn that, “Where they would get together and sing, you know, the old-time way, which is not the log cabin style, but.“

“-Like a Sacred Harp?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m, trying to say.

“I remember there at Philadelphia Sister, Ruth Sinclair said, “ ‘Brother John, why don’t you line “Amazing Grace,” and we’ll sing that.’ “

“In other words, there was and elderly man who had been there years ago who hadn’t come back in twenty-five years.

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262 Interview, August 20, 2005.

263 This phrase, “log cabin style,” is how Elder Jackson refers to a song style slower than that of Hollow Springs or Philadelphia Churches, with a predilection for minor-keyed tunes, and often in conjunction with groups that sing out of D.H. Goble’s *Primitive Baptist Hymn Book*. Churches such as those in the Senter Association in Ashe County and those of the Mountain District Association (documented by Beverly Patterson, James Peacock, Ruel Tyson, and others) are often described by Elder Jackson as singing in the log cabin style.
“And she said, ‘Why don’t you line “Amazing Grace,” and we’ll sing it.’

“And you know, that church just jumped to life. It really did. *Everybody* was singing. I mean, it just added such a *new* and *different* and invigorating dimension to ‘Amazing Grace,’
it really did.

“I remember, this young man, he *really* enjoyed that,
he really, really did.
I mean, he was singing like a bird.
He was singing his heart out…

“…So there’s something to it. There’s another dimension that you don’t always have.”

This “dimension” for Elder Jackson is his expression of a deeply-felt moment of spirituality. In preaching, he feels this touch of the Lord and expresses it vocally and physically:

“I call it spiritual adrenaline,

“And I don’t think it’s necessarily recognizing that others see and understand what you’re doing and therefore their being led along,
“More rapidly or in a better fashion than when you began, but
“*It’s* the knowledge that God, *it’s* the feeling that God,
‘Yeah, this is what I want you to say. Please make this point,’ so to speak.
“And when you see me *leaning* on my elbow,
I’m in full swing.”

When he gets “in full swing” while singing at the end of a service, he lines.

“Well, I’m riding high.
I’m feeling very good.

“I have a surge of adrenaline, spiritually, so to speak, and

*feeling* the presence of God in a very strong way. And that’s the only way that I know to,

to *react* or to *respond*
to such a
*spiritual surge.*

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264 Interview, June 12, 2006.
265 Ibid.
266 Ibid.
In singing, spiritual individuality is maintained and accepted because believers recognize these expressions in one another. Sister Anderson recognizes Elder Watson’s shift in volume and force as his particular way expressing himself. Likewise, Sister St. Clair notices this in Elder Jackson’s lining. When I asked her about the first time I heard him line, during the third service I attended, she commented, “Well, I think it has an effect on him. I think that he was inspired to do that when he did. Sometimes the preachers just feel led to do that.”

Others integrate their individuality in more private, less observable ways. For Sister Swanson, this can be achieved through staggered harmony parts. “I love songs with multiple parts—like one where you have, ‘Like ‘Where the Soul Never Dies,’ where there’s one line being sung by one and the other line [by another], and they’re, they sort of fall together.’”

Initially, I did not consider her statement significant beyond being her preference in song style, but when reading over the transcription of our interview and taking in the larger flow and scope of our discourse, connections of expression through song to her individual belief, her religious and spiritual identity, became apparent. As we began the interview she said, “I have other thoughts in my-self that doesn’t necessarily go with the Primitive Baptists, but the basic? “Oh, it does, that’s what keeps me there.”

Later, Sister Swanson brought up the individual nature of her spirituality again: “I ask questions, and am I a Bible reader? Occasionally. I don’t read the Bible everyday. I don’t read it every week…” “…And can I quote scripture, line and verse? No, I can’t. “And, “You know,”

267 Interview, February 26, 2005.
a lot of it’s just how you feel, 
and not how it’s written, 
but how you feel.

“And personally, and that’s a personal belief, I think you’ve got to have your own belief system in here for it to work. 
“Yeah, ok, I still feel like I need to go to church, 
“I need to get reinforcement. 
“I need to do that, 
but it’s still how I feel in here that counts.

“But you can’t, 
you can’t impart all of what you feel on other people.”

