

The Good Death:
Expectations concerning death and the afterlife
among Evangelical Nonconformists in England 1830-1880

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I, Mary Riso, declare that this thesis has been composed by me and that the work which it embodies is my work and has not been included in another thesis.

Mary Riso, 30 September 2013

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Abstract

This thesis examines six factors that helped to shape beliefs and expectations about death among evangelical Nonconformists in England from 1830 down to 1880: the literary conventions associated with the denominational magazine obituaries that were used as primary source material, theology, social background, denominational variations, Romanticism and the last words and experiences of the dying. The research is based on an analysis of 1,200 obituaries divided evenly among four evangelical Nonconformist denominations: the Wesleyan Methodists, the Primitive Methodists, the Congregationalists and the Baptists.

The study is distinctive in four respects. First, the statistical analysis according to three time periods (the 1830s, 1850s and 1870s), close reading and categorisation of a sample this large are unprecedented and make it possible to observe trends among Nonconformists in mid-nineteenth-century England. Second, it evaluates the literary construct of the obituaries as a four-fold formula consisting of early life, conversion, the living out of the faith and the death narrative as a tool for understanding them as authentic windows into evangelical Nonconformist experience. Third, the study traces two movements that inform the changing Nonconformist experience of death: the social shift towards middle-class respectability and the intellectual shift towards a broader Evangelicalism. Finally, the thesis considers how the varying experiences of the dying person and the observers and recorders of the death provide different perspectives.

These features inform the primary argument of the thesis, which is that expectations concerning death and the afterlife among evangelical Nonconformists in England from 1830 down to 1880 changed as reflections of larger shifts in Nonconformity towards middle-class respectability and a broader Evangelicalism. This transformation was found to be clearly revealed when considering the tension in Nonconformist allegiance to both worldly and

spiritual matters. While the last words of the dying pointed to a timeless experience that placed hope in the life to come, the obituaries as compiled by the observers of the death and by the obituary authors and editors reflected changing attitudes towards death and the afterlife among nineteenth-century evangelical Nonconformists that looked increasingly to earthly existence for the fulfilment of hopes.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:

THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF EVANGELICAL NONCONFORMIST DEATH

The Reverend J. Glyde was born at Exeter on the 1st of January, 1808. It was his frequent custom to refer to the blessings of a pious ancestry, and to claim descent from three ministers ejected in the time of Charles II. His parents were distinguished for piety; the father being a deacon of one of the Independent churches of Exeter, and his mother an eminent example of tenderness, virtue, and consecration to God ... Mr. Glyde's conviction was that 'where a religious education has been enjoyed, and where, from infancy, it has been the aim of parental anxiety to keep the conscience awake, and to promote religious impressions, it is often impossible to fix the precise period of the consecration of the heart to God'. Nor did he know the exact moment of his own conversion, - in this he resembled Richard Baxter, and other eminent servants of Christ.

He received his sentence of death with much composure; ... yet his constant desire, with humble reference to God's will, was to be permitted to resume his favourite work – the work in which he expressed himself to have been so 'happy'. 'Oh how unfit I am for the company of such men as Whitefield and Wesley, Baxter and Owen!' A friend asked him – 'On what are you resting your hopes?' 'On Jesus dying, living, reigning! ... Jesus Christ the crucified – the cross! The cross!'

Piety was, in his estimation, not a mere system of orthodox theological belief, nor a consciousness, more or less developed, of certain states of religious feeling and experience, but a real spiritual life, energizing in every thought, and manifesting itself in every circumstance and relation in which humanity can be placed. Religion was not to be a thing for Sundays and solemn occasions only. In the market and the exchange, in relations between employers and employed, between representatives and electors, in the social circle, around the domestic hearth, the same principle was unremittingly inculcated.¹

This excerpt from the memoir of Jonathan Glyde, a Congregational minister of Bradford in Yorkshire, who died on 15 December 1854 at the age of 46 from exhaustion due to his ministerial labours, is an example of the richness of evangelical Nonconformist obituaries and memoirs as primary source material in several respects. It follows a pattern that is evident in almost all the memoirs and obituaries analysed for this study, one which represents evangelical conviction as a continuum from birth to death encompassing the early

¹ *The Evangelical Magazine* [hereafter *EM*] 1855, pp. 121-27 (Rev Jonathan Glyde).

life, conversion, living out of the Christian faith and deathbed piety of the subject. Further, the reference to a conversation makes it clear that death was an experience that was shared between the dying person and those who observed and recorded the event. Finally, it provides a sense of how the account of an individual's encounter with death could open a door into a rapidly changing society, one in which religion touched on a complex set of experiences encompassing social class, theology, culture, emotion and spirituality. In *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey, 1825-1875* (1976) James Obelkevich states that 'The secret of religious history is social history.'² The present study, as social history, may be one confirmation of that assertion as it attempts to contribute to the understanding of the history of Nonconformity in the mid-nineteenth century.

Four evangelical Nonconformist denominations are considered here and they must be distinguished from the evangelical Anglicans and those Nonconformist denominations that were not evangelical, such as the Unitarians. The Nonconformists were those Protestants who separated from the Established Church, beginning in the mid-seventeenth century.³ Among these early 'Dissenters' were the Congregationalists (or Independents) and the Baptists. These two denominations belonged to the 'Old Dissent'. The 'New Dissent' was comprised of the Methodists, a new group that emerged from the Established Church as a result of the Evangelical Revival in the 1740s. The two Methodist denominations that are central to the present study are the Wesleyan Methodists and the Primitive Methodists, who formed in 1811, holding to Methodism's revivalist roots, which were being abandoned by the Wesleyans. The Congregationalists and the Baptists were among those Old Dissenters who were affected by the Evangelical Revival, as noted in the *Methodist Magazine* of 1814. While some Old Dissenters 'had little but the form of godliness ... all was not lost ... The holy flame

² J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey, 1825-1875* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. ix.

³ D. W. Bebbington, *Victorian Nonconformity* (Bangor: Headstart History Papers, 1992), pp. 2-7.

is burning, we may trust it is increasing in strength and clearness ... Holy Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists (one in Christ), unite to teach, to warn all they can.⁴ These denominations of the Old and the New Dissent were Evangelicals.

Evangelicalism has been defined in a variety of ways. The revival that started in Britain in the 1740s under the leadership of John Wesley and George Whitefield sought to breathe new life into an ancient faith that had become remote and nominal for some eighteenth-century adherents. Evangelical religion was ‘vital’ in that it was necessary for life and it was based on personal experience of an encounter with God. In *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (1989) David Bebbington presents a ‘quadrilateral’ that, according to this author, identifies the four key elements of Evangelicalism: conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism.⁵ To be evangelical was to have had a conversion from life without God to life with God at the centre, to live out that faith through service and evangelism, to believe in the Bible as the word of God and to trust in the crucifixion of Christ for salvation and eternal life.

Historical assessments of Evangelicalism in Britain have paid particular attention to its intersection with the broader culture. This is a reasonable focus in several respects. First, the nature of evangelical religion was such that it called its followers to be active in the world but to give spiritual matters priority: their primary allegiance was to Christ and their true home in heaven. This created an inevitable tension between evangelical commitments in this life and hopeful anticipation of the life to come. They were called to remain separate from the world’s temptations and pleasures, but also to renew the world for God’s glory. The

⁴ *Methodist Magazine* xxxvii, 376, in W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), p. 70.

⁵ D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 2-17.

evangelical movement in nineteenth-century Britain played a significant role in its identity as a Christian nation.

Second, between 1830 and 1880, evangelical virtue was integrated increasingly with Victorian values. Two terms that will receive considerable attention throughout this study in relation to evangelical Nonconformist social mobility and self-identity in the period are ‘middle class’ and ‘respectable’. One of the best discussions of middle-class respectability in the Victorian era appears in Geoffrey Best’s *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851-1875* (1972).⁶ In *The Dissenters* (1995) Michael Watts refers to the obsession with respectability that took hold of the middle- and upper-working classes by the middle of the nineteenth century.⁷ Indeed, scholarship pertaining to what it meant to be both respectable and middle class in Victorian England, and to evangelical Nonconformist aspirations towards respectability and expanded activity within the middle classes during the nineteenth century is extensive.⁸

⁶ G. Best *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851-1875* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), pp. 250-85.

⁷ M. R. Watts, *The Dissenters: the expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 595.

⁸ Studies related to evangelical Nonconformist social aspirations and mobility also include C. Binfield, *So Down to Prayers: Studies in English Nonconformity, 1780-1920* (London: J. M. Dent Ltd, 1977); J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey, 1825-1875*; W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850* (New York, Schocken Books, 1973); C. D. Field, ‘The Social structure of English Methodism: eighteenth-twentieth centuries,’ *British Journal of Sociology* 28/2, 1977, pp. 199-223. Works that provide broad yet in-depth investigations into the social history of the period include M. Anderson, ed., *British Population History: from the Black Death to the present day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); M. J. Daunton, *Progress and Poverty: an economic and social history of Britain, 1700-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); R. Floud and D. McClosley, eds., *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, second edition, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). All of these works contribute to an understanding of evangelical Nonconformist social mobility, hopes, life span and attitudes towards death in the middle of the nineteenth century in England.

In the context of the obituaries, class can often be defined by occupation. Middle-class professions could include everything from bankers, lawyers and ministers to shopkeepers, merchants and civil servants. One way of distinguishing the middle classes from the labouring classes is that the labouring classes worked with their hands in such occupations as factory work, mining, sewing or agricultural labour. Although words such as prosperous and successful can point towards a middle-class subject, middle-class respectability was related more to social acceptance in one's chosen sphere than to money. One could become middle class through the proper education, occupation and connections: and this was the case for a number of the obituary subjects considered here. Indeed, training for the ministry was one way of moving into middle-class status.

However, it was easier to become respectable than to become middle-class because respectability was not dependent on success or prosperity. Rather, respectability was characterised by personal responsibility, determination, self-discipline, thrift, generosity of spirit and sacrifice. Respectability could not be separated from the energy and optimism of the industrialised world, or from assuming the responsibilities that came with living in such a society. Glyde's 1855 memoir states that he believed that 'Religion was not a thing for Sundays and solemn occasions only. In the market and exchange, in relations between employers and employed, between representatives and electors, in the social circle, around the domestic hearth, the same principle was unremittingly inculcated.'⁹ He was a man of his age and his faith was part of politics, business, family and social life. Geoffrey Rowell's exceptional insight in *Hell and the Victorians* (1974) about the development between 1830 and 1880 of 'an immortality of self-realization' over 'an immortality of salvation' informs any consideration of trends concerning death in that time period.¹⁰ These phrases contrast the

⁹ *EM* 1855, pp. 121-27 (Rev Jonathan Glyde).

¹⁰ G. Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: a study of the nineteenth century theological controversies concerning eternal punishment and the future life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 15.

soul as identified by its potential for growth and the soul as identified by its need for rescue from sin. This transition, closely related to the Christian belief in persevering through suffering and to the doctrine of sanctification, was also in keeping with the Victorian belief in self-help and character building. The overlap between evangelical beliefs and Victorian virtues contributed to the Nonconformists' integration with the larger culture.

Finally, Evangelicalism was influenced by the spirit of the age – or two spirits of the long era during which Evangelicalism was a dominant force: the Enlightenment and Romanticism. In *Methodism: empire of the Spirit* (2005) David Hempton refers to the tension from the earliest days of Methodism between the Enlightenment and enthusiasm, between the head and the heart.¹¹ This tension mirrors the ongoing influence of these cultural movements. On the one hand, Evangelicalism was a reasonable, thoughtful and practical religion. It attempted to find a balance between justification (peace with God through the death of Jesus for sin) and sanctification (growth in holiness and likeness to Jesus) in that it valued both the internal life of the spirit and the working out of the faith in terms of study, mission and ministry. As David Bebbington states, ‘Reason, not emotion, had been the lodestar of the Evangelicals.’¹² On the other hand, evangelical religion concerned the renewed life of the soul. Jonathan Glyde’s view that ‘piety was ... a real spiritual life, energizing in every thought, and manifesting itself in every circumstance’¹³ captures some of this vitality. It ‘revived’ not only the existing Nonconformist denominations, but also the Church of England. Vital religion was experiential, emphasised personal relationship with God and stressed the importance of conversion to a new life. This energy and subjectivity of the life of the spirit is also mirrored in Romanticism, an atmosphere that stirred within western culture for more than a century. Like Evangelicalism, the Romantic spirit valued individual

¹¹ D. Hempton, *Methodism: empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 206.

¹² Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, p. 81.

¹³ *EM* 1855, pp. 121-27 (Rev Jonathan Glyde).

experience and passionate, deeply held convictions. Head and heart could not be separated: they existed side by side in evangelical religion against the historical backdrop of the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

Contemporary Perspectives on Nonconformity

General studies have explored this intersection of faith and culture along some intriguing paths. In *Evangelicalism and Culture* (1984) Doreen Rosman considers evangelical and particularly Nonconformist engagement with novels, poetry, music, entertainment, scholarship and other aspects of culture between 1790 and 1830. She notes during this period conflict between the desire of evangelicals to remain separate from a world that was the devil's territory and a viewpoint, still somewhat rare before 1830, that included the anticipation that Jesus could return at any moment, expecting to find the world well-prepared for his coming.¹⁴ Subsequently premillennial pessimism began to eclipse some aspects of postmillennial optimism, but optimism continued to persist leading to aspirations of creating heaven on earth connected to signs of God's favour such as material prosperity. Such ideas continued throughout the nineteenth century. In *The Dissolution of Dissent* (1987) Mark Johnson refers to a comment made in 1866 by R. W. Dale, the Congregational minister at Carrs Lane in Birmingham, that 'the recovery of the whole world from idolatry, from vice, from atheism, from unbelief, will be accompanied with a condition of material prosperity, of intellectual culture, of social and political freedom, unexampled in human history'.¹⁵ The potential connection between godly behaviour in this world and earthly rewards, with its focus on the secular realm, is crucial to a consideration of death in the nineteenth century.

¹⁴ D. M. Rosman, *Evangelicalism and Culture* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 61-62.

¹⁵ R. W. Dale, *Discourses Delivered on Special Occasions*, 1866, p. 231, in M. D. Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent, 1850-1918* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1987), p. 52.

Rosman also considers the movement towards respectability among the evangelical Nonconformists in the hundred years since the eighteenth-century Revival, and how this engendered a further conflict in that the dilution of Evangelicalism was feared to be the result of their acceptance of and by the culture.¹⁶ Further, she shows that the Nonconformist reader was familiar with secular literature, including some of the more conservative Romantic writers such as Southey and Scott.¹⁷ Rosman's study provides essential background for the present study, which picks up in 1830, where she leaves off. The tension between this world and the next, the subjects of social respectability, a broader Evangelicalism and the engagement of Nonconformity with the spirit engendered by Romanticism in the high Victorian era are worth exploration. They are topics that are of particular importance to a consideration of death, which might be considered the final battleground for the resolution of a tension between this life and the afterlife.

The matter of evangelical activity in the world – its motivation and its outworking – is closely examined by David Bebbington. As has been noted, activism forms part of the 'quadrilateral' defining Evangelicalism.¹⁸ Activism followed conversion and took the form of efforts to spread and live out the gospel through evangelism, philanthropy, ministerial labours and even politics. This direct connection between conversion and activism, and the myriad forms that the activity took is an accurate representation of the evangelical spirit. Activity is a central feature of the obituaries, and the changing nature of such 'work' and its relationship to the prioritisation of eternal life is a theme explored as part of the life story recounted by them.

Ian Bradley's *The Call to Seriousness* (1976), though primarily about evangelical Anglicans, also identifies activity in the world as one of the hallmarks of Evangelicalism,

¹⁶ Rosman, *Evangelicalism and Culture*, p. 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 174-84.

¹⁸ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 2-17.

along with a sense of personal responsibility and the embracing of vital religion. He makes the central connection for the Evangelical between personal responsibility and relationship with Christ, referring to the Victorian conviction that ‘It was ... just a perpetual call to seriousness – to a sense of personal responsibility; taking the form of an appeal to be like Christ, to trust Christ, to be near Christ.’¹⁹ Bradley further notes that although the evangelicals could not be otherworldly (if they were, it would be impossible to be useful) they were called to be set apart.²⁰ So this sense of being ‘in the world but not of it’ is again identified as a key aspect of evangelical life in the nineteenth century. That it was also a key aspect of death and dying is one of the contentions of the present study. The extent to which one’s activity in life was of central importance at the deathbed will be considered.

In *The Death of Christian Britain: understanding secularisation, 1800-2000* (2001)

Callum Brown connects conversion with the active work of Evangelicalism and identifies both as aspects in the democratisation – and the privatisation - of faith. Brown correctly notes that this privatisation – designating a faith that is an increasingly personal encounter with God – was an important feature of medieval spirituality, but that activity was a dominant feature of nineteenth-century Christianity.²¹ Obituaries are a key resource for continuing the exploration of this balance of personal experience and outward activity - and the movement towards or away from a medieval conception of what constituted a good faith and a good death.

Bradley notes that the success of Evangelicalism, with its focus on personal responsibility and participation in the affairs of the world, exactly suited the industrial age.²²

¹⁹ T. R. Birks, *A Memoir of the Reverend E. Bickersteth* (1852), I, 39, in I. Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: the evangelical impact on the Victorians* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1976), p. 18.

²⁰ Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness*, pp. 18, 19, 29-30.

²¹ C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: understanding secularisation, 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 35-37

²² Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness*, pp. 32-33.

According to Brown, personal responsibility and self-reliance were mirrored in both the capitalist economy of industrialisation and in its spiritual parallel – Evangelicalism.²³ While a connection can certainly be made between personal responsibility and vital religion, and between self-reliance and capitalism, it does not necessarily follow that a direct connection can be made between a capitalist economy and Evangelicalism. Personal responsibility and self-reliance are not exactly the same thing. However, a case can be made for an evangelical tension between self-help and the impossibility, due to human depravity, of helping oneself. The relationship between human endeavour, material rewards and vital religion, then, is an especially fruitful avenue of exploration for the present project because of the evangelical tendency to connect prosperity with God’s favour, particularly during the high Victorian era. The recognition of prosperity could be a delicate matter for the obituary authors, but inevitably they found a way to sanctify the prosperity of the deceased.

Brown also refers to the importance of the Enlightenment for Evangelicalism, making the astute observation that vital religion itself became rationalised and a field of investigation²⁴ in a variety of ways, from the study of the Bible to tracking the success of evangelistic efforts.²⁵ One of the most extensive considerations of the Enlightenment in relation to Evangelicalism is Bebbington’s argument that Evangelicalism began in the 1740s with the Evangelical Revival and that many of its characteristics such as experimentalism, human benevolence, optimism and the assurance associated with human knowledge were closely related to those of the Enlightenment, making it a fruit of that period rather than a conservative reaction against it.²⁶ *The Advent of Evangelicalism: exploring historical continuities* (2008) presents a collection of essays that discuss Bebbington’s argument. Some

²³ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, pp. 35-37.

²⁴ Perhaps the most striking example of this rational study of religion is the *Census of Great Britain, 1851*.

²⁵ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, p. 38.

²⁶ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 57-74.

scholars such as Ian Shaw and Gary Williams maintain that the Evangelical Revival was a renewal or a restoration of Reformation and Puritan principles, and thus was not a new phenomenon. They emphasise the continuity of Protestant history, placing the Evangelical Revival on that trajectory and claiming that the Reformation and Puritanism were authentically evangelical. Others, such as Bruce Hindmarsh and Michael Haykin, take a more moderate view claiming that there were aspects of historical continuity in the Evangelical Revival combined with features that were indeed unusual, setting it apart from the rest of Protestant history.²⁷ The debate is an important one for the present study because it not only informs the obituary content but relates to the extent to which the evangelical Nonconformist experience of death represents something new or is the continuation of a tradition. Moreover, the spirit of the Enlightenment is reflected in many of the Nonconformist obituaries: they are optimistic in tone, based on experimental religion, feature acts of benevolence and place hope in assurance of salvation. Indeed, it is the theme of optimism that introduces some of the most intriguing questions based on obituary content. With the passing years, what were the subjects optimistic about? Was it their prospects in this life or their anticipation of the life to come?

The larger question is whether the primary features of the evangelical Nonconformist death narratives of the nineteenth century, like the conversion narratives discussed by Bruce Hindmarsh in his *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative* (2008),²⁸ reflect continuity with previous centuries or are more in keeping with Evangelicalism as a relatively new phenomenon. Answering this question will help to reveal the extent to which the evangelical

²⁷ M. A. G. Haykin and K. J. Stewart, eds., *The Advent of Evangelicalism: exploring historical continuities* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), pp. 322-23, 374, 344, 59-60.

²⁸ D. B. Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Nonconformist experience of death was defined by its secular and specifically nineteenth-century context.

Thus Evangelicalism cannot be separated from the larger culture. One of the most revealing tests of this conclusion is the potential influence of Romanticism on evangelical Nonconformity, and more specifically on views of death and the afterlife. In *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), M. H. Abrams introduces a pivotal insight to the theme when he argues that the Romantic artists secularised traditional theological ideas that had been part of Judaeo-Christian culture for centuries.²⁹ Moreover, in *A Companion to Romanticism* (1998) Mary Wedd suggests that Romantic writers would have assumed biblical knowledge on the part of their readers.³⁰

Those scholars who have explored the relationship between Protestant theology and death in the nineteenth century have focused largely on the influence of the larger culture, particularly the Romantic spirit, on beliefs about heaven and hell. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang's *Heaven: a history* (2001) provides a rich account of the similarities and differences between Protestant theology and Romanticism as they engaged with death. They explain that Romanticism rejected the heaven of the reformers that had the worship of God at its centre and sought to humanise it, making it a place of social relations, reunions and the continuation and fulfilment of love. Just as service, activity and progress were highly regarded by the Victorians in their day-to-day life on earth, so the deceased continued to be employed when they moved from this life to the next. The eternal nature of human love and progress became fully entrenched in the nineteenth century.³¹ On his deathbed, Jonathan

²⁹ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: tradition and revolution in Romantic literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971). This theme is woven throughout Abrams' work; however, see especially Chapter One, 'This is our high argument,' pp. 19-70.

³⁰ M. Wedd, 'Literature and Religion,' in D. Wu, ed., *A Companion to Romanticism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 63.

³¹ C. McDannell and B. Lang, *Heaven: a history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 249-75.

Glyde's 'constant desire was to resume his favourite work – the work in which he expressed himself to have been so "happy"'.³² It is argued that during the nineteenth century service and education replaced worship as the primary activity of the Protestant heaven, and that working in heaven also reflected the Victorian disdain for the idle. McDannell and Lang's conclusions about this fundamental shift in perceptions of heaven during the nineteenth century – particularly as regards the replacement of God with loved ones at heaven's centre - and the place they give to Romanticism in that shift, are vitally important for understanding death in the period under consideration.

These conclusions are echoed by other scholars. In *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (1990) Michael Wheeler argues that by the second third of the nineteenth century the influence of Romanticism on views on death, theology and literature was profound.³³ The fiction of mid-century reflects the changing theology outlined by McDannell and Lang, including God as friend and companion, reunion in heaven and heaven as a beautiful destination. Almost the last words of Helen Burns to Jane Eyre are these: 'I am sure there is a future state; I believe God is good; I can resign my immortal part to Him without any misgiving ... God is my father; God is my friend; I love Him; I believe He loves me.'³⁴ *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, and its author Charlotte Brontë was the daughter of an evangelical clergyman. Helen's perception of God is as father and friend; she trusts in her relationship with him and her conviction of continued life after death is unwavering. Twenty years later blatant doubt is expressed as Elizabeth Gaskell, the author of *Wives and Daughters* (1866) and the wife of a Unitarian minister, has Squire Hamley cry out at the loss of his son: 'I do try to say God's will be done, sir ... but it is harder to be resigned

³² *EM* 1855, pp. 121-27 (Rev Jonathan Glyde).

³³ M. Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 25-68.

³⁴ C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Random House, 1943), p. 58. (Originally published 1847)

than happy people think.’³⁵ By way of contrast, when Jane Austen, the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, wrote *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Mansfield Park* (1814), both of which contain scenes of near fatal illness, she did not feel the need to include explicit references to God, the soul or heaven.³⁶ Geoffrey Rowell explains that by the 1870s traditional arguments for immortality such as those based on the universality of belief, the testimony of the conscience or moral considerations no longer carried weight, and notes Mark Pattison’s comment in an 1872 Metaphysical Society paper that in the eighteenth century ‘the soul was not thought of as an assumption; it counted as a fact’ whereas at the time of his writing anyone who wished to speak of the soul could only do so after ‘a voluminous preamble’.³⁷ The contrast between the Georgian and the Victorian eras is striking.

In *Death in England: an illustrated history* (1999) Pat Jalland notes that beginning in the 1850s hell was represented increasingly as the absence of God while heaven was a place where loved ones were reunited.³⁸ In the same volume Julie Rugg relates Romanticism to a respect for individual experience that dominated most of the nineteenth century. She reflects on the effect the Romantic emphasis on the individual and continuation of human love and relationships exerted on Christian theology where the anticipation of heavenly reunions replaced what was at times the threat of hell used by evangelical preachers. Rugg agrees with McDannell and Lang that the worship of God in heaven was no longer central; heaven was the place where people met again after long separations and enjoyed eternity together. She also sees a connection between Romanticism and Evangelicalism as both emphasising individual experience.³⁹ This view is particularly relevant for the influence of the Romantic

³⁵ E. Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 557 (Originally published 1866)

³⁶ J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: The Folio Society, 1975), Chapter 7. (Originally published 1811); J. Austen, *Mansfield Park* (London: The Folio Society, 1975), pp. 341-45. (Originally published 1814)

³⁷ M. Pattison, ‘The Argument for a future life’ (Metaphysical Society Papers, xxv), p. 4 and *passim* in Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, p. 4.

³⁸ P. Jalland, ‘Victorian death and its decline: 1850-1918,’ P. C. Jupp, and C. Gittings, eds., *Death in England: an illustrated history* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 235-37.

³⁹ J. Rugg, ‘From reason to regulation: 1760-1850,’ Jupp, and Gittings, eds., *Death in England*, pp. 210-15.

spirit on how death and the afterlife were viewed by people during the period under consideration.

Perhaps the most comprehensive work on theology as it relates to the Victorian conception of death and the afterlife is Geoffrey Rowell's *Hell and the Victorians*. Rowell's focus is on the theological debate over the everlasting punishment of the wicked and the immortality of the soul. Rowell refers to the waning impact, particularly in the 1870s, of traditional arguments for immortality and the increasing popularity of the doctrine of conditional immortality and evolutionary theory. Several other developments contributed to doubts about hell and eternal punishment: changing ideas about the punishment of criminals with a new emphasis on deterrence and reformation, and a vision of heaven as a place of progress rather than static perfection. Rowell suggests that the nineteenth century was characterised by a more personal understanding of Christianity, owed partly to the subjectivism of the Romantic spirit. He argues that the theology of death cannot be considered apart from cultural influences and that there were discernible theological shifts that influenced expectations concerning death and the afterlife, and must as a result have influenced how people lived.⁴⁰ His assessment of changing Victorian expectations concerning the afterlife is directly relevant to how these expectations are communicated in the obituaries. McDannell and Lang, Wheeler, Rowell, Jalland and Rugg are in general agreement on the theological shifts with regard to death that took place during the nineteenth century, and on the influence of the Romantic spirit and other cultural developments of the period. However, there is some question as to whether Nonconformist experience was in close agreement with these cultural trends or whether there are ways in which the Nonconformists stood apart.

⁴⁰ G. Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*.

Some historians, Mark Hopkins in *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation* (2004),⁴¹ Mark Johnson in *The Dissolution of Dissent* (1987),⁴² and Willis B. Glover in *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (1954)⁴³ among them, maintain that theology did not have a central place in the Evangelical Revival, and that evangelical theology was ill-equipped to face the challenges raised by science, biblical criticism and changing beliefs regarding hell and the nature of God. This conclusion is a reasonable one considering the extent to which Evangelicalism accommodated itself to these challenges, and the tendency to place a high value on experience of God as leading to genuine change of life and consequently as an arbiter of truth. Mark Johnson notes particularly the effect that the embracing of a moderate Calvinism as a result of the Evangelical Revival – as opposed to the strict Calvinism of their Puritan forebears - had on Congregational doctrine.⁴⁴ However, in the specific context of death, the Nonconformist obituaries provide evidence that theology had a prominent place at the deathbed and played an important role in facing this greatest challenge. The basic tenets of evangelical theology (among them the necessity of conversion, the atonement, sanctification, personal experience of God and eternal life) are constitutive elements of Nonconformist death. When a friend asked Jonathan Glyde in 1855 – “On what are you resting your hopes?” he replied with conviction “On Jesus dying, living, reigning! ... Jesus Christ the crucified – the cross! The cross!”⁴⁵ Whether evangelical Nonconformist theology was adequate to the task of meeting the challenges to belief that gathered momentum in the 1860s is a subject for another study. However, whether Nonconformists were continuing to call on their evangelical theological

⁴¹ M. Hopkins, *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation: evangelical and liberal theologies in Victorian England* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), pp. 1-5.

⁴² Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent, 1850-1918*, pp. xv-xvii and pp. 296-98.

⁴³ W. B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Independent Press, 1954), pp. 16ff, 285.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent*, pp. 13-14.

⁴⁵ *EM* 1855, pp. 121-27 (Rev Jonathan Glyde).

convictions at the point of death down to 1880 will be addressed in the course of our investigation.

Any observable shifts in theological emphasis in the obituaries may have been partly the result of the increase in theological training among ministers. In *The Changing Shape of English Nonconformity, 1825-1925* (1999) Dale Johnson considers how the education of ministers affected evangelical standards, particularly in the areas of the atonement, language about God and biblical criticism. Johnson accurately notes that both the character of the ministry and Evangelicalism itself were transformed, becoming more tentative and more open to change. He explains that teachers at colleges such as Spring Hill, established by the Congregationalists in Birmingham in 1838, were capable of shaping thought.⁴⁶ Mark Johnson agrees, paying particular attention to the Congregational colleges of the 1870s and providing an outstanding evaluation of what R. W. Dale termed the New Evangelicalism, which blurred the lines between heaven and earth. The New Evangelicalism suggested that everyday business is a divine matter, and that the Old Evangelicalism focused too much on the internal life of the soul, on the afterlife and the depravity of human nature.⁴⁷ These considerations are of fundamental importance for Nonconformists' beliefs about death. Both Glover and J. W. Grant in *Free Churchmanship in England, 1870-1940* (n.d.) discuss the broadening of evangelical beliefs partly as a result of the growing educational levels of the Nonconformists.⁴⁸ Expanding educational opportunities definitely made the intersection of intellectual and spiritual life more likely, thereby affecting the realm of theology where the two naturally converged. This matter of shifting levels of education forms part of the obituary content and factors into the overall themes that are addressed.

⁴⁶ D. Johnson, 'Theology and the Task of Reconstruction,' *The Changing Shape of English Nonconformity, 1825-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 126-62.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent*, pp. 115-63.

⁴⁸ J. W. Grant, *Free Churchmanship in England, 1870-1940* (London: Independent Press, n.d.), pp. 68-74.

Contemporary Perspectives on Nonconformist Denominations

This study considers the Nonconformists as a group but also looks at variations that are related to the four denominations that have been chosen to represent that group. The evangelical Nonconformity of the mid-nineteenth century was the Evangelicalism of one hundred years after the beginning of the Evangelical Revival and, if considered in relation to its earliest Puritan forebears, the Nonconformity of three hundred years after the beginning of Dissent from the Established Church. In this consideration of four Nonconformist denominations, the New Dissenters (the Methodists) and the Old Dissenters (the Baptists and the Congregationalists) had different histories that encompassed some diverging emphases. ‘It was [Jonathan Glyde’s] frequent custom to refer to the blessings of a pious ancestry, and to claim descent from three ministers ejected in the time of Charles II. His parents were distinguished for piety; the father being a deacon of one of the Independent churches of Exeter.’⁴⁹ This was not a claim that could have been made by most Methodists. Moreover, the memoir of Jonathan Glyde refers to the dying man’s exclamation that he is not fit company for ‘Whitefield and Wesley, Baxter and Owen’.⁵⁰ John Wesley and George Whitefield were the fathers of Evangelicalism and yet had different theological emphases: Whitefield preached a moderate Calvinism while Wesley endorsed an Arminian viewpoint which, while not rejecting formally predestination, emphasised the role of humanity in exercising faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. Wesley also believed in the possibility of Christian perfection, which affirmed that those who were saved and had the life of Christ in them were empowered to refrain from sin. ‘They are freed from self-will, as desiring nothing but the holy and perfect will of God... At all times their souls are even and calm; their hearts are steadfast and immovable.’⁵¹ The Congregationalists, whose early obituaries often made a point of stating

⁴⁹ *EM* 1855, pp. 121-27 (Rev Jonathan Glyde).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ J. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (New York: G. Lane and P.P. Sandford, 1844), pp. 7-8.

a strong adherence to Calvinist doctrine, showed many gradations of belief with the passing years as did the Baptists who were divided into General Baptists, who embraced an Arminian viewpoint on the atonement, and Particular Baptists, who were Calvinist in their soteriology. The Methodists could almost always point to the day and hour of their conversions, and the Baptists to the date of baptism, while it was not uncommon for the Congregationalists to say with Glyde: “where a religious education has been enjoyed, and where, from infancy, it has been the aim of parental anxiety to keep the conscience awake, and to promote religious impressions, it is often impossible to fix the precise period of the consecration of the heart to God.” Nor did he know the exact moment of his own conversion, - in this he resembled Richard Baxter, and other eminent servants of Christ.⁵² Thus, although salvation through the atonement was central to all, the evangelical Nonconformists did not have an entirely common creed when it came to theology.

Each of the four denominations considered in the present study has something to contribute to an overall understanding of evangelical Nonconformist death. Histories of Primitive Methodism are remarkably rare. The only academic study of the denomination is J. S. Werner’s *The Primitive Methodist Connection* (1984), which provides a vivid portrait that focuses on the early years of Primitive Methodism and the success of the denomination among the labouring classes in agricultural and mining districts, industrial villages and mill towns. She uses obituaries from *The Primitive Methodist Magazine* to present a picture of adherents of this denomination: their conversions, occupations, causes of death and the relative number of men and women who were memorialised. Werner comes to several important conclusions that are echoed by other historians and provide supporting evidence for the argument of the present study as it concerns the Primitive Methodists. First, she notes that, due to the danger of such occupations as mining and the prevalence of disease such as

⁵² *EM* 1855, pp. 121-27 (Rev Jonathan Glyde).

cholera, they lived under the constant shadow of sudden death. This fear of death often led to conversion. For example, at the end of the 1840s mortality rates from cholera were particularly high. This coincided with a gain of 9,205 new Primitive Methodists in 1849-50 – the largest annual increase.⁵³ In *Victorian Religious Revivals* (2012) Bebbington argues that dangerous occupations and the threat of epidemic disease could lead to revival and conversion.⁵⁴ Watts affirms this as well, stating that the labouring classes, of whom the Primitive Methodists contributed the largest number to the present study, felt drawn towards ‘respectability’ because they were most at risk from occupational hazards and disease.⁵⁵

Second, Werner states that the rise of Primitive Methodism in the 1820s and 1830s offered a bridge between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century patterns of living, providing stability amidst change for factory workers, agricultural labourers and miners.⁵⁶ Obelkevich comes to a similar conclusion when he states that the Primitive Methodists appeared in the transition period between the passing of traditional culture and the development of working-class culture. He convincingly argues that the Primitive Methodist experience anticipated developments in the secular culture in which the ‘soul emerged before the private self (and “character”)’ and which ‘affirmed spiritual worth before laying claim to social inheritance’.⁵⁷ These associations of occupation and class status with attitudes towards death, the appeal of Primitive Methodism to the labouring classes and the distinction between the spiritual and the secular identity are central considerations for this study of death.

The history of Wesleyan Methodism is in many ways the history of tensions that are reflected in nineteenth-century Nonconformist deathbeds. The pull towards this world and the

⁵³ J. S. Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: its background and early history* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 153-54.

⁵⁴ D. W. Bebbington, *Victorian Religious Revivals: culture and piety in local and global contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 90-92, 110-111.

⁵⁵ Watts, *The Dissenters*, p. 652.

⁵⁶ Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion*, p. 178.

⁵⁷ Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, p. 258.

next and the tension between the head and the heart have been noted.⁵⁸ Obelkevich takes a close look at Methodism in its social context. He considers the effects of social mobility among the Wesleyan Methodists, and the marked shift in Wesleyan culture that had occurred by 1875. His conclusion is that the increasing concern for respectability, and growth in both self-consciousness and class consciousness, meant that the middle classes could no longer exhibit the vulnerability required by revivalism.⁵⁹ Thus the question arises of the extent to which this shift over time affected the Wesleyan obituaries. Watts notes that the expansion of evangelical Nonconformity served to encourage the determination among the labouring classes to move into the respectable middle classes (particularly relevant for the Primitive Methodists), and in fact inhibited the development of a working-class identity by promoting social harmony.⁶⁰ Hempton states that Methodism emphasised discipline, fellowship and social responsibility. He further notes that Methodist deathbed scenes attempted to ‘alter taste from concentration on this life alone to a consideration of eternal life’.⁶¹ This is in many ways the tension introduced by death, and the emphasis placed by historians on social movement among the Wesleyans, the effect that movement had on Wesleyan spirituality and culture and the conflicts between the claims of head and heart that are evident in the obituaries are important themes for Nonconformist deathbed experiences in general.

Studies of the Old Dissent tend to focus less on spirituality and more on doctrine, while maintaining the overall theme of the effects of social mobility and intersection with the larger culture. In *So Down to Prayers* (1977) Clyde Binfield comments that in the movement from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century, the ‘querulous’ ‘Dissent’ changed to ‘Nonconformity’ or the ‘manly’ refusal to conform.⁶² This insight captures an important

⁵⁸ Hempton, *Methodism*, p. 206.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Watts, *The Dissenters*, pp. 651-54.

⁶¹ Hempton, *Methodism*, pp. 206-207.

⁶² C. Binfield, *So Down to Prayers: Studies in English Nonconformity, 1780-1920* (London: J. M. Dent, 1977), p. 7.

aspect of the character of Nonconformity during the period in question – a dimension of the solidifying of middle-class respectability - which will be investigated throughout the study. Although Binfield focuses on the Old Dissent, he makes this general statement about the Old and the New: ‘The Methodists were the pacemakers of revival and were caught most firmly in their own initiative, the Baptists experienced the most spectacular transformation, and the Congregationalists were *les hommes moyens sensuels*⁶³ of the new Nonconformity.’⁶⁴ This excerpt from an 1869 Baptist sermon indicates the tone of that change: ‘We have left the old Puritan error. We no longer despise the beautiful and artistic, but claim them as divine things, and enlist them in the divine service. We no longer consider retirement from the world a sign of holiness, but believe that all man’s life and work can be dedicated to heaven.’⁶⁵ The final evaluation of a person’s life and work is central to obituary content. Here we see again the tension between this world and the next. Whether or not the declaration of this sermon is borne out by an investigation of death is carefully addressed in the study.

Binfield’s book tracks the immersion of the Nonconformists in various dimensions of the world they inhabited, including business and politics, suggesting an inevitable measure of compromise with the secular world.⁶⁶ He refers to the 1860s as a time of significant change for Nonconformity. Mark Johnson also delves deeply into the 1860s and 1870s as a turning point in the history of Congregationalism, paying particular attention to the influence of the theology of R. W. Dale and the New Evangelicalism on the future of the denomination and Nonconformity.⁶⁷ Binfield’s description of the Congregationalist as the average non-intellectual or reasonable man suggests that it was this denomination that was most representative of the broader society beyond Nonconformity in the middle of the nineteenth

⁶³ ‘the average non-intellectual men’

⁶⁴ Binfield, *So Down to Prayers*, p. 21.

⁶⁵ E. Luscombe Hull, *Sermons preached at Union Chapel, Kings Lynn*, 1869, 2nd series, p. 193, in Binfield, *So Down to Prayers*, p. 19.

⁶⁶ Binfield, *So Down to Prayers*, pp. 19-20.

⁶⁷ Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent*, pp. 47-62.

century, and that Nonconformity was both a subculture and an integrated part of the culture at large. He tells his story through accounts of individual lives, a method suited to the time he is studying. Binfield's sophisticated perceptions about the intersection of Nonconformity with culture, and his placement of the denominations on the historical trajectory inform our study of death among Nonconformists.

Despite an outlook that was fundamentally conservative, the Baptists had a heritage of independent thought, autonomous congregations and pragmatism. David Bebbington notes in *Baptists through the Centuries* (2010) that both the Enlightenment and the Evangelical Revival were essentially pragmatic and democratic. Arminian theology, which General Baptists upheld, also opened salvation to everyone, not just the elect.⁶⁸ The pragmatism that opened the Baptists to the impact of the Evangelical Revival also opened them to the influence of the theological and cultural trends that were affecting the nation. But the basic conservatism of the Baptists balanced this effect and slowed it down. By 1873 when the basis of the Baptist Union was discussed there was hesitation about the word evangelical. In fact, the reference to 'evangelical sentiments' was removed and a statement to the effect that 'every separate church has liberty to interpret and administer the laws of Christ' put in its place.⁶⁹ In *The Baptist Union* (1959), Ernest Payne further states that the basis of the Baptist Union should be compared with what happened in the Congregational Union in 1877-78 at the Leicester Conference. Despite the objections of James Baldwin Brown, the delegates affirmed the loyalty of Congregationalists to 'Evangelical Religion' and referred to the 1833 'Declaration of Faith and Order'. C. H. Spurgeon, the renowned Baptist pastor, was pleased with this Congregational vote. In *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (1994) J. H.

⁶⁸ D. W. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: a history of a global people* (Baylor University Press, 2010), Chapter 7.

⁶⁹ E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: a short history* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1959), pp. 109-10.

Y. Briggs discusses the ‘tensions’ in Baptist congregational life.⁷⁰ He refers to two sources of this tension: the Evangelical Revival itself that challenged the Puritanism of the early Baptists, and the secular thought that accelerated in the 1860s and 1870s.⁷¹ The influences and tensions to which these scholars refer are among the themes explored in the Nonconformist obituaries.

Contemporary Perspectives on the Authenticity of Nonconformist Obituaries

There are several important literary dimensions of the obituaries. The first is their appearance in an era when biographies, autobiographies and the theme of spiritual journey in novels abounded. As Callum Brown notes, Evangelicalism popularised for the faithful the novel boom that began in the 1830s, including many stories in their magazines that followed an individual’s journey towards moral improvement. He compares the life stories of the 1830s where the basic structure for such stories was the conviction of sin followed by conversion with the later Victorian period when tales of spiritual journey encompassed doubts and uncertainty.⁷² This connection between the evangelical life story and the content of the memoirs and obituaries as analysed over a period of years is worthy of further consideration. However, the notion that there was a narrative structure based in part on the popularity of fiction raises the question of the authenticity of sources, especially since references to Nonconformity in novels were not necessarily historically accurate. In *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian novel* (1975) Valentine Cunningham discusses the portrayal of Nonconformity – clearly distinguishing Dissent from the broader Evangelicalism that encompassed the Anglican church as well as the Nonconformist denominations - in the novels of Dickens, Eliot, the Brontës and others. He refutes the widely

⁷⁰ J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 1994), p. 42.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷² Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, pp. 70-71, 81-82.

accepted idea that the majority of Victorian novelists provided a realistic and accurate portrait of Dissent.⁷³ Cunningham's work contributes to the question of whether the evangelical Nonconformist obituaries are only loosely based on fact and so stylised as to be completely unreliable. If there was any perceived connection between the popularity of fiction and biography centred on spirituality journey, and the life stories published in the denominational magazines, then they could be read with a certain amount of scepticism.

It must be acknowledged that the reliability of published life stories, whether they take the form of obituaries, memoirs, biographies or autobiographies has been a subject of scholarly debate. We will take into account arguments raised against the reliability of certain documents for historical research. Ralph Houlbrooke, while making excellent use of death narratives found in letters and memoirs to convey an understanding of death in the fifteenth down to the eighteenth centuries in *Death, Religion and the Family in England* (2000), nevertheless questions the reliability of biographies and autobiographies for proving an overall movement towards a more individualised and privatised society.⁷⁴ However, Hindmarsh addresses this question of the individualisation of society in his careful assessment of conversion narratives in the context of autobiographies. In keeping with his goal of setting the eighteenth-century evangelical conversion narrative within a broad historical framework, he determines that 'the Renaissance made people more aware of themselves as individuals, and the church made them more aware of themselves as sinners'. The increase in literacy and heightened self-consciousness along with the concept of inward conversion that emerged for Protestants in the seventeenth century constituted the sources for modern spiritual autobiography.⁷⁵ Hindmarsh contends that the Evangelicals contributed to

⁷³ V. Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 7.

⁷⁴ R. Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 380.

⁷⁵ Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, p. 32.

the resurrection of these narratives that were beginning to wane by the eighteenth century. He lays vital groundwork for understanding the extensive use of memoir and obituary among the Nonconformists to convey a personal spiritual journey.

Hindmarsh also points out that the evangelical emphasis on individual experience is different from secular individualism because it is not about personal autonomy. In *Heart Religion* (2008) Phyllis Mack investigates another similar aspect of rising individualism in her discussion of ‘agency’ among the Methodists in the eighteenth century. Mack differentiates between the Methodist brand of agency – which related more to repentance and sacrifice than to desire for power - and the usual secular understanding of agency that was related to personal authority and self-worth.⁷⁶ This intriguing assessment of Mack’s suggests that these conventions played important roles in the formation of evangelical Nonconformist memoirs and obituaries and attested to a genuine internal culture. Thus Methodist spirituality as it is conveyed in the obituary context may contribute to an understanding of Nonconformist death.

Scholars have variously assessed the viability of the obituaries that were published in the denominational magazines as primary source material for exploring evangelical Nonconformist death. On the one hand, some argue against their value as resources. In *Death in the Victorian Family* (2000), Pat Jalland draws a sharp distinction between published accounts of deathbed experiences, such as those found in the Nonconformist magazines, and the accounts found in the diaries and letters, not originally intended for publication, which she uses as the foundation for her research. She carefully investigates experiences of illness, death and mourning in fifty-five upper-middle-class and aristocratic families between 1830 and 1920, including the Gladstones and the Lyttones. Jalland argues that published accounts

⁷⁶ P. Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: gender and emotion in early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 9-15.

are less authentic since they cannot be accurate accounts of a death experience because they were written for the purpose of encouraging the readership and paying tribute to the deceased.⁷⁷ The issue raised by Jalland is of central importance and is addressed in Chapter Two of the present study.

Geoffrey Best, in *The Victorian Crisis of Faith* (1970), suggests that not only the obituary authors but the subjects conveyed the death narrative with audience expectations in mind. However, Best also notes that the way in which Evangelicals confronted death was part and parcel of their Evangelicalism.⁷⁸ According to David Hempton, the Methodist *Arminian Magazine* (which became *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*) had more deathbed accounts than the publications of the other denominations, and the deathbed scenes were consistently portrayed alongside the conversion narratives, thereby emphasising the two life experiences that tested and proved the claims of the Methodist message. Hempton suggests that the death narratives in the magazines became the subject of increased editing over the years. They were an evangelistic tool, and were also intended to show readers the proper way to die. He describes the deathbed accounts as highly formulaic in language and structure with an emphasis on experience, assurance and community – all keys to Methodist theology.⁷⁹

Scholars have explored Nonconformity through specialised topics – several of which make use of the denominational magazine obituaries as primary sources. In *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales* (1988) Ken Brown provides a study of Nonconformist ministers, including their social and spiritual origins, training and the challenges they faced.⁸⁰ Since a number of the 1,200 subjects considered in the present study

⁷⁷ P. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 19-25.

⁷⁸ G. Best, 'Evangelicalism and the Victorians', A. Sydmondson, ed., *The Victorian Crisis of Faith* (London: SPCK, 1970), p. 55.

⁷⁹ Hempton, *Methodism*, pp. 60-68.

⁸⁰ K. D. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales, 1800-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 56-123.

were Nonconformist ministers, this work is particularly helpful concerning the professionalisation of the ministry. Brown's view on the use of published obituaries as historical sources is worth noting. His study covers the period from 1800 to 1930, and he recognizes a shift in the obituaries from the piety of the subjects to their abilities. While the authenticity of the obituaries is not his primary subject, Brown also contrasts the 'refreshing candour' of the earlier obituaries with the later ones that are 'glossed over by a veneer of respectability that would permit no ill-speaking of the dead'.⁸¹ Whether or not this is an accurate representation of the change over time that occurred will be investigated.

Against these arguments that question the authenticity of the obituaries that were published in the denominational magazines are compelling rejoinders. Scholars have convincingly employed published death narratives as a reliable means of understanding evangelical Nonconformist spirituality. J. S. Werner turns to Primitive Methodist obituaries to acquire facts (cause of death, occupations, ages and gender distribution) about Primitive communities.⁸² Linda Wilson's *Constrained by Zeal* (2000) explores female Nonconformist spirituality in the mid-nineteenth century, using denominational magazine obituaries as her primary source. She notes the disadvantages of doing so, including the fact that most of the obituaries were written by men, that they were written with the purpose of advancing the agenda of the magazine and that they were in themselves a form of literature. The advantages listed by Wilson include the fact that the obituaries recount the lives of many ordinary women, that some of the obituaries include excerpts from diaries, letters and other documents, that the accounts refer to problems and doubts experienced by the women they memorialised and that the obituaries are revelatory of how women were regarded by the obituary authors and by the denominations. Thus she contends that these sources provide

⁸¹ Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales, 1800-1930*, p. 18

⁸² Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion*, pp. 153-54.

considerable insight into lives that might otherwise have been forgotten.⁸³ Bebbington takes a close look at deathbed accounts published in the denominational magazines of the evangelical Nonconformists and finds that they contribute significantly to an understanding of how the Nonconformists of the 1850s approached and experienced death, and that this approach reflected an evangelical orientation and was marked by a hopeful anticipation of the life to come.⁸⁴ In his article on ‘Evangelical Endings’ (1992) Henry Rack focuses largely on Methodist deathbed piety and found published obituaries to be a valuable source for understanding Methodist spirituality.⁸⁵ All of these studies contribute to the ongoing assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of using published obituaries that will be elaborated upon in the present study.

The obituaries are taken from five magazines. *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* was founded by John Wesley in 1778 as *The Arminian Magazine*, retitled in 1822, and continued until 1969. *The Primitive Methodist Magazine* commenced in 1821 by one of the co-founders of Primitive Methodism, Hugh Bourne. *The Primitive Methodist Magazine* ceased publication in 1898. *The Baptist Magazine* was published from 1809 down to 1904. Two magazines represent the Congregational obituaries. *The Christian Witness* had a relatively short tenure from 1844 down to 1878. Most of the Congregational obituaries are taken from *The Evangelical Magazine*, which started publication in 1793 and as of 1813 continued as *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* until its close in 1883. A helpful overview of the history of the magazines is found in J. L. Altholtz’s *The Religious Press in Britain, 1760-1900* (1989).⁸⁶ In *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850* (1973) W. R. Ward provides a vital discussion of events in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, noting

⁸³ Wilson, *Constrained by Zeal*, pp. 20-33.

⁸⁴ D. W. Bebbington, ‘Deathbed Piety of Evangelical Nonconformists in the Nineteenth Century’ (unpublished, 2011).

⁸⁵ H. Rack, ‘Evangelical Endings: death-beds in evangelical biography’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 74 (1992), pp. 39-56.

⁸⁶ J. L. Altholtz’s *The Religious Press in Britain, 1760-1900* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

particularly the French Revolution and the downfall of the Papacy, which led to the development of an ecumenical spirit among the Evangelicals – what Ward calls ‘the great flowering of undenominational theology’.⁸⁷ The Baptists, Methodists, Independents and Anglicans joined forces in missionary and other efforts, an example of which was the formation of the London Missionary Society in 1795. This sense of being joined in a common cause is highly relevant for the launching of *The Evangelical Magazine* in 1793. The magazine, although it became essentially Congregational, continued to reassure readers of its adherence to ‘the true principles of catholic and comprehensive piety, in which the Evangelical Magazine originated’.⁸⁸ The magazines had varying agendas and editorial processes, which will be considered in Chapter Two.

Obituaries were chosen as the primary research tool for six reasons: (1) there are an enormous number of them, and many of them are very long – hence, they provide ample content for statistical comparisons; (2) they appeared throughout the period in question; (3) they cover a wide variety of subjects from the middle and labouring classes; (4) they represent four Nonconformist denominations of considerable variation but in a similar format that allows for comparison; (5) they are written in such a way as to present a complete life story in many cases, thereby placing the death narrative in a larger context; (6) they provide details about death from every vantage point: theology, class, denominational emphasis, experience, literary style – and the perspective of both dying person and observer. The risk of using such evidence is that they were edited and published for a particular audience and were conventional in presentation and thus do not present a comprehensive picture of nineteenth-century death. A considerable amount of attention has been given to the obituaries as literature: their composition, purpose and authorship. A closer investigation will consider the

⁸⁷ Ward, *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850*, pp. 44-45.

⁸⁸ *EM* 1834, p. iv (Preface).

usefulness and consistency of the published obituaries, both as part of a larger tradition and within the Nonconformist subculture.

Contemporary Perspectives on Deathbed Piety

The history of deathbed piety and the theology of death have been subjects of interest for scholars for a number of years, with growing interest during the last three decades. Studies on death look back to the years between 1450 and 1900 to attempt to understand what the dying were thinking, feeling and saying in their last days and hours and how their death experience affected those left behind. The study of death as it was experienced and witnessed in the western world down to the turn of the twentieth century was inevitably the study of Christian death. However, by the second half of the twentieth century the gap widened considerably between Christian and non-Christian views of death. Contemporary views on death have been greatly influenced by the early work of such authors as psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who focused on the steps to achieving peace and acceptance before death, and gave attention to both the dying person and those left behind.⁸⁹ While some of the aspects of death are mirrored in this contemporary understanding, the steps towards achieving it are substantially different from the medieval, Puritan and evangelical journeys of preceding centuries. Scholarly investigation has naturally been drawn to try and discover the roots of the movement towards an increasingly private and individual experience of death where attention was focused less on historical Christianity and more on the personhood of the individual.

Death studies encompass broad works investigating periods of time as well as narrower studies focused on particular groups. Philippe Ariès produced an overview of death throughout history, *The Hour of Our Death* (1981), which has a strong statement to convey

⁸⁹ E. Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

about the contemporary distancing of death, placing an increasing gap between the dying and the living, thereby making death a more isolated and unfamiliar experience.⁹⁰ Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992) provides a vivid portrayal of death in the late Middle Ages, and looks to medieval spirituality with a sense of what was lost.⁹¹ The deathbed piety of the late Middle Ages and of the Puritans is given compelling treatment by Houlbrooke through his study of wills, letters and diaries.⁹² In the period leading up to the Victorian era, Hindmarsh sees the Evangelicals as keeping alive a tradition of deathbed piety that was waning by the end of the eighteenth century.⁹³ Mack uses a number of primary sources including diaries and letters to consider the life and spirituality of early Methodist men and women, with a particular focus on women and their reaction to the change in religion of the seventeenth century to a spiritual environment affected by the Enlightenment.⁹⁴ The study of death down to the first two decades of the nineteenth century focuses on a tradition of deathbed piety that remained consistent at its core while reacting to the spirit of the Enlightenment.

Scholarship in the area of nineteenth-century social history of death covers a wide range of topics. In addition to Jalland's important work, Clare Gittings argues in *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern Britain* (1984) that funeral practices are one of the most valuable sources of information about attitudes towards death because they span all social classes.⁹⁵ In *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (2007) Julie Marie Strange, dealing with the latter half of Jalland's time period, argues that Jalland is separating a small and privileged group from the larger world, and further suggests that the labouring

⁹⁰ P. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), pp. 105-115.

⁹¹ E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: traditional religion in England, 1400-1560* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 310-27.

⁹² Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480-1750*, pp. 150-60.

⁹³ Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, pp. 256-59.

⁹⁴ Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment*.

⁹⁵ C. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1984), pp. 8-12.

classes are marginalised because there are few first-hand accounts of labouring-class people and because they were supposedly so preoccupied with the challenges of existence and with ensuring a respectable funeral that they had neither the time nor the energy for grieving. She notes that both Jalland and David Cannadine in Joachim Whaley's *Mirrors of Mortality* (1981)⁹⁶ focus on death among the elite because records of death among the labouring classes are obscure.⁹⁷ This adds to the value of the Nonconformist obituaries, a percentage of which are of labouring-class subjects and yet were accounts that included emotional, spiritual and physical aspects of the experience of death.

On the whole, scholarship that is sharply focused on mid-nineteenth-century evangelical Nonconformist beliefs about death and the afterlife is sparse. The most directly relevant to the present study is Bebbington's recent work on deathbed piety among evangelical Nonconformists, which focuses primarily on the high Victorian period of the 1850s.⁹⁸ Wilson, in her work on the spirituality of Nonconformist women between 1825 and 1875, sees the deathbed as an opportunity for female self-expression and as closely connected with central elements of evangelical religion such as conviction of sin and the efficacy of the atonement. However, the goal of her work is not death but a better understanding of female spirituality.⁹⁹ Rack directly addresses deathbed piety in his article about evangelical deathbeds.¹⁰⁰ But his focus is exclusively on Methodist experience of death. Little has been done to observe trends among a more socially and denominationally comprehensive Nonconformist group with specific reference to changing views on death over a period of fifty years in the heart of the nineteenth century. The present study contributes towards filling

⁹⁶ D. Cannadine, 'War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain,' J. Whaley, ed., *Mirrors of Mortality: studies in the social history of death* (London: Europa Publications, 1981).

⁹⁷ J-M. Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 8-10

⁹⁸ Bebbington, 'The Deathbed Piety of Evangelical Nonconformists in the Nineteenth Century'.

⁹⁹ Wilson, *Constrained by Zeal*.

¹⁰⁰ Rack, 'Evangelical Endings: death-beds in evangelical biography'.

this gap in the study of death as a means of achieving a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of nineteenth-century English evangelical Nonconformity.

The Aim of this Study

This study investigates six of the factors that helped to shape beliefs and expectations about death among the evangelical Nonconformists: the literary conventions associated with the denominational magazine obituaries that were used as primary source material, theology, social background, denominational variations, Romanticism, and the last words and experiences of the dying. These factors were selected as the aspects of mid-nineteenth century evangelical Nonconformity most likely to cast light on changing beliefs about death. An initial sample of 400 obituaries – 100 for each of four denominations - was originally chosen. However, the results of the analysis proved to be so valuable that it was determined to expand the sample, and the study is therefore based on an analysis of 1,200 obituaries evenly divided among the four Nonconformist denominations. While Nonconformist obituaries have been used in research before, the division according to three time periods (the 1830s, 1850s and 1870s), close reading, analysis and categorisation of a sample this large is unprecedented and makes it possible to observe trends amongst Nonconformists in England between 1830 and 1880. Statistics have been compiled for obituaries from both the Nonconformist sample as a whole and for each of the four denominations considered. The issue of change over time is of vital importance because, as the scholarship indicates, the period between 1830 and 1880 were years of sometimes dramatic change in evangelical Nonconformity in relation to the larger culture.

Thirty-nine categories of reference are explored. The trends across the 1830s, 1850s and 1870s appear throughout the study, and are summarised in a series of charts in Appendix B that covers both the Nonconformist sample of 1,200 and each denominational sample of

300. The charts are organised according to five general areas. Although there is some overlap (for example, spiritual battle is relevant to both Theology and Experience), the categories are grouped as follows. *Theology* covers Jesus, the atonement, conversion, God the Father, assurance of salvation, Bible references, hymn references, prayer and awareness of sin. *Lifestyle and Social Mobility* encompasses good works (service to the community or charitable giving), character traits (personality descriptions focused on virtues of character), accomplishments (primarily secular achievements but can also include accomplishments related to chapel life or the ministry), social involvement (participation in Christian or secular societies), religious heritage (specifically related to Nonconformist ancestry), education, funerals and cemeteries. *Social Background* covers gender, occupation and class. A separate chart is allocated to *Age at Death*. Categories related to *Experience* include last words, physical suffering, patience, depression, delirium, joy, peace, doubt, spiritual battle and the purposes of the obituaries. The subject of physical death itself is also included under *Experience* and encompasses the cause of death, medical advice and hospitals. The statistical results that are summarised in Appendix B are referred to throughout the work, as are the lists of occupations by denomination that are summarised in Appendix A.

The categories were chosen in order to obtain as comprehensive a picture of evangelical Nonconformist death as possible from the obituary content and only explicit references were counted as part of the statistics. Certain categories were not chosen for statistics because their appearance was very infrequent (such as explicit references to entire sanctification), they are cumulative themes based on several categories (such as formulaic phrasing), they appear in unspecified forms such as ‘a divine manifestation’ (such as the Holy Spirit) or because they represent a general tone (such as hope - in many cases the hope is in something such as Christ). The goal was to observe the intersection at the deathbed of the obituary subject’s internal experience of faith with his or her life in this world, and to

determine to what extent expectations concerning death and the afterlife had changed or remained the same with the passing years. The large sample and the range of categories made it possible to observe consistency and shifts over time in matters concerning evangelical Nonconformist death because the larger the sample the proportion of exceptional cases goes down and statistical distortions are diminished.

Every effort was made to obtain a random sample. The 1200 obituaries were not chosen because they featured particular categories, were long or short, were of men or women, were especially interesting or because they fit a developing model. Rather, the method used was simple. Three hundred obituaries were needed for each of the four denominations. For each denomination, one hundred obituaries were needed for the 1830s, 100 for the 1850s and 100 for the 1870s. These were obtained by starting at the beginning of a magazine issue or year and including all memoirs and obituaries that appeared until the requisite number for the time period was reached. The only deviation from this straightforward method had to do with the months of the year. Some magazines included so many obituaries that the 100 needed could be gathered in just a few issues and there was a danger of focusing on deaths that occurred only in January, February and March. It was deemed important to include obituaries from the four seasons of the year because weather conditions could affect causes and frequency of death. Other than this, the obituaries were not evaluated for content before being chosen for analysis. Rather, the statistical categories and the findings emerged authentically from the research and a close analysis of the obituaries. The six core chapter themes emerged from the initial sample of 400 and the 39 categories emerged as the larger sample of 1200 was analysed.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ See pp. 34-35.

The potential weaknesses of the method used relate primarily to the increasing number of men and particularly of ministers in the sample and the resulting imbalance in occupations and gender in the overall statistics as well as a preponderance of categories that were especially relevant to the lives of men and ministerial occupations. However, the dangers of hand-picking obituaries based on their subject and content outweighed any weaknesses in the random method. Such hand-picking would have suggested that certain choices were made to support the central argument of the thesis, while others, which did not support this argument, were ignored. Moreover, the method used revealed important information about evangelical Nonconformity as it was developing in the mid-nineteenth century. The choices of the magazine editors as to what they deemed appropriate material to include when conveying the story of a good death were of relevance and reflected evangelical Nonconformist attitudes and beliefs about death over the fifty years between 1830 and 1880. The increasing number of male obituaries may be deemed a result of the research rather than a weakness of the method used.

Finally, the full meaning of any particular statistic is dependent in part on the category. For example, if 39% of those sampled in the 1850s referred to Jesus at the point of death while only 7% referred to God the Father, this does not necessarily mean that references to God the Father were insignificant. Indeed, when compared with 4% in the 1830s the increase in references to God the Father was notable. When a category is negligible and then begins to appear with more frequency, those appearances are striking although the overall percentage may remain low. The study analyses the statistics both in terms of their intrinsic value and when viewed over time, within and across denominations and by comparison with the statistics in other categories.

The fifty years from 1830 down to 1880 were chosen because it was a short enough period of time to be manageable for analysis but long enough to indicate genuine consistency

or change with regard to Nonconformist death. Moreover, it allowed for a comparison of three points of statistical analysis within the fifty years: the 1830s when the evangelical Nonconformists were emerging from the heights of evangelical expansion; the 1850s when they were solidifying their place in Victorian society; and the 1870s, when they were experiencing the results of decades of questioning and change on theological and cultural fronts. Understanding Nonconformist attitudes towards death in this period not only provides insight into the world of Nonconformity but into Victorian England and on an even broader scale into the changing face of Christian death in the western world. The question of how the evangelical Nonconformists related to this world and to the next is of primary importance for the study of Nonconformity, and an exceptionally fruitful moment to explore this question is at the point of death.

The Structure of this Study

A few terms require explanation. A ‘Good Death’ for the Nonconformist was a death that was consistent with Christian faith in all of its aspects. Its hallmarks were peace, preparedness and trust for the dying, assuredness of salvation for the observers of the death and hope for both. Deathbed piety was devotion to God and holiness as expressed on the deathbed. The Good Death is taken from the Latin term *ars moriendi* (the art of dying), and was a central feature of the hoped-for experience of death from the late Middle Ages to the period under consideration. A Good Death featured the heart of evangelical theology: dependence on the crucifixion of Christ to gain eternal life. This focus on the atonement and the expectation of continued life made it possible for death to be good. The ‘Dying Person’ and the ‘Observer’ need some explanation. A distinction is drawn between the expectations and experience of the person who was dying and the expectations and experience of the people who watched and waited as the loved one approached death and finally passed to the next life. This distinction, which will be explored primarily in Chapter Seven, is made

because the obituaries reveal some differences between the two that are so striking as to have some effect on the conclusions reached, particularly as regards change over time. ‘Literary Conventions’ relate to obituary form, content, style and formulaic phrases that were so familiar as to constitute accepted usage at the time. They not only concern how the obituaries were written but the purposes of the published obituaries and their authorship. The use of literary conventions in the obituaries will be carefully evaluated for their effectiveness in historical research.

Each chapter investigates a different aspect of evangelical Nonconformist death experiences and beliefs, and considers how change over time affected that overall subject. The debate over the authenticity and historical value of the published obituaries has been noted. Chapter Two considers this important aspect of the research by investigating the literary conventions that characterised the obituaries - including how the obituaries were written, why they were written, who wrote them and the primary features of the content. Chapter Three discusses theological features most central to death and the afterlife and the place of theological convictions at the deathbed. Since evangelical Nonconformists believed in continued life after death and the necessity of conversion and the atonement for salvation, few subjects could be more directly related to Nonconformist death than theology. Chapter Four considers the social background of the Nonconformists, particularly with regard to changes in class and occupation, and how social mobility may have been relevant to expectations concerning this life and the next. Chapter Five details denominational variations, and how the similarities and differences between the four denominations contribute to an overall picture of Nonconformist death in this period. Chapter Six discusses how the Romantic spirit slowly influenced Nonconformist self-expression in the obituaries as literature in the 1850s, as well as its relevance for doctrine and worldview in the 1870s. Chapter Seven focuses attention on the last words and experience of the dying, with

particular attention to the varying viewpoints of the dying person and the observers of the death. This distinction is relevant to the place of the nineteenth-century evangelical Good Death in the history of western civilization.

The Contributions of the Study

The results of this investigation will cast light not only on Nonconformist expectations and beliefs about death and the afterlife, but also on changes in Nonconformist culture, social background, theology, experience and expression. The conviction of the nineteenth-century evangelical Nonconformist that life continued beyond the grave, and that eternal life was dependent upon decisions made during one's earthly existence, meant that the Nonconformist community interpreted death as part of its own set of beliefs. However, the Nonconformists cannot be considered apart from the larger culture of which they were a part. Thus this study contributes to the ongoing discussion about Christian death, and what place the Victorian era, during which the Nonconformists comprised a substantial portion of the English population, had in the history of Christian death. Jonathan Glyde's estimation of piety as 'not a mere system of orthodox theological belief'¹⁰² and the impossibility he felt of separating religion from the rest of life give some indication of the value of the obituaries for the present research. This study of death among the Nonconformists will add to an overall understanding of how Nonconformity changed or remained constant between 1830 and 1880 in England.

¹⁰² *EM* 1855, pp. 121-27 (Rev Jonathan Glyde).

CHAPTER TWO

OBITUARIES AS LITERATURE: FORM AND CONTENT

‘She lived the life of the righteous and died their happy death.’¹

Obituaries are not a modern phenomenon. They have long been a literary vehicle for providing insight into a particular life journey. In the contemporary world, obituaries are most often brief sketches containing only factual details such as dates of birth, marriage and surviving family members. They provide little of what made the individual distinct. But that has not always been the case. In mid-Victorian England, religious obituaries often provided a glimpse into what mattered most to the deceased. This was certainly true in the obituaries found in the Nonconformist denominational magazines.

Pat Jalland argues that the obituaries published in the denominational magazines are less authentic because they were written for the purpose of encouraging the magazine’s readership and paying tribute to the deceased.² If the obituaries used as a primary resource in this study are to be of value in understanding Nonconformist beliefs about death, rather than simply a form of Nonconformist religious instruction, it is vital to investigate the literary conventions – the form and content that became established patterns through usage or custom - in play. Key questions that must be answered when considering the obituaries as accounts of deaths and as a literary genre include: how were they written, why were they written, who wrote them and what were the primary features that characterised the content? Some denominational distinctions are useful here because, while the Methodists provided greater insight into who wrote the obituaries, the Baptists and the Congregationalists provided more

¹ *The Primitive Methodist Magazine* (hereafter *PMM*) 1854, p. 697 (Mary Crabtree).

² P. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 19-25.

comprehensive explanations as to why they were written. However, these denominational distinctions are not as enlightening when how the obituaries were written is considered.

FORM

How were the Obituaries written?

The evangelical Nonconformist obituaries that appeared in denominational magazines from 1830 down to 1880 were written according to a general pattern that was shared by all four denominations represented in this study. This pattern, or convention, commenced with reference to the early life of the deceased, continued with a description of conversion to the faith, provided evidence of how that faith was lived out and concluded with the death narrative, often inclusive of last words uttered by the dying. The author endeavoured to tell the story of a good death, meaning that the person experienced peace in the midst of suffering, placed his or her hope in Jesus for salvation from sin and thus was properly prepared for the passage from the earthly realm to heaven. So there was a basic formula established that featured four stages of the pilgrimage through life to death.

