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SHOUTING METHODISTS!

Some early Methodists were known for their noise. But was it all just emotional excess or a genuine release of the Holy Spirit?

One name commonly applied to early nineteenth century Methodists was "shouting Methodists" - name Methodists were glad to accept and make their own

What was meant by the term, "shouting Methodists"? At the very least, it meant that Methodists were a noisy lot, interrupting the preacher with ejaculations of "Praise the Lord," "Hallelujah," and "Amen." Alexander Campbell declared that the Methodist church could not live without her cries of "Glory! Glory! Glory!" And he reported that "her periodical Amens dispossess demons, storm heaven, shut the gates of hell, and drive Satan from the camp."

But Methodist noise was not limited to ejaculations. Singing and clapping, groaning and crying, praying and exhorting, contributed to the din. In one Methodist hymn book, dated 1807, the initial impression of a convert is reported:

The Methodists were preaching like thunder all about.

At length I went amongst them, to hear them groan and shout.

I thought they were distracted, such fools I'd never seen.

They'd stamp and clap and tremble, and wail and cry and scream.

It is clear that "shout" was a prominent part of the Methodist vocabulary. Nowhere is this more evident than in the refrains of their spiritual songs. "Shout, shout, we're gaining ground," they sang. "We'll shout old Satan's kingdom down." The word would appear in casual conversations. An aged person, for example, would rejoice at being still able "to shout," and a death would be recorded: "She went off shouting."

What did it mean to "shout"? "Shouting" was never mere noise. "Shouting" was neither preaching nor exhorting. Exhorting was a noisy performance, but the word had a technical meaning that was not broad enough to include even the "action sermon." Nor was "shouting" praying, not even when praying became a din as a congregation sought to "pray down" a sinner or to contend in prayer for the souls of the penitent.

"Shouting" was praise or, as it was often called, rejoicing. Both its practice, including the clapping of hands and its meaning was partly shaped by Old Testament texts (for example, Joshua 6:5-20; 1 Samuel 4:5-7; Psalm 32:11; Isaiah 42: 11-13). Initially, "shouting" was probably no more than uttering ejaculations of praise. But it quickly became, in addition to these ejaculations, a type of singing, a type of song, a "shout song," or just a "shout."

If a "shout" was an ejaculation of praise and a song of rejoicing, it also became the name of a religious service, a service of praise, a praise meeting. People spoke of going to a "preaching," of going to a "class meeting," and of going to a "shout", a praise meeting. "When we get home," they sang, "we'll have a shout in glory."

Finally, for some, a "shout" became a dance, a shuffling of the feet, a jerking of the head, a clapping of the hands, and perhaps an occasional leap. Most often it was a circular march, a "ring shout." Thus Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines "shout" as "to give expression to religious ecstasy, often in vigorous, rhythmic movements (as shuffling, jumping, jerking) specifically, to take part in a ring shout."

The term "shouting" suggests confusion, and this was the initial impression one gained of Methodist meetings. Devereux Jarratt, a Methodist himself prior to the separation of 1784, reported of a Methodist gathering in 1776 that "the assembly appeared to be all in confusion, and must seem to one at a little distance more like a drunken rabble than the worshippers of God." The development of a specialised vocabulary with highly technical meanings, on the other hand, suggests that there were patterns of group activity in the midst of the confusion, a degree of order and method in the apparent madness.