Difference, in song represented by the singing of different lines and in spirituality represented by her personal beliefs, does not disappear but “sort of fall[s] together.” Sister Anderson expresses this as well, “When Primitive Baptists gets in the Spirit and gets to singing the songs, it affects everyone in many different ways.” Similarly, Elder Jackson spoke of predestination in terms of one’s “spiritual journey…from point A to point Z.” “God has charted, he has predetermined ahead of time each and every step that you take of a spiritual way,” Elder Jackson said, and “no two stops along the way are the same from one person to another.” Thus, while believers identify with one another in the group context of shared doctrine, the path each follows is unique as is her personal relationship with God.

**Spiritual Harmony (Feeling)**

Spiritual harmony includes but extends beyond the specific form and act of singing. Spiritual harmony refers to the integration of experience and interpretation through singing in

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268 Interview, May 6, 2006.

269 Interview, July 16, 2006.

270 See Chapter 4 for Elder Jackson’s discussion of predestination in more detail.
worship. It may be symbolized and expressed through the beautiful harmonies sung each Sunday at Philadelphia or Hollow Springs, but it refers more to feeling that sound. Spiritual and sensual meaning take precedence over form. When I, unsure of what I was really asking, tried to inquire about the physical or bodily feelings while singing, Sister Anderson responded:

“You feel a certain,

“You feel a certain physical, oh,

“Release, I guess, when you sing.
“Because I can’t sit there and not say nothing…

“…But it’s something physical, and I consider it spiritual because lots of times I get more out of the singing service than I do
the *preaching*,
and it’s just according to what mood I am in…

“…And certain songs when we all are harmonizing together, means,
means something physical to me.”

Each time I rephrased my questions about the physical feelings of singing, trying to organize my thoughts in a sensible way, Sister Anderson went back to harmony connecting physical and spiritual feeling. Just as the tunes are often spoken of as vehicles for the message of a hymn text, tune and text together, harmonized spiritual expression in the form of song, are often a vehicle for the Holy Spirit. Elder Jackson commenting on my insertion of the term “performance,” said,

“It’s done from the heart, now. It doesn’t mean that it’s just thrown up there for *singing*, but it comes from the heart.

“And it has deep *feelings* that are brought forth from it, and it expresses a lot of *doctrine* and church thought, too…

“…It more or less just springs from the heart. It’s instantaneous,

it comes from deep down in,
but it’s very informally presented.”

271 Interview, June 11, 2006.
Any notions of strict form give way to these “deep down in” wellings of spiritual expression. However, all of this is not a taken for granted expectation upon entering church on Sunday. Rather, through past experience, believers come with a hope for achieving musical and spiritual harmony. As everyone I spoke with related, sometimes it happens; sometimes it does not. In terms of musical harmony, this seems to be confirmed in the sonic and harmonic variation among multiple performances of the same hymn. Further, powerful performances were consistent among many hymns I recorded only once. The “spirit feeling” through spiritual harmony comes with the movement of the Holy Spirit. While one can listen to the recordings and guess as to when believers reached spiritual harmony (which I have tried to do), this state of harmony among vocal expression, consciousness, and emotion can only be felt. Worldly attempts at explanations rooted in the human mind’s conceptualization of logic fall short of capturing what the senses perceive.

When I talked with Sister Anderson in the church at Hollow Springs following the communion service in June 2006, she and Sister Watson, who entered momentarily, expressed precisely this point in reference to singing a few weeks prior.

“Well, that’s what the harmonizing together means to all of us.
“And it, well the only word I can think of, it’s just a spiritual feeling when you sing together and you sing good together, and we’ve sung together for years and years.
“And it’s like Aunt Pansy says,
“‘Some days we sing very good and then some days we don’t,’ but we always enjoy singing together….

“…Well, I’ll go back to the example of Justin and his mother and father and wife that came.

