

Methodist Reform and Revival among Native Americans in Oregon, 1838-1844

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We will soon be celebrating the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church Missionary Society in 1819. Anniversaries like this inspire reflection on the progress, decline, faithfulness, and faithlessness in the history of the Methodist movement. Anniversaries can also orient us to other “benchmark” years in Methodism’s past. I found it curious when beginning my explorations of early Methodism in the Oregon Territory that several key dates in the history of Methodism coincide with critical events in the history of European / Native American contact in the Pacific Northwest.

Since we have a bit longer to work with papers here at Oxford than we do at typical academic conferences and since most of you know little of the Pacific Northwest context, I invite you to join me in reflecting on some of these coincidental events in Methodism and the Pacific Northwest. After summarizing Pacific Northwest history of European contact in three dates, I will then discuss the intellectual / cultural context of early nineteenth century Methodist missionaries in their perception of Native American peoples before they arrived in Oregon. I will do that with three pictures. After this bit of context-setting, I will move on to the main substance of my paper.

Introduction: Three Dates

In 1784 Methodist leaders gathered to consider how to step out on their own away from British Methodism at the Christmas Conference at Lovely Lane Chapel. In the Pacific Northwest this date is synonymous with the establishment of the first permanent settlement of Russians on Kodiak Island in Alaska and of the publication in London of James Cook’s book about his third voyage which included exploration of the Oregon coast and the riches to be had there from the slaughter of sea otters for their

pelts. These furs were highly desirable in the Chinese market.¹ A “soft gold” rush was on for this first-wave fur trade. Boston merchants led the way among the Americans. It would be another fifty years before Methodist missionaries – also with strong New England ties – arrived in the Oregon interior seeking to gather people into Methodist societies. The term for white people in the Oregon pidgin language, Chinook Wawa, remains “Boston.”

In 1792 Richard Allen and Absalom Jones led a walkout from St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia to protest the racism of the white parishioners there. It was also the year of the first settlement of Nova Scotian freed black slaves in Sierra Leone – a good portion of whom were Methodists – which has been described as the first big “success story” in the Protestant missionary movement.² In the same year, Captain Robert Gray – again from Boston – was the first to successfully pilot his ship (a treacherous task) up the main waterway of Oregon and also name it after his own ship – *The Columbia*. It was the first American ship to sail around the world – a fitting symbol for the global connections then happening on the Northwest coast among Russian, Spanish, Japanese, British, and Boston sailors, merchants, and, eventually, missionaries.³

The year 1816 saw both the death of Francis Asbury and the birth of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination. This is also the year when the first Methodist society was established among the Wyandot Native Americans in Ohio by African American missionary John Stewart (1786-1823).⁴ In

¹ James R. Gibson, "Bostonians and Muscovites on the Northwest Coast, 1788-1841," in *The Western Shore: Oregon Country Essays Honoring the American Revolution*, ed. Thomas Vaughan (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society, 1976), 82.

² Andrew Walls and Edited by Mark R. Gornik, *Crossing Cultural Frontiers: Studies in the History of World Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 91-110.

³ Spanish settlement at Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island was in the early 1790s, but they left in 1795 without making much of an impact. Evidence suggests that the converts they made to Christianity were people whom they took with them when they left – probably against their will. Thomas E. Jessett, "Christian Missions to the Indians of Oregon," *Church History* 28, no. 2 (1959): 147.

⁴ Frederick A. Norwood, "Strangers in a Strange Land: Removal of the Wyandot Indians," *Methodist History* 8, no. 3 (1975).

Oregon, during this same year, a group of 24 Iroquois Indians from the Great Lakes came to live among the Flathead tribe of eastern Washington and northern Idaho for the purposes of fur trapping and trading. The Iroquois visitors were Christians and likely descendants of persons who had encountered Jesuit or perhaps Franciscan Recollect missionaries in 17th century eastern Canada.⁵ The leader of these 24 Iroquois was known as Big Ignace or Old Ignace. He told stories about his Catholic faith which fired the imaginations of the Flatheads. Perhaps a century earlier the Flatheads heard about the existence of “black robes” from a medicine man named “Shining Shirt.” He had foretold their coming as well, and now they were hearing this again from 24 Iroquois.⁶