The 1830 obituary of the Congregationalist Mary Wathew Wiggin exemplifies this four-part formula. It refers to her early life: she ‘was the eldest daughter of the late Mr Thomas Foxall, surgeon, at Walsall, in the county of Stafford’. The ‘genuine piety of her parents’ secured for the branches of their family their intercessions at “the throne of grace”. The first part of the obituary sets the scene for the Nonconformist life story. Evidence of the piety of ancestors suggested openness to conversion, and Mrs Wiggin’s conversion is then described as a gradual process: ‘In very early life she was the subject of serious impressions, which by degrees became more deep and fixed, till a firm decision of character, in a cordial reception of Christ as her only Saviour, and in her avowed adoption of Christian principles, was the happy result.’ Next, the living out of her faith is set out: ‘Nearly 26 years Mrs W. was

a member of the Independent Church at Walsall, during which time her exemplary piety and truly Christian conversation endeared her to all around.’ Finally, the narrative of her death occupies the last two-thirds of the obituary, and includes some of her last words: ‘Whilst her relatives and friends evinced hopes of her recovery, she observed that “to depart and be with Christ, was far better”.’ As the end drew near, ‘she called her family into her room, that she might bless them before she died; when, after imparting affectionate and pious counsel, and whilst in the act of imploring the blessings of Heaven upon them, her happy spirit, without a struggle or a groan, took its flight to the world where Sabbaths never end’. The obituary author notes that ‘she endured affliction with much patience and serenity of mind; and whilst she expressed the deepest sense of her unworthiness, her trust in the merits of the Saviour was unshaken’.³ This early example reflects the paradigmatic four-fold formula that was essential to the Nonconformist obituary: early life, conversion, the living out of faith and a good death.

Mary Wiggin’s obituary gives more attention to the first, second and fourth sections than to the third section of the formula: the Christian virtues and activity that were the fruit of her life. A later example, while showing the consistency of the four features, indicates a shift in emphasis over time. Thomas Atkinson, a Primitive Methodist farm labourer who died in 1878 of cancer at 52, was born in Grainsby in Lincolnshire. His early life and conversion are explained, but in terms that suggest they were most properly dealt with in a calm and minimal way. ‘Nothing of a particular character marked the early part of the history of the subject of this sketch. No near escapes from death, no singular providential deliverances are especially notable, as is the case of some who in after life made the world feel and acknowledge their presence.’ His conversion was also unremarkable: ‘He was brought to God, saw the exceeding sinfulness of sin, earnestly desired pardon, sought and found peace through

³ *EM* 1830, pp. 447-48 (Mrs Mary Wathew Wiggin).

believing in Christ, though no particular agent in the sense of human instrumentality could speak of him as “this is the fruit of my labour”’. However, the living out of his faith is described much more extensively: ‘As a man he was humble and intelligent. As a leader he was plain and honest in his statements, very regular in his engagements, never missing unless something uncommon hindered. He bore a good character ... he was scrupulously conscientious ... He was concerned too about the prosperity of the circuit.’ The narrative of his death formed the smallest portion of the obituary. He died of an ‘inward cancer ... his sufferings were great and he was not able to take the slightest food without pain; but through all patience possessed his soul’. He cherished his ‘quiet rest with God and his oneness with His will ... Thus he who had lived to put away sin and battle for the right, in great assurance passed to his reward.’⁴ While his life as a Christian is the subject of considerable detail and the four-fold formula used is the same in its essentials, the areas of emphasis have changed in that his early life, conversion and death narrative are downplayed.

There are exceptions to this formula, primarily due to the varying lengths of the memoirs and obituaries. While very short obituaries appeared with increasing frequency in the 1870s, there were already brief obituaries or ‘Recent Deaths’ in the 1830s. For example, there were ten ‘Recent Death’ notices on one page at the end of the obituary section in the January 1830 issue of *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*.⁵ Although abbreviated, these obituaries follow a remarkably similar pattern to the four-fold formula. While they do not refer to features of early life, they often make a brief reference to conversion, mention evidence of faith in life and include a description of the death - although usually without the last words of the dying. Jane Treffrey of Leeds is said to have ‘adorned the Christian profession in the Methodist society for nearly thirty-four years’. She was ‘indebted to Divine

⁴ *PMM* 1880, p. 311 (Thomas Atkinson).

⁵ *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* (hereafter *WMM*) 1830, p. 71 (Recent Deaths).

chastisement for her first permanent religious impressions’ and ‘she was a woman of eminent Christian attainments, undaunted heroism, exemplary seriousness, and severely scrupulous integrity ... Her last hours were marked by the most perfect serenity and divine confidence.’⁶ Thus three of the four features – conversion, Christian life and death – are included in this brief obituary.

Both the Wesleyans and the Primitive Methodists continued to devote at least a paragraph and often more to obituaries down to 1880, employing the same basic formula. However, the overall space devoted to obituaries began to vary. The January 1830 issue of *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* opens with a long memoir followed by eight obituaries and ten ‘Recent Deaths’ while the May 1880 issue has one long memoir, the June issue has a memoir and one obituary, the July issue has a biographical sketch and one two-paragraph obituary and the August issue has two memoirs and eight obituaries. The appearance of obituaries became less regular, but the content continued to follow the formula in at least three of the four sections.

The Primitive Methodists followed a somewhat similar pattern of development. The January 1834 issue opens with a lengthy biography, three memoirs of moderate length and three partial-column obituaries. The memoir of John Wignall of Hesketh Bank in Lancashire relates his early life in one paragraph before eight pages are devoted to his conversion, one page to his Christian life, and one to his death. In this case there are subtitles: ‘His conversion’, ‘His efforts to obtain peace’, ‘He obtains pardon’, ‘His manner of life after conversion’, ‘His last affliction’, and ‘His happy death’.⁷ This may be contrasted with the obituary section of the 1880 issue. Each ‘Connexional Biography’ section of *The Primitive Methodist Magazine* for the year 1880 (which is one continuous volume) includes seven to

⁶ *WMM* 1830, p. 71 (Mrs Jane Treffrey).

⁷ *PMM* 1834, pp. 12-22 (John Wignall).

eight obituaries comprising about one column each. The content follows the four sections of early life, conversion, Christian life and death narrative, as in the case of William Lister of London who died at 76 of a ‘derangement of the stomach’. His 1880 obituary devoted one column to his early life, one column to his conversion, six columns to his Christian life and character and one column to his death.⁸ However, the magazine no longer opened with a memoir and it became more unusual to see a long memoir (one covering five to seven pages or more). By 1880 all *Primitive Methodist Magazine* obituaries appeared according to the same pattern and approximate length. But the striking aspect of change lies in the movement of emphasis from the conversion story, as in the case of John Wignall, to the detailed account of the Christian life after conversion, as in the case of William Lister. Most attention in 1834 was on the conversion experience and reception of salvation; the primary focus of attention in 1880 was on Christian life in this world.

An exception to the four-fold formula, and yet in keeping with the declining attention paid to obituaries, was the introduction by the Congregationalists in the mid to late 1870s of a new structure with ‘Death Notices’ of ministers, including their ages and the location of and years in ministry. Joseph Ellison, who died at 80 in 1877, was minister of Heathfield Independent Chapel, Sussex, for twenty-three years⁹ and J. M. Charlton, President of Western College, was 59 when he died ‘in the thirty-fourth year of his ministry in Plymouth’.¹⁰ Typically, there were about six of these per issue. The Baptists also introduced one-line announcements of deaths in the 1870s, although they continued to include one or two memoirs or obituaries of considerable length per issue. The ‘News of the Churches’ section of the August 1876 issue includes the deaths of ‘Evans, Rev. W. W., formerly of Calcutta, at Waterloo, Liverpool, July 11th, aged 74’ and ‘Marriott, Rev T., Milton, Northamptonshire,

⁸ *PMM* 1880, pp. 562-66 (Rev William Lister).

⁹ *EM* 1877, p. 734 (Rev Joseph Ellison).

¹⁰ *EM* 1876, p. 40 (Rev J. M. Charlton, MA).

June 14th, aged 87'.¹¹ Obviously, there was not enough room in this structure for what had previously been considered essential items in an obituary. These brief death notices in the monthly denominational periodicals seem to have been influenced by weekly magazines and newspapers. The sharing of obituary content with secular newspapers became more common in the 1870s, particularly among the Congregationalists from the larger towns, and the appearance of one-line death notices suggests the influence of publications outside the denominations. With such exceptions noted, the obituaries were still generally written according to a four-fold formula that covered early life, conversion, the life of faith and death. The chief alteration was that, as the years passed, emphasis was placed on different sections of the formula.

Why were the Obituaries written?

The Nonconformist denominational magazines were a valuable setting for communicating aspects of the faith related to death in the community of believers. From the beginning of the nineteenth century religious monthlies were a significant percentage of the growing number of publications. By the 1820s *The Evangelical Magazine* and *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* sold over 20,000 copies per month.¹² Nonconformists were proud of the denominational magazine collection that found a prominent place in the family library. When the future Baptist minister William Brock was training to be a watchmaker, the people at the Independent chapel in Sidmouth lent him *The Evangelical Magazine*. 'It was his belief that he was the first person to introduce a book of any kind into the watchmaker's house.'¹³ The effect of the obituary section could be significant. In 1830 *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* noted that 'Next to the Bible [Mrs Broad] prized the Methodist Magazine and Hymnbook. By

¹¹ *The Baptist Magazine* (hereafter *BM*) 1876, p. 384 (Rev W. W. Evans and Rev T. Marriott).

¹² J. R. Topham, 'The *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* and religious monthlies in early nineteenth-century Britain,' G. Cantor, *et al.*, eds., *Science in the Nineteenth Century Periodical: reading the Magazine of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 69.

¹³ *WMM* 1878, pp. 309-18 (William Brock, D.D.).

reading the Biography of the pious dead, as recorded in the former, her soul was often refreshed.¹⁴ Thomas Jackson, who later became editor of *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, recalled that

the Preachers who came on the week-days brought cheap books ... short biographies, containing authentic accounts of the conversion, the holy lives, and the happy deaths of persons of both sexes, and in every rank of society ... The ‘Arminian Magazine,’ the monthly organ of Methodism, was also introduced, two or more families united in their purchase of it ... in this manner a taste for reading was created in families, and profitable books supplanted profane conversation and sports on the Lord’s Day.¹⁵

These anecdotes provide a glimpse into the importance of literature, and particularly of obituaries, in day-to-day life. The expense of the plates that introduced each issue of *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* with a picture of a prominent minister (one-fifth of the total cost of production)¹⁶ is an indication of the importance placed on its religious biography section. Moreover, the memoirs and obituaries comprised a significant portion of an average magazine issue. Family members would hear the inspiring stories of both prominent ministers and obscure housewives. Since the obituaries were strongly supported by Bible passages, hymn selections and sermon excerpts, they formed part of religious experience in the evangelical Nonconformist faith.

When John Wesley founded the *Arminian Magazine* in 1778, he described its purposes in the ‘To the Reader’ section of its opening issue: ‘First, a defence of that grand Christian doctrine, “God willeth all men to be saved” ... Secondly, an extract from the Life of some holy man ... Thirdly, accounts and letters containing the experience of pious persons, the greatest part of whom are still alive; and, Fourthly, verses explaining or confirming the capital doctrines we have in view.’¹⁷ Wesley deeply believed that reading (including verses of

¹⁴ *WMM* 1830, pp. 148-51 (Mrs Broad).

¹⁵ T. Jackson, *Recollections of My Own Life and Times*, B. Frankland, ed. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1878), pp. 25-26.

¹⁶ Topham, ‘The *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* and religious monthlies in early nineteenth-century Britain’ in Cantor, et al, eds., *Science in the Nineteenth Century Periodical*, p. 85.

¹⁷ *The Arminian Magazine* (1778), pp. vi-vii.

hymns) could have a profound effect on belief and sanctification. Wesley had a purpose in providing his readership with material likely to encourage and deepen their faith.

In some instances, the purposes for the obituaries were clearly articulated by the obituary authors. There is variation in the stated purposes, but generally obituaries were to provide consolation and reassurance for those left behind, alleviate fears, provide exemplars for piety, stir up evangelism, issue warnings for the wayward, affirm the tenets of evangelical religion and make personal tributes. These categories are reflected in the range of Nonconformist obituaries considered here, especially among the Old Dissenters where they were often explicitly stated. In the Baptist and Congregational obituaries, purpose is referred to 84 times, or 7% in the Nonconformist sample as a whole and 14% when looking at the Old Dissent alone. The Baptist obituaries refer to purpose most frequently, accounting for 51 instances of the 84 total. The Methodists often did not explicitly refer to the purpose for writing the memoirs and obituaries; however, the purposes clearly emerge from their content. The fact that the Methodists rarely made an explicit claim of purpose suggests that they did not feel the need to do so. Their denominational magazines were assumed to be organs of Methodist doctrine and piety, while the publications of the Old Dissent had a more eclectic feel and somewhat varied purposes.

Consolation to surviving friends and family was a primary purpose of the obituaries. The last words and experiences of the dying in particular were intended to address the fears of those left behind, as in the case of Ann Walker, a Baptist of Hull who died in 1830 at 38 from ‘complications of a severe cold’: ‘The joy and ecstasy of our friend in her last moments show the most timid and fearful saint what God can do for them.’¹⁸ The author of the 1856 obituary of the Wesleyan Hannah Bryan noted that ‘in death she was delivered from the fear she had known all her life long’. Among her last words were: “‘I have no fear of death ... I

¹⁸ *BM* 1830, pp. 401-405 (Mrs Ann Walker).

am happy; I have oil in my lamp; I am prepared for heaven".¹⁹ A good death included preparedness for the life to come. Some fear was understandable, especially among Evangelicals for whom conviction of sin was the entry point to conversion and salvation. However, the obituaries were used to reassure readers of the peace and preparedness that the dying experienced in their last moments.

The obituaries helped to alleviate a variety of fears concerning the process of dying. The obituary of H. Teape, a Congregationalist of London, who died at 65 of an 'inflammation of the lungs,' was written 'as a proof of its power to cheer and sustain the mind under the pressure of severe bodily suffering'.²⁰ At a time when little could be done to lessen suffering, obituaries often provided reassurance that death could be easy and calm. The obituary of Miss Oakden, a Wesleyan of the Uttoxeter circuit in Staffordshire who died at 67 in 1856, states that her death 'was not only peaceful, but ineffably beautiful; so strikingly so, that her friends for some moments seemed to lose the idea of mortality in the glorious transition of the soul to life'.²¹ The dying also needed encouragement if they were not experiencing the joy and excitement that often accompanied deathbed narratives. Joshua Sing, a Baptist of Bridgnorth in Shropshire, was a businessman who died of gout in 1855. His obituary states that he had 'derived comfort from reading about Christians to whom rapturous enjoyments in their last moments had not been granted'.²² After reading many accounts of joyous deathbeds, it helped to read statements that were sombre and simple. Those without intense emotion could feel that they were 'missing something' and might even doubt that their hopes of entering eternity would be fulfilled. Thus the obituaries provided encouragement in the midst of fear, suffering, self-doubt and uncertainty.

¹⁹ *WMM* 1856, p. 95 (Hannah Bryan).

²⁰ *EM* 1830, pp. 27-28 (H. Teape).

²¹ *WMM* 1856, p. 479 (Miss Oakden).

²² *BM* 1856, pp. 1-11 (Joshua Sing).

Moreover, the obituaries provided reassurance about the future happiness of the loved ones. The author of the 1834 obituary of Sarah Bruce, a Congregationalist of Wakefield in the West Riding of Yorkshire, who died at 74, envisaged heavenly reunions: ‘If souls departed know each other in heaven – and we believe they do – then every new arrival of the companions they have left behind must be an accession to their bliss.’²³ Jane Ellis, a Baptist of London, died at 22 in 1870 of erysipelas following childbirth. The author of her obituary noted that ‘after the blessed testimony she left behind, we cannot doubt for an instant of her eternal happiness, and it would be selfish to wish her back again’.²⁴ The obituaries assisted in providing assurance that a loved one who had suffered had arrived safely and happily in heaven, and offered the reader encouragement that his or her hope was well placed.

The obituaries could also serve as a warning for the living, as in the case of Thomas Hands, a Baptist of Middlesbrough in North Yorkshire who died in 1870 at 53 of ‘a combination of maladies’. The author of his obituary states that ‘the decease of our fellow-labourer ought to inspire us with new zeal and fidelity. When the Son of Man cometh may we all be found “watching”’.²⁵ Howard Harper was a Wesleyan who died instantaneously on his twentieth birthday in a railway accident at Shipton, near Oxford, on 24 December 1874. The obituary author notes, referring to 1 Thessalonians 4:13: ‘If all were as well prepared for sudden death as he, their friends will not have to sorrow as those without hope.’²⁶ The obituaries helped to keep the possibility of sudden death from an epidemic of disease, an accident or childbirth always present so that readers would be ready to depart this life when their time came.

²³ *EM* 1834, p. 72 (Mrs Sarah Bruce).

²⁴ *BM* 1870, p. 116 (Mrs Jane Ellis).

²⁵ *BM* 1870, pp. 226-28 (Rev Thomas Hands).

²⁶ *WMM* 1876, p. 188 (Howard Harper).

An account of a Christian's death was also intended to exhort the reader to imitate his or her virtues, and to strive for consistency between a holy life and a holy death. The dying were examples to the living. When B. W. Noel, a distinguished Baptist minister, died in 1872 at 72, he left 'to all who knew him an example, which it were well to emulate, of a wise philanthropy, a readiness in love to serve the brethren, and of entire consecration to God'.²⁷ George Balderstonkidd, a Congregational minister, of Scarborough, died in 1851 at 57. The author of his memoir explains that 'The best use to which we can apply the removal of the righteous from our midst, is to commend their holy example to those who survive ...The fragrance of their memory becomes an incentive to virtue.'²⁸ It is common to see the final words of an obituary include this quotation from Numbers 23:10: 'Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!'²⁹ The dying persons were set up as heroic figures, having accomplished what the living could only anticipate.

The obituaries also provided stimulus for evangelism, and the reader was exhorted to observe how death related to the necessity for spreading the gospel. Maria Smith, a Baptist of Northumberland, died in 1856 at 66 after a long and painful illness. The author of her obituary states: 'Let this brief memorial ... stimulate and encourage you – [to] realize the sublime thought that you, too, may be useful in the service of Jesus and in the salvation of souls.'³⁰ There is often the hope that children and grandchildren will witness the deathbed scene and acquire a faith of similar depth. The author of the 1830 obituary of John Millard, a Baptist of Reading, expressed this hope: 'Oh, may they who now survive, even at the eleventh hour, be led to seek pardon and life, through the blood of the Lamb; and may his children be enabled to copy him, wherein he was enabled to copy his divine Lord.'³¹ The

²⁷ *BM* 1873, pp. 73-75 (Hon and Rev B. W. Noel, M.A.).

²⁸ *EM* 1852, pp. 61-65 (Rev George Balderstonkidd).

²⁹ *BM* 1870, p. 116 (Mrs Jane Ellis).

³⁰ *BM* 1856, pp. 231-32 (Miss Maria Smith).

³¹ *BM* 1830, pp. 27-29 (John Millard).

obituaries were an ideal and highly appropriate place to promote evangelism as a central part of evangelical practice. The story of the sudden death of young Howard Harper was both an exhortation and an evangelistic message to those who ‘sorrow without hope’.³²

The Nonconformist obituaries and memoirs also reminded the reader of his or her primary allegiance to Christ and core evangelical beliefs. The obituaries often made a pointed statement about the importance of holding firm to evangelical orthodoxy, particularly after 1850. The 1877 obituary of Henry Spicer, a Congregationalist who owned a London paper mill, ‘rejoiced in the old Evangelical doctrine. With speculative doubts and questionings of these later days he had no sympathy.’³³ James Knight, a Congregational minister of London, died in 1852. His memoir states that

His was the good old-fashioned theology, ... which, it is feared, in the boasted march of intellect and scientific improvement, has been suffered to fade from the ministrations of many of our modern teachers, who have substituted the flimsy but gaudy essay, or the elaborated scientific disquisition, for those glorious truths of the gospel of Christ which constitute the food, the nourishment, and the life of the soul.³⁴

The obituaries were a tool for calling faithful Nonconformists to stand firm with those who had gone before them and received their reward.

Finally, the memoirs and obituaries presented an opportunity to honour good men and women. In the case of Richard Horsey, a Baptist minister of Wellington in Somerset who collapsed in the pulpit in 1831 at 75, the obituary author noted that ‘our aim is simply to furnish to a wide circle of friends, a permanent record of his worth; and to supply to our readers in general, a few particulars in the life of one who, though unknown in many districts of our land, was esteemed and venerated in no ordinary degree, by our churches in the West of England’.³⁵ Samuel Kent was a Baptist minister in Norfolk; the author of his 1855 obituary

³² *WMM* 1876, p.188 (Howard Harper).

³³ *EM* 1877, pp. 344-45 (Henry Spicer).

³⁴ *EM* 1852, pp. 121-24 (Rev James Knight).

³⁵ *BM* 1831, pp. 265-73 (Rev Richard Horsey).

notes that ‘a principal purpose answered by *The Baptist Magazine* is the preservation from oblivion of useful men, of whom there exists no separate memorial’.³⁶ The Nonconformist obituaries felt a scriptural and natural mandate to pay honour to their dead, and they used the memoirs and obituaries in their denominational magazines to do so. The evangelical Nonconformist obituaries served as far more than public announcements of deaths. They were summaries of Nonconformist culture and convictions. Although they primarily communicated with the faithful, they were also historical records of thousands of Victorian Nonconformists, from the most obscure to the most prominent.

Who wrote and edited the obituaries?

The purposes of the obituaries are further informed by some understanding of who wrote and edited them. The final published obituary was probably the product of a number of contributors, starting with the recollections and insights of someone at the deathbed, the drafting of an obituary by a friend, family member, or minister, the careful editing of the magazine editor and a final review by the editorial board.³⁷

Editorship and denominational oversight could be just as important to the obituaries as authorship, if not more so. The Primitive Methodist memoirs were often written by friends or family while the shorter obituaries were often written by the minister. However, the author’s name at the end of the entry was usually accompanied by denominational approval. The 1834 issues of *The Primitive Methodist Magazine* include many examples of this endorsement: Edward Thompson’s memoir composed by William Richardson was ‘approved

³⁶ *BM* 1855, p. 302 (Rev Samuel Kent).

³⁷ In his history of the Methodist Book Room, Frank Cumbers comments on Wesleyan Methodist obituaries, noting that they were ‘drafted by someone who has a close knowledge of the man concerned, submitted to the Synod of the District in which he lived, edited by the Connexional Editor and a small committee, run the gauntlet of publication in the *Conference Agenda*, and receive the approval of the Conference itself’. F. Cumbers, *The Book Room: the Story of the Methodist Publishing House and Epworth Press* (London: Epworth Press, 1956), p. 91.

by the quarterly meeting',³⁸ revealing that the obituary of a deceased member was sent up to the quarterly meeting for it to be adopted as official record. Indeed, by the 1870s the Primitive Methodist obituaries fell under the section entitled 'Connexional Biography', indicating that they were denominational statements as much as accounts of individual spiritual journeys.

The Wesleyan obituaries underwent an approval process as well, and the person appointed as editor of the Methodist Book Room had a central role to play in any denominational publications, including the obituary sections of *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*. There were three editors during the period under consideration: Thomas Jackson, William Thorndike and Benjamin Gregory. Thomas Jackson took over the editorship of *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* in 1824 and continued in that role down to 1842. His reflections suggest that he sought to guard the denomination from both internal and external attacks, and saw the magazine as a shield against damage to its honour. His comments also make it clear that the role of the editor was to review meticulously every word that appeared in the denominational magazine, including the obituaries.

Eighteen years I spent in this service ...reporting the progress of the Gospel at home and abroad; censuring books of bad tendency, commending such books as were likely to benefit the general reader; supplying illustrations of particular texts of Holy Scriptures; refuting error, repelling the attacks of hostile parties; expounding the truth in the form of sermons, and of doctrinal essays; and *especially exhibiting the nature and power of Christianity in the holy lives and peaceful deaths of individual believers*.³⁹

Jackson 'was aware that to please all readers of *The Methodist Magazine* was an impossibility ... *The Methodist Magazine*, I remembered, too, is the official organ of a large body of religious people whose every movement is watched by hostile parties, and anything erroneous ... would bring upon the hapless Editor a clamorous outcry, because the honour of

³⁸ *PMM* 1834.

³⁹ Jackson, *Recollections of My Own Life and Times*, p. 214. (emphasis mine)

the Body would be compromised and its enemies gain a triumph.’⁴⁰ In many ways the magazine was a tool of the Methodist Conference to be used to publicise and maintain standards of orthodoxy within the denomination. When necessary, editors were expected to use a heavy hand when preparing the monthly issue for publication.

William Lockwood Thornton, editor of the magazine from 1851 to 1865, was described as ‘a vigilant observer of the tendencies of current thought, ever ready to rebuke the follies of “modern scepticism”’.⁴¹ Jackson and Thornton influenced the magazine under their care, perhaps because they believed that ‘one object that Mr Wesley had in view when he commenced his monthly Magazine was to provide a regular medium of self-defence against hostile attacks’.⁴² They saw themselves as the guardians of Methodism and it is reasonable to assume that the obituaries and memoirs were edited with a view to presenting to the world a ‘respectable’ Methodism and an increasingly strong identity as a denomination.

Benjamin Gregory, editor from 1868 to 1893, arrived at a time when Methodism had gained a measure of cultural acceptability. He did not have to be as defensive as his predecessors and thus he felt free to be more creative and take some risks. He was the first to arrange for a fund for the payment of contributors – all contributions had previously been on a voluntary basis. ‘From the beginning of his editorship it became almost an independent magazine ... As an editor my father had always a kindly welcome for young and unknown writers, and greatly rejoiced when he had made a discovery.’⁴³ However, it should be noted that:

He believed that the mission of the *Methodist Magazine* was to defend and expound the truth of God, to illustrate God’s providential government, to advocate the extension of the kingdom of God both at home and abroad, *to show the power of the*

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 211.

⁴¹ Elchett, *Wesley and His Successors*, p. 202, in F. Cumbers, *The Book Room*, p. 123.

⁴² Jackson, *Recollections of My Own Life and Times*, p. 212.

⁴³ J. R. Gregory, *Benjamin Gregory: autobiographical recollections edited with memorials of his later life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903), pp. 428-28.

Gospel as exhibited in the life and death of the saints, to cultivate the deepest spiritual life, and to criticise with relentless vigour, but as he conscientiously believed with absolute fairness, all forms of erroneous teaching. ... My father's views of an Editor's duties and responsibilities were those of the old school, and he dealt with his contributors as the early editors of the Quarterly dealt with theirs. He abridged ruthlessly, and exercised the powers of a literary and theological censor relentlessly'.⁴⁴

Jackson, Thornton and Gregory had a clear sense of their roles as editors, and their responsibility to their denomination.

Some insight into *The Evangelical Magazine* and *The Baptist Magazine* can be gained from the prefaces. The Congregationalists felt a particularly strong need to proclaim the status of *The Evangelical Magazine* as a publication with no denominational bias, harking back to its origins in 1793, a time of pronounced ecumenism in the evangelical community due in part to the end of French power and the rise of atheism in France after the French Revolution as well as its effect on the Papacy in Europe.⁴⁵ The preface to the 1834 edition of the magazine states:

To the true principles of catholic and comprehensive piety, in which the Evangelical Magazine originated, its present conductors are determined most rigidly to adhere; but in that adherence it will be impossible for them to overlook the spirit of the age, and the altered circumstances in which they find themselves placed. With confidence they can appeal to their pages, from the beginning to the present moment, and assert, that they have preserved more of neutral ground than any of their contemporaries. There are occasions, however, in which they feel themselves bound to speak out in the strong language of rebuke; but whenever this is the case, as it is when notorious infringement has been made upon those principles of charity and good will, which ought to bind all Christians in the bonds of a common brotherhood.⁴⁶

The Congregational obituaries often refer to catholicity and religious tolerance within the Protestant faith as virtues, and this did not diminish with the passing years. In 1852 it was stated that James Knight had 'a spirit of wise catholicity towards all those who loved the Lord Jesus, whatever might be their sect, denomination or party.'⁴⁷ John Sibree's 1877 obituary

⁴⁴ Gregory, *Benjamin Gregory*, pp. 429-30. (emphasis mine)

⁴⁵ W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), pp. 44-45.

⁴⁶ *EM* 1834, p. iv (Preface).

⁴⁷ *EM* 1852, pp. 121-24 (Rev James Knight).

notes that he had ‘a sincerity of conviction but was not narrow or sectarian. He was a catholic Christian ... attached to the polity and freedom of our Independent Churches ... appreciated the value of character and labour in other denominations.’⁴⁸ The editors hoped to use the memoirs and obituaries in their quest to achieve a balance between catholicity and orthodoxy. The purposes outlined by the editors in the prefaces of the 1830s are in evidence down to 1880.

The prefaces to *The Baptist Magazine*, unlike *The Evangelical Magazine*, were signed by the editor and provide some information about his role, and changes to the content.⁴⁹ The 1830 preface prioritises ‘experimental religion’ and states that ‘We have endeavoured also to guard against those extremes in theology to which many good men are prone, especially the error of urging on man his obligations to duty in such a manner as to compromise our essential dependence on supernatural aid.’⁵⁰ The 1830 issue then opens with a facsimile from an engraving in *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* with the heading: ‘A lively picture, describing the weight and substance of God’s most blessed word, against the doctrines and vanities of men’s traditions.’⁵¹ This engraving and heading indicated a separation between God’s standards and those of men, a separation between heaven and earth: a theme that the reader would expect to find reflected in the pages of the magazine in the 1830s, including the sections on death.

The 1854 preface notes the character of a Christian gentleman: ‘The duties of its editor cannot be discharged properly by any man who does not realize the solemnity of his

⁴⁸ *EM* 1877, p. 288 and pp. 343-4 (Rev John Sibree).

⁴⁹ Between 1815 and 1837 an editorial committee presided; however, beginning in 1838 the names of the editors appeared in the prefaces: William Groser (1838-1856), Samuel Manning (1857-1860), Daniel Katterns (1861-1863), C. H. Spurgeon (1861-1862) and W. G. Lewis (1861-1865). R. Taylor, ‘English Baptist Periodicals 1790-1865,’ *Baptist Quarterly* 27.2 (April 1977), pp. 50-82.

⁵⁰ *BM* 1830, pp. i, iii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. vi.

position. On his integrity, faithfulness, and skill, it depends.’⁵² The obituaries of the 1850s paid tribute to these prized qualities of respectability and gentlemanliness.⁵³ By 1862, the editor wrote in the preface: ‘Our readers will perceive by the announcement on the covers that we have made arrangements for the ensuing year which will secure for the Magazine the assistance of a large number of the most influential names in our denomination.’⁵⁴ 1863 brought an even stronger statement of engagement with the world: ‘Without sacrificing any of the objects which our fathers had in view when they projected this work, we hope in the coming year so far to popularize its contents, as to render it an attractive visitor in the numerous families connected with our congregations.’⁵⁵ The 1874 issue of the *Baptist Magazine* begins not with a biography but with an article about ‘Work: A Motto for the New Year’ – doing one’s duty as daily shown by God. This motto is amply supported in the obituaries of the period. John Candlish, a Baptist and Member of Parliament for Sunderland who died at 58 in 1874, is described as ‘a prince among men’ who ‘gave away large sums of money’ and had a ‘force of character and boundless capacity for work’. He was ‘not a genius’ but had a ‘conscientious and indomitable determination to make the best of himself – a moral quality independent of circumstances’. His Liberalism was ‘of an advanced type.’⁵⁶ The prefaces, the tone of the articles and the obituaries mirrored each other in shifting emphasis from the evangelical Nonconformist subculture to broader cultural standards of Liberalism, self-improvement and hard work. Moreover, the fact that the magazine no longer opened with a memoir suggests that the emphasis on death was decreasing. The prefaces show a progression from an emphasis on experimental religion to respectability to cultural

⁵² *BM* 1854, p. iv (Preface).

⁵³ See pp. 120-23.

⁵⁴ *BM* 1862, p. iii (Preface).

⁵⁵ *BM* 1863, p. iii (Preface).

⁵⁶ *BM* 1874, pp. 270-80 (John Candlish, M. P.).

engagement, thus encapsulating several aspects of the development of Nonconformity from 1830 down to 1880.

CONTENT

Thus the formulaic structure of the obituaries (how they were written) was used by the authors and editors (who wrote them) to produce the desired purpose (why they were written). Within the four-tiered structure comprising early life, conversion, post-conversion life and death was content that reflected a variety of literary conventions that presented Nonconformist belief and experience in a way that would be familiar to the reader. The conventions that were present to varying degrees dependent upon the period are the Romantic element, which combined recognition of the holiness of daily life with a focus on the eternal and unseen world;⁵⁷ an attempt to balance an idealised view of death, where the dying person is a heroic figure, with a strict adherence to an accurate representation of the circumstances; the transmission of Nonconformist theological orthodoxy;⁵⁸ a focus on the last words of the dying; the use of particular words and phrases to describe death; and the inclusion of excerpts from sermons, diaries, letters, testimonials and occasionally secular obituaries. Moreover, Bible verses and hymn stanzas are interwoven throughout the obituaries. These conventions point back not only to the four-fold structure of the obituaries, but also to the heart of Evangelicalism. How far did the formulaic nature of the obituaries distance the accounts from the reality of death so as to invalidate them as historical sources, and how far may they be regarded as accurate representations of Nonconformist death?

⁵⁷ This feature will be discussed in Chapter Six,

⁵⁸ This feature will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Taming death

By the 1850s it was increasingly common to idealise the obituary subject and write about him or her in an elaborate manner. The 1854 obituary of William Jay, Congregational minister of Bath, described as a ‘rapid sketch’, is approximately 5,600 words in length. It states that ‘In the annals of pure, solid, popular, evangelical preaching there is not a more illustrious name to be found. It is without a shadow or a stain. The halo from the Cross that shone around it when village rustics hung upon his lips, continued to shine on with augmented brightness, when rank and fashion thronged around him.’⁵⁹ Was the name of William Jay literally without stain, and was a halo shining around him as he preached? It is unlikely that either of these remarks was strictly accurate. Was he a solid, popular, evangelical preacher- even a virtuous and charismatic one? Yes: it seems reasonable to assume from what we know of Jay that this is an accurate description. His autobiography recounts some of his last words, which point to a balanced view: “‘I do not murmur – allow me to groan. It seems to ease my pain. Objects most dear and attractive now fail to interest. Oh for a grateful heart! I have made some little stir in life, but now I am nothing. God seems to be saying, ‘I can do without you.’”⁶⁰ His doctor recalled that his last illness was long and painful, with ‘great sufferings and sleepless nights, over which medicine had little or no control’. Moreover, he states that ‘Mr. Jay through life had always a natural fear of death – that is, of the agonies of the dying struggle – but even all this he was at last quite freed from.’⁶¹ The portrait of William Jay as a heroic, almost mythical figure is belied by these statements of fact. Yet the description of Jay as perfect and holy seems to suggest that he

⁵⁹ *EM* 1854, pp. 125-33 (Rev William Jay).

⁶⁰ G. Redford and J. A. James, eds., *The Autobiography of William Jay* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 234. (Originally published 1854)

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-53. (‘Dr. Bowie’s Recollections of Mr. Jay’)

already had one foot in heaven, almost beyond the reach of physical deterioration and the common lot of mortals.

The phrases that appeared among the last words to indicate the final moments of the dying person and his or her departure from the body often suggested triumph and freedom. They were literary conventions in that they were indeed conventional: phrases that would be expected and understood by the reader. Formulaic phrases about death usually combined biblical and poetic content with emotions such as happiness and peace, confirmation of the person's readiness for heaven by referring to the deceased as 'the righteous', and activity such as flight or departure. Moreover, there is a sense of separation and completion. John Williams was a Wesleyan Methodist who died in 1855 at 75. His biographical sketch states that 'he bore with meekness and resignation the pains of dissolving nature. When his silver cord was loosed, it was with such tenderness that even the last sigh of the soul, when leaving all dear on earth, was not heard. The spirit silently winged its glad flight to the paradise of God.' His last words, taken from Paul's letter to the Romans, were 'O grave! Where is thy victory? O death! Where is thy sting?'⁶² This closure to the obituary includes quotations from both the New Testament and the Old ('the silver cord was loosed' is from Ecclesiastes 12:6) and a strong indication of complete separation from the earth and physical body: 'dissolving nature', 'the last sigh of the soul', 'leaving all dear on earth'. There was a sharp separation between earth and heaven. This combination of biblical and poetic content to indicate death is an example of formulaic phrasing.

The obituary subjects were often referred to as 'the righteous' because, theologically, their righteousness before God was essential for a good death. Mary Crabtree, a Primitive Methodist millworker of Manchester who died at 37 in 1854, 'joyfully looked forward to a

⁶² *WMM* 1855, pp 569-70 (John Williams).

glorious immortality ... She lived the life of the righteous, and died their happy death.’⁶³ Mary Dawes, a Primitive Methodist of Tadcaster in North Yorkshire, died in 1835 at 67. Her dying words from Job 14:14 were: “‘All the days of my appointed time will I wait till my change come’” and her obituary is full of formulaic phrases. ‘She slept in the arms of Jesus. Her happy spirit took its flight to the paradise of rest ...’⁶⁴ How did the spirit take its flight? What does the paradise of rest look like? Did she literally sleep in the arms of Jesus? The final words of her obituary are typical of the poetic turn of many of the obituaries, particularly the early ones, using symbolic language to express the inexpressible – moving away from the literal into the figurative.

The contrast between the uncertainty and grief of this life are often contrasted with the security and joy of the next, and this contrast is expressed in symbolic language. John Tomlinson, a Primitive Methodist of Grimsby in Lincolnshire, drowned while swimming at 22 when cramp seized him and efforts by his companions to save him failed. The writer of his obituary stated, ‘[W]e felt a satisfactory confidence that his happy soul had taken its flight to the abodes of the spirits of just men made perfect, to mingle his theme of triumphant rapture with the shining millions of happy souls who sing salvation to our God.’⁶⁵ In Tomlinson’s obituary we see the dramatic contrast between a deadly accident in this world and his joy in heaven, along with another Bible verse: ‘the spirits of just men made perfect’ from Hebrews 12:23. J. T. Gray was a Baptist of Bristol who died in 1855 from a burst blood vessel in the lungs at 45. ‘His mother, bending over his emaciated form, was in the act of repeating the lines of a hymn “when the spirit winged its happy flight to mansions in the skies”’.⁶⁶ The contrast between the emaciated form and the winged spirit was evocative for those who saw

⁶³ *PMM* 1854, p. 697 (Mary Crabtree).

⁶⁴ *PMM* 1836, pp. 425-26 (Mary Dawes).

⁶⁵ *PMM* 1836, pp. 336-37 (John Tomlinson).

⁶⁶ *BM* 1855, pp. 1-7 (Rev J. T. Gray).

death in the home all the time. This was conventional in that it would have been acceptable language and imagery for a Bible-believing, chapel-going evangelical Nonconformist of the nineteenth century in England. However, the idealisation of the subject coupled with the moulding of the obituary by scripture and poetic imagery also served to make the stark reality of death more palatable for the reader.

Accuracy of representation

The Nonconformists also made a point of stating facts clearly in their obituaries, and thereby balanced the idealised with the literal. There is evidence that details of the death scene were written down almost immediately and thus were likely to be simple and accurate amidst the exhaustion of ministering to the ill and the emotion of the loss. The 1855 obituary of J. Pocock, a Primitive Methodist miller, explains that he left his home at 5 pm to work at night and was last seen alive at 3 am. ‘He fell into the flour room when the flour was descending with great velocity and was found about 6 o’clock quite dead.’⁶⁷ Pocock’s obituary exemplifies the attention that was often given to details concerning time, date, place and circumstances of death. The 1830 memoir of a Congregationalist, Marina Ross, includes an account of her last moments from her husband, who was with her to the end. The obituary author notes that ‘About four hours previous to her death, her husband was sitting by her bedside – she was then in acute pain ... About midnight the signs of approaching dissolution became apparent; and about one o’clock in the morning of Nov. 3rd, she fell asleep in Jesus, leaving a husband and five children to mourn their severe loss.’⁶⁸ The obituaries are full of such vivid details that do not spare the reader from the reality of death.

⁶⁷ *PMM* 1855, pp. 68-69 (J. Pocock).

⁶⁸ *EM* 1830, pp. 1-4 (Mrs Marina Ross).

Indeed, the death narrative was not always an entirely happy story; this was particularly evident in the obituaries of the 1870s. Christiana Hammond, a Wesleyan of Leeds, died in 1879 at 81 and her obituary included some conflicting views. The author, her son, states that her death was preceded by ‘four months of painless decay’. However, a friend paints a rather disappointing picture of her death, stating that her last affliction was ‘painful and mysterious’ and that ‘great joy shone through the cloud of anxieties which overshadowed her approach to the grave’. Mrs Hammond ‘had often desired and prayed for a triumphant departure, for a death in which she might witness a good confession; but God ordered it otherwise. It pleased Him that she should rather bear witness that the way in which we *live* is the chief concern.’⁶⁹ References in her obituary to anxiety, pain and mystery at the point of death represent a departure from the joy and peace of the formulaic.

Other obituaries were surprisingly forthright about the personalities of their subjects. William Swinden was a Primitive Methodist and a shoemaker of Tadcaster in North Yorkshire who died suddenly at 71 in 1879. The author of his obituary explained that: ‘His natural temperament was a little peculiar, and on some occasions his manner, to a stranger especially, would appear rather repulsive.’⁷⁰ Words like ‘peculiar’ and ‘repulsive’ are not what one would expect to find in these carefully edited obituaries. They indicate a desire to give an accurate portrayal of the obituary subject, perhaps recognising that it would be difficult for readers to relate to perfection. W. R. Smart, a Congregationalist and a teacher of Nottingham, who died at 26 in 1854 exclaimed ‘It is a startling thing to look around, and say, and know, I have done with all things here! In this world all over our knowledge reaches us through the *senses* and one is led to wonder how it will be *there*. And yet why harass the mind? For the moment that dispels all doubt will reveal the glorious truth.’⁷¹ This was a

⁶⁹ *WMM* 1879, pp. 556-58 (Mrs Christiana Hammond).

⁷⁰ *PMM* 1879, pp. 376-77 (William Swinden).

⁷¹ *The Christian Witness* (hereafter *CW*) 1854, pp. 327-30 (W. R. Smart).

statement of considerable complexity when compared with some of the neat combinations of biblical reference, theological affirmation, happy anticipation of heaven and evidence of a life well-lived that were the standard formulae of the obituaries. Mary Scropton, a Baptist, expressed some doubts in 1873: 'I cannot understand *why* my Heavenly Father should make me suffer so much.'⁷² Candid remarks concerning doubts, eccentricity of character, philosophical musings on this world and the next, anxiety, suffering and death that emerged in the 1870s, did not accord with the typical obituaries of the previous era.

Biography and autobiography were exceptionally popular during the period under consideration. As Thomas Carlyle expressed it, 'The History of the world is but the Biography of great men.'⁷³ Biography could lend itself to the fanciful. In his 1854 autobiography, William Jay referred to the appeal of biography in his day: 'The present rage for biography is excessive and notorious. Such is the voracity of its appetite that it frequently waits not for the license which death is supposed to give.'⁷⁴ However, the Nonconformists allude to both the importance of biography and the dangers of fiction. *The Baptist Magazine* explained its policy of not reviewing novels in 1812: 'The region of fact supplies such combinations of character, principle, and circumstances, as are fully adequate to every purpose of moral persuasion or spiritual instruction.'⁷⁵ In 1800 *The Methodist Magazine* justified its inclusion of biography:

Few subjects, except those immediately of a religious nature ... have a greater tendency to promote humility, benevolence, and piety. The man whose heart is enlarged with LOVE TO GOD, necessarily feels an interest in the concerns of his fellow creatures; hence arises a desire to know the events which have taken place among men. The man whose heart glows with LOVE TO MAN, will naturally be

⁷² *BM* 1873, pp. 463-64 (Mrs Mary Scropton).

⁷³ T. Carlyle, *Thomas Carlyle's Collected Works, Vol. XII, Heroes and Hero Worship* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869), p. 34.

⁷⁴ Redford and James, eds., *The Autobiography of William Jay*, p. 12.

⁷⁵ *The Baptist Magazine* 4 (1812), 391-92, in S. Pickering, Jr., *The Moral Tradition in English Fiction, 1785-1850* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1976), p. 67.

stimulated to beneficent actions, by instances placed before him, of distinguished zeal and industry.⁷⁶

Moreover, the great importance placed on stories of individual lives and choices, in both non-fiction and fiction, made memoirs and obituaries popular and familiar. Even the titles of fiction between 1830 and 1880 give some indication of this focus on the individual: *Doctor Thorne*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Ruth*, *Adam Bede* and *The Heir of Redclyffe* are just a few examples of how larger issues are considered through the critical decisions of one person. The Nonconformist obituaries were biographical sketches, often - especially down to 1870 - telling the story of a pilgrimage through life to death in remarkable detail.

This emphasis on the individual story is central to an understanding of the obituaries. In the 1830 memoir of Harriett Lewis, wife of David Lewis, a Congregational minister of Newport in Shropshire, we learn that ‘Harriett Lewis was born at Aston, a small village near Newport ...’ We read about her parents, the death of her father, her attachment to books, her education as a governess, her duties as a teacher in a seminary from the age of 16 to 21, her fondness for worldly amusement, her conversion under the preaching of ‘Rev. Mr Hartley of Lilleshall’, her concerns for the children in her care, her marriage, the serious illness of all of her children and the death of one, her own illness and death.⁷⁷ The memoir is written in exhaustive detail – and this is not unusual. The shorter 1855 obituary of James Taplin also tells the story of his life, beginning ‘Mr James Taplin was born at East Cowes, in the Isle of Wight ...’ and continuing with his removal to Portsea with his parents, the bad influence of ‘youths of dissipated character’, the commencement of his spiritual life under the ministry of the Rev. John Griffin, his position as an officer in the sail loft at the Dockyard, Portsmouth, his many children, his domestic cares, his talent for letter writing, his job promotion ... the

⁷⁶ *The Methodist Magazine* 23 (1800), 374, in Pickering, *The Moral Tradition in English Fiction*, pp. 66-67.

⁷⁷ *EM* 1830, pp. 421-26 (Mrs Harriett Lewis).

story goes on, with a ‘to be continued in our next ...’.⁷⁸ Many of the Nonconformist obituaries valued evidence of commonplace virtues in everyday life; some are comprehensive and practical accounts of evangelical Nonconformist lives, rich in details of daily existence.

External documentation such as excerpts from diaries, letters, sermons and secular newspapers also lent authenticity to the obituaries. The Nonconformist determination to place a high value on individual experience of God was not only in keeping with evangelical spirituality but also with the trends of the times when maintaining diaries and commonplace books and engaging in extensive letter writing were usual and encouraged. This historical confluence provided another resource for gaining insight into Nonconformist death. Much of the Wesleyan Mary Ivey’s obituary in 1831 was taken from her ‘memorandum book’.⁷⁹ J. Harrison, a Baptist, received an obituary in 1872 that included lengthy excerpts from his diary and a long letter quoted in its entirety at the end.⁸⁰ Stephen Mundy, a Baptist of London who died in 1832, kept a diary for 61 of his 77 years, and his obituary included excerpts reflecting his devotional life, his church commitments and the major transitions of his life.⁸¹ The diary reflections and letters sometimes continued to the point of the obituary subject’s final illness, conveying thoughts about the nearness of death. Moreover, they were certainly not intended for publication and thus did not intentionally serve a Nonconformist purpose or agenda.

It was not uncommon to see funeral sermons and personal testimonies cited, particularly among Baptists, as in the cases of Stephen Glover of London who died in 1871 at 57⁸² and William Hague of Scarborough whose 1832 obituary was taken from the funeral

⁷⁸ *EM* 1855, pp. 92-94 (James Taplin).

⁷⁹ *WMM* 1831, p. 83 (Mrs Mary Ivey).

⁸⁰ *BM* 1872, pp. 722-28 (J. Harrison).

⁸¹ *BM* 1832, pp. 329-33 (Stephen Mundy).

⁸² *BM* 1871, pp. 305-306 (Stephen Glover).

sermon.⁸³ Hundreds of obituaries, especially from the mid-1850s onwards, also included testimonies from friends, as in the 1856 memoir of W. M. O'Hanlon, a Congregationalist of Lancashire, which included a lengthy commentary from Samuel Davidson, the Presbyterian turned Congregationalist who was Professor of Biblical Literature in the Lancashire Independent College from 1842 to 1857.⁸⁴ This supporting documentation was not necessarily intended for publication, but contributed additional authenticity to the denominational memoirs and obituaries, and indeed was probably included precisely for that purpose.

A number of Nonconformist ministers and businessmen received obituaries in secular publications, particularly those of the larger towns and increasingly with the passing years. When this was the case, excerpts from secular sources would sometimes be included in the denominational magazine obituaries. William Roby, minister for 35 years at Grosvenor Street Chapel in Manchester, who died in 1830 of a 'deep-rooted asthma', received a substantial obituary in the *Manchester Times* for 16 January, which then became a source for an obituary in *The Evangelical Magazine*. The secular obituary has a respectful and even affectionate tone, which probably was due to the likelihood that its authors knew Roby since Manchester had a significant Nonconformist population. The obituary focuses on Roby's ministry in Manchester and the circumstances of his death. 'Mr Roby assiduously discharged the duties of his sacred office, and prosecuted, with preeminent success, a career of usefulness ... perhaps, no one, of the present day, has furnished a more worthy example of every thing that gives energy to religious character, and secures respect for the ministers of Christ.'⁸⁵ These

⁸³ *BM* 1832, pp. 276-80 (Rev William Hague).

⁸⁴ *EM* 1856, pp. 241-44 (Rev W. M. O'Hanlon).

⁸⁵ *EM* 1830, pp. 71-72 (Rev W. Roby).

independent sources broadened the scope and appeal of the denominational account, and sometimes contributed a more formal style.

Secular obituaries became more commonly quoted in the denominational magazines of the 1870s. Thomas Hamilton was founder and head of the publishing firm Hamilton, Adams and Co. of London and died at 94, receiving an obituary in the *Weekly Review* of 5 January 1878, which was quoted in *The Evangelical Magazine*: 'Erect in form, genial in disposition, simple in living, warm in friendship, brilliant in conversation, sincere in conviction, truthful in statement, diligent in business, liberal in giving – such was Thomas Hamilton ... To those who had the privilege of his friendship there is a blank which only memory, and that but feebly, can fill.'⁸⁶ James Matheson, a Congregational minister at Friar Lane, Nottingham, for 23 years, died at 52 in 1878. He received an obituary in the *Nottingham Express*, which was quoted in *The Evangelical Magazine*: his removal by death would be 'felt to be a public loss by every class of his fellow townsmen who value the spread of knowledge, true social refinement, religious faith, and Christian charity'.⁸⁷ These newspaper obituaries primarily dwelt on two of the four parts of the formula: the way the faith was lived out and the narrative of the death, with an emphasis on the former. A brief consideration of early life was sometimes included, although conversion and theology were not normally considered.

By the 1870s the Nonconformist obituaries, particularly those of the Old Dissent but to an increasing degree those of the Methodists, were beginning to mirror these areas of emphasis. This was not necessarily an attempt to imitate secular publications so much as a sign of further integration with the larger culture and the fact that some of the obituary subjects were assuming more prominent positions in secular society. The inclusion of

⁸⁶ *EM* 1878, pp. 216-20 (Thomas Hamilton).

⁸⁷ *EM* 1878, pp. 287-90 (James Matheson).

excerpts from other documents constituted supporting evidence for the claims of the obituary author, and these excerpts sometimes provided a broader cultural backdrop for the reader, offering a glimpse into how the evangelical Nonconformist obituary subject fitted into or stood apart from that setting.

Thus the obituaries combined a portrayal of death that was romanticised with factual statements. The idealisation of the subject coupled with the moulding of the obituary by scripture and poetic imagery served to make the stark reality of death more palatable for the reader. However, even these formulaic features represent genuine aspects of Nonconformist culture in the mid-nineteenth century. They do not detract from the value of the obituaries as valid historical sources for understanding Nonconformist death in the mid-nineteenth century; rather, they assist in a comprehensive vision of Nonconformity at the time. Combined with descriptions of the most commonplace features of the life of the deceased, the vivid details of the final illness or accident that culminated in the death and the inclusion of excerpts from external documents, the obituaries represent the authentic communal values of evangelical Nonconformity.

Change over time

Over the fifty years between 1830 and 1880 there was some movement towards a less formulaic and in some ways less spiritual obituary. This change was manifested in a number of ways. In the 1870s the qualities of the deceased as considered worthy of emulation were a little more down-to-earth than in the 1830s. Harvey Leigh, a Primitive Methodist of Barnsley in Yorkshire died in 1878 at 62. He had ‘relinquished a lucrative employment’ in order to enter ‘the ranks of the regular ministry’. The author warned: ‘Let not the reader imagine that Brother Leigh was a man whose religious enjoyment consisted in sentiment, or song. He was

too solid for that. He was too much of a “matter-of-fact” man to live in a region like this.’⁸⁸ Here, the deceased was portrayed as being successful in both worldly and spiritual matters.

By the 1870s the words used to describe death in the Old Dissent also became more passive. While the Methodists used both active and passive words down to 1880, the Congregationalists and Baptists frequently replaced such words as ‘flight’ and ‘departure’ with ‘sleep’ and ‘rest’. In 1876, W. P. Jarrold, a Congregationalist of Norwich, ‘entered rest’.⁸⁹ When J. E. Giles, a Baptist minister, died in 1875, he ‘passed away, like one who had fallen asleep’.⁹⁰ These words and phrases indicate an ease concerning death: a fluid transition from one world to the next rather than a dramatic break with the ‘vale of tears’.

Over time, a shift in emphasis from the second and fourth sections of the four-fold formula (conversion and death) to the third section (the living out of the faith) took place. By the 1850s, the obituaries also began to include references to a more prosperous lifestyle, and this progression into the solid middle classes is conveyed in tones of admiration and respect.⁹¹ The memoir of Richard Harris, a Baptist of Leicester who died in 1854 at 76, provides a good example. His chief spiritual influence was his mother and he was baptized on 21 September 1800. His father was a master stocking maker but he, Richard, eventually became ‘the principal of one of the most extensive manufacturing and mercantile establishments in the Midland counties’ and a Member of Parliament. He founded a church and erected school rooms at his own expense. Harris’s memoir includes an entire page of closing remarks. The narrative of his death concludes:

When the power of speech had failed, and his end drew very near one of his children observed – ‘Heaven is a place of rest and of love, and our dear father will soon be there.’ He turned and grasped the hand of the speaker with all his remaining strength and with a look of delight and of pleasurable anticipation far more expressive than the

⁸⁸ *PMM* 1879, pp. 49-51 (Rev Harvey Leigh).

⁸⁹ *EM* 1876, p. 670 (W. P. Jarrold).

⁹⁰ *BM* 1875, pp. 399-403 (Rev J. E. Giles).

⁹¹ The topic of social mobility will be considered fully in Chapter Four.

most eloquent language. Death arrived and released him from mortal sufferings and his spirit smoothly and calmly passed from the scenes of earth to those of heaven.⁹²

Thus the obituary balanced an account of rise to the middle classes with some achievements and charitable works with a smooth transition from earth to heaven. Death was still viewed as a release from earthly suffering, but there was a sense that there was more love and more prosperity (though of a different kind) waiting on the other side of the veil.

The 1870s also saw the development of a style that was more formal but less formulaic, and less emotional. More attention was given to this world, to business, to service to church and community, even to politics and to character traits with correspondingly less emphasis on conversion, human depravity and anticipation of heaven as an entirely ‘other’ place. The death narrative was considerably more limited; dying words were included but they were fewer. At the end of a memoir of more than 6,000 words that encompassed his life from his grandparents to his death we learn that William Brock’s last words in 1875 were two: ‘Amen, amen!’⁹³ The 1878 obituary of Thomas Hamilton, the Congregationalist and publisher of London, looks at the intersection of his faith and works, with a strong emphasis on the third part of the four-fold formula:

In his prosperity Mr Hamilton did not forget to help the cause of Christianity. When the devoted David Naismith – after having been instrumental in forming City Missions in fifty towns of England and America – sought to carry out his ideal of united Christian effort in London, Mr Hamilton was one of his coadjutors ... He largely aided the Bishop of London’s Fund for building twelve new churches in Bethnal Green, while in his native place he erected a commodious school-house at his sole expense.⁹⁴

Hamilton served the faith through his activities, many of which were made possible because of his wealth. The obituary of John Brown, a Congregational minister of Matlock in Derbyshire who died in 1880, provides a helpful overview. Reference is made to his alma

⁹² *BM* 1854, pp. 265-69 (Richard Harris).

⁹³ *WMM* 1878, pp. 309-18 (William Brock, D.D.).

⁹⁴ *EM* 1878, pp. 216-220 (Thomas Hamilton).

mater, Blackburn Academy, pastorates and accomplishments. We are told that his parents ‘trained him in the nurture and admonition of the Lord’, although he ‘could not specify the time when marked religious change came over him’. On the morning of 22 March he fell asleep.’ His dying words were simply: ‘I am going through the Epistles of John.’ The end of the obituary concludes with a religious editorial: ‘May we not believe in the higher sphere of service on which he has entered he is now made “ruler over many things?”’⁹⁵ This, although a specific example of a Congregational minister, represents the typical Nonconformist obituary of the very end of the period - more formal in its presentation; vaguer in its attention to personal relationship with God; and more reflective of a fluid transition between earth and heaven. It envisions heaven as a continuation of this life and a place of ongoing service and accomplishments. The style of the obituaries reflects the slow transition over a fifty-year period from a largely heaven-focused to a more earth-focused obituary.

Conclusion

The Nonconformist memoirs and obituaries were indeed formulaic and conventional in both structure and content. They were written and edited with specific and often stated purposes. These purposes included consoling, reassuring and alleviating the fears of those left behind; providing life stories that served as exemplars for piety; stirring up evangelism; offering warnings to the wayward; affirming of the tenets of evangelical religion; and making personal tributes. The writers and editors were aware that they had a mission to fulfil. The structure of the obituaries was based on four key elements: early life, conversion, life of faith and death. This structure reflected the features that were Bible-based and at the heart of Evangelicalism, including the necessity of a conversion experience, belief in the death of

⁹⁵ *EM* 1880, pp. 491-92 (Rev John Brown).

Jesus for the atonement of sins in order to achieve a good death and an active Christian life that reflected a process of sanctification.

The content of the obituaries included conventions that were familiar to the reader, and that combined an idealised with a literal presentation of death. Efforts were made to portray the obituary subject as a heroic figure and death as the source of hopeful anticipation. Words and phrases that combined poetic imagery with Bible and hymn verses communicated that death would bring triumph, freedom, security and joy. However, there was also a determination on the part of the writers and editors to create obituaries that were clear statements of fact replete with vivid details that confirmed dying as a bewildering and complex process. The recounting of the most commonplace occurrences and homely virtues made the obituaries realistic summaries of Nonconformist life. External documentation contributed to the authenticity of these life stories. The balance of content that was formulaic but reflective of Nonconformist culture and spirituality with content that was more objective and factual resulted in obituaries that were authentic representations of mid-nineteenth century evangelical Nonconformist beliefs about death and the afterlife.

The four-fold formula of the obituaries remained largely consistent with the years. However, different sections of the formula were emphasised, depending upon the period. So with the passing years the emphasis was less on conversion from a life of sin and an extended death narrative (the second and fourth parts of the four-fold formula), and more on how the faith was lived out (the third part of the formula). The content of the obituaries was more likely to honour success in the secular realm as well as the spiritual, more attention was given to works and accomplishments and the transition from earth to heaven was perceived as more fluid, with heaven as a continuation of earthly life. While the style was more formal than in previous years and included fewer dying words, it could also be more candid and blunt concerning the person being memorialised. The later obituaries were literally ‘down-to-earth’

portrayals of the obituary subject. The obituaries distorted in some measure the comprehensive clinical and emotional reality of the experience of death in nineteenth century England. However, they did not misrepresent the religious and spiritual reality of death. Rather, the obituaries were authentic accounts that are largely contained within a formula – and even that formula reflects the heart of evangelical Nonconformity.

CHAPTER THREE
EVANGELICAL NONCONFORMIST THEOLOGY
AND DEATHBED PIETY

‘The precious blood of Christ’¹

Evangelical Nonconformist theology during the nineteenth century assumed the existence of the soul and its continued existence after physical death. Any consideration of death among the evangelical Nonconformists must presuppose this underlying theological conviction. The traditional Christian notion about the futility of seeking the fulfilment of hopes in this life would have been warmly embraced by the Nonconformists because they took seriously biblical declarations such as: ‘If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.’ (1 Corinthians 15:19). Their obituaries were often comprehensive summaries of their commitment to evangelical theology, not only because of the central place given to conversion and its accompanying personal relationship with Jesus but also because of the importance placed on holy living. For the Nonconformists, a theology based on forgiveness of sin, a holy life and anticipation of heaven was inseparable from achieving a peaceful and fearless death: this was evident in their dying words and in the descriptive narratives of the obituary authors. Their theological convictions have been analysed in terms of several categories, including the conversion, the atonement, awareness of sin and relationship with and salvation through Jesus. This chapter will explore the ways in which doctrinal positions that relate particularly to evangelical Nonconformist beliefs about death and the afterlife changed or remained consistent from 1830 down to 1880.

¹ *WMM* 1830, p. 69 (Elizabeth Barker).

The obituary authors sought to provide answers to deep theological questions about the unseen aspects of this world and life in the next: was the subject of the obituary saved, and, if so, how did the conversion come about? What were signs of the process of sanctification during the person's lifetime? What did the person have to say about his or her salvation from sin and the prospect of heaven in the final days and hours? What were his or her thoughts and feelings on the threshold of death? One of the stated purposes of the obituary was to function as 'an additional testimony to the value of true religion; and as a proof of its power to cheer and sustain the mind under the pressure of severe bodily suffering'.² One of the routes to answering these questions and fulfilling this purpose was the clear presentation of evangelical Nonconformist theology.

The obituaries reminded the reader of the theological foundations for the hopeful anticipation that many felt at the deathbed. Dying could introduce a new state of mind in the Nonconformist believer, when the hope of heaven was within one's grasp and the end of suffering was near. At such moments, the sense of God's love could be keenly experienced, as in the introduction to the 1830 obituary of George Nathaniel Parnell, a Baptist of London: 'There are states of mind in the consciousness of every believer, when the simplest narrative, illustrating the preciousness of the Redeemer's love, in the chamber of sickness and in the prospect of eternity is of more worth than all the abstract arguments which the most powerful reasoning may have produced.'³ Evangelicals believed that souls were saved not only to glorify God but to enjoy an intimate relationship with him. The prospect of death brought both of these spiritual aspirations within reach. Mrs Ann Walker, a Wesleyan of the Pocklington circuit in the East Riding of Yorkshire, who died in 1854 of 'a cancer on her stomach' at 61, 'was eminently devoted to God and would call nothing religion less than the

² *EM* 1830, p. 27 (H. Teape).

³ *BM* 1830, p. 221-26 (George Nathaniel Parnell).

life of God in the soul ... To keep up her fellowship with God was the great aim of her life.’⁴ Mrs Walker epitomized one of the chief goals and central theological conceptions of every evangelical Nonconformist.

Conversion: encounter with the divine

The conversion narrative is the portion of the obituary where evangelical Nonconformist theology is articulated most explicitly. Many of the obituaries include either a highly detailed description of the person’s conversion or a clear but simple reference as in a number of the Congregational obituaries where the precise moment of conversion could not be identified. Conversion is the most frequently mentioned of all the statistical categories, and, along with references to Jesus, the most consistent over time: it appears 58% of the time in the 1830s, 63% in the 1850s, and 59% in the 1870s. The conversion story clearly held a prominent place among the key life events of the subjects.

The fact that conversion is discussed so frequently in the obituaries, even if briefly, indicates that it was a central feature of evangelical Nonconformity. However, conversion stories differed. The Nonconformists would have resonated with the Puritan Richard Baxter’s statement that ‘God breaketh not all men’s hearts alike’⁵: not all conversions were the same. The 1855 obituary of Thomas Patterson, a Primitive Methodist of Middlesbrough in the North Riding of Yorkshire who died of cholera, a man who ‘grew up in sin and became a drunkard’, recounted that he ‘had a narrow escape from death though the recklessness of some fellow workmen’ and shortly afterwards ‘found peace through believing’ when ‘his impressions were deepened through the preaching of Mr J. Glide [*sic*]’.⁶ The 1854 obituary of Mrs Cook, a Baptist of Leicester, who in her youth attended the Established Church and died

⁴ *WMM* 1854, pp. 401-405 (Mrs Ann Walker).

⁵ L. Bacon, *Select Practical Writings of Richard Baxter: with life of the author*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Durrie and Peck, 1831), p. 28.

⁶ *PMM* 1855, p. 60 (Thomas Patterson).

at 80, states that she ‘was convicted of sin while sitting in the theatre’.⁷ William Coleman Woon, a Congregational minister of Kingswood in Gloucester, was, at an early age, the ‘subject of religious impressions, through the instructions and prayers of a pious grandmother’.⁸ He died at 34 in 1854. Thomas Spence, of the Otley circuit in West Yorkshire, became a Wesleyan when he happened to hear an open-air sermon.⁹ Nonconformist encounters with God did not follow a prescribed pattern: but they always entailed a personal experience.

The conversion stories of the 1830s often exhibit an emotional and vulnerable tone. The 1830 obituary of Elizabeth Southwood, a Wesleyan Methodist of Knapp in the Taunton circuit in Somerset, who died at 33, explains that:

A view of the purity of God, contrasted with her sinfulness, produced feelings that cannot be described. She searched the Bible, found the passage, and was in such distress as alarmed her family; her husband especially was terrified with the apprehension that she was insane ... Unable to bear the anguish of a wounded spirit, on the very same day she came to Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant ... her joy was inexpressibly great.¹⁰

There is a sharp difference between the description of this experience and the conversion of Henry Badger, a Wesleyan minister of Stow-on-the-Wold in Gloucestershire, who died in 1877 at 63. His obituary simply states that he ‘was very early the subject of the strivings of the Holy Spirit, which resulted in his consecration to God’.¹¹ The tone of the conversion story changed over time.

Moreover, the amount of obituary space dedicated to the conversion narrative varied over time. The Congregational accounts of the 1870s could be especially brief. The account of the conversion of Andrew Doncaster, a Wesleyan Methodist, in his 1830 obituary is

⁷ *BM* 1854, pp. 168-69 (Mrs Richard Cook).

⁸ *EM* 1855, pp. 61-64 (Rev William Coleman Woon).

⁹ *WMM* 1855, pp. 378-79 (Thomas Spence).

¹⁰ *WMM* 1830, p. 208 (Elizabeth Southwood).

¹¹ *WMM* 1880, p. 635 (Rev Henry Badger).

approximately 400 words in length; that of Henry Badger in 1880 is a mere 25 words. Thomas Laird, a Congregational minister of Pudsey in Yorkshire, died in 1831 of ‘an inflammatory complaint’; an account of his conversion, which was found among his papers after his death and included in his memoir, is approximately 660 words in length.¹² By contrast, the 1880 obituary of Henry Cresswell, a Congregational minister of Wallingford in Berkshire, who died at 70, recounts his conversion in 30 words.¹³ Regardless of the means, tone or length, some reference to conversion confirmed the supernatural intervention of God at death when an encounter with the supernatural was once again desperately needed. It was an affirmation of what was necessary to obtain eternal life.

The Atonement: the way to heaven

For all denominations considered here, the atonement of Christ for the sins of humanity by means of the crucifixion was the theological focus of the conversion stories as presented in the Nonconformist obituaries. The dying had been convicted of their need for a Saviour at some point in their lives and their readiness for death was based on response to that conviction. References to the atonement occurred primarily in the conversion narrative and in the death narrative of the obituaries. As the door to eternal life, the atoning death of Christ was heartily affirmed in the conversion and then reaffirmed with gratitude at the point of death. The centrality of the atonement for Nonconformist theology of death was unmistakable: without it the dying person had no assurance of eternal life. The obituary of Mrs Bayley, a Wesleyan Methodist of Wednesbury in Staffordshire who died in 1877 at 19 of a protracted illness, stated that ‘through personal trust in a personal Redeemer... [she] entered

¹² *EM* 1832, pp. 1-5 (Rev Thomas Laird).

¹³ *EM* 1880, pp. 257-58 (Rev Henry Cresswell).

into the enjoyment of God's favour'.¹⁴ The atonement was at the heart of the Nonconformist's life story and was often accorded extended space in the obituaries.

The evangelical Nonconformists tended to embrace a particular theory of the atonement. Freedom from sin and death was not the result of Jesus' 'moral influence' – a theory of the atonement that viewed the crucifixion as a means of encouraging human improvement. The moral influence theory typically was not embraced by the evangelical Nonconformists because they did not believe that personal growth was the cause of their justification before a holy God. Certainly, they believed that the crucifixion of Jesus was an unparalleled example of sacrificial love; however, it *was* unparalleled and was a once-for-all event. William Simpson, a Wesleyan minister of Guernsey, lay dying of a painful illness at 71 in 1878, and

felt himself approaching the spirit-world, and he loved to speak of it. He meditated with holy joy upon some of our hymns which set forth the Atonement as the only but all-sufficient ground of human hope, especially ... that beginning: 'Rock of Ages, cleft for me'.... 'If I had not that now, I do not know what I should do; what should I do with a self-sacrificing martyr only?'¹⁵

For the evangelical Nonconformist, Jesus was not a martyr but a sacrificial lamb.

Nor do the Nonconformist obituaries suggest a belief in the 'satisfaction' theory of the atonement: the belief that the efficacy of the atonement for salvation was the result of Jesus' special merits. The 'merits' of Christ are referred to in varying contexts, as in the case of Jesse Hall, a Congregationalist of Christchurch, Hampshire, who died at 19 on Christmas Eve 1831, two weeks after 'the accidental discharge of a fowling-piece'. The author of the obituary states that Hall 'felt it to be his bounden duty through life to show forth the death of him through whose merits he was brought into fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the

¹⁴ *WMM* 1880, pp. 632-33 (Mrs Bayley).

¹⁵ *WMM* 1878, pp. 561-66 (Rev William Simpson).

Spirit'.¹⁶ Shortly before her death in 1834, Mrs Samuel Bruce, a Congregationalist of Wakefield in the West Riding of Yorkshire stated: "I come as a poor, helpless, guilty sinner, cast myself at the footstool, and rest, for acceptance, on the alone and sufficient merits of Christ".¹⁷ However, as in these cases, 'merit' was actually a means of indicating the inadequacy of human virtue for salvation. This is clearly the case of James Barnett, a Wesleyan of Tattershall in the Coningsby circuit, who exclaimed on his deathbed in 1877 (incorporating both a reference to 1 Timothy 1:15 and Charles Wesley's hymn 'Let the World Their Virtues Boast') "'Oh, I have been nothing! I am nothing! I the chief of sinners am, but Jesus died for me!".¹⁸ The merits of Christ chiefly consisted in the achievement of his crucifixion.