272 Interview June 12, 2006.

273 Over the course of fourteen “regular” services I attended, I recorded approximately 150 hymns. This group of performances includes 72 different hymn texts. Forty-eight (or 67 percent) of the seventy-two different hymns were only sung once. Most repeated were “Amazing Grace” (8), “There’s a Little Old Church That I Love So Well” (7), “Sweet Hour of Prayer” (7), “Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed” (6), “Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone” (5), “I Know That I Cannot Pray Just Like Old Daniel” (5), “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” (4), and “Farther Along” (4).
“There was just maybe ten of us that day, but the harmonizing that they put and the leading of Justin, “We all just sung so much better. Because we had help. Because we had the harmonizing of the songs together.

“And we were just all together in the harmonizing that day. But now on some days, on some Sundays, we all sing the best we can, but it doesn’t turn out that harmonizing. And I don’t know what makes it that way, although, you know, Justin is a good leader and he has a beautiful voice.

“So as Sister Pansy says, that makes us sing a little bit better…

“…I think that when certain songs are sung, they mean a lot to me, and I’m sure they mean a lot to Sister Pansy and Sister Ruth and to David. “And when you’re singing them, and you do it spiritually, I think it makes you feel better. “When we’re all harmonizing together, you can feel the whole spirit of the song and the spirit of the Lord, I feel like.”

Sister Watson, having entered the sanctuary to begin gathering up the bread plates, wine carafe, cups, and other items used in the communion that day, chimed in, “I know so.”

“See? “And I was telling him Pansy about the singing last Sunday when Justin and his mother and father and his wife was there. “You could just hear it resounding through the church, could you not?”

“You could feel it,” said Sister Watson emphatically.

“You could feel the Spirit there. And I went to a singing last night at a church, and our worst days, our worst singing days, sounded like the Tabernacle Choir.”

Folklorist Glenn Hinson writes, “Religious experience…imparts a knowledge said to resonate with the soul, a knowledge carrying so much certainty that it denies the need for objective verification and makes all calls for public validation seem petty and irrelevant.”

Spiritual knowledge “resonates with the soul” and is perceived through the heart as much as the

274 Interview, June 11, 2006.

mind. When Sister Anderson answered my question of what it means to be a Primitive Baptist,\textsuperscript{276} she began by contextualizing her answer within her experiences here in the world. She then concluded with one word: “Knowing.” As she points out, this knowledge does not make sense in secular modes of understanding or even in some modes of religious thought (especially those encouraging notions of human free will in salvation). It is not something to be explained. Believers who share in it do not do so through worldly explanations fitted to the structures of secular logic. Rather, they share this spiritual knowledge through worship and feel it with all the senses as it is imparted by the Holy Spirit.

“\textit{It’s Not a Surface Feeling}: Experiencing the Sacred

At times when reviewing the recordings of services at the churches, I honestly convinced myself that I could hear and feel the Spirit in their singing on a given Sunday. I felt like I could hear it emerge throughout the song, building just short of sonic rupture at the end. Yet the next day such explicitness faded and I thought, where did it go? Sister Swanson talked about recordings of singing in a similar fashion:

\begin{quote}
\textit{I wish} that we had been able to do

\texttt{stereo recordings}

of those things way back when.

\texttt{And you can digitally re-master some of the stuff, but it still doesn’t—}

\texttt{And, you know, maybe you just can’t.}

\texttt{But it’s like mom was saying one time. She was listening to [a recording of] us singing after the fact.}

\texttt{And she said—}

\texttt{At the time they were singing it, she said, ‘Oh! It was beautiful!’ And she said, you know, ‘I went back and listened to it,’ and she said, ‘You know, it didn’t sound the same.’ [laughs] And she said—}

\texttt{But the feelings are not there either.}

\texttt{Listening to it and participating in it make a difference…}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{276}See chapter 4.
“...The whole feeling, the whole aura of the congregation, the whole schmeer.
“And it's not always the same.
“You know, this Sunday this song might sound fabulous, and next Sunday it sound like dragging a cat through the ditch. [laughs]. 277

Sister Swanson followed with this after I had tried to described one of the performances led by her father on a recording of the Annual Old-Time Singing at Hollow Springs from the mid-1990s (of which no doubt she too was a participant). She was talking about the inability to capture experience on tape. I began this chapter with a brief comment Elder Jackson made on the use of term “performance” and that such a term did not capture the “very deep otherwise” he felt to be far more significant. Here, Sister Swanson has illustrated the same point in regard to recordings of singing, and her words bear upon my recordings as well.