These three stories from three different dates in American Methodist history are a helpful reminder that even if Methodist missionaries to Oregon were the first white missionaries to arrive in that place they were not the first ones to bring news about the Christian faith. Methodist missionaries to Oregon were entering a place where fur trappers had been for over fifty years on the Oregon Coast and where news of a holy book and priests with an important story to tell and spiritual power to share were already stirring among the indigenous persons there. Sadly, they were also entering a place that was being decimated by disease brought by these earlier waves of fur trappers and traders. By the early 1840s some Native American groups – namely, the Chinookans and Kalapuyans – had lost up to 88% of

⁵ Franciscan Recollect mission preceded that of the Jesuits in New France. While the Recollects focused most of their attention on Huron rather than the Iroquois their influence on the ancestors of these 19th century Iroquoian visitors to Oregon may still have been substantial. Franciscan Recollect mission history has only recently become more well-developed. For a recent review of that historiography see Anicka Fast, "Helping "Our Canadian Brothers": Early Recollect Missiology as an Experiment in Christian Community, 1615-1629," *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 5, no. 1 (2018).

⁶ Wilfred P. Schoenberg, *Paths to the Northwest : A Jesuit History of the Oregon Province*, A Campion Book (Chicago, Ill.: Loyola University Press, 1982), 2-3. These 24 Iroquois fur trappers were hardly the only influence of Christianity in the Northwest. In 1825 two Native American boys – sons of prominent “war chiefs” of the Spokane and Kutenai people – were brought east to the Red River Indian School which was run by the Church Missionary Society. In 1829, when they returned to the region around modern-day Spokane they taught their people about the Christian faith and interest in Christianity spread rapidly. It is this event more than any other that likely prompted the 1831 voyage of Nez Perce Native Americans to St. Louis in search of “black robes.” Alvin M. Josephy, *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest* (Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 84-97.

their population.⁷ This was especially noticeable in the Willamette Valley where Methodists first settled. So many of the indigenous peoples were gone or were dying when they arrived that the school Methodists soon established for children was in some respects an orphanage. An early missionary layman, P. L. Edwards, gets at some of the bleakness of the area filled with disease: "In one day's ascent of the Wallamette in a canoe, I have counted nine depopulated villages: in some instances whole tribes were nearly annihilated, and the few desolate survivors fled from the abodes of death, and identified themselves with their less unfortunate neighbors."⁸

Introduction: Three Pictures

After a brief hiatus in missionary activity among Native Americans during the Revolutionary War, a number of missionary societies emerged to once again seek to convert them. Historians estimate that there were over twenty missionary societies founded in the decades after the end of the Revolutionary War focused on ministry among indigenous persons. Moravians, Religious Society of Friends, and, most notably, the Congregationalists all became engaged in Native American evangelization and civilization in the decades following the Revolutionary War. By 1820, one of the largest missionary societies, the ABCFM, was spending half of its resources and utilizing half its personnel in work among Native Americans.⁹ When the Methodist Episcopal Church's missionary society began in 1819 the vast majority

⁷ Robert T. Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence: Introduced Infectious Diseases and Population Decline among Northwest Coast Indians, 1774-1874* (Vancouver / Seattle: UBC Press ; University of Washington Press, 1999), 84. The leading scholar of early epidemics in the Pacific Northwest, Robert T. Boyd, estimates that the Chinookans and Kalapuyans had a population somewhat less than the estimated 15,545 in the Lewis and Clark report in the early 1800s. By 1841 Boyd estimates that these Native American groups had declined to less than 2,000. The early 1830s saw the beginning of a major malarial epidemic in the northern Willamette and lower Columbian valleys.

⁸ P. L. Edwards, *Sketch of the Oregon Territory or, Emigrants' Guide* (Liberty, Missouri: The Herald, 1842), 15.

⁹ R. Pierce Beaver, "Protestant Churches and the Indians," in *Handbook of North American Indians: History of Indian-White Relations*, ed. Wilcomb E. Washburn (Washington, D.C. : Smithsonian Institution, 1988), 437.

of their mission initiatives in the early years were also among various Native American groups.¹⁰ The strategy of most missionary societies among Native Americans followed the lead of the Congregationalists in using a “civilize first evangelize second” strategy for their work. All missionary societies did both; the debate was which to focus on first.¹¹ For the most part, Methodists promoted a belief in an “evangelize first” strategy – at least rhetorically and especially at the beginning. Among Oregon Methodist missionaries there was no explicit agreement on whether to evangelize or civilize first, and some, like Henry Perkins, the missionary I will be discussing most in my paper, maintained an “evangelize first” prioritization until the end of his time in Oregon. In practice, like so many missionaries before and after them, they found it difficult to discern where their own ethnocentrism was operative in what they did and thus how civilization and evangelization could be disentangled from one another.¹²