Thus, the evangelical Nonconformists believed that they were justified before God through their faith in the death of Jesus Christ. Richard Brown, a Wesleyan Methodist of London, who died in 1830 at 63 'was awakened by the Holy Spirit to see and feel himself a sinner, and that salvation was only attainable through faith in the atonement of Christ'.¹⁹ The obituary of Jane Foster, who died at 28 in 1833 four days after giving birth, recalls her conviction of sin and conversion:

And from a consciousness of her depravity and lost condition, she was led to seek the sinner's Friend; and was directed to him by the preaching of the Word; and, like the man-slayer, pursued by the avenger of blood, she, by faith, took speedy refuge in the atonement of Christ; and found the pearl of great price, the salvation of her soul.²⁰

References to the atonement – the belief that forgiveness of sins and enjoyment of eternal life were only possible because of the crucifixion of Christ– appear consistently in the obituaries. However, words such as 'blood' and 'imputed righteousness' clearly suggest that most

¹⁶ *EM* 1832, pp. 115-16 (Jesse Hall).

¹⁷ *EM* 1834, p. 72 (Mrs Samuel Bruce).

¹⁸ *WMM* 1880, p. 670 (James Barnett).

¹⁹ *WMM* 1830, p. 209 (Richard Brown).

²⁰ *PMM* 1834, pp. 107-9 (Jane Foster).

evangelical Nonconformists were inclined toward the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, with Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb of God, taking on the sins of humanity and dying in their place, thereby satisfying the demands of God's justice. Mrs Maria Hadlow, a Congregationalist of London died at 33 in 1832, leaving her husband and six children. The disease that attacked her brought on premature labour and a raging fever. According to her obituary, the disorder produced insensibility, delirium and insanity. However, there were lucid moments where she made a theological declaration: "'As a sinner I know I cannot be just in the sight of God, but through the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.'"²¹ Jane Barber, a Wesleyan of Leicester who died in 1830, developed 'an interest in the Saviour's blood'.²² Although penal substitutionary atonement tends to be identified with Reformed and Calvinistic theology, it was the primary conviction of the wide range of evangelical Nonconformists considered here, all of whom pointed to justification by faith alone as their doctrinal centre. The dying repeatedly made it clear that they would be lost without Christ, and that their justification before God depended on his atoning sacrifice.

Down to the 1850s explicit references to the atonement are sometimes presented as a matter of doctrinal import and contrasted with unorthodox doctrines. For example, renunciations of Unitarianism and Socinianism, both of which reject the doctrine of the Trinity, appeared with some frequency, particularly among the Congregationalists of the 1830s. Such was the case of a Congregational man named Wells who died in 1834, and claimed that the doctrines of Socinianism 'will not do for a dying hour. No, no. His blood is my only hope.'²³ Acceptance of the atonement was vital for a peaceful death, and any theology that rejected the divinity of Jesus also detracted from the power of his death on the cross to cover sin. At other times references to the atonement were less explicitly doctrinal

²¹ *EM* 1832, pp. 27-28 (Mrs Maria Hadlow).

²² *WMM* 1830, p. 208 (Mrs Jane Barber).

²³ *EM* 1834, p. 70 (Mr Wells).

but accompanied exclamations of joy at its effects. In the 1850s the dying were still proclaiming that they were sinners saved by grace, as in the case of Mrs Brock, a Congregationalist: ‘Lord, I am nothing, have nothing, can do nothing. Thou must save and thou alone.’²⁴ The dying took comfort in the work of the Saviour, as they faced the unknown realm of what awaited them.

One notable development was that the explicit references to the doctrine of the atonement in the death narratives of the Old Dissent decreased dramatically between 1830 and 1880, and particularly between 1855 and 1880: from 21% to 16% to 2% for the Congregationalists, and from 15% to 19 % to 2% for the Baptists. The sharp decrease in references came in the 1870s, when the emphasis in the four-fold obituary formula²⁵ shifted to the third section: the living out of the faith. Previously, the theology of the atonement had been forthrightly present in the second and fourth sections - the conversion story and the death narrative. In these later obituaries, it was common to find the deathbed dialogue replaced by an account written by the obituary author, or to find an abbreviated summary of just a few lines. Among the Congregationalists, fewer last words were recorded, decreasing from 40% in the 1830s to 19% in the 1870s. This would inevitably reduce references to the theological convictions of the dying.

While the sharp decrease in references to the atonement was, by the 1870s, in part a function of abbreviated obituaries, it also suggests a movement during the fifty-year period in the theology of the Old Dissenters as it related to death. The dying, or at least those who recorded the deaths, appeared to be distancing themselves from the raw image of blood washing away sin. Attention began to turn, at least among ministers, towards their preaching gifts, their gentlemanly behaviour and their philanthropic efforts, and, while the obituaries

²⁴ *EM* 1853, pp. 604-09 (Mrs Brock).

²⁵ The four-fold obituary formula: early life, conversion narrative, life of faith, death narrative.

continued to cite their orthodoxy, there was a general lack of doctrinal specificity. The 1880 obituary of James Fleming, a Congregational minister of London, closed with an extensive account of how he was honoured by the brethren, the neighbourhood and by God the Father. Some of his last words – ‘I am drawing near my end. I died in the faith I have preached, I have no fear for the future, I shall soon see Him whom I have loved’ - were a contrast to the words recorded in the 1830 obituary of C. T. Milcham, a Baptist minister of London, who died at 48: ‘When questions were put to him as to the state of his mind, his answer was generally a reference to the texts which lay beside him. “That is my rock; I go into eternity resting on that. I feel *reliance* rather than *triumph*; a penitent sinner at the foot of the cross.’”²⁶ Moreover, some ministers were also concerned about the effectiveness of their preaching: ‘Can I have preached as I ought?’ wondered Alfred J. Morris. ‘Many who have heard me will never see heaven.’²⁷ With the increasingly formal tone of the obituaries in the latter period, and the attention paid to human endeavour, reliance solely on the sacrifice of the Redeemer made less practical sense in day-to-day life, and death. The doctrine of the atonement did not suit the atmosphere of the 1870s in the same way that it suited the atmosphere of the 1830s.

Methodist obituaries do not show the same trend. References to the atonement among the Wesleyan Methodists and Primitive Methodists remained steady throughout the period. References among the Wesleyans barely shifted, moving from 16% in the 1830s to 17% in the 1850s to 14% in the 1870s. The pattern among the Primitive Methodists was similar although instances were less frequent, moving from 9% to 11% to 9%. This relative consistency over time partly reflected the internal governance of the Methodist denominations. In the face of multiple denominational splits over the years, Methodists made

²⁶ *BM* 1830, pp. 89-95 (Rev C. T. Milcham).

²⁷ *CW* 1868, pp. 37-40 (Rev Alfred J. Morris).

strenuous efforts to maintain core theological commitments - unlike the essentially independent nature of the old Dissenting congregations. However, references to the atonement within the entire Nonconformist sample declined by almost 50%, from 19% in the 1830s to 10% in the 1870s.

Another theological inference from the doctrine of the atonement affected one's approach to the end of life. The question of whether the atonement was limited to the elect who were predestined for salvation (the strict Calvinist view) or unlimited and available for all humanity to choose (the Arminian view) was a notable point of distinction between the obituaries of the Old and the New Dissent. The Methodist accounts tended to stress a spiritual battle to arrive at a conversion, sometimes described as anguish or a painful struggle, which could take days and weeks before it was complete. Before the Wesleyan William Simpson died in 1878, he recalled "I met in Class several times before I received much benefit, but my Leader endeavoured to impress upon my mind the plan of salvation, and the necessity of my obtaining a knowledge of my acceptance with God through the Atonement; and, after having sought the Lord sorrowing, for some time, it pleased Him to speak peace to my soul."

²⁸ The 1830 obituary of John Schofield, a Wesleyan local preacher of the Huddersfield circuit in the West Riding of Yorkshire who died at 69, recalls that, at 20, 'his convictions of sin were deepened; and he earnestly, with strong cries and tears, sought the salvation of his soul.'²⁹ Perhaps because the Methodists actively sought God and felt their eternal safety could be lost even up to the point of death, they felt a particular need to proclaim victory over sin at the deathbed.

²⁸ *WMM* 1878, pp. 561-66 (Rev William Simpson).

²⁹ *WMM* 1830, pp. 440-41 (John Schofield).

Sin: Victory or Burden

An important implication of the doctrine of the atonement became a point of difference between the Old and the New Dissenters. Did the death of Jesus empower individuals to gain the victory over sin? The obituaries often referred to the specific sins of early life. However, the New Dissenters – and particularly the Primitive Methodists – tended to refer to all sin, which salvation erased forever. William Simpson recalled a love feast in 1835 where:

The fire broke out in a remarkable manner: ‘It seemed as though the Spirit of grace was fully poured out. Several were groaning for full redemption, and their desire was granted, so that they could attest the virtue of Jesus’ blood to cleanse from *all* sin. I had been long looking for this great blessing, but this evening I felt such a sinking into God as I scarcely ever anticipated’.³⁰

The possibility of being cleansed from ‘*all* sin’, which Simpson describes as a ‘great blessing’, that he had long sought, refers to John Wesley’s belief in entire sanctification or possibility of Christian perfection, which affirmed that those who were saved and had the life of Christ in them could be empowered to refrain from sin. The Wesleyan Methodist Elizabeth Southwood ‘having for some years enjoyed “the communion of saints” ... felt the necessity of being saved from all sin, and of being filled with the fullness of God; and she obtained her heart’s desire.’³¹ Entire sanctification or Christian perfection were actively sought by many Methodists and often formed part of the conversion story.

In the 1830s a distinguishing feature of Methodist obituaries was this longing for entire sanctification not only in life but as death approached. In 1830 John Ripley, a Wesleyan Methodist, stated “I have peace and sometimes joy, but what I want now is the further work, - the second blessing, - to be sanctified wholly.” The attainment of this blessing had been with him an object of deep solicitude and strong desire for some time before his

³⁰ *WMM* 1878, pp. 561-66 (Rev William Simpson).

³¹ *WMM* 1830, p. 208 (Elizabeth Southwood).

illness.³² Although references to this central Methodist idea of entire sanctification continued to appear, the quest for holiness or entire sanctification began to die down by mid-century. David Bebbington argues that the Methodist teaching on distinctive holiness was in decline by the 1850s.³³ The Nonconformist obituaries reflected this trend. The 1880 obituary of a Wesleyan, Mrs Bernhardt, lists twenty-one items that were vital to her life as a Christian: holiness and entire sanctification are not among them.³⁴ Such a quest for holiness could still emerge as in the case of the Wesleyan Methodist Mrs Bayley, who shortly before her death stated: “I am anxious for the higher life – perfect love.”³⁵ However, in general, references to the achievement of entire sanctification were few and although references to the search for holiness were frequent they were much more likely to occur in the earlier obituaries – or as recollections of early life in the later obituaries. Nonetheless the possibility of entire sanctification affected feelings about sin at the end of life. The Methodist deathbed tended to celebrate triumph over sin. The sacrifice of Jesus was always acknowledged with thankfulness; however, the focus of the Methodists at the point of death was typically on victory, joy and blessing. In 1830 Mrs Sarah Retton characteristically proclaimed “O how happy I am!” ... Death was met as a conquered enemy. With calm and holy triumph she obtained the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.³⁶ The correlation between belief and feeling was part of the Methodist spiritual journey, from conviction of sin down to the moment of death. At the Methodist deathbed there was a direct relationship between assurance of salvation by means of the atonement and expressions of emotional well-being.

³² *WMM* 1830, p. 82 (John Ripley).

³³ D. W. Bebbington, ‘Holiness in Nineteenth-Century British Methodism,’ in W. M. Jacob and N. Yates, eds., *Crown and Mitre: religion and society in Northern Europe since the Reformation* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1993), pp. 162-63.

³⁴ *WMM* 1880, pp. 639-40 (Mrs Bernhardt).

³⁵ *WMM* 1880, pp. 632-33 (Mrs Bayley),

³⁶ *WMM* 1830, p. 210 (Mrs Sarah Retton).

By way of contrast, the Old Dissenters were inclined to recall their weaknesses on the deathbed. The 1845 obituary of Benjamin Ravenscroft, a Congregationalist of Barnsley in Yorkshire who died at 73, recounts that in the later part of his final illness he exclaimed, “I never properly knew before the meaning of Job’s expression of self-abhorrence, but now I see more the character of God I understand it better: I abhor myself”.³⁷ The 1830 obituary of C. T. Milcham includes almost 900 words recounting the spiritual anguish he endured in the weeks preceding his death, the overwhelming conviction of sin, the lack of peace and the longing for God’s presence.

‘Oh! Religion is no trifling thing, it is not saying a few prayers, or hearing a few sermons, or going to chapel, or receiving the sacrament. A person may do this all his life and yet be no Christian. It is having the heart right with God, the heart right with God.’ It was suggested that his heart *was* right with God. He exclaimed, ‘I fear I have been deceiving myself’.... He was reminded that God never forsakes those who trust in him. – ‘Ah!’ he said, ‘he is not with *me* now.’ Finally, about four weeks before his death, he confirmed that God had given him peace, having said a few days before ‘I can come to Christ, whose ‘blood cleanseth from all sin’³⁸.

The Old Dissenters emphasised their total reliance on Christ and were fully cognizant not only of their sins but of their sinful nature down to the end.

The Congregationalists and Baptists recognised their sin and their need for salvation, but they tended to stress God taking the initiative, to which they responded and received that which was offered. On the other hand, the Methodists were more inclined to emphasise their activity in pursuit of salvation. The importance of this distinction at the point of death was intriguing, for the Methodists, their hard work being accomplished, appeared to rest more comfortably than those of the Old Dissent. The 1855 obituary of Mrs Sarah Glew, a Primitive Methodist of Keadby in North Lincolnshire, recounted the accident that led to her death: ‘as she and two other ladies were riding a short distance in the evening with a friend, the pony

³⁷ *CW* 1845, pp. 86-87 (Benjamin Ravenscroft).

³⁸ *BM* 1830, pp. 89-95 (Rev C. T. Milcham).

became unmanageable, and they were all thrown out of the gig'. Three weeks later she was near death and her daughter asked her "Mother, I hope you are not afraid to die." She answered, "No, Mary Ann, I have not served God thirty-four years, to have religion to seek now."³⁹ The distinction between freedom from sin and the burden of it at the point of death affected contentment: was one ready to depart this life or was the conscience still to some extent burdened.

The death of Jesus not only ensured eternal life for the believer, but also atoned for sin and made it possible to behave according to the example of Christ rather than the sinful nature. Like the atonement, references to awareness of sin declined sharply among the Congregationalists from 14% to 1 %, and were consistently low among the Methodists, reaching the lowest point among the Primitive Methodists at 2% in the 1830s and 1850s and 3% in the 1870s. The Wesleyan Methodist references follow a similar pattern (except for a rise to 8% in the 1850s) with 5% in the 1830s and 1870s. The subjects of the early Baptist obituaries portrayed an unmistakable anxiety about the state of the soul on the threshold of death, even as they trusted in Jesus as their only hope, as in the case of Mrs Martha Thomas, a Baptist of Moleston in Pembrokeshire, when asked if she had assurance of her interest in Christ, replied 'No, but my confidence is in the Saviour and I believe I am not to be lost.'⁴⁰ The Baptists had the strongest awareness of sin until the end of the period under consideration; however, awareness of sin among the Baptists still declined from 18% in the 1830s to 10 % in the 1870s. References to sin in the entire Nonconformist sample declined by 50% from 10% in the 1830s to 5% in the 1870s and, when combined with other theological factors, this trend indicates the slow emergence of a gentler Nonconformity, particularly among the Old Dissenters who had their roots in a strict Calvinism but became more

³⁹ *PMM* 1855, pp. 12-13 (Mrs Sarah Glew).

⁴⁰ *BM* 1830, pp. 386-88 (Mrs Martha Thomas).

moderate with the Evangelical Revival and then with the liberalising influences of the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴¹ The decline in deathbed anxiety was partly attributable to the fact that the number of obituaries included in *The Baptist Magazine* diminished in the early 1870s with fewer and briefer entries, suggesting a possible decline in the prioritisation of memorialising the dead. It was inevitable that with less content fewer categories would be referred to in any given obituary.

One may generally observe that an awareness of sin became less prominent in Nonconformist deathbed theology over time. The Methodists tended to focus less on post-conversion sin by virtue of their piety, which emphasised victory over sin and the possibility of a holy life. Conviction of sin played its greatest role in the spiritual journey to a saving encounter with God that made entire sanctification possible. Thus, the Methodists tended to look forwards rather than back towards the ‘old man’. And even the Congregationalists and Baptists focused less on post-conversion sin as time went on. As the century progressed and the Nonconformists gained a firmer place in respectable society, discussion of personal sin may have represented too much exposure of what should remain private. It is also possible that with increased confidence and pride in the accomplishments that were possible by means of human endeavour, humility and awareness of sin decreased in importance.

Jesus: Saviour and Beloved⁴²

The themes of the atonement and awareness of sin, as central as they were to evangelical theology, still had the potential to become abstract in the minds of believers. The features that remained consistent across denominations and across time periods were those

⁴¹ M. D. Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent, 1850-1918* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), pp. 12-15.

⁴² Evangelical theology held that Jesus was both divine and human, and historically one nature or the other was emphasised. The themes of the humanity of Jesus – as well as the Fatherhood of God and the theology of heaven - will be discussed in Chapter Six, which considers that influence of Romanticism on Nonconformist doctrine in the 1860s and 1870s. The discussion here will also serve to address the matter of an intimate relationship with Jesus as vitally important for deathbed experience (Chapter Seven).

that were concerned with personal relationships such as references to Jesus and to heaven. This was in keeping with the Evangelical Revival, which emphasised a personal encounter with God, reunion with loved ones in heaven and the value of subjective human experience. A personal relationship with Jesus, whether connected to conversion, daily walk or deathbed presence, emerged as second only to conversion among the most frequently mentioned features of evangelical theology as expressed in the Nonconformist obituaries, with Jesus referred to 45% of the time in the 1830s, increasing to 51% in the 1850s and decreasing to 40% in the 1870s. (The percentage would be considerably higher in the 1870s without the Congregational figure of 19%, due in part to the brevity of some of the Congregational obituaries of the 1870s.) Certainly, the high percentage of references was due to the fact that all Evangelicals believed Jesus was the only way of salvation from sin and the pathway to eternal life.

The Evangelical Revival emphasised personal relationship with God, and Jesus was the person who brought the converted to the Father and filled them with the Spirit. In comparison with the Enlightenment, which portrayed God as benevolent but remote, and the Puritans, who had been strict Calvinists and perceived God to be a loving but ultimately righteous judge, the evangelical Nonconformists represented a variety of views when it came to God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Particular Baptists were Calvinists and believed in predestination, while General Baptists held the view that salvation was possible for all through the atonement if one made the decision to accept it. In this they were similar to the Methodists who were Arminian and also held to the possibility of entire sanctification. The Congregationalists began as strict Calvinists but became more moderate with the passing years. However, the evangelical Nonconformists shared several theological convictions that united them. All Evangelicals focused on the love of the Saviour, and his close companionship to be continued into eternity.

The need for a complete reliance on Jesus to secure entry into heaven remained of great importance. When asked whether he was prepared for meeting his judge, Benjamin Hill, a Baptist soldier of Herefordshire who had fought at the battle of Waterloo and died at 64 in 1855, replied, "I have no fear of my acceptance with God; I rest on the atonement of Jesus Christ".⁴³ Thus in referring to their reliance on Jesus the dying were also proclaiming evangelical doctrine. Joseph Wadsworth, a Congregational minister of Lancashire who died in 1853 at 58, claimed at his death that "I have nothing that affords satisfaction but the rich, sovereign mercy of a covenant God in Christ Jesus, and this gives me hope". Robert Grieves, a Primitive Methodist of Dudley Colliery in Northumberland proclaimed "Christ is the mighty Saviour, how can we fail? He is the prop which holds the world and all things up" when he died in 1878 at 62.⁴⁴ Reliance on Jesus for one's eternal safety was in keeping with both the heart of evangelicalism and the notion of a good death. Whether as expressions of love or of dependence, Jesus was central to the Nonconformist's deathbed experience.

The Nonconformists used words like 'precious', 'dear', 'love', 'sweet' and 'my' to indicate the intimacy of their relationships with Jesus, which was a claim that went to the very heart of the evangelical message. Moreover, they wanted to be 'filled' and to have 'more' of him. Such language was not only a reflection of evangelical and particularly Methodist theology, but recognition of their limitations in this life: they looked to Jesus for the fulfilment of their hopes. Michael Wood, a Wesleyan Methodist and a chemist of Boston in Lincolnshire who died in 1875 at 56 of a 'serious, painful and mysterious affliction,' stated "More of Christ – I must have more of Christ".⁴⁵ When William Ford, a Primitive Methodist of Dunton in Essex died in 1835 he exclaimed "O my sweet Jesus! I feel he is

⁴³ *BM* 1855, p. 164 (Benjamin Hill).

⁴⁴ *PMM* 1879, pp. 243-44 (Robert Grieves).

⁴⁵ *WMM* 1877, pp. 559-60 (Michael Wood).

precious to my soul".⁴⁶ The Baptist Mrs Manning died at 90 after eleven weeks of 'extreme suffering'. Among her last words were "I do not love him enough, I cannot love him enough, I want to have my whole soul filled with his love ... Dear Jesus!"⁴⁷ And Abraham Pilling, a Wesleyan Methodist of the Todmorden circuit in the West Riding of Yorkshire, who died at 74 and had already seen the deaths of seven of his children, said during his last illness: "I am conversing with my Jesus. My mind is in heaven".⁴⁸ Henry Ewen, a Congregational physician of Long Sutton in Lincolnshire, told his son that 'he was in the dark valley but that it was glorious to have the Saviour's Presence with him there.'⁴⁹ Evangelical Nonconformist spirituality was always based on a personal encounter with Jesus: through the Holy Spirit, through the Bible, through his death and resurrection. At the scene of death this was no less the case.

The Bible Spoken and Sung⁵⁰

The Bible was the basis for evangelical theology, Nonconformist sermons and hymns. The Nonconformists' knowledge of the Bible was extensive, even among the uneducated. It was primary reading material in the home and the centre of family worship. It was common for an obituary to end with a Bible reference, especially in the 1830s, as in the closing lines of Samuel Woolmer's 1830 memoir. The writer was assured that, as in Daniel 12:3, Woolmer, a Wesleyan Methodist of Wellington in Somerset, 'shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars for ever and ever'.⁵¹ Often, an obituary ended with a note that the funeral sermon was based on a particular text. This was the case in the death of Samuel Parrott, a Congregationalist, in 1830: 'The Rev W. Rooker, Tavistock, improved the

⁴⁶ *PMM* 1836, pp. 27-29 (William Ford).

⁴⁷ *BM* 1872, pp. 115-16 (Mrs Manning).

⁴⁸ *WMM* 1856, p. 382 (Abraham Pilling).

⁴⁹ *CW* 1870, p. 89 (Henry Ewen).

⁵⁰ The Bible was central to part four of the four-fold formula - the death narrative - and so this discussion will also support Chapter Seven.

⁵¹ *WMM* 1830, p. 371 (Rev Samuel Woolmer).

mournful event ... from the passage selected by the deceased in the early part of his illness, 1 Tim. 1:15.⁵² The dying would sometimes include Bible verses among their last words, as in the 1875 obituary of Elizabeth Horter, a Baptist, who quoted Psalm 73:26 in 1875 - 'My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever' - two days before her departure.⁵³ Love of the Bible and enjoyment of hymns were among the items listed in the Wesleyan Mrs Bernhardt's 1880 obituary as characterising her life as a believer.⁵⁴ The Bible served as an anchor of hope and comfort for the dying.

As important as the Bible was to all evangelicals, from the 1830s to the 1870s one may note that specific references to Bible passages declined over time, moving from 26% in the 1830s to 17% in the 1850s and to 14% in the 1870s. The denominations followed the same pattern as in the categories of the atonement and awareness of sin: the Old Dissent declined and the New Dissent increased or stayed the same. These trends may be partly attributable to the waning references to the funeral sermon at the end of the obituary. Instead, biblical texts were replaced with references to the burial and occasionally to the funeral procession. References to the funeral sermon alone declined from 20% in the 1830s to 7% in the 1870s, while allusions to the funeral increased from 10% to 23% and to the cemetery from 11% to 18%. However, the falling off of Bible references also points to a broader transformation in the obituary content. References to Bible verses were one way of reinforcing Nonconformist theology in the context of death. The gradual disappearance of these references suggests that they were less essential to the obituary's message. The natural place for biblical references was in the second and fourth sections of the four-fold formula

⁵² *EM* 1830, p. 469 (Rev Samuel Parrott).

⁵³ *BM* 1875, pp. 47-48 (Elizabeth Horter).

⁵⁴ *WMM* 1880, pp. 639-40 (Mrs Bernhardt).

(conversion and death narratives); with the emphasis of the obituary increasingly placed on the third section (the living out of the faith), a decrease in these references is understandable.

Quotations from hymns were also directly related to evangelical Nonconformist theology. The percentages for hymn references among the sample are 14% in the 1830s, 10% in the 1850s and 15% in the 1870s, with the highest percentages being among the Baptists in the 1830s at 21% and the Wesleyan Methodists in the 1870s at 23%. The stanzas of hymns as quoted in the obituaries were virtually indistinguishable from their roots in Bible passages. So Mary Monkhouse, a Wesleyan Methodist of Barnard Castle in County Durham who died at 34 in 1833, included a quotation from Charles Wesley's hymn 'Eternal Day' among her last words: 'O what are all my sufferings here If, Lord, Thou count me meet With that enraptured host to appear, And worship at thy feet?'⁵⁵ The hymn verse is clearly based on Romans 8:18: 'For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.' However, the general pattern of decline in Bible references within the overall Nonconformist sample is not mirrored in references to hymns. There are several possible explanation for this. From the standpoint of the dying, it may have been easier to recall the verses of hymns than verses of scripture. From the perspective of the obituaries authors, there was a shift over time towards the inclusion of more poetic imagery and symbolism in the obituaries, and hymns may have fit in to this category.⁵⁶ Finally, the decline in the percentage of hymns is largely attributable to the Congregationalists for whom quotations from hymns were negligible by the 1870s.

⁵⁵ *WMM* 1833, pp. 896-97 (Mrs Mary Monkhouse).

⁵⁶ See Chapter Six, pp. 189-96.

Theological Education

Some of the most dramatic changes in the Nonconformist obituaries of 1830 down to 1880 relate to the increase in references to character traits, good works, accomplishments and education. This is an important theological consideration because these new areas of emphasis often took the place of doctrinal considerations such as the atonement and sin. They also pointed to this world as a source of fulfilment of hope where qualities such as intelligence, diligence, benevolence and ambition were valuable rather than a vale of tears where patience, trust in God and resignation to the will of God were the keys to a good death. Character traits, good works, accomplishment and social involvement will be largely be considered in Chapters Four and Five. However, education will be considered in the context of theology.

Between 1830 and 1880 the number of times that an institution of higher education such as a theological college or university was mentioned in the Congregational sample tripled, increasing from 13% to 39%; in the case of the Baptist obituaries it increased by a factor of eight, moving from 3% to 24%. The degree to which education affected the theological content of the obituaries deserves some consideration but can be evaluated only among the Congregationalists and the Baptists because there are almost no references to institutions of higher education among the Methodists. In contrast to the Old Dissent, the Methodist obituaries almost never referred to formal education. This is partly because higher education was not required for a calling to preach, and advanced education, until the opening of the first Theological Institution by the Wesleyans in 1842 and by the Primitives in the 1860s,⁵⁷ was not as highly valued as it was among the Congregationalists and Baptists. And, although attendance at the institution was high, many of the Methodist recipients of such

⁵⁷ See pp. 150-52.

education would not be among the deceased by 1880. However, even when more Wesleyan Methodists and a few Primitive Methodists were receiving higher education, there is a sense in which it was not considered to be an indispensable part of the memoir.

Among the Congregationalists, references to theological matters were detailed and relatively frequent, although as the century progressed, some of the obituaries were shortened dramatically. By the 1870s all the Congregational obituaries were of men (primarily because so many of them were dedicated to ministers), and often included content concerning their preaching gifts and how well-read they were in addition to their theology. These theological references changed not only in number but in content. Until around 1870 the focus was primarily on endorsing aspects of evangelical orthodoxy, and comparing these to beliefs that were considered to be unorthodox and particularly unhelpful at the point of death. So, encouraging references were made to the person and work of Christ, general Nonconformist principles, the Puritan writers such as John Baxter and John Owen, Wesley in the case of the Methodists and Calvinism primarily in the case of the Old Dissent. Doctrines that were rejected included Socinianism, which denied the divinity of Christ and thus also denied the Trinity, and Antinomianism, which claimed that salvation by faith exempted the believer from moral obligations. All of these beliefs were seen to be in contradiction to the Bible, which was the basis for evangelical Nonconformist theology. It was vital for the believer to be able to say that he or she had obeyed the commands of Jesus, and believed him to be God in order to have peace and eternal safety.

After 1870 themes appeared that suggested that, even within the context of the obituaries, Nonconformity was increasingly intersecting with the wider culture. References to scepticism, doubt, materialism, biblical criticism and Liberal politics appeared – and all were placed in juxtaposition to evangelical truth. The Congregational emphasis on education and theology was rivalled only by the Baptists in the 1870s. Among the Baptists, the earlier

theological references generally concerned differences with the Established Church, Puritanism and Calvinism. The later references expressed concern about ritualism, popery, the union of church and state or being a Dissenter in a university setting and some began to make a connection between being a Liberal and being a Nonconformist. Both the Congregationalists and the Baptists were often described as Calvinists, presumably to distinguish them from their fellow Evangelicals, the Methodists. For example, in 1832 W. H. Crockford, a Congregationalist, was ‘a man of strictly Independent principles, a sound Calvinist in doctrine’⁵⁸ and William Pollard, a Baptist of Ipswich, who died at 84 in 1854, ‘was a decided Calvinist of the Puritan school ... A Strict Baptist but too much of a Christian to be anything of a Bigot.’⁵⁹ However, in 1880 the Congregationalist Alexander Raleigh ‘was alive to all the pleadings and all the bitterness and scoff of modern unbelief and understood the agony of deep darkness through which many hearts are compelled to pass these days. Though he could sympathize with the doubter he would not patter with unbelief.’⁶⁰ These three examples convey the progression of theological emphases that appeared in the obituaries, from a hearty affirmation of strict Calvinist doctrine to the exhibition of at least some sympathy with sceptics if not with scepticism itself.

Mid-Century Exceptions

It is important to turn briefly to the 1850s to observe trends for certain obituary features that do not follow the generally consistent patterns of the other categories. References to conversion, Jesus and heaven increased in the 1850s and then decreased in the 1870s. The reason for this pattern among the Congregationalists was probably the fact that some of the obituaries of the 1870s were shorter than those of the earlier periods. This decline

⁵⁸ *EM* 1832, p. 202 (W. H. Crockford).

⁵⁹ *BM* 1854, pp. 9-14 (William Pollard).

⁶⁰ *EM* 1880, pp. 379-81 (Rev Alexander Raleigh).

in references in the 1870s is a very important consideration for understanding Congregational theology as related to death and the afterlife: it is a case where the lack of evidence tells a story. When there is an upward trend followed by a drop-off, it does not necessarily mean that these features were not present at the deathbed. What it does mean is that the person doing the recording and/or the editor of the magazine did not consider it valuable enough to include.

However, there was a pattern of mid-century increase in these categories among the Nonconformists as a whole. The reason becomes immediately apparent upon reading a series of memoirs and obituaries from the 1850s. They are long; some of them are extraordinarily elaborate and the style is bold and sentimental. The reader receives a great deal of information concerning the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual life of the person who has died. But more than this is the style, which might be called ornate, even lavish. If an author used 100 words in 1830 to make a statement, an author in 1855 often used 500 to make the same statement.⁶¹ The increase in number of words would result in an increase in references to certain categories.

Conclusion

The themes most directly relevant to evangelical Nonconformist theology at the deathbed between 1830 and 1880 were conversion, the atonement, sin, Jesus, the Bible, hymns and education.⁶² These categories were emphasised in the second, fourth – and, in relation to conversion, the first - sections of the four-fold formula. The conversion story often offered a comprehensive summary of theology and pointedly drew the reader's attention to the change that took place in the obituary subject's life when he or she turned from sin to

⁶¹ See Chapter Two, pp. 59-60 and Chapter Six, pp. 205-13 for discussion of style.

⁶² Other themes that overlap with Theology – heaven and spiritual battle – are discussed in Chapters Six and Seven.

God. While individuals were converted in a wide variety of ways, the tone of the story became more sedate and the amount of space devoted to it lessened over time, conversion remained a central feature of the obituaries down to 1880. It was important to recall this pivotal act of God in the dying person's life when, from the standpoint of an evangelical Nonconformist, another death-to-life transformation was imminent.

The theological focus of the conversion story was the atonement. The evangelical Nonconformists tended to embrace a penal substitutionary doctrine of the atonement in which Jesus was a sacrificial lamb for the sins of humanity and justification before God was based on faith in him. While the atonement remained central down to the 1850s, by the 1870s a decrease in doctrinal specificity is observable in the obituaries of the Old Dissent. References to the blood of Christ and the sacrificial lamb fade in favour of attention to the gifts and accomplishments of the many ministers being memorialised. However, references to the atonement among the New Dissenters remained steady, attesting to efforts to maintain a consistent Methodist piety. All but the shortest obituaries generally acknowledged the need for a Saviour to attain eternal life. The overall sample reveals a significant decrease in specific references to the doctrine of the atonement.

The conviction of sin was the factor that led to recognising the need for a Saviour and resulted in conversion. The awareness of sin at the deathbed was a different experience from the original conviction of sin. Methodists, once having endured the anguish of arriving at conversion, tended to emphasise the triumph over sin at the point of death. Thus references to sin were consistently low among the New Dissenters. There was a strong correlation between what they believed and what they felt. The Old Dissenters were more inclined to recall their weaknesses on the deathbed and to experience a certain measure of doubt about their acceptability to God. They stressed the initiative of God in salvation, while the Methodists pointed to the importance of their efforts in the pursuit of salvation. Nonetheless, by the

1870s references to sin had declined sharply among the Congregationalists and Baptists as did the percentage of references in the overall Nonconformist sample.

Although the evangelical Nonconformists represented a variety of views concerning the doctrine of election - God's sovereignty and human responsibility in the process of salvation – they all found Jesus at the centre of conversion, spiritual growth and deathbed piety. Evangelicals emphasised personal relationship with God, and it is the second person of the Trinity who is mentioned with the most frequency by far.

The Bible was central to Evangelicalism. Since the Bible was God's word, the appearance of Bible verses and hymns based on the Bible in the second and fourth sections of the obituaries was not surprising. These verses were reminders for both the dying and living of the basic tenets of evangelical Nonconformist theology as well as sources of hope and consolation. References to the Bible in the obituaries declined over time, partly because the tendency to refer to the scriptural foundation for the funeral sermon declined but also suggesting that explicit quotations from the Bible were less essential to the obituary's message as the second and fourth sections of the formula became less important than the third section on how to live out the faith.

The fact that evangelical Nonconformist ministers had access to higher levels of education over the years meant two things for deathbed theology. First, there was a marked increase in references to higher education in the obituaries of the Old Dissent, indicating the heightened importance of education, particularly for the life and death stories of ministers who appeared with greater frequency. Second, it was inevitable that intellectual and spiritual life would converge in the area of theology, and that topics related to theology would move out of the Nonconformist subculture and into broader areas of cultural engagement.

Exceptions in the 1850s to overall trends relate to an increase in references to Jesus and conversion in the 1850s followed by a decline. There are two probable reasons for this. First is the extraordinarily elaborate and wordy style of some of the obituaries in the middle of the century. At times it is simply a case of more words. Second the obituaries of the later period tended to be more concise, particularly in the Congregational sample, which includes a number of entries from the 1870s that are one-line death notices. Moreover, by the 1870s there were fewer obituaries in any given issue of the magazines.

Thus with the exception of a consistently high percentage of references to Jesus and a steady but moderate pattern of references to hymns, the other categories considered in this chapter indicate that, in the context of death, evangelical Nonconformist theology broadened over time. The obituaries were rich in the theology of evangelical Nonconformity, and these theological convictions provided a window into Nonconformist beliefs about death. However, although these beliefs continued to reflect the heart of Evangelicalism they were not as stark and uncompromising in 1880 as they were in 1830. Evangelical Nonconformist theology as it related to death had broadened, and, in terms of the obituaries, found a narrower place as fewer words were dedicated to theological convictions.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CLAIMS OF HEAVEN AND EARTH:

SOCIAL BACKGROUND AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

‘Let it be shown that a man can be a thriving tradesman and a consistent Christian, - that the interests of the present and the future world ... need not be pursued by separate individuals – that the just claims and rightful prerogatives of the heavenly Lord, and those of human masters, come at no point into collision’.¹

It will surprise no one that social context affects the way one faces death. If one is plagued by hunger, disease and worry, death may be a welcomed relief and a source of hope. On the other hand, if one’s life is characterised by prosperity, good health and attainable personal goals, death tends to fade into the background of life. Prosperity, expectations about life, social background and death were interconnected for the Nonconformists in ways that were subtle and theologically oriented. As evangelical views broadened, however, there was a shift from the supernatural to the natural and from matters of eternal salvation to matters of life on earth. The religious focus tended to be more about how to thrive in life and improve it. Moreover, Nonconformist beliefs and lifestyle, with their focus on the family, perseverance and duty were well-suited to Victorian standards of respectability.

Upward social mobility between 1830 and 1880, not only in terms of status but also as related to material prosperity, transformed what it meant to be an evangelical Nonconformist. There were those among the obituary subjects born in the eighteenth century who had personal experience of persecution and rejection as Nonconformists, or certainly had parents and grandparents who did. However, a great deal changed between 1830 and 1880. With the repeal of the Test and Corporations Acts in 1828, the Registration Act of 1836, admittance to Oxford first degrees after 1854 and the Cambridge equivalent after 1856, the abolition of the

¹ *EM* 1855, pp. 31-33 (William Fontaine).

compulsory payment of church rates in 1868 and the Burial Act of 1880, the Nonconformists had, at least according to the laws of the land, many more opportunities. Evangelical Nonconformists had the chance to step past their original boundaries and make inroads into positions of power and influence. The tension between the relative merits of investing in this life or the next is apparent in a consideration of death among the Nonconformists. How did they fit the mould of middle-class Victorian respectability in relation to death, and how far did they break out of it?

The Sacred and the Secular

The connection between the sacred and the secular in the nineteenth century had deep roots. From the early years of the Evangelical Revival there was an assumption that a faithful Christian life would result in prosperity. John Wesley saw the danger of a connection he considered inevitable: 'Religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, and anger, and love of the world ... the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods ... So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away.'² However, in 1851 Horace Mann, the young barrister who was asked to organize the Religious Census, did not see this connection as a cause for concern when he made this summary statement:

Applying to the regulation of their daily conduct towards themselves and towards society the same high sanctions which control them in their loftier relations, Christian men become, almost inevitably, temperate, industrious, and provident, as part of their religious duty; and Christian citizens acquire respect for human laws from having learnt to reverence those which are divine. The history of men and states shows nothing more conspicuous than this – that in proportion as a pure and practical religion is acknowledged and pursued are individuals materially prosperous and

² R. Southey, *Life of Wesley* (1925), II, 306, in H. Perkins, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 356.

nations orderly and free. It is thus that religion ‘has the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come’.³

This connection between faith and prosperity was mirrored in the obituaries, particularly after 1850. William Fontaine, a Congregationalist of London who died in 1855 at 43, began as an apprentice to a tallow chandler and worked his way to a position of considerable affluence as a ‘thriving tradesman’. He acknowledged ‘the good hand of God’ which prospered him and ‘gave him power to get wealth’.⁴ Material prosperity in this life was by no means a surprise to the faithful Evangelical; indeed, God was acknowledged as its source because all things were under his sovereign influence. Thus it was appropriate to accept good gifts along with suffering. It was not necessary to wait until life after death to receive some of the rewards promised by God.

Moreover, as faith was associated with the middle and upper classes, so lack of church and chapel attendance among the labouring classes was specifically associated in the Census Report with their focus on worldly matters and their doubts about the afterlife. The author described them as influenced by ‘a system called Secularism’:

This is the creed which probably with most exactness indicates the faith which, virtually though not professedly, is entertained by the masses of our working population; by the skilled and unskilled labourer alike – by hosts of minor shopkeepers and Sunday traders – and by miserable denizens of courts and crowded alleys. They are *unconscious Secularists* – engrossed by the demands, the trials or the pleasures of the passing hour, and ignorant or careless of a future. These are never or but seldom seen in our religious congregations; and the melancholy fact is thus impressed upon our notice that the classes which are most in need of the restraints and consolations of religion are the classes which are most without them.⁵

Thus lack of church and chapel attendance was interpreted as lack of faith, which in turn contributed to doubts about eternal life and an inordinate focus on the present life. In this

³ H. Mann, *Census of Great Britain, 1851. Religious Worship in England and Wales, abridged from the official report made by Horace Mann, Esq. to George Graham, Esq., Registrar General* (London: George Routledge and Co., 1854), p. 103.

⁴ *EM* 1855, pp. 31-33 (William Fontaine).

⁵ Mann, *Census of Great Britain, 1851*, p. 93.

context, there was a strong assumed connection between social background and views of the afterlife.

Occupations and Social Class

The obituaries can enhance our understanding of the social history of the nineteenth-century Nonconformists. Indeed, some of the obituaries present such a comprehensive picture of social background that it is possible to arrive at remarkably vivid and varied images of Nonconformist lives. Class is not the only aspect of social background that figures prominently in the Nonconformist obituaries. However, it is a good starting point. Whether or not social class can be determined with accuracy depends largely on whether the occupation of the subject is named in the obituary. In addition to occupation, other features such as philanthropic activity, financial contributions, cause of death, family life and descriptive words and phrases such as 'prosperous' are revelatory of social status.

Several general observations may be made about Nonconformist occupations as identified in the obituary sample. First, occupations are named with increasing regularity among the Nonconformist sample of 1,200, advancing from 36% in the 1830s and 1850s to 57% in the 1870s. These statistics indicate the growing importance of naming both secular and ministerial employment in the obituaries of the denominational magazines as part of a Christian life that was well-lived. Second, despite the dramatic increase in the number of ministers among the Congregationalists (from 58% in the 1830s to 86% in the 1870s) and to a lesser extent the Baptists (from 37% to 46%), the occupations are remarkably varied and reflect considerable social mobility with the passing years.

Social mobility is most dramatically observable when comparing the Primitive Methodist obituaries of the 1830s and 1850s with those of the 1870s, especially with regard to occupation and poverty. The 1834 obituary of John Wignall states that he was born in 1763

at Hesketh Bank, a small seaside village in Lancashire, and was known for his drunkenness and profanity. Wignall kept a public house (an occupation with one of the highest mortality rates of the era, due not only to alcohol consumption but also to airborne bacterial infection⁶). Poverty also drove him to take on additional employment as a guide over the Ribble Sands, ‘a dangerous employment, the fords being changed every tide, besides there being various quick sands, where horses, carts and passengers have been lost ... in times of danger [he] would, with an oath, say to his timid passengers, “What are you frightened at? If you were born to be hanged, you will never be drowned.”’⁷ Even where occupation is not listed in the early Primitive Methodist obituaries, occupation and thus social class can be deduced from the obituary content. Thomas Bailey, a Primitive Methodist of the Burnley circuit in Lancashire, who died at 30 in 1836, had ‘suffered from poverty and hardship when young and never fully recovered from its effects’.⁸ With a background of poverty and daily occupations that involved risk, the prospect of eternal life promised spiritual, emotional and physical safety that this life could not offer.

The 1851 Census Report, in lamenting the relative lack of Christian commitment among the lower classes and the ineffectual efforts of outreach to the poor, refers explicitly to the Primitive Methodists as remaining in and appealing to the lower classes.

The community whose operations penetrate most deeply through the lower sections of the people is the body called the Primitive Methodists; whose trespass against what may be thought proper order will most likely be forgiven when it is remembered that their rough, informal energy is best adapted to the class to which it is addressed, and that, at all events, for every convert added to their ranks, society retains one criminal, one drunkard, one improvident the less.⁹

⁶ M. Anderson, ‘The Social Implications of Demographic Change,’ F. M. L. Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 22.

⁷ *PMM* 1834, pp. 12-22 (John Wignall).

⁸ *PMM* 1836, p. 268 (Thomas Bailey).

⁹ Mann, *Census of Great Britain, 1851*, p. 100.

References to criminals, drunkards and improvidents among Primitive Methodist converts suggest that they were perceived as not holding a stable place in society. And this fragility in life related closely to an awareness of the unpredictability and imminence of death. The Nonconformist obituaries often refer to the gratitude the dying felt at being properly prepared for an untimely death, which could occur through an epidemic of disease such as cholera, which killed quickly, or as the result of an accident at work as in the case of Benjamin Brewerton, a Birmingham iron worker who died in 1855 ‘while engaged in repairing the machinery in an iron forge. His skull was broken in two and his face mangled. When his medical attendant was taking the bandages off his head, it opened and he expired immediately.’¹⁰ In the 1850s the Primitive Methodist obituaries give some evidence of occupational expansion, but little evidence of movement into the safer occupations of the middle classes.

However, in the 1870s down to 1880 the lives of those memorialised in *The Primitive Methodist Magazine*, while still marked by financial worries, were mixed with a measure of prosperity. The 1880 obituary of Thomas Atkinson, a farm labourer of Lincolnshire, noted that he had ‘poor but frugal parents’ and ‘a meagre education’¹¹ and Martha Redman’s husband in the Andover circuit in Hampshire ‘worked for low wages; they knew what poverty was’.¹² However, sample from the 1870s identified 14 businessmen, a lawyer, five farmers, a school principal, a chemist, two schoolmasters, a ferryman, a baker, a miner, a tradesman and 11 ministers. The fact that occupations are identified at all suggests an elevation in the importance of one’s profession; it is even more striking that many of the occupations included are unmistakably of the middle class. The 1880 obituary of Joseph Ritson of Keenly Fall in Northumberland who died at 72 states that he had ‘an extensive and

¹⁰ *PMM* 1855, p. 63 (Benjamin Brewerton).

¹¹ *PMM* 1880, p. 311 (Thomas Atkinson).

¹² *PMM* 1880, p. 185 (Mrs Martha Redman).

prosperous trade'.¹³ One of the most striking examples is that of Primitive Methodist William Fox of Sheffield who died in 1877 of liver and heart disease. His father was a currier and was accidentally killed by a horse when William was eight years old. William was apprenticed to a carpenter; became a foreman of the works at Bolton, near Manchester; then was a partner in the building firm of Messrs Flint and Elliott; and finally became a medical botanist, skilled in the treatment of disease. He received an MD from an American university and published a book.¹⁴ There is a marked difference between these stories and the life of John Wignall, the drunkard who kept a public house and died in 1834. The 1870s were a period of social mobility for the Primitive Methodists, and the obituary authors found the results of that mobility worth noting.¹⁵ In his analysis of the social structure of English Methodism, C. D. Field explains that although the Wesleyan Methodists saw a marked shift from the labouring classes to the middle classes between 1830 and 1880, the Primitive Methodists were still largely of the labouring classes, even by the 1870s. The evidence of our research indicates that by the 1870s 29% of the Primitive Methodist sample was of the middle-classes (as compared with 0% in the 1830s) and 19% were of the labouring classes. Thus within this group, which by the 1870s included a number of ministers, there was social mobility for the Primitive Methodists.

Although the Primitive Methodists saw their most significant social advancements in the 1870s, it is evident that the 1850s was an era of upward mobility for the Baptists. William Lepard Smith, a wholesale stationer in James Street, Covent Garden, died in 1869. He accumulated enough wealth to contribute to the Baptist Fund, Ward's Trust, the Hackney Retreat, the *Selection Hymnbook*, the Orphan Labouring School, the Baptist Missionary

¹³ *PMM* 1880, pp. 245-46 (Joseph Ritson).

¹⁴ *PMM* 1879, pp. 51-52 (William Fox).

¹⁵ C. D. Field, 'The Social structure of English Methodism: eighteenth-twentieth centuries,' *British Journal of Sociology* 28/2, 1977, pp. 199-223.

Society and the Aged Ministers' Society.¹⁶ William Thomas Buckland of Wraysbury in Berkshire, who died in 1871, was an apprentice near Reading. In 1820 he became a freeman of the city of London and commenced business on Holborn Bridge. In 1826 he returned to the family house and became a farmer, eventually advancing in wealth and social position, becoming a land valuer and surveyor.¹⁷ These Nonconformists knew about hardship and struggle from their early years, but by the time of their deaths many of them had settled into a more comfortable middle-class lifestyle.

The occupations listed among the Wesleyan Methodists suggest that the Wesleyans advanced over time to increasingly powerful positions in industry. In the 1830s the occupations named include a farmer, a coach maker, a miller, a journeyman, a collier, a framework knitter, a gardener, a master mariner and two soldiers. The obituary analysis for the 1850s reveals similar occupations and adds four agricultural labourers, a coal miner, an iron worker and a businessman. By the 1870s there were five men engaged in manufacturing, three tradesmen (coal and iron), three builders, a mine overman, a railway worker and six ministers. The Wesleyan Methodist occupations show a shift away from the land and towards industry, and towards jobs that would yield greater income, places in middle-class society that would be, literally, safer. There was greater physical danger, both in terms of disease and injury, for a coal miner – an occupation that had one of the highest mortality rates at mid-century¹⁸ - than for a manufacturer or a tradesman. The movement towards middle-class occupations could not be separated from the fact that these occupations were safer and less likely to lead to an early death, making it less of an immediate threat and more remote.

¹⁶ *BM* 1871, pp. 235-42 (William Lepard Smith).

¹⁷ *BM* 1871, pp. 32-37 (William Thomas Buckland).

¹⁸ Anderson, 'The Social Implications of Demographic Change,' Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, pp. 22-23.

As with the Primitives of the 1870s and the Baptists in the 1850s, the period of gradual transition for the Wesleyans occurred in the 1850s. The 1855 obituary of James Hebditch of South Petherton in Somerset describes a man who ‘was early cast on the world’. He was engaged as a shepherd and placed in the service of a distant relative. ‘The gentleman whom he served soon put him to a good farm’ and he became a successful farmer who was ‘loved by all his labourers and gave to the poor.’¹⁹ John Mowbray Pearson who died in 1855 was apprenticed in early life to a business establishment in Stockton but later became a Methodist minister.²⁰ In 1880 Charles Gillatt is described as ‘prosperous in London’,²¹ and Thomas Dix was a lawyer who ‘helped the widow and the fatherless, the needy and the oppressed’.²² Thus, the Wesleyan Methodists often progressed in society and became prosperous and successful.

The Congregationalists were notably middle-class and generally well-educated from the earliest period. Occupations for the 1830s sample included 58 ministers, four businessmen, a surgeon, a solicitor, an editor and a composer. In the 1850s there were 45 ministers, 11 businessmen, three teachers, an iron merchant, a leather merchant, an engineer and a publisher. These middle-class occupations continued in the 1870s when the obituaries referred to 86 ministers, three businessmen, a banker, three professors, a physician and a publisher. While the large number of ministers contributes dramatically to the overall status statistic, there can be no doubt that this was a solidly middle-class group.

Throughout the fifty-year period and particularly after 1850, the Congregational obituaries usually do not give the history of the subject’s progression from poverty to prosperity. Rather, they state the profession and then tell of how the Congregationalists used

¹⁹ *WMM* 1855, p. 381 (James Hebditch).

²⁰ *WMM* 1855, pp. 289-94 (Rev John Mowbray Pearson).

²¹ *WMM* 1880, p. 320 (Charles Gillatt).

²² *WMM* 1880, pp. 637-38 (Thomas Dix).

their wealth and were recognized by others. The 1868 obituary of John James Waite of Bristol, for whom overwork produced blindness at the age of 17, notes that he ‘was a true philanthropist’ and a minister who lectured on worship music to 100,000 and issued 30,000 to 40,000 instruction books; his publications were valued at as much as £1,400.²³ According to his 1870 obituary, the Lincolnshire physician Henry Ewen had parents who ‘moved in the circle of well-to-do farmers’.²⁴ Joseph Mather, a banker of Newcastle who died in 1879, ‘supported many charitable institutions’ including the Children’s Hospital and the Orphans’ Asylum.²⁵ William Irving, an industrialist of Kingston-upon-Hull in the East Riding of Yorkshire, who died in 1854, was ‘ready to lend his aid’ to ‘every object of Christian philanthropy’.²⁶ Recognition was given on the basis of success, lineage, position and philanthropy.

With the passing years, philanthropic activity became a more notable feature in the Nonconformist obituaries as evidence of a successful and godly life, and as an indicator of social background. This was particularly true among Congregational women whose elevated social status was increasingly evident in their philanthropic activity and family associations. The 1855 obituary of Mary Parsons of Heckmondwike in the West Riding of Yorkshire states that she was a philanthropist who visited the afflicted and needy, and gave regularly to the poor. She purchased a large plot of ground near the old chapel and gave it to the trustees as a site for a new sanctuary. Moreover, she gave £400 towards liquidating the debt on the chapel. Parsons remained single until her death at 85 although she had offers of marriage from non-believers which ‘she promptly refused’.²⁷ Mrs N. Markinson of Bolton-le-Moors in Lancashire is described as ‘affluent’ in 1830²⁸ and Mrs Glover of Birmingham had ‘money

²³ *CW* 1868, pp. 94-98 (Rev John James Waite).

²⁴ *CW* 1870, pp. 85-89 (Henry Ewen).

²⁵ *EM* 1879, pp. 46-47 (Joseph Mather).

²⁶ *EM* 1854, pp. 465-66 (William Irving, Sen).

²⁷ *CW* 1855, pp. 27-31 (Miss Mary Parsons).

²⁸ *EM* 1830, p. 447 (Mrs N Markinson).

and property in the family'. Her last words included an inquiry as to whether money had been paid to the poor as she directed. After receiving an answer in the affirmative she said, 'That is all right', and died in 1854.²⁹ The association of material wealth with women in their obituaries lends support to the solidly middle- and occasionally upper-class status of the Congregationalists. Their philanthropic activity was from the earliest days integrated with both church and community activity.

Based upon the occupations of the subjects and other factors of the obituary content, 768 or 64% of the obituary subjects were from the middle classes by the 1870s, a substantial increase from the 44% of the 1830s. However, middle-class status did not necessarily mean a comfortable life. Life was an arena of work and responsibility. The quiet pastoral image of the rural middle-class Anglican clergyman so often presented in the novels of Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope is difficult to find mirrored in the lives of Nonconformist ministers and Methodist travelling preachers, particularly down to the 1850s. The life of a minister could be exhausting and could contribute to a gradual breakdown of health. Stephen Deacon, a Baptist minister of Earl's Barton in Northamptonshire, died in 1831 at 39 from 'overwork', 'repeated colds' and finally the rupture of a blood vessel.³⁰ Richard Bowden, a Congregational minister, died in 1830 in his mid-50s: he had rheumatism, 'caused by overwork and exposure to cold and damp'.³¹ The Nonconformist ministry presented risks to health that involved both the mind and the body. It is not uncommon to see death explained in the obituaries as attributable to a combination of factors, such as a generally weak constitution, overwork, the lasting effects of an early illness, a history of lung trouble that started with a chill or an

²⁹ *EM* 1854, pp. 31-34 (Mrs Glover).

³⁰ *BM* 1831, pp. 110-111 (Rev Stephen Deacon).

³¹ *EM* 1830, pp. 177-81 (Rev Richard Bowden).

accident from which the obituary subject never fully recovered. The tension between increasing prosperity and the nearness of death was always in the background.

The analysis of occupations in the obituaries reveals two things relevant to Nonconformist death in the mid-nineteenth century. First, the fact that the obituary authors named the occupations of their subjects with greater frequency over the years suggests that work and social position were increasingly relevant when memorialising the dead. Second, social mobility among the Nonconformists is evident and there was a substantial movement into the middle classes. While middle-class status certainly did not exempt the evangelical Nonconformists from suffering and hardship, it would not have been unusual to see such prosperity as the fruit of godly living. The obituary authors would thus seek to balance these signs of God's favour in this world with the rewards promised in the life to come.

Women and Death

It is impossible to consider death in the nineteenth century without drawing specific attention to women. The number of women in the obituary sample goes down steadily during the time period: from 43% in the 1830s to 41% in the 1850s to 26% in the 1870s. The percentage of women memorialised in the Congregational obituaries decreased from 20% in the 1830s to 0% in the 1870s, and, among the Baptists, from 35% in the 1830s to 23% in the 1870s. This decline within the Old Dissent is of particular interest when compared with the increase in the number of women among Baptist and Congregationalist church numbers in Britain in the nineteenth century. C. D. Field notes that the percentage shifted from 65.2% (1826-1850) to 67.2% (1851-1876).³² Although two-thirds of the Old Dissent as represented by these two denominations consisted of women by the 1870s, the denominational magazines

³² C. D. Field, 'Adam and Eve: gender in the English Free Church constituency,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44/1, 1993, pp. 63-79.

were devoting an increasing amount of obituary space to men and particularly to ministers. This would seem to suggest that the magazine editorial boards were detached from trends within their own denominations. However, a more likely explanation is that these denominational organs were increasingly focused on people of prominence and the professional ministry. The progression towards male subjects suggests the increasing importance of an obituary model that had the potential to provide both descriptions of success on the secular plane as well as triumph on the spiritual plane (the world of business and denominational affairs offering more scope for such things than household affairs).

The overall decline in female obituaries undoubtedly increased the average age at death among the overall sample because some young women died from bacterial infections resulting from childbirth or high levels of respiratory tuberculosis (consumption) because of low levels of nutrition (food went to the ‘breadwinners’); women and girls spent more time indoors in poorly ventilated areas, and functioned as nurses for the sick.³³ The decrease of women subjects by the 1870s could be a contributing factor in the decrease in early death among those sampled. In the 1830s, 56% of the sample comprised men and 43% women, and 24% of the sample died before the age of 40. By the 1870s, when the ratio had changed to 74% men and 26% women, just 9% of the Nonconformist group died before the age of 40. The statistics for all Nonconformists considered here show that as the number of women in the sample decreased, the number of people dying before the age of 40 decreased. The health risks posed to women are well documented in the Nonconformist obituaries, as in the cases of the Wesleyan Mary Cornish of Penzance in Cornwall who died in 1830 at 27 after ‘a pulmonary disease commenced its fatal progress’³⁴ and Emma Evans, a Primitive Methodist of Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire who died in 1880 at 25 of ‘complications after childbirth’

³³ Anderson, ‘The Social Implications of Demographic Change,’ Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, pp. 18-19.

³⁴ *WMM* 1830, p. 442 (Miss Mary Cornish).

when puerperal fever developed. Her brother James was a doctor and tried to reduce the fever but all efforts failed.³⁵ A typical obituary of a young married woman indicated the connection between childbirth and death by stating that a child was born and that several weeks later the mother died without explicitly stating the cause of death. It is common to see the obituary of a man whose wife died after a few years of marriage (probably in childbirth), and who married for a second time, acquiring a mother for his small children, as in the case of the 1834 obituary of John Fernie, a Congregationalist of Brewood in Staffordshire whose first wife ‘died after eight years of marriage, leaving him with four children under the age of five’.³⁶ At a time when many Nonconformist women hoped to marry, and marriage meant a risk of death following childbirth, death may well have been on the minds of many young women as they approached marriage.

Women were well acquainted with death through the nursing and sometimes the burial of their own children. Although the ministry was a middle-class occupation, the life of a minister could be very hard on his family. Hannah MacDonald (1809-1875), the daughter of a prosperous wholesaler of Manchester, and the wife of the Wesleyan Methodist minister George MacDonald (and grandmother of Rudyard Kipling and Stanley Baldwin), felt something akin to despair as she anticipated yet another move with her husband and eight children (they moved every three years). Her son Fred stated that ‘her health was delicate and her spirit sensitive, and she felt the strain of a life that was not in all its details congenial to her’. He refers to an 1856 letter he received from her when he was 14: ‘My mind has been bordering upon distraction with the multiplicity of my cares. This removing is a growing (and I was going to say evil) burden, and I sometimes think I shall sink under it – unless, indeed I

³⁵ *PMM* 1880, pp. 374-75 (Mrs Emma Evans).

³⁶ *EM* 1854, pp. 685-90 (Rev John Fernie).

never find time to do so.³⁷ Like many women of the period, Hannah gave birth to children in rapid succession – eleven in all. The home life of the family was by all accounts a happy one, but nonetheless exhausting for both George and Hannah in different ways. As a minister, George and his family were middle-class, but were well acquainted with suffering and death. Hannah saw her first child Mary die at the age of two, and her sons Walter and Herbert die as infants. She nursed her third daughter Caroline through consumption until she died at 15 in 1853. By that time, the family had moved from Manchester to London, and Caroline was buried at Brompton Cemetery in a special area for Dissenters. Suffering and death could not be escaped in the home where illness progressed, death occurred and the body of the deceased remained until the burial.

Funerals and Cemeteries

The obituary categories related to events that took place after death reflect a shift among the evangelical Nonconformists that was concurrent with the broader culture. The number of references to both funerals and cemeteries increased greatly over the fifty years – moving from 10% in the 1830s to 13% in the 1850s to 23% in the 1870s, and from 11% in the 1830s to 12% in the 1850s to 18% in the 1870s respectively. References to the funeral sermon alone (with no mention of the funeral or the cemetery) correspondingly declined substantially, moving from 20% in the 1830s to 6% in the 1850s and 7% in the 1870s. However, in comparison with the total obituary content the material related to funerals and cemeteries even in the 1870s is usually minimal, comprising a sentence or two at the end of what can sometimes be an entry of five to ten pages. And it is rare to find any reference at all to mourning customs. The description of William Pexton of Hull's funeral procession stands out from most of the obituaries as elaborate: his 'corpse was followed by a large company of

³⁷ H. MacDonald to F. W. MacDonald, 1856, in J. Flanders, *Circle of Sisters: Alice Kipling, Georgiana Burne-Jones, Agnes Poynter, and Louise Baldwin* (New York: W & W Norton & Co., 2005), p. 15.

business men in carriages, phaetons, cabs, and other vehicles as well as by hundreds of people on foot'.³⁸ Later in the period and particularly among Congregationalists, there are references to large numbers of people honouring the person who has died, as in the 1868 funeral of the Congregational minister John James Waite: 'Procession of 200 clergy, ministers, tradesmen of Hereford'.³⁹ At the 1878 funeral of James Hastie, 'shops were closed and blinds drawn down'.⁴⁰ This was a common form of respect in a community. However, the most frequent type of reference in the Nonconformist obituaries is similar to that of Elizabeth Tasker, whose body was committed to the tomb in 1880 'according to her expressed desire'; the minister 'improved her death to a large and attentive congregation'.⁴¹ The dramatic increase in references to funerals and cemeteries placed an emphasis on death as a temporal rather than a spiritual aspect of life. However, in the final analysis, the authors attempted to make the obituary a spiritual experience for the reader. Although references to funerals and cemeteries increased with the years, they warranted sparse attention in the obituaries, reflecting what was important to the Nonconformists of the period.

Nonconformist Virtues and Victorian Values

The Nonconformists were becoming more closely aligned with the larger culture, not only in terms of social class but also in terms of character traits that were associated with Victorian respectability. This alignment affected the obituary content in terms of what was considered of worth both in remembering a life and in preparation for a good death. Christian conviction affected deeply held Victorian values that included responsibility, thrift, cleanliness, self-help, industry, generosity, kindness and a well-ordered family life. To be a gentleman was not so much a class position as the description of the ideal character. Geoffrey

³⁸ *PMM* 1880, pp. 179-80 (William Pexton).

³⁹ *CW* 1868, pp. 94-8 (Rev John James Waite).

⁴⁰ *EM* 1878., pp. 496-97 (Rev James Swift Hastie).

⁴¹ *PMM* 1880, pp. 310-11 (Mrs Elizabeth Tasker).

Best notes that being a ‘gentleman’ had more to do with social acceptance than with social mobility, and comments that while the nobility expected deference to rank, gentlemen sought deference to their quality.⁴² Character was very much rooted in Christian morality. In 1852 John Henry Newman, a leader of the Oxford Movement, described a Christian gentleman in an essay in *The Idea of a University*:

It is almost the definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain ... He has his eyes on all his company; he is tender towards the bashful, gentle towards the distant, and merciful towards the absurd; he can recollect to whom he is speaking; he guards against unseasonable allusions, or topics which may irritate; he is seldom prominent in conversations, and never wearisome. He makes light of favours while he does them, and seems to be receiving when he is conferring.⁴³

Samuel Smiles’ enormously popular *Self-Help* (1859) also describes ‘The True Gentleman’:

The True Gentleman is one whose nature has been fashioned after the highest models ... His qualities depend not upon fashion or manners, but on moral worth ... Riches and rank have no necessary connexion with genuine gentlemanly qualities. The poor may be a true gentleman – in spirit and in daily life. He may be honest, truthful, upright, polite, temperate, courageous, self-respecting, and self-helping – that is, be a true gentleman.⁴⁴

To be a respectable Nonconformist gentleman was by no means to be on the fringe of society. The more the Nonconformist fitted in, the more he or she was no longer a stranger in a strange land. The line between motivations inspired by this world and the next was blurred.

The traits listed in the obituaries as admirable in Nonconformist men in the 1830s were closely related to their spirituality. For example, the 1830 obituary of James Reeve, a Congregationalist of London, described his most prominent feature as his ‘piety’ and stated that ‘The Gospel was his rule of conduct’.⁴⁵ In 1832, A. Steill, a Congregationalist of Wigan in Lancashire, was ‘a firm and unwavering champion of the truth’.⁴⁶ However, as time went

⁴² G. Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851-1875* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), pp. 247, 256.

⁴³ J. H. Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 145-6 (Discourse VIII). (Originally published 1852, 1873)

⁴⁴ S. Smiles, *Self-Help; with illustrations of character, conduct, and perseverance* (London: John Murray, 1866), pp. 397-400.

⁴⁵ *EM* 1830, p. 491 (James Reeve).

⁴⁶ *EM* 1832, p. 202 (Rev A. Steill).

on characteristics were more closely related to secular values. Consider James Matheson, a Congregationalist of Nottingham who died in 1878, a man of ‘sprightliness of intellect, refinement, purity, independence of judgement, poetic taste, love of beauty, unselfish, gentle, devout, sympathetic, joyful ... wide reading and knowledge, enjoyment of country walks and excursions’.⁴⁷ The emphasis here is broader and certainly betrays a greater awareness of this world and its attractions.

References to character were particularly prevalent in the Congregational and Baptist obituaries, and in the 1850s often referred to the subject’s integrity, humour, consistency, kindness and energy. The 1855 obituary of William Cooper, a Congregational merchant of Sunderland, states that he ‘combined ‘honourable, successful striving in this world’s business with “seeking first the kingdom of God”’.⁴⁸ This sense of steadiness, consistency, moderation and the ability to integrate the business of the world with the business of heaven reflect the standards of middle-class Nonconformity. The 1855 obituary of Joseph Routledge, a Congregational businessman of Cumberland, was ‘diligent, persevering, energetic, prompt, affable, obliging, hopeful, humble and moral’ who also ‘did a great deal for the needy’.⁴⁹ W. P. Lyon, a Congregationalist of London, is described as ‘gentlemanly’ and ‘unselfish’ with ‘literary attainments’ in his 1878 obituary.⁵⁰ The 1854 obituary of John Wassell, a Baptist of Bath, states that he had a ‘spirit of benevolence and sympathy blended with undeviating integrity’.⁵¹ Clearly, these were the characteristics that marked the Nonconformist ideal after 1850.

By 1880 the Primitive Methodist obituaries closely resembled those of the Congregationalists in terms of character descriptions. In 1880 Thomas Smith was described

⁴⁷ *EM* 1878, pp. 287-90 (James Matheson).

⁴⁸ *CW* 1855, pp. 114-15 (William Cooper).

⁴⁹ *CW* 1855, pp. 159-62 (Joseph Routledge).

⁵⁰ *EM* 1878, pp. 99-100 (Rev W. P. Lyon).

⁵¹ *BM* 1854, pp. 301-302 (John Wassell).

as a man of ‘sound judgement, kindly manner, peaceful disposition, and excellent business capacity ... [He was] prudent and orderly – yet affable and cheerful’.⁵² In 1880 James Haigh was judged to be ‘diligent, industrious, consistent’.⁵³ In accordance with Samuel Smiles’ view of ‘The True Gentleman’, the character of a Christian gentleman transcended class. In fact, in the obituaries from 1880 character descriptions started to appear with some regularity even among the Primitive Methodists and increasingly reflected aspects of Victorian respectability. This emphasis on respectability and virtues of character has several implications for attitudes towards death among the evangelical Nonconformists. First, it was evident that the development of a virtuous character was not only worthy of praise but unquestionably possible in this life. It was inevitable that some decline in focus on human depravity would result and that humanity might feel fitter for heaven than ever before. Second, the display of gentlemanly attributes was one more proof of the movement towards middle-class respectability and the accompanying sense of having a home in this world.

Mortality and the Claims of Heaven and Earth

Regardless of the ideal character, the Nonconformists needed the Victorian (and Christian) virtue of perseverance in daily life: they were well acquainted with suffering, grief and death. This world was both unreliable and showing signs of becoming a safer haven than ever before. The degree to which it was one or the other was dependent largely on one’s social status, occupation and living conditions. For example, seamanship, file making, inn-keeping, chimney sweeping and railway work placed one at high risk for accidents and/or tubercular conditions. Those who could expect to live the longest included those who had a middle-class lifestyle, as in the cases of solicitors and manufacturers or, better yet, combined

⁵² *PMM* 1880, pp. 51-54 (Rev Thomas Smith).

⁵³ *PMM* 1880, pp. 54-55 (James Haigh).

this with country life, as in the cases of ministers, farmers, corn millers and carpenters.⁵⁴

Although the Nonconformists represented a cross-section of occupational categories, their shift into the middle classes from 1830 down to 1880 made it increasingly likely that they would be engaged in healthier occupations.⁵⁵ With the exception of some of the Primitive Methodists it was more likely that by the 1870s the Nonconformists from the sample would be businessmen, merchants, manufacturers, solicitors or ministers rather than miners, railway workers or factory workers.