Stasis pervades in the construction of a text. There are no sacred performances to hold in our hands and inspect or marvel at. Rather, the sacred is experienced, here and gone again, which we think, talk, and write (not necessarily in that order or all of those) about or around, and thus we perform a construction of meaning.

The recordings I made did not capture experience, but are only reminders of experience. In other words, they are texts. Such aural texts evoke original performance through sound more precisely than might a representation in printed words and musical notation, but the experience comes and goes. Any sensation—emotive, physical, mental, spiritual—experienced by the listener constitutes a new and unique performance of reflection on past subjective experience (perhaps the original experience of the singing recorded) and hope of the future. Past, present, and future are connected in a new experience. These can be powerful, as Elder Jackson described:

277 Interview, May 6, 2006.
“I remember Elder Calvin Yates gave me a recording of someone who preached at Senter Church.

“And they were singing prior to the actual service, and they sang ‘Sweet Hour of Prayer’.”

“And by the time that preacher began, I was crying. I mean I was carried away. And even on a tape recorder, you know, you get chill bumps.”

Just as songs can be sung as hymns or as “jigs,” as Sister Watson referred to those that do not provide spiritual meaning for her, recordings of Primitive Baptist singing can be listened to as worship or as music.

The full performative event, the moment of significance, that “Spirit feeling, cannot be captured. Just as recordings cannot capture the performative event, performance itself cannot capture experiences with the sacred, cannot contain the spirit within the confines of song. Nor is that the intended purpose. Through performance, however, the sacred can be sensed, and for believers at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia it is felt, and it is only momentary.

But performance, itself, does not suffice in experiencing the sacred identity with God’s elect. For Primitive Baptists, ritual, or the performance thereof, does not cause effects; the movement of the Holy Spirit does. While believers offer up their lived experiences through song, the Holy Spirit performs as well to bind these individuals in experiences beyond the particulars of the performance event. However, experiences with the sacred are emergent and unpredictable, as Sister Swanson said:

“And you don’t, you don’t know when it’s going to happen.

“I mean, and there are some song services that I can’t get through without crying because the songs that they’re singing and they sound really good,

278 A favorite of Elder Jackson’s.

279 Interview, June 12, 2006.
“And it just touches you somewhere.”

Thinking back to Elder Jackson’s discussion of the doctrine of effectual calling in chapter four, connections can be made to experiences with the sacred in worship. Elder Jackson made the point that although one’s salvation (or not) was predestined before time, the effectual call of God, that force that impels the believer to sing praises, occurs in time, “in his set and appointed time.” Elder Jackson often speaks of unpredictability in conjunction with the effectual call—of the non-believer who inexplicably feels a “burning desire to go to church,” the unsure believer who suddenly realizes some larger understanding of what previously had merely been words exiting the preacher’s mouth, the believer who notices the “little tear that’s dropping from the corner of your eye.”

I used the word “ritual” above, but such a term overemphasizes habitual repetition and a routinization of experience. Anthropologist Victor Turner wrote of ritual among the Ndembu in Africa in terms of “social drama,” in which schism occurred and was “repaired” by the performance of ritual. Stressed in this approach was the collective action of people in bringing about a resolution to a particular social problem, implying that this resolution lay in collective action while the participants in the ritual “believed” it lay in spiritual forces. I could make a similar argument for singing at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia, that the very act of singing together produces the sacred experience, the “closeness” as Elder Jackson put it or “communitas” as Turner labeled it. Sure, the sacred is sensed through performance, but to say that it is constructed or made real by it denigrates believers’ experiences as mental trickery and self-delusion. Believers are very well aware of the social construction of institutions of religion. That is why they do not claim to fully represent the church of God’s chosen and do not unequivocally claim membership in it. If human will is susceptible to error, so too must the

280 Interview, May 6, 2006.
human’s religious forms be. They do not refer to worship as ritual. Singing conceived of as ritual reduces it to enactment of form, or performance. Believers do not go to church on Sunday with the expectation that sacred experience will surely be achieved. In fact, the absence of transcendent sacred experience, “dragging a cat through a ditch” as Sister Swanson colorfully described it in relation to singing, serves as much to verify the reality of the sacred. Statements like “I don’t know what makes it that way” and “you don’t know why it comes” do not reflect ignorance on the part of believers. Rather, they attest to the unpredictability of the movement of the Spirit and the inability to contain the spirit in form, whether song or descriptions of singing. The inability to “know why it comes” and “what makes it that way” bolster sacred realities because despite unpredictability, the “Spirit feeling” is still felt.

In a manner related to what anthropologist Dell Hymes called the “breakthrough to performance,” believers transcend a frame of singing, as such, to a spiritual frame imbued with divine insight—eyes to see and ears to hear. While verbal and paralinguistic cues, such as a request for the first hymn of the day or the beginning of a hymn without a spoken preface, might signify to believers to invoke a frame of mind for worship, the “breakthrough” into experience with the sacred is impossible to observe from the outside and the experience is difficult to describe. It cannot be “observed” simply through attention to the form through which it is experienced. It must be felt in the moment of performance through participation. Not attendance at a service, but full participation through singing and attentive listening.

Sacred experience is spoken of by believers as feeling, a combination of the physical feeling of singing with the spiritual feeling of a closeness with God. Putting those feelings into words with any specificity is beyond the limitations of language, a point made by several believers. Sister Swanson said it explicitly.

281 1975.
“That’s one of those spiritual things that you can’t quite, “You can’t describe it. There’s no description for it. “It’s just, it makes you feel happy and sad, and the whole gamut of emotions at one time that you can’t can’t nail them down. “And you don’t know why it comes.”

This overflow of feeling correlates to the vastness of the sacred, in terms of experience and comprehension. Sister Swanson described the feeling of sacred experience as “the whole gamut of emotions at one time.” This is more than the human intellect can hold and hammer into logical shape. Elder Jackson prayed,

“Lord, would it please thee this morning that you might come and open our hearts. “Give us eyes to see, and ears to hear. We pray heavenly Father, that we would not only rightly divide the word of God, but we pray also, heavenly Father, that you would make our hearts receptive vessels to that which you sayeth.”

However, the sensual capabilities of the heart and the intellectual processing of the mind are limited in respect to the sacred. “Thou art with me…my cup runneth over,” read Elder Watson from the 23rd Psalm.

Sister Watson chose metaphor describe the rush of feeling during sacred experience. After she described getting the “spirit feeling”, I pressed further: “What does it mean to you to have that?” “That feeling?” she asked for clarification:

“It’s hard to explain.
“It’s just like

you’re not in this world.

You’re somewhere in between here and heaven.

I won’t say you’re in heaven.

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282 Interview May 6, 2006.

“But I’ve been lifted up so with a song.”

Further, sacred experience cannot be invoked by the performers with verbal or paralinguistic cues that make it known that a frame of worship is being established. The sacred cannot be framed, cannot be constructed, or competently achieved through action. It always lies just out of full grasp. Sister Watson describe sacred experience as somewhere in between here and heaven, not in heaven. Believing in God’s grace, the singers at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia churches act in hope that such a bridge between the sacred and secular will be provided for them, that they will dwell among one another in their church building and among the Spirit of the Lord in the sacred realm. The emergent sacred experience is felt and it is new each time.

In the previous chapter Sister Watson said, “you have a part in there.” Believers do not take themselves out of the equation. While ultimately any transcendent experience is imparted by the grace of God, singers recognize their part. Sister St. Clair told me when I asked her about different meanings in a hymn:

“I think, yes, sometimes you’re more in the spirit than others. And I think sometimes it means—

“It all depends on what kind of week you’ve had, maybe, that, you know, how you feel about a song.”

Believers bring themselves into the songs they sing, and the experience of singing changes from this perspective. When Sister Anderson said that “Amazing Grace” always means something to her, I was initially puzzled by the ambiguity. I am now realizing that it means different things on different occasions. Steven Feld writes, “Interpretive moves act roughly like a series of social processing conventions by locating, categorizing, associating, reflecting, and evaluating at and through moments of experience. Such conventions [which Feld means in a loosely defined way] do not fix a meaning; instead they focus some boundaries of emergent and

284 Interview November 5, 2005.

285 Interview, November 6, 2005.
fluid shifts in our attentional patterns as we foreground and background experience and
knowledge.” Each occasion represents the opportunity for new meaning, for expanded
understanding of the human condition. Each person I asked about this answered almost
precisely in the words of Sister St. Clair above. Lived experience is brought in and if singing in
the spirit and experiencing the sacred, meaning overflows the confines of the worship service to
transform meaning in the outside world.

Sister Anderson had been talking about her favorite song, “Alas and Did My Savior
Bleed,” and the experience of singing it—it touched a place in her heart, it “struck a note,” and
she loved the harmony of it. Sister Miller then followed with a few words on the overflow of
meaning.

“And it brings you down.
“Like you go through all the week, and you struggle and work and you strive and you
ride the highways, and you think, well, I’m riding high this week.
“Well, then you come in and sing that song talking about ‘a worm such as I.’
You come back to reality, to where you hit,

well, that’s where I really am.”

Elder Jackson said of the same hymn,

“Goodness gracious, it’s a composite of every,

every born again

child of God.

That’s where you once were and where you come from and how you still are, but
nonetheless

you’re a child of God.

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286 1984:10.

287 I temper this with Elder Jackson’s words in regard to human action and the will of God: “I get the idea that God
just kind of picks you up by the scruff of the neck and brings you anyway” (Sermon, February 13, 2005).

288 The opening stanza of the hymn reads:

Alas, and did my savior bleed,
And did my sovereign die;
Would be devote his sacred head
For such a worm as I. (as printed in the Old School Hymnal, 11th ed.)

289 Interview, September 18, 2005.
Believers are not merely performing for the sake of singing well, of displaying their musical competence. Rather, as Sister Miller’s comments express, any sense of competence or “riding high this week” erodes through singing the reflective words to a hymn like “Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed.” Consider Elder Jackson’s analysis of King David’s pleading words from Psalm 51:

“This is a Psalm of David.
“Look at the seventh verse. I’m going to deal with the seventh verse. He says, ‘Purge me with hyssup, and I shall be clean.
“‘Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.’
“‘Purge me with hyssup, and I shall be clean.
“‘Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.’ Purge me with hyssup. What does purge mean? It means to clean me out.
“CLEAN ME OUT! From the inside.
“From the heart. PURGE ME!
“WASH ME!
“CLEANSE ME!
Make me right.

“And the writer—the psalmist—doesn’t say, ‘Well, I’ll purge myself, and I’ll clean myself, and I’ll wash myself, and I’ll make things right.’ In fact, he’s saying, “God do these things for me because I cannot do them for myself.

“This is a psalm of David….
“…A PSALM IS A SONG, AND THIS IS A SONG OF A BROKEN-HEARTED MAN.
“Sister Pansy, I’m going to repeat myself just a time or two here if it’s alright.
“THIS IS A SONG, A PSALM, OF A BROKEN HEARTED MAN!

“HE CAN’T GET ANY LOWER!

“HE REALIZES THAT HE HAS SINNED!

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Interview, June 12, 2006.
“AND HE’S APPEALING TO GOD!

“HE IS DOWN AND OUT!
“HE IS AN
EMOTIONAL, A PHYSICAL, AND A SPIRITUAL WRECK!

“AND HERE IS A LESSON FOR EACH OF US:
“WE HAVE ALL BEEN IN THIS SHAPE AND WILL PROBABLY BE IN THIS SHAPE SOMETIME IN OUR LIVES!
“THERE IS A TIME IN OUR LIFE, AS HUMANS, WE UNDERGO THIS, AND WE SEEMINGLY CANNOT GET ANY LOWER, AND THE ONLY RE COURSE WE HAVE IS TO LOOK UPWARD TOWARD GOD FOR HELP!
“AND KING DAVID HERE, THOUGH HE BE A KING, IS PLEADING TO GOD!”

“HE’S SAYING, “CREATE WITHIN ME A CLEAN HEART!
“PURGE ME, CLEANSE ME, MAKE ME RIGHT!
“DRAW ME BACK TO YOU!
“RESTORE UNTO ME THAT JOY OF SALVATION!”

Despite feelings of worldly accomplishment or status, the weight of sin and the distance it creates between the world of human accomplishment and the world of the divine is so vast as to render the former slight, petty, and meaningless.

This type of expansion of meaning into the everyday lives of believers does not coalesce into the stereotypes of fatalism often ascribed through the misunderstandings of non-believers. The words to “Alas and Did My Savior Bleed” and Elder Jackson’s sermon are indeed humbling, but there is a thread of triumph binding them together. Despite one’s spiritual shortcomings, he or she is as eligible a candidate for salvation as another. When singing the hymn, believers bring their weekday lives into the church, meditate on them through song, and come away with new understandings.

These types of movements, of transcending the lived-in world for a glimpse of the sacred, and the meanings from that experience of transcending the immediate context to reorder

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291 Sermon, November 6, 2005. For clarification of this last phrase, Elder Jackson then explained, “And I want to point something out here: he didn’t say, ‘Restore unto me the salvation.’ He said, ‘Restore unto me the joy of my salvation.’ What’s the joy of it? I’ve not lost the salvation, but I’ve lost the joy of it.”
or otherwise affect interpretations of the lived-in world, constitute the real experiences with the sacred. This all-encompassing nature of sacred experience is what distinguishes it from ordinary performance. Peacock, using the examples of a theater actor and a priest, writes that the former can perform a role and step out of it while the latter, ideally at least, remains a priest in any context. Believers at Hollow Springs do not go to church and sing because the Bible tells them they should. Their belief in predestinated and limited atonement prevents any ambiguity in that regard. Why do they go then? Why do they sing with tears of joy trickling down their cheeks? They feel that need, that urge, and experiences with the sacred, especially those felt together among their sisters and brothers in hope, nourish and provide strength or “reinforcement,” to use Sister Swanson’s term. However, this is not merely a result of the singers’ mental states when singing or the act of singing, itself. Sister Swanson includes a receptive side to meaning creation: “They [hymns] mean different things to you on different occasions. Now you know, it may actually hit you. This Sunday it got you, and last Sunday it didn’t.” That is, meaning “may actually hit you” as the Spirit moves among the singers.

Through singing believers experience identities as members among God’s elect, a portion of the true church, which is not bound by denomination, ethnicity, community, town, city, state, or nation. It is a union of disparate hearts and minds felt, if only momentarily, above human carnality and the fallen world. Singing prepares the heart and mind of the individual—draws the believer into the spiritual realm amidst her sisters and brothers in Christ. The individual effort is put forth, woven amidst other such efforts, and returned to the individual as something more, a new performance. This release and return patterns the release and return of the experience of transcendence. There is movement, it is momentary, and there is the return.

292 1990.

293 Interview, May 6, 2006.
If believers are singing in the spirit and receiving the Spirit, they experience this spiritual harmony. “I don’t know, it sort of lifts you up,” said Sister Swanson.

“You feel light.
“And if the singing’s going well, and you feel like you’re singing well, then it just raises you up another level.
You know, you feel connected.
You feel—

“I don’t know there’s not a word for it.
“There’s just not a word in there that—

It’s just a feeling,
and it comes from somewhere deep.

It’s not a surface feeling.
It’s somewhere in there.

When the songs are touching a chord in you that you’re feeling particularly sensitive about at the time, then it makes you,

I don’t know, bubbly—[laughs]
if a song service can be bubbly.
You just sort of—
it wells up from inside.

“Now there are song services that make me cry, and I can’t sing if I cry…
“…But there are song services that do that,
but I prefer the ones that you just feel connected to, and that all of the voices connect and all of the music comes together and it brings the rafters.

“Does that make sense?”

294 Ibid.
Sister Swanson spoke of receiving reinforcement through the spiritual experience of worship. Elder Jackson described spiritual experience as “that place in and out of the storms….” Sister Anderson described it as “a moment in time.” Sister Watson describe it as “somewhere in between here and heaven.” Through experiences with the sacred, believers receive spiritual reinforcement in a place and time that draws meaning from here and from heaven into an interpretive and meditative sphere that invokes all the senses in its comprehension. Sometimes it “brings you down to where you really are.” Sometimes it “sort of lifts you up.” Sometimes “it’s like heaven’s doors open up.”\footnote{295 Interview, November 5, 2005.} Whichever the case, it can only minimally be rendered in words, which has been the hardest fact I have grappled with in writing an ethnographic account around it.

Reading Peacock’s article on sacred and profane performance in preparation for this work, I was perplexed by the fact that he immediately stated that the notion of sacred performance “is an oxymoron,” that the sacred cannot be performed, but then proceeded to discuss sacred performance.\footnote{296 1990.} It reminded me of my dilemma of how to integrate the useful aspects of theoretical and methodological conceptions of performance. I think Peacock is correct when writing that the sacred cannot be performed, and I think Elder Jackson is correct when he said, “No, when it comes from the church, I never see it being considered a
Yet I have continued to write about performance, emergence, and active expression instead of passive repetition. Performance does not ensure experiences with the sacred, but it is through the active expression of performance that believers sense and experience the emergence of the sacred. The overriding danger with invoking a term like performance is the tendency it carries toward elevating form over meaning. I put forth my best effort to recognize the limits of secular cultural theory in describing or explaining experiences with the sacred. I hope that any effacing of the spiritual beauty of singing at Hollow Springs and Philadelphia Churches that appears in this text is regarded as a reflection of my deficiencies as a writer and thinker rather than my intentions. My attempt was to negotiate a place where secular theory and spiritual interpretations might mutually benefit one another in the task of ethnographic description.

Spiritual experience through singing is the result of an emergent process of communication of self and praises to God, revelations of meaning through meditative action and divine inspiration, and expanding understandings of the sacred and the human condition. Anticipated sacred experiences, what Elder Jackson called “closeness,” are perceived by social actors acting in a context particular to each occasion. Through the simultaneity of singing and listening, believers engage in a complex of interpretive processes whereby they communicate their spiritual and lived experiences and partake in the experiences of their spiritual sisters and brothers. They invest themselves personally in the social community they have formed through years of worship together building upon that of generations of their forbears.

Their singing practice is not a reflection of the social experience, however, but is a crucial process in an interpretive and reflexive cycle of meaning creation, reception, and communication through which they build and maintain the social experience. Experiential

297 Interview June 12, 2006.
connections are made between social and sacred realms. While these realms are separated by a gulf of difference—human carnality on one hand and divine perfection on the other—sacred experience provides a bridge across which social community is interpreted and shaped by the sacred, and thus the sacred, or more correctly the concept as manifest through doctrine, is perceived and interpreted through the social experience of worship. This cycle of interpretation and meaning constructions is a continual feedback loop in which believers form their community around their common belief in the basic principles of their doctrines. These doctrines, while allowing room for individual and differential interpretations, outline a basic concept of sacred community, the true church of God’s elect, the body of believers predestined for salvation in heaven and immortal glory. While the sacred itself is fixed, established before time, believers’ comprehension of it and its relation to their lives is not. Their spiritual understandings are constantly evolving. In song, believers engage the doctrines of their faith and put them into motion, whereby lived experience is framed by notions of the sacred, which is framed by doctrine, which is framed by experience.

Singing is personalized, and hymns provide a text through which church members can infuse their feelings and thoughts with the body of spiritual messages circulating within the church building on a given Sunday. Singing is an opportunity for individuals to share their worship, their hope, directly with one another. They meet on common ground with all the reassurances and stringencies of their faith. They meet as fellow believers, and they meet as family and friends. In that sense there is a sort of group identity and community representation taking place. However, it is not a ritualistic reinforcement of themselves as God’s chosen, and thus a sacralizing of their social community as the sociology of Emile Durkheim would suggest. In fact, to imply that humans can construct a ritual procedure to effect any assurance in the individual denies Primitive Baptists’ doctrines of sovereign grace and total human depravity. For
Primitive Baptists, ritual does not cause effects; the movement of the Holy Spirit does. Singing, as a believing process, prepares the heart and mind of the individual—draws the individual into the spiritual realm. If bestowed with the wonders of the sacred during song, the individual believer meets her sisters and brothers in Christ, however fleeting the moment is.
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