



Michael A.G. Haykin

“FOR GOD’S GLORY [AND] FOR THE GOOD OF PRECIOUS SOULS”:
CALVINISM AND MISSIONS IN THE PIETY OF SAMUEL PEARCE (1766-1799)¹

One of the most common charges raised against Calvinism in recent days is that it is not a theological perspective conducive to fostering a passion for missions and evangelism and to fueling such a passion over the long term.² To anyone acquainted with the details of the history of Calvinistic Baptists—who stand at the fountainhead of most English-speaking Baptists today, no matter their orientation on the matter of Calvinism³—the charge is frankly quite incongruous. For there have been Baptists too numerous to number across the centuries who have been ardent in their commitment to a Calvinist view of salvation and at the same time aflame with the desire to see men and women converted.

“Look to Jesus”: Evangelism among seventeenth-century Calvinistic Baptists

A number of Calvinistic Baptist leaders from seventeenth-century England can be briefly cited to illustrate the point here. Probably the most famous of such Baptists is John Bunyan (1628-1688), best known for his classic *Pilgrim’s Progress*.⁴ His open-membership Baptist convictions meant that in his day he was not as influential among his fellow Calvinistic Baptists—for whom closed-membership and closed-communion convictions were the norm—as he became for this community in subsequent centuries. Strongly committed to Calvinism after his conversion in the early 1650s, Bunyan was soon bearing witness to his faith in small villages and hamlets tucked away in rural Bedfordshire, his home county. In his own account of his conversion and early

¹ This paper was read at The Southern Baptist Founders Conference Midwest 2009 (February 25, 2009). Dr. Haykin was unable to deliver it due to illness, but it was read for him.

The quotation in the title is from Samuel Pearce, Letter to Cannon Street Baptist Church, July 18, 1790 [cited S. Pearce Carey, *Samuel Pearce, M. A., The Baptist Brainerd* (3rd. ed.; London: The Carey Press, n.d.), 95].

² See Kenneth J. Stewart, “Calvinism & Missions: The Contested Relationship Revisited” (Unpublished paper, 2009, 18 pages). Stewart intends to include this paper as a chapter in his book *Ten Myths About Calvinism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming).

³ When it comes to Baptist origins in the seventeenth century, the attention of Baptist historians has largely been focused on the General Baptists. Yet, it is the Calvinistic Baptists, who, though they appear on the scene of history later than the General Baptists—that is Baptists committed to an Arminian perspective—are more important for the ongoing stream of Baptist history. See Glen H. Stassen “Anabaptist Influence in the Origin of the Particular Baptists”, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 36 (1962), 322-323.

⁴ On Bunyan, see Kenneth Dix, *John Bunyan: Puritan Pastor* (N.p.: The Fauconberg Press for The Strict Baptist Historical Society, 1978); N.H. Keeble, ed., *John Bunyan: Conventicle and Parnassus. Tercentenary Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).



Christian experience, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), he tells us of his evangelistic zeal.

My great desire in fulfilling my Ministry, was, to get into the darkest places in the Countrey, even amongst those people that were furthest off of profession; yet not because I could not endure the light (for I feared not to shew my Gospel to any) but because I found my spirit leaned most after awakening and converting Work, and the Word that I carried did lean itself most that way; Yes, so have I strived to preach the Gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another mans foundation, Rom. 15.20.

In my preaching I have really been in pain, and have as it were traveled⁵ to bring forth Children to God; neither could I be satisfied unless some fruits did appear in my work: if I were fruitless it matter'd not who commended me; but if I were fruitful, I cared not who did condemn. ...It pleased me nothing to see people drink in Opinions if they seemed ignorant of Jesus Christ, and the worth of their own Salvation, sound conviction for Sin, especially for Unbelief, and an heart set on fire to be saved by Christ, with strong breathings after a truly sanctified Soul: that was it that delighted me; those were the souls I counted blessed.⁶

Given Bunyan's passion to reach sinners for Christ, it comes as no surprise to learn that when Bunyan preached on occasions in London, twelve hundred or so would regularly turn out to hear him on a weekday morning and no less than three thousand if he were there on a Sunday!⁷

Then there is Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), probably the most significant Calvinistic Baptist theologian of the late seventeenth century.⁸ Keach's pulpit ministry was characterized by vigorous evangelism and regular calls to the unconverted to respond to Christ in faith. Here is one example of many that could be cited: "Receive this Saviour, believe in him, and you shall be saved whosoever you are. It is not the greatness of your Sins that can hinder or obstruct him from saving your Souls; though your Sins be as red as scarlet, or as red as Crimson, he will wash them all away, and shall make you as white as Wool, as white as Snow."⁹

According to C. H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)—the famous nineteenth-century Calvinistic Baptist preacher who pastored the congregation that descended from Keach's congregation—in speaking

⁵ I.e. travailed.

⁶ *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* 289-291 [John Bunyan: *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 89].

⁷ T. L. Underwood, "John Bunyan: A Tercentenary", *American Baptist Quarterly*, 7 (1988), 439.

⁸ On Keach, see Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (Dundas, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2004); Tom Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 163-193.

⁹ "The Great Salvation," *A Golden Mine Opened* (London, 1694), 385. I am indebted for this reference to Revd. Austin Walker of Crawley, England.



to the lost Keach was “intensely direct, solemn, and impressive, not flinching to declare the terrors of the Lord, nor veiling the freeness of divine grace.”¹⁰ Typical of Keach’s evangelistic appeals to the unconverted is the following, cited by Spurgeon to illustrate the above statement:

Come, venture, your souls on Christ’s righteousness; Christ is able to save you though you are ever so great sinners. Come to him, throw yourselves at the feet of Jesus. *Look to Jesus*, who came to seek and save them that were lost... You may have the water of life freely. Do not say, “I want qualifications or a meekness to come to Christ.” Sinner, dost thou thirst? Dost thou see a want of righteousness? ’Tis not a righteousness; but ’tis a sense of the want of righteousness, which is rather the qualification thou shouldst look at. Christ hath righteousness sufficient to clothe you, bread of life to feed you, grace to adorn you. Whatever you want, it is to be had in him. We tell you there is help in him, salvation in him. “Through the propitiation in his blood” you must be justified, and that by faith alone.¹¹

If one turns from such well-known figures to lesser-known men the passion for the advance of the gospel is no different. Consider three sermons, all of them funeral sermons, given by the London Calvinistic Baptist John Piggott (d.1713) in the first decade of the seventeenth century.¹² On the occasion of the death of the Baptist minister Thomas Harrison (d.1702), Piggott closed his funeral sermon for Harrison with a long and emotional appeal to those who had been the regular hearers of his dead friend’s preaching, yet who remained unconverted:

To you that were the constant Auditors of the deceas’d minister. Consider how indulgent and favourable God has been to several of you, even in this dark Dispensation: He has removed one that was ripe for Heaven; but how dismal has been your State, if he had call’d you that are unprepar’d! If you drop into the Grave while you are unprovided for Eternity, you sink beyond the Reserves of Mercy. O adore the Patience and Long-suffering of God, that you are yet alive, and have one Call more from this Pulpit, and another very Awful one from the Grave of that Person who us’d to fill it. His Death calls upon you to repent, and turn to close with Christ, and make sure of Heaven. Surely you cannot but feel some Emotions in your Breasts, when you think you shall never see nor hear your Painful¹³ minister more. And methinks the Rocks within you should flow, when you think that he preached himself to Death, and you have not yet entertain’d that Jesus whom he preached.

¹⁰ *The Metropolitan Tabernacle; Its History and Work* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1876), 31.

¹¹ Cited *Metropolitan Tabernacle*, 31.

¹² For what follows with regard to these three sermons, I am indebted to research carried out by Pastor Steve Weaver in an unpublished paper, “A Seventeenth Century Baptist View of Ministry as seen in Three Funeral Sermons by John Piggott” (August 2006), that he submitted to me in a course taught at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, on “Baptist Theologians in Historical Context.”

¹³ That is, hard-working.



'Tis true, God gave him several Seals of his ministry, which was the Joy of his Heart, and will be his Crown in the Day of the Lord.

But if you who were only Hearers will continue so, he will be a swift Witness against you in the Day of God. For tho one place held you and him in this World, you'l [*sic*] have very different habitations in the next. He shall eternally solace himself in boundless Rivers of Pleasure; but you shall be eternally plung'd into a bottomless Lake of Fire. But let me intreat you by all that is sacred, by the Joys of Heaven and the Torments of Hell, by the Interest of your never-dying Souls, by Christ's bloody sweat in the Garden, and his Agony on the Cross, that you immediately close with Christ, and receive him as offered in the Gospel; submitting to his Scepter, as well as depending on his Sacrifice; that you may eternally be lodged in the Bosom of his Love.¹⁴

In his funeral sermon for Hercules Collins (d.1702),¹⁵ who died on October 4, less than two months after Harrison, Piggott also commented upon the evangelistic zeal of Collins by saying that "no Man could preach with a more affectionate Regard to the Salvation of Souls."¹⁶ Later in this sermon Piggott called on the regular hearers of Collins' Wapping-street Church who remained unsaved to be witnesses to the gospel fervour of the dead preacher: "You are Witnesses with what Zeal and Fervour, with what Constancy and Seriousness he us'd to warn and persuade you."¹⁷ At this point Piggott himself could not hold back from crying out, "Tho you have been deaf to his former Preaching, yet listen to the Voice of this Providence, lest you continue in your slumber till you sleep the sleep of death." And he closed with these forceful words:

You cannot but see, unless you will close your Eyes, that this World and the Fashion of it is passing away. O what a Change will a few Months or Years make in this numerous Assembly! Yea, what a sad Change has little more than a Fortnight made in this congregation! He that was so lately preaching in this Pulpit, is now wrapped in his Shroud, and confin'd to his Coffin; and the Lips that so often dispers'd Knowledg [*sic*] amongst you, are seal'd up till the Resurrection.

Here's the Body of your late Minister; but his Soul is enter'd into the Joy of his Lord. O that those of you that would not be persuaded by him living, might be wrought upon by his Death!¹⁸

¹⁴ John Piggott, *A Funeral Sermon Occasion'd by the Death of the Reverend Mr. Thomas Harrison* in his *Eleven Sermons Preach'd upon Special Occasions* (London: Nath. Cliff and Dan. Jackson, 1714), 196-197.

¹⁵ On Collins, see Michael A.G. Haykin with Steve Weaver, "*Devoted to the Service of the Temple*": *Piety, Persecution, and Ministry in the Writings of Hercules Collins* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007).

¹⁶ *A Sermon Preach'd at the Funeral of the Reverend Mr. Hercules Collins* in his *Eleven Sermons*, 236.

¹⁷ *Sermon Preach'd at the Funeral of the Reverend Mr. Hercules Collins* in his *Eleven Sermons*, 240.

¹⁸ *Sermon Preach'd at the Funeral of the Reverend Mr. Hercules Collins* in his *Eleven Sermons*, 240.



As in his funeral sermon for Thomas Harrison, Piggott's own passion for the salvation of souls is clearly visible in the way in which he addressed the unconverted.

Finally, in the funeral sermon that he preached for another Calvinistic Baptist minister, William Collins (d.1702)—Piggott was called upon to preach this but three weeks after the one he gave for Hercules Collins—Piggott asserted that the main content of Collins' sermons were related to free gospel proclamation rooted in a love for sinners :

The Subjects he ordinarily insisted on in the Course of his Ministry, were the great and important Truths of the Gospel, which he handled with great Judgment and Clearness. How would he open the Miseries of the fall! And in how moving a manner would he discourse of the Excellency of Christ, and the Virtues of his Blood, and his willingness to save poor awaken'd burdened sinners!¹⁹

The rest of this paper could be filled with the names and stories of other Calvinistic Baptists from this era who shared this indefatigable passion for evangelism—men like Abraham Cheare (c.1626-1668),²⁰ Andrew Gifford, Sr. (1642-1721), William Mitchel (1662-1705), and Joseph Stennett I (1663-1713), who preached Piggott's funeral sermon. Instead, I shall look at a Calvinistic Baptist leader at the close of the “long” eighteenth century, Samuel Pearce (1766-1799), who was convinced that *both* Calvinist soteriology *and* a passionate concern for evangelistic preaching are biblical givens. A close friend of fellow Calvinist William Carey (1761-1834), who is one of the most iconic figures of the modern missionary movement, Pearce's Calvinistic and missional piety are indeed worthy of imitation, as we shall see.

Remembering Samuel Pearce

Scarcely known today, Samuel Pearce was in his own day well known for the anointing that attended his preaching and for the depth of his spirituality. It was said of him that “his ardour...gave him a kind of ubiquity; as a man and a preacher, he was known, he was felt everywhere.”²¹ William Jay (1769-1853), who exercised an influential ministry in Bath for the

¹⁹ *A Funeral Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Reverend Mr. William Collins* in his *Eleven Sermons*, 280-281.

²⁰ For Cheare, see below.

²¹ F. A. Cox, *History of the Baptist Missionary Society, from 1792 to 1842* (London: T. Ward & Co./G. J. Dyer, 1842), I, 54.



first half of the 19th century, said of his contemporary's preaching: "When I have endeavoured to form an image of our Lord as a preacher, Pearce has oftener presented himself to my mind than any other I have been acquainted with." He had, Jay went on, a "mildness and tenderness" in his style of preaching, and a "peculiar unction." When Jay wrote these words it was many years after Pearce's death, but still, he said, he could see his appearance in his mind's eye and feel the impression that he made upon his hearers as he preached. Ever one to appreciate the importance of having spiritual individuals as one's friends, Jay has this comment about the last time that he saw Pearce alive: "What a savour does communion with such a man leave upon the spirit."²²

David Bogue and James Bennett, in their history of the Dissenting interest in England up to the early 19th century, have similar remarks about Pearce. When he preached, they said, "the most careless were attentive, the most prejudiced became favourable, and the coldest felt that, in spite of themselves, they began to kindle." But it was when he prayed in public, they remarked, that Pearce's spiritual ardour was most apparent. Then the "most devout were so elevated beyond their former heights, that they said, 'We scarcely ever seemed to pray before'."²³ In fact, for some decades after his death it was not uncommon to hear him referred to as the "seraphic Pearce."²⁴

Formative years, 1766-1789

The youngest of a number of children, Pearce was born in Plymouth on July 20, 1766, to devout Baptist parents.²⁵ His mother died when he was but an infant, and so he was raised by his godly father, William Pearce (d.1805) and an equally pious grandfather. He would also have known the nurturing influence of the "sturdy Baptist community" of Plymouth, whose history reached back well into the 17th century.²⁶ The heritage of these Baptists is well seen in the character of one of

²² *The Autobiography of William Jay*, eds. George Redford and John Angell James (1854 ed.; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 372, 373.

²³ *The History of Dissenters* (2nd. ed.; London: Frederick Westley and A. H. Davis, 1833), II, 653.

²⁴ See, for example, *The Life and Letters of John Angell James*, ed. R. W. Dale (3rd. ed.; London: James Nisbet and Co., 1861), 67; John Angell James, *An Earnest Ministry the Want of the Times* (4th. ed.; London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1848), 272. The phrase appears to have originated with Pearce's friend, John Ryland, Jr.; see Ernest A. Payne, "Samuel Pearce" in his *The First Generation: Early Leaders of the Baptist Missionary Society in England and America* (London: Carey Press, [1936]), 46.

²⁵ "Memoir of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce, A.M.," *The Evangelical Magazine*, 8 (1800), 177.

²⁶ Payne, "Samuel Pearce", 47.



their early ministers, Abraham Cheare, who has been mentioned above.²⁷ During the time of the great persecution from 1660 to 1688 of all those Christian bodies outside of the Church of England, Cheare was arrested, cruelly treated and imprisoned on Drake's Island, a small island in Plymouth Sound. Fearful that some of his flock might compromise their Baptist convictions to avoid persecution, he wrote a number of letters to his church during the course of his imprisonment. In one of them he cites with approval a statement from the *Irenicum* (1646) of "holy Burroughs," that is, the Puritan author Jeremiah Burroughs (c.1599-1646). "I desire to be a faithful Minister of Christ and his Church, if I cannot be a Prudent one," Cheare quotes from Burroughs' "Epistle to the Reader," "standing in the gap is more dangerous and troublousom [sic] than getting behind the hedge, there you may be more secure and under the wind; but it's best to be there where God looks for a man."²⁸ Cheare himself was one who "stood in the gap," for he died in 1668 while a prisoner for his Baptist convictions.

As Pearce came into his teen years, however, he consciously spurned the rich heritage of his godly home and the Plymouth Baptist community. According to his own testimony, "several vicious school-fellows" became his closest friends and he set his heart on what he would later describe as "evil" and "wicked inclinations."²⁹ But God had better plans for his life. In the summer of 1782, a young preacher by the name of Isaiah Birt (1758-1837) came to preach for a few Sundays in the Plymouth meeting-house.³⁰ The Spirit of God drove home Birt's words to Pearce's heart. The change in Pearce from what he later called "a state of death in trespasses and sins" to a "life in a dear dying Redeemer" was sudden but genuine and lasting.³¹ After his conversion Pearce was especially conscious of the Spirit's witness within his heart that he was a child of God and of being "filled with peace and joy unspeakable."³² A year or so later, on the day when he celebrated his seventeenth birthday, he was baptized as a believer and joined the Plymouth congregation in which he had been raised.

²⁷ On Cheare, see Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London, 1814), II, 103-116.

²⁸ *Words in Season* (London: Nathan Brookes, 1668), 250.

²⁹ Andrew Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce, A. M.* (2nd ed.; Clipstone: J. W. Morris, 1801), 1-2. Henceforth cited as Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd ed.).

³⁰ For the life of Birt, see the memoir by his son: John Birt, "Memoir of the Late Rev. Isaiah Birt", *The Baptist Magazine*, 30 (1838), 54-59, 107-116, 197-203,

³¹ Samuel Pearce, Letter to Isaiah Birt, October 27, 1782 (*The Evangelical Magazine*, 15 (1807), 111).

³² Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd ed.), 2-3.



It was not long after his baptism that the church perceived that Pearce had been endowed with definite gifts that marked him out as one called to pastoral ministry. So, in November of 1785, when he was only nineteen years of age and serving as an apprentice to his father who was a silversmith, Pearce received a call from the church to engage in the ministry of the Word. The church recommended that Pearce first pursue a course of study at the Bristol Baptist Academy. From August, 1786 to May, 1789 Pearce thus studied at what was then the sole Baptist institution in Great Britain for the training of ministers for the Calvinistic Baptist denomination. The benefits afforded by this period of study were ones for which Pearce was ever grateful. There was, for example, the privilege of studying under Caleb Evans (1737-1791), the Principal of the Academy, and Robert Hall, Jr. (1764-1831)—the former a key figure in the late eighteenth-century Calvinistic Baptist community and the latter a reputed genius and one who was destined to become one of the great preachers of the early decades of the next century.³³

Then there were the opportunities for the students to preach and try their wings, as it were. A number of years later Pearce recalled one occasion when he went to preach among the colliers of Coleford, Gloucestershire, the town in which his father in the faith, Isaiah Birt, had grown up. Standing on a three-legged stool in a hut, he directed thirty or forty of these miners to “the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.” “Such an unction from above” attended his preaching that day that the entirety of his hearers were “melted into tears” and he too, “weeping among them, could scarcely speak...for interrupting sighs and sobs.”

Cannon Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, 1789-1799

Early in 1789 Pearce received and accepted a call to serve for a year’s probation as the pastor of Cannon Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. He had supplied the Birmingham pulpit the previous summer as well as over the Christmas vacation. Impressed by Pearce’s evangelistic zeal—a number were saved on both occasions—along with his ability to edify God’s people, the

³³ On the life and ministry of Evans, see especially Norman S. Moon, “Caleb Evans, Founder of the Bristol Education Society”, *The Baptist Quarterly*, 24 (1971-1972), 175-190; Roger Hayden, “Evangelical Calvinism among eighteenth-century British Baptists with particular reference to Bernard Foskett, Hugh and Caleb Evans and the Bristol Baptist Academy, 1690-1791” (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Keele, 1991), 209-240. On Hall, see, in particular, John Greene, *Reminiscences of the Rev. Robert Hall, A.M.* (2nd ed; London: Frederick Westley and A. H. Davis, 1834); G. W. Hughes, *Robert Hall (1764-1831)* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1961); George J. Griffin, “Robert Hall’s Contribution to Early Baptist Missions”, *Baptist History and Heritage*, 3, No.1 (January, 1968), 3-8, 42; Thomas R. McKibbens, Jr., *The Forgotten Heritage: A Lineage of Great Baptist Preaching* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986), 61-66.



church sent their request to him in early February 1789. Five weeks later Pearce wrote back consenting to their request, and by June, his studies finished, he was with them.³⁴ The following year he was formally called to be the pastor of what would turn out to be his only pastoral charge.

His ministry at Cannon Street occupied ten all-too-brief years. Yet they were ones of great fruitfulness. No less than 335 individuals were baptized during his ministry and received into the membership of Cannon Street. This figure does not include those converted under his preaching who, for one reason or another, did not join themselves to the Birmingham cause. A Sunday school was started in 1795 and within a very short period of time grew to the point that some 1200 scholars were enrolled in it.³⁵

At the heart of his preaching and spirituality was that key-note of evangelicalism, the mercy of God displayed in the cross of Christ. Writing one Sunday afternoon to William Summers, a friend then residing in London, Pearce told him that he had for his sermon that evening “the best subject of all in the Bible. Eph. i.7—Redemption! how welcome to the captive! Forgiveness! how delightful to the guilty! Grace! how pleasant to the heart of a saved sinner!” Christ’s atoning death for sinners, he went on to say, is “the leading truth in the N.T., ... a doctrine I cannot but venerate; and to the Author of such a redemption my whole soul labours to exhaust itself in praise.”³⁶ And in his final letter to his congregation, written on 31 May 1799, he reminded them that the gospel which he had preached among them for ten years and in which he urged them to stand fast was “the gospel of the grace of God; the gospel of free, full, everlasting salvation, founded on the sufferings and death of God manifest in the flesh.”³⁷

³⁴ S. Pearce Carey, *Samuel Pearce, M. A., The Baptist Brainerd* (3rd ed.; London: The Carey Press, n.d.), 93-94.

³⁵ Carey, *Samuel Pearce*, 113; Arthur S. Langley, *Birmingham Baptists: Past and Present* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1939), 34. Even after Pearce’s death, his wife Sarah could rejoice in people joining the church who had been saved under her husband’s ministry. See Andrew Fuller, “Memoir of Mrs. Pearce” in his *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce, A. M.* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1829), 160-161.

³⁶ Carey, *Samuel Pearce*, 97-98.

³⁷ Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd ed.), 123-124. See also Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd ed.), 140-141.



Men and women called him the “silver-tongued” because of the intensity and power of his preaching.³⁸ But there were times when preaching was a real struggle for him. Writing to William Carey (1761-1834) in 1796, for example, he told the Baptist missionary who at that time was living in Mudnabati, West Bengal:

At some times, I question whether I ever knew the grace of God in truth; and at others I hesitate on the most important points of Christian faith. I have lately had peculiar struggles of this kind with my own heart, and have often half concluded to speak no more in the name of the Lord. When I am preparing for the pulpit, I fear I am going to avow fables for facts and doctrines of men for the truths of God. In conversation I am obliged to be silent, lest my tongue should belie my heart. In prayer I know not what to say, and at times think prayer altogether useless. Yet I cannot wholly surrender my hope, or my profession.—Three things I find, above all others, tend to my preservation:—First, a recollection of time when, at once, I was brought to abandon the practice of sins which the fear of damnation could never bring me to relinquish before. Surely, I say, this must be the finger of God, according to the Scripture doctrine of regeneration:—Second, I feel such a consciousness of guilt that nothing but the gospel scheme can satisfy my mind respecting the hope of salvation: and, Thirdly, I see that what true devotion does appear in the world, seems only to be found among those to whom Christ is precious.³⁹

A handful of his sermons were published, as well as the circular letter for the Midland Baptist Association that he drew up in 1795 and that was entitled *Doctrine of Salvation by Free Grace Alone*. A good overview of his Calvinism may be found in the following extract from this circular letter:

The point of difference between us and many other professing Christians lies in the doctrine of salvation entirely by grace. For whilst some assert that good works are the cause of justification; some that good works are united with the merits of Christ and so both contribute to our justification; and others that good works neither in whole nor in part justify, but the act of faith; we renounce everything in point of our acceptance with God, but his free Grace alone which justifies the ungodly, still treading in the steps of our venerable forefathers, the compilers of the Baptist Confession of Faith, who thus express themselves respecting the doctrine of justification: “Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth, . . . for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them as their righteousness; but by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith” which “is the alone instrument of justification.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Payne, “Samuel Pearce”, 48-49.

³⁹ Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd ed.), 80-81.

⁴⁰ *The Second London Confession of Faith* 11.1, 2.



In this point do all the other lines of our confession meet. For if it be admitted that justification is an act of free grace in God without any respect to the merit or demerit of the person justified, then the doctrines of Jehovah's sovereign love in choosing to himself a people from before the foundation of the world, his sending his Son to expiate *their* guilt, his effectual operations upon *their* hearts, and his perfecting the work he has begun in them until those whom he justifies he also glorifies, will be embraced as necessary parts of the glorious scheme of our salvation.⁴¹

A second prominent feature of his spirituality was a passion for the salvation of his fellow human beings. On a preaching trip to Wales, for instance, he wrote to his wife Sarah (d.1804) about the lovely countryside that he was passing through: "every pleasant scene which opened to us on our way (& they were very numerous) lost half its beauty because my lovely Sarah was not present to partake its pleasures with me." But, he added, "to see the Country was not the immediate object of my visiting Wales—I came to preach the gospel—to tell poor Sinners of the dear Lord Jesus—to endeavour to restore the children of misery to the pious pleasures of divine enjoyment."⁴² This passion is strikingly revealed in four events.

Preaching at Guilsborough

The first event took place when Pearce was asked to preach at the opening of a Baptist meeting-house in Guilsborough, Northamptonshire, in May, 1794. The previous meeting-house had been burnt down at Christmas, 1792, by a mob that was hostile to Baptists. Pearce had spoken in the morning on Psalm 76:10 ("Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain"). Later that day, during the midday meal, it was quite evident from the conversation that was going at the dinner tables that Pearce's sermon had been warmly appreciated. It was thus no surprise when Pearce was asked if he would be willing to preach again the following morning. "If you will find a congregation," Pearce responded, "I will find a sermon." It was agreed to have the sermon at 5 a.m. so that a number of farm labourers could come who wanted to hear Pearce preach and who would have to be at their tasks early in the morning.

⁴¹ *The Doctrine of Salvation by Free Grace Alone* (1795; repr. n.p.: New York Baptist Association, 1855), 2.

⁴² Letter to Sarah Pearce, July 11, 1792 (Samuel Pearce Mss., Angus Library, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford).



After Pearce had preached the second time, and that to a congregation of more than 200 people, and he was sitting at breakfast with a few others, including Andrew Fuller, the latter remarked to Pearce how pleased he had been with the content of his friend's sermon. But, he went on to say, it seemed to him that Pearce's sermon was poorly structured. "I thought," Fuller told his friend, "you did not seem to close when you had really finished. I wondered that, contrary to what is usual with you, you seemed, as it were, to begin again at the end—how was it?" Pearce's response was terse: "It was so; but I had my reason." "Well then, come, let us have it," Fuller jovially responded. Pearce was quite reluctant to divulge the reason, but after a further entreaty from Fuller, he consented and said:

Well, my brother, you shall have the secret, if it must be so. Just at the moment I was about to resume my seat, thinking I had finished, the door opened, and I saw a poor man enter, of the working class; and from the sweat on his brow, and the symptoms of his fatigue, I conjectured that he had walked some miles to this early service, but that he had been unable to reach the place till the close. A momentary thought glanced through my mind—here may be a man who never heard the gospel, or it may be he is one that regards it as a feast of fat things; in either case, the effort on his part demands one on mine. So with the hope of doing him good, I resolved at once to forget all else, and, in despite of criticism, and the apprehension of being thought tedious, to give him a quarter of an hour.⁴³

As Fuller and the others present at the breakfast table listened to this simple explanation, they were deeply impressed by Pearce's evident love for souls. Not afraid to appear as one lacking in homiletical skill, especially in the eyes of his fellow pastors, Pearce's zeal for the spiritual health of *all* his hearers had led him to minister as best he could to this "poor man" who had arrived late.

"An Instrument of establishing the empire of my dear Lord"

Given his ardour for the advance of the gospel it is only to be expected that Pearce would be vitally involved in the formation in October, 1792, of what would eventually be termed the Baptist Missionary Society, the womb of the modern missionary movement. In fact, by 1794 Pearce was so deeply gripped by the cause of missions that he had arrived at the conviction that he should offer his services to the Society and go out to India to join the first missionary team the

⁴³ F. A. Cox, *History of the Baptist Missionary Society, from 1792 to 1842* (London: T. Ward & Co./G. J. Dyer, 1842), I, 52-53. Pearce's friendship with Fuller drew him into a highly significant circle of friends. For the story of this circle, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *One Heart and One Soul: John Sutcliff of Olney, his friends and his times* (Darlington, Co. Durham: Evangelical Press, 1995).



Society had sent out, namely, William Carey, John Thomas (1757-1801), and their respective families. He began to study Bengali on his own.⁴⁴ And for the entire month of October, 1794, which preceded the early November meeting of the Society's administrative committee where Pearce's offer would be evaluated, Pearce set apart "one day in every week to secret prayer and fasting" for direction.⁴⁵ He also kept a diary of his experiences during this period, much which Fuller later inserted verbatim into his *Memoirs of Pearce* and which admirably displays what Fuller described as his friend's "singular submissiveness to the will of God."⁴⁶

During one of these days of prayer, fasting, and seeking God's face, Pearce recorded how God met with him in a remarkable way. Pearce had begun the day with "solemn prayer for the assistance of the Holy Spirit" so that he might "enjoy the spirit and power of prayer," have his "personal religion improved," and his "public steps directed." He proceeded to read a portion of the life of the American missionary David Brainerd (1718-1747) by Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), a book that quickened the zeal of many of Pearce's generation, and to peruse 2 Corinthians 2-6. Afterwards he went to prayer, but, he recorded, his heart was hard and "all was dullness," and he feared that somehow he had offended God.

Suddenly, Pearce wrote, "it pleased God to smite the rock with the rod of his Spirit, and immediately the waters began to flow." Likening the frame of his heart to the rock in the desert that Moses struck with his rod in order to bring forth water from it (see Exodus 17:1-6), Pearce had found himself unable to generate any profound warmth for God and his dear cause. God, as it were, had to come by his Spirit, "touch" Pearce's heart and so quicken his affections. He was overwhelmed, he wrote, by "a heavenly glorious melting power." He saw afresh "the love of a crucified Redeemer" and "the attractions of his cross." He felt "like Mary [Madgalene] at the master's feet weeping, for tenderness of soul; like a little child, for submission to my heavenly father's will." The need to take the gospel to those who had never heard it gripped him anew

⁴⁴ Payne, "Samuel Pearce", 50.

⁴⁵ Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd ed.), 38.

⁴⁶ Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd ed.), 59. For the diary, see Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd ed.), 39-57. For some lengthy extracts from the diary, see also Michael A. G. Haykin, "Samuel Pearce, Extracts from a Diary: Calvinist Baptist Spirituality in the Eighteenth Century", *The Banner of Truth*, 279 (December 1986), 9-18.



“with an irresistible drawing of soul” and, in his own words, “compelled me to vow that I would, by his leave, serve him among the heathen.” As he wrote later in his diary:

If ever in my life I knew anything of the influences of the Holy Spirit, I did at this time. I was swallowed up in God. Hunger, fulness, cold, heat, friends and enemies, all seemed nothing before God. I was in a new world. All was delightful; for Christ was all, and in all. Many times I concluded prayer, but when rising from my knees, communion with God was so desirable, that I was sweetly drawn to it again and again, till my...strength was almost exhausted.⁴⁷

The decision of the Society as to Pearce’s status was ultimately a negative one. When the executive committee of the Society met at Roade, Northamptonshire, on 12 November, it was of the opinion that Pearce could best serve the cause of missions at home in England. Pearce’s response to this decision is best seen in extracts from two letters. The first, written to his wife Sarah the day after he received the decision, stated: “I am disappointed, but not dismayed. I ever wish to make my Saviour’s will my own.”⁴⁸ The second, sent to William Carey over four months later, contains a similar desire to submit to the perfectly good and sovereign will of God.

Instead of a letter, you perhaps expected to have seen the writer; and had the will of God been so, he would by this time have been on his way to Mudnabatty: but it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps. Full of hope and expectation as I was, when I wrote you last, that I should be honoured with a mission to the poor heathen, and be an instrument of establishing the empire of my dear Lord in India, I must submit now to stand still, and see the salvation of God.

Pearce then told Carey some of the details of the November meeting at which the Society executive had made their decision regarding his going overseas.

I shall ever love my dear brethren the more for the tenderness with which they treated me, and the solemn prayer they repeatedly put up to God for me. At last, I withdrew for them to decide, and whilst I was apart from them, and engaged in prayer for divine direction, I felt all anxiety forsake me, and an entire resignation of will to the will of God, be it what it would, together with a satisfaction that so much praying breath would not be lost; but that He who hath promised to be found of all that seek him, would assuredly direct the hearts of my brethren to that which was most pleasing to himself, and most suitable to the interests

⁴⁷ Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd ed.), 55.

⁴⁸ Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd ed.), 35.



of his kingdom in the world. Between two and three hours were they deliberating after which time a paper was put into my hands, of which the following is a copy.

“The brethren at this meeting are fully satisfied of the fitness of brother P[earce]’s qualifications, and greatly approve of the disinterestedness of his motives and the ardour of his mind. But another Missionary not having been requested, and not being in our view immediately necessary, and brother P[earce] occupying already a post very important to the prosperity of the Mission itself, we are unanimously of opinion that at present, however, he should continue in the situation which he now occupies.”

In response to this decision, which dashed some of Pearce’s deepest longings, he was, he said, “enabled cheerfully to reply, “The will of the Lord be done;” and receiving this answer as the voice of God, I have, for the most part, been easy since, though not without occasional pantings of spirit after the publishing of the gospel to the Pagans.”⁴⁹

From the vantage-point of the highly individualistic spirit of twenty-first-century Western Christianity, Pearce’s friends seem to have been quite wrong in refusing to send him to India. If, during his month of fasting and prayer, he had felt he knew God’s will for his life, was not the Baptist Missionary Society executive wrong in the decision they made? And should not Pearce have persisted in pressing his case for going? While these questions may seem natural ones to ask given the cultural matrix of contemporary Western Christianity, Pearce knew himself to be part of a team and he was more interested in the triumph of that team’s strategy than the fulfillment of his own personal desires.⁵⁰

“Surely Irish Zion demands our prayers”

Pearce’s passion for the lost found outlet in other ways, though. In July of 1795 he received an invitation from the General Evangelical Society in Dublin to come over to Dublin and preach at a number of venues. He was not able to go until the following year, when he left Birmingham at 8 a.m. on May 31. After travelling through Wales and taking passage on a ship from Holyhead, he landed in Dublin on Saturday afternoon, June 4.⁵¹ Pearce stayed with a Presbyterian elder by the

⁴⁹ Letter to William Carey, March 27, 1795 [*Missionary Correspondence: containing Extracts of Letters from the late Mr. Samuel Pearce, to the Missionaries in India, Between the Years 1794, and 1798; and from Mr. John Thomas, from 1798, to 1800* (London: T. Gardiner and Son, 1814), 26, 30-31].

⁵⁰ See Ralph D. Winter, “William Carey’s Major Novelty” in J. T. K. Daniel and R. E. Hedlund, eds., *Carey’s Obligation and India’s Renaissance* (Serampore, West Bengal: Council of Serampore College, 1993), 136-137.

⁵¹ Samuel Pearce, Letter to Sarah Pearce, June 4, 1796 (Samuel Pearce mss.).



name of Hutton while in Dublin who was a member of a congregation pastored by a Dr. McDowell.⁵² Pearce preached for this congregation on a number of occasions, as well as for other congregations in the city, including the Baptists.

Baptist witness in Dublin went back to the Cromwellian era to 1653 when through the ministry of Thomas Patient (d.1666), the first Calvinistic Baptist meeting-house was built in Swift's Alley.⁵³ The church grew rapidly at first, and by 1725 this church had between 150 and 200 members.⁵⁴ A new meeting-house was put up in the 1730s. By the time that Pearce came to Ireland in 1796, though, the membership had declined to roughly forty members. Pearce's impressions of the congregation were not too positive. In a letter he wrote to William Carey in August, 1796, the month after his return to England, he told the missionary:

There were 10 Baptist societies in Ireland.—They are now reduced to 6 & bid fair soon to be perfectly extinct.

When I came to Dublin they had no meeting of any kind for religious purposes... Indeed they were so dead to piety that, tho' of their own denomination, I saw & knew less of them than of every other professors in the place.⁵⁵

This opinion does not appear to have dampened his zeal in preaching. A Dublin deacon wrote to a friend: "We have had a Jubilee for weeks. That blessed man of God, Samuel Pearce, has preached amongst us with great sweetness and much power."⁵⁶ And in a letter to his close friend Summers, Pearce acknowledged:

Never have I been more deeply taught my own nothingness; never has the power of God more evidently rested upon me. The harvest here is great indeed; and the Lord of the harvest has enabled me to labor in it with delight.⁵⁷

⁵² Samuel Pearce, Letter to Sarah Pearce, June 4, 1796.

⁵³ B. R. White, "Thomas Patient in England and Ireland", *Irish Baptist Historical Society Journal*, 2 (1969-1970), 41. See also Robert Dunlop, "Dublin Baptists from 1650 Onwards", *Irish Baptist Historical Society Journal*, 21 (1988-1989), 6-7.

⁵⁴ Joshua Thompson, "Baptists in Ireland 1792-1922: A Dimension of Protestant Dissent" (Unpublished D. Phil. Thesis, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, 1988), 9.

⁵⁵ Letter to William Carey, August, 1796 (Samuel Pearce Carey Collection—Pearce Family Letters, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford).

⁵⁶ Carey, *Samuel Pearce*, 119.

⁵⁷ *Memoir of Rev. Samuel Pearce. A.M.* (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), 132.



This passionate concern for the advance of the gospel in Ireland is well caught in a sentence from one of his letters to his wife Sarah. “Surely,” he wrote to her on June 24, “*Irish Zion demands our prayers.*”⁵⁸

Praying for the French

In the three remaining years of Pearce’s earthly life, he expended much of his energy in raising support for the cause of foreign missions. As he informed Carey in the fall of 1797:

I can hardly refrain from repeating what I have so often told you before, that I long to meet you on earth and to join you in your labours of love among the poor dear heathens. Yes, would my Lord bid me so, I should with transport obey the summons and take a joyful farewell of the land that bore me, though it were for ever. But I must confess that the path of duty appears to me clearer than before to be at home, at least for the present. Not that I think my connexions in England a sufficient argument, but that I am somewhat necessary to the Mission itself, and shall be as long as money is wanted and our number of active friends does not increase. Brother Fuller and myself have the whole of the collecting business on our hands, and though there are many others about us who exceed me in grace and gifts, yet their other engagements forbid or their peculiar turn of mind disqualifies them for that kind of service. I wish, however, to be thankful if our dear Lord will but employ me as a foot in the body. I consider myself as united to the hands and eyes, and mouth, and heart, and all; and when the body rejoices, I have my share of gladness with the other members.⁵⁹

One of the meetings at which Pearce preached was the one that saw William Ward (1769-1823)—later to be one of the most invaluable of Carey’s co-workers in India—accepted as a missionary with the Baptist Missionary Society. Those attending the meeting, which took place at Kettering on 16 October 1798, were deeply stirred by Pearce’s passion and concern for the advance of the gospel. He preached “like an Apostle,” Fuller later wrote to Carey. And when Ward wrote to Carey, he told his future colleague that Pearce “set the whole meeting in a flame. Had missionaries been needed, we might have had a cargo immediately.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Letter to Sarah Pearce, June 24, 1796 (Samuel Pearce mss.).

⁵⁹ Letter to William Carey, September 8, 1797 (*Missionary Correspondence*, 53-54).

⁶⁰ Andrew Fuller, Letter to William Carey, April 18, 1799 (Letters of Andrew Fuller, typescript transcript, Angus Library, Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford); William Ward, Letter to William Carey, October 1798 [cited S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey*, ed. Peter Masters (London: Wakeman Trust, 1993), 172]. In his memoirs of Pearce, Fuller wrote that Pearce’s sermon was “full of a holy unction, and seemed to breathe an apostolical ardour” [*Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd ed.), 100].



Returning back to Birmingham from this meeting Pearce was caught in a heavy downpour of rain, drenched to the skin, and subsequently developed a severe chill. Neglecting to rest and foolishly thinking what he called “pulpit sweats” would effect a cure, he continued a rigorous schedule of preaching at Cannon Street as well as in outlying villages around Birmingham. His lungs became so inflamed that Pearce was necessitated to ask Ward to supply the Cannon Street pulpit for a few months during the winter of 1798-1799.

By mid-December, 1798, Pearce could not converse for more than a few minutes without losing his breath. Yet still he was thinking of the salvation of the lost. Writing to Carey around this time, he told him of a plan to take the gospel to France that he had been mulling over in his mind. At that time Great Britain and France were locked in a titanic war, the Napoleonic War, that would last into the middle of the second decade of the next century. This war was the final and climactic episode in a struggle that had dominated the “long” eighteenth century. Not surprisingly, there was little love lost between the British and the French. But Pearce was gripped by a far different passion than those that gripped many in Britain and France—his was the priority of the kingdom of Christ. In one of the last sermons that he ever preached, on a day of public thanksgiving for Horatio Nelson’s annihilation of the French Fleet at the Battle of the Nile (1798) and the British repulse of a French invasion fleet off the coast of Ireland in the fall of 1799, Pearce pointedly said:

Should any one expect that I shall introduce the *destruction* of our foes, by the late victories gained off the coasts of Egypt and Ireland, as the object of pleasure and gratitude, he will be disappointed. The man who can take pleasure at the destruction of his fellow men, is a cannibal at heart;... but to the heart of him who calls himself a disciple of the merciful Jesus, let such pleasure be an everlasting stranger. Since in that sacred volume, which I revere as the fair gift of heaven to man, I am taught, that “of one blood God hath made all nations,” [Acts 17:26] it is impossible for me not to regard every man as my brother, and to consider, that national differences ought not to excite personal animosities.⁶¹

A few months later—when he was desperately ill—he wrote a letter to Carey telling him of his plans for a missionary journey to France. “I have been endeavouring for some years,” he told Carey, “to get five of our Ministers to agree that they will apply themselves to the French

⁶¹ *Motives to Gratitude* (Birmingham: James Belcher, 1798), 18-19.



language, ... then we [for he was obviously intending to be one of the five] might spend two months annually in that Country, and at least satisfy ourselves that Christianity was not lost in France for want of a fair experiment in its favour: and who can tell what God might do!”⁶² God would use British evangelicals, notably Pearce’s Baptist contemporary Robert Haldane (1764-1842), to take the gospel to Francophones on the Continent when peace eventually came, but Pearce’s anointed preaching would play no part in that great work. Yet his ardent prayers on behalf of the French could not have been without some effect. As Pearce had noted in 1794 “praying breath” is never lost.

Final days

By the spring of 1799 Pearce was desperately ill with pulmonary tuberculosis. Leaving his wife and family—he and Sarah had five children by this time—he went to the south of England from April to July in the hope that rest there might effect a cure. Being away from his wife and children, though, only aggravated his suffering. Writing to Sarah—“the dear object of my tenderest, my warmest love”—from Plymouth, he requested her to “write me as soon as you receive this” and signed it “ever, ever, ever, wholly yours.” Three weeks later when he wrote, he sent Sarah “a thousand & 10 thousand thousand embraces,” and then poignantly added, “may the Lord hear our daily prayers for each other!”⁶³

Sarah and the children had gone to stay with her family in Alcester, twenty or miles or so from Birmingham. But by mid-May Sarah could no longer bear being absent from her beloved. Leaving their children with Birmingham friends, she headed south in mid-May, where she stayed with her husband until the couple slowly made their way home to Birmingham in mid-July.⁶⁴ By his time Samuel’s voice was so far gone that he could not even whisper without pain in his lungs. His suffering, though, seemed to act like a refiner’s fire to draw him closer to Christ. “Blessed be his dear name,” he said not long before his death, “who shed his blood for me. ... Now I see the value of the religion of the cross. It is a religion for a dying sinner. ... Yes, I taste its sweetness, and enjoy its fulness, with all the gloom of a dying-bed before me; and far rather would I be the poor emaciated and emaciating creature that I am, than be an emperor with every earthly good

⁶² Cited Carey, *Samuel Pearce*, 189.

⁶³ Letters to Sarah Pearce, April 20, 1799 and May 3, 1799 (Samuel Pearce mss.).

⁶⁴ Ernest A. Payne, “Some Samuel Pearce Documents”, *The Baptist Quarterly*, 18 (1959-1960), 31.



about him, but without a God.”⁶⁵ Some of his final words were for Sarah: “I trust our separation will not be forever...we shall meet again.”⁶⁶

He fell asleep in Christ on Thursday, 10 October 1799. William Ward, who had been profoundly influenced by Pearce’s zeal and spirituality, well summed up his character when he wrote not long before the latter’s death: “Oh, how does personal religion shine in Pearce! What a soul! What ardour for the glory of God! ...you see in him a mind wholly given up to God; a sacred lustre shines in his conversation: always tranquil, always cheerful. ...I have seen more of God in him than in any other person I ever met.”⁶⁷

A concluding word

When Pearce accepted the pastorate of the Birmingham congregation at Cannon Street, he stated in his letter of acceptance, written on July 18, 1790, that he hoped the union between pastor and church would “be for God’s glory, for the good of precious souls, for your prosperity as a Church, and for my prosperity as your minister.”⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that he placed “God’s glory” and “for the good of precious souls” as his first two goals of his ministry. These two expressions well capture the twin themes examined in this paper: Pearce’s Calvinistic commitment to living to the glory of God and his missional passion for the salvation of sinners.

⁶⁵ Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (2nd. ed.), 141.

⁶⁶ “The dying words of dear Br^r Pearce to his wife” (Samuel Pearce Mss.).

⁶⁷ Cited Carey, *Samuel Pearce*, 188.

⁶⁸ Carey, *Samuel Pearce* 95.