It is striking to note that in the 1830s more Primitive Methodists from the sample were dying in their 20s (26%) than in any other age group while more Congregationalists were dying in their 60s (22%).⁵⁶ 33% of Primitive Methodists studied were still dying before the age of 40 in the 1850s, while this was true for only 12% of the Congregationalists. Since the Congregationalists were well ensconced in the middle classes they had better nutrition, cleaner living conditions, less dangerous occupations and were less susceptible to certain diseases such as smallpox, measles and consumption that were due to living in crowded and unsanitary conditions.⁵⁷ The relative safety of the Nonconformist lifestyle that emerges from the research sample of 1,200 is borne out by their life expectancy, which is above the national average of 39.5 years in 1850. This had increased little since the national average of 36.6 years in 1750.⁵⁸ Even in 1861 life expectancy in England and Wales was 40.5 for men and

⁵⁴ Anderson, 'The Social Implications of Demographic Change' in Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950*, Volume 2, pp. 21-23.

⁵⁵ For example, those engaged in some form of business increased from 2% in the 1830s to 9% in the 1870s, and the percentage of ministers increased from 24% to 37%. Since the total percentage of Nonconformists in the middle classes increased from 44% to 64%, it is evident that the obituary content points to a middle-class status, and that many of the women represented were married to men in middle-class occupations.

⁵⁶ Of the 300 Primitive Methodists studied, the number dying in their 20s was higher than any other age group in the 1830s sample: 26% died in their 20s, 19% died in their 30s, 13% in their 40s, 15% in their 50s, 5% in their 60s, 10% in their 70s, and 3% in their 80s. By way of comparison, the percentages for the Congregationalists were 4, 7, 7, 8, 22, 17 and 15 respectively.

⁵⁷ M. J. Daunton, *Progress and Poverty: An economic and social history of Britain, 1700-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 413

⁵⁸ P. H. Lindert, 'Unequal living standards', R. Floud and D. McCloskey, eds., *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, vol. 1: 1700-1860, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 361-63.

43.0 for women and between 1861 and 1901 it rose to 45.3 and 49.4, more in those 40 years than in the previous century.⁵⁹ It is difficult to make a direct comparison because the method used to calculate ages in the present research focuses on age groups rather than specific ages. However, although there are notable distinctions within the denominations – the Primitive Methodists did not see an increase in life expectancy until the end of the period - the average age at death for the overall Nonconformist sample both increased with social mobility and appears to have been consistently higher than these national averages. The overall statistics for those living past the age of 60 for the entire sample increased from 42% in the 1830s to 58% in the 1870s, and those living past 70 saw a dramatic shift from 19% in the 1830s to 37% in the 1870s. Thus the obituary analysis confirms the expected connection between social status and life expectancy within this group of 1,200 Nonconformists.

Causes of Death and the Nearness of Heaven

Causes of death also reflected social background, and often pointed to the fragility of life and the certainty of death. Causes among the Primitive Methodists were varied and sometimes violent, particularly down to the middle of the century. A sampling of causes from the obituaries includes drowning, being struck by a tree branch on a farm or a heavy stone at work, falling into a flour mill, breaking the skull while repairing machinery in an iron forge, injury by a ballast wagon and being thrown from a carriage. There was also a high rate of deaths from diseases such as cholera, typhus, smallpox and consumption. The specific cause of death for the Wesleyan Methodists varied more than in the other three denominations. For the 1830s causes included typhus, a fall, stroke, breast cancer, a bruise on the arm that mortified, and a cold caught while on a voyage; in the 1850s childbirth, an injury from the

⁵⁹ D. Baines, 'Population, migration and regional development, 1870-1939', R. Floud and D. McCloskey, eds., *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, vol. 2: 1860-1939, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 30-31.

falling of millstones, an attack by an enraged bull, being run over by a train and heart disease; and for the 1870s apoplexy, chest disease, a nervous affection, a railway accident, seizures and cancer. The fact that they were the largest and most evenly spread out over the country of the four denominations considered here may be the reasons for the wide variety of causes of death among the Wesleyan Methodists.

With the exception of a few cases of cholera and typhus and one case of suicide, many deaths in the Congregational sample were related to a condition of the heart or lungs. Baptist deaths also most often involved an illness of the heart or lungs (consumption, bronchitis, asthma, heart disease) although there were two cases of gout in the 1850s. These illnesses may have offered an opportunity to make preparations for departing this life or to become accustomed to an impending death in the family. Overall, the causes of death observable among the four denominations show a distinction between the Old Dissent and the New Dissent: among the members of the Old Dissent causes were more predictable and could take some time to result in death, while among the New Dissenters death were often unexpected and dramatic. This may have affected the degree to which one felt a sense of urgency concerning preparing for death.

Thus some social factors that contributed to mortality were controllable while others were not. Access to good nutrition, fresh air and sanitation was increasingly possible for some. However, medical knowledge and treatment options were extremely limited. As a result, death could occur from such daily occurrences as an infected cut, injury from a fall, a cold that developed into bronchitis or childbirth. In 1830 Jeremiah Cozens, a Wesleyan Methodist of Norwich, his wife Ann (described as ‘excellent young people’) and their only child all died of consumption within a few months of each other.⁶⁰ An 1876 obituary recounts

⁶⁰ *WMM* 1830, p. 71 (Ann Cozens).

the death of Emma Davis of Wallsall in Staffordshire at the age of 19 of several weeks after an attack of ‘brain fever’.⁶¹ Death was always near at hand and the extent to which it was realistic to entertain a strong expectation of passing a long life in this world depended in part on occupation and social status.

Life Span and Hope

Social mobility and movement into the middle classes were highly relevant for the evangelical Nonconformist’s changing experience of death. This gradual change in lifestyle, as it was reflected in the obituaries, seems to have conveyed an increasing interest in and potential attachment to this world with the passing years. By the 1870s, 58% of the Nonconformists considered in this sample were living past the age of 60, as compared with 42% in the 1830s and 51% in the 1850s. Did the relatively long life and opportunities to become attached to earthly existence affect expectations about fulfilment of hopes in this world? Two important aspects of the study suggest that this was the case. First, as age at death increased with the years, so did references to categories related to earthly existence. The naming of occupations increased from 36% in the 1830s to 57% in the 1870s, suggesting the increasing importance of identifying a person with his or her work. The movement into the middle classes from 44% to 64% and the implied increase in lucrative employment and financial stability also pointed to an attachment to this world.

Four obituary categories relevant to lifestyle and social mobility support these findings related to occupation and class. The increase over time in these categories is steady and clear within the overall sample. References to accomplishments increased from 4% in the 1830s to 8% in the 1850s and to 14% in the 1870s. This, combined with an increase in references to character traits from 10% in the 1830s to 15% in the 1850s to 22% in the 1870s,

⁶¹ *WMM* 1876, p. 378 (Emma Davis).

to participation in societies from 6% to 10% to 14% and to good works from 9% to 17% to 24% suggests two significant shifts. First, the deceased clearly devoted more time to worldly concerns, and the obituary authors devoted more space to recording them, deeming these categories to be integral to an account of one's life as death was faced. Second, over time more attention was given to human merit, not necessarily instead of but in addition to Christ's merit. An effort to balance the two may be seen in the obituary of William Robinson, a saddler who later became a Congregational minister of Redbourne in Hertfordshire who died in 1855.

To seek out the child absent from school, to offer kindly counsel to its parents, to advise the youth who had left the class for some employment, to sympathize with the afflicted, to do what he could for the poor, were his chief employments when his hours of labour had closed in the evening ... Meanwhile, his seat in the sanctuary, or at the church or school meetings, was never empty ... He had no more thought of neglecting these than his closet: here were the springs of his inner life – the fountains of his peace, his joy, his hope.⁶²

The overall obituary content reveals an ongoing effort to balance earthly and heavenly concerns amidst a marked increase in references to accomplishments, virtues of character, good works and social involvement.

With increasing frequency over the years, the obituaries featured individuals who were engaged in the affairs of the world. John Wilks, a Congregationalist and a Member of Parliament and magistrate for the County of Middlesex, 'contributed to the commanding position occupied by Dissenters from the National Establishment' and 'taught Nonconformists to fight their own battles'.⁶³ James Gwyther, a Congregationalist of Manchester, supported the anti-slavery movement, the abolition of the Corn Laws, and a system of popular education for everyone, helping institutions of both city and county.⁶⁴ Moreover, obituary excerpts suggest that this world was perceived as holding out more

⁶² *EM* 1855, pp. 1-5 (Rev William Robinson).

⁶³ *EM* 1854, pp. 590-91 (John Wilks).

⁶⁴ *EM* 1878, pp. 350-52 (Rev James Gwyther).

potential for happiness in the 1870s than it did in the 1830s. Jabez James Hancock, a Wesleyan Methodist of the Tunstall circuit in Staffordshire who died in 1876,

was a fair specimen of a somewhat numerous class of men who have made their way upwards from humble circumstances, til they have won a good position in the Church of Christ, and in social life. *Men of this type practically solve the problem, 'How may we do best for both worlds?' Their temporal advancement is plainly traceable to that strict Christian principle, which in the end generally proves to be the best policy even for this life, whilst it prepares the spirit for the life to come.* There is not a manufacturing centre in the kingdom where Methodism has not helped to develop men of this class.⁶⁵

This effort to blur the line between this world and the next, based on social advancement, suggests that this life was on a par with the life to come. The same strategy might be used as preparation for success on earth and in heaven; Hancock had won a good position in society and the church. The Nonconformist was continually confronted with the rival claims of earth and heaven.

However, if someone lived past the age of 80, which was rare, it was all the more likely that he or she would face the deaths of most if not all immediate family members, including their children. William Pollard, a prosperous Ipswich corn merchant from a family of farmers and a Baptist deacon born in 1769, encountered death with relentless frequency (his two wives, seven children, father, and sister-in-law who died on her wedding day) before his own death at the advanced age of 84 in 1854.⁶⁶ Thus a long and successful life on earth could also increase the appeal of heaven.

The evangelical Nonconformists attempted to balance the demands of this world with their primary allegiance to the next. Benjamin Francis Flint, a Baptist, was placed with an agriculturalist at the age of 16, then engaged in a large family business in Canterbury in Kent and later became a managing partner. When he was dying in 1870, 'Any reference to the

⁶⁵ *WMM* 1879, pp. 477-80 (Jabez James Hancock). (emphasis mine)

⁶⁶ *BM* 1854, pp. 9-14 (William Pollard).

consistency of his past life distressed him; but when a dear relative passed from that topic to the sufferings and mediation of Christ, he exclaimed: “You may talk of that if you will.”⁶⁷ Thomas Flint, an ironmonger and businessman of Margate in Kent who died in 1868, said on his deathbed: ‘Oh, my dear sir ... what a glorious world is that to which we are going! I have often thought that if it were to occupy our minds more fully, we should be altogether unfitted for the duties of this life. It will indeed be a glorious rest’.⁶⁸ Although there was an inevitability about the shift to worldly matters as a result of a gradually changing lifestyle, it was also a conscious decision to make a commitment to the heavy responsibilities of this life, as indicated in the 1870 obituary of John Adey, a Congregational minister of Bexley Heath in Kent, which includes his motto: ‘Earth for work, heaven for rest.’⁶⁹

Conclusion

The tension that the evangelical Nonconformists experienced between this world and the next becomes more apparent when an analysis of the obituary categories related to social background reveals not only the fragility of earthly existence but its increasing appeal. Its fragility consisted in the inability to cure disease and illness, the risk inherent in certain occupations and lifestyle and the consequent brevity of life for some. Its appeal lay in the accessibility of lucrative and safe employment, the potential of becoming a respectable gentleman and recognised engagement with the world through accomplishments and good works. To put it perhaps too simply the tension consisted in this: middle-class respectability and the assumed connection between godly living and worldly prosperity juxtaposed against the consciousness of human depravity and the inevitability of death.

⁶⁷ *BM* 1870, pp. 463-64 (Benjamin Francis Flint).

⁶⁸ *BM* 1869, pp. 179-80 (Thomas Rest Flint).

⁶⁹ *CW* 1870, pp. 152-53 (Rev John Adey).

An analysis of occupations as they were named with increasing regularity in the obituaries indicates social mobility among the denominations, with the Primitive Methodists making their most substantial movement in the 1870s towards the middle classes, the Wesleyan Methodists and Baptists doing the same in the 1850s and the Congregationalists remaining firmly entrenched in the middle classes. It is important to note the number of ministers in the sample because the ministry was a middle-class occupation. While ministers were memorialised to a greater degree with the passing years, especially among the Congregationalists and Baptists, there are a variety of other occupations as well as obituary content that confirms the social mobility of the evangelical Nonconformists between 1830 and 1880.

Gender played a part in expectations concerning death for several reasons. First, the tendency to memorialise more men over time suggests that the denominations felt the life and death stories of men had more scope for the recording of both secular and spiritual accomplishments. Second, it was likely that the decline in the number of female obituary subjects contributed to the increase in the overall age at death for the sample because women encountered particular health risks through child-bearing and consumptive disease. The possibility of dying in childbirth may have affected women's feelings about marriage, causing them to be somewhat fearful but also acutely aware of death. This awareness was accentuated by the fact that death usually took place in the home, with women doing much of the nursing in a final illness.

The personal qualities that were considered virtuous and worthy of inclusion in the obituary not only changed with the years from a spiritual focus to a secular focus, but increasingly represented Victorian values and included key descriptive terms that identified a respectable middle-class gentleman. Victorian values and Christian virtues were closely linked. Both the proclamation of a virtuous character and references that confirmed middle-

class respectability became more prevalent in the obituary by the 1850s, and were firmly entrenched by the 1870s, even to some extent among the Primitive Methodists.

An analysis of age at death, status and occupations over the fifty years shows a connection between upward social mobility and longer life – and, correspondingly, between poverty, exposure to danger in terms of health and occupation and early death. Causes of death depended partly on status: for the Old Dissent death was more predictable and often resulted from a long illness while for the New Dissent and particularly for the Primitive Methodists death could be unexpected and the result of an injury or a contagious disease that acted quickly. An overview of selected obituary categories and content suggests that a relative level of material prosperity, a reasonably ‘safe’ occupation and middle-class status led to a strengthening of attachment to this world – not to the exclusion of anticipation of heaven, but in tension with it. Moreover, a growing interest in evaluating and elevating the personality traits and virtues of the deceased and recording their accomplishments and good works, led not to a discarding of the merits of Christ but shared space with a complete dependence on Christ for a sense of well-being in this life and preparedness for the next.

Social background is relevant to the foundations of Nonconformist beliefs about death in that it informs any shift that took place from placing one’s hopes primarily in this life or in the next. As they became more integrated into the prosperity and power of mid-Victorian England, the evangelical Nonconformists recognised the claims of both earth and heaven on their lives. It is far from clear that the Nonconformists were materialistic in the sense that they believed that the material world had a reality that the spiritual world did not. However, the increasing number of references to life accomplishments, good works, occupations and character traits all point to an emphasis on the third section of the four-fold obituary formula: the living out of the Christian life. This is the section that, to a greater extent than the other three sections, draws the attention of the reader to this world and to earthly matters.

The tension that the Nonconformists experienced between seeking the fulfilment of hopes in this life or in the next persisted, even as their social background changed and with it a broadening of their evangelical views and a shift towards middle-class respectability. With a shift towards the middle classes within their own ranks, a movement towards social respectability within their denominations and the passage of national laws that encouraged participation in higher education and the civil service, they began to find a home on earth. They found themselves increasingly fitting into a world in which their ancestors had been strangers and pilgrims.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE OLD DISSENT AND THE NEW DISSENT: DENOMINATIONAL VARIATIONS

‘As a poor, guilty, and helpless sinner, I have come to Him through the intercession of the Lord Jesus Christ, pleading for mercy and for grace, and He has not cast me off.’¹

‘[He] fixed his eyes on the foot of the bed, and with a transport of joy, exclaimed, “O my Jesus is there!” He said to his wife, “I am dying, do you hear that beautiful music? I must go.”’²

An analysis of the evangelical Nonconformist obituaries uncovers both denominational variations and consistencies with regard to attitudes about death in nineteenth-century England. The Baptists, Wesleyan Methodists, Congregationalists and Primitive Methodists considered here were all Nonconformists and shared the same general challenges that came with dissenting from the Established Church;³ thus their obituaries reveal a certain harmony. However, there were distinctions in their accounts of death, particularly in relation to their identification with either the Old Dissent or the New Dissent. This chapter will investigate the denominational variations that contribute to an understanding of evangelical Nonconformist death. Particular attention will be given to variations between the Old and the New Dissent, and how distinctions are revealed by a close investigation of the statistical categories related to gender, class, religious heritage and deathbed piety. Moreover, certain exceptions to overall statistical trends will be noted, especially among the Primitive Methodists. Finally, an overview of the denominations will determine to what extent these four Nonconformist groups shared similar views of death.

¹ *EM* 1830, pp. 1-4 (Mrs Marina Ross).

² *PMM* 1836, p. 160 (John Smith).

³ Although for many years the Wesleyan Methodists claimed not to be Dissenters, and sought renewal from within the Established Church.

Variations related to gender

There are many entry points into the statistics for examining the content of the denominational obituaries, and thus to understanding their differences and similarities. One such entry point is the category of gender. While the overall sample of 1,200 shows a dramatic shift from 56% men and 44% women in the 1830s to 74% men and 26% women in the 1870s, the percentages when observed according to denomination show that the Nonconformist denominations were not of one mind in choosing whom to memorialise. The relative amount of obituary space dedicated to men and women by the Old and the New Dissent is the first step in understanding denominational variations.

In the early 1830s the Methodist obituaries were dominated by women. The Primitive Methodists allocated 55% of their magazine's obituary section to women and 45% to men while the Wesleyan Methodist percentages were 60% women and 40% men. In the 1850s the figures remained the same for the Primitive Methodists while the Wesleyans showed signs of a gradual change to 46% women and 54% men. By the 1870s the statistics for both denominations were substantially different from what they were in the 1830s, with 42% female and 58% male Primitive Methodist obituaries, and 32% female and 68% male Wesleyan Methodist obituaries. The number of Wesleyan Methodist women in the sample declined by nearly 50%. However, while the New Dissenters showed a shift towards memorialising men, the 42% and 32% percentages of the 1870s still represent significant numbers of Methodist women.

Indeed, both the Primitives and the Wesleyans continued to honour obscure wives and mothers through the years as an important part of their denominational history and message. In 1831 the 70-year-old Sibella Hamlyn of Widdecombe-in-the-Moor, a small village in

Devon, was described as ‘the mother of Methodism in her neighbourhood’.⁴ Women were often known by their personal qualities. Sarah Clayton of Dudley Hill in the West Riding of Yorkshire, who died in 1831 at 32 of pulmonary consumption, was a woman of ‘meek and quiet spirit’ and ‘guarded in her speech’ who ‘loved the Sabbath’ and ‘loved Methodism’.⁵ However, it became more common for the Wesleyan women of the 1870s to be identified with their husbands as in the 1879 obituary of the 67-year-old Sarah Jubb of Keelby in Lincolnshire, who was described as the wife of Martin Jubb and who ‘no one could surpass ... in household management’.⁶ The Wesleyan Methodist choice about memorialising more men was consistent with the gradual shifts towards a more professionalised ministry as well as more powerful positions in trade and industry that were taking place within their denomination. However, although men began to assume a stronger position in the obituaries, women were still honoured.

The Primitive Methodists seemed particularly determined to celebrate their deceased female members in the years between 1830 and 1880. This may have been influenced by their tradition of welcoming women in ministerial roles (such as preaching and teaching) from which they were excluded in other denominations. Primitive Methodist women were memorialised not only in their own obituaries, but also in those of men from their community. The roles of Primitive Methodist women sometimes differed from female roles in the other three denominations, and information about these roles appears in the obituaries with some consistency throughout the fifty years. Barnabas Cook, a Primitive Methodist local preacher of Norfolk, who died of brain fever in 1836 at 32, ‘awakened to a sense of sin under the preaching of a female’.⁷ John Riley of Stafford died in 1854 at 61 after a long illness. In

⁴ *WMM* 1831, pp. 205-206 (Mrs Sibella Hamlyn).

⁵ *WMM* 1831, p. 210 (Sarah Clayton).

⁶ *WMM* 1879, p. 80 (Mrs Sarah Jubb).

⁷ *PMM* 1836, pp. 416-18 (Barnabas Cook),

1832 he ‘heard Hannah Farr preach at Whiston ... deeply affected, [he] gave his heart to God’.⁸ Mary Ann Mayos of Hereford, who died at 80 in 1879, ‘instituted a preaching service in a cottage close by which led to the formation of a class of which she was leader. The group grew and a chapel was built mainly at her own expense.’⁹ Although the Primitive Methodist obituaries changed in other respects by 1880, the magazine editors still devoted a substantial number of them to women and acknowledged the important role they played, particularly in matters related to conversion. Over time both the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists began to incorporate more male obituaries. However, the consistent strong presence of women in the obituaries suggests an attempt by the New Dissent to show that one’s eternal identity in Christ still took precedence over distinctions of gender or status.

The obituary section of the magazines of the Old Dissent, by contrast, was always dominated by male subjects and this only increased over time. The Congregational sample of the 1830s consisted of 80% men and by the 1870s this had increased to 100% male obituaries, partly because they were dedicated primarily to ministers. This example from the extreme end of the gender ratio spectrum provides insight into how the choice of whom to memorialise is important for understanding trends in Old Dissenting beliefs and expectations about death. Since the Congregational obituaries in the 1870s are of men, this means that at least 25% of all the Nonconformist obituaries in the sample from that period are of men. This necessarily affects the overall averages connected to such things as occupation (named more frequently), class (the sample would be more solidly middle-class because of the clear identification of occupations), age at death (it is likely that the average age is higher because of the absence of female deaths), education (more frequently mentioned) and theological references (more specific and possibly more sophisticated). Thus due to a single

⁸ *PMM* 1855, p. 68 (John Riley).

⁹ *PMM* 1879, pp. 310-11 (Mrs Mary Ann Mayos).

characteristic (in this case, gender), one denomination can have a substantial effect on the overall Nonconformist averages.

The sampling technique used in the study is directly relevant to changing percentages of male and female obituaries over time.¹⁰ No effort was made to balance the increasing number of men by searching through the denominational magazines for female obituaries. While the number of men and especially of ministers results necessarily in an emphasis on certain statistical categories, it also reveals the fact that over time the evangelical Nonconformist editors of the magazines considered men to be of importance in telling the story of both a good life and a good death at the deathbed. The obituaries focused increasingly on the intersection of the secular and sacred with the passing years, and it is likely that the life of a man was deemed more effective in the portrayal of both secular and spiritual accomplishments than the life of a woman, which intersected less with the public sphere. The gender imbalance, which increased consistently in the obituaries over time, reflected some aspects of the evangelical Nonconformist culture.

A further insight into how gender can inform an understanding of death for the nineteenth-century Nonconformists may be gained by observing the dramatic differences between obituaries of Congregational men of the 1830s and those of Primitive Methodist men of the 1830s. While both denominational obituaries concentrate on males, they tell very different stories that reflect distinctions at that time. The 1830 memoir of Thomas Pellatt of London states that he was educated for the profession of the law and was chosen as clerk to the Ironmongers' Company. He served as deacon at the Congregational church at Fetter Lane and was a director of the London Missionary Society for twenty-eight years. In addition, he was associated with the Religious Tract Society for twenty-nine years as well as with the

¹⁰ See pp. 34-38.

British and Foreign Bible Society, the Irish Evangelical Society, the Hibernian Society (for Establishing Schools and Circulating the Holy Scriptures in Ireland) and the London Female Penitentiary. The memoir goes on to state:

It is obvious that *all* pious and well-educated persons cannot be ministers; but all may co-operate with ministers in the instruction of the ignorant; the reclaiming of the vicious; in visiting the sick and dying; and in extending the light of truth to dark and distant lands. Nor should it be forgotten, that laymen of piety and education may not unfrequently exert their influence where ministers have no access; and the very circumstance of religion not being with them a professional matter, will often secure a more willing and attentive ear to their friendly admonitions.¹¹

This early Congregational obituary shows the subject's place in business, in philanthropic work, in church and in evangelism. It is a reflection of several aspects of Pellatt's life, both within the Nonconformist subculture and in the world that extended beyond the borders of Nonconformity.

In contrast to Pellatt's obituary are two Primitive Methodist examples. John Kitchen was a local preacher with the Halifax circuit and worked at Bradley Mill in North Yorkshire. His sudden death at 24 occurred when he attempted to save his master's 17-year-old son from drowning in Bradley Mill dam. His obituary notes that 'As a child he was the subject of religious impressions but stifled conviction and lived a stranger to God and vital godliness. In August 1824 he was brought into a glorious liberty at a prayer meeting after a Camp Meeting at Gretland.'¹² The obituary of Joseph Oliver, a Primitive Methodist of Manby in Lincolnshire who died in 1833 at 62, has similar points of emphasis. 'In the early part of his life he was noted for wickedness. He had few around him who could surpass him in walking the downward road to destruction ... However, he stepped into "gospel liberty" after hearing the Primitive Methodist preaching.'¹³ The differences portrayed in these examples reflect not

¹¹ *EM* 1830, pp. 45-52 (Thomas Pellatt).

¹² *PMM* 1834, p. 95 (John Kitchen).

¹³ *PMM* 1834, p. 122 (Joseph Oliver).

only social status but also features that were considered important within the Old and the New Dissent for memorialising the dead in the 1830s. The Congregational obituary shows opportunities for engagement with a wider world, both to serve others and to accomplish personal goals, and to achieve a certain sense of security in this life. The Primitive Methodist obituaries display personal conviction of sin and conversion, evangelistic efforts among their own and some sense of personal danger rather than of being settled in this world.

These social distinctions between the Congregationalists and the Primitive Methodists are further emphasised when the obituary of a Primitive Methodist man of the 1830s is compared with that of a Primitive Methodist woman of the same period, and then both are compared with the Congregational obituary. The Primitive woman is Hannah Beacham of Frome in Somerset, who was converted at a love feast followed by life with a Methodist family. Eventually, she ‘got liberty’. She had vomited blood before her marriage and died after the birth of her child at the age of 22.¹⁴ The Primitive man is Joseph Stokes, a Primitive of Burton-upon-Trent in Staffordshire who was lame for many years, died in 1836 at 29 and ‘lived according to the course of this vain world until a month before his death’, when he proclaimed ‘’I have the victory’’.¹⁵ With the exception of the cause of death, these excerpts from male and female Primitive Methodist obituaries, with reference to conversion and freedom, are interchangeable. Even the 1836 obituary of Elizabeth Barker, a Primitive Methodist of the Halifax circuit in the West Riding of Yorkshire could be mistaken for that of a man. A single woman, she died at 53 after keeping a provision shop for 20 years and serving as a local preacher. She was ‘in comfortable circumstances’, showing ‘liberality to the saints and charity to the poor.’ Moreover, she contributed to the building of a Primitive Methodist chapel.¹⁶ By way of contrast, the obituary of the Congregationalist Thomas Pellatt

¹⁴ *PMM* 1836, p. 40 (Hannah Beacham).

¹⁵ *PMM* 1836, 160 (Joseph Stokes).

¹⁶ *PMM* 1836, pp. 415-16 (Elizabeth Barker).

with its references to his education for the law, his work at the Ironmongers' Company, his service as deacon and as director of the LMS, if read without the name attached, could not be mistaken for that of a woman. This suggests that the identity of Primitive Methodists as Christians was more important within their community than their gender identity. The spiritual life was elevated above worldly considerations, which were given ample space in the Congregational obituaries. The attention of the reader was drawn towards different areas of emphasis, depending upon whether he or she was reading the obituary of a Primitive Methodist or a Congregationalist.

However, by the 1870s the differences between the Congregationalists and the Primitive Methodists began to diminish and similarities may be noted among the male obituaries of each. The 1880 obituary of the Primitive Methodist Thomas Smith states that he was a self-taught man who went to work in the coal mines in Sunderland in County Durham at an early age. However, in 1834 he entered the ministry and travelled for 34 years. In 1868 he was made Governor of Elmfield College in York and the institution thrived under his leadership. He died at 65 from heart disease resulting from rheumatic fever.¹⁷ Samuel Ransom, a Congregational minister, attended Hackney College in London and published a Hebrew Grammar after spending some time superintending a secular business left to him by his brother. His health slowly declined and he died at 77.¹⁸ While levels of education were not comparable, the end results were similar. Both were middle-class, educated ministers and successful in their professions. It must be emphasised that the choice of material for the obituaries, and the evident change in social status, had strong implications for how death was viewed. There is a shift towards acknowledgement of status, work and worldly success in the later Primitive Methodist obituaries. The obituary author appears to be calling on the reader

¹⁷ *PMM* 1880, pp. 51-54 (Rev Thomas Smith).

¹⁸ *EM* 1877, p. 101 (Rev Samuel Ransom).

to meditate on success of a secular rather than a spiritual nature. Viewing this emphasis through a comparison of Nonconformist men helps to access shifts over time in denominational variations.

Nonetheless, the Primitive Methodist obituaries generally showed an emphasis on the spiritual life that endured over time for both men and women. While the obituary of Thomas Smith could not be mistaken for that of a woman, that of Thomas Elliott, a miner of North Seaton in Northumberland for 70 years until he died at 78 in 1879, holds many similarities to the 1879 obituary of 39-year-old Elizabeth Parrish of Silsden in the West Riding of Yorkshire, wife of a minister and mother of six children. Elliott had ‘no saving acquaintance with the truth until age thirty-two ... His religion was of the deep and quiet order that moved the heart with divine impulses, and shaped the conduct on the principles of the gospel, without any clamorous manifestations.’¹⁹ Mrs Parrish ‘became conscious of her need for Christ’ at 21. ‘She made no offensive parade of sacred matters. She was not noted for sudden and unrestrained enthusiasm.’²⁰ While these descriptions are remarkable in that they show a shift within the denomination away from emotional displays of spiritual fervour, they follow the pattern of placing shared spiritual inheritance above gender distinctions. Thus, while the Primitive Methodists undoubtedly became more prosperous and respectable, they attempted to prioritise spiritual matters when considering death, especially among the obituaries of women, who typically had fewer opportunities for worldly accomplishments on which to focus.

The matter of prioritising spiritual identity over gender or class identity is also an intriguing element of the Baptist obituaries. The Baptists followed a similar trend to that of the Congregationalists - beginning the period with 65% of their obituaries dedicated to men

¹⁹ *PMM* 1879, pp. 184-85 (Thomas Elliott).

²⁰ *PMM* 1879, pp. 245-46 (Mrs Elizabeth Parrish).

and ending with 77%. However, this means that by 1880 23% of the Baptist obituaries were still of women, whereas the Congregationalists had none. Just as the Baptists made slow but steady progress towards middle-class respectability over the years, so the content of the obituaries slowly changed. However, as in the case of the Primitive Methodists, that content continued to emphasise spiritual identity over worldly identity. The Baptist obituaries provided a balance of features regardless of age, occupation, region or background – and this is clearly observable in comparing the male and female Baptist obituaries. Their obituaries tell the story of conversion, baptism, spiritual life, service, character and death with regularity – although the emphasis moves from conversion (part two of the obituary formula) and death (part four of the formula) on to service and character (part three of the formula).

The obituaries of several Baptists illustrate the tendency to focus on the spiritual identity of the subject. Hannah Turner of Crewkerne in Somerset died at 31 from consumption complicated by childbirth. Her 1830 obituary states that ‘at an early age [she was] the subject of deep and abiding religious impressions. At first she bewailed the corruptions of her own soul and then was helped to see her interest in Christ and rejoiced in the Lord. Her father baptized her at sixteen.’ At her death she derived ‘great consolation from the simplest, most familiar portions of Scripture’.²¹ In similar fashion, John Millard’s 1830 obituary states that ‘when quite young (he was) impressed with the value of the soul and its ultimate destination ... He heard Rev. Mr. Talbot preach and found peace and pardon to his soul.’ Shortly thereafter he became ‘a candidate for believer’s baptism’. At his death in his 70s he repeated various parts of John 17.²² These obituaries provide similar details about conversion, baptism and scripture for a man and a woman.

²¹ *BM* 1830, pp. 433-34 (Mrs Hannah Turner).

²² *BM* 1830, pp. 27-29 (John Millard).

By the 1870s we see a marked difference in the Baptist obituaries from the 1830s with more references to Christian character, good works and engagement with the larger world. In 1873 William Henry Bond of the Royal Navy and a resident of Falmouth in Cornwall died at 78. His obituary notes that he was baptized around 1814 and that he was ‘unceasing in his efforts to do good, he was the ardent advocate of every measure tending to promote civil and religious liberty. He was eminently a Christian gentleman.’²³ The 1872 obituary of Mrs Manning of Gamlingay in Cambridgeshire notes that in her early life she was ‘seriously impressed with truths of the Gospel’. She was baptized and joined a Baptist church. In her final illness, at the age of 89, she was ‘concerned that her usefulness was over. She is remembered for her anxiety for the welfare others, abiding love of the Saviour, domestic skill and consistency of Christian character.’²⁴ These remarks are a mixture of focus on service and character with matters of the soul. Over time, the importance of a useful life of service and living out the gospel, the third portion of the obituary four-fold formula, gained in importance in the later examples. This shift reflects some change in emphasis when considering death from the inner to the outer life. However, it was a slow transformation among the Baptists as compared with the Congregationalists who were already focusing outward to some extent by the 1830s, but more rapid than the Primitive Methodists, who did not make that shift in any discernible way until the 1870s.

A consideration of gender reveals several aspects of denominational variations. First, while there was a movement towards male obituaries in all four groups, the New Dissent still gave considerable space to female obituaries suggesting that spiritual identity took precedence over other considerations. This was particularly true among the Primitive Methodists, which is revealed through a comparison and observation of similarities among

²³ *BM* 1873, pp. 566-79 (William Henry Bond).

²⁴ *BM* 1872, pp. 115-116 (Mrs Manning).

both male and female obituaries. The importance of gender identity and indeed the secular identity associated with gender were more evident among the Congregationalists and to some extent the Baptists. However, by the 1870s comparisons particularly of Congregational and Primitive Methodist obituaries show a similar focus on men of these two most disparate denominations, suggesting that by the end of the period the third section of the four-fold formula – the living out of the Christian life - was gaining in importance when speaking of death in every one of the religious bodies.

Religious heritage and denominational identity

The matter of denominational religious heritage is complex. On the one hand, a high number of references to this category in the obituaries can suggest that a denomination identified strongly with its pious roots and was focused not only on the life of the soul in the case of the obituary subject but also on the spiritual lives of parents and grandparents. For example, the Primitive Methodist percentage of references to religious heritage increased from 39% in the 1830s and 1850s to 57% in the 1870s. Obituary content often indicates a connection between new life through conversion and religious heritage. The 1880 obituary of Martha Redman of Andover states that she was ‘among the first fruits of Primitive Methodism in Hampshire’²⁵ and John Bowman of Darlington in County Durham was the child and grandchild of Primitive Methodists; he was converted through the piety of his family and died at 43 in 1877.²⁶ The stress is on the evangelistic efforts of the Primitive Methodists and the effect of those efforts on life-changing conversions. The Primitive Methodist obituaries often refer to life prior to conversion in dramatic terms, the tone of which is unique among the denominations, typically using the word ‘wild’. Thomas Claridge,

²⁵ *PMM* 1880, p. 185 (Mrs Martha Redman).

²⁶ *PMM* 1879, pp. 54-55 (John Bowman).

a farm labourer of Sheepscombe in Gloucestershire, who died in 1879 ‘pursued a wild career until age thirty-one’.²⁷ These descriptions point to the transformative power of vital religion.

On the other hand, highlighting religious heritage could indicate a belief that a proud lineage lent respectability to life as a Nonconformist. Such was the case of Mrs Brown, a Wesleyan, who, according to her 1855 obituary, ‘had the honour of a personal acquaintance with the venerable Wesley and with many of the most distinguished individuals of his day’, and who became the ‘mother of Humphrey Brown, Esq., M.P.’.²⁸ The increase in references in this category among the Wesleyan Methodists, particularly between 1850 and 1880, is so extraordinary as to suggest a probable connection between a movement towards social respectability and an accent on religious heritage. The Wesleyan Methodist percentage increased from 15% in the 1830s to 20% in the 1850s to 51% in the 1870s. In the case of the Wesleyans, the sharp increase in references to their religious heritage may indicate nostalgia for roots that were beginning to be lost. However, it may also have been a claim to a respectable identity – along the lines of someone coming from an ‘old family’.

The references to religious heritage among the Baptists also increased with time, although they started the period at a higher level (23%) and ended at a lower percentage (35%) than among the Wesleyans. A memoir of the Baptist minister William Brock appeared in an 1878 issue of *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*. It began with an extraordinarily elaborate and lengthy description of Brock’s heritage:

Some Anabaptists from Holland, welcomed too warmly by Queen Elizabeth, were glad to be quiet on our Southern coast. A branch of their descendents became blighted with heresy; and to this degenerate line, in the end of the last century, belonged a humble tradesman in Honiton, whose boy, reading the writings of Dr. Doddridge, and being impressed during a visit to London by some Evangelical sermons, returned to the faith of the old immigrants ... He found work for himself as an exhorter and a

²⁷ *PMM* 1879, pp. 565-66 (Thomas Claridge).

²⁸ *WMM* 1855, p. 283 (Mrs Brown).

tract-distributor, and one of the first Sunday-school teachers in Devonshire. This good young man, William Brock, married Ann Alsop, a minister's daughter, May 14th 1806. Their eldest child, the subject of our paper, was born on Valentine's Day in the following year.²⁹

Baptist ministers often came from generations of Baptists; it is not uncommon to read of a Baptist minister whose grandfather established the first Baptist church in a town. The 1869 obituary of Samuel Brawn states that his father often conducted the services and there was an expectation that the son would take his place. 'This caused him to think about the truths he was presenting.'³⁰ Indeed, the Baptists in particular continued to make it clear that one cannot inherit faith: 'Vital religion does not run in the blood'³¹ said Thomas Flint, the Baptist businessman who died in 1868. Vital religion was still a matter of personal conversion and was the key to eternal life. It was not possible to make the leap from family heritage, however noteworthy, to assurance of salvation.

The Congregational references to religious heritage saw a significant increase between the 1830s at 28% and the 1850s at 47%. The references suggest pride in a noble Nonconformist ancestry. It is probable that the dip in references to 25% in the 1870s is reflective of the brevity of the later Congregational obituaries. The 1855 memoir of John Whitridge, a Congregational minister of Carlisle, begins:

The Reverend John Whitridge was born at Far End, near Bootle, in the County of Cumberland, on the 23rd of May 1790. His father, William Whitridge, was a pious and zealous Nonconformist, an active supporter of the Independent cause in Bootle, and a lineal descendent of Anne Askew, who suffered martyrdom for her Protestant principles. His mother was Martha Fletcher, daughter of Abraham Fletcher, of Broughton, near Cockermouth, a celebrated mathematician, a woman of exemplary piety, and a member of the Baptist church at Millam.³²

²⁹ *WMM* 1878, pp. 309-18 (Rev William Brock, D.D.).

³⁰ *BM* 1869, pp. 349-55 (Rev Samuel Brawn).

³¹ *BM* 1869, pp. 69-70 (Thomas Rest Flint).

³² *EM* 1855, pp. 313-18, (Rev John Whitridge).

These descriptions introduce another dimension to the subject of religious heritage. Although they appeared in the denominational magazines, they are notable for their ecumenical spirit among the family of Nonconformists. Both denominational and Nonconformist religious heritage were important, particularly among the Old Dissenters who had been in existence for centuries. Overall, while there was certainly some overlap between denominations, references to religious heritage could contribute to piety (in the case of the Primitive Methodists), respectability (in the case of the Wesleyan Methodists) or ancestry (in the case of the Baptists and Congregationalists)

Denominational variations related to class and social mobility

It has been shown that social mobility can reflect changing perspectives on departure from this world.³³ The increase in prosperity among the Methodists in the nineteenth century was understood at the time. In the 1850s one historian claimed that Methodism ‘had saved [the poor man] from rags – put him on his feet – gave him a character, and placed him in the path of industry in which he had found influence and position’.³⁴ ‘What a host of noble lay members have proved that “godliness is profitable in all things,”’ a minister wrote in 1866, but added ‘Gold comes in at one door, and Grace is driven out at another.’³⁵ By the 1880s *The Methodist Times* stated: ‘It is evident at once that Methodism has been much too exclusively the sect of the lower middle class’; ‘we make the pulpit and the pew too much a middle-class monopoly’.³⁶ The obituaries of the fifty years between 1830 and 1880 reflect this broader social movement.

³³ See Chapter Four.

³⁴ J. B. Dyson, *The History of Wesleyan Methodism in the Congleton Circuit* (London: John Mason, 1856), p. 178.

³⁵ ‘A Wesleyan Minister’, *Temporal Prosperity and Spiritual Decline* (1886), pp. 16, 18, in H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 356.

³⁶ *Methodist Times*, 19 August 1886, 4 February 1897, in Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, p. 356.

Another category directly connected to this trend towards middle-class obituaries is occupation.³⁷ Among the Congregationalists, occupations are named 67% of the time in the 1830s and 95% of the time in the 1870s; among the Baptists the ratio is 48% in the 1830s and 67% in the 1870s; among the Wesleyan Methodists 10% in the 1830s and 38% in the 1870s; and among the Primitive Methodists 15% in the 1830s and 26% in the 1870s.³⁸ The Wesleyan obituaries underwent the greatest change regarding references to occupation, increasing instances almost four-fold, yet the number still falls well below those of the Congregationalists and the Baptists by the end of the period. While ministers, tradesmen, doctors, lawyers, naval officers, shipwrights, farmers, builders, miners, drapers, teachers, bankers and merchants are among those named in the Congregational and Baptist obituaries, by 1880 there were still many Methodist obituaries that make no reference at all to occupation. When broken down by denomination, the percentages for naming occupations reveal a distinction between the Old Dissent with an average of 81% in the 1870s and the New Dissent with an average of 32% in the 1870s.

The difference between the Old and the New Dissent is even more marked when considering the percentage of subjects who were ministers. The percentage of Baptist obituaries dedicated to ministers increased from 37% to 46%; the Congregational percentage increased from 58% to 86%. Within the New Dissenters the percentage is 1% in the 1830s and 11% in the 1870s for the Wesleyans, 0% in the 1830s and 6% in the 1870s for the Primitive Methodists. While it was far more likely for Old Dissenters to be identified as ministers in the early years, this fact highlights yet another difference in the obituary content when comparing denominations. Both professional ministry and secular occupation were important enough to the Old Dissent to warrant references with increasing frequency and

³⁷ In the overall sample, occupations are named 36% of the time in the 1830s and 57% of the time in the 1870s. The number of businessmen increase from 2% to 9%, and the number of ministers from 24% to 37%.

elaboration. Honouring ministers was a priority for the Congregationalists and the Baptists from an early period in a way that it was not for the New Dissent because ministry as a formal occupation was seen differently by the Old and the New and the internal structure of the denominations differed widely. The ordained minister among Old Dissenters was set apart whereas the Methodist model allowed non-ordained persons to participate fully in church leadership, as in the case of Matthew Hand. A Wesleyan Methodist of Congleton in Cheshire who died suddenly in 1831 at 53, he was described as a class leader, local preacher, society steward, chapel steward, circuit steward and trustee.³⁹ However, by mid-century, the Wesleyan Methodists became more hierarchical as a body, a higher value was placed on the education of ministers and the call to preach became more professionalised. A letter from W. M. Harvard, superintendent of the Maidstone circuit from 1847-1849, to Jabez Bunting refers to ‘the adoption by our Conference of the appellation “Church” as designating our Connexion, and “Ministers” as applicable to those among us as are wholly separated to holy work’.⁴⁰ Over time the identity of a Methodist minister became more formal, in keeping with the general movement of the Wesleyans towards the comparative respectability of the Old Dissent.

The increase in references to higher education has been noted.⁴¹ These references include both the Dissenting academies and the universities. The Congregational minister of Union Street Chapel, Brighton, G. Wade Robinson, attended Trinity College, Dublin, and then New College, London,⁴² and Nathaniel Haycroft, a Baptist, went to Stepney College and then to the University of Glasgow for his M.A.⁴³ The intentionality of the obituary authors in

³⁹ *WMM* 1831, p. 214 (Matthew Hand).

⁴⁰ W. M. Harvard to Jabez Bunting, 26 January 1848, W. R. Ward ed., *Early Victorian Methodism: the correspondence of Jabez Bunting 1830-1858* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 356.

⁴¹ See pp. 98-100.

⁴² *EM* 1877, p. 164, and 1877, p. 223 (Rev G. Wade Robinson).

⁴³ *BM* 1873, pp. 97-98 (Rev N. Haycroft).

including these references to institutions of higher learning makes it clear that education was perceived as increasingly vital to quality Nonconformist leadership.

There are several reasons for these educational distinctions. First, the high percentage of ministers in the Congregational and Baptist samples and the denominational expectations in terms of preparation for ministry would affect both the Old and the New Dissent. The Old Dissent offered theological training for its relatively high number of ordained ministers from an early period; Ken Brown notes that almost 80% of the Congregationalists and just under 50% of the Baptists who entered the ministry between 1820 and 1849 had been educated at an academy, a college, or even a university.⁴⁴ However, the New Dissent had fewer expectations in terms of formal education and did not have as many colleges as the Old Dissent; indeed, at the beginning of the period under consideration the Methodists had none. An 1831 letter from Joseph Entwistle to Jabez Bunting shows concern about Methodist training: ‘Unless the improvement of our young preachers keep pace with the general improvement of Society – our ministry will not be supported ... [T]he clergy and our brethren the Dissenters will take our glory from us.’⁴⁵ In 1842 the Wesleyans opened the first branch of their Theological Institution and by 1840-1869 over half the men entering the Wesleyan ministry had attended it.⁴⁶ Second, since the women in this group never pursued higher education, the relatively high number of women within the New Dissenting sample would bring that percentage down. Third, movement among the Baptists in the sample to a more highly educated middle-class group with fewer women by the end of the period would increase the percentages of those pursuing higher education among the Old Dissenters. Thus,

⁴⁴ K. D. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 58.

⁴⁵ J. Entwistle to Jabez Bunting, 23 June 1831, W. R. Ward ed., *Early Victorian Methodism*, p. 14.

⁴⁶ In the 1860s the Primitive Methodists opened the Sunderland Institute for the training of their ministers. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales*, pp. 59, 62-63.

distinctions between the Old and the New Dissent related to gender, occupation and class affect references in the obituaries to education.

The denominational variations reveal an overall movement towards memorialising the middle classes. In this respect, the Congregationalists were always ahead of the curve, so to speak, in choosing obituary subjects who were more likely to model the middle-class success story. The Congregationalists, as compared with the other denominations, followed the latest trends in theology and were the most prosperous. Thus it makes sense that men and particularly ministers figured largely in their published memoirs as the most appropriate representatives of their denominational identity as middle-class and educated. The Primitive Methodists were behind the curve but by the 1870s, when almost one-third of the sample could be identified as middle-class and the naming of occupations had almost doubled, they were catching up with the other denominations in terms of a middle-class identity. The Baptists and Wesleyans were on the curve, steadily moving in the same direction towards more general middle-class status. While the shift in Nonconformity towards middle-class respectability was clear, each denomination was on a different part of that trajectory between 1830 and 1880.

Denominational variations in lifestyle

Denomination and choice of obituary subject also affected character traits that were considered virtuous and worthy of imitation as well as how time was occupied in good works, accomplishments and participation in denominational and charitable societies. This is an area of considerable complexity in distinguishing trends among denominations. Most of these categories increased consistently over the fifty-year period for all four denominations. However, the denominational trends show some features of obituary content and emphasis that are not observable when looking only at the Nonconformists as a single group.

The increase in frequency of references to good works may be in keeping with shifts in evangelical theology of the period. Since it was the strong conviction of evangelicals that salvation was possible through the atoning death of Jesus for the sins of humanity rather than through good works, this might account for relatively infrequent references to good works in the 1830s. The 1830 obituary of Richard Bowden, a Congregationalist of Middlesex, suggests that ‘well-doing’ was in keeping with fearing God, and that ‘good works’ were not the same as worldly accomplishments.

Nor is it necessary that these records should invariably exhibit some pre-eminent talent or some splendid achievement. The man who has ‘feared God and eschewed evil,’ who has been marked by deep experience, patient endurance, and unwearied perseverance in well-doing, though his station in life may have been less prominent than that of many, may have, nevertheless, finished an interesting and instructive course, deserving of notoriety and study.⁴⁷

With the years ‘works’ found more of a place in the eternal perspective of an evangelical Nonconformist because of a movement away from a focus on the state of one’s soul and on to integrating faith and every-day life.⁴⁸ This sort of thinking, as it seeped into Nonconformist life, especially in the larger towns, may account in part for the dramatic increase in references to good works between 1830 and 1880.

The Wesleyan Methodists began the period with a moderate number of references to good works at 17%. By the 1870s that percentage had more than doubled to 38% and was at least 12% higher than among the Baptists (26%), Primitive Methodists (18%) and Congregationalists (13%). This is consistent not only with the Wesleyan movement towards integration with the larger society but also with the Wesleyan presence in the larger towns that had opportunities for assisting the poor. Two examples point to Wesleyan good works after 1850 in the cities of Leeds and Liverpool. John Collins, a local preacher of Leeds, who

⁴⁷ *EM* 1830, pp. 178-81 (Rev Richard Bowden).

⁴⁸ See Chapter Six, pp. 197-209.

died in 1853, was active in the Leeds Town Mission, which served ‘the most degraded and miserable of the population’.⁴⁹ Mary Boyd, a Wesleyan of Liverpool who died at 50 in 1874 was a member of the Ladies Committee of the Prescott Domestic Mission, ‘visited the houses of the poor, invited poor women to the Mothers’ Meeting and led inquirers to Christ’.⁵⁰ The Congregational references to good works increased significantly by the 1850s but are the lowest of the four denominations by the end of the period at 12%. This is no doubt due to the brevity of the Congregational obituaries at that time and the increase from 11% in the 1830s to 28% in the 1850s may be more indicative of the trend within the denomination. The Primitive Methodist references jump dramatically from 2% in the 1830s and 1850s to 18% in the 1870s – still moderate by the end of the period, but showing a most definite change in obituary content. The 1879 obituary of Mrs Sarah Lamb, a Primitive Methodist of London, includes quotations from associates of her minister husband: ‘’When it was my lot to travel with you in Hull I got to see more of her Christian life. [S]he went with me to visit the sick in some low parts of the town, the Charity Hall, and the Infirmary ... she took deep interest in the suffering poor’.⁵¹ The Baptist statistics reflect a great increase from 5% in the 1830s to 19% in the 1850s to 26% in the 1870s as well, ending at a percentage second only to the Wesleyans. The obituary of Mrs Chapman, a Baptist of Sheffield, states that she died in 1855 at the age of 53 as a result of a disease caught while engaged in charitable work. The obituary includes a lengthy description of her good works, which included visiting the poor, the ill and the fatherless.⁵² These shifts towards reporting more good works in the obituaries possibly reflect a broadening of theological emphasis and a decision to move away from doctrinal content and towards outward manifestations of evangelical belief.⁵³ With the exception of the

⁴⁹ *WMM* 1854, p. 286 (John Collins).

⁵⁰ *WMM* 1876, pp. 89-91 (Mary Boyd).

⁵¹ *PMM* 1879 pp. 181-83 (Mrs Sarah Lamb).

⁵² *BM* 1855, pp. 162-63 (Mrs Chapman).

⁵³ See J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825-1875* (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 204-211.

Congregationalists, all show a dramatic increase by the 1870s, indicating the importance of works in the Christian life and an emphasis on the third portion of the four-fold formula.

The trends in descriptions of character traits are worth noting. The percentage remains low among the Congregationalists throughout the period, starting at 8% in the 1830s and remaining at 10% during the 1850s and 1870s, while the other three denominations show marked increases in this area: Primitive Methodists (8/12/27); Baptists (12/25/30); Wesleyan Methodists (12/13/32). The Congregationalists are the exception: what is the cause? Three primary reasons surface. First, the large number of ministers memorialised in the Congregational obituaries makes it more likely that a minister's skills and style in preaching would be emphasised over other aspects of his character. Second, the somewhat sophisticated and concise tone of the later Congregational obituaries suggests that indulging in elaborate descriptions of the character traits of a minister was considered overly sentimental. Indeed, the 1871 issue of the *Congregational Yearbook* suggested that 'the evangelical father was 'more vehement and passionate in his feelings and devotions, more given to self-discipline and godly behaviour. His son was more self-restrained; he neither rises to the same ecstasies of devotion, nor sinks to the same depths of despondency.'⁵⁴ Third, the brevity of some of the later obituaries, as in the case of E. Muscutt of London who died in 1876 at 80, who was 'writing an important work on "The Ages" till within a short time of his death and was 'called to his rest',⁵⁵ did not allow for the long narratives and testimonies that characterised some of the other denominational obituaries at the end of the period. The reason for the limited references to character traits throughout the fifty years is probably the result of a combination of all three of these possibilities. The significant increases among the other three denominations are in keeping with the overall trend away from the conversion story and last

⁵⁴ *Congregational Yearbook*, 1871, pp. 89ff, in C. Binfield, *So Down to Prayers: Studies in English Nonconformity, 1780-1920* (London: J. M. Dent, 1977), p. 17.

⁵⁵ *EM* 1877, p. 40 (Rev E. Muscutt).

words and towards a narrative description of the person and his or her activities and service. As in the case of good works, the Wesleyan Methodists and the Baptists end the period with the highest percentages at 32% and 30% respectively. These are among the highest percentages in any category for any denomination with the exception of Jesus, religious heritage and conversion, indicating the central importance of the living out of the faith through virtuous behaviour and activity by the end of the time period.

The record of accomplishments increased almost four-fold among the Baptists (3/4/11) and the Wesleyan Methodists (6/11/22). Here again these two denominations seem to be on a similar trajectory towards incorporating middle-class and even secular values into the spiritual journey. So, for example, the 1878 obituary of John Blanchard, a Wesleyan Methodist of Winterton in Lincolnshire, notes that he ‘established a flourishing day-school’, and helped to erect a chapel that included school premises and a minister’s residence, as well as contributing to local charities and Methodist institutions.⁵⁶ The obituary of John Walding, a Baptist businessman in Northamptonshire who died in 1855 at 59, states that ‘by steady perseverance he raised himself to a position of influence and comfort in life’.⁵⁷ References to overall change in status were remarkably common among the Baptists and the Wesleyans between 1850 and 1880. Although for many years the Primitive Methodists had the smallest scope for this sort of fulfilment, they also included references to personal accomplishments beyond those normally associated with the spiritual journey, with increased frequency in the 1870s. The percentage is still low in comparison with the other denominations (0% in the 1830s, 2% in the 1850s and 7% in the 1870s). However, the difference between the beginning and end of the fifty-year period is marked. The pattern among the Congregationalists is intriguing. As has been noted, a dip in many categories in the 1870s was common for the

⁵⁶ *WMM* 1878, pp. 319-20 (John Blanchard).

⁵⁷ *BM* 1856, p. 170 (John Walding).

Congregationalists. However, in the realm of accomplishments, the percentage goes consistently up from 7% in the 1830s to 14% in the 1850s to 16% in the 1870s, suggesting that this was an area of particular importance for the Congregationalists.

For the overall Nonconformist sample the percentage for participation in charitable and evangelistic societies more than doubled over the fifty-year period. However, for the Primitive Methodists the percentage remained at 3%, even in the 1870s (barely increasing from 2% in the 1830s and 1850s), while for the Baptists it jumped from 1% in the 1830s to 4% in the 1850s and then to 17% in the 1870s. For the Congregationalists the references increased from 10% in the 1830s to 26% in the 1850s and then declined to 18% in the 1870s (this last number again being attributable to brevity suggests that a continued increase was likely). The Wesleyans pattern was similar to that of the Baptists, moving from 9% in the 1830s and 1850s to 17% in the 1870s.

The Primitive Methodists continued to use their obituary space to recount aspects of spiritual life, as in the 1880 account of Thomas Taylor who died in Grimsby in Lincolnshire in 1878 at 72. It refers to his 'zealous devoted activity to save the souls of his fellow men from death and hell', remembers that 'at fourteen he became convinced of his sad condition as a sinner before God but did not enter into the freedom and blessedness of the gospel until age eighteen' and states that at his death 'his sufferings were born with Christian fortitude and resignation and he entered his rest'.⁵⁸ For the Primitive Methodists, the focus on the activity of the soul was consistent.

A point of comparison in this category is the starting point for the Baptists and the Wesleyans. It would appear that references to social participation were not considered worthy of inclusion in an early Baptist obituary because the spiritual battle and journey were of

⁵⁸ *PMM* 1880, pp. 180-81 (Thomas Taylor).

primary importance, as in the 1830 obituary of C. T. Milcham. His dying words indicate a prolonged struggle: 'I feel I am a dying man, death has got hold of me and is shaking me to pieces ... Save me, O God'. Eventually he told his daughter that God had given him peace. This obituary contains no references to his good works, accomplishments or participation in chapel or community societies, even though he was both a minister and a manufacturer.⁵⁹ By way of contrast, the 1875 obituary of William Payne, a Baptist minister of Chesham in Buckinghamshire, states that he was the secretary of the Buckinghamshire Baptist Association.⁶⁰ The denominational percentages in the category of social participation may reflect the amount of time the obituary subjects had to devote to activities outside of work and home in addition to the changing priorities of the writers as to what was chosen for inclusion in the obituaries. The substantial increases in this area suggest that by the 1870s it became important to specifically note social involvement in the Baptist and Wesleyan obituaries. This may have been particularly true for the Baptists who started the period in the 1830s with almost no references to social involvement.

In summary, with the exception of the Congregationalists, dramatic increases in references to good works and virtues of character may be observed over time in the denominational obituary content, with especially high percentages for the Baptists and Wesleyan Methodists in the 1870s. References to accomplishments increased for all, although the Wesleyan Methodists increased four-fold and ended the period with the highest percentage. Social involvement remained consistently low for the Primitive Methodists and, if not for abbreviated obituaries in the later period, would probably have ended at a very high level for the Congregationalists. The Baptists and Methodists saw significant increases in this area, ending at much the same point.

⁵⁹ *BM* 1830, pp. 89-95 (Rev C. T. Milcham).

⁶⁰ *BM*1875, PP. 209-16 (Rev William H. Payne).

The Old and the New Dissent: doctrine and experience

The obituaries demonstrate that the Old Dissent and the New Dissent embraced different areas of emphasis within the general framework of evangelical theology. One area of distinction related to doctrine is the atonement. Specific trends in relation to the atonement have been noted in Chapter Three. It may be concluded that while the Old Dissent focused on this aspect of doctrine down to the 1850s, explicit statements referring to and even explaining the atonement were not as necessary to the obituary as they were in the earlier periods. Indeed, the striking aspect of these statistical sequences is the sharp drop in references to the atonement among the Old Dissenters by the 1870s. This is not a pattern that is observable among the New Dissenters with regard to the atonement. While the low to moderate percentages cannot be compared to the New Dissenting references to such categories as Jesus or conversion where the numbers are exceptionally high, they do not suggest a dramatic change in attention paid to the atonement, the most central theological doctrine of Nonconformity.

The matter of awareness of sin is also considered in Chapter Three. The acute awareness of the effects of sin and a felt need for the atoning blood of Christ, often experienced acutely by members of the Old Dissent, were dramatically modified by the end of the period: there was a sense of calm, fuelled not by introspection but by an assumption that all was well. Although the references dropped over time for the Old Dissent, the Methodist references to the awareness of sin at the deathbed were consistently low. By the 1870s the level of self-examination and horror over sin seems to have faded for all of the denominations. Facing the prospect of death, they expected to go to heaven.

The New Dissent showed a stronger interest in assurance of salvation than the Old Dissent and, although this decreased with time, it remained fairly consistent. The Primitives

referred to assurance 18% of the time and the Wesleyans 14% of the time in the 1830s. In the 1850s the percentages were 9% and 8%. By the 1870s these statistics remained the same or increased slightly to 11% and 8% respectively. However, compared to the Old Dissent, even those lower numbers were high. The Congregationalists moved from 4% to 6% to 0% and the Baptists from 9% to 9% to 1%. The emphasis of the New Dissent was in keeping with Methodist theology which emphasised both this assurance of salvation through Christ (as in the 1854 obituary of a Wesleyan, Mrs Elizabeth Lowe: ‘Let me go: farewell. Jesus is mine, and I am His!’⁶¹) and the importance of the process of sanctification (as in the 1854 obituary of Mary Marsden, a Wesleyan: ‘Softly and gently her redeemed and sanctified spirit passed from earth to be for ever with the Lord.’⁶²) Intimacy with Jesus and the departure of a sanctified spirit were intrinsic to the Methodist death narrative.

References to heaven were also valued highly among the Methodists. These references were highest for the Primitives at 23% in the 1830s, 31% in the 1850s, and 28% in the 1870s. The expectation of meeting others in heaven increased from 11% in the 1830s to 16% in the 1850s to 21% in the 1870s. References to heaven remained steady among the Wesleyans at 24%, and meeting others in heaven went up from 8% in the 1830s to 5% in the 1850s to 13% in the 1870s. While theological references declined, experiential references rose. This is a rather untypical case where the Congregationalists mirrored the Primitives with references to heaven increasing from 15% in the 1830s to 30% in the 1850s and to 18% in the 1870s (and this despite the noted brevity of the later Congregational obituaries). Only the Baptist sample showed these references decreasing, from 18% to 8%. References to meeting others in heaven were strikingly low among the Old Dissenters, never rising much above 7% for the entire time period. By contrast, the obituary of Edward Thompson, a Primitive

⁶¹ *WMM* 1854, p. 286 (Mrs Elizabeth Lowe).

⁶² *WMM* 1854, p. 288 (Mary Marsden).

Methodist of County Durham, who died at age 80 in 1834, exemplifies his emotions, the prospect of heaven and his anticipation of meeting not only those he knew but those whose acquaintance he hoped to make:

When relating his experience he spoke particularly of his prospect of unerring happiness, and of a sensible impression which he had on his mind, that he was verging very near the borders of the eternal world .. he was found to be in a delightful state of mind, and was much animated with the prospect of meeting the worthies who had gone before, and especially those with whom he had taken sweet counsel on earth ... he appeared to be just in the suburbs of heaven.⁶³

The Methodist emphasis on a personal encounter with God, a hallmark of the Evangelical Revival, would necessarily include heaven as a real place to be anticipated, glimpsed and finally entered once the journey through the valley of the shadow of death had been traversed.

Experience was central to the Methodist spiritual journey, and it was believed that this would continue in heaven. So, glimpsing heaven and the anticipation of meeting other Christians were essential components of waiting on the threshold between this life and the next. Indeed, these spiritual sensibilities were part of the Methodist identity. Thus Martha Pollard, a Primitive Methodist of Burnley in Lancashire who died at 22 in 1835 from the bursting of a blood vessel, assured her mother ‘that her peace was made with God, and that were she to die she should go safe to heaven where she would be better provided for than she could possibly be in this life’.⁶⁴ The unobtainable could be obtained; the unknowable could be known. The Primitive Methodists had by far the highest number of visions recorded in the obituaries: it was part of their spiritual heritage to be open to the possibility of seeing the unseen, and thus less likely to be doubted and more likely to be embraced. This was particularly true in the 1830s with visions at 13%; both men and women had audible and visual glimpses of the supernatural. The 1836 obituary of Hannah Beacham explains that

⁶³ *PMM* 1834, pp. 32-35 (Edward Thompson).

⁶⁴ *PMM* 1836, pp. 269-70 (Martha Pollard).

Hannah told her husband that she fell ‘into a kind of doze and saw her body carried into Norton church and brought out and put into the grave ... she said she had seen Lazarus and Prince [a travelling preacher], that used to call at her house, but now in heaven’.⁶⁵ John Smith of the Birmingham circuit who died in 1834 at 53 ‘fixed his eyes on the foot of the bed, and with a transport of joy, exclaimed, “O my Jesus is there!” He said to his wife, “I am dying, do you hear that beautiful music? I must go.”’⁶⁶ Nonetheless, the Primitive Methodist recording of visions decreased sharply by the 1850s at 5% and ended the period at 3%. This decline may reflect the movement of the Primitive Methodists towards a more respectable status in the Nonconformist and wider communities.

Indeed, each denomination displayed a different pattern with regard to visions that suggest either a conservative theology focused more on doctrine than experience, or a trend that mirrors changes in social status as appears to be the case with the Primitive Methodists. The Baptist references to visions are negligible at 3/0/2 and the Congregational references are what might be expected at 3/8/1, indicating that this was not a strong aspect of their spirituality. However, the Wesleyan Methodist statistics were surprisingly low, particularly in the early period, at 2/5/5. The openness of the Methodists to experience as an indication of vital religion suggests that the number of recorded visions might be higher. The low percentages in all denominations suggest that perhaps the visions were not believed by the obituary authors, or the dying had them but doubted their own senses. Perhaps they did not have them at all.

Both the Wesleyans and the Primitives encountered manifestations of the presence of God. Ann Pickles, a Wesleyan of Haworth in Yorkshire who died in 1876 at 82, ‘had a serious seizure in the midst of which she had an overwhelming manifestation of the Divine

⁶⁵ *PMM* 1836, p. 40 (Hannah Beacham).

⁶⁶ *PMM* 1836, p. 160 (John Smith).

Presence'.⁶⁷ John Coad, a Primitive Methodist of Wainfleet in Lincolnshire, experienced 'a very gracious outpouring of God's Holy Spirit' shortly before his death at 74 in 1835.⁶⁸ Sometimes these experiences are phrased in a way that is less formulaic, as in the case of John Collins, a Wesleyan of Leeds, who was 'favoured with seasons of overpowering tenderness and rapture' upon his death in 1854.⁶⁹ The Methodists were looking for certain signs at the point of death, just as they looked for certain signs at conversion. They sought the presence of God in a way that touched the spirit, the emotions and the physical senses; they looked for references to assurance of salvation and to the holiness of the person on the verge of departure.

While the conversion story was central to the Nonconformist obituaries, it was of exceptional importance to the Methodists. The percentages for the Primitives are 97% in the 1830s, 81% in the 1850s, and 90% in the 1870s. The Wesleyan percentages increased from 55% to 62% to 64% by the end of the time period. By contrast, the Congregationalists started at 36% and end at 23%. The Baptists, once again mirroring the movement of the Wesleyans (and vice versa), moved from 45% to 57%. These percentages are all relatively high, but the Methodist percentages are consistently highest and the Primitive numbers are striking. As previously noted, there is a sense that those who made the choice to join the Primitive Methodists had a particular story to tell because of their relatively recent history in sharp contrast to the history of the Wesleyans and dramatic contrast with the Old Dissent. As in the case of the Primitive Methodist William Ford who died in 1835 at 71 and was 'set at liberty' less than a year before his death,⁷⁰ it was not unusual for the Primitive Methodists to live for many years before their conversion: the conversion might even occur a few years or a few

⁶⁷ *WMM* 1878, pp. 78-79 (Mrs Ann Pickles).

⁶⁸ *PMM* 1836, p. 440 (John Coad).

⁶⁹ *WMM* 1854, p. 286 (John Collins).

⁷⁰ *PMM* 1836, pp. 27-29 (William Ford).

months before death. And the conversion stories, while they reached the same conclusion of salvation as the other denominations, were different. The Methodists' focus was on personal conversion through a sometimes arduous emotional and spiritual process. Conversion brought freedom from sin through the blood of Jesus but was necessarily followed by a lifetime of moral advancement towards holiness.

The Baptists were often convicted of sin through a sermon at a fairly young age, followed by being baptized (with the date of the baptism usually recorded) and joining a Baptist church. The process of public commitment to the faith was taken seriously. Elizabeth Veall, who died in 1869 at 67, was baptized in 1818 through the influence of a minister. 'She was questioned rather severely by a few of those assembled, when her minister threw his shield over her, and she was immediately received for baptism. It was bitter cold weather, but she persevered, and was baptized on the 15th of February 1818.'⁷¹ The Congregationalists sometimes could not recall the moment of conversion, which often occurred at a young age through a family member, a sermon or through personal reading. In this respect, the Congregational conversion experience was least reminiscent of the Evangelical Revival, but more in keeping with their Puritan forebears, as in the case of Jonathan Glyde who did not 'know the exact moment of his own conversion, - in this he resembled Richard Baxter, and other eminent servants of Christ'.⁷²

While some categories stand out as exceptions, the distinction between doctrine and experience is reflected to some extent when considering the emotions at the point of death. For example, the references in the Primitive Methodist and the Wesleyan Methodist obituaries to both suffering and joy (Primitive Methodist suffering 33/42/38 and joy 46/39/17; Wesleyan Methodist suffering 34/34/31 and joy 34/38/18 respectively) are higher

⁷¹ *BM* 1869, p. 184 (Mrs Elizabeth Veall).

⁷² *EM* 1855, pp. 121-27 (Rev Jonathan Glyde).

than those in the Baptist and Congregational obituaries (Baptist suffering 20/29/24 and joy 17/13/17; Congregational suffering 22/27/9 and joy 20/17/6 respectively). The Primitive Methodists refer to the need for patience as well (33/33/36). Emotions were an important part of death for the New Dissent, and the denomination that stands out in terms of dramatic emotional expression at the point of death is the Primitive Methodists. While some formulaic references were shared with other denominations - such as the phrase 'Happy, happy!', which was commonly used by the Baptists and the Wesleyan Methodists, particularly in the 1830s - the Primitives were unrivalled for intensity of feeling at the deathbed.

However, by 1880 this focus on emotion in the Primitive Methodist obituaries changed dramatically, with fewer dying words included. The obituary author's presentation of the end of life is toned down and noticeably calmer. This is particularly striking because of the drama of the earlier obituaries. The 1836 obituary of 23-year-old Priscilla Boulton of Leicester, who died of consumption, recounts many of her last words: 'Glory to God. I feel happy. Praise him! Praise him! Help me to praise him Glory, glory, glory be to God! I believe it! I believe! Yes, I have got the victory. Angels are waiting to waft me home. Come, Lord Jesus, and come quickly. Glory, glory! He is here!'⁷³ The emotions at the deathbed had many aspects, not all of them happy ones. In the case of Mary Bayley of the Birmingham circuit who died in 1836 at 25, we learn that 'a short time previous to her dissolution she had a very sharp conflict with the powers of darkness, her state was very afflicting. The imbecility of her frame and the agonies of her soul were great, and her cries to God were inexpressible. He came to her help.'⁷⁴ These references are in sharp contrast with that of Thomas Davison of New Delaval in Northumberland who died at 56 in 1877: 'Mr Davison's religion was not of the sort which expands itself in mere religious talk and noisy declamation;

⁷³ *PMM* 1836, pp. 93-95 (Priscilla Boulton).

⁷⁴ *PMM* 1836, p. 240 (Mary Bayley).

it shaped his life and found expression in self-denial and earnest work for the good of others⁷⁵ or that of Mrs Tuton of Liverpool who died of bronchitis in 1879 and whose last words were “It is finished ... Father, I leave you my dying blessing.”⁷⁶ By the 1870s even the Primitive Methodists had followed a pattern in keeping with the rest of Nonconformity. Their religious expression became less intense and less focused on God.

It might be said, then, that the Old Dissent prioritised doctrine in the early years while the New Dissent prioritised experience consistently over time. This analysis of obituary content portrays shades of difference in what mattered to the obituary authors and editors of the denominational magazines. Thus other than the frequent references to Jesus by all four denominations, it is intriguing to observe that the lines of demarcation fall where one might expect, with the Old Dissent focusing on the atonement and awareness of sin and the New Dissent emphasising conversion, assurance of salvation and heaven. This is not to say that the Methodists were not concerned with awareness of sin. A strong conviction of sin was central to every conversion story. However, in a very real sense, deathbed conviction of sin was old news. At that point the Methodists were focused on their freedom from sin and peace with God as they faced eternity.

Last Words

Some distinctions between the Old Dissent and the New Dissent are apparent in the inclusion of the last words of the dying in the obituaries. The Methodists included more last words with the passing years, while the Baptists and the Congregationalists included fewer words. The Wesleyans moved from 35% at the beginning of the time period to 45% at the end and the Primitives from 51% to 68%; but the Baptists from 45% to 39% and the

⁷⁵ *PMM* 1879, p. 376 (Thomas Davison).

⁷⁶ *PMM* 1880, pp. 307-308 (Mrs Tuton).

Congregationalists from 40% to 19%. The trends of the Old Dissent are in keeping with the movement from a style that was more robust and direct in the 1830s to a more formal narrative in the 1870s. It is not at all surprising that the Congregationalists who were more integrated into the culture would move in this direction more quickly than the Methodists. And the fact that the Baptists and the Methodists ended the period with percentages that were close in range – 39% and 45% – is also in keeping with their similar movement towards higher representation in the middle classes and an obituary presentation that was less orientated to the Nonconformist community and more acceptable to the larger world.

In the death narrative, the Primitive Methodists referred to prayer almost twice as often in the 1830s (23%) as the other denominations (Congregationalists 13%, Baptists 13% and Wesleyan Methodists 12%). The 1836 obituary of John Hunter, a Primitive Methodist and master mariner of South Shields in County Durham, who died on the river in London of a bowel complaint, informs us that he ‘attended a lively prayer meeting on the vessel the day of his death’.⁷⁷ Over time, references to prayer among the Primitive Methodists also declined to 20% in the 1850s and to 16% by the 1870s. Since the increase among the Baptists (17% by the 1870s), Congregationalists (dropped to 2% in the 1870s, in keeping with some other Congregational categories due to brevity) and Wesleyans (14%) was minimal, the decrease in references over time suggests that prayer, which was a vital component in the birth of Primitive Methodism, may have become less central to the Primitives than it had been in their earlier years. Primitive Methodist camp meetings differed from other Methodist revival meetings in that they were day-long, outdoor gatherings which focused on prayer and testimonies by a variety of people, whereas the primary focus of the normal revival meeting was preaching to induce conviction of sin with prayer to follow. The death narratives of the

⁷⁷ *PMM* 1836, p. 121 (John Hunter).

later Primitive Methodist obituaries were less reminiscent of an open-air revival and more suitable to a chapel prayer meeting.

Denominational similarities

A category of striking continuity among all four denominations is references to Jesus. The Primitive Methodists were the only group that increased references over the fifty-year span, from 43% to 51% to 54%. The other three groups decreased their references slightly but they still remained high at 41% for the Baptists and 44% for the Wesleyan Methodists in the 1870s. The Congregationalists moved from 45% in the 1830s to 51% in the 1850s and then dropped to 19% in the 1870s. It may very well be that the Congregational percentages would have been even higher if some of the obituaries were not shortened so dramatically. If this assumption is correct, it would mark one of the few times that the Congregationalists and the Primitive Methodists were on a similar trajectory. So to take two opposite examples, a Primitive Methodist obituary of 1834 and a Congregational obituary of 1880, we see both anticipating an encounter with Jesus upon dying. When Thomas Wright, a Primitive Methodist of Bishop's Tuckland in the Darlington circuit, died in 1834 at 31, he exclaimed 'I am ready to depart and be with Christ.'⁷⁸ When the Congregational minister John Curwen died in 1880, he talked with his wife 'about heaven and Jesus. "When we came nearer the golden gates, she saw Jesus more clearly than I, she cast off her worldly cares and went before me".'⁷⁹ The fact that all denominations displayed high percentages in this category throughout the period suggests little change in the importance of the second person of the Trinity in the moments before and after death.

⁷⁸ *PMM* 1834, pp. 161-62 (Thomas Wright).

⁷⁹ *EM* 1880, pp. 489-91 (Rev John Curwen).

The Nonconformist obituaries shared a tone of hope, that is, the hope for salvation from sin and the anticipation of a home in heaven. The spirit of the obituaries and memoirs across denominations and time periods was never grim. While the style and areas of emphasis varied with time and denomination, the obituaries may be described as encouraging, confident and hopeful. When William Todman, a Congregational minister of Welton in Lincolnshire faced his death at 50 in 1856, his final words communicated his hope. ‘I have always loved to think of heaven; and I hope, unworthy as I am, I shall be admitted there, where I shall meet my dear parents, my beloved pastor, and may meet with whom I have had sweet intercourse on earth – and, above all, my blessed Saviour will be there!’⁸⁰ Frances Elizabeth Smith, a Wesleyan Methodist who died in 1874 exclaimed ‘’O such a sight as I have had! After such views as I have had, I have no longer any desire to remain here on my own account’’.⁸¹ These individuals were ready to leave this world for another. That is where they placed their hope.

A further area of similarity is that, as noted in Chapter Two, the obituaries of all four groups contain phrases that may be regarded as formulaic. And while the inclusion of formulaic phrases decreased over time, the style of the obituaries became more formal. The formulaic phrasing spanned all denominations and times, although it did become more subtle and less frequent among the Congregationalists of the 1870s.

No matter what their denominational affiliation was, the dying Nonconformists – except in the cases of sudden death - inevitably faced their last illness in community. When this was not indicated by their last words, it was described by the obituary author. Death was by necessity a family experience and by intent a community experience. For one thing, the obituaries are full of recorded conversations at the deathbed, indicating that the person was

⁸⁰ *EM* 1856, pp. 685-89 (Rev William Todman).

⁸¹ *WMM* 1876, pp. 91-92 (Mrs Frances Elizabeth Smith).

not alone. The 1853 obituary of the Baptist John Ruff, a businessman of London who died at 77, recounted that his 'wife heard him praying that the Lord would fulfil all his good pleasure and then take him to himself'.⁸² The Primitive Methodist Joseph Oliver who died in 1833 'had many gracious visits from kind friends and many gracious manifestations of His Saviour's glorious character'.⁸³ The Nonconformists were surrounded not only by the presence of God but by friends and family. Thus the four denominations had a similar experience of death when it came to knowing Jesus as Saviour and friend, the hopeful anticipation of freedom from sin and death in the life to come, the expression of that hope in phrases that were formulaic and the consolation offered by the presence of others at the deathbed.

Conclusion

Despite variations, the four denominations contributed to overall upward or downward Nonconformist trends. However, the variations provide insight into the distinct identities of the groups, and particularly the varying emphases of the Old and the New Dissent that primarily related to gender, social status and piety. The magazines of the Old and the New Dissent moved towards obituary sections that were increasingly devoted to middle-class men. However, the New Dissent continued to include a significant number of women, even down to the 1870s. And the pace at which the general movement towards male middle-class obituaries occurred differed for the denominations. It may be said that the Congregationalists were ahead of the overall Nonconformist trends, the Baptists and Wesleyan Methodists moved steadily in accordance with the trends and the Primitive Methodists were behind the general trends until the 1870s when it became apparent that they had made progress in catching up with their fellow Nonconformists. Therefore some of the

⁸² *BM* 1853, pp. 302-304 (John Ruff).

⁸³ *PMM* 1834, p. 122 (Joseph Oliver).

differences between the four denominations as revealed in the obituary content, such as those relating to gender and class, diminished with time as they moved towards each other in terms of middle-class respectability.

The four denominations saw upward trends in the number of references to religious heritage. However, each seemed to have a different reason for doing so. The Primitive Methodists made increasingly frequent mention of their pious roots and the power of vital religion to transform lives. The Wesleyan Methodist obituaries indicate that a focus on Methodist history and lineage lent respectability to their identity as Nonconformists. The Baptists, who had been in existence for hundreds of years, still heightened their focus on heritage while being careful to point out that faith could not be inherited and a history of Nonconformity could not replace a personal faith experience. The Congregationalists took pride in their Nonconformist ancestry. However, denominational heritage did not take the place of the importance of Nonconformist heritage. An ecumenical spirit, particularly within the Old Dissent, was present in the obituaries.

As concerned piety, a tendency among the Old Dissenters to emphasise doctrine (such as awareness of sin and the atonement), while the New Dissent emphasised experience (such as heaven, divine manifestations and the last words of the dying) marks another area of differentiation. This remained valid throughout the period, although specific references to doctrine and expressions of intense emotion both declined in keeping with the broadening of Evangelicalism and movement towards middle-class respectability. This overview reveals a pattern. If the Old Dissent continued to emphasise occupations, higher education and doctrine and the New Dissent emphasised experience, emotions and last words at death then it might be concluded that the Old Dissent focused in the obituaries on this world and the intellect, while the New Dissent focused on the next world and matters of heart religion. This is of

course a very general conclusion. Nonetheless, it reveals some of the roots of the tension between this world and the next that is evident in the overall obituary sample.

The inclusion of lists of character traits or lengthy descriptions of the personalities and characters of the obituary subjects increased dramatically among all of the denominations with the exception of the Congregationalists where they remained consistently low. The likely reasons for this exception are, first, that the large number of ministers memorialised tends to focus on qualifications for that occupation, and, second, that the brevity of some of the later Congregational obituaries would leave little room for this sort of narrative description, nor would the increasingly concise and sophisticated tone of these obituaries. The inclusion of accomplishments, particularly related to secular employment or community activity, increased dramatically among the Baptists and the Wesleyan Methodists. This is indicative of their shared movement towards incorporating middle-class values into the spiritual journey recounted in the obituaries. However, the percentage of accomplishments in the Primitive Methodist obituaries remained low throughout the period, suggesting not only a limited scope for the fulfilment of accomplishments in these arenas – although their participation in chapel activities was marked.

The obituaries of the Old and the New Dissent also shared a number of similarities: references to Jesus, formulaic phrasing, death viewed as a community experience and a general tone of hope at the deathbed are shared by all. References to good works and virtues of character increased dramatically for all the denominations except the Congregationalists.

The analysis of the denominational variations yields complex results. It suggests that the differences between the Old and the New Dissent were more substantial than their similarities. However, the four denominations had a great deal in common during the period between 1830 and 1880. The variations related to social background were considerable but

they were headed in the same general direction: towards middle-class respectability. They were at different points on that trajectory and it was the differing pace that introduced many of their differences. A marked distinction arose in the area of piety, with the Old Dissent emphasising doctrine and the New Dissent focusing on experience. However, the four denominations shared evangelical Nonconformist piety that had relationship with Jesus and hopefully anticipation of the afterlife at its centre. In these essential but broad elements of Evangelicalism and in their movement towards a stronger identification with worldly matters they may have had more in common by the end of the period than they did at its beginning.

CHAPTER SIX

THE INFINITE IN THE FINITE:

THE ROMANTIC SPIRIT AND NONCONFORMIST DEATH

[S]ubjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity ... Mr Wordsworth ... was to ... give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure.¹

The life of our Exemplar, the Incarnate Son of God, for thirty years in the carpenter's shop, in the home at Nazareth, has taught us the grandeur and nobility of quiet unostentatious devotion to simply daily duties.²

The Romantic spirit pervaded western society and culture for many years, the climax of its impact being traditionally and narrowly aligned with the generation of Romantic poets between approximately 1790 and 1830. However, Margaret Drabble expands the Romantic literary movement to encompass the years between 1770 and 1884³ and David Bebbington suggests that the influence of the Romantic mood may have extended beyond the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ This study assumes that the influence of the Romantic spirit extended well beyond 1830 and certainly encompassed the years down to 1880. It further supposes that any influence was not limited to the life spans of the Romantic artists but had a delayed, trickle-down effect that was manifested to varying degrees with the passing years. Writers, musicians, painters and architects all reflected the passion and imagination of Romanticism. However, examples portraying the Romantic spirit will be taken primarily from works of prose and poetry since the source material for Nonconformist death, obituaries, is also a form of literature. This chapter will examine the extent to which Romanticism may have affected

¹ S. T. Coleridge, from *Biographia Literaria*, in H. Bloom and L. Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 645.

² *WMM* 1879, pp. 556-69 (Mrs Christiana Hammon).

³ M. Drabble, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 842-43.

⁴ D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain : a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 80-81.

evangelical Nonconformist beliefs about death and the afterlife, how that influence can be traced in the Nonconformist obituaries and how it changed between 1830 and 1880.

As Doreen Rosman notes, the work of some of the more conservative Romantic writers such as Scott and Southey was enjoyed by some Nonconformists while Keats, Coleridge, Shelley and particularly Byron, whose work placed them in the heart of the Romantic tradition, were more suspect.⁵ However, Rosman's work ends at 1830 and it is intriguing to note the frequency with which Coleridge, Wordsworth and even Keats and Shelley are mentioned in the later obituaries.

The Romantic cultural phenomenon was chosen for special consideration because of its relationship to the literary expression and Protestant theology of the nineteenth century, and because the Romantic spirit was particularly attuned to death and matters of the supernatural in the natural world: all features of Nonconformist death as exemplified in the primary source material. The fact that it is possible to trace Romantic motifs at all in the denominational magazine obituaries is indicative of the pervasive influence of Romanticism in English culture between 1830 and 1880. However, the presence of the Romantic spirit in the obituaries does not mean that the Nonconformists were Romantics; rather, it means that Nonconformist views of death were not isolated from the larger culture. M. H. Abrams rightly argues that the Romantic artists secularised traditional theological ideas that had been part of Judaeo-Christian culture for centuries.⁶ Indeed, the Romantic spirit, while not conventionally Christian, was by no means wholly disconnected from Christianity. It held its place in history and, while there was ambivalence towards and rejection of orthodox Christianity on the part of many Romantic artists, a complete absence of Christianity in the

⁵ D. Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 180-84.

⁶ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: tradition and revolution in Romantic literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971). This theme is woven throughout Abrams' work; however, see especially Chapter One, 'This is our high argument,' pp. 19-70.

Romantic element would not have been possible in the nineteenth-century western world. But, more than that, the Romantic spirit dealt with the same universal themes of life and death, meaning and suffering, that humanity had always faced.

Evangelicalism and the Enlightenment

The Age of Enlightenment flourished for almost 150 years, from the mid-seventeenth century down to the end of the eighteenth century and the Evangelical Revival of the 1740s began in the heart of the Enlightenment's cultural influence. The Revival shared some Enlightenment aspects in that it was an experimental religion: it relied partly on personal spiritual experience as proof for its validity to the objective onlooker. It was also a religious movement whose earliest founders turned to a methodical system to ensure spiritual growth after conversion; John Wesley was widely read in Enlightenment thought and influenced by its spirit.⁷ In 1792 he wrote 'I dislike something that has the appearance of *enthusiasm* ... overvaluing *feelings* and inward *impressions*: mistaking the mere work of *imagination* for the voice of the Spirit: expecting the end without the means, and undervaluing *reason, knowledge* and *wisdom* in general.'⁸ Thus the early days of Methodism were a curious mixture of an outpouring of religious feeling attributed to the Holy Spirit, and an orderly system of Bible study and prayer organized into societies or 'classes'. Although holiness was not obtained by the acquisition of knowledge, Methodism required study as well as encouraging the pursuit of holiness. Travelling preachers were assigned to 'circuits': from its earliest days Methodism was organized according to circuits, which were groups of societies, and then into districts. The districts together formed the Methodist Connexion. Methodism imposed reason and

⁷ D. Hempton, *Methodism: empire of the spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 41-43; Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 50-55.

⁸ J. Wesley to Maxfield in T. Coke and H. Moore and H. Moore, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London, 1792), p. 337, in Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, p. 52.

order on the outbreak of spiritual power that came with the Revival. It was a pragmatic and orderly religion that in some ways suited the spirit of the Enlightenment.

Evangelicalism and Romanticism

Evangelicalism was also marked by enthusiasm, and by a breaking out of established norms, whether in emotional or liturgical terms. This is one of the primary ways in which it resonated with the Age of Romanticism. The Romantic spirit was in some respects a reaction against the reason and order of the Enlightenment. It was characterised by the expression of passion and the inner life; it sought to break out of structures and its boundaries were fluid. In an attempt to simplify some of the features of two complex cultural phenomena, Peter Kitson correctly notes some of the ‘versus’ features of the two eras as traditionally understood: reason *versus* emotion, objectivity *versus* subjectivity, limitation *versus* aspiration, empiricism *versus* transcendentalism, society *versus* individual.⁹ David Bebbington considers Romanticism in contrast with the Enlightenment, which exalted reason, as, emphasising the will, spirit and emotion.¹⁰ One way of envisioning the difference between the Age of Enlightenment and the Age of Romanticism is to compare the gardens of Versailles with a wild English garden, Mozart with Beethoven, or Jane Austen with Charles Dickens. The Enlightenment had a spirit of order, boundaries, objectivity and reason. Nature was there for investigation and experimentation; order could be placed around it. Romanticism had a spirit of grandeur, beauty, subjectivity and sentiment. Nature was a force in itself and could not be controlled. Evangelicalism was influenced by both eras, but it was the Romantic period that intersected most directly with the period under consideration.

⁹ P. Kitson, ‘Beyond the Enlightenment: the philosophical, scientific and religious inheritance,’ in D. Wu, ed., *A Companion to Romanticism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 35.

¹⁰ D. W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: the age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 148.

Romantic Motifs

In addition to a spirit of passion and imagination, the Romantic era was marked by a high regard for strong individuals and heroic figures. The Scottish philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle, who grew up during the height of the Romantic era, gave a popular series of lectures culminating in 1840 with 'On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History'. Carlyle believed that the hero could discern the unseen world of the spirit hidden from most people, and that history is dominated by inspired leaders. In describing the 'Hero as Poet', Carlyle noted the unique ability of the Poet 'to discern the inner heart of things, and the harmony that dwells there'.¹¹ Walter Scott portrayed remarkable individuals in a vivid historical setting, and sought to combine factual events with ideal characters caught up in those events. This attention to the value of an individual life, as romanticised and affected by events in time and space, was echoed by Carlyle in his essay on Scott: 'There is no heroic poem in the world but is at bottom a biography, the life of a man; also, it may be said, there is no life of a man, faithfully recorded, but is a heroic poem of its sort, rhymed or unrhymed.'¹² Subjective experience and the ability to intuit the mysteries of the unseen world were held in high regard. The unequalled value of the individual (as compared with society) was honoured.

In 1886 the American transcendentalist F. H. Hedge claimed that 'the essence of romance is mystery ... The woody dell, the leafy glen, the forest path which leads, one knows that whither, are romantic: the public highway is not.' He further claimed that 'the essence of romanticism is aspiration' and attributed the Romantic interest in the mysterious to 'the influence of the Christian religion, which deepened immensely the mystery of life, suggesting

¹¹ T. Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* (Boston: D. C. Heath), 1913, p. 114. (Lecture first given 1840)

¹² T. Carlyle, [Essay on] Sir Walter Scott, 1838. Harvard Classics, Vol. 25, Part 5, New York: bartleby.com, 2001.

something beyond and behind the world of sense'.¹³ In his preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley explains his purpose up to that point:

My purpose hitherto has been simply to familiarise the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence; aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness.¹⁴

Shelley hoped to inspire others to aspire to moral greatness. This sense of aspiration and longing after something important yet mysterious is a central feature of the Romantic spirit that bears some similarity to the Nonconformist desire for holiness.

The expression of strong emotion, which was a hallmark of the Romantic spirit, was also a characteristic of the mid-nineteenth century when the ability to articulate feelings was regarded as a proof of a rich and strong character. There was no need to hide, minimise or extinguish passionate thoughts and responses. Thomas Taylor, the Congregationalist who died in 1853 at 85, was the pastor at Bradford for 40 years. He was known to be popular, earnest and useful and described as both 'great and good'. At his death his 'utterances of faith and hope were joyous' and he 'poured his blessings' on those who survived him.¹⁵ Henry Spicer - a 'self-made man' - was a Congregationalist who began assisting his father in the family paper mill at the age of 12 and later joined with his father and brother to found a business in London. He died in 1877 at 76 after a brief illness and would often exclaim "'Oh when we get to heaven,'" and his eyes would fill with tears and his voice would tremble as he

¹³ F. H. Hedge, *Atlantic Monthly* March 1886, in H. A. Beers, *A History of English Romanticism in the eighteenth century* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1916), pp. 11-12. (Originally published 1898)

¹⁴ P. B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound: Act II*, 95-103, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 424.

¹⁵ *EM* 1854, pp. 92-95 (Rev Thomas Taylor).

quoted 'Eye hath not seen ...'.'¹⁶ This relationship between strength and emotion was part of the idealism, confidence and subjectivity of the era.

The balance between the supernatural and natural, between the sublime and the homely, is one of the chief characteristics of the Romantic spirit. If Romanticism had any influence on the Nonconformist view of death it was not just stylistic but spiritual. First, accessing the world of the spirit and the intersection between that world and this were Romantic motifs. Emily Brontë, the daughter of an evangelical Anglican clergyman, spoke of departure from the body as a release in her poem *The Prisoner*:

Then dawns the Invisible; the Unseen its truth reveals;
My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels —
Its wings are almost free, its home, its harbour found;
Measuring the gulf, it stoops and dares the final bound¹⁷

Death was a frequent theme in Romantic literature, partly because it was a potential door to the fulfilment of spiritual aspirations. Second, the Romantic spirit dealt openly with evil, suffering and death, and the boundaries of the material world were not only apparent but a source of anguish. Indeed, Abrams identifies the problem of evil and suffering as the central concern of the major Romantic philosophers¹⁸ and Wedd discusses the strong sense of ethical values and concern about social evils that motivated some of the more irreverent poets such as Shelley and Byron.¹⁹ The themes of death, evil and the life of the spirit were as central to Romanticism as to Nonconformity.

Subtleties of the Romantic Spirit

It must be noted that not all English authors who wrote in the peak years of 1790 down to 1830 embraced the Romantic style of the period, and the ones who did differed from

¹⁶ *EM* 1877, pp. 344-45 (Henry Spicer).

¹⁷ A. C. Benson, ed., *Brontë Poems: Selections from the Poetry of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë* (New York: G. Putnam's Sons, 1915), pp. 202-203.

¹⁸ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 444.

¹⁹ Wedd, 'Literature and Religion,' in Wu., ed., *A Companion to Romanticism*, p. 63-64.

each other in their beliefs and areas of emphasis. Jane Austen, who lived and wrote during the Romantic Era, was more classical in her style and satirised the Romantic prose of Ann Radcliffe and Sir Walter Scott, especially in her novel *Northanger Abbey*. Wordsworth himself criticised the ‘Gothic Novels’ of German Romanticism, calling them ‘frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.’²⁰ While the Romantics typically elevated feeling above reason, Keats emphasised the former to the exclusion of the latter, referring to ‘Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratum of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.’²¹ Coleridge and Wordsworth, however, saw the inevitability of moderating feeling with thought as essential for poetic expression. Coleridge felt that ‘GOOD SENSE is the BODY of poetic genius’²², while Wordsworth, in the *Prelude to Lyrical Ballads*, stated that:

For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts...²³

There is some similarity between Wesley’s view that the balance of reason and emotion was essential for wisdom in religious expression, and the advocacy of Coleridge and Wordsworth for a combination of thought and feeling in poetry.

The Romantic writers had widely different beliefs about religion. The limits of this study do not permit an in-depth analysis of how Christianity intersected with Romanticism in the lives of individual cultural figures. It is simply important to note that when the

²⁰ W. Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 598.

²¹ J. Keats to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 December 1817, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 768.

²² S. T. Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria IV*, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 599.

²³ W. Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, pp. 596-97.

Nonconformist obituaries interacted with the Romantic spirit, they were dealing with a broad range of views. For example, Coleridge was as much a philosopher as he was a poet, and grappled with theological issues familiar to the Nonconformists such as the atonement and Socinianism. Yet Coleridge's epitaph, which he composed himself in 1833, the year before his death, is as follows:

O, lift one thought in prayer for S.T.C.;
That he who many a year with toil of breath
Found death in life, may here find life in death!
Mercy for praise - to be forgiven for fame
He ask'd, and hoped, through Christ. Do thou the same!

The words that Coleridge chose to last through time include a blatant proclamation of the necessity of hoping in Christ for continued life after death, an acknowledgement that he asked Christ for help and even an evangelistic message to the reader. This is a clear reflection of the central evangelical message of salvation through faith in Jesus.

A few months before he died, Keats' straightforward last known letter ends with several references to God: 'I have an habitual sense of my real life being past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence. God knows how it would have been ... God bless you!'²⁴ Keats further stated that he could not believe in the Bible, but asked for Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Holy Dying* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* when he was dying.²⁵ While he did not consider himself to be an orthodox Christian, Keats' references indicate some form of at least Deism. Some element of Christianity was a source of questions and doubts to his last day.

In the case of Byron, a strong note of disapproval rings in the Congregational minister William Jay of Bath's sermon taken from 1 Peter 1:24-5, following Byron's death:

²⁴ J. Keats to Charles Brown, 30 November 1820, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 786.

²⁵ W. Wordsworth, from 'Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour. July 13, 1798.' Wedd, 'Literature and Religion,' in Wu, ed., *A Companion to Romanticism*, p. 70.

Who can help lamenting the perverse and unhallowed use of thy stupendous powers!
... Of a genius that might have ranked with Milton, quenched for ever; and leaving so
much to admire – so much to deplore – so much to abhor! No knell of departed
greatness has ever more solemnly sounded forth this sentiment – ‘All flesh is as grass,
and all the glory of man as the flower of grass; the grass withereth, and the flower
thereof fadeth away.’²⁶

Jay acknowledged the ‘stupendous powers’ given to Byron – his intellect, imagination and poetic vision. Yet he felt that his genius was debased by his sinful life. The variety of beliefs and perspectives among the Romantics made room in Nonconformist literature for the Romantic influence, especially when it came to an acknowledgement of death and of a world beyond this.

Parallels and Distinctions

Prior to 1850, it is difficult to determine the direct influence of the Romantic spirit on the obituaries with accuracy. However, it is possible to observe some general parallels and distinctions that are relevant to the fifty-year period under consideration. The evangelical Nonconformists and the Romantics shared a view of the universe that acknowledged the existence of an unseen world where some things are beyond the limits of sense perception. It is safe to say that none of them were materialists. Wordsworth affirmed this as fully as any Romantic poet:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar ...
From God, who is our home ²⁷

John Jarrold, a Congregationalist and a successful businessman of Norwich who died in 1852 at 79, made this unequivocal statement on his deathbed: “I have no strength. This proves I

²⁶ *New York Spectator*, 23 July 1824, ‘Foreign News’.

²⁷ W. Wordsworth, *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, V, 58-65, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 178.

have two natures. The spiritual nature is alive and will be for ever".²⁸ Human life consisted of more than the physical body.

Moreover, Romantics and Nonconformists understood life to be fragile and full of suffering and perceived earthly existence as limited. Keats' 1819 letter to his brother and sister-in-law, written two years before his death, is striking in its acknowledgement of the limitations and hardships of this world.

This is the world – thus we cannot expect to give way many hours to pleasure – Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting – while we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of events – while we are laughing it sprouts is (*for* it) grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck – Even so we have leisure to reason on the misfortunes of our friends; our own touch us too nearly for words.²⁹

On the death of Keats, Shelley wrote *Adonais*, lamenting the loss of his friend:

As long as skies are blue, and fields are green,
Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,
Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to sorrow.³⁰

Here Shelley acknowledged the undeniable sorrow inherent in earthly existence. The Romantics found a measure of consolation through a contemplation of nature where even as 'grief returns with the revolving year ... the airs and streams renew their joyous tone ... fresh leaves and flowers deck the dead Seasons' bier ... And the green lizard and the golden snake, like unimprisoned flames, out of their trance awake.'³¹ Shelley was comforted by the resurrection of life in the spring, a Christian theme as well as a Romantic one.

The Nonconformist obituaries did not attempt to deny the fragility of life, but their accounts of death were part of a universe in which God was a safe refuge and death the doorway to eternal life. When Rebecca Whiffen died in 1855 at 37 of consumption, her last

²⁸ *EM* 1852, pp. 534-39 (John Jarrold).

²⁹ J. Keats to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 February-3 May 1819, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p.780.

³⁰ P. B. Shelley, *Adonais* XXI, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p 463.

³¹ P. B. Shelley, *Adonais* XVIII, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 305.

words were “All is right”. Her obituary author notes that she was ‘more than a conqueror in death’.³² The spirit of Romanticism openly grieved concerning mortality and loss.

Nonconformity as represented in the obituaries fully acknowledged death, but ended on a note of triumph. This victorious attitude towards death was in accordance with their convictions and their purposes in memorialising the dead.

The Nonconformists and the Romantics also shared a sense that this life could not fulfil one’s hopes or provide happiness.

[Y]ou perhaps at one time thought there was such a thing as Worldly Happiness to be arrived at ... I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness ... The first thing that strikes me on hea[r]ing a Misfortune having befallen another is this. ‘Well it cannot be helped. – he will have the pleasure of trying the resources of his spirit.’

Keats’ remark about the use of misfortune as ‘trying the resources of his spirit’ is somewhat reminiscent of the purpose of suffering as it would have been understood by the evangelical Nonconformists in the process of sanctification. The conviction that happiness was not to be found in this world was mirrored in the experience of the early Nonconformists. The 1830 obituary of William Orme, a prominent Congregational minister of London, stated that he looked forward to communion with God: ‘This mortal conflict will soon be over – and *then* to be admitted into the presence of God! Shall you not be glad to see your suffering friend released? ... Ah ... to sleep in Jesus ... that will be best, I long to be gone. Lord, come and set my spirit free!’³³ The evangelical Nonconformists assumed that earthly existence was a place of many trials and limitations.

When it came to acknowledging the inescapable painful aspects of earthly existence, and the placement of some hope in death as an escape route, there was a certain amount of sympathetic understanding between Romanticism and Nonconformity. However, the

³² *PMM* 1855, p. 58 (Rebecca Whiffin).

³³ *EM* 1830, pp. 253-56 (Rev William Orme).

distinctions between the two are even more marked than the similarities. The first relates to the nature of death itself. Both the Romantics and the Nonconformists thought and wrote about death a great deal. However, the good death of evangelical Nonconformity was not the same as death being good. While death was indeed the means of bursting out of the limitations of a painful existence, the Nonconformists did not consider death as good in itself. For the Romantics, death could be a goal and its mystery held a certain fascination. In John Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* death is dream-like, easy and peaceful: the destination is vague and mysterious, but the departure is a relief:

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death ...
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain ...³⁴

The Nonconformists, however, recognised the painful transformation and often the spiritual battle involved in death. Timothy Wilson, a Primitive Methodist of Preston Gubbals in Shropshire, was 'much tried by the enemy of souls'³⁵ on his deathbed from consumption in 1834. Death was not beautiful or regarded as a friend: rather, it was the final enemy to be encountered in life. While death was a passage to go through to reach heaven and God, it was still an enemy. Mary Wall, a Primitive Methodist of Addingham in the West Riding of Yorkshire, 24, knew this: 'When death, "the last enemy," approached her, to dissolve the union of soul and body, she was wonderfully supported and calmly fell asleep in the arms of Jesus.'³⁶ For the Nonconformists, death was good only in that it was the door to eternal life.

Although the Romantics often saw life itself as a burden and a source of anguish, some also revered youth and associated ageing with a loss of creativity, as Byron laments in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

³⁴ J. Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*, II, III, VI, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, pp. 539-40.

³⁵ *PMM* 1834, p. 93 (Timothy Wilson).

³⁶ *PMM* 1834, pp. 35-36 (Mary Wall).

Yet Time, who changes all, had altered him
In soul and aspect as in age: years steal
Fire from the mind as vigour from the limb,
And life's enchanted cup but sparkles near the brim.³⁷

This was radically different from the Nonconformists, who revered age. The fact that the obituaries recount with care the most commonplace details of a long life, making every attempt to honour the deceased especially amid the frailties of old age and illness, attests to the fact that youth was not idolised. Nowhere in the sample is this more apparent than in the compassionate memoir of the Congregationalist Thomas Pratt of Mitcham in Surrey who died in 1845 at 81 after a series of strokes that left him in a state of 'second childhood in which the gentleness and helplessness of infancy were singularly blended with occasional evidences of deep Christian experience and sound sanctified intelligence'.³⁸ The burden for Nonconformists was not age: it was sin. The evangelical Nonconformists felt the burden of sin and suffering, which was lifted through an explicit relationship with Christ through the atonement and departure from the body.

Although life came to an end and was full of trials, the Nonconformists had a mission to accomplish during their sojourn in this world and were determined to submit to the will of God, whatever the circumstances. The 1830 obituary of Agnes Stubbs, a Wesleyan Methodist of Kendal in Cumbria who died at 26, indicates that her 'constant language' was "'Not my will, but thine be done'".³⁹ This is echoed again and again in the Nonconformist obituaries, particularly with regard to their dying moments. The obituaries present a scenario that is as disciplined and wholesome as the life leading up to it: a life centred on prayer, Bible reading, chapel and family life, good deeds and following God's commands. Thomas Collyer, a Congregationalist of London who died at 82 in 1830, exemplified this pattern:

³⁷ G. Gordon, Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto III and Canto II*, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, pp. 294-95.

³⁸ *EM* 1854, pp. 569-72 (Thomas Pratt).

³⁹ *WMM* 1830, pp. 68-69 (Mrs Agnes Stubbs).

He was a man of prayer ... I have often overheard him in the midst of his voluntary occupations, such as comported with his active habits, holding communion with God ..The Sabbath was indeed religiously observed when he was at the head of a family. No labour was done – no visitor admitted – a constant attendance on public worship, and the interval filled up by domestic reading or private meditation characterised the day ... I cannot but conclude from all these premises that he was a man of God.⁴⁰

This life of service was a preparation for death. Caleb Evans Birt, a Baptist of Wantage in Berkshire who died in 1855 at 60 and had seen four of his children die before him, ‘often laid down the principle that preparation for death is the business of life’.⁴¹ While the evangelical Nonconformists did not fear death, there is no evidence that they tried to hasten it. The Romantics perceived themselves as living lives of drama and turbulence: they took risks. Between their strong sense of duty and responsibility to society, their increasingly middle-class status and their efforts to live within the law of God, these aspects of the Romantic spirit did not suit Nonconformity. The evangelical Nonconformists prized order, propriety and adherence to a structure. This was as true in death as in life.

Finally, Romantic and Nonconformist expectations concerning life after death seem to have been distinct. In contemplating what awaited them on the other side of death, the Romantics could be hopeful, but unsure. Shelley voiced some of his uncertainty about this in *On Death*:

This world is the nurse of all we know,
This world is the mother of all we feel,
And the coming of death is a fearful blow
To a brain unencompass'd by nerves of steel:
When all that we know, or feel, or see,
Shall pass like an unreal mystery.⁴²

However, he expressed conviction about life after death when writing about his friend Lord Byron:

Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep –

⁴⁰ *EM* 1830, pp. 445-47 (Rev Dr Thomas Collyer).

⁴¹ *BM* 1855, pp. 37, 69-72 (Rev C. E. Birt).

⁴² P. B. Shelley, ‘On Death,’ *The Poetical Works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats* (Philadelphia: 1831), p. 235.

He hath awakened from the dream of life --
Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife
He lives, he wakes-'tis Death is dead, not he;
Mourn not for Adonais.⁴³

This shifting back and forth between hope and despair, between certainty and doubt is one aspect of the Romantic spirit.

The Nonconformists had very clear ideas of what to expect about what was on the other side of the door, at the end of the passage from life to death. The 1834 obituary of Elizabeth Dover, a Primitive Methodist of Carlisle in Cumbria, notes that a few hours before she died she dreamed 'she was being conducted to the gates of glory where her five boys were waiting to welcome her'.⁴⁴ George Manby Smith, a Baptist of Oxfordshire who died in 1855 at 78, stated that "I should like to wake up and see Jesus before you come to see me again".⁴⁵ The Nonconformists anticipated joyful reunions, the presence of God and freedom from sorrow.

Abrams' conviction that basic Judaeo-Christian theological themes were central to the Romantic spirit is accurate. Thus the themes of suffering, sanctification, the existence of the soul, life beyond the grave and the reality of the unseen are themes shared by Romanticism and Nonconformity, although they often did not arrive at the same conclusions about the nature of life and death. These were some of the parallels and distinctions that are generally observable when considering the Romantic spirit and Nonconformity.

1850s: Style

It was not until the 1850s that the peculiar style and beauty of Romantic literature began to affect the literary style of the Nonconformist obituaries. Many of the obituaries of

⁴³ P. B. Shelley, *Adonais*, XXXIX, XLI, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 468.

⁴⁴ *PMM* 1834, p. 82 (Elizabeth Dover).

⁴⁵ *BM* 1855, pp. 133-38 (George Manby Smith).

the 1830s are classical in tone: clear, concise and straightforward. In 1830 the obituary author had this to say about the Congregationalist Richard Bowden: ‘But it is not enough that the good and useful should live only in the pleasing recollections of surviving friends ...Our Christian journals do well, therefore, for the purpose of utility, to record, from time to time, the lives of “good and faithful servants” of Jesus Christ.’⁴⁶ This is not an expression of emotion: it is a statement of fact. William Orme’s 1830 obituary describes virtues that are remarkably classical in nature: ‘The various powers of his mind were well-balanced; there was an admirable equipoise and adjustment in their exercise; and his views of truth were luminous and unequivocally evangelical. No one could mistake him.’⁴⁷ In his case, mystery is explicitly discarded: ‘One of those who watched by his bed-side spoke of the immediate happiness of the soul when it quitted the body. He noticed the remark, and said, “That has not been a mystery to me at any time”’.⁴⁸ This simple and straightforward style was typical of the earlier obituaries which, while often conveying the intense emotions that accompanied conversion and joyful anticipation of heaven, were subject to less interpretation and imaginative phrasing than in later years.

However, in the 1850s two changes became apparent: the literary style became more elaborate, excessive and sentimental as well as incorporating more use of symbol; and the obituary authors included references to Romantic poetry with considerable frequency. The importance of feeling and subjective experience was a primary characteristic of the Evangelical Revival and the Romantic spirit, and it was in the 1850s that the literary presentation of the obituaries began to reflect this feature fully. Coleridge, in his *Aids to Reflection*, emphasised feeling and self-knowledge as vital for faith: ‘Evidences of Christianity! I am weary of the word. Make a man feel the want of it; rouse him, if you can,

⁴⁶ *EM* 1830, p. 178 (Rev Richard Bowden).

⁴⁷ *EM* 1830, pp 263-66 and 289-95 (Rev William Orme).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

to the self-knowledge of his need for it; and you may safely trust to its own evidence'.⁴⁹ The Bible, he likewise believed, will prove itself - the test is personal experience: 'The Christian religion is constituted not by the Bible but by Christ and the truth revealed through him, the proof of its divine authority being its fitness to our nature and its needs; and ... [t]he clearness and cogency of the proof is proportionate to the degree of self-knowledge in each individual hearer.'⁵⁰ Keats echoed this shift away from reason and towards subjective experience as the basis for accessing truth: 'I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination.'⁵¹ The Romantic notion of the 'holiness of the Heart's affections' was a mirror of Evangelicalism as a religion of the heart, where feelings could be relied upon to reveal truth. Some of the Methodists resided in rural areas: it was this type of rustic, simple person whom Wordsworth chose as best exemplifying the 'passions of the heart':

Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity.⁵²

The evangelical Nonconformist obituaries reflected the emphasis placed on the 'passions of the heart' as they related to religious enthusiasm.

The obituaries presented an opportunity for imaginative as well as emotional expression of deathbed experiences. This was imagination not in the sense of creating something fanciful, but rather perceiving something that was not immediately present to the senses. The Romantic longing for the unseen world was fulfilled as the Nonconformists

⁴⁹ H. N. Coleridge, ed., S. T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection with the Author's Last Corrections*, (London: William Pickering, 1839), pp. 317-18.

⁵⁰ H. N. Coleridge, ed., S. T. Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, Letter IV (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1841), p. 83

⁵¹ J. Keats' to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, pp. 765-66.

⁵² W. Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 596.

glimpsed what awaited them on the other side of death. In 1855 Isabella Cooke of South Shields in County Durham had an experience that affected those at her deathbed greatly, and that was carefully recorded:

The veil between her spirit and heaven seemed very thin. Her heart was there, and her communion with God seemed more and more intimate ... her attendants were so overwhelmed with the manifestations of the Divine presence, that they could only kneel and gaze on her serene and happy countenance ... She clasped her hands, as in prayer, frequently repeating 'Yes! Yes!' – as if replying to some heavenly visitant.⁵³ Cooke was experiencing something that was beyond verbal expression. In 1853 the Primitive Methodist Maria Wallis of Chevington in Suffolk 'bade adieu to all sublunary things, and entered the world of spirits'.⁵⁴ Lord Byron expressed a longing

To mingle with the Universe, and feel
What I can ne'er express, yet can not all conceal.⁵⁵

Although the Nonconformists would not have endorsed 'mingling with the universe', they certainly understood the conflict of having an experience yet being unable to express it fully. John Gray, a Congregationalist of Northumberland who died in 1855 at 63, 'asked that the curtains be opened to view the fields' and 'had views of the eternal world which he could with difficulty find terms to express'.⁵⁶ This was one of the strengths of Nonconformity and the Romantic spirit: placing value in both the visible and the unseen worlds. A blend of this strength with literary trends already in place made exceptional use of the memoir as a literary convention.

The use of Romantic poetry to enhance the obituary content indicates two things. First, the obituary authors were familiar with the poetry and expected their readers to recognise the excerpts they chose, often without directly attributing authorship, and second, they considered the use of Romantic poetry relevant to a consideration of death. Some

⁵³ *WMM* 1855, pp. 380-81 (Mrs Isabella Cooke).

⁵⁴ *PMM* 1854, p. 125 (Maria Wallis).

⁵⁵ G. Gordon, Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: Canto IV*, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 305.

⁵⁶ *CW* 1855, pp. 64-66 (John Gray).

examples convey a sense of how not only Romantic style but Romantic themes had made their way into Nonconformist self-expression. The 1855 memoir of William Holmes, a Congregational minister of Wisbech in Cambridgeshire, opens with a quotation from Wordsworth's *The Excursion, Book Fifth, 'The Pastor'*. This is immediately followed by two introductory paragraphs, both of which suit Romantic priorities. The first refers to Christianity as 'unquestionably the most social and comprehensive spirit which the world has ever known. It seeks to make every heart one link in a chain of love that shall encompass all lands.' The second elaborates on the image of the wilderness through which all Christians travel on their way to heaven, and the footprints, pillars and finger-posts left by those who have gone before. These concepts of the world as a wilderness with signposts along the way left by individuals who could discern the right way to go, and of Christianity as a generous social force for good were part of the combination of naturalism, heroism and tolerance communicated by the Romantic spirit. Holmes' memoir ends with an excerpt from a poem by James Montgomery:

The voice at midnight came,
He started up to hear;
A mortal arrow pierced his frame,
He fell, but felt no fear.⁵⁷

The obituaries from the middle of the century could be heavily symbolic. The 1845 obituary of the Congregationalist Benjamin Ravenscroft refers to the toll taken on his nerves by 'almost insufferable asthma' and the resulting irritability of temperament. The author draws a contrast between the body (the casket) and the soul (the gem), expressing concern that Ravenscroft was sometimes undervalued and misunderstood: 'They looked at the unloveliness of the casket without perceiving the beauty of the gem it contained.'⁵⁸ The 1855

⁵⁷ CW 1855, pp. 64-66 (John Gray).

⁵⁸ CW 1845, pp. 86-87 (Benjamin Ravenscroft).

obituary of William Peacock, a Congregationalist of Nottingham who died at 82, ends with a phrase in quotations that is remarkably similar to Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: 'His departure was gentle as the fall of the last golden leaf of autumn, which has borne the summer's heat, and then 'drops slowly through the quiet air'.⁵⁹ The explicit use of Romantic poetry, the often unattributed use of Romantic quotations and the increasing use of symbolic imagery in the Nonconformist obituaries all indicate that Romanticism had influenced Nonconformist culture and how that culture conveyed beliefs about death in ways that would be comprehensible to readers.

The style of the obituaries of the 1850s is noticeably distinct from the style of the 1830s. The opening sentence of the 1830 obituary of Thomas Pellatt, a Congregationalist of London – 'The subject of this brief memoir was, emphatically, "*a good man*," – good, in the exalted sense in which the term is used by the apostle Paul, when drawing a distinction between a righteous man and a good man'⁶⁰ - is remarkable for its clarity and brevity. By way of contrast, the 1845 memoir of Hugh Hughes of Liverpool memoir includes this extraordinarily elaborate statement:

Had he remained a subject of the Circean enchantment, his existence might have been dissipated to the injury of his fellows, and a gloomy shade might have been thrown over his premature grave ... Not until Divine grace had penetrated his soul did latent powers shoot forth in from their embryo forms and rise into vigorous life.⁶¹

The introductory lines of the 1854 memoir of William Jay are also indicative of the excessive style of the obituaries of the period:

There is nothing more beautifully illustrative of the providence of God, than the mighty results which are often wrought by the simplest agencies; nor is there anything that more forcibly recalls the thoughts of men to the immediate control of a supreme and overruling intelligence, than the frequency with which their conceptions of the fittest instrumentality for accomplishing important purposes are set aside by unexpected incidents, or 'things which are despised'.

⁵⁹ *EM* 1855, p. 155 (William Peacock).

⁶⁰ *EM* 1830, p. 45 (Thomas Pellatt).

⁶¹ *CW* 1845, p. 173 (Hugh Hughes).

In speaking of the atmosphere of Bath, the author explained that: ‘There is light in the tents of each party, and the sweet music of the silver trumpet of the world’s jubilee swells, in many instances, beneath “the high embowed roof” of national temples, as well as in the less magnificent edifices of dissent.’⁶² The tendency to use complex imagery instead of a simple word (as in ‘the less magnificent edifices of dissent’ instead of ‘chapels’) resulted in a higher word count and the probability of more references in some of the obituary categories in the middle of the period.

The influence of Romanticism on the evangelical Nonconformist notion of heroes is also apparent. As was noted in Chapter Two, one of the purposes of the obituaries was to honour good and holy men and women. The subjects of the obituaries were described in such a way as to invite imitation and sometimes reverence. Even the most obscure Nonconformist could be a hero to a reader. When George Tucker, a Congregationalist and an iron merchant of Sheffield, died in 1851 at the age of 51, his obituary stated that ‘like a warrior clad in complete armour, and enveloped in his martial cloak, he lay down to necessary repose ready, when the hour arrived, again to wield the sword of the Spirit and serve in the ranks of the Lord of the Sabaoth’.⁶³ Tucker, in the attire of a warrior, is portrayed as a great man. However, there was an element of elitism to the notion of the Romantic hero that did not form part of the Nonconformist psyche. When near death the Congregationalist John Jarrold claimed “‘I shall soon know the great secret’.” The nature of this secret is not entirely clear but the content of the obituary strongly suggests that it relates to the exact nature of life beyond the grave upon which the living can only speculate. Jarrold’s words suggest a slightly wary anticipation: “‘There is but a step between me and death ... I hoped to have awoke in a better world’.”⁶⁴ There was a difference between these portraits, even the most ideal, and the

⁶² *EM* 1854, pp. 125-33 (Rev William Jay).

⁶³ *EM* 1852, pp. 89-92 (George Tucker).

⁶⁴ *EM* 1852, pp. 534-39 (John Jarrold).

Romantic hero who had an almost Gnostic ability to divine the secrets of the universe. However, heroism is a theme where the influence of the Romantic spirit on evangelical Nonconformist portraits of death can be seen because the notion of finding the extraordinary in an ordinary setting was an important feature of the obituaries, as shall be seen.

1870s: Worldview and Doctrine

By the 1870s evangelical Nonconformist doctrine as it concerned issues related to death such as the afterlife, the transition between this world and the next and the relationship between the two worlds could not be considered independently of the influence of the Romantic spirit. The influence of Romanticism on Nonconformity during this later period, while generally less specific than in the 1850s (although direct quotations from the Romantics continued to appear), was more pervasive. It was the result of a trickle-down effect of many years during which the subjectivity and individualism of the Romantic spirit intersected with the gradual broadening of evangelical Nonconformist theology to transform expectations about this life and the next. The effect can be seen in several areas, all of which point to a central developing belief that earth and heaven, God and humanity, were less separate than they had been considered before. Nonconformity showed signs of becoming a faith that was more familiar to the unconverted than in previous years when the dramatic reorientation of life from sin to salvation was its centrepiece. It also spoke of a gentler God who was an approachable Father with an incarnate Son. The features that contributed to this shift will be explained, followed by an analysis of the 1878 obituary of a Wesleyan minister whose life and death story reflected much of the Romantic spirit that still pervaded the culture.

Scholars such as Geoffrey Rowell, Colleen McDannell, Bernhard Lang, Pat Jalland and Julie Rugg have argued that expectations concerning heaven changed as a direct result of the subjectivism and focus on personal experience that was part of the Romantic spirit. Mark

Johnson explains how such developments as the changing Nonconformist theology of the 1860s and 1870s de-emphasised eternal punishment in favour of annihilationism, universalism or simply a softening of feeling towards sin that led to sympathy rather than judgement.⁶⁵ This shift meant that the afterlife was less the scene of God's judgement and wrath and more the scene of continued human relationship.

There is no question that belief in the afterlife was a central evangelical Nonconformist doctrine. References to heaven were consistently high in the obituaries at 20% in the 1830s, 25% in the 1850s and 20% in the 1870s. Heaven was envisioned as a beautiful place populated by those in relationship with God through the saving work of Jesus, and was a realm of peace, joy and an absence of suffering. Many seemed to enjoy a sense of being between two worlds as death approached, and this anticipation of what was to come appeared to comfort and inspire both the dying and those left behind. The 1830 obituary of H. Teape, a Congregationalist of London, pointed to a sharp distinction between this world and the next, as encountered by Teape and observed by those around him:

At one time, while in excruciating pain, he raised his arm with a degree of energy of which it might have been supposed his enfeebled strength was utterly incapable, and exclaimed, 'My happy spirit bursts the bands of death and takes its flight.' Then, after a short pause he added with peculiar emphasis, as though his eye could pierce the veil and discover that which it conceals from mortal vision, 'Glory! glory! glory!'⁶⁶

The division between the two worlds was not presented in as dramatic a fashion in the 1854 obituary of a Baptist, Mrs Richard Cooke:

If thought and feeling be life she had long lived on the threshold of heaven ere the summons to enter it arrived. She loved to dwell on the nature of its employments, the greatness of its joys, and the nearness of its approach. Her affections were fixed on things above. Those left behind derived consolation that she had entered that 'Better country, a heavenly one'.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ M. D. Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent, 1850-1918* (New York Garland Publishing Co., 1987), pp. 61, 89.

⁶⁶ *EM* 1830, p. 28 (H. Teape).

⁶⁷ *BM* 1854, pp. 168-69 (Mrs Richard Cooke).

By 1880 death was frequently thought of as an extension of life, and as sharing some of its characteristics. Heaven was portrayed as a home-going to a familiar atmosphere. The increase in references to heavenly reunions from 8% in the 1830s to 12% in the 1870s is worth noting because it may indicate a gradual increase in attention from heaven as a place of worship to heaven as a place of reunion. Any fear of the unknown seemed to be alleviated by this idea in the case of the 23-year-old Dorothy Ann Featherstone, a Wesleyan Methodist: 'Death seems only like going upstairs but far grander ... I shall be in heaven tonight.'⁶⁸ The Congregationalist John Curwen 'passed to his home' on 26 May 1880.⁶⁹ The transition from this world to the next became increasingly smooth with the years.

John Keats' comment, 'We shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated',⁷⁰ suggests that he anticipated enjoyment and familiarity in whatever awaited him after death. This notion of heaven as a continuation of something already experienced on earth is a theme that was not prevalent in the early Nonconformist obituaries from this sample. Another aspect of a changing theology of heaven as a continuation of life in this world was work or service. The 1880 obituary of Fletcher Menhinck, a Wesleyan of the Brecon circuit in Cornwall who died in 1877 at 41, states that he 'had another and higher sphere to fill and entered upon it'.⁷¹ Employment in heaven was part of life and health, not a source of anxiety and weariness. Heaven was a source of hope and comfort for the dying and their loved ones, and was increasingly perceived as a familiar environment and the result of a relatively easy transition from this life to the next life.

⁶⁸ *WMM* 1880, pp. 319-20 (Dorothy Ann Featherstone).

⁶⁹ *EM* 1880, pp. 489-91 (Rev John Curwen).

⁷⁰ J. Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p 765.

⁷¹ *WMM* 1880, pp. 633-34 (Rev Fletcher Menhinck).

The notion of continued human relationship after death that was so much a part of Romanticism was also a feature of the later Nonconformist obituaries. However, the Romantic image of the afterlife was also distinct from that of Nonconformity. First, it is impossible to escape the dream-like and unspecified passage from life to death and to life again as it was imagined by some of the Romantic poets, including Shelley in his *Prometheus Unbound*, where:

Realms where the air we breathe is love ...
Harmonizing this earth with what we feel above.
We have passed Age's icy caves,
And Manhood's dark and tossing waves,
And Youth's smooth ocean, smiling to betray ...
Through death and birth to a diviner day;⁷²

This differed significantly from the acute awareness of passing from one life to another, however gentle that passage might be, of the Nonconformist obituaries. Second, the atmosphere of love anticipated in another world by the Romantics, such as is described by Shelley is quite distinct from the often understated (by the 1870s) and homely anticipation of the Nonconformists. The 1875 obituary of the Baptist William Payne states that 'With calmness he looked forward to another world, wishing to meet his beloved sons there ... Calmly the life was breathed out and a little before midnight he fell asleep.'⁷³ The 1879 obituary of Sarah Jubb refers to her dying conversation: "'Bless my family! Watch my family!' (Do you feel yourself safe in the arms of Jesus?) 'Yes.'" (You will soon be home mother.) "Yes."⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the Nonconformist obituaries could convey sublimity and beauty when speaking of heaven. The 1879 obituary of Sarah Olley, a Primitive Methodist of Leek in Staffordshire who died at 57 describes her final moments: 'The shadows of earth began to flee away, the day was breaking, the morning of eternal glory was throwing its

⁷² P. B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*: Act II, 95-103, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 432-33.

⁷³ *BM* 1875, pp. 209-16 (Rev William H. Payne).

⁷⁴ *WMM* 1879, p. 80 (Mrs Sarah Jubb).

everlasting light over the dark valley, heaven was bursting upon her view.⁷⁵ Finally, although the worship of God was not as central to the image of heaven in the later obituaries, it was by no means discarded. However, it was more likely to take a different form, as in the 1879 obituary of Thomas Davison, a Primitive Methodist: '[He] was called to the service of the upper sanctuary.'⁷⁶ It might be said that the Romantic and Nonconformist visions of the afterlife shared an expectation of freedom from the suffering and dreadfulness of life: they are, however, in some respects different.

The infusion of daily life with a divine aspect became increasingly important to the Nonconformists, as it had been to the Romantics from an early period. The opening lines of William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* attest to the sacredness of creation, even of time:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.⁷⁷

The 1879 obituary of Frederic George Brabbrook, a Wesleyan Methodist of London notes that his life 'was not spent amid stirring events or in the eye of the public'. It is suggested that this might 'make the record more useful; for it cannot be too often pointed out that:

The trivial round, the common task,
Will furnish all we ought to ask;
Room to deny ourselves; a road
To bring us, daily, nearer God.⁷⁸

These lines from *The Christian Year* (1827) by the poet and High Churchman John Keble refer to the sacredness of everyday life: 'He felt a sacredness in life, a consciousness that, after all drawbacks, this is really God's world, and the life to be lived in of divine

⁷⁵ *PMM* 1879, p. 312 (Sarah Olley).

⁷⁶ *PMM* 1879, p. 376 (Thomas Davison).

⁷⁷ W. Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, in Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 69.

⁷⁸ *WMM* 1879, pp. 637-38 (George Brabbrook).

appointment.⁷⁹ This notion of the divine in the finite is constantly attested to in the focus on the natural world as a portal for glimpsing the eternal, and it formed one of the central ideas for *Lyrical Ballads*:

The thought suggested itself ... that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real ... the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity ... Mr Wordsworth ... was to ... give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure ...⁸⁰

The inspiration for *Lyrical Ballads* by Coleridge and Wordsworth is an example of the importance attributed by the Romantics to writing about the extraordinary and ordinary, interpenetrating. The Nonconformists and Romanticism attempted to express both the unusual and the unexceptional – the holiness of the everyday, created world.

The notion that daily life was the setting for individuals to execute matters of eternal consequence as appointed by God gained latitude through the 'New Evangelicalism', as described by R. W. Dale, the influential Congregational minister of Carr's Lane in Birmingham, who had in turn been influenced by George Dawson, a Birmingham minister who was deeply immersed in the Romantic spirit.⁸¹ Dale's concerns about the 'Old Evangelicalism' that had emerged from the Evangelical Revival of the 1740s had to do with its 'tendency to Individualism' and its lack of 'a disinterested love of truth ... What it cared for was to save individual men from eternal death. This done, Evangelicalism was apt to assume that everything would come right with them either in this world or the next.'⁸² He

⁷⁹ E. Ross, *The Day of Rest: Illustrated Journal of Sunday Reading*, 15 Mar 1875, p. 319.

⁸⁰ S. T. Coleridge, from *Biographia Literaria*, Bloom and Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 645.

⁸¹ R. W. Dale, 'George Dawson', *Nineteenth Century*, 2 (1877), 48.

⁸² R. W. Dale, *The Old Evangelicalism and the New* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), pp. 18-22.

stated that ‘everyday business is a divine matter,’ and that the ‘Old Evangelicalism’ focused too much on the internal life of the soul, on the afterlife and on the depravity of human nature.

The present life – with its sorrows and joys, its business, its art, its literature, its politics, - the present life was not invented by the devil, to prevent us getting into heaven; it was appointed by God that we might, by discharging its humbler duties, and caring for its inferior interests, be disciplined for glory, honour, and immortality ... I believe that ... the recovery of the whole world from idolatry, from vice, from atheism, from unbelief, will be accompanied with a condition of material prosperity, of intellectual culture, of social and political freedom, unexampled in human history ...⁸³

This was different from the spiritual poverty and the assumption that the devil was at work in the world proclaimed by many early obituary subjects. The separation between the natural and the supernatural world, so sharply defined by the breaking through an invisible barrier of sin by God’s Spirit in conversion, was not as distinct. ‘...[I]t is as secular a work to create the sun to give light in the day-time, as to make a lamp, or to build gas-works, or to manufacture gas to give light at night ... our secular work is just the same kind as a great part of God’s work.’⁸⁴ Every aspect of life, including business and politics, belonged to God. This perspective inevitably made God seem more imminent and more accessible.

The notion of a gentler and more approachable God in a more comfortable hereafter was associated with a tendency to focus on the Fatherhood of God and the humanity of Jesus. After 1860 new challenges arose in the realm of theology, some of which concerned a new emphasis on the incarnate Jesus. In the *Congregational Year Book* of 1879, J. Baldwin Brown said, ‘We have for ages been frowning on the human; the human is now taking its revenge. The Incarnation has been accepted and upheld *as a doctrine* with admirable fidelity; it has been obscured and distorted as a fact – as *the fact*, the fact underlying all human history

⁸³ R. W. Dale, *Discourses Delivered on Special Occasions*, 1866, pp. 229-31, in Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent*, pp. 51-52.

⁸⁴ R. W. Dale, *The Laws of Christ for Common Life*, pp. 4-5, in H. Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: from Newman to Martineau, 1850-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 328.

and ruling all human development.⁸⁵ Not all agreed. In 1866 *The Baptist Magazine* had this criticism of the American Congregationalist Horace Bushnell:

According to Dr. Bushnell, the life of Christ, His incarnation, His submission to the lot of humanity, His sympathy and fellow-feeling with man, are everything. His death is the mere accident of His condition, and was a sacrifice to the malice and cruelty of man, and not a sacrifice to God at all ... But in the sacred Scriptures the death or blood of Christ is everywhere prominent.⁸⁶

In the Downgrade Controversy of 1887-88 the Baptist pastor Charles Spurgeon warned of preaching that disregarded the atonement and had become too intellectualised and influenced by cultural trends.⁸⁷ Thus emphasising the humanity and immanence of Jesus rather than his divinity and transcendence could affect views of the atonement. Their obituaries disclose that the evangelical Nonconformists were affected by these cultural trends towards finding holiness in everyday life, and the divine in humanity as well as the human in the divine. Romanticism, which permeated nineteenth-century English culture, is particularly relevant for understanding this influence.

In the earlier obituaries, the second person of the Trinity and the atonement through his death were prominent themes. A new emphasis on other aspects of the nature of God, such as Fatherhood and the Incarnation, is found in the Nonconformist obituaries of the 1870s. The 1879 obituary of Christiana Hammon, a Wesleyan Methodist of Leeds, explains that ‘... as soon as they could walk, their mother took them [her two sons] regularly every evening to her room, and there she not only prayed earnestly with them, as soon almost as they could lisp, to pray in their childish fashion to the great Father of spirits’.⁸⁸ The holy

⁸⁵ J. Baldwin Brown, ‘Our Theology in Relation to the Intellectual Movement of our Times,’ in *Congregational Yearbook*, 1879, pp. 62-64, D. A. Johnson, *The Changing Shape of English Nonconformity: 1825-1925* (Oxford: University Press, 1999), pp. 139-40.

⁸⁶ *The Baptist Magazine* (June 1866), p. 365, in D. W. Bebbington, ‘Gospel and culture in Victorian nonconformity,’ *Culture and the Nonconformist tradition*, J. Shaw and A. Kreider, eds., (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 46.

⁸⁷ M. Hopkins, *Nonconformity’s Romantic Generation: evangelical and liberal theologies in Victorian England* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), pp. 193-248; Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent*, pp. 249-51.

⁸⁸ *WMM* 1879, pp. 556-69 (Mrs Christiana Hammon).

simplicity of Mrs Hammon's life is praised in the introduction to her biographical sketch: 'The life of our Exemplar, the Incarnate Son of God, for thirty years in the carpenter's shop, in the home at Nazareth, has taught us the grandeur and nobility of quiet unostentatious devotion to simply daily duties.'⁸⁹ Thomas Tarn, a Wesleyan Methodist of Lanehead in County Durham, 'had an unbounded faith in the Fatherhood of God'.⁹⁰ This was in keeping with the Romantic spirit of simplicity and the immanence of the divine.

In his autobiography the Methodist leader John Scott Lidgett reported that the theologian W. B. Pope told him in 1881 of having come from a meeting for the revision of a children's catechism, where he had fought a great battle and won a great victory. "You remember the first question and answer of the catechism." Pope said, "What is God? An infinite and eternal Spirit"? Well, I have got them to alter that, and now it is to be, "Who is God? Our Father".⁹¹ By emphasising subjective experience, the Evangelical Revival had played a part in forming the concern articulated by William Ewart Gladstone in 1896:

It is not now sought to alarm men by magnifying the power of God and by exhibiting the strictures and severity of the law of righteousness. The anxiety now is to throw these subjects into the shade, lest the fastidiousness of human judgement and feeling should be so offended as to rise in rebellion against God for His harshness and austerity.⁹²

The obituaries referred to God the Father with more frequency by the mid-1840s, and such references were often connected to the Trinity. Although still relatively infrequent, references to the Father did increase slightly over time (4% in the 1830s, 7% in the 1850s, 6% in the 1870s) and they were striking when they began to appear with more regularity. By the 1870s God was gentler and more approachable than he was in the 1830s.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ *WMM* 1879, pp. 635-37 (Thomas Tarn).

⁹¹ J. S. Lidgett, *My Guided Life* (1936; London: Methuen, 1939), pp. 86-87, in Johnson, *The Changing Shape of English Nonconformity*, p. 148.

⁹² W. E. Gladstone, *Studies subsidiary to the Works of Bishop Butler* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), p. 201.

In her last illness, Mrs Bayley, the Wesleyan Methodist who died in 1877, ‘told her daughter that she had asked her Heavenly Father for a special token of His acceptance of her, and that immediately she was conscious of the Spirit’s witness, and was filled with peace and joy’.⁹³ When John Congleton, a Congregationalist of Launceston in Cornwall met an early death in 1845 at 24 from drowning in a neighbouring millpond, the author of the obituary states ‘Even so, Father, for so it pleased thee.’⁹⁴ In 1880 ‘The Father enabled [James Fleming] to meet death without a cloud of regret or alarm’⁹⁵ and the author of the Baptist W. Knight’s 1873 memoir ‘can attest to his having walked in close communion with his Heavenly Father’.⁹⁶ However, it is not the case that the increasing references to the Father thereby diminished references to the Son, who remained central to the obituary content.

A decrease in obituary references to explicit doctrine concerning penal substitutionary atonement, accompanied by a tendency to de-emphasise human depravity, has been noted. Keats’ thoughts on sin and the atonement were not an explanation of penal substitution, but rather combine an element of mystery with a subjective awareness of his need for redemption.

My faith is simply this – that there is an original corruption in our nature, from which & from the consequence of which, we may be redeemed by Christ - not as the Socinians say, by his pure morals or excellent Example merely – but in a mysterious manner as an effect of his Crucifixion – and this I believe – not because I *understand* it; but because I *feel*, that it is not only suitable to, but needful for, my nature and because I find it clearly revealed.⁹⁷

His words echo the frequent declarations of the early Nonconformists against Socinianism, and then arrive at a conclusion that would not have suited the Nonconformists of the 1830s, but might have suited some of the Nonconformists of the 1870s.

⁹³ *WMM* 1880, pp. 632-33 (Mrs Bayley).

⁹⁴ *CW* 1845, pp. 441-42 (John Congleton).

⁹⁵ *EM* 1880, pp. 45-48 (Rev James Fleming).

⁹⁶ *BM* 1873, pp. 190-91 (W. Knight).

⁹⁷ J. Keats to his brother George 1802, in W. A. Ulmer, ‘Virtue of Necessity: Coleridge’s Unitarian Moral Theory’, *Modern Philology*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (Feb., 2005), pp. 372-404, p. 397.

The lengthy 1878 obituary of Alfred Barrett, a Wesleyan Methodist minister of Richmond in London who died at 70, is a remarkable example of an account of Nonconformist death that incorporates several elements of the Romantic spirit, including the immanence of God, the goodness of humanity, the divine in the commonplace, the importance of the natural created world, the elevation of shared human love above human depravity and the use of quotations from Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley to illustrate central points of his life and death story.⁹⁸ Barrett's obituary shows the trickle-down effect of the Romantic influence concerning a more subjective and personal faith. As evidence of Barrett's closeness to God from infancy, prior to conversion, the obituary author does not focus on his subject's sinful state but instead provides a quotation from Wordsworth's *Ode:*

Intimations of Immortality:

... not in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory, do we come
From God, Who is our home
Heaven lies about us in our infancy.

In giving an account of Barrett's difficult work in Manchester, the author then refers to

Shelley's *Lines written among the Euganean Hills:*

Many a green isle needs must be
In the deep sea of misery,
Or the mariner worn and wan,
Never thus could voyage on ...

The obituary author further notes that Barrett's 'words were distinguished by an almost feminine tenderness and gentleness (learnt from his Master) ... and the prominence he gave to the more elevated and Divine experiences of the Christian life.' The imitation of the quiet,

⁹⁸ *WMM* 1878, pp. 340-49, 401-408, 482-93 (Rev Alfred Barrett). This is the source of obituary quotations down to the end of the chapter.

unobtrusiveness of the life of Jesus was of increasing importance as the humanity of God shared space with his divinity.

Moreover, God was imminent, and spiritual treasures lay hidden in daily events. The weighty destiny of humanity seemed elevated above dependence on the Saviour. 'Ever musing on the personality of God and the nearness of His presence, and never for a moment forgetting the sublime and eternal destinies of man, he looked out upon the world ... with a glance that penetrated more deeply than the surface of things ... To him incalculable issues were ever at stake; all avenues of thought led him to the Supreme.' Barrett's love for others and not his relationship with God is emphasised as the most important aspect of his life. 'The secret of his success was his patience, his gentleness and his tender sympathy – in a word, his love.' The obituary author then goes on to illustrate this with a quotation from Keble's poem, *Second Sunday after Trinity*:

Wouldst thou the life of souls discern?
Nor human wisdom nor divine
Helps thee by ought beside to learn;
Love is life's only sign.

This is a strong statement for any evangelical Nonconformist obituary: essentially, it states that human love and not divine wisdom is the key to life.

Barrett was subject to attacks of illness that left him 'mentally prostrate'. The obituary author uses a quotation from Coleridge's *Ode to Dejection* to assist in describing Barnett's state during these times:

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear;
A drowsy, stifled, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no outlet or relief
In word, or sigh, or tear.

A quotation from Barrett's own poetry also serves to describe his suffering. Worthy of note in this eight-stanza poem are the references to nature ('summer', 'earth', 'flowers', 'storm', 'breezy night', 'stars' and 'sea') and the absence of references to God except as 'the heavenly

Dove'. 'He saw in all things the loving Fatherhood of God of the Brotherhood of Christ in every human creature; he felt himself in *God's* world.' The divine resided in every person, and God's presence was fully evident in this world as in the next.

Yet when all was said and done, the obituary author was careful to include the words of a close colleague of Barrett's who stated that "'The Bishop of Peterborough, in Norwich Cathedral, before the British Association for the Advancement of Science, portraying to their imagination that character of a Christian man – self-sacrificing, brave, humble, patient, pure'" went on to say that Barrett had these qualities only by the grace of God. And the obituary states that Barrett's last word, 'twice repeated, was that name in which his whole life had been founded, and which summed up all his hopes, "Jesus!"' The proclamation of the name of Jesus as the source of Nonconformist hope at death could not be left out.

Conclusion

The influence of the Romantic spirit on evangelical Nonconformist expectations concerning death and the afterlife between 1830 and 1880 cannot be identified by neat categories. The effect was fluid and built up over time. It is important to note that examples of the Romantic spirit and Nonconformist death are taken primarily from two different kinds of literature: poetry and the obituary. The fact that the latter was dedicated to a consideration of death makes the Romantic emphasis on death in literature all the more marked.

There are parallels between Romanticism and Nonconformity that were apparent throughout the period. Some basic Judaeo-Christian themes such as continued life beyond death, the problem of suffering and evil and the cycle of birth, death and resurrection so evident in the created world were shared experiences. These included the acknowledgement of a life beyond what was apparent to the senses. Moreover, they shared the awareness that earthly existence was fragile and full of suffering and that it was limited.

However, there were also marked distinctions between the two perspectives. For the Romantics, the process of death was imagined to be easy and dreamlike; it held a certain fascination and could be perceived as good in itself. The evangelical Nonconformists aspired to a good death but they did not believe that death in itself was good. A second area of divergence was the nature of the burden presented by life in a limited world. The Romantics were burdened by ageing and the accompanying loss of creativity while the Nonconformists were burdened by sin. Third, the Romantic spirit sought to burst out of structures and social expectations. Nonconformity felt a strong responsibility to God and to society; the Nonconformists sought to live within the law of God and valued propriety and order. Finally, while the Romantics speculated on death and the afterlife, often using beautiful imagery to capture their ideas, the Nonconformists had a clear biblical vision as to what awaited them on the other side of the grave. Although both of these cultural phenomena granted a high value to individual subjective experience, and aspired to more than could be offered by their limited earthly existence, the distinctions between the Romantic spirit and evangelical Nonconformity were significant.

By the 1850s the effect of the Romantic spirit on Nonconformist expectations concerning death became increasingly apparent in the literary style of their obituaries. While the obituaries of the 1830s often had a classical tone in that they could be concise and straightforward, those of the 1850s were not only more elaborate, excessive and sentimental but used direct quotations from Romantic poetry with greater frequency. The passions of the heart and subjective experience as expressed by Romanticism were related to religious enthusiasm. The use of Romantic poetry and imagery suggested that both the obituary authors and the readers were familiar with it, and that the use of such excerpts and images was considered to be relevant to death.

References to Romantic literature continued to some extent with the passing years. However, the 1870s saw the less specific but more pervasive effect of the subjective and personal Romantic spirit. The obituaries communicate – albeit subtly and unevenly – less of a separation between earth and heaven and between God and humanity. Heaven was increasingly perceived as an extension of earthly relationships and work with a gentle, at times almost imperceptible, transition between this life and the next. The notion that daily life was infused with the divine and that all actions were of eternal consequence caused the separation between the natural and the supernatural to fade. Contributing further to this was a new emphasis on the Fatherhood of God and the humanity of Jesus. If God was more gentle and approachable, and humanity had power to affect God’s world for good, then a focus on human depravity and the desperate need for the atonement did not fit as well in the 1870s as it had in the 1830s. The obituaries reflect this softening of doctrine and movement away from stark images of sin and its consequences.

Nonetheless, the life and death story of Alfred Barrett, the Wesleyan minister of London who died in 1878 - with its emphasis on God’s immanence, humanity’s goodness and mission, the elevation of human love as the key to wisdom, the appearance of the divine in the commonplace and the attention given to the created world – ends on a note of distinction between the Romantic spirit and Nonconformity that is supremely evangelical and Nonconformist. Barrett was who he was by the grace of God alone and his last word was ‘Jesus’, the source of his hope.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LAST WORDS: THE EXPERIENCE OF DEATH

‘Don’t weep for me. I am going to heaven.’¹

The last words of the dying have been recorded for centuries in diaries, histories, funeral sermons, letters, biographies, fiction and, as in the present case, memoirs and obituaries. The published accounts of evangelical Nonconformist deathbed experiences in mid-nineteenth-century England were a curious mixture of the familiar and the innovative; the formulaic and the authentic; the last words of the dying and the interpretation of those in attendance; the mystical and the practical; a scene of final conflict and one of peaceful deliverance. In some respects, they were a faithful reflection of characteristics of a ‘good death’ as recorded since the fifteenth century. In others, they introduced new features that were the fruit of the Evangelical Revival and suitable to their place in the industrialised, modern world. This chapter will consider the experience of the dying that is described primarily in the fourth part of the four-fold obituary formula – the death narrative. Careful consideration will be given to its relative consistency or modification with the passing years, with special attention accorded to the ways in which the experience of the dying person differed from that of the observers of the death and to what extent there was continuity between the deathbed piety of the nineteenth-century evangelical Nonconformists and that of previous centuries.

The *Ars moriendi*

A good death for the evangelical Nonconformist had elements of a tradition that dated back to the fifteenth century and beyond. Although the late Middle Ages focused a good deal of attention on merit and good works, when the faithful found themselves at death’s door they

¹ *PMM* 1854, p. 72 (Hugh Manual).

looked to the passion of Christ. The medieval English mystic, Julian of Norwich, left an account of her deathbed experience. ‘Holding the Crucifix before her, the priest said, “Dowghtter, I have brought the ymage of thy saviour; loke there oponn and comforthe the there with in reverence of hym that dyede for the and me”.’² The priest was instructed to tell the sick person to ‘Put alle thi trust in his passion and in his deth, and thence only thereon, and non other thing.’³ The deathbed was seen as a final battleground with Satan, where he tempted the sick to succumb to despair, lack of faith, impatience and pride. The priest in attendance at the death sought a statement from the dying that he or she had repented of sins and acknowledged a total dependence on Christ. Grace was then mediated through the church and the sacraments of confession, communion and anointing. A ‘holy’ death was in keeping with the rites of the church and the necessity of being in a state of grace at the moment of death. Confident last words were seen as indications of readiness for departure of the soul from the body, while fearfulness in the last moments could cast a dark pall over one’s eternal prospects. Attention was turned entirely to the next life: the dying contended with the unseen world. One’s deathbed ‘performance’ was decisive.

In an attempt to address the terrors of death and to reassure the sick and dying, in 1415 the Council of Florence ordered the writing of a book on the *ars moriendi*, or the ‘art of dying’. The Latin text was translated and circulated throughout England and Europe. It reassured Christians that death was not something to fear, and provided pastoral remedies for the temptations that were common on the deathbed as well as consolation through Christ’s redemption. As a practical matter it also set forth rules of behaviour for friends and family; and prayers to be said for the dying. By 1450 it appeared in a short version comprising eleven woodcuts accompanied by brief descriptions that was accessible to both clergy and laity,

² *Manuale*, p. 98; Colledge and Walsh (eds.), *A Book of Showings*, I, p. 208, in E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: traditional religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 314.

³ Maskell, *Monumenta Ritualia*, III, pp. 357-8, in Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 315.

including the illiterate. The *ars moriendi* became the standard for achieving a good death. Because the dying person and those in attendance at the deathbed were confronting death from different angles, instructions were offered to both. They had different work to do at the scene of death.⁴

There was also a strong tradition of deathbed piety in Puritan England, and its central features strongly resembled those of the pre-Reformation world. One of the most prominent works in this literary genre during the seventeenth century was *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying* (1651) by Jeremy Taylor. The author described the book as ‘The means and instruments of preparing ourselves and others respectively for a blessed Death; and the Remedies against the Evils and Temptations proper to the state of Sickness: Together with Prayers and Acts of Virtue to be used by Sick and Dying persons, or by others standing in their attendance. To which are added Rules for the Visitation of the Sick, and offices proper for that Ministry.’⁵ Taylor focused on the importance of patience, repentance and overcoming fear in the face of death. In preparation for a ‘Holy and blessed Death’ he particularly emphasised the ‘Vanity and Shortness of Man’s Life’, comparing it to a bubble, a vapour and a shadow.

Let no man extend *his thoughts*, or let *his hopes* wander towards future and far-distant events and accidental contingencies ... Since we stay not here, being people but of a day’s abode, and our age is like that of a fly, and contemporary with a gourd, we must look somewhere else for an abiding city, a place in another country to fix our house in, whose walls and foundation is God, where we must find rest, or else be restless for ever.⁶

⁴ P. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), pp. 105-15; Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 310-27; R. Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 150-60.

⁵ J. Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1857), p. xxvii. (Originally published 1651)

⁶ Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, pp. 1, 16, 19.

As with the earlier *ars moriendi*, the attention of the reader was directed towards the life to come.

Records of deathbed experiences during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries reflected the same needs addressed in the *ars moriendi* and *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying*: the importance of repentance and assurance of salvation (both for the dying person and those observing the death), the necessity of resisting temptation, the exercise of faith and patience and the imminence of and even longing for the next world. The London Presbyterian pastor Benjamin Grosvenor's account of the death of Mrs Susannah Rudge in 1716 clearly conveys the features of the good death and the importance of such a death for the dying and for those in attendance at the deathbed:

From that time we stood around the Dying, as curious Spectators, to see, to observe, how Heaven met the travelling Soul upon its way; to learn to die; to see Religion in some of its Grandour; to catch now and then an *Ejaculation* from her Lips, and carry it on, and improve it a little, to her Comfort, and our own Edification; and finally, to see a Mortal triumph over Death, and thro' Faith and Patience, more than a Conqueror, thro' the Blood of the Lamb.⁷

In the case of Susanna Noel in 1715, 'as her Misery and Pain increased, so was her Hope enlarged, and her Patience doubled'.⁸ Many feared a sudden death, delirium in one's last days and hours or excessive physical weakness at the end would preclude a good death. For those left behind there was a desperate need for assurance that their loved one would arrive safely in heaven, as well as a personal assurance that death held no terrors.

From the 1740s the Evangelical Revival placed great value on the experience of death. This was particularly true for the Methodists, who saw a good death as the third part of the three essentials for holy living, the first two being conversion and sanctification. Bruce

⁷ B. Grosvenor, *Precious Death: A Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of Mrs Susannah Rudge* (1716), 16-17, in Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England*, p. 177.

⁸ Rogers, *A Sermon Preached at the Funeral of the Honourable Susanna Noel* (1715), 15, in Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England*, p. 198.

Hindmarsh shows the continued importance of deathbed experiences among Evangelicals during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He refers to John Wesley's decision to publish accounts in the *Arminian Magazine* of 'those real Christians who ... have lately finished their course with joy'.⁹ He describes a holy death as the consummation of evangelical conversion.¹⁰

In a discussion of Wesley and the Counter-Reformation Eamon Duffy notes Wesley's interest in the Catholic contemplative Gregory Lopez and his intimacy with God, which Wesley felt contributed to Christian perfection, a sense of the divine presence and assurance. In his biography of Lopez, Wesley stated that Lopez's assurance never wavered, even on his deathbed: 'Seeing him suffer extremely, I said, "Now is the time to think upon God." "And of whom should I ever think?" was his reply. When he was in the very pangs of death, I said, "Are you now thoroughly united to God?" He answered "Yes, thoroughly".'¹¹ Wesley and many Evangelicals saw suffering and death as an opportunity for God to work in the lives of all those at the deathbed.

The importance of deathbed piety continued into the early nineteenth century. Phyllis Mack demonstrates how the Methodists of the Evangelical Revival placed a high value on deathbed experiences.¹² Mack gives evangelical Nonconformist women a unique place at the deathbed. In an essay on 'Methodism and Motherhood' she tells the story of the Methodist Mary Taft, who, while caring for her dying daughter gave birth to another child 'at her bed feet'. Her older daughter survived, but experienced a powerful vision of her grandmother and

⁹ *Arminian Magazine* 4 (1781), p. v, in D. B. Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: spiritual autobiography in early modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 257.

¹⁰ Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, pp. 2-3.

¹¹ J. Wesley, *Life of Gregory Lopez*, in *The Christian Library* (London, 1826 edn), xxvii, p. 408, in E. Duffy, 'Wesley and the Counter Reformation,' J. Garnett and C. Matthew, eds., *Revival and Religion Since 1700: essays for John Walsh* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1993), p. 13.

¹² P. Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: gender and emotion in early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 9-15.

two women friends – all of whom had died in the previous four years. Mary Taft later recounted the incident in a letter of 1811, and was clearly more interested in her daughter's near-death vision than in her own experience of childbirth. Mack suggests that Taft's identity as a child of God, and her communion with other women who had gone before her to heaven, were more important than some other aspects of her identity as a woman. A further example from the period is found in the *Commonplace Book of the Nonconformist Samuel Forsaith*, spanning 1759-1819, which includes a conversation between his son Robert, who died at 37 on 16 Oct 1817 and Robert's sister, Mary:

He said Sister is this dying, am I dying now, - I replyd I fear it is; you fear, for what? Thank God for it ... Tuesday evening the pain and pangs of death were great. O Sister what shall I do? This pain? – are you sure I am dying? Yes, Brother, are you afraid to die as you approach nearer? He answr'd quickly No, - that I am not, I long to die – are you happy? – happy, yes, and safe too that's more ... dying is hard work, hard work indeed Sister, my Father loves me for all this ... how long longer do you think it will be? Can't tell, hold out Faith & patience a little longer, - my Father grant it me! About 12 OClock, he said the pain is going off, the conflict is ceasing, I fear I shall have it all to bear again ... its all right – its all right – tis all well, - he spoke no more.¹³

Forsaith's impending death clearly reflected the tradition of the *art of dying*. It included conversation with his sister, a spiritual and physical conflict, a sense of his soul's safety in Christ and a longing to die as his attention focused increasingly on the life to come.

Some modern scholars have considered the evangelical Nonconformist experience of death. Linda Wilson discusses such elements as patience, suffering, spiritual battle and the need to confirm that the dying person was ready to depart that comprised a good death in the experience of mid-nineteenth century Nonconformist women as an important part of her investigation into their spirituality. This is particularly relevant as it relates to the recording of the last words of thousands of women in the denominational magazines of the

¹³ Samuel Forsaith's [Commonplace] Book, 1759-1819, pp. 229-36. Private Property of John Forsaith and Peter Forsaith. (Both Samuel and Robert Forsaith were Dissenters and, were probably Independents by 1817.)

Nonconformists.¹⁴ David Bebbington explains the connection between exposure to dangerous occupations and religious revival. The pervasive sense of danger and the unpredictability of disease inclined people to prepare for a good death through conversion. A good death was the final hallmark of a good life.¹⁵ Elsewhere, Bebbington takes a close look at deathbed accounts published in the denominational magazines of the evangelical Nonconformists and finds that they contribute significantly to an understanding of how the Nonconformists of the 1850s approached and experienced death, and that this approach reflected an evangelical orientation and was marked by a hopeful anticipation of the life to come.¹⁶ Henry Rack focused on Methodist deathbed piety and found published obituaries to be a valuable source for understanding Methodist spirituality.¹⁷ The scholarly consensus suggests that the faithful of the mid-nineteenth century, and their loved ones, still longed for a good death.

Last Words

The last words of the dying – the best indicator in the obituaries of the experiences of those who faced death - fall into part four of the four-fold obituary formula – the death narrative. In the fourth section there are several important statistical categories as well as several themes directly related to the last words of the dying that remained consistent over the fifty-year period. Although this section became shorter over time, the Nonconformist obituaries included the last words of the dying at a consistently high level in the sample studied throughout the period between 1830 and 1880: 43% of the obituaries included last words in the 1830s, 46% in the 1850s and 50% in the 1870s. In the years down to 1850 these

¹⁴ L. Wilson, *Constrained by Zeal: female spirituality amongst Nonconformists, 1825-1875* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), pp. 3, 16, 154-163.

¹⁵ D. W. Bebbington, *Victorian Religious Revivals: culture and piety in local and global contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 90-92; 110-11.

¹⁶ D. W. Bebbington, 'Deathbed Piety of Evangelical Nonconformists in the Nineteenth Century,' (unpublished, 2011).

¹⁷ Rack, 'Evangelical Endings: death-beds in evangelical biography', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 74 (1992), 39-56.

were at times quoted extensively and covered weeks of conversations between the dying and those they were leaving behind. The dying consistently addressed certain themes and disregarded others when knocking on heaven's door. Their attention was focused on matters that harked back to the *ars moriendi*, including their readiness to depart this world, an awareness of the divide between this world and the next, relationship with and dependence on Jesus, anticipation of heaven, their encounter with suffering and the need for patience. It is important to investigate these themes because they suggest that there were some aspects of nineteenth-century death, as it was experienced by those who faced it, which not only remained fairly consistent between 1830 and 1880, but reflected the good death of previous centuries.

Readiness to depart

The evangelical Nonconformists characteristically spoke candidly about their acceptance of death. Mary Chapman, a Baptist of Sheffield who died at 53 in 1855, was asked at her deathbed whether she “felt happy at the prospect of a change in [her] condition?”. Her reply was “O yes, that is all right, dear brother, that is all right”.¹⁸ Fear sometimes surfaced as an issue in the early stages of an illness; however these fears eventually ceased as death drew closer. Mrs Groves, a Wesleyan Methodist of Wednesbury in Staffordshire, died of a short but painful illness in 1856. ‘She requested her medical attendant not to withhold from her his opinion of her state, observing that she had no fear of death.’¹⁹ Thomas Hardy, a Primitive Methodist who died in 1856 at 68 of ‘a severe affliction’ asked “Doctor, is it death? – doctor, is it death? If so, I am ready!”²⁰ The dying were focused on affirming their preparedness of death: this strong affirmation was as consoling to their loved

¹⁸ *BM* 1855, pp. 162-63 (Mrs Chapman).

¹⁹ *WMM* 1856, p. 388 (Mrs E. A. Groves).

²⁰ *PMM* 1856, pp. 331-32 (Thomas Hardy).

ones as it was to themselves. The readiness for death was often connected with a sense of completion: the dying had finished the course marked out for them in this world. The 1830 obituary of the Wesleyan Methodist Richard Lee states that ‘he gave his family his dying advice and benediction and said “I am now ready to be offered: the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course”’.²¹ In keeping with the *ars moriendi*, and with their spirituality, the evangelical Nonconformists looked away from this world and placed their hopes in the life to come.

Not all Nonconformists were eager to depart this life. One consistent exception must be pointed out: young mothers with children expressed a reluctance to die from 1830 down to 1880. The Primitive Methodist Mary Ingraham of High Burton in the West Riding of Yorkshire was the mother of four children and died in 1835 at 32. Her obituary includes a conversation with her husband:

(On my observing that she did not seem to care much for me and the children, she said) ‘No, I have shed tears enow for you, but not since Trinity Tuesday. I gave you all up then ... Victory, victory, victory ... Blessed Jesus. He is waiting to waft me to heaven – But I have just been thinking about my children.’ (I observed I could soon fetch them) ‘Nay, it’s a pity to disturb them in bed. The Lord will take care of them ... O Jesus! Come, Jesus – Why Jesus – Why Jesus – Thou hast promised, Jesus to lay no more upon me than I am able to bear.’²²

Although peace was achieved eventually, there was a sense of divided loyalties. The Baptist Sarah Evans expressed anxiety, saying: “It is hard, very hard, to be suddenly hurried away from husband, children, brothers and sisters, hard to give them up; - I feel it!”²³ Maria Payne, a Primitive Methodist of Sunderland in County Durham who died in 1835 at 28 several days after giving birth, spoke with her husband when she was near death: “Oh how I have been tempted about the child.” (My dear, don’t be afraid, I gave the child to the Lord the

²¹ *WMM* 1830, p. 66 (Richard Lee).

²² *PMM* 1836, pp. 108-110 (Mary Ingraham).

²³ *BM* 1856, p. 233 (Mrs Sarah Evans).

day it was born, and I believe he will take care of it.) “Have you?” she said, “that’s right”.²⁴

These poignant remarks point to an experience that superseded earthly considerations, a longing of mothers to stay with children. This area of consistency was a source of tension between fulfilment in this world and fulfilment in the next.

A Foretaste of heaven

Nonconformists often spoke as if they were already citizens of heaven and hence expressed their desire to depart for this new spiritual world. This perspective was consistent for the dying across the period under consideration. The sense of complete separation from this world could be dramatic and the dying person was aware of it. Harriet Lander, a Congregationalist of London who died in 1833, said: “Oh! Why is it that I continue recovering so? I thought I was gone then ... *I do not belong to this world now. I have nothing to do here.*”²⁵ The death of the Baptist William Bailey of London in 1854 suggested he believed himself already engaged with the heavenly realm. ‘A more than human power was tutoring him, *weaning him from the earth.*’²⁶ When Jane Ford, a Primitive Methodist of Canterbury, was dying in 1854 at 35, she stated that “*I shall soon pass the boundaries of time; but my soul is happy and I shall be with Jesus.*”²⁷ The 1879 obituary of George Tildesley, a Primitive Methodist of Edgmond in Somerset, states that he ‘*lost all interest in the affairs of the world, but not so with the things of the kingdom above.* If one spoke to him of them his countenance would brighten, his soul would be moved, and he would give utterance to his feelings in devout exclamations of praise.’²⁸ Conceiving themselves as having one foot already in the afterlife, many lost interest in the things of this world. In the later stages of [Mrs Le Frank’s] very painful affliction she was quite *weaned from the world*

²⁴ *PMM* 1836, pp. 111-14 (Maria Payne).

²⁵ *EM* 1834, pp. 334-36 (Mrs Harriet Lander). (emphasis mine)

²⁶ *BM* 1854, pp. 233-34 (William Bailey). (emphasis mine)

²⁷ *PMM* 1854, p. 698 (Jane Ford). (emphasis mine)

²⁸ *PMM* 1879, p. 630 (George Tildesley). (emphasis mine)

...”*The world is nothing to me, nor are any of the comforts of this life (and she had many) anything to me now; I can gladly leave them all*”.²⁹ These sentiments suggest that a shift often took place during the illness, during which the dying began to see themselves no longer as chained to this world but as citizens of heaven. The statements of the dying about crossing a boundary and having nothing to do with this world represent an intriguing contrast to the increasingly fluid transition between this world and the next as described by the obituary authors and editors. As the Primitive Methodist Hugh Manuel who died of a cancer on his face in Kenwyn in Cornwall in 1853 at 25 said simply, “Don’t weep for me, I am going to heaven”.³⁰ The dying seemed to discern a dramatic difference between earth and heaven that was not acknowledged by those who were not on the threshold of death.

The Hard work of dying: suffering and patience

Throughout the period, the Nonconformists were forthcoming about the suffering they endured and the patience they needed to do the ‘hard work of dying’, as described by the Wesleyan Sarah Jubb who died in 1876.³¹ Patience is mentioned at a consistently high rate with 21% in the 1830s, 24% in the 1850s and 23% in the 1870s and was, understandably, often referred to in the same sentence as suffering, references to which also remained high at 27% in the 1830s, 33% in the 1850s and 26% in the 1870s. In the case of the Congregationalist Edward Brock, a draper of Chatham in Kent, who died at 79 in 1853, the ‘pain was so bad that conversation of a spiritual character was greatly restricted’. Mr Brock ‘endured a painful surgical operation without a murmur’. The obituary further mentions his ‘fortitude and patience’.³² The 1853 obituary of the Congregationalist Elijah Butler, a merchant of Alton in Hampshire, refers to the ‘disease which had for some time been preying

²⁹ *BM* 1831, pp. 297-98 (Mrs Le Frank). (emphasis mine)

³⁰ *PMM* 1854, p. 72 (Hugh Manuel).

³¹ *WMM* 1879, p. 80 (Mrs Sarah Jubb).

³² *EM* 1853, pp. 604-609 (Edward Brock).

on his constitution' and to his 'patience during suffering'.³³ Mary Boyd was a Wesleyan Methodist who died at 50 in Liverpool in 1874. She said, "I do want to be resigned and patient, but pain is pain, and I cannot help moaning".³⁴ Suffering and patience on the deathbed were consistently present over time and consistently linked. As the body grew weaker and the spirit was enlivened: patience was a necessary component of dying well.

It is very important to consider the physical experiences of this group who died in the nineteenth century. Like patience and suffering, the cause of death was also mentioned with great consistency at 24% in the 1830s, 26% in the 1850s and 27% in the 1870s. The cause of death mattered because it affected how 'good' a death could be displayed. Pat Jalland portrays with sensitivity the physical reality of nineteenth-century death, carefully describing with vivid individual portraits causes of death that appeared with frequency in the obituaries considered here. Jalland explains the death of a young mother who died in 1870 from puerperal fever³⁵ after she was 'taken dangerously ill' starting with 'a terrible seizure'.³⁶ Another illness that killed more people than cholera and smallpox combined and that was prevalent in the Nonconformist obituaries is consumption or tuberculosis.³⁷ Charlotte Brontë's description of her sister Emily's slow death in 1848 from consumption, refers to her 'hollow, wasted, pallid aspect', 'deep, tight cough', and 'pains in the chest and side'.³⁸ Cholera epidemics appeared in the obituaries as do deaths from typhus, smallpox, cancers, severe injuries, heart disease, persistent bronchitis, asthma and infections. Gradually, from

³³ *EM* 1853, pp. 424-25 (Elijah Butler).

³⁴ *WMM* 1876, pp. 89-91 (Mary Boyd).

³⁵ Puerperal fever caused between 33% and 38% of maternal deaths between 1847 and 1874 in England and Wales. J. M. Munro Kerr, R. W. Johnstone, and M. H. Phillips, *Historical Review of British Obstetrics and Gynecology 1800-1950* (1954), 259, table 1, in P. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 45-46.

³⁶ Elizabeth King's journal on the death of her daughter, Margaret Gladstone, 1870, MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/852, in Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, p. 46.

³⁷ F. B. Smith, *The Retreat of Tuberculosis, 1850-1950* (1988), 1-2, in Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, p. 40.

³⁸ Charlotte to Ellen; Haworth, 23 November 1848, in J. Barker, *The Brontës: a life in letters* (London: The Folio Society, 2006), p. 225.

the middle of the century, infectious disease slowed and surgery became more effective in slowing mortality; however, the overall effect of hospitals, even down to the end of the period in 1880, was limited because not everyone had access to them.³⁹ This is why by comparison with the percentages for the causes of death, references to medical advice and hospitals were low. Medical advice was referred to 6% of the time in the 1830s, 8 % in the 1850s and 8% in the 1870s; hospitals were almost never mentioned with 0% in the 1830s, 1% in the 1850s and 1% in the 1870s. Spiritual matters were usually the primary focus in the obituaries; medical and physical features and considerations provided the background, the detail and personal narrative of suffering and sacrifice that completed the drama of death.

Although the denominational magazines sought to give a message of hope to readers, there was a considerable amount of detail related to the physical process of dying through the period. The Congregationalist Elizabeth Phillips of Theddlethorpe in the Louth circuit in Lincolnshire ‘uttered no shouts of victory, nor evinced any perceptible rapture at his coming. Doubtless her exhausted energy and extreme weakness exercised an influence unfavourable to this. However, she died in peace and went to the presence of her Saviour.’ She died in 1854 at 54 of an ‘affliction of seven years’ duration.⁴⁰ The Baptist John Candish of Sunderland, who died in 1874 at 58, was a Member of Parliament and owner of a large bottle works. His obituary recounts that ‘severe attention to Parliamentary duties undermined his health’. His throat became swollen and a tracheotomy was necessary. His left arm was ulcerated, with the flesh worn off to the bone. Chloroform and opiates were used. His ‘friends came to look for death as a happy release from his sufferings’ and referred to his ‘great fortitude and brave spirit’.⁴¹ The obituary of the Baptist William Payne records an excerpt

³⁹ R. Floud and D. McCloskey, eds., *The Economic History of Britain Since 1700*, vol. 2: 1860-1939, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 34.

⁴⁰ *EM* 1854, pp. 698-99 (Elizabeth Phillips).

⁴¹ *BM* 1874, pp. 270-80 (John Candish, M.P.).

from a letter to his son written two weeks before William's death in 1875 at 65 from a rheumatic affection brought on by being inadvertently put into a damp bed that caused him to be 'crippled in his limbs and to walk with crutches ... "All on a sudden I became physically and morally prostrate. Never in all my life have I felt so utterly helpless. Sometimes I thought I should die, at other times I almost desired death but not, I fear, always from the noblest motives".⁴² This is why a quiet, calm death was welcomed as a blessing and a relief. Seeking patience at the time of death was not an effort to avoid reality but rather was a response to the possibility that intense suffering could precede death in the nineteenth century. Suffering and patience were closely connected for the dying, and represent consistently key elements of the good death. Thus it became important to refer to the cause of death and the intensity of suffering in the obituaries in order to explain the exceptions to a good death.

Since a variety of illnesses could affect one's clarity of mind, ability to speak and physical stamina, the cause of death was sometimes related to whether a testimony to faith could be given in the final moments; whether preparation for death was adequate; whether a lifetime of faith could fill in the blanks for a lack of faith at the end; why so many people were glad that they did not have to seek God in their dying moments. In 1879, those who waited at the bedside of the Primitive Methodist Eliza Hall, the wife of a Derbyshire coalminer, 'became extremely anxious towards the close of her life to see some manifestation of the power of that "lively hope" which had sustained and comforted her more or less during the last thirty-five years'.⁴³ John Hardey, a Wesleyan Methodist and a farmer of Adlingfleet of the Goole circuit in Yorkshire who died in 1876 at 81, was converted when he heard a funeral sermon in which 'the Preacher observed that he had not met with more than two cases of death-bed repentance of which he could indulge hope of a blessed result'.⁴⁴ So references

⁴² *BM* 1875, pp. 209-16 (Rev William H. Payne).

⁴³ *PMM* 1879, pp. 627-28 (Mrs Eliza Hall).

⁴⁴ *WMM* 1879, pp. 319-20 (John Hardey).

in the obituaries to the cause of death, to the level of physical suffering and to patience shown in its midst made sense. In keeping with the *ars moriendi* it was vitally important to not be caught unprepared when death came. A trial was expected, and patience was requisite for the journey from this life to the next. All of these themes were consistently attested to by the words of the dying.

Conversations between the living and the dying

The recorded conversations between the dying person and those attending the deathbed are worth noting because they demonstrate that such conversations were not uncommon and that dialogue at the deathbed was a continuing tradition. They also reveal distinctions between formulaic phrases that were part of the Nonconformist cultural response to death, and words that have a ring of authenticity and were very likely the actual words of the dying person. The 1830 obituary of the Baptist Mr Thackerey, a merchant of Leeds, records that he was asked a series of what might be considered leading questions – but might also be a way to assist a physically weakened person to express his or her thoughts: “(Is all well with you now?) Yes. (Do you find Jesus precious to you, as he is to them who believe?) Yes. (Can you look forward to heaven through the merits of Jesus, with humble confidence?) Yes”.⁴⁵ Mrs Lewis, a Baptist of Hoxton in Norfolk who died in 1854 of a painful ‘complication of disorders’ at 37, was asked if she was afraid to trust in Christ. She replied, “I must think before I answer that question ... No I am not afraid to trust him”. Her husband overheard her praying for grace and patience. However, her husband or her daughter reminded her that “Jesus could make a dying bed feel as soft as downy pillows are” [from the fourth stanza of the Isaac Watts hymn ‘Why should we start, and fear to die?’] – to which she replied, “Yes, I feel it. He is precious, precious!”⁴⁶ The Congregationalist William

⁴⁵ *BM* 1830, p. 113 (Mr Thackerey).

⁴⁶ *BM* 1854, pp. 304-6 (Mrs Lewis).

Cooper died at 24 in 1855. An esteemed friend asked “” (Do you feel the promises of God precious?) Oh, yes! I feel Christ has done all for me. I am perfectly at rest in Christ. [Dear William, do you feel assured you will go to heaven?] Oh, yes. I feel conscious that if I die any moment I shall go straight to heaven”.⁴⁷ The people at the deathbed may have needed to hear these words, but the dying also needed to say them in order to achieve a sense of completion and the freedom to depart. The dying were remarkably generous in their willingness to encourage those they were leaving behind.

A peaceful death?

The category of peace represents an area where both consistency and change over time can be observed. An experience of peace, calm, composure – a general state of well-being – is consistently expressed at the high rate of 34% in the 1830s and 35% in the 1850s. Although references to peace decrease, 21% for the 1870s is still a significantly high percentage “I am very calm”, said the Baptist J. L. Phillips, of Melksham in Wiltshire at his death in 1856 from a disease which developed following a chill taken while visiting the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851.⁴⁸ The 1856 obituary of John Hunt, a Congregational minister of London who died at 82, states that ‘When his medical attendant suggested that his departure was drawing nigh he calmly replied: “Rather hasty, but all is well”.⁴⁹ The Congregationalist William Todman stated before his death at 50 in 1856: “All is peace ... I am too weak to tell you what I feel; but I am perfectly happy, that must satisfy you”.⁵⁰ In the 1870s an increasing number of obituaries do not include references to peace among the words of the dying. However, peace remained an important part of the experience of death – and, indeed, the statistic is comparable to that for patience (23%) in the same period. There was

⁴⁷ *EM* 1855, pp. 114-15 (William Cooper).

⁴⁸ *BM* 1856, pp. 171 and 197-203 (J. L. Phillips).

⁴⁹ *EM* 1856, pp. 445-49 (Rev John Hunt).

⁵⁰ *EM* 1856, pp. 685-89 (Rev William Todman).

certainly decline over time but it was a decline from a level that was rivalled by few other categories. Peace was so central to a good death that references continued despite the decline in emotional expression.

A happy death?

Although consistency can be observed in such categories as Jesus, heaven, patience and suffering other categories related to the death narrative show change over time. Happiness and joy were mentioned 29% of the time in the 1830s, 27% in the 1850s, and 15% in the 1870s, thus decreasing by nearly 50% over the period. The Baptist Hannah Turner was the mother of seven children when she died at the age of 31. Shortly before her death in 1830 she stated that she had “steady peace – no raptures, but happy, happy, quite happy”.⁵¹ Indeed, after reviving from a fit she still exclaimed: “Happy! Happy!” Yet, this was not giddiness: indeed, her lucidity is attested to in a striking manner. ‘Her serenity and joy were mixed with deep humility and fear of self-delusion. “I used to feel great dread of death but I have now lost it all. Can it be insensibility – delusion?”’⁵¹ By the 1870s there were still a few instances of these intense emotions. George Tildesley, a Primitive Methodist, stated that, as he neared death in 1878, “When I lie awake in the night I feel so happy”.⁵² Mrs William Dent, a Wesleyan of Leyburn in North Yorkshire, married at 18 and the mother of several children, whose great-grandparents knew John Wesley, died in 1875 at 22: “I am dying, but I am very happy in Jesus ... It is light; I thought it would have been dark; but it is light ... I am dying; my hands are dead. I am in the river, but I feel the bottom; I am so happy! ... My Saviour, Hallelujah!”⁵³ However, despite these (usually Methodist) instances, by the 1870s references to strong emotion in the Nonconformist obituaries declined. Even the Primitive

⁵¹ *BM* 1830, pp. 433-34 (Mrs Hannah Turner).

⁵² *PMM* 1878, p. 630 (George Tildesley).

⁵³ *WMM* 1877, pp. 158-60 (Mrs William Dent).

Methodist death narratives, normally the most emotionally dramatic, became more subdued over time. While the dying remained focused on Jesus, the life to come and patience in the midst of suffering, both their words and the choices of the obituary authors tended to shift away from the revivalist tone of the earlier obituaries.

Duelling with the devil

Death could be a battleground that was complicated by physical suffering. References to spiritual battle decreased between 1830 and 1880 by more than 50%, from 11% to 5%. The 1830s saw deathbed scenes that generally were more spiritually complicated than those of the 1870s. For 66-year-old Mrs Greenwood, a Baptist of Haworth in Yorkshire, a mother of eight children, who died in 1832 of dropsy of the chest, a terrible spiritual battle ensued at her deathbed:

My heart feels hard, and I cannot find liberty in prayer – but seem shut up – dull – stupid. I never doubted his goodness – he is long-suffering – but I am such a sinner – my heart is deceitful – what if I should not be found right at last! O! I am cut off – I have no hope – I shall be cast away. I know not what to do – such temptations come – some evil influence has hold of me – what can it be? Dear Jesus, don't leave me – leave me not a moment!⁵⁴

The 1834 obituary of the Congregationalist Harriet Lander who died of typhus fever states that:

At first she enjoyed a sweet and undisturbed peace. Soon that peace was exchanged for warfare, hope for fear, and faith for unbelief. She now complained that her mind was becoming dark, and was afraid that her sins were not pardoned. She exclaimed 'Oh, my God! Why hast Thou forsaken me? What have I done that I cannot be forgiven? Break through those dark clouds and smile on me again.' She suffered from 'mental aberrations' and lamented that 'she could not find Christ or when she found him he would not look at her but turned his back. However, this state of mind was exchanged for a sweet season of enjoyment.' Among her last words were 'The struggle will soon be over.'⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *BM* 1832, pp. 377-81 (Mrs Greenwood).

⁵⁵ *EM* 1834, pp. 334-36 (Harriet Lander).

Greenwood and Lander experienced hardness of heart, doubts about her salvation and a sense of evil. This was the sort of onslaught for which the *ars moriendi* sought to prepare the dying. By the 1870s, a peaceful death was sought, and not only for spiritual reasons but also to avoid extended physical suffering. A quiet death that was barely recognisable to the onlookers was a source of admiration and rejoicing. In 1880 Thomas Smith ‘took a little breakfast, settled himself on his pillows, and quietly passed away. No bursts of joy, no glowing testimony – just the calm of everlasting rest. The expression on his face was full of ineffable peace, as though he had stepped from a bed of pain and anguish into joy and rest unspeakable.’⁵⁶ A battle with Satan was expected in the Middle Ages, but by the second half of the nineteenth century it was hoped that such a battle could be avoided.

Shifting attitudes about death and suffering in the 1870s

Despite the expectation that death would bring something good, a slight but growing reluctance to suffer and to die began to creep in after 1850 and especially during the 1870s. This reluctance was almost never expressed in the earlier obituaries. This was particularly true among the young. Miss Eliza Reed Gynn, a Wesleyan Methodist of the Launceston circuit in Cornwall who died in 1879 at 30 of consumption, said,

I have been reading about a girl who was ill of consumption, as I am, and who seemed to be very happy, and when she was asked about her feelings, always said: ‘O, I am very happy, I have no fear of death!’ But when death came she found she had been deceiving herself, by trusting in her feelings instead of on Christ. Miss Gynn then said anxiously: You do not think I am deceiving myself, do you? O, I do want to trust in Jesus alone! I want to be fully his, sanctified to Him.⁵⁷

This quotation conveys a complex set of emotions. The suggestion is that as she faced death Gynn found that her emotions failed to provide all she needed. She may not have felt as happy or as free of fear at the prospect of dying as the model of the consumptive girl. She

⁵⁶ *PMM* 1880, pp. 51-54 (Rev Thomas Smith).

⁵⁷ *WMM* 1879, pp. 477-78 (Eliza Reed Gynn).

realized that in the absence of the requisite emotions she was not even sure that she could place her faith in Jesus. That faith may have seemed too small. The Congregational minister Henry Wonnacott of Hull, who died in 1877 at 27 of heart disease, stated: “Just think,” he said “only twenty-seven, and the heart failing! ... Thousands of prayers have been offered for me: they will not be answered; God says ‘No!’ and therefore it must be right; must it not?”⁵⁸ Wonnacott is not entirely convinced of the rightness of God’s decision to allow him to die of heart failure at 27. And John Waddington of Cobham who died in 1880 at 69 confessed to ‘mixed feelings’ when asked if he would like to live.⁵⁹ Such sentiments suggest that by the 1870s it was becoming more difficult to feel reconciled to departing this life for the next.

What the last words did not say

By the 1870s the last words of the dying reflected, to some extent, the emphasis on work and accomplishments, some perceived overlap between earth and heaven. Some saw heaven as a continuation of this life, with more work to do and more goals to set. Benjamin Millard, a Baptist minister of Wiltshire, who died in 1875 of dropsy at 67: “It will be hard to give up my work. Am I to do no more work for the Master? It was so pleasant to work for Him”.⁶⁰ William Riggall, a Wesleyan Methodist and a farmer of Tetford in Lincolnshire who died at 71 in 1875, stated: “I don’t know what the Lord is going to do with me; they are turning me out of my old home, but there is a mansion ready for me. I have been looking round and think my work is done”.⁶¹ Sometimes they referred to their upward movement in society, but only as a point of comparison with things they then, at the point of death, deemed to be more important. The Baptist W. Yates of Stroud in Gloucestershire who died in 1870 at 68 proclaimed: “I cast overboard all my good works and deeds, they are nothing, nothing ...

⁵⁸ *EM* 1877, pp. 546-47 (Rev Henry Wonnacott).

⁵⁹ *EM* 1880, pp. 770-72 (Rev John Waddington).

⁶⁰ *BM* 1875, pp. 352-60 (Rev Benjamin Millard).

⁶¹ *WMM* 1879, pp. 559-60 (William Riggall).

but Jesus is all to me – oh, my precious Jesus, help me to glorify Thee, even in the fire!”⁶²

However, although the dying were increasingly concerned over time with the theme of work, their primary attention was consistently on the life to come and, as in the cases of Millard and Riggall, they endeavoured to place any references to accomplishments in a spiritual and eternal context.

Therefore while certain categories remained consistent and others underwent change over time, there are some that were rarely referred to by the dying. The dying seldom alluded to their accomplishments, their occupations, the value of their education or their virtuous characters. If anything, they deliberately minimised their accomplishments and focused on Jesus, heaven, their families and visions of the eternal. When Jane Gate, a Baptist of Keysoe in Bedfordshire was dying in 1868 at 65, and was told “You have spent a useful life, and can look forward to a bright reward” she replied “No reward for me ... Just as I am”⁶³ The dying rarely discussed their worldly occupations. This lack of emphasis suggests that earthly endeavours and accomplishments were not uppermost in their minds at the point of death. Instead, the dying focused on spiritual matters that they believed would be of consequence in heaven and that would prepare them for their new home. The attention of the dying was fixed on the life to come, on an intimate relationship with Jesus, and on a new home in heaven with family and friends.

The audience at the deathbed listened and looked for the normative manifestations of a good death both as a source of personal encouragement and to pass on to the larger evangelical community. The last words of George Hefford, a Primitive Methodist of Leicester who died in 1877 at 63, provide this helpful summary:

⁶² *BM* 1871, pp. 505-11 (Rev W. Yates).

⁶³ *BM*1869, pp. 112-13 (Jane Gate).

(Have you set your house in order, George? – is it all right?) He looked at me, as if I doubted the goodness of God. ‘Do you think, after some forty years’ service, the Master is going to cast me off now? Not so, Master! Not so! If you mean temporal matters, that is all right, I have made my will and put it all straight; and if you mean spiritual matters, that is all right too. I’m on the Rock! Yes, firm on the Rock .. I hope you will not see me again down here, not here, I hope it will be up yonder. Beautiful! Beautiful! ... I have peace, perfect peace in Christ. I am waiting, anxiously waiting, the change. Death is robbed of his terrors and turned into a welcome guest.’⁶⁴

The audience at the deathbed was assured that all was well both in terms of the affairs of this world that Hefford would be leaving behind, and in terms of his confident anticipation of the world to come. What could be more unambiguous than the statement of the Primitive Methodist Thomas Davison: when asked if he was clinging to the world as his death approached, he responded “No, I cling only to the Cross”.⁶⁵ Davison placed his hope in the cross of Christ, which he considered to be the bridge to the next world.

Conclusion

It has been explained in previous chapters that a shift in emphasis took place in the four-fold obituary formula, with an increasing emphasis over time on the third section that discussed the living out of the faith. Despite this shift the fourth part of the formula – the death narrative – while shorter and less effusive remained. The contents of that narrative, which included the last words of the dying, indicate that there was considerable consistency in maintaining the historical tradition of the *ars moriendi* or good death and in the focus of the dying on evangelical convictions concerning Jesus as the way to heaven and the need for total reliance on him.

A brief historical overview showed that the elements of the good death – reliance on Christ for salvation, the need for patience amid physical and spiritual suffering, an increasing focus on the next world and an ongoing dialogue both spoken and unspoken with those who

⁶⁴ *PMM* 1879, pp. 242-43 (George Hefford).

⁶⁵ *PMM* 1879, p. 376 (Thomas Davison).

surrounded the deathbed – continued to appear in accounts of deaths from the fifteenth down to the nineteenth centuries. An analysis of the nineteenth-century evangelical Nonconformist obituaries that appeared in the denominational magazines shows that the good death found a solid place in this historical trajectory of deathbed piety. The dying consistently spoke about their readiness to depart this world (with the exception, at times, of young mothers) and their anticipation of the life to come, about an intimate relationship with and reliance on Jesus, about heaven, about physical and spiritual suffering and the need for patience in this time of trial. Moreover, they were in communion with loved ones at the point of death. Their words showed some modification in the realm of emotional expression such as peace and happiness, spiritual warfare, Bible quotations, the nature of heavenly reunion and the continuing importance of work in the eternal realms. These areas of change in the language of the dying suggest some movement towards a more respectable presentation of their faith, and a slightly broader Evangelicalism. The dying diverged sharply from the obituary authors when it came to emphasising accomplishments, occupations, education and virtues of character. While references to these categories do appear, the dying attempted to understand these things in the context of their spiritual state and their heavenly destination. Therefore, over time the dying continued to place hope in Jesus and in the world to come. In the categories most closely related to the last words and to the experience of the dying person there is a degree of consistency that suggests that with the passing of the years between 1830 and 1880 the evangelical Nonconformist experience of death, as viewed by the person doing the ‘hard work’ of dying, changed relatively little.

The topics that are largely absent among the last words of the dying – occupation, social standing, education, accomplishments, character virtues, service to the community and good works - are amply accounted for by those who observed the death and wrote the obituary. The increase in references in these categories reflects significant change over time

in evangelical Nonconformist beliefs and expectations concerning death. The attention given to these categories by the obituary authors and editors provides a window into the social mobility and changing priorities the Nonconformists experienced in the mid-nineteenth century. The living and the dying had different work to do. Those left behind had a different experience from that of those on the threshold of eternity, and different expectations concerning death and the afterlife. They had a different story to tell and a message to pass on to the readers of the obituaries. Death was a life-changing experience, not only for the dying, but also for the living.

The obituaries addressed many of the same questions that had been central to the experience of death in previous centuries, and reflect the same fears and concerns for both the dying and those who attended to them in their last moments. The experience of the dying person as reflected in his or her last words provides the strongest evidence of consistency with the *ars moriendi*, the good death. Yet the evangelical Nonconformists had something distinct to contribute to the history of deathbed piety and experiences. As can be seen from the highly varied memoirs and obituaries that appeared in the denominational magazines between 1830 and 1880, there were many ways to die. The fruits of the Evangelical Revival, which emphasised personal experience, were amply represented in the obituaries of the Evangelicals. The formulaic phrasing of these obituaries was representative of the internal culture of the evangelical Nonconformist community. The four-fold formula of the obituaries mirrored the heart of Evangelicalism with its emphasis on the necessity of conversion through dependence on the death of Jesus for salvation from sin, the centrality of the Bible and the living out of the faith through activity. Moreover, the observers of the death and the obituary authors helped to shed light on many aspects of death that reflected the changing Nonconformist and larger culture with the passing of the years. Although by the 1870s signs

of change were apparent even among the dying, their last words continued to point to an experience that was timeless.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION: THE GOOD DEATH AND A GOOD LIFE

A friend asked him – ‘On what are you resting your hopes?’ ‘Jesus Christ the crucified – the cross! The cross!’ Piety was, in his estimation, not a mere system of orthodox theological belief, nor a consciousness, more or less developed, of certain states of religious feeling and experience, but a real spiritual life ... manifesting itself in every circumstance and relation in which humanity can be placed.¹

Down through the ages Christians have approached death in a variety of ways. Some have resigned themselves to it, others feared it and some have actually welcomed it. In any case, the manner in which one faces death reveals a great deal about one’s life. A considerable amount of scholarship has been devoted to the study of death as it was understood and experienced in the western world, with particular attention given to the deathbed piety and funeral practices of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Indeed, the late Middle Ages and the Puritan era down to the end of the seventeenth century comprised a macabre Golden Age in the deathbed piety of England. However, from the 1740s the Evangelical Revival played its part in reviving not only the centrality of a personal and intimate relationship with God but also an interest in achieving a ‘good death’. The Evangelical Revival kept the medieval and Puritan traditions of the *ars moriendi* (the art of dying) or the ‘good death’, alive, while adding new elements in keeping with evangelical spirituality. According to Puritan principles, souls were saved to glorify God; the Evangelical Revival introduced a new feature, namely, recalling to memory the enjoyment of an intimate relationship with a loving God. Recounting a faithful life was an indispensable part of a good death. It revealed that the person had been prepared to depart this life for the next: knowing that redemption from sin was through Christ, he or she was at peace and equipped for any

¹ EM 1855, pp. 251-57 (Rev Jonathan Glyde).

spiritual battle that might ensue as death approached. Death was the final chapter in the overall life story.

The dual theme of temporal and eternal concerns revealed in the obituary analysis flourished in mid-Victorian England. Evangelical activism and strong sense of personal responsibility were a good fit for Victorian virtues. The association of respectability with the middle classes and marking prosperity as a sign of God's favour were consistent with the movement of the evangelical Nonconformists towards not only acceptance but also respectable middle-class status and opportunities. Vital religion was not just a matter of a personal relationship with God, but of how it was manifested in the workplace, the political arena and the home. Evangelicalism was a religion not just of the heart but of the head. This association of religion with every part of life began to be a particular hallmark of the Victorian period at mid-century. However, in the years between 1830 and 1880 it was not just a matter of religion exceeding the boundaries of the soul. It was the world encroaching on matters normally reserved for the inner life: the obituaries reveal that deathbed piety was a place for intersection between the sacred and the secular.

Literary Conventions: authenticity in a formula

The shifting emphasis and changing content of the four-fold formula of the obituaries – early life, conversion, living out of the faith and the death narrative – reveals the movement towards a focus on its third section over time. Ironically, it is their formulaic nature that also contributes towards an understanding of evangelical Nonconformity. The obituaries were indeed formulaic and conventional in the four-fold structure and, to some extent, in the features that comprised their content. They were written and edited by people who had specific and often stated purposes in mind, including the alleviation of the fears of those left behind, provision of consolation and reassurance, inclusion of life stories as exemplars for

piety, affirmation of the tenets of evangelical religion, warnings for the wayward, stimulation for evangelism and the use of obituaries to make personal tributes. Understanding the structure, purpose and authorship of the obituaries assists in revealing their contribution to Nonconformist history.

Within the formula, the obituary both provides an accurate representation of evangelical Nonconformist death and distorts its reality. The deceased is often idealised, and death itself is tamed with poetic imagery and formulaic language based on scripture and hymns. However, the obituaries also contain objective statements of fact with vivid detail of the dying process, unvarnished remarks about both the fears and flaws of the deceased, references to everyday life and homely virtues and the inclusion of excerpts from external documents that support the authenticity of the account. The content helps to uncover the internal workings of Nonconformist culture while providing compelling portraits of individual lives and deaths in the mid-nineteenth century in England.

Different sections of the four-fold formula received more or less attention with the passing years. In the 1830s, all four sections were addressed, with marked attention given to the conversion from a life of sin and extended death narratives. The 1870s saw the third section – the living out of the faith - receiving the most words. The obituaries of that period were more thoroughly integrated with how faith intersects with the activities of this world, rather than as preparation for the next. The 1850s was a period of transition when this shift of emphasis slowly occurred. However, the four sections of the obituary formula appeared (with some exceptions due primarily to brevity) in the obituaries down to the end of the period. Moreover, the obituaries included references to conversion and the living out of faith through a variety of activities as well as content that consistently referred to salvation through Jesus while interweaving Bible verses and hymns. Thus the obituaries accurately mirrored Evangelicalism as defined by David Bebbington in his ‘quadrilateral’, which lists

conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism as its four key components.² The obituary authors never abandoned these components. Perhaps more importantly, the dying did not abandon them.

It is possible to observe changes over time in the obituary formula emphasis and content. Attention was given to success in both worldly and spiritual matters. Evidence of a more prosperous lifestyle began to appear in the 1850s and a literary style developed by the 1870s that was less formulaic but more formal and dignified with fewer dying words and less intensity of emotional expression. Heaven was increasingly presented as a continuation of aspects of this life based on work and relationship, and a more fluid transition between heaven and earth became apparent. The words used to describe death became more passive but the words used to describe the deceased were more factual and candid. Finally, the overall emphasis of the obituary shifted from the second and third sections about conversion and death to the third section about the living out of the faith. The form and content of the obituaries are crucial to understanding change and consistency in expectations and beliefs about death over time.

Some of the obituaries broke out of the formulaic pattern and content by expressing persistent anxiety, depression, doubts and eccentricities of character that were not in keeping with a happy death. Moreover, by the 1870s some new formulas were created to make a brief announcement of a death rather than a memoir or obituary. However, even the majority, which did not break away from the formula, may be considered authentic representations of Nonconformist evangelical beliefs and expectations about death and the afterlife. Written from within the community of faith, both form and content present evidence of Nonconformist theology, culture and self-expression – and how Nonconformity changed with

² D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 2-17.

the passing years. While the clinical and emotional reality of the death experience may have been distorted to some extent, the obituaries did not distort the religious and spiritual reality. The obituaries are authentic accounts contained within a formula – and even that formula reflected the key elements of evangelical Nonconformity.

Theology: broadening the boundaries

Theological considerations were central to Nonconformist hopes in connection with death because evangelical Nonconformist theology assumed the existence of the soul, eternal life, the reality of heaven and of hell and the necessity of salvation from sin in order to enter heaven. References to theology were most often found in the conversion narrative and the death narrative (the second and fourth sections of the four-fold formula) – although there were numerous references to theological systems in sections devoted to the early life and education, as in cases of people who rejected suspect beliefs in favour of evangelical orthodoxy. Theological categories that received the most attention were conversion, the atonement, sin, relationship with and reliance on Jesus, the Bible, hymns and education. Several other themes – heaven, spiritual battle and the Fatherhood of God – have strong theological implications that are considered in Chapters Six and Seven under the theme of the influence of Romanticism on doctrine and as part of the experience of dying. For this group of 1,200 Nonconformists death appears to have been inseparable from theology.

In the 1830s, hopes were largely focused on salvation from sin through the atonement, personal relationship with Jesus and release from sin and suffering into the enjoyment of a new home in heaven. The process of conversion and ultimate reliance on the merits of Christ for entry into heaven were of primary importance, as was an intensely personal and sometimes highly emotional experience of entering into relationship with God. However, the

overall obituary content of the 1870s suggests that by then the way of salvation was not quite so narrow.

Although the need for a Saviour was acknowledged and references to Jesus were frequent throughout the period, the obituary content reflects an increasing lack of doctrinal specificity with regard to the atonement. By the 1870s, a focus on atonement for sins to ensure eternal life had decreased by 50% since the 1830s, suggesting that it was not considered as essential to the obituaries, which increasingly sought to portray a peaceful transition for both the departed and those left behind, and an assurance of continued life beyond the grave. Awareness of sin, when considered in the context of death, was a somewhat different experience for the Old Dissenters (who emphasised their weakness and depravity before God) and the New Dissenters (who tended to focus on triumph over sin at the point of departure). However, attention to sin declined with the years as did references to a spiritual battle when confronting death. The obituaries reflect changes in personal merit were perceived.

Although the Bible remained central to evangelical Nonconformity, references to the Bible and hymns based on scripture generally declined. However, mention of higher education and theological training increased, sometimes dramatically. These trends reflect a movement away from the second and fourth sections of the obituary, as well as a declining emphasis on doctrine while maintaining a somewhat relational focus that still acknowledged conversion (although considerably abbreviated and calmer in tone) and Jesus. Along with this movement away from doctrine while maintaining relational elements of the faith the emphasis of the obituaries had shifted to other things such as good works, accomplishments and character traits, suggesting that faith and works were intricately woven together, leading to an end result that was a good death followed by eternal life. The obituaries still featured the four sections of the formula, but the focus shifted from the second section on conversion

and the fourth section on the death itself, to the third section: the living out of the faith. An emphasis on theological orthodoxy is more narrowly defined than an overview of a life undergoing the gradual process of sanctification. This broadening of Evangelicalism as observed in the obituaries is the first key shift that is traceable throughout the thesis.

Social Background: shift to middle-class respectability

The analysis of the obituaries shows that the social background of the Nonconformists underwent a clear and dramatic shift towards middle-class respectability between 1830 and 1880. This shift was directly relevant to changing attitudes towards death and the afterlife because it heightened the tension between the claims of heaven and earth and between the fragility of life in this world and its increasing appeal over the period in question. One of the signal results of our research is that whereas material prosperity had once been a danger signal to the believing Christian, by mid-century it was seen as a sign of God's favour. John Wesley's concern that worldly prosperity would result in a loss of faith was replaced by a perceived connection between a faithful Christian life and material success that was increasingly reflected in the obituaries. In keeping with this theme, there was an assumed connection between lack of church and chapel attendance among the poor and an inordinate attachment to this life as opposed to the next. Social class was associated with investment in earth or heaven: ironically, it was the poor who were perceived as investing too heavily in this life while middle-class prosperity proved a proper attention given to spiritual matters.

Based upon the occupations of the subjects and other factors of the obituary content, by 1880 64% of the obituary subjects were middle-class, as compared with 44% in the 1830s and 43% in the 1850s. However, the number was almost certainly higher because occupation was the most accurate way of determining class, and was frequently absent from the Methodist obituaries, including those of the numerous Methodist women who were memorialised and whose class cannot be determined. Taking the Old Dissent alone, by 1880,

95% of the Congregational and 84% of the Baptist obituaries were of middle-class subjects. The fact that this movement to the middle classes is so easy to trace in obituary content through the increasing identification of occupations suggests that the obituary authors saw improving social status as well worth recording.

The relationship between this social movement and death is two-fold. First, an increasing expectation of material prosperity led to a complex set of results that focused on this life rather than the life to come. Occupations in the obituaries were the key to social status, and the obituaries provide abundant information in this area, with the references to specific occupations increasing from 36% in 1830 to 57% in 1880. The importance of occupation cannot be overestimated. Changes in occupation were often accompanied by longer lives and the gradual loss of a pervasive sense of the uncertainty of life. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Primitive Methodist obituaries. Many of the Primitive obituaries down to 1850, if they refer to occupation at all, refer to those that were dangerous or unhealthy, with only 3% of the Primitive Methodists in the 1830s identified as middle-class; by the 1870s this percentage rose to 29%. In the 1830s 26% of the group died in their 20s; by 1880 that percentage had decreased to 10%, and the percentage dying in their 60s had increased from 5% to 21%. The Primitive Methodist age at death reflects the connection between class, occupation and the imminence of death.

Of the other three groups of Nonconformists studied, the Baptists and the Wesleyan Methodists also moved increasingly into middle-class occupations. Indeed, the fact that occupation was referred to at all by the Wesleyans, and much more frequently with the passing years is indicative of the increasing value of middle-class status because in the early years the Methodists did not include these features in their obituaries. The shifts in occupation among some of the Baptist subjects were particularly intriguing, sometimes showing a stage-by-stage movement from labourer to apprentice to small business owner to

successful merchant. The Congregational obituary sample, overwhelmingly middle-class even in the 1830s, focused almost entirely on ministers by 1880; the ministry was one of the safest occupations possible in the nineteenth century. Class related to death in that occupation related to risk: if one's expected life span was 65 instead of 35, there was more time for hopes to be fulfilled in this world.

The category of gender in the context of the obituaries yields some key insights concerning death among the evangelical Nonconformists. The tendency among all denominations to commemorate more men with the passage of time suggests that the denomination magazines sought to tell stories that encompassed both spiritual and worldly success. The resulting decrease in the number of women in the sample probably contributed over time to the increase in the age at death because of the number of young women who died in childbirth and consumption. Women may have had a particular awareness of death as they entered marriage. While age at death increased with the years, the Primitive Methodists lagged behind in this trend until the 1870s. Although the Nonconformists considered had a life expectancy that exceeded the average life span of the period, especially as they entered more middle-class occupations and the obituaries included more ministers, the relationship between social status and life span was inescapable.

The obituaries focused increasingly on the merits of the deceased both in terms of worldly success and virtues of character. Thus the movement between 1830 and 1880, and particularly in the 1870s, to the third part of the four-fold obituary formula – the living out of the faith - was seen in increased references to life accomplishments, education, good works, social participation and character traits. By focusing the attention of the reader on these areas, the obituary author was connecting success in this life with readiness for the next. More obituaries spoke with pride of characteristics of the deceased, such as responsibility, thrift, industry, generosity, kindness, self-help and a well-ordered family life, that were part of the

overlapping worlds of Christian virtue and Victorian values. The emphasis in the obituaries on human merit and success suggests that for the evangelical Nonconformists of the period this world increasingly offered potential for the fulfilment of hopes concerning the development of Christian character and opportunities for worldly prosperity. The desire to escape from earthly existence to the heavenly realms may not have been as pronounced in 1880 as it was in 1830. The movement towards middle-class respectability is the second general shift gleaned from the obituary analysis.

Denominational Variations: the Old and the New Dissent

The analysis of denominational variations introduces a new dimension to the understanding of death among the Nonconformists of the mid-nineteenth century. Although a change of emphasis in the four-fold formula, a broader theology and the movement towards middle-class respectability are traceable in all four denominations, each denomination was located at a different point on this overall Nonconformist trajectory. Some of the denominational differences relate to distinctions between the Old and the New Dissent, and some to exceptions in the observable patterns. However, there were also similarities among the four denominations considered here.

Over time, the differences between the Old Dissent and the New Dissent diminished to some extent because between 1830 and 1880 an increasing number of obituaries were dedicated to men, including many ministers, making the sample more homogeneous. The early years saw a large number of obituaries dedicated to women, especially among the Methodists. By the 1870s more men than women were being memorialised in all four denominations. With the movement towards respectability, occupations were named and described more frequently, making it easy to identify the class of the subject. The overall

movement towards middle-class respectability with an accompanying measure of prosperity is reflected in the analysis of the denominations.

However, the Primitive Methodist obituaries continued to stand out in several respects. They included a relatively large number of women as well as acknowledging the influence of women on the lives of men and noting female contributions to leadership and spiritual growth within the community. Moreover, the obituaries of Primitive Methodist men and women were virtually interchangeable: if the name and a few other details of the deceased were removed, it would sometimes have been impossible to identify gender. In this sense the Primitive Methodists tended to prioritise spiritual identity over gender identity. This was certainly not the case with the Congregationalists. However, through the years the Baptists and the Wesleyan Methodists attempted to balance the increasing number of male middle-class subjects with the prioritisation of spiritual matters.

An important area of differentiation was the continuing tendency of the Old Dissent to focus on doctrine while the New Dissent emphasised experience. In fact, a broad view points towards the Old Dissent featuring occupations, higher education and doctrine while the New Dissent highlighted experience, emotions, the Bible and last words. An even broader statement might be that the Old Dissent focused obituary content on this world and the head while the New Dissent focused on the next world and matters of heart religion. This distinction affirms the tension that the evangelical Nonconformists experienced between the claims of this world and the next world that is evident in the overall obituary sample.

References to character traits among the Congregationalists remained consistently low, even by the 1870s. The reasons for this may include the fact that the Congregational obituaries became shorter by the end of the period, and the number of ministers increased, making it more likely that the author would focus on pastoral skills and accomplishments.

The more dignified and formal tone of the obituaries may also have been a factor. References to accomplishments among the Primitive Methodists also remained minimal over time when compared with the other denominations. However, the percentage increase over time from 0% to 7% is significant.

The four denominations also shared similarities in their obituaries. Jesus was consistently referred to throughout the period and by all denominations. It is clear that death was a community experience: there is no sense of isolation in the death narratives. A general tone of hopeful anticipation is present. References to good works, to character traits and to accomplishments increased, to varying extents and sometimes dramatically, between 1830 and 1870. Thus, despite the consistent community presence, there was an increase in focus on the individual. This movement also reflected a shift towards outward manifestations of evangelical belief in contributions to charities and community service – a sort of secularised activism. These testimonies of faith were increasingly representative of a transformed Evangelicalism that was focused on humanity as well as God, on service as well as relationship. The tension between this world and the next that was part of what it meant to be evangelical was still present, but it lessened as the weight of the obituaries settled in the third part of the four-fold formula: the living out of the faith. In this settling process, the Congregationalists were ahead of the curve in terms of their engagement with secular society and the integration of faith and works, the Wesleyan Methodists and the Baptists were on the curve moving towards middle-class respectability and the Primitive Methodists were behind the curve but catching up by the 1870s. The focus on Jesus and hope regarding both this life and the life to come reflected broad features of Evangelicalism that were shared by all four denominations as they moved towards social respectability.

The Romantic Spirit: the infinite and the finite

Romanticism pervaded nineteenth-century western culture so completely that the Nonconformists would inevitably experience its effects. Its influence is most explicitly apparent in the obituary sample from the 1850s although by the 1870s the Romantic influence may have been greater but less specific – trickling down into the culture to the point where it influenced theology, doctrine and worldview. It is not possible to identify a direct influence of Romanticism in the obituaries of the 1830s, although there are certain parallels and distinctions between Romanticism and Nonconformity related to death when considering the period as a whole.

The Nonconformist and the Romantic spirits were non-materialist and engaged with the unseen world. Death and life beyond the material world were central preoccupations for both the Romantics and the evangelical Nonconformists – yet the two groups often reached different conclusions. Both experienced death as a release from a burden that was connected in some way to life in this world. For the Romantics – who revered youth – the burden was the world and age and freedom from both could come with death. The Nonconformists – who revered age – felt the burden of sin and release came through the atonement and departure from the body. Both recognised the inevitable suffering and the fragility of life: for the Nonconformists this was balanced by a determination to submit to the will of God.

Part of the Romantic spirit was a conviction that life in this world was limited and could not fulfil all of one's hopes. However, for the Romantics the mystery of death could be an end in itself whereas the Nonconformists saw death as a passage to eternal life. Death was not, in itself, a good thing. On the contrary, the Nonconformist obituaries do not shy away from the spiritual and physical battle involved in confronting the last enemy, as opposed to the dream-like passage to an uncertain destination often pictured by the Romantic poets. In

addition, for the Nonconformists the destination was not uncertain: the attitude was one of happy anticipation of arriving in heaven where the promises of the Bible would be fulfilled. There was a shared vision of this world in that it had limited potential, but the Romantics and the Nonconformists diverged in the nature of their hopes concerning a world beyond death.

Another area of divergence had to do with the Nonconformists' mission in this world. They had a strong sense of service to the community and to fulfilling the will of God. Their attitude to life was orderly and dutiful; it might be said that their attitude towards death was the same. The obituary formula and purpose is an example of how the deathbed was a scene of fulfilling one's obligations one last time. It was important to die well. The Romantic spirit, being intensely subjective to the point of self-absorption, was not consistent with Nonconformity, particularly at the point of death.

During the 1850s, the effect of Romanticism on expectations concerning death was expressed in the style of the obituaries, which became elaborate, excessively dramatic and sentimental. Increased references to Romantic poetry to enhance the obituary content indicated that the obituary authors expected their readership to be familiar with this literature regardless of direct attribution of authorship, and that they considered such poetry to be helpful for a consideration of the difficult subject of death. It is clear that the Romantic spirit was not only integrated with Nonconformist culture but may have been particularly relevant at the deathbed.

The influence of the subjectivity of Romanticism and its emphasis on individual experience resonated with some aspects of Evangelicalism and affected the Protestant perception of heaven, making it a place centred in human relationship and endeavour: a continuation of life. This shift was partly but not entirely mirrored in the evangelical Nonconformist obituaries, which continued to find Jesus at the centre of the subjects'

heavenly expectations even as they looked forward to reunions with loved ones. It is possible to trace the integration of the spirit of Romanticism in other aspects of Nonconformist doctrine concerning death in the 1870s. This integration had to do in part with the relationship between this world and the next. The earlier years of Evangelicalism saw a starker contrast between earth and heaven, and the transition from one to the other through death as truly daunting – a genuine battleground. This transition became gentler with the passing years, partly because this world held more of heaven. The natural creation was miraculous, many types of experience could lead to God and all of daily life was infused with the divine. The spiritual poverty, prospect of eternal punishment and desperate need for salvation through the crucifixion felt by the early Nonconformists was replaced to some extent with an emphasis on the Incarnate Jesus and the Fatherhood of God. This change was consistent with the Romantic emphasis on the immanence of God, the holiness of nature and the daily commonplaces of life and the conviction that experience led to truth. While the Romantic spirit displayed an affinity with the evangelical Nonconformist belief in the unseen and anticipation of continued life after death, it also reflected the movement towards a more respectable and theologically broad outlook.

Last Words: the narrative of death

While the authors and editors of the obituaries focused the attention of the reader on the four-fold life and death story of the deceased with an increasing emphasis in the 1870s on the broad spectrum of life, the last words of the dying directed that attention to the next world. These last words, which were at times quoted extensively and cover weeks of comments and conversation prior to the death, provide the best insight into the dying person's experience of death. There was a sharp distinction between the topics referred to by the dying and those that seem to have been entirely absent from their thoughts as death approached. The themes addressed by the dying in their last words across the period from 1830 down to

1880 made it clear that the gaze of the dying was consistently focused on the life to come. They spoke of acceptance of death and a readiness to depart, a sense of completion, separation from this world and longing for the next, intimate relationship with Jesus, spiritual battle, a new home in heaven with loved ones and experiences of suffering and patience. Attention to these themes over time was not as consistent in the topics addressed by the obituary observers and recorders, who tended to be more influenced by changes in expectations concerning death. These areas of change related to such topics as accomplishments, good works, virtuous character, occupations, social status, theology and education. While substantial transformation over time is clearly observed in the overall obituary content, the words of the dying reflect a substantially consistent experience. The fourth part of the formula – the death narrative – provides insight into a very private experience that in the context of the nineteenth-century evangelical Nonconformist culture was a community experience. The obituaries give a glimpse into what it was like to die.

The dying Nonconformists focused on the unseen both in terms of internal experiences and the anticipation of the life to come. They did not hesitate to speak of their imminent deaths and turned their attention from the world with which they had been so familiar to the world they were just beginning to glimpse. Nor did they minimise their physical suffering, but spoke of it in reference to the need for patience and perseverance. Indeed, details of the illness that led to death were an important component in evaluating a good death because certain physical symptoms could produce depression or prevent a person from assuring loved ones of his or her hope in Christ. The dying expressed gratitude for the cross and longing for a deeper relationship with the Saviour, using terms of endearment such as ‘precious’, ‘dear’ and ‘sweet’. Heaven and reunion with loved ones were eagerly anticipated. Nonetheless, a reluctance to die crept in with the passing years. The exception to this shift was the consistent experience of young mothers who frequently expressed a sense of

being pulled in two directions: towards their children and towards heaven. Overall, however, while the process of dying was not welcomed, death was acknowledged as the necessary door to eternal life.

Not only did the dying not discuss their social standing, good works, education, accomplishments or character – they did not refer to these in any context except to express gratitude for the goodness of those who waited at the bedside. When the dying mentioned work it was usually in a spiritual context as a precursor to their continuing employment in heaven. Occasionally they referred with slight regret to things they had left undone in this world. Expressions of intense emotion decreased, which was in keeping with a more dignified and respectable Nonconformity. However, calm, suffering and patience were understandably directly connected to the process of death and to each other, and were consistently evident in the obituaries. An attitude of hopefulness pervaded the dying words, and that hope was in the cross of Christ.

When considering the last words and experience of the dying person, the spiritual identity and eternal nature of the dying person were of consequence as compared with identity in the world; the theology of the dying, as far as it can be understood, was simple and centred on Jesus and eternal life. Their last words connected with an earlier tradition of a good death that focused on the merits of the Redeemer, the community waiting at the deathbed and the wonders of the next world, while the comments of the observers and recorders of the death reflected a Nonconformist culture that was becoming more privatised and individualised. Yet everyone at the deathbed reflected the Nonconformist experience of death from 1830 down to 1880. The living and the dying had different work to do. Those left behind had a different experience from those on the threshold of eternity, and different expectations concerning death and the afterlife. Both the consistency of the dying person's experience and the changes reflected in the account provided by the observers and recorders

of the death, although they do not provide a comprehensive picture of death in nineteenth-century England, contribute towards an understanding of evangelical Nonconformist beliefs and expectations concerning death.

The relative experiences of the dying person and the observer shed light on the question of whether there was continuity in evangelical Nonconformist deathbed experience and piety with that of previous centuries. The place of Evangelicalism on the larger historical trajectory is a matter of importance for this study because it relates directly to how the evangelical death narratives were influenced and formed. David Bebbington achieves a balance in stating that Evangelicalism began with the Evangelical Revival and was a new phenomenon, but that it cannot be considered as independent of the larger cultural setting, particularly noting the influences of the Enlightenment and Romanticism.³ Many scholars affirm that the Evangelical Revival had aspects both of historical continuity and features that were new. This view is reflected in the present study on death. The evangelical Nonconformist obituaries show a level of personal piety, emotional intensity, clarity of thought and spiritual vision that reflect the uniqueness of the Evangelical Revival. They also indicate that the evangelical Nonconformists were by no means isolated from the larger cultural context. Medieval, Puritan, Enlightenment, Romantic and Victorian elements were woven into their life and death stories.

The Evangelical Revival renewed an ancient faith with its emphasis on personal relationship with God, the centrality of the Bible, the necessity of conversion and the living out of the faith in the world. Nonetheless, the experiences of the dying in the mid-nineteenth century support continuity with the good death of previous centuries. The evangelical Nonconformists knew the *ars moriendi* and lived it out in their last moments. While accounts

³ D. W. Bebbington, in M. A. G. Haykin and K. J. Stewart, eds., *The Advent of Evangelicalism: exploring historical continuities* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), pp. 417-432.

of death written by those who stood by the deathbed indicate a multiplicity of changes that occurred in Nonconformity between 1830 and 1880, there was a sense in which little had changed for the person who actually stood on the threshold of death and sought to prepare to depart this world in the midst of suffering and with patience.

Conclusion

Scholarship on the general theme of tension between the temporal and the eternal among Evangelicals in nineteenth-century England is well confirmed by our research. Rosman,⁴ Binfield,⁵ Johnson,⁶ Bebbington,⁷ Brown,⁸ Bradley⁹ and others consider Evangelicalism's strong presence in a world that was a spiritual battleground yet one that could be claimed for God. Bradley explains it well by associating the evangelical 'call to seriousness' as a sense of personal responsibility motivated by personal relationship with Christ. All these are discerning investigations into the range of evangelical activities and the intersection of internal belief with its outward working that set the stage for a consideration of how life came to a close. The resulting tension between fixing one's hopes on this world or on the next that was brought to a head at the deathbed touched all of the themes considered in this study.

The use of obituaries published in the denominational magazines of the evangelical Nonconformists to inform an understanding of death is a source of debate because they were written with an agenda for a particular audience. While some scholars such as Brown¹⁰ and

⁴ D. Rosman, *Evangelicalism and Culture* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 61-62.

⁵ C. Binfield, *So Down to Prayers: Studies in English Nonconformity, 1780-1920* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1977), pp. 19-21.

⁶ M. D. Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent, 1850-1918* (New York: Garland Publishing), pp. 51-52.

⁷ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 2-17.

⁸ C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: understanding secularisation, 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 35-37.

⁹ I. Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: the evangelical impact on the Victorians* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1976), p. 18, 19, 29-30.

¹⁰ K. D. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry, 1800-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 18.

Jalland¹¹ assume a lack of authenticity that is sufficient to detract from their usefulness, others such as Wilson¹², Werner,¹³ Rack¹⁴ and Bebbington¹⁵ feel that the value of the obituaries outweighs the obvious formulaic content, and that they include both factual information and authentic representations of Nonconformity. The present study confirms that while the obituaries do not provide a comprehensive account of every aspect of death in the mid-nineteenth century, they are grounded in substantial reportage and are by no means entirely happy, pain-free narratives of illness and death. They are not only authentic representations of evangelical Nonconformity providing a glimpse into their community of faith, but are invaluable for analysing beliefs about death as they changed over time. Indeed, it might be said that their formulaic content contributes as much to an understanding of Nonconformity as to an understanding of death.

Scholarship in the history of Nonconformity has paid particular attention to social status and social mobility. Obelkevich correctly concludes that the dramatic shift among the Wesleyan Methodists between 1825 and 1875 resulted in ownership of their middle-class identity and their concern for respectability to the point of abandoning some aspects of their early spirituality based in revivalism.¹⁶ Watts' astute observations on the Nonconformist 'obsession with respectability' and the increasing incompatibility between the labouring classes and Nonconformity indicate the specifically class-conscious motivation that drew the Nonconformists irresistibly towards a middle-class lifestyle in Victorian England.¹⁷ The very

¹¹ P. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 19-25.

¹² L. Wilson, *Constrained by Zeal: female spirituality amongst Nonconformists 1825-1875* Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000).

¹³ J. S. Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: its background and early history* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 153-54.

¹⁴ Rack, 'Evangelical Endings: death-beds in evangelical biography', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 74 (1992), 39-56.

¹⁵ Bebbington, 'Deathbed Piety of Evangelical Nonconformists in the Nineteenth Century,' (unpublished, 2011).

¹⁶ J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey, 1825-1875* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 219.

¹⁷ M. R. Watts, *The Dissenters: the expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 595.

notion of personal responsibility that was integral to Evangelicalism would inevitably lead to self-betterment on the secular plane. The important contributions made by Brown¹⁸ and Johnson¹⁹ to understanding the effect of education and the professionalisation of the Nonconformist ministry are attested to in the obituaries, and the analysis of those references in the present study shows how these dimensions of social movement could affect perspectives on death. The current understanding of the social mobility of the Nonconformists, and the continuing tension and eventual blurring between the spiritual and secular that was the result is deepened by the obituary analysis comprised in our research.

The obituary analysis reveals a close relationship between the Romantic spirit and evangelical Nonconformist theology as it changed in the years between 1830 and 1880. Hopkins calls Nonconformist ministers of the 1870s and 1880s such as R. W. Dale and C. H. Spurgeon ‘Nonconformity’s Romantic Generation’ because they wrestled with the liberalising theological influence of the Romantic spirit.²⁰ Mark Johnson deals effectively with the influence of Dale and others on broadening evangelical Nonconformist beliefs.²¹ Our research makes a novel contribution to proving the escalating influence of the Romantic spirit on Nonconformity down to the last decades of the nineteenth century, particularly in terms of Nonconformist self-expression of the 1850s and doctrine of the 1870s. It has been noted that Rowell refers to a shift in the 1860s and 1870s from salvation to ‘self-realisation’ and from ‘soul-making’ to ‘self-making’.²² This movement as the nineteenth century progressed presents an intriguing contrast to Mack’s description of the Methodist view of ‘agency’ in the

¹⁸ Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry*, pp. 56-123.

¹⁹D. A. Johnson, *The Changing Shape of English Nonconformity, 1825-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Part I: ‘Factories of Preachers and Pastors’: The Nonconformist Engagement with Theological Education.

²⁰ M. Hopkins, *Nonconformity’s Romantic Generation: evangelical and liberal theologies in Victorian England* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), pp. 1-5.

²¹ Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent, 1850-1918*.

²² G. Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: a study of the nineteenth century theological controversies concerning eternal punishment and the future life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 15.

late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when, she notes, repentance and sacrifice were placed above traditional views of agency that incorporate power, authority and self-worth.²³ What is clear is that a theological broadening was taking place over time and this is borne out in our research.

Historical assessments of the Nonconformist denominations represented here are enhanced by the conclusions of the present study. Wesleyan Methodism was a body that underwent a transformation from a revivalist movement to a respectable, middle-class body that was integrated with the larger culture. The Baptists exhibited a balance of advancement in affairs of the world with a general conservatism that was not only theological but also temperamental. The Congregationalists are portrayed as leaders in politics, ministry and industry as well as representing the cutting edge of theological change. Binfield's reference to the Congregationalist as the average non-intellectual man conveys a great deal about the integration of Congregationalism with the broader society. He portrays Nonconformity through a series of portraits of prominent figures.²⁴ One of the attractive aspects of the obituaries is that many of them present a vivid details of evangelical Nonconformist lives in a particular denominations and regions over a period of years. They are time capsules that confirm the value of biography. Werner's study of the Primitive Methodists presents an accurate explanation of why many of the exceptions in the denominational obituary analysis apply to them.²⁵ Unlike the rest of the sample, a considerable percentage were from the labouring classes (as far as class can be determined from the obituary content) and were exposed to disease and danger resulting from poverty and occupation. Their circumstantial

²³ Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment*, pp. 9-15.

²⁴ Binfield, *So Down to Prayers*, p. 21.

²⁵ Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion*, pp. 153-54.

vulnerabilities were mirrored in a willingness to be emotionally vulnerable in the context of their faith.

The Christian idea of a good death – one that featured reliance on Jesus as Saviour and that showed preparedness for the life to come and for any spiritual battle that might ensue when on the threshold of death and that assumed that death would not take place in isolation – is brought vividly to life in the work of Ariès,²⁶ Duffy²⁷ and Houlbrooke. Of particular help in accessing continuity of the good death with Puritan deathbed piety is Houlbrooke.²⁸ Evangelicalism introduced some new features to the good death, with a focus on conversion, sanctification and an intimate relationship with Jesus. Hindmarsh considers the evangelical death narrative as expressing continuity with previous centuries and as a means for understanding evangelical conversion.²⁹ Mack places high value on the death experiences of the eighteenth century as revealing the repentance and sacrifice central to Nonconformist culture.³⁰ Wilson considers women's encounters with death as a way of better understanding their lives, especially in terms of conversion, repentance, forgiveness and personal piety.³¹ Rack focuses on deathbeds as a window into Methodist piety.³² Bebbington discusses the heart of evangelical Nonconformist faith when tested and strengthened by the approach of death.³³ These scholars set the stage for continued research into the good death and our research confirms their findings.

²⁶ P. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), pp. 105-115.

²⁷ E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars, traditional religion in England 1400-1580* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 310-27.

²⁸ R. Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England 1480-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 150-60.

²⁹ Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, pp. 256-59.

³⁰ Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment*, pp. 9-15.

³¹ Wilson, *Constrained by Zeal*, pp. 20-33.

³² Rack, 'Evangelical Endings: death-beds in evangelical biography', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 74 (1992), pp. 39-56.

³³ Bebbington, 'Deathbed Piety of Evangelical Nonconformists in the Nineteenth Century,' (unpublished, 2011).

This study investigates six of the factors that helped to shape beliefs and expectations about death among the evangelical Nonconformists of mid-nineteenth century in England: literary conventions, social background, theology, denominational variations, Romanticism and the last words and experiences of the dying. The study is distinctive in four respects. First, it uses a large sample of 1,200 obituaries, making it possible to observe trends and themes using a wide variety of statistical categories. Second, it evaluates the literary construct of the obituaries as a four-fold formula consisting of early life, conversion, the living out of the faith and the death narrative as a tool for understanding them as authentic windows into evangelical Nonconformist experience. Third, it traces two movements that inform the changing Nonconformist experience of death: the social shift towards middle-class respectability and the intellectual shift towards a broader Evangelicalism. Finally, it considers how the varying experiences of the dying person and the observers and recorders of the death provide different perspectives. These four distinctive features inform the primary goal of the study, which is to determine areas of change and consistency in evangelical Nonconformist expectations about death and the afterlife between 1830 and 1880, with particular emphasis on observing where Nonconformists were looking for the fulfilment of their hopes over a period of fifty years: to this world or the next.

It has been noted that the obituaries chosen for analysis were written from within the community of faith. However, the understanding of death that emerges from that community suggests that the evangelical Nonconformists did not seek deliberate separation from the world, even if that had been possible. While the last words of the dying draw the reader back to eternal matters, the process of dying, during which all worldly things were to be intentionally put aside, was increasingly presented in the obituaries in such a way that they drew the attention of the reader to human endeavour. The trends that can be observed from their obituaries show an increasing integration not simply with the culture of Victorian

England, but with secular interests in the face of death. The shift of emphasis that occurred between 1830 and 1880 from looking towards the next life to this life suggests that, for good or ill, the conflict was moving towards resolution. Activity was always an evangelical theme but a new emphasis on personal accomplishments, on qualities of character and on work in general as opposed to activity related to personal faith were obituary emphases of the second half of the nineteenth century and particularly the 1870s. Yet the final word in the story of evangelical Nonconformist death in the mid-nineteenth century is not unequivocal. The obituaries also reveal a core of experience that is not only consistent with evangelical Nonconformity but is as old and otherworldly as the *ars moriendi*.

The memoirs and obituaries analysed here exhibit a sense of tension, a balancing of attention between the concerns of this world and the next that became increasingly precarious for Nonconformists between 1830 and 1880. However, the draw towards a middle-class cultural identity and the broadening of beliefs was held within a framework offered by the obituaries that remained true to the heart of Evangelicalism. The study of evangelical Nonconformist death shows how very much a part of Victorian culture Nonconformists were, and the two features that were sometimes complementary and sometimes in conflict: integration with a powerful and successful society, and identity as a people set apart for a higher purpose. The observers of the death and the obituary authors considered many aspects of death that reflected a changing Nonconformity and larger culture with the passing of the years. However, the last words of the dying pointed to a timeless experience. The observers were beginning to look to this world for the fulfilment of hopes, but the eyes of the dying were fixed on the next world. By 1880 the Nonconformists were no longer pilgrims in a land not their own as far as being respectable middle-class English men and women was concerned, but they would always be pilgrims when faced with life beyond the grave.

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Unpublished Works

D. W. Bebbington, 'The Deathbed Piety of Evangelical Nonconformists in the Nineteenth Century' (unpublished, 2011).

APPENDIX A: OCCUPATIONS BY DENOMINATION³⁴

Primitive Methodists

1830s	1850s	1870s
<u>Labouring Classes</u> Coach maker (1) Coal miner (1) Ferryman/Innkeeper (1) Framework knitter (1) Journeyman (1) Miller (1) Posting bills (1) Servant (1)	<u>Labouring Classes</u> Agricultural Labourer (4) Chimney Sweep (1) Coal miner (1) Iron worker (1) Journeyman (1) Mill worker (1) Servant (1)	<u>Labouring Classes</u> Agricultural Labourer (3) Builder (3) Mining overman (1) Railway worker (1) Ship's carpenter (1)
<u>Middle Classes</u> Army/Navy (3) Farmer (2) Shopkeeper (1)	<u>Middle Classes</u> Businessman (1) Farmer (1) Farm Bailiff (1)	<u>Middle Classes</u> Businessman (5) Farmer (1) Governor of College (1) Minister (5) Pattern Designer (1) Manufacturing - Iron (2) Trade - Coal (2)

Congregationalists

1830s	1850s	1870s
<u>Middle Classes</u> Businessman (4) Composer & Writer (1) Governor of Prison (1) Minister (58) Solicitor (1) Surgeon (1) Writer & Editor (1)	<u>Middle Classes</u> Army/Navy (2) Attorney & Solicitor (1) Businessman (11) Draper (1) Engineer (1) Minister (45) Politician (1) Publisher (1) Shopkeeper (1) Teacher (3) Trade – Iron, Leather (2) Writer (1)	<u>Middle Classes</u> Businessman (4) Minister (86) Physician (1) Professor (3) Publisher (1)

³⁴ Note: Women are not included because women from this sample – with a few exceptions - were not occupied outside the home. There are no labouring-class Congregationalists in the sample. 'Businessman' indicates that the subject was engaged in a business that was clearly middle-class from the context of the obituary but unspecified. Finally, while members of the Royal Navy or others engaged in military service could have come from any social background (indeed, this was a favoured choice of many sons from upper-class families) the placement of military personnel in the middle-class category is due to the fact that these individuals from the sample usually emerged from the labouring classes or middle classes and advanced through the ranks to become officers. By the end of their lives their occupational history and overall obituary content indicated middle-class status.

Baptists

1830s

Labouring Classes

Builder (1)
Dress maker (1)
Ironmonger (1)
Worsted maker (1)

Middle Classes

Businessman (2)
Merchant (2)
Minister (37)
Musician (1)
Politician (1)
Printer (1)
Trade (1)

1850s

Labouring Classes

Middle Classes

Businessman (7)
Editor (1)
Farmer (2)
Merchant (2)
Minister (22)
Printer (1)
Surgeon (1)
Trade (1)
Banker (1)

1870s

Labouring Classes

Middle Classes

Army/Navy (2)
Businessman (12)
Composer (1)
Farmer (1)
lawyer (1)
Minister (46)
Politician (1)
Student (1)
Teacher (2)

Wesleyan Methodists

1830s

Labouring Classes

Fishery worker (1)
Servant (1)

Middle Classes

Businessman (2)
Farmer (2)
General Assayer (1)
Merchant (1)
Minister (1)
Printer (1)

1850s

Labouring Classes

Miller (1)
Shop worker (1)
Stonemason (1)

Middle Classes

Businessman (4)
Farmer (2)
Merchant (1)
Minister (3)
Solicitor (1)

1870s

Labouring Classes

Baker (1)
Coal miner (1)
Ferryman (1)

Middle Classes

Businessman (14)
Chemist & Druggist (1)
Farmer (5)
Lawyer (1)
Minister (11)
School principal (1)
Teacher (2)
Trade – iron (1)

APPENDIX B

Appendix B: Evangelical Nonconformist attitudes towards death based on a sample of 1200 obituaries from 1830 down to 1880¹

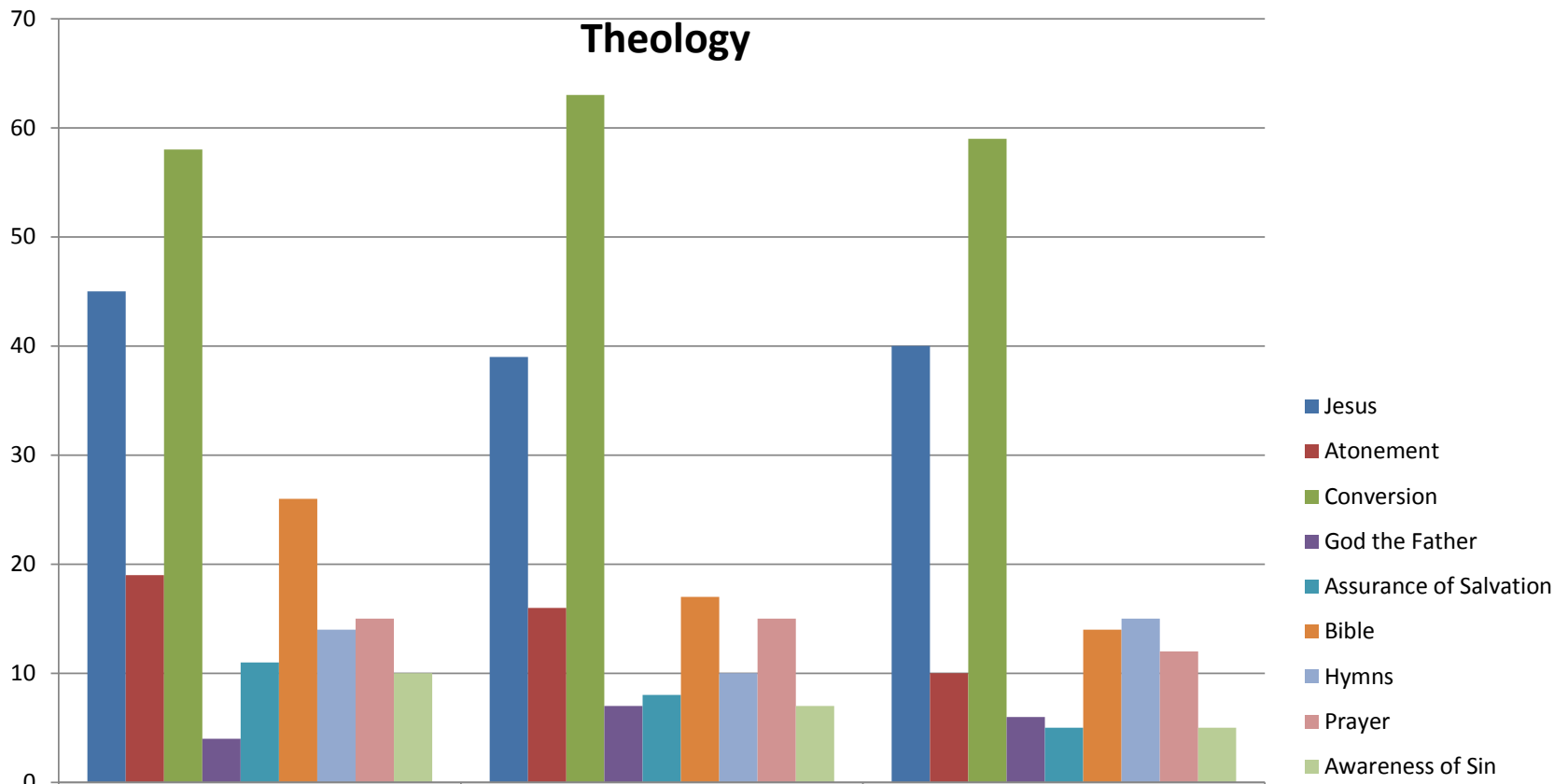
Statistics have been compiled for obituaries from both the Nonconformist sample as a whole (Appendix B-1-6) and for each of the four denominations considered: Primitive Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists and Wesleyan Methodists (Appendix B-7-30). Thirty-nine categories of reference are explored in each of three periods: the 1830s, 1850s and 1870s. The charts are organised according to five general areas. Although there is some overlap (for example, spiritual battle is relevant to both Theology and Experience), the categories are grouped as follows. *Theology* covers Jesus, the atonement, conversion, God the Father, assurance of salvation, Bible references, hymn references, prayer and awareness of sin. *Lifestyle and Social Mobility* encompasses good works (service to the community or charitable giving), character traits (personality descriptions focused on virtues of character), accomplishments (primarily secular achievements but can also include accomplishments related to chapel life or the ministry), social involvement (participation in Christian or secular societies), religious heritage (specifically related to Nonconformist ancestry), education, funerals and cemeteries. *Social Background* covers gender, occupation and class. A separate chart is allocated to *Age at Death*. Categories related to *Experience* include last words, physical suffering, patience, depression, delirium, joy, peace, doubt, spiritual battle and the purposes of the obituaries. The subject of physical death itself is also included under *Experience* and encompasses the cause of death, medical advice and hospitals.

The categories were chosen in order to obtain as comprehensive a picture of evangelical Nonconformist death as possible from the obituary content and only explicit references were counted as part of the statistics. Certain categories were not chosen for statistics because their appearance was very infrequent (such as explicit references to entire sanctification), they are cumulative themes based on several categories (such as formulaic phrasing), they appear in unspecified forms such as ‘a divine manifestation’ (such as the Holy Spirit) or because they represent a general tone (such as hope - in many cases the hope is in something such as Christ). The goal was to observe the intersection at the deathbed of the obituary subject’s internal experience of faith with his or her life in this world, and to determine to what extent expectations concerning death and the afterlife had changed or remained the same with the passing years. The large sample and the range of categories made it possible to observe consistency and shifts over time in matters concerning evangelical Nonconformist death because the larger the sample the proportion of exceptional cases goes down and statistical distortions are diminished.

The fifty years from 1830 down to 1880 were chosen because it was a short enough period of time to be manageable for analysis but long enough to indicate genuine consistency or change with regard to Nonconformist death. Moreover, it allowed for a comparison of three points of statistical analysis within the fifty years: the 1830s when the evangelical Nonconformists were emerging from the heights of evangelical expansion; the 1850s when they were solidifying their place in Victorian society; and the 1870s, when they were experiencing the results of decades of questioning and change on theological and cultural fronts.

¹ For a further explanation of the method used in compiling the statistics, please see pp. 34-38 of the thesis.

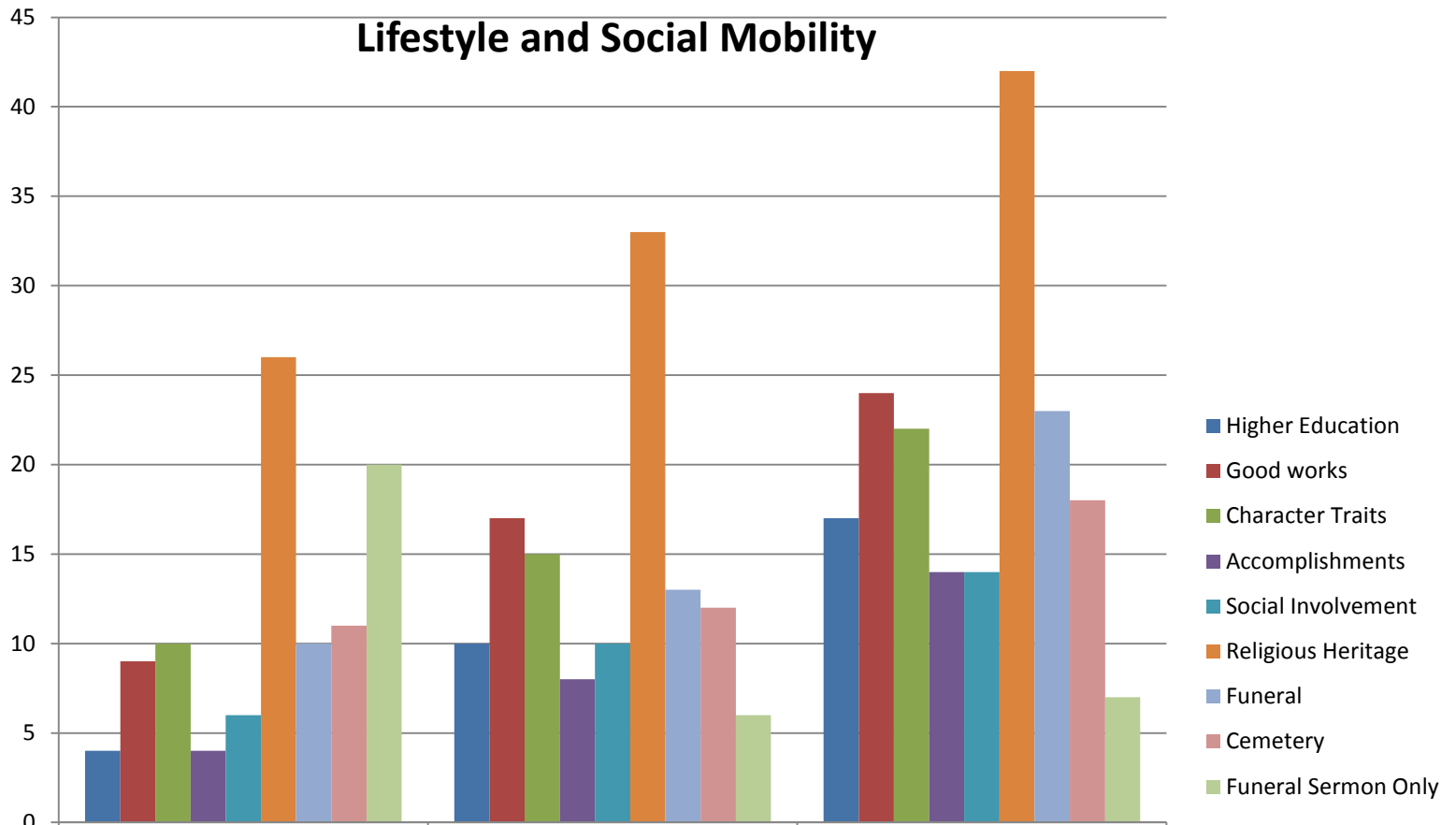
Percentages of Nonconformist Sample of 1,200



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Jesus	45	39	40
Atonement	19	16	10
Conversion	58	63	59
God the Father	4	7	6
Assurance of Salvation	11	8	5
Bible	26	17	14
Hymns	14	10	15
Prayer	15	15	12
Awareness of Sin	10	7	5

Lifestyle and Social Mobility

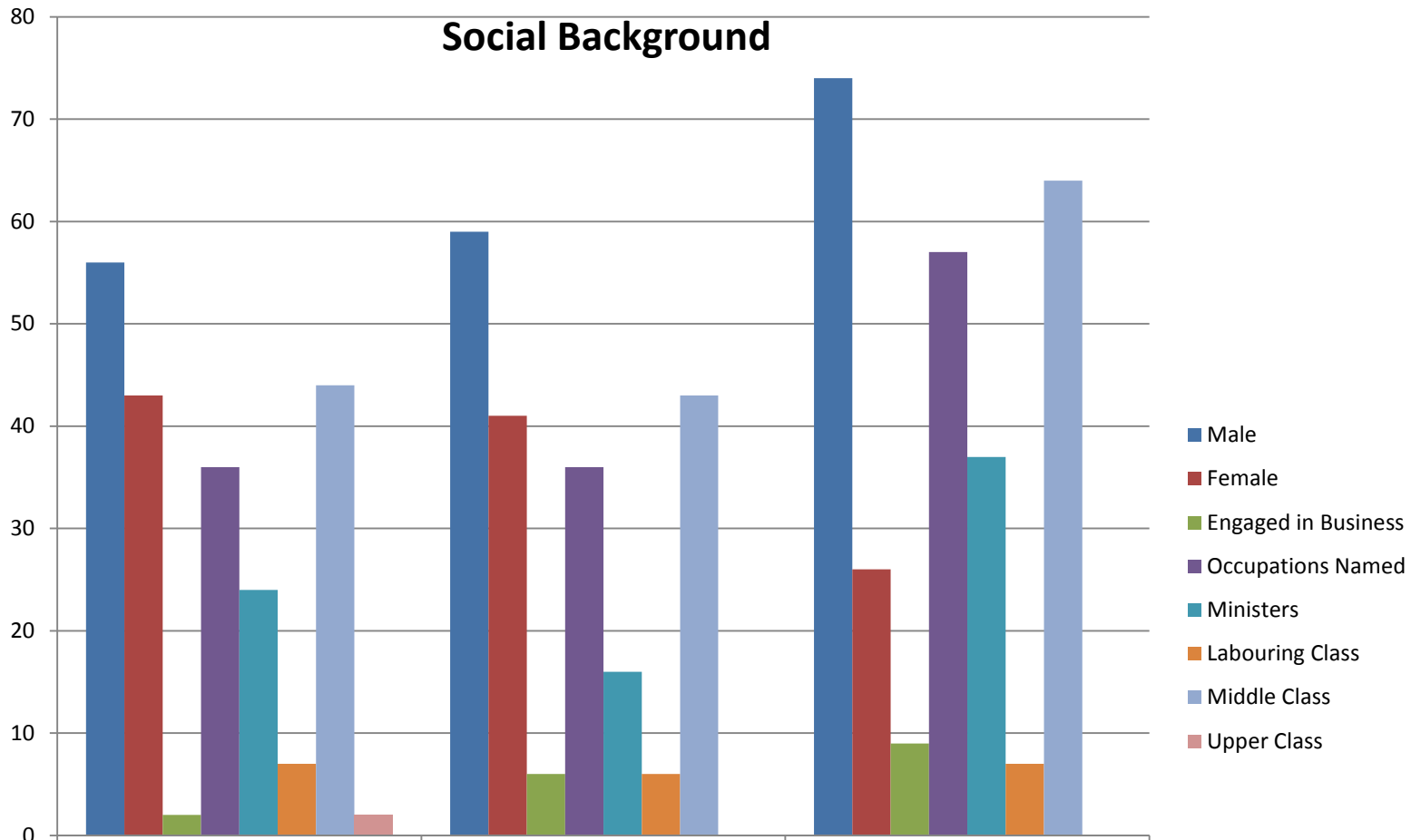
Percentages of Nonconformist Sample of 1,200



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Higher Education	4	10	17
Good works	9	17	24
Character Traits	10	15	22
Accomplishments	4	8	14
Social Involvement	6	10	14
Religious Heritage	26	33	42
Funeral	10	13	23
Cemetery	11	12	18
Funeral Sermon Only	20	6	7

Percentages of Nonconformist Sample of 1,200

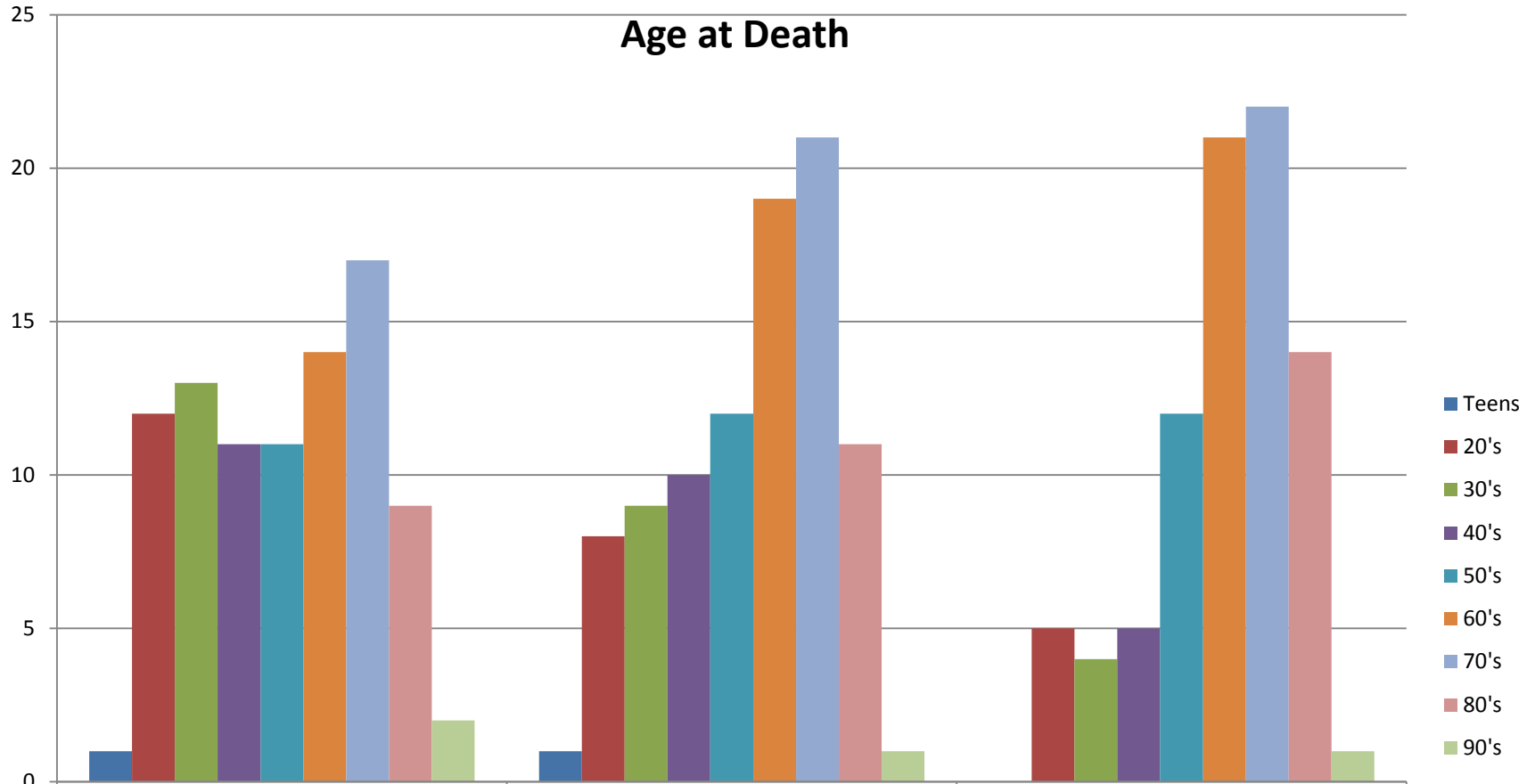
Social Background



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Male	56	59	74
Female	43	41	26
Engaged in Business	2	6	9
Occupations Named	36	36	57
Ministers	24	16	37
Labouring Class	7	6	7
Middle Class	44	43	64
Upper Class	2	0	0

Age at Death

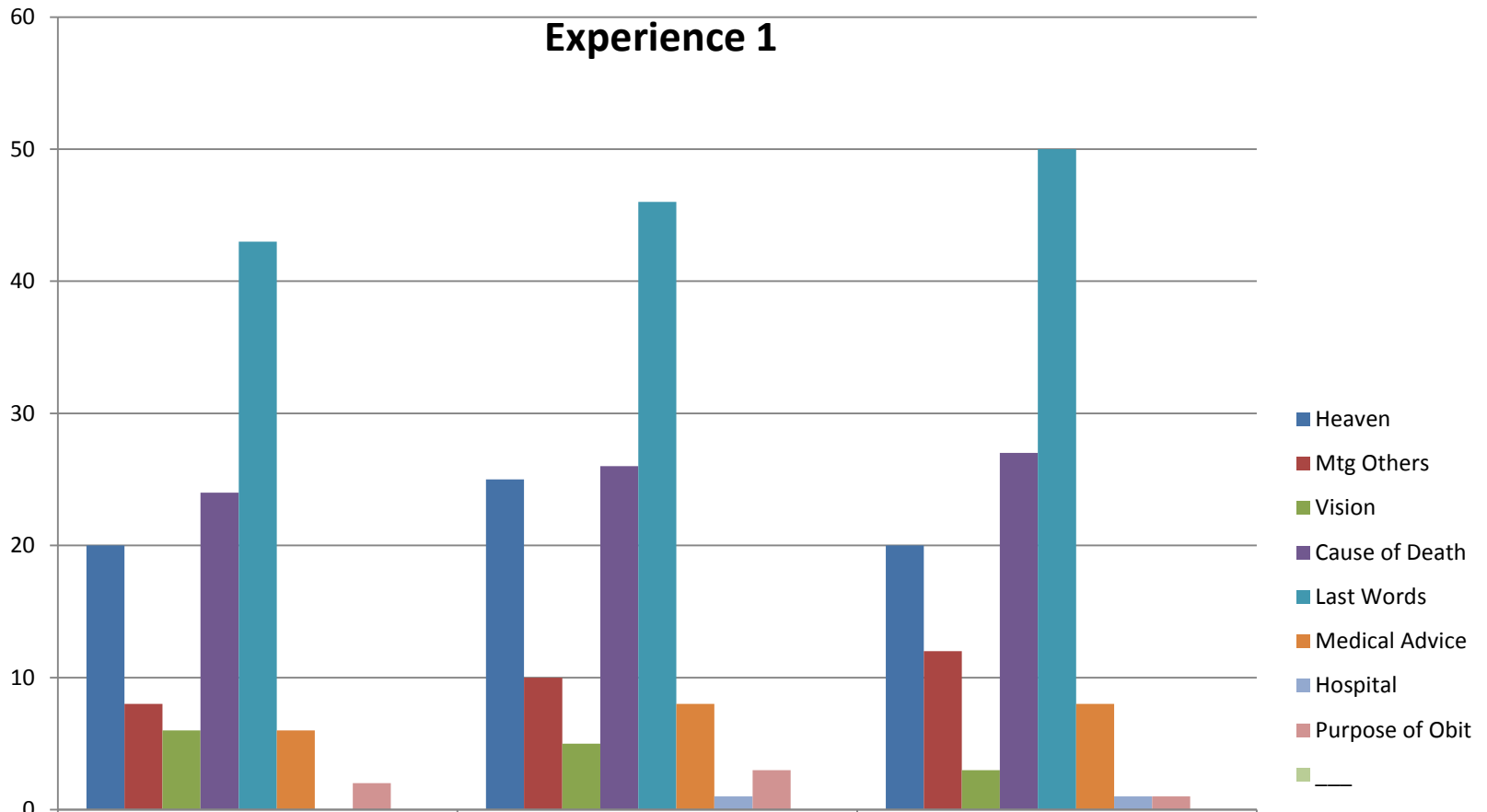
Percentages of Nonconformist Sample of 1,200



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Teens	1	1	0
20's	12	8	5
30's	13	9	4
40's	11	10	5
50's	11	12	12
60's	14	19	21
70's	17	21	22
80's	9	11	14
90's	2	1	1

Experience 1

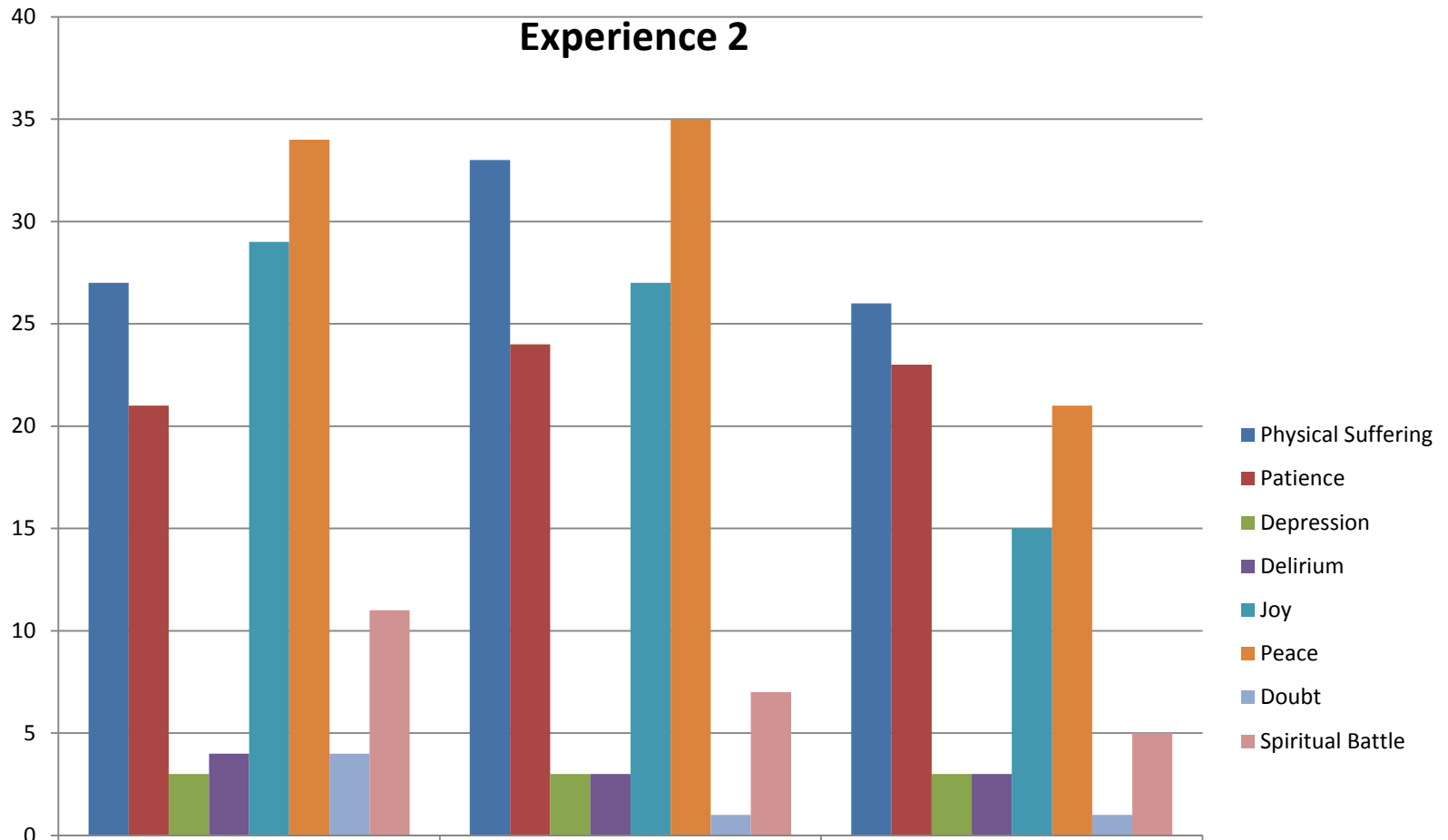
Percentages of Nonconformist Sample of 1,200



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Heaven	20	25	20
Mtg Others	8	10	12
Vision	6	5	3
Cause of Death	24	26	27
Last Words	43	46	50
Medical Advice	6	8	8
Hospital	0	1	1
Purpose of Obit	2	3	1
—			

Experience 2

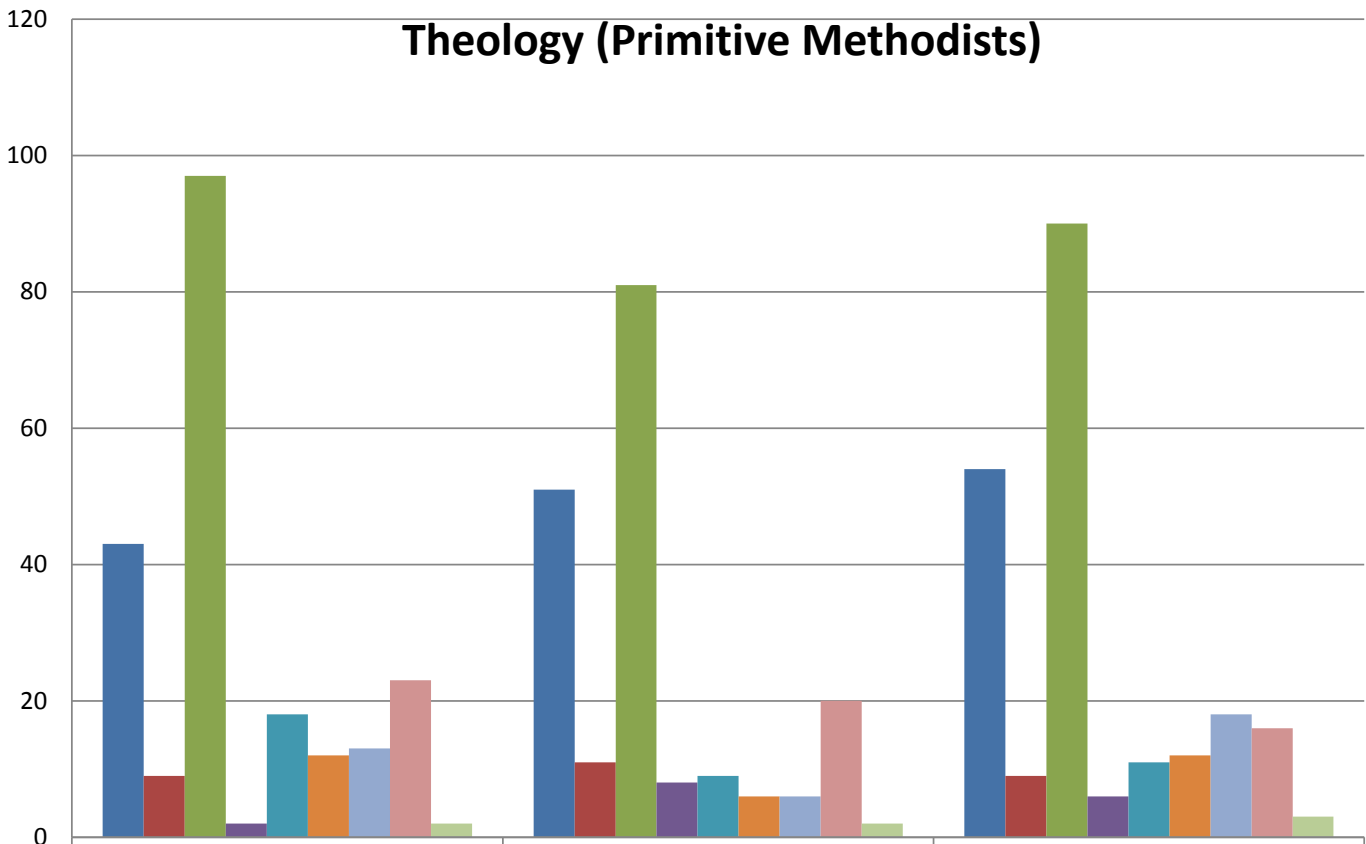
Percentages of Nonconformist Sample of 1,200



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Physical Suffering	27	33	26
Patience	21	24	23
Depression	3	3	3
Delirium	4	3	3
Joy	29	27	15
Peace	34	35	21
Doubt	4	1	1
Spiritual Battle	11	7	5

Percentages of Primitive Methodist Sample of 300

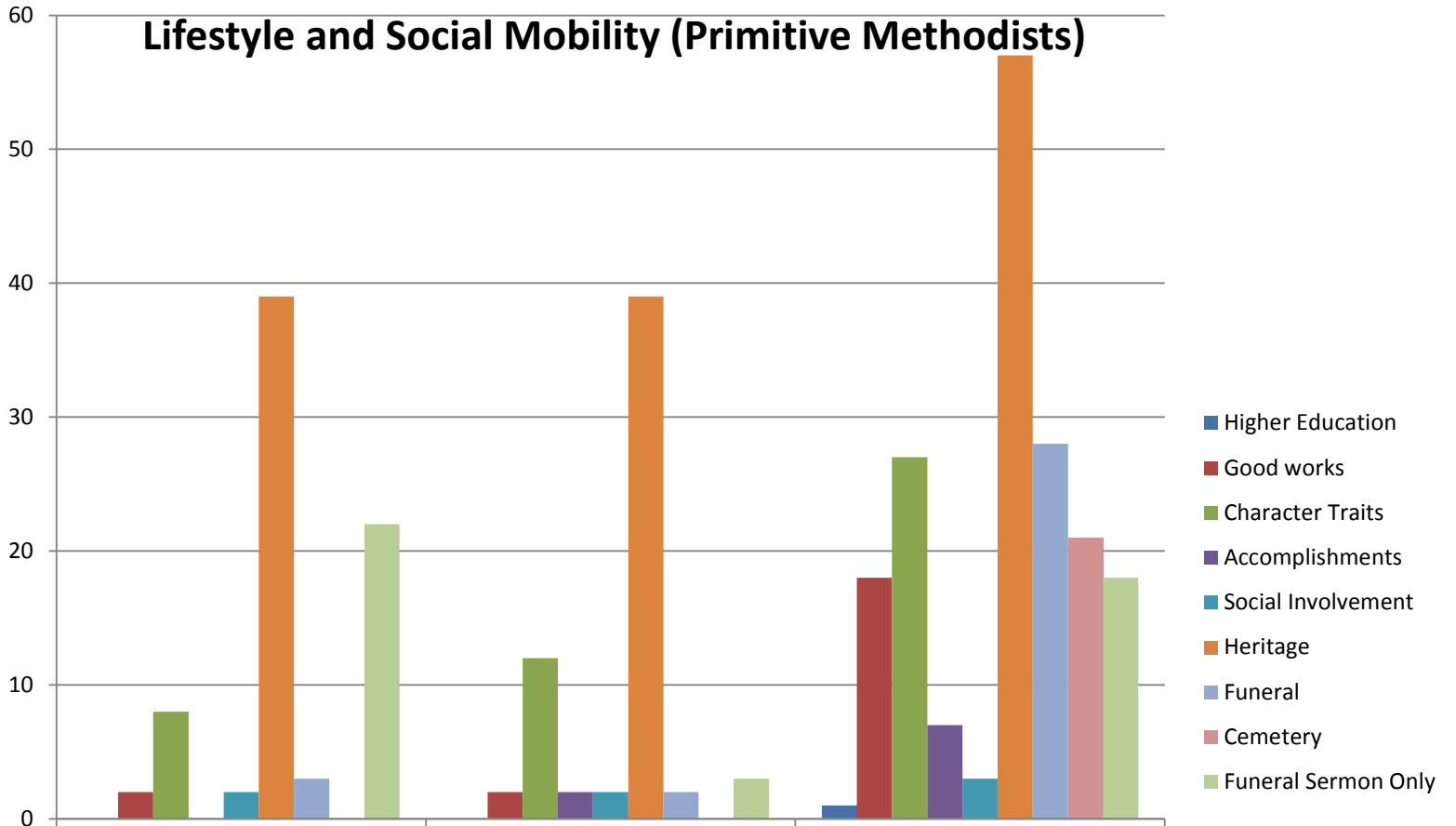
Theology (Primitive Methodists)



Jesus	43	51	54
Atonement	9	11	9
Conversion	97	81	90
God the Father	2	8	6
Assurance of Salvation	18	9	11
Bible	12	6	12
Hymns	13	6	18
Prayer	23	20	16
Awareness of Sin	2	2	3

Lifestyle and Social Mobility (Primitive Methodists)

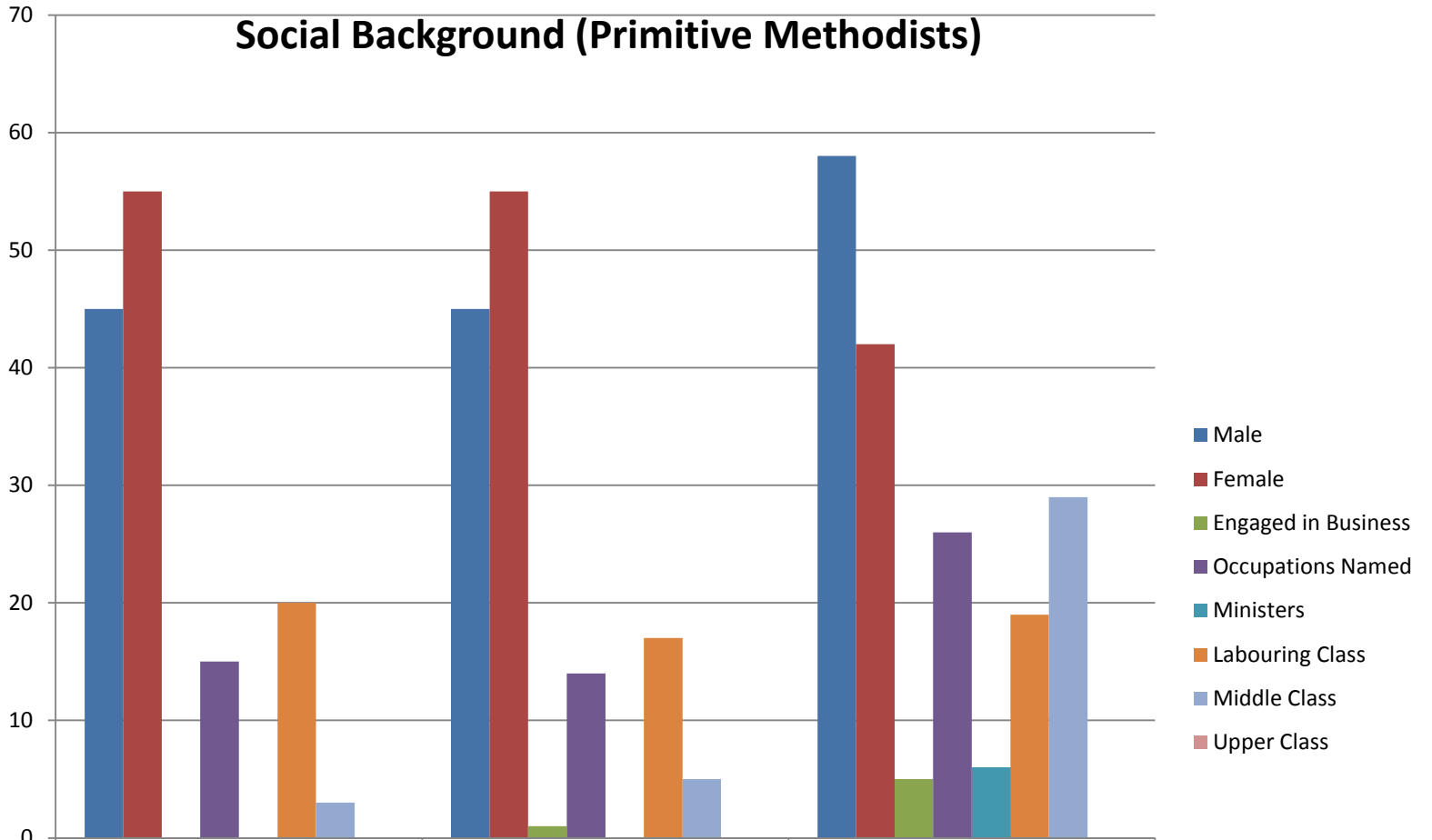
Percentages of Primitive Methodist Sample of 300



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Higher Education	0	0	1
Good works	2	2	18
Character Traits	8	12	27
Accomplishments	0	2	7
Social Involvement	2	2	3
Heritage	39	39	57
Funeral	3	2	28
Cemetery	0	0	21
Funeral Sermon Only	22	3	18

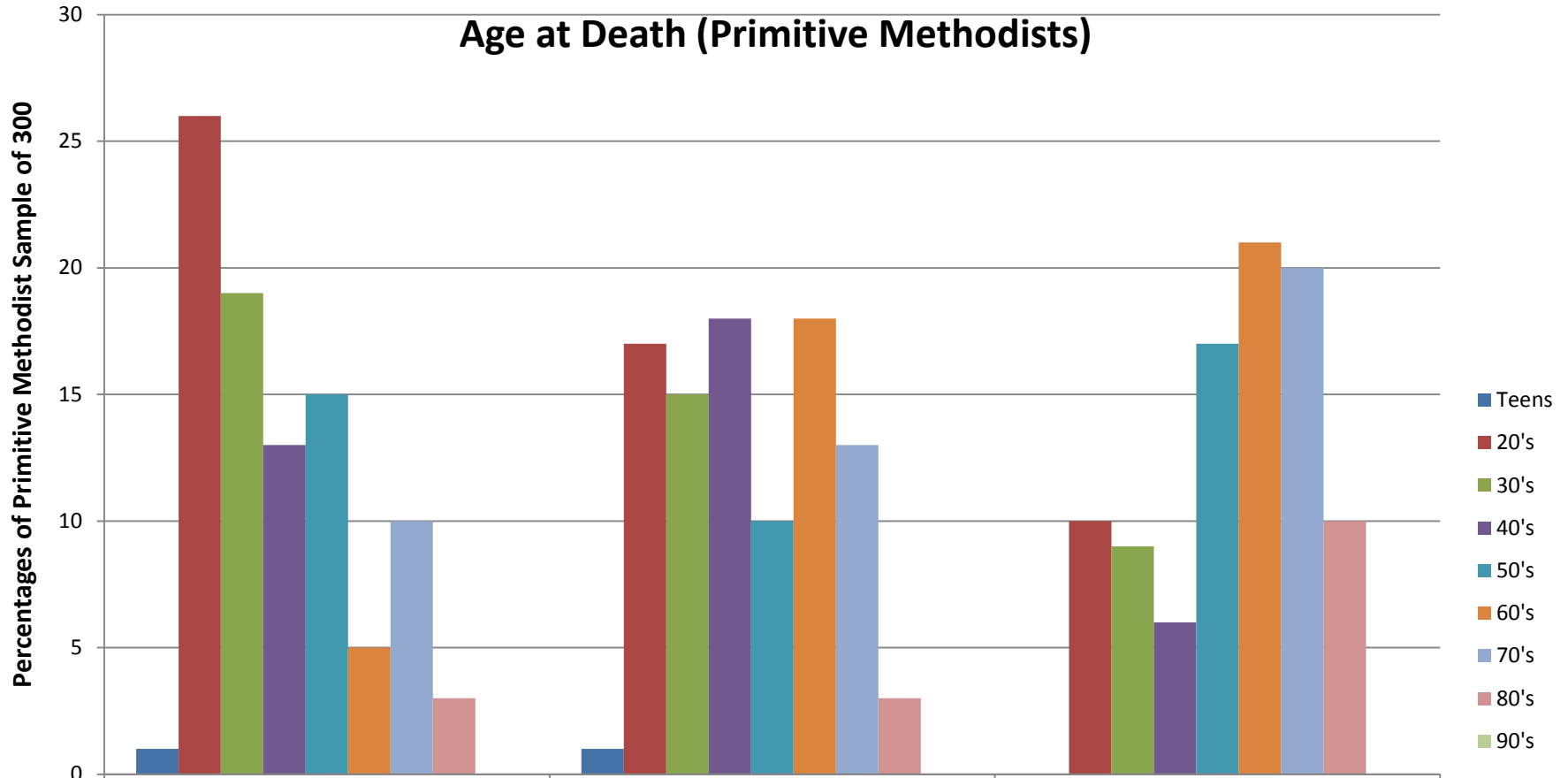
Social Background (Primitive Methodists)

Percentages of Primitive Methodist Sample of 300



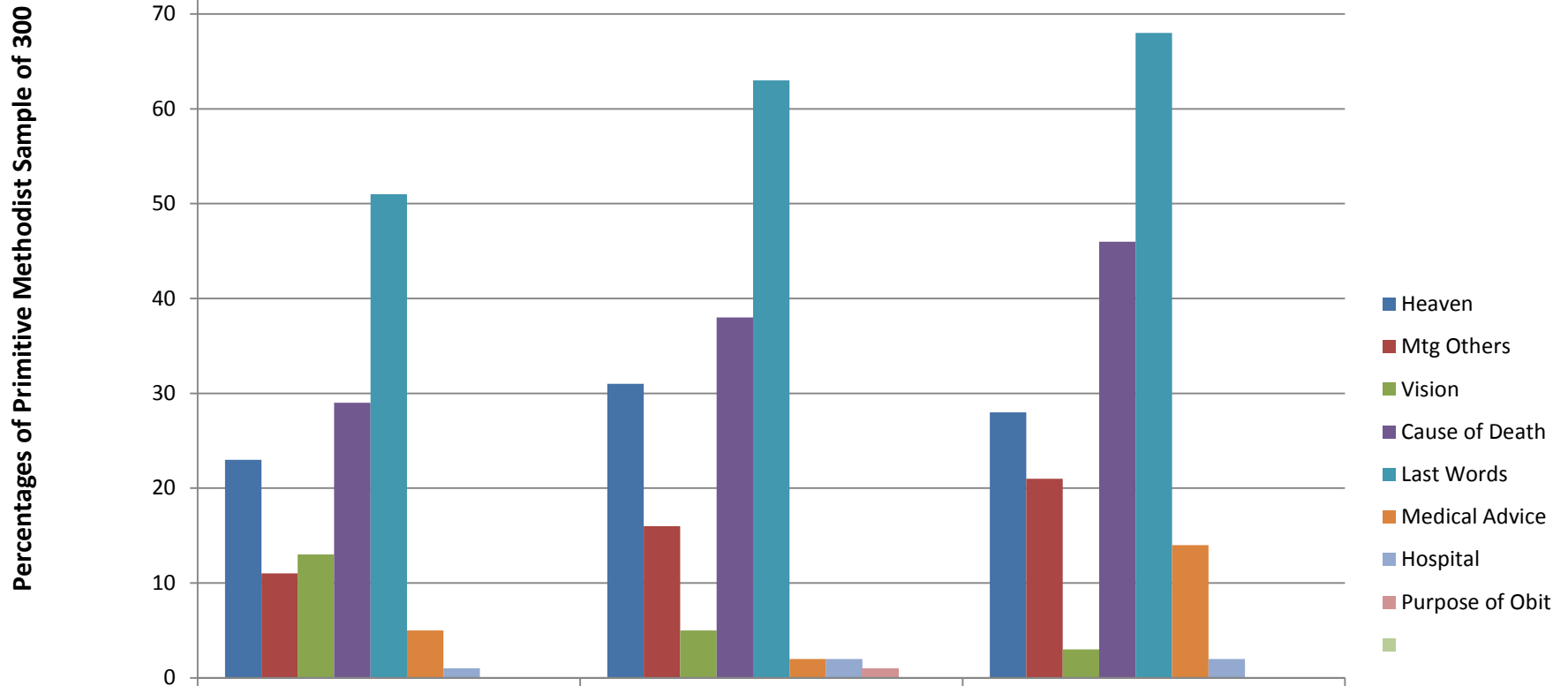
	1830s	1850s	1870s
Male	45	45	58
Female	55	55	42
Engaged in Business	0	1	5
Occupations Named	15	14	26
Ministers	0	0	6
Labouring Class	20	17	19
Middle Class	3	5	29
Upper Class	0	0	0

Age at Death (Primitive Methodists)



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Teens	1	1	0
20's	26	17	10
30's	19	15	9
40's	13	18	6
50's	15	10	17
60's	5	18	21
70's	10	13	20
80's	3	3	10
90's	0	0	0

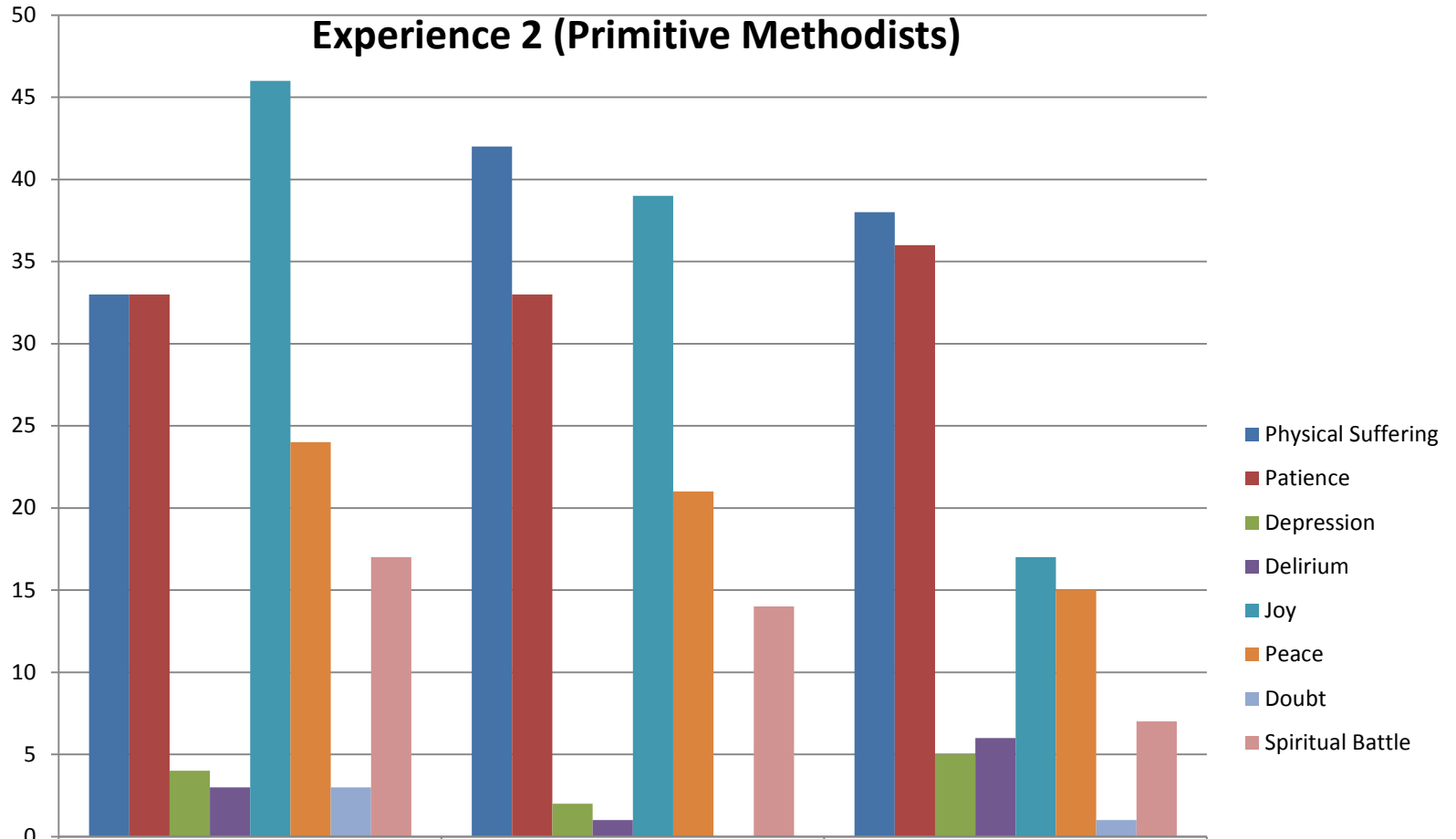
Experience 1 (Primitive Methodists)



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Heaven	23	31	28
Mtg Others	11	16	21
Vision	13	5	3
Cause of Death	29	38	46
Last Words	51	63	68
Medical Advice	5	2	14
Hospital	1	2	2
Purpose of Obit	0	1	0

Experience 2 (Primitive Methodists)

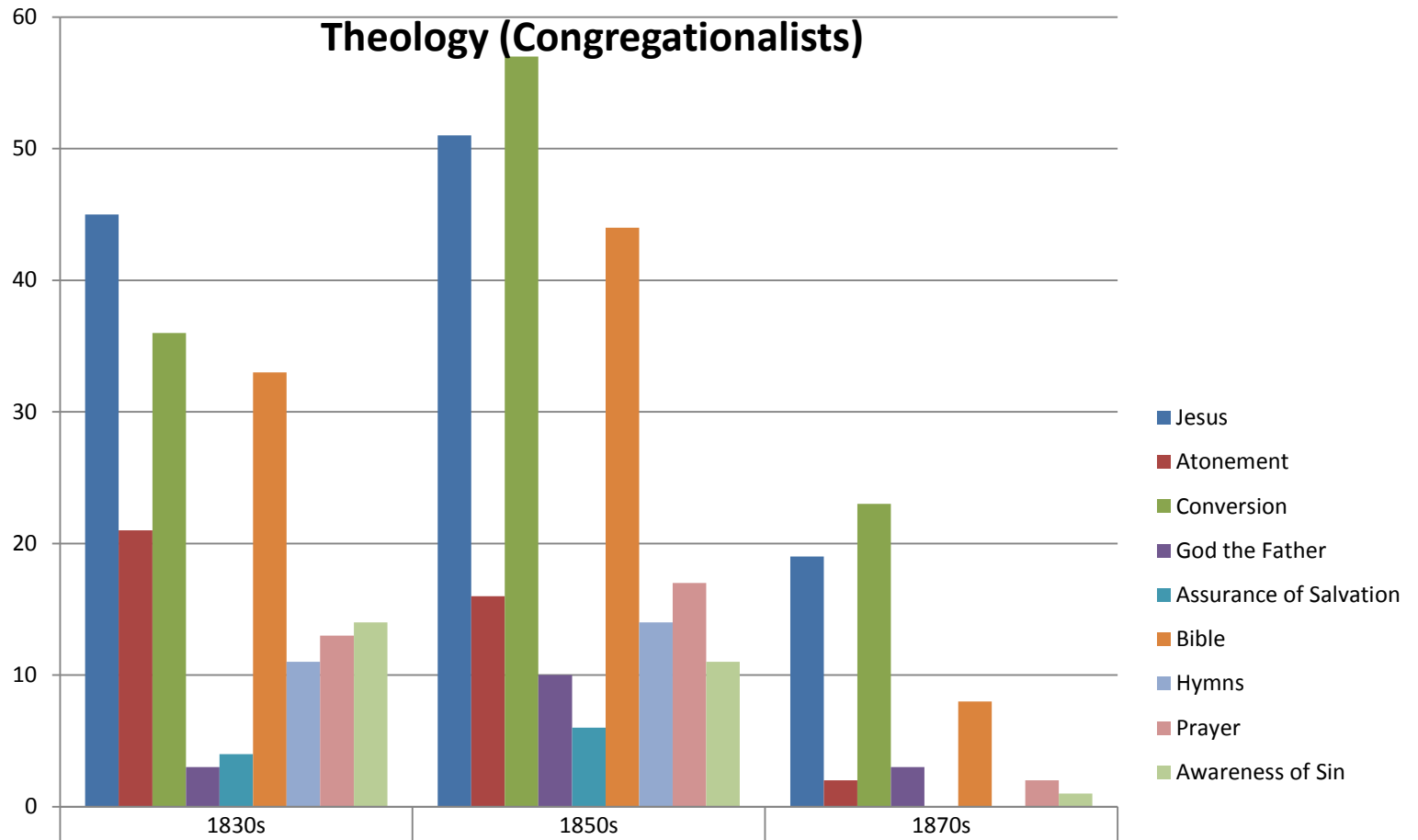
Percentages of Primitive Methodist Sample of 300



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Physical Suffering	33	42	38
Patience	33	33	36
Depression	4	2	5
Delirium	3	1	6
Joy	46	39	17
Peace	24	21	15
Doubt	3	0	1
Spiritual Battle	17	14	7

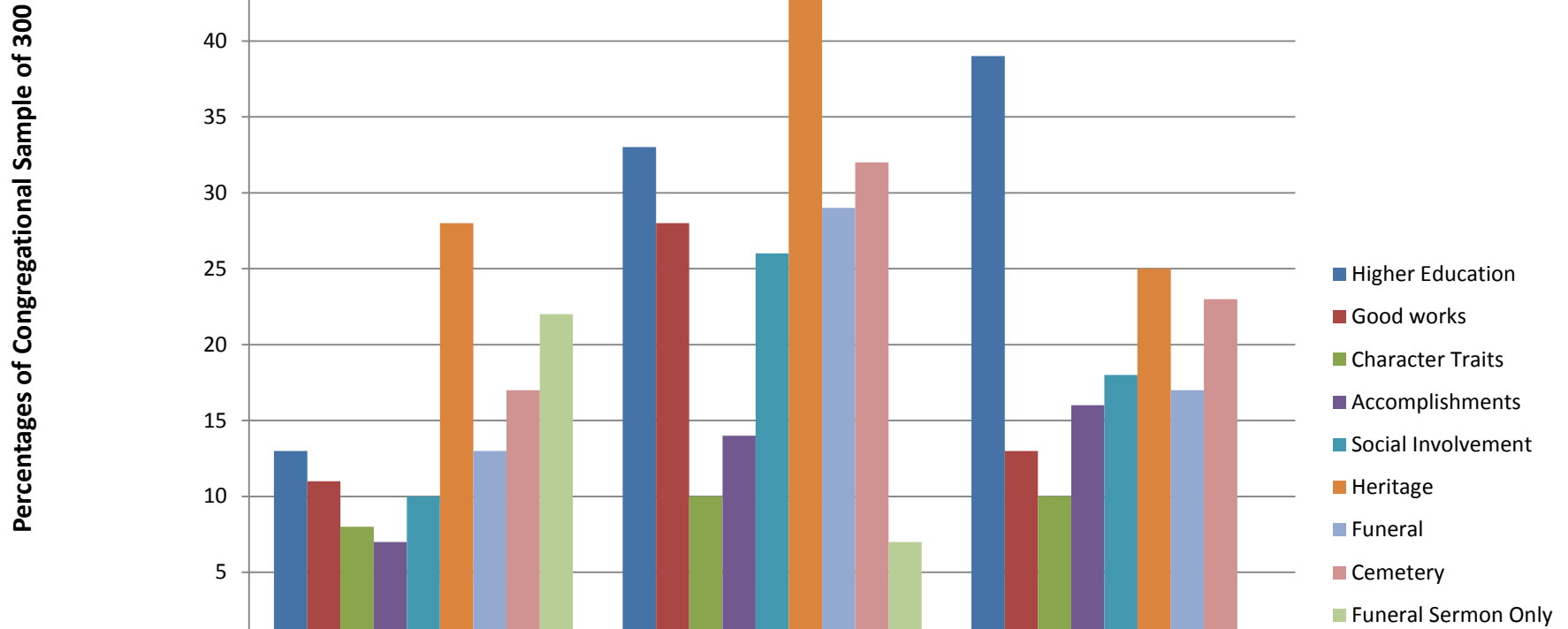
Theology (Congregationalists)

Percentage of Congregational Sample of 300



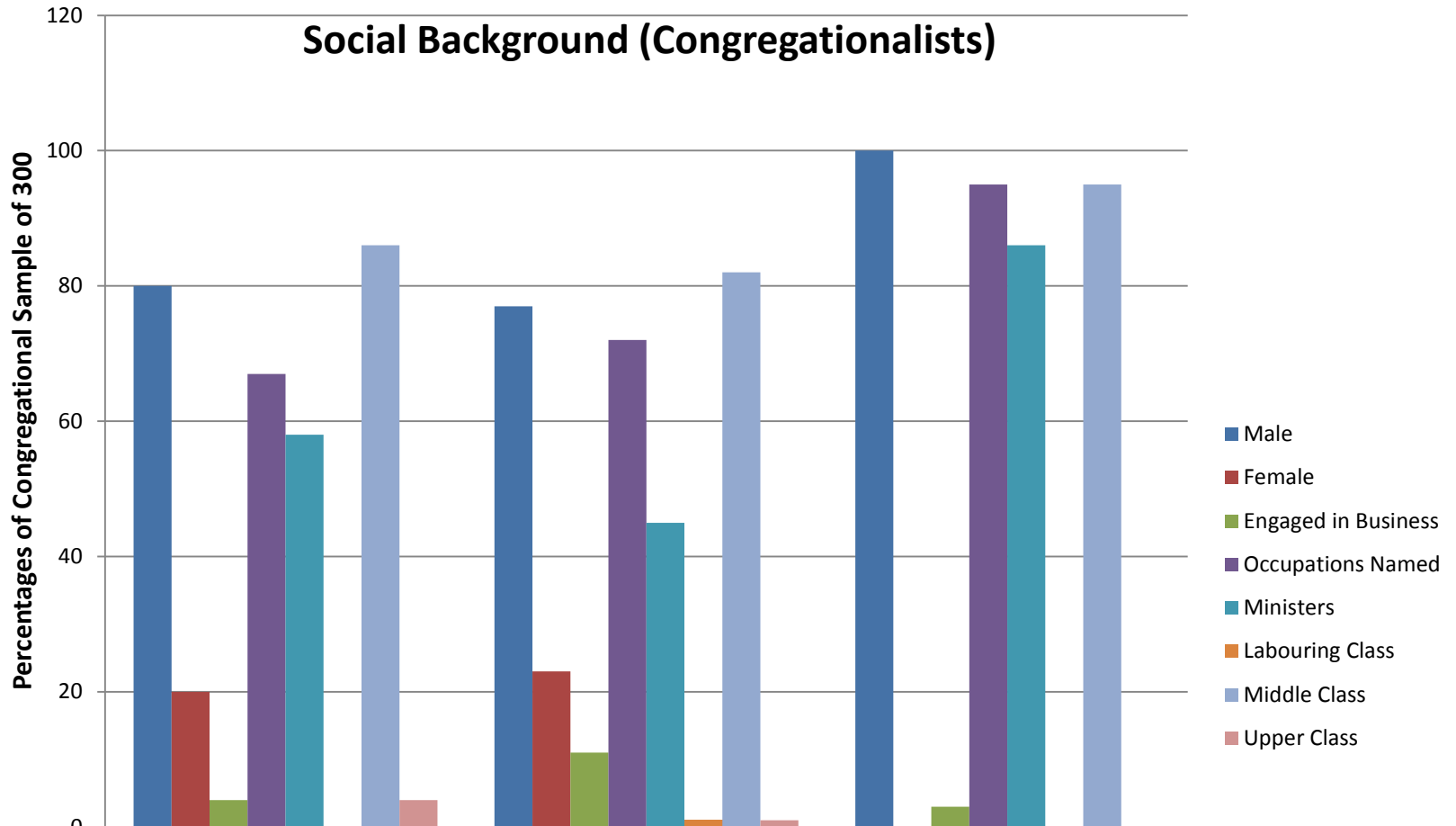
	1830s	1850s	1870s
Jesus	45	51	19
Atonement	21	16	2
Conversion	36	57	23
God the Father	3	10	3
Assurance of Salvation	4	6	0
Bible	33	44	8
Hymns	11	14	0
Prayer	13	17	2
Awareness of Sin	14	11	1

Lifestyle and Social Mobility (Congregationalists)



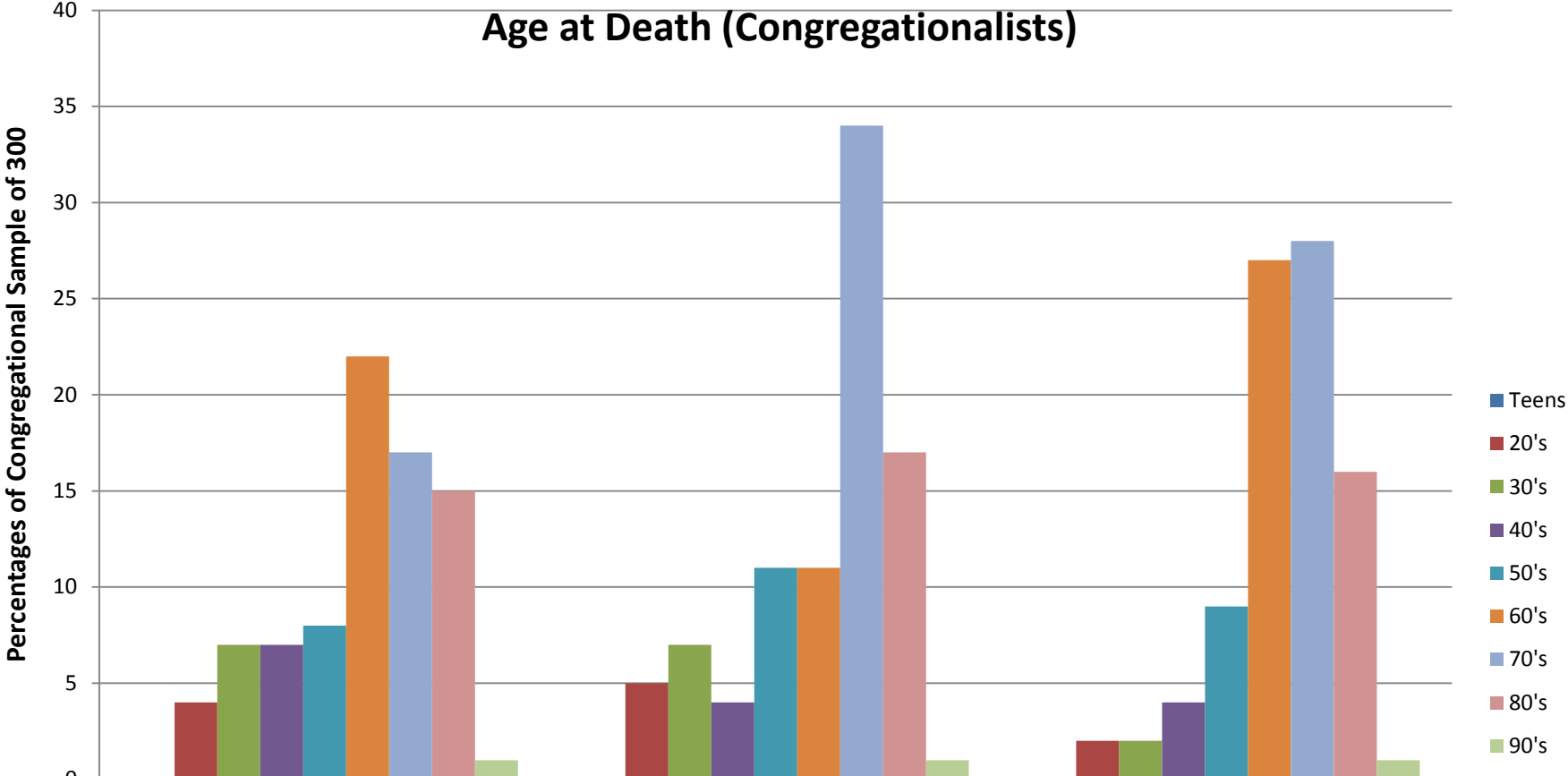
	1830s	1850s	1870s
Higher Education	13	33	39
Good works	11	28	13
Character Traits	8	10	10
Accomplishments	7	14	16
Social Involvement	10	26	18
Heritage	28	47	25
Funeral	13	29	17
Cemetery	17	32	23
Funeral Sermon Only	22	7	0

Social Background (Congregationalists)



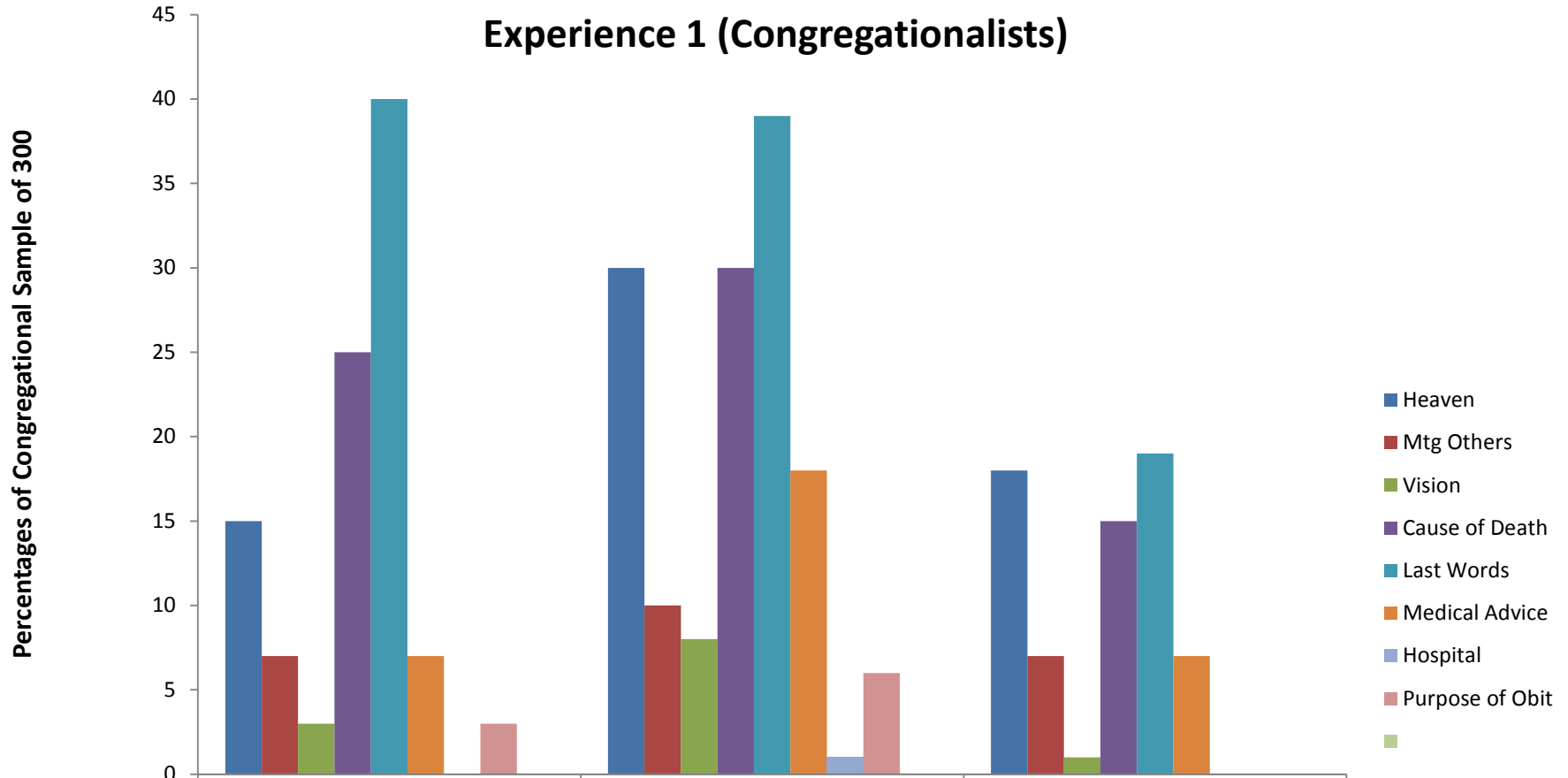
	1830s	1850s	1870s
Male	80	77	100
Female	20	23	0
Engaged in Business	4	11	3
Occupations Named	67	72	95
Ministers	58	45	86
Labouring Class	0	1	0
Middle Class	86	82	95
Upper Class	4	1	0

Age at Death (Congregationalists)



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Teens	0	0	0
20's	4	5	2
30's	7	7	2
40's	7	4	4
50's	8	11	9
60's	22	11	27
70's	17	34	28
80's	15	17	16
90's	1	1	1

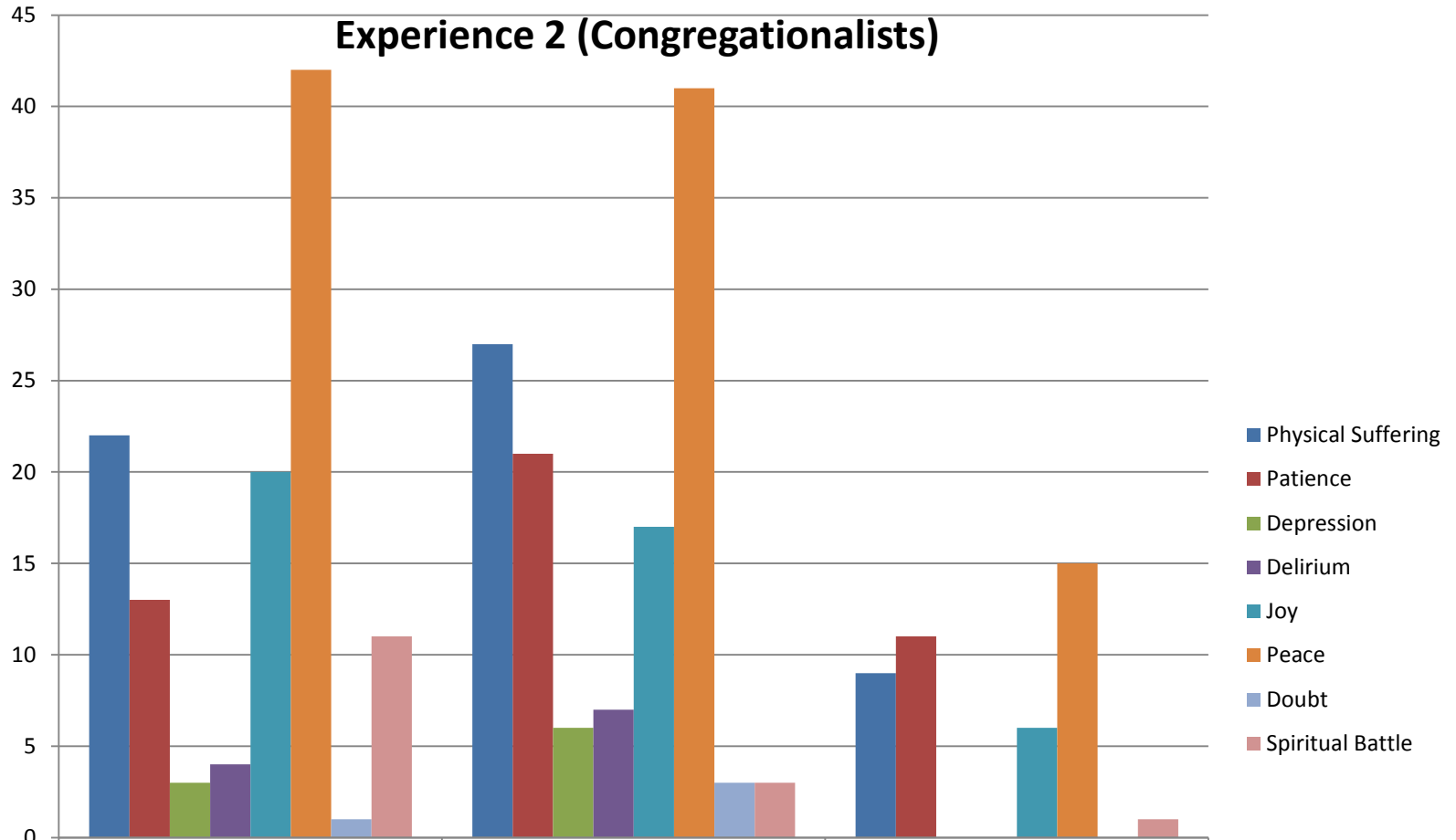
Experience 1 (Congregationalists)



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Heaven	15	30	18
Mtg Others	7	10	7
Vision	3	8	1
Cause of Death	25	30	15
Last Words	40	39	19
Medical Advice	7	18	7
Hospital	0	1	0
Purpose of Obit	3	6	0

Experience 2 (Congregationalists)

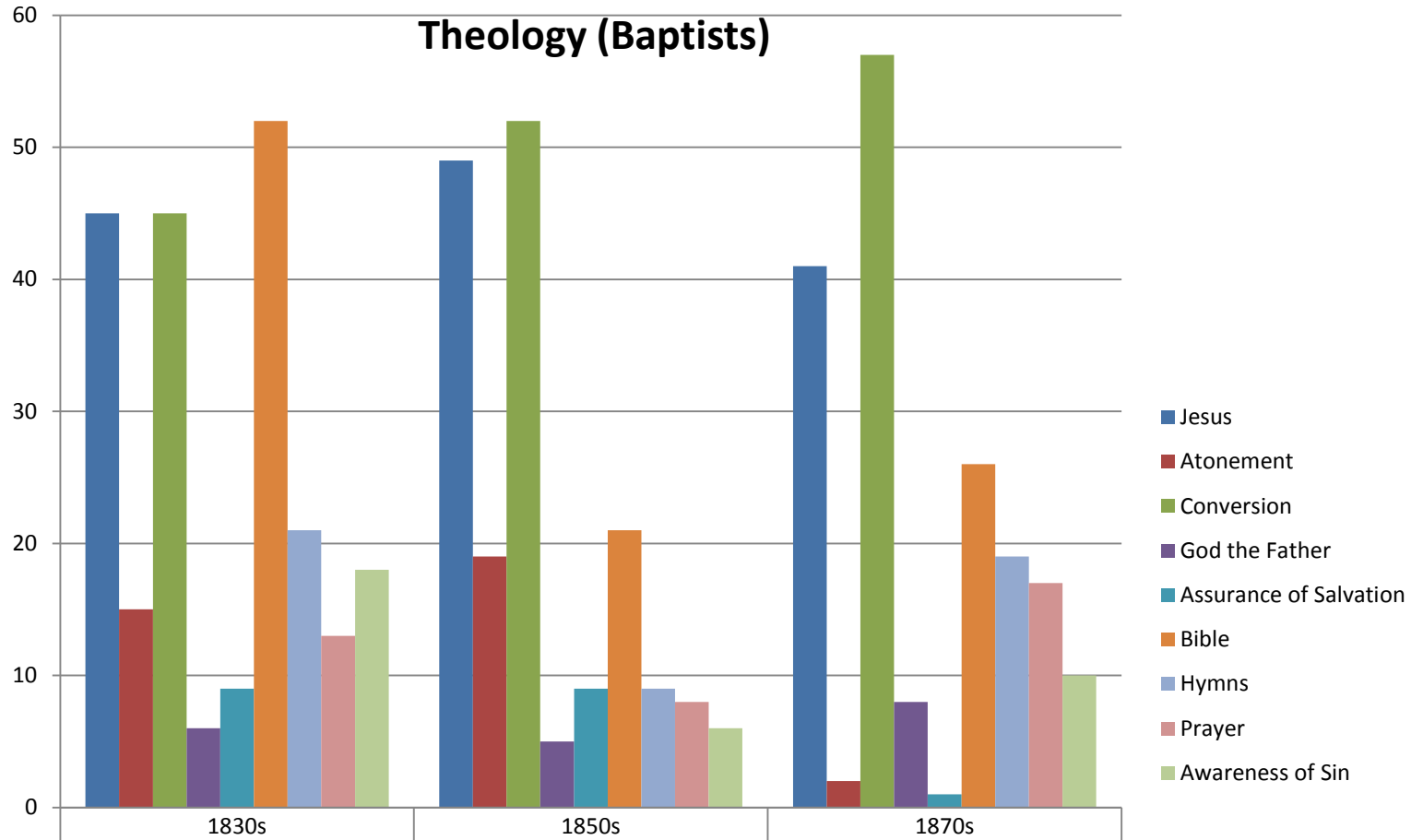
Percentages of Congregational Sample of 300



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Physical Suffering	22	27	9
Patience	13	21	11
Depression	3	6	0
Delirium	4	7	0
Joy	20	17	6
Peace	42	41	15
Doubt	1	3	0
Spiritual Battle	11	3	1

Theology (Baptists)

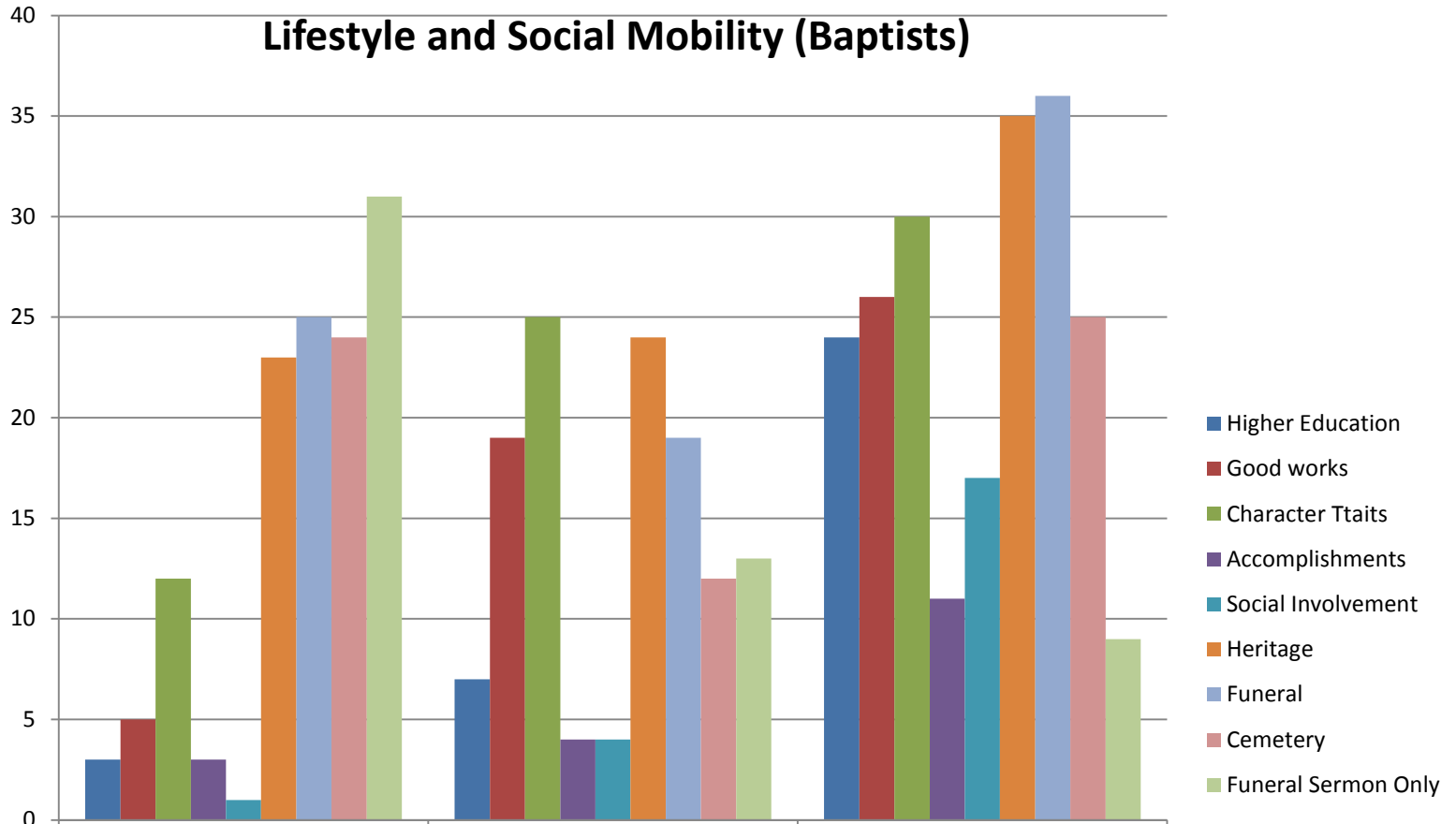
Percentages of Baptist Sample of 300



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Jesus	45	49	41
Atonement	15	19	2
Conversion	45	52	57
God the Father	6	5	8
Assurance of Salvation	9	9	1
Bible	52	21	26
Hymns	21	9	19
Prayer	13	8	17
Awareness of Sin	18	6	10

Lifestyle and Social Mobility (Baptists)

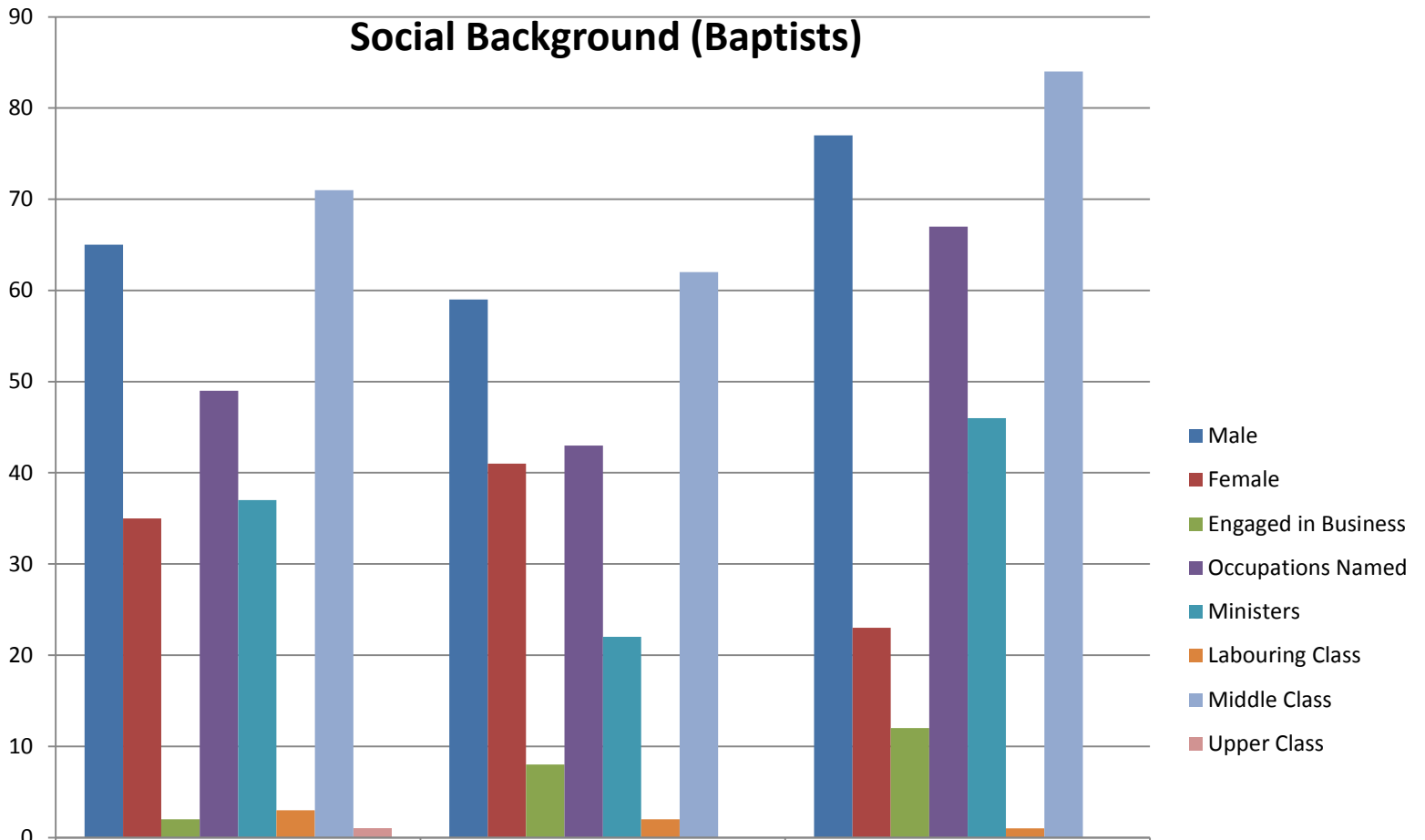
Percentages of Baptist Sample of 300



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Higher Education	3	7	24
Good works	5	19	26
Character Traits	12	25	30
Accomplishments	3	4	11
Social Involvement	1	4	17
Heritage	23	24	35
Funeral	25	19	36
Cemetery	24	12	25
Funeral Sermon Only	31	13	9

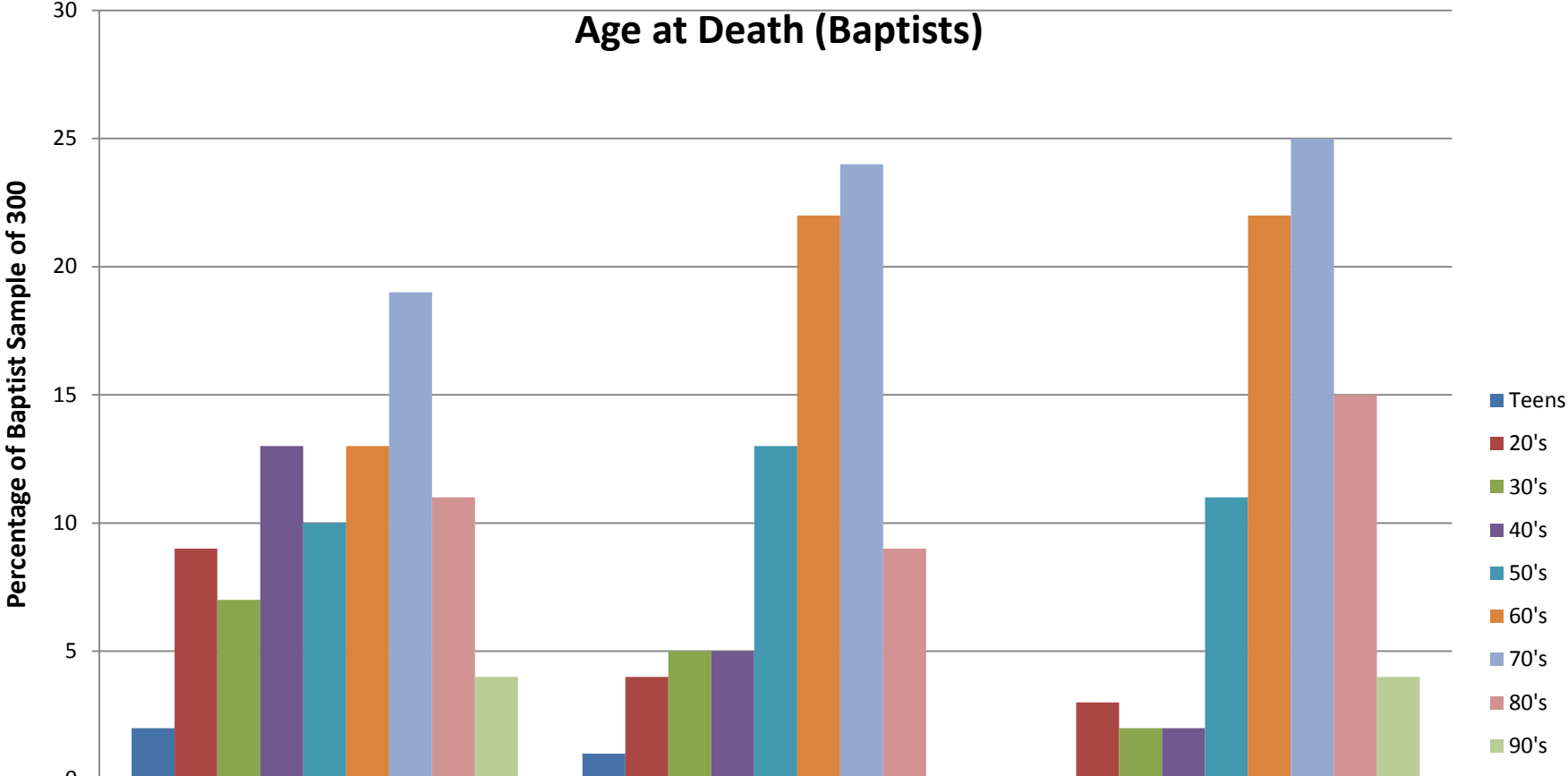
Social Background (Baptists)

Percentages of Baptist Sample of 300



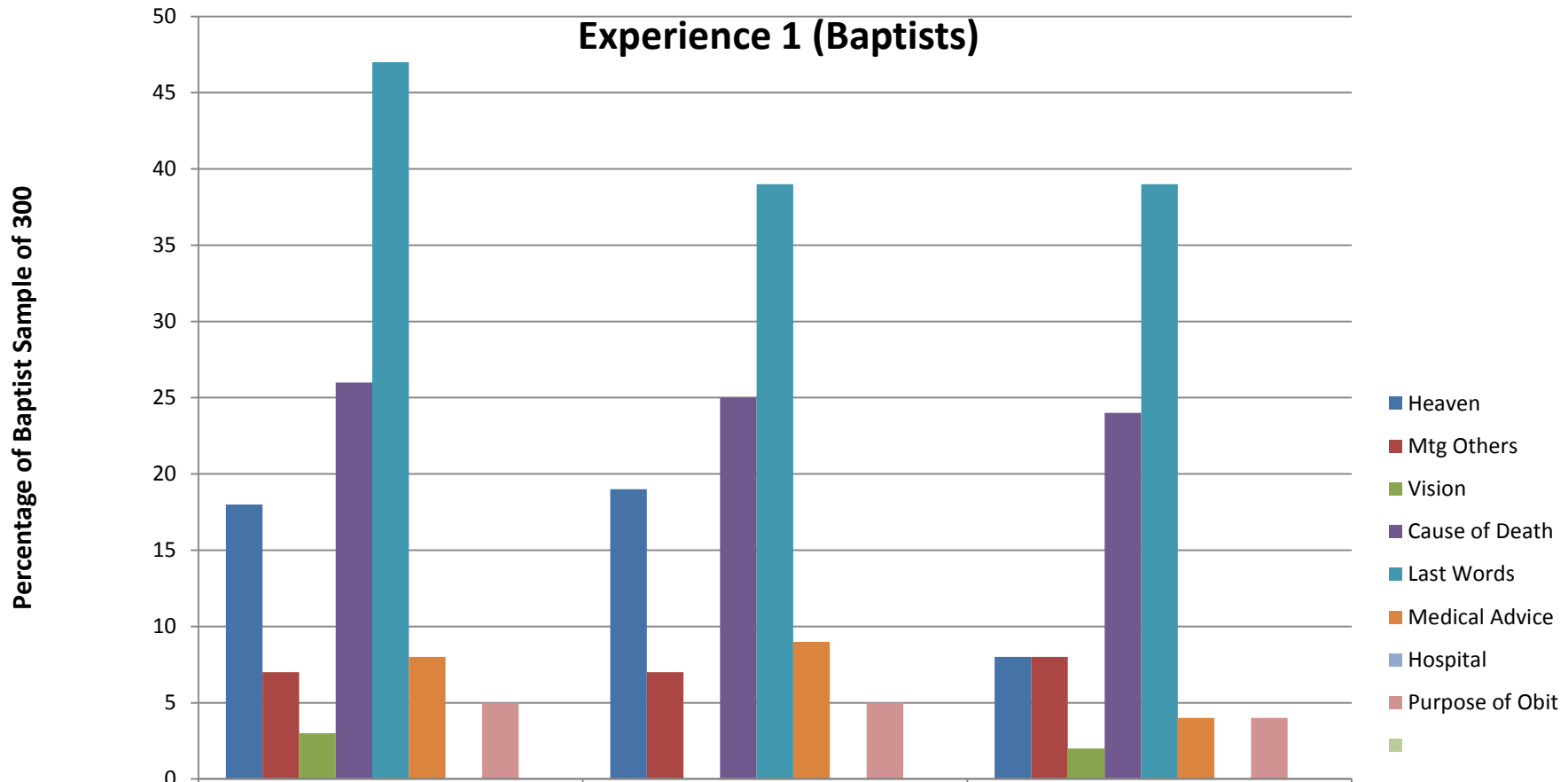
	1830s	1850s	1870s
Male	65	59	77
Female	35	41	23
Engaged in Business	2	8	12
Occupations Named	49	43	67
Ministers	37	22	46
Labouring Class	3	2	1
Middle Class	71	62	84
Upper Class	1	0	0

Age at Death (Baptists)



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Teens	2	1	0
20's	9	4	3
30's	7	5	2
40's	13	5	2
50's	10	13	11
60's	13	22	22
70's	19	24	25
80's	11	9	15
90's	4	0	4

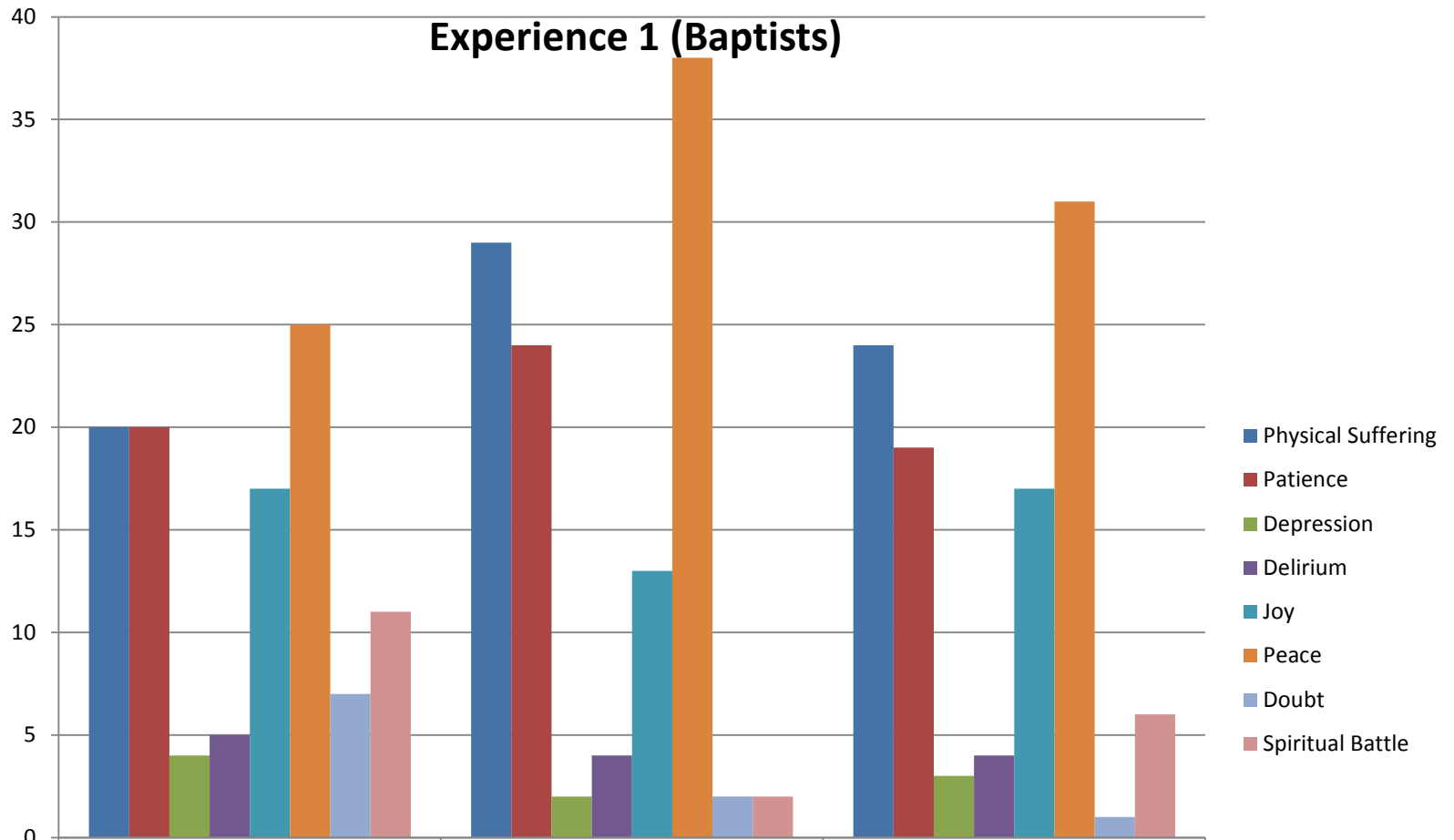
Experience 1 (Baptists)



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Heaven	18	19	8
Mtg Others	7	7	8
Vision	3	0	2
Cause of Death	26	25	24
Last Words	47	39	39
Medical Advice	8	9	4
Hospital	0	0	0
Purpose of Obit	5	5	4

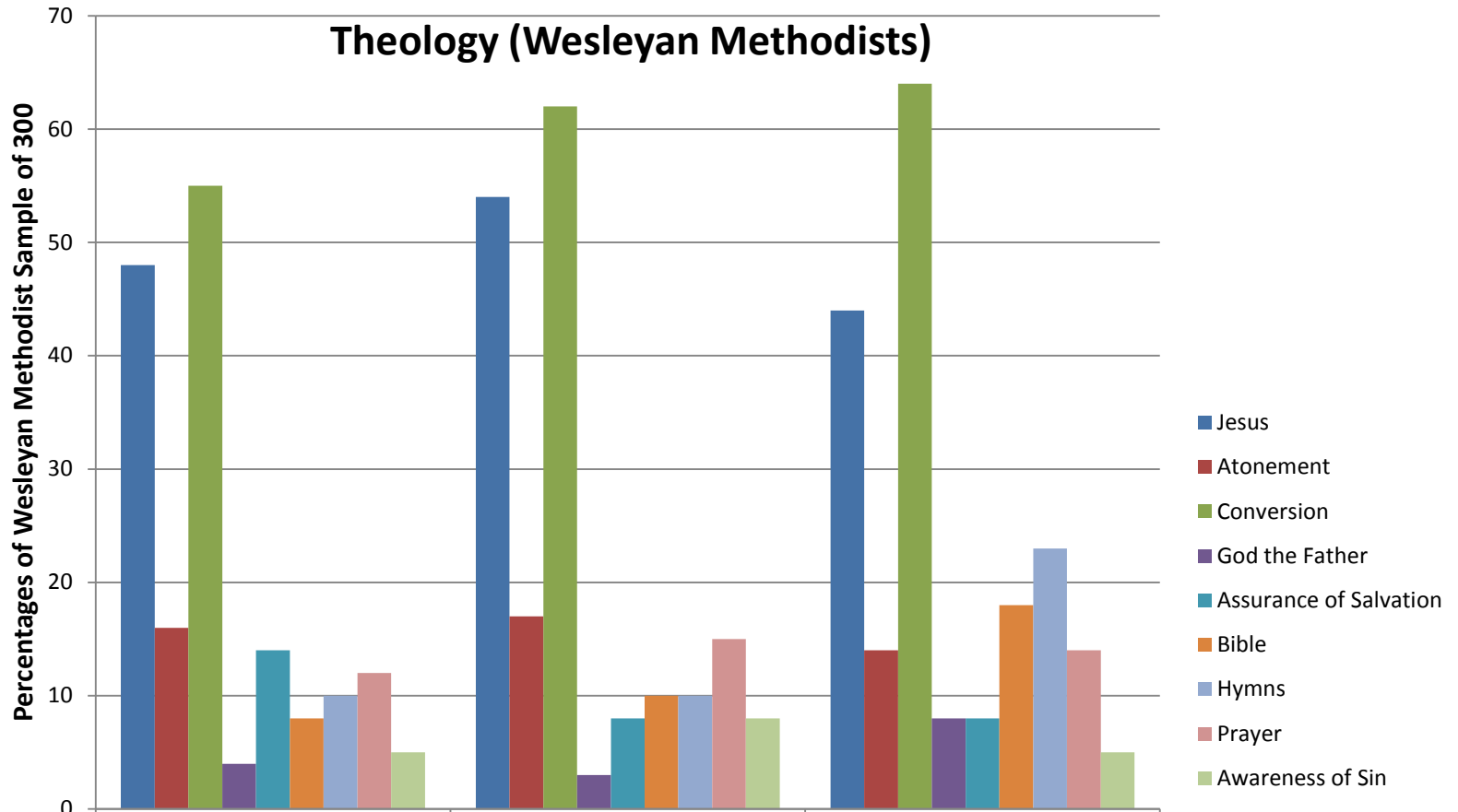
Experience 1 (Baptists)

Percentages of Baptist Sample of 300



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Physical Suffering	20	29	24
Patience	20	24	19
Depression	4	2	3
Delirium	5	4	4
Joy	17	13	17
Peace	25	38	31
Doubt	7	2	1
Spiritual Battle	11	2	6

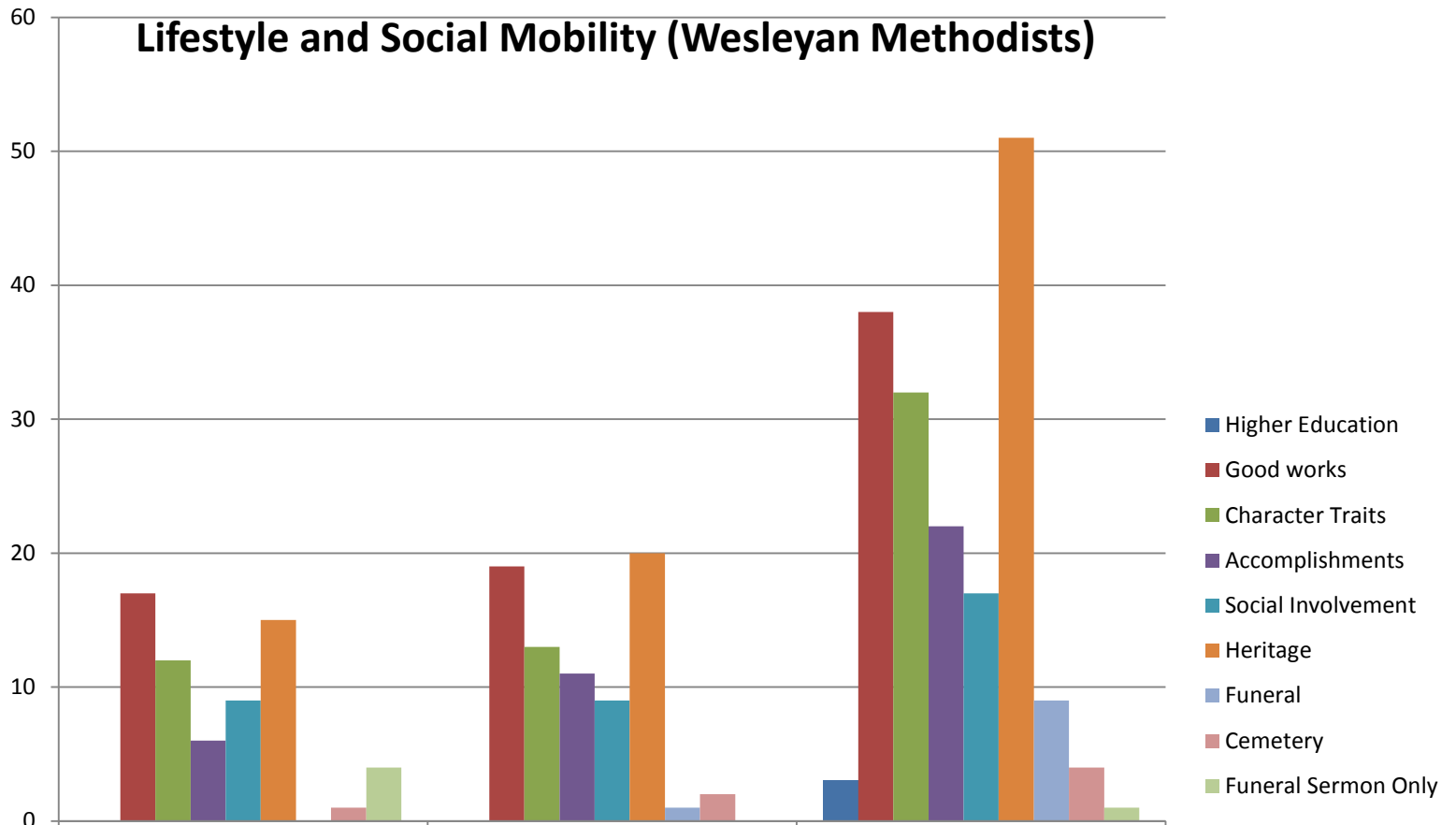
Theology (Wesleyan Methodists)



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Jesus	48	54	44
Atonement	16	17	14
Conversion	55	62	64
God the Father	4	3	8
Assurance of Salvation	14	8	8
Bible	8	10	18
Hymns	10	10	23
Prayer	12	15	14
Awareness of Sin	5	8	5

Lifestyle and Social Mobility (Wesleyan Methodists)

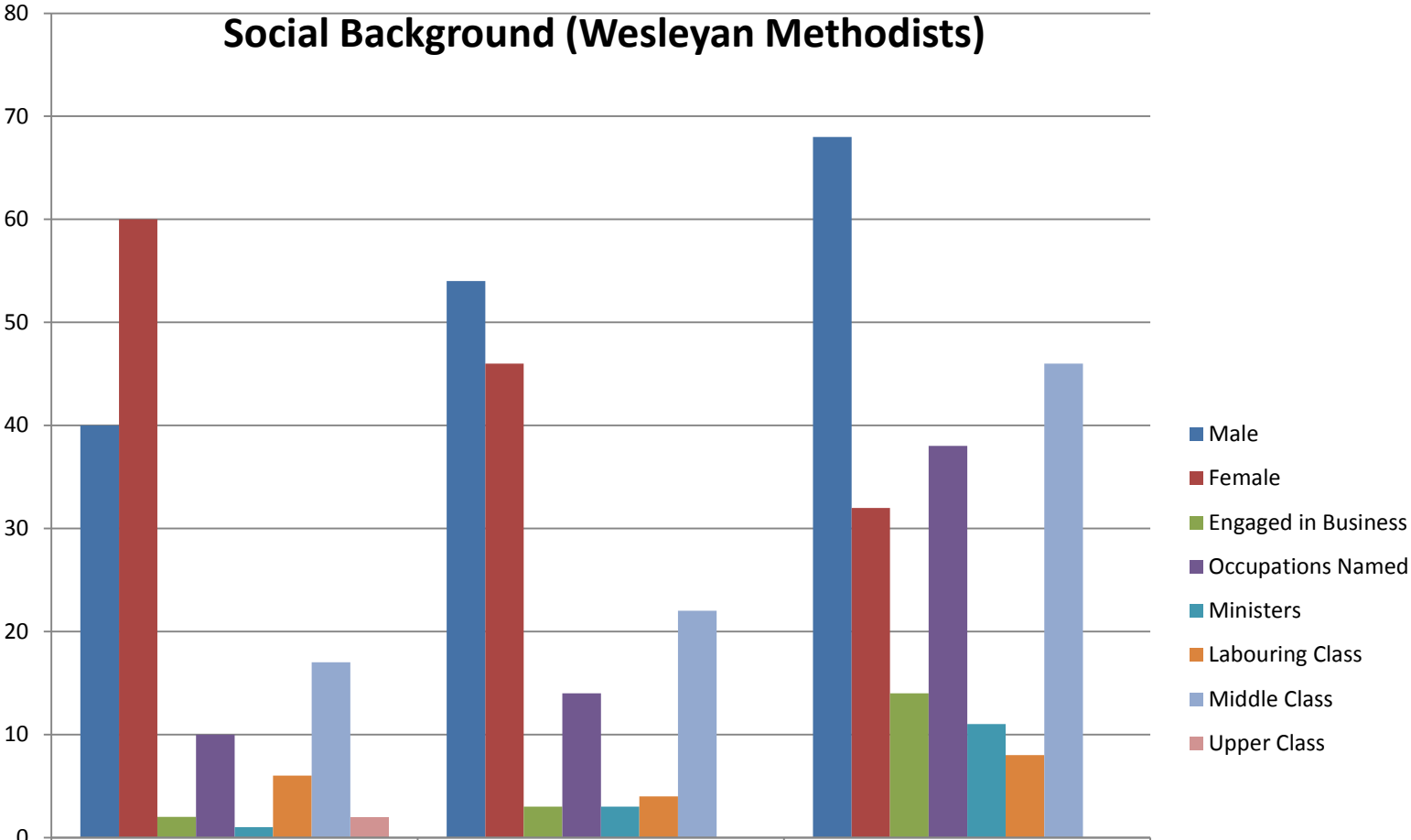
Percentages of Wesleyan Methodist Sample of 300



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Higher Education	0	0	3
Good works	17	19	38
Character Traits	12	13	32
Accomplishments	6	11	22
Social Involvement	9	9	17
Heritage	15	20	51
Funeral	0	1	9
Cemetery	1	2	4
Funeral Sermon Only	4	0	1

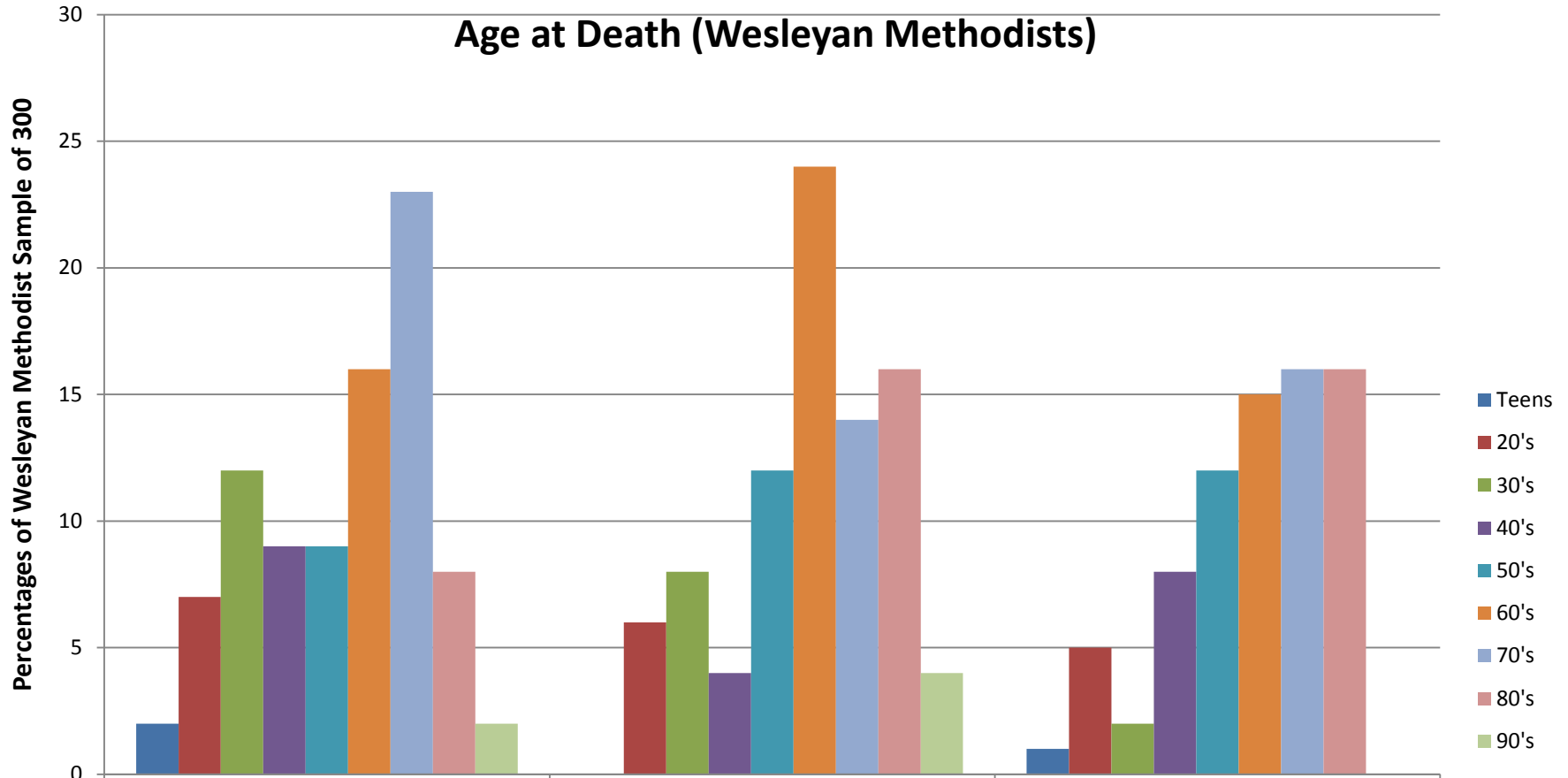
Social Background (Wesleyan Methodists)

Percentages of Wesleyan Methodist Sample of 300



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Male	40	54	68
Female	60	46	32
Engaged in Business	2	3	14
Occupations Named	10	14	38
Ministers	1	3	11
Labouring Class	6	4	8
Middle Class	17	22	46
Upper Class	2	0	0

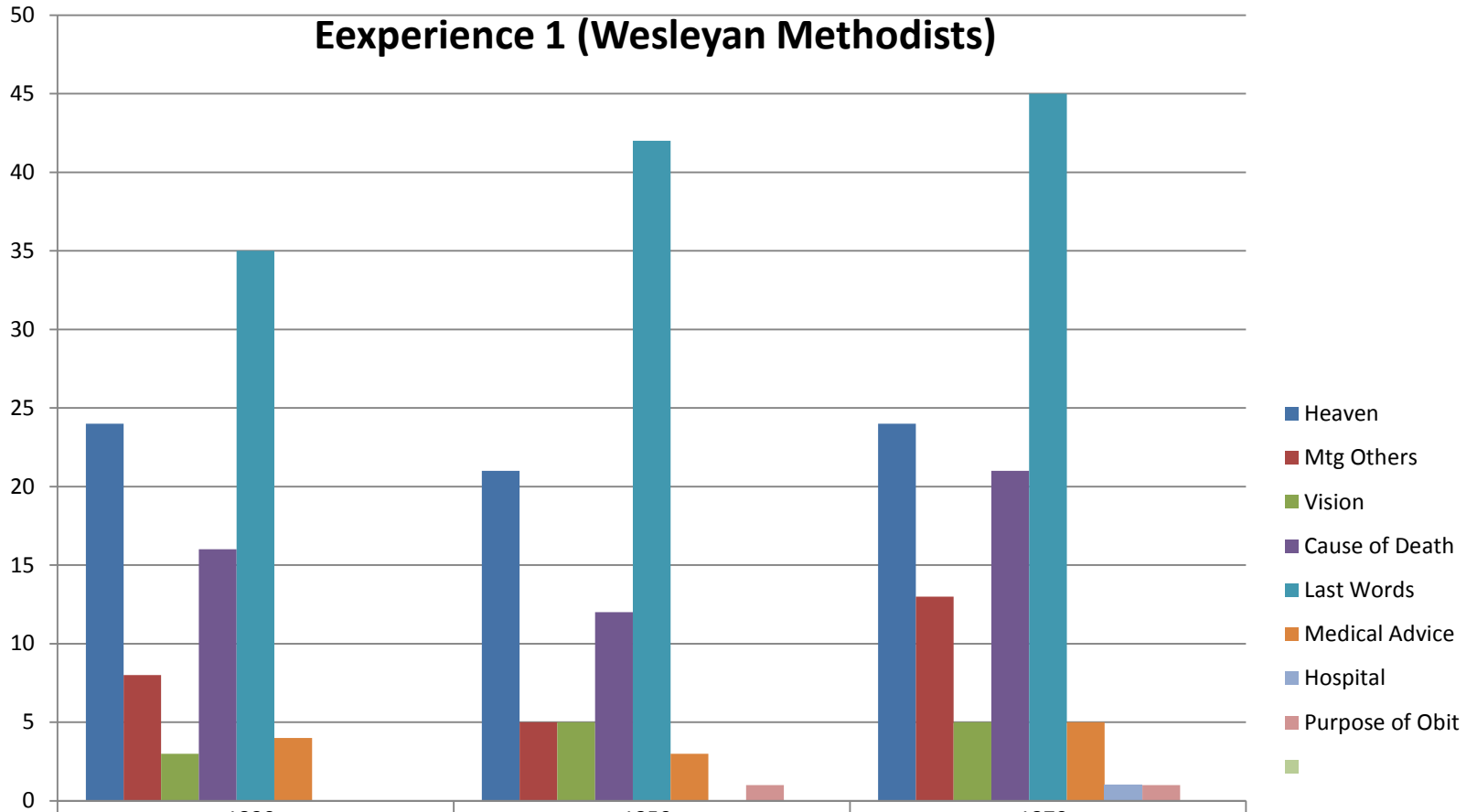
Age at Death (Wesleyan Methodists)



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Teens	2	0	1
20's	7	6	5
30's	12	8	2
40's	9	4	8
50's	9	12	12
60's	16	24	15
70's	23	14	16
80's	8	16	16
90's	2	4	0

Experience 1 (Wesleyan Methodists)

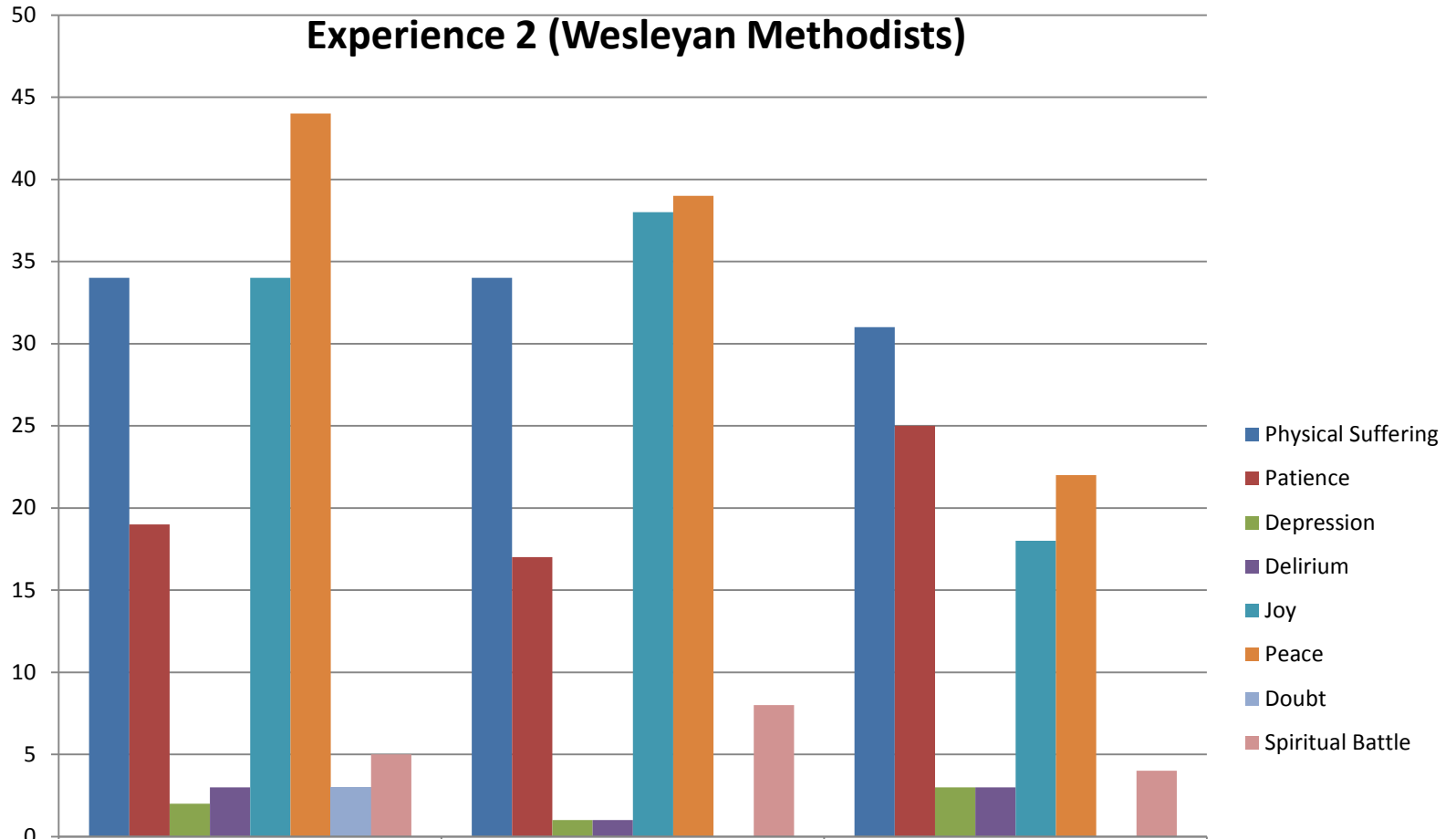
Percentages of Wesleyan Methodist Sample of 300



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Heaven	24	21	24
Mtg Others	8	5	13
Vision	3	5	5
Cause of Death	16	12	21
Last Words	35	42	45
Medical Advice	4	3	5
Hospital	0	0	1
Purpose of Obit	0	1	1

Experience 2 (Wesleyan Methodists)

Percentages of Wesleyan Methodist Sample of 300



	1830s	1850s	1870s
Physical Suffering	34	34	31
Patience	19	17	25
Depression	2	1	3
Delirium	3	1	3
Joy	34	38	18
Peace	44	39	22
Doubt	3	0	0
Spiritual Battle	5	8	4