The Cherokee were, in many respects, literally the “poster child” for this civilize then evangelize effort in the 1820s as exemplified in this picture from 1830 of President Andrew Jackson holding Native Americans in his lap as children. This first picture is in reference to the Indian Removal Act, passed by the US congress in 1830, which resulted in the expulsion of eastern tribes to places further west (often Oklahoma and Arkansas) in subsequent years. The image simultaneously conveys the paternalism of

¹⁰ As previously stated, the first Methodist society among the Wyandot was established in 1816 through the leadership efforts of African American Methodist preacher John Stewart. Norwood. For more on the context of Methodism in New England during the period which roughly corresponds to the life of Methodist missionaries to Oregon see Eric Baldwin, ““The Devil Begins to Roar”: Opposition to Early Methodists in New England,” *Church History* 75, no. 1 (2006). Baldwin’s examination of Methodists in New England is a helpful contrast to Furtwangler’s portrayal of New England Methodists as bookish tenderfoots although Furtwangler’s discussion of Methodists’ literary orientation is nonetheless helpful. Albert Furtwangler, *Bringing Indians to the Book*, The Emil and Kathleen Sick Lecture-Book Series in Western History and Biography (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).

¹¹ Beaver, 437.

¹² Robert J. Loewenberg, “New Evidence Old Categories: Jason Lee as Zealot,” *Pacific Historical Review* 47, no. 3 (1978): 357. Another missionary to Oregon, Joseph C. Frost, confessed that during his 3 years in Oregon he changed his mind with regard to the Christianize first civilize second prioritization. Daniel Lee and Joseph H. Frost, *Ten Years in Oregon* (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1968), 319.

Andrew Jackson and also the manipulation of Native Americans to US imperialistic desires.¹³ Methodist missionaries sometimes opposed Native American removal. This was especially true among the Cherokees and the Wyandots with whom they worked closely.¹⁴ The months that Methodist missionaries were voyaging west to encounter Native American groups for the first time coincides with a period when Methodist missionaries together with Wyandot Methodist Native Americans gathered for protracted meetings with US government officials who desired that they move further west. They successfully resisted removal at this time in 1834; Methodist Native American leaders and Methodist missionaries who worked with them resisted again in 1843 but to no avail.¹⁵

A second image from a few years earlier, in 1826, reveals a rather different portrayal of Native Americans the Methodist missionaries may have had at the outset but rather quickly rejected after their arrival in the American West. This picture is from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* published in 1826. It conveys a "noble savage" motif which was common among whites in the eastern United States. Depicted in this image is a dying Native American along with his companion dressed in what appear to be robes reminiscent of a Greek philosopher.¹⁶ In the period of the 1830s when Methodists became enthralled with the possibility of seeing Indians come to faith in Christ in the far

¹³ Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. "White Conceptions of Indians" in *Handbook of North American Indians: History of Indian-White Relations, Vol 4*. Washington DC: Smithsonian, 1988.

¹⁴ Methodist missionary J. J. Trott and Superintendent of the Methodist Cherokee Mission D. C. M'Leod were imprisoned due to their opposition to a series of Georgia laws that declared laws of the Cherokee Nation null and void and even threatened imprisonment of anyone who urged members of the Cherokee nation not to move west. For details on this experience from a Methodist perspective see Wade Crawford Barclay, *Early American Methodism, 1769-1844: Volume Two: To Reform the Nation* (New York: The Board of Missions and Church Extension fo The Methodist Church, 1950), 129.

¹⁵Norwood, 52-54.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the impact of Cooper's book see John P. McWilliams, *Last of the Mohicans: Civil Savagery and Savage Civility* (New York: Macmillan, 1995).

west this was most certainly a common and even useful image for the recruiting of missionaries and fundraising for the effort.¹⁷

There is evidence of this “noble savage” attitude in the March 1, 1833 account published in *The Christian Advocate* of Nez Perce visiting St. Louis which was characterized as an urgent “Macedonian call” for Christian missionaries. It set American Methodists aflame with missionary fervor to reach indigenous peoples in Pacific Northwest for Christ. The closing words from this 1833 article provide a glimpse of the enthusiasm for Native American mission that ensued in subsequent months:

Not a thought of converting or civilizing [the Flat-Head tribe] ever enter the mind of the sordid, demoralized hunters and fur trader: Those simple children of nature even shrink from the loose morality and inhumanities often introduced among them by the white man. Let the Church awake from her slumbers, and go forth in her strength to the salvation of these wandering sons of our native forests. We are citizens of this vast universe, and our life embraces not merely a moment, but eternity itself. Thus exalted, what can be more worthy of our high destination than to befriend our species and those efforts that they are making to release immortal spirits from the chains of error and superstition and to bring them to the knowledge of the true God.¹⁸

The portrayal of Native Americans in this excerpt from Disosway does not convey a “noble savage” image such that Indians were not in need of the Gospel, although one does see elements of this idea along with an assessment of the Flatheads as “simple children” who stand in contrast with corrupt representatives of western civilization – hunters and fur traders. Instead of portraying them in a wholly different world there is also a universalizing motif present here whereby Native Americans in Oregon are identified as people who hold things in common with American Methodists. They inhabit “our” native forests, and Methodists are reminded that “[w]e are citizens of this vast universe” that extends into

¹⁷ Methodist fundraising for the Oregon endeavor was indeed tremendous. No other effort in the first 17 years of the Methodist Episcopal Missionary Society’s history received as much financial support as the effort to evangelize the Native Americans of Oregon. Robert J. Loewenberg, “The Missionary Idea in Oregon: Illustration from the Life and Times of Methodist Henry Perkins,” in *The Western Shore: Oregon Country Essays Honoring the American Revolution*, ed. Thomas Vaughan (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1976), 152.

¹⁸ G. P. Disosway, “The Flathead Indians” 1 March 1833, *The Christian Advocate and Journal* in Furtwangler, 200.

eternity with an obligation to “befriend our species.”¹⁹ While not without occasional nuance like this, the perception of Native Americans as noble, innocent, and pure was persistent in the east. Oregon Missionaries Henry Perkins, Daniel Lee, and Joseph Frost still sought to disabuse potential readers of these attitudes in their writings ten years after their arrival in Oregon.²⁰

The final image most likely dates from 1832 and portrays Native Americans as violent people to be feared as much as the disease of cholera which had devastated New York, Philadelphia, and elsewhere where thousands of easterners died during the summer of 1832. The caption to this image reads:

While many of our most populous cities have been visited by that dreadful disease, the Cholera, and to which thousands have fallen victims, the merciless Savages have been as fatally engaged in the work of death on the frontiers; where great numbers (including women and children) have fallen victims to the bloody tomahawk.²¹

While this perception of Native Americans as peoples to be feared probably influenced Methodist missionaries and their supporters to some extent, it is difficult to find much evidence of this in the record that the earliest missionaries have left. There is irony in this image as well which would have come out around the same time as the *Christian Advocate* article noted above. The Methodist missionaries could not have known that the context of Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest would actually be epidemiologically similar to the disease-ridden urban centers from which they had migrated. In the years after 1832 it would be epidemic disease more than Native American violence that most hurt their missionary efforts in Oregon.

¹⁹ At this point in US history one ought not import a conception of Oregon as belonging to the United States. Thus, “our native forests” may not really be an appeal to our *nation’s* forests.

²⁰ Henry K. W. Perkins, typescript transcription of 1843–44 journal by Robert Boyd, Henry Perkins Papers, University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington. Lee and Frost, 206–07; 61.

²¹ Robert F. Berkhofer, “White Conceptions of Indians,” in *Handbook of North American Indians: History of Indian-White Relations*, ed. Wilcomb E. Washburn (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1988), 533.

Introduction

In keeping with our conference theme, the purpose of this paper is to evaluate early Oregon Methodism with regard to Methodist missionary attempts to facilitate revival and reform. However, instead of evaluating missionary success or failure in facilitating revival and reform among Native Americans, this paper will focus on how early Methodist missionaries in Oregon experienced reform in themselves and sought to promote revival in missionary fervor among supporters back east. The focus of the paper will not primarily be on gaining a better ethnographic understanding of Native American culture during this time as valuable as that has proven to be in Robert T. Boyd's work who used much of the same sources I evaluate here.²² Rather, this paper represents the beginning of what I hope will be an ongoing research project to re-evaluate missionary experience in the Pacific Northwest.²³

There are at least four reasons why continued research on early Methodist mission in Oregon is especially valuable. First, unlike most missionary efforts among Native Americans east of the Mississippi River, in Oregon the Methodist missionaries were the first ones to arrive and make direct contact with indigenous groups. Subsequent missionary efforts frequently learned from and sometimes reacted against what Methodists were doing in the region. Second, the Oregon mission represents for the Methodists their first big experiment as a new denomination with an even newer missionary society.

²² Robert T. Boyd, *People of the Dalles: The Indians of Wascopam Mission : A Historical Ethnography Based on the Papers of the Methodist Missionaries*, Studies in the Anthropology of North American Indians (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press in cooperation with the American Indian Studies Research Institute, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1996).

²³ Boyd himself points out that there is a great need to develop thorough biographical studies of both Daniel Lee and Henry K. W. Perkins. To this end, I have visited with the great-great grandson of Oregon Methodist missionary Daniel Lee who now lives in Wichita, Kansas. He has done some biographical work on his ancestor, but I have not yet seen it. The wider historiography of early Oregon Methodism runs the gamut from the hagiographical to the strident criticism of everything the early Methodist missionaries thought or did. One of the more helpful overview articles on Native American Christianity from a historiographical point of view is Michael D. McNally, "The Practice of Native American Christianity," *Church History* 69, no. 4 (2000).

Methodists spent big on the Oregon mission both with regard to financial resources and personnel; no other location in the world received a greater proportion of missionary society funds than Oregon.²⁴ Third, the mission history in the Pacific Northwest – especially with regard to the Methodists – has strangely not focused much attention on the missionaries who were probably the most effective. Jason Lee, for example, has received the most praise and blame for the mission. He may have been in charge of the mission, but he never learned an indigenous language (except a local pidgin) and spent relatively little time in Oregon compared to his nephew Daniel Lee, Henry Perkins, or Elvira Perkins who were much more effective in language and culture learning and evangelistic effort. Finally, it is worth considering the impact of the Oregon Methodist missionary experience for the subsequent development of “mission theory” for the nascent Methodist Episcopal Missionary Society. Did Missionary Society leaders in New York invest so much in Oregon because they saw it as a kind of “test case” for cross-cultural mission experimentation? When the mission failed, what lessons – if any – were taken from this experience for the development of subsequent mission theory among the Methodists?²⁵

In this paper, I specifically examine two strategies of reform and revivalism the Methodist missionaries used. The first of those revivalist strategies – really, it was more of an evangelistic than a revivalistic strategy – was a Bible translation effort into what is now known as Columbia Sahaptin (and which early missionaries called Walla Walla). Columbia Sahaptin was a common language along the Columbia River in the vicinity of the second Methodist mission outpost at The Dalles, about one hundred miles east of the modern city of Portland, Oregon. Bible translation among the Columbia Sahaptin surely did impact Native American life to some extent and likely helped to sustain some of the camp

²⁴ Loewenberg, "The Missionary Idea in Oregon: Illustration from the Life and Times of Methodist Henry Perkins," 152.

²⁵ Historiographically, I would like to follow some of the trajectories of Catherine Balleriaux's thought in this regard. See Catherine Balleriaux, *Missionary Strategies in the New World, 1610-1690* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

meeting revivals that preceded the translation efforts, but it is difficult to evaluate what long-term effect this translation effort had among Columbia Sahaptin speakers. By contrast, one is able to draw some conclusions about how the translation effort started to reform Henry Perkins's own self-understanding of his missionary vocation as he wrote extensively about his translation work in his 1843-44 journal.

The other expression of revivalism is more truly described as such, but, unlike Bible translation, it was not aimed at Native Americans in Oregon at all. Oregon missionary Henry Perkins wrote journal entries which he probably planned to send back east to Rev. Charles Pittman, Corresponding Secretary of the Methodist Episcopal Missionary Society. Many of these journal excerpts appear to have been written with the intent to stir up interest in missionary work in the Pacific Northwest – and anywhere else would-be missionaries might wish to serve. I call these sections of his journal, which comprise about a dozen typescript pages, Perkins's "recruitment discourses." No portion of the journal was ever published (until the late 20th century). By the time these journal entries would have reached Pittman (if they ever did) the Missionary Society would have already taken steps to end the mission effort and to liquidate its assets. Still, these recruitment discourses help us to understand what sort of "missionary ideal" these Oregon missionaries were promoting both in terms of the practical skills needed of missionaries as well as reflections on a proper theological or missiological motive for mission work.²⁶

Oregon Mission Begins

²⁶ There are a number of other revivalistic strategies. These included camp meeting practices the early Oregon Methodists employed and the evangelistic visual aid known as the "Protestant Ladder" that Daniel Lee (most likely) developed to counter the "Catholic Ladder." Both "ladders" helped preachers to visualize and thus to explain Christian history but with rather different portrayals of Catholic and Protestant history. For a discussion of Lee's ladder see Philip M. Hanley and Edward J. Kowrach, *History of the Catholic Ladder* (Fairfield, Wash.: Ye Galleon Press, 1993).

By August of 1833 Jason Lee left his native Stanstead, Canada to begin to make preparations for his missionary service out west; his nephew Daniel Lee, who was just a few months younger than Jason, was similarly wrapping up his service as a preacher in the New Hampshire Conference at this time. By November 20th of the same year the Methodist missionary society held their farewell service for Jason and Daniel Lee and schoolteacher Cyrus Shepard (whom Jason Lee had hired without seeking any outside advice).²⁷ During the winter of 1833 the three made final preparations for their venture west, and by late April they had joined their guide, Nathaniel Wyeth, in Independence, Missouri to set out on their overland trek to Oregon. After a rather uneventful months-long voyage the three missionaries arrived at Fort Vancouver along the Columbia River in September of 1834.²⁸

The Methodist missionaries received counsel to establish a mission in the Willamette Valley from the “chief factor” of the Hudson’s Bay Company John McLaughlin. They followed his advice (which some speculate was self-serving to keep Methodists from interfering with the fur trade of the HBC) and soon established a mission outpost together with a school.²⁹ This location proved to be a poor choice in some ways as it was in an area that had been decimated by malaria, and where the Native American population was sparse. The Willamette Valley Mission, however, remained in operation throughout the ten years under consideration (1834 – 1844). Although never a particularly good site for an evangelistic mission to Native American peoples, the Willamette Mission fulfilled its purpose in the greater Methodist plan to have one site that was largely focused on agriculture and other sustaining projects for

²⁷By all accounts, Cyrus Shepard was a humble, pious, and hard-working companion although complications from a leg amputation in Oregon led to his untimely death in 1840. Robert J. Loewenberg, *Equality on the Oregon Frontier: Jason Lee and the Methodist Mission, 1834-43* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976), 81.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Michael C. McKenzie personal communication. McKenzie is a fellow-researcher I met during an archival visit who is completing a book manuscript on early Oregon Methodism with a particular focus on James H. Wilbur’s work among the Yakima. He noted this possible motive of McLaughlin’s advice to the Methodists on locating their mission in the Willamette valley. Note to self: McKenzie teaches at Keuka College in NY.

the missionary effort and to have another one that was primarily focused on more direct evangelization.³⁰

The latter missionary effort was accomplished in 1838 when Daniel Lee, Henry Perkins and Elvira Perkins set out to establish a Methodist mission site in Wascopam on the Columbia River (what is today the downtown area of The Dalles).³¹ Elvira Perkins had arrived in Oregon by ship in May of 1837; Her fiancé, Henry Perkins, came a few months later arriving in September of 1837. By November they were married. Elvira delayed the marriage somewhat due to some stories she had heard – relayed to her from Hawaii before Henry arrived – about Henry being too strongly influenced onboard ship by his readings of Thomas Paine.³²

If, as some have argued, the “Mission Bottom” along the Willamette River was a remarkably poor choice, the site at Wascopam could hardly have been better. This area had been, for generations, a meeting place of a number of different Native American ethno-linguistic groups. They came to trade and to fish when the salmon were running strong.³³ As a trading post along the Columbia River, The Dalles was not, strictly speaking, in the territory of any single tribe although persons who spoke the Chinook and Columbia Sahaptin languages predominated. Along the Columbia River during the 1830s

³⁰ Robert J. Loewenberg, "Not... By Feeble Means": Daniel Lee's Plan to Save Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (1973).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

³² Henry Kirk White Perkins, *A Portion of the Autobiography of Rev. Henry Kirk White Perkins with the Addition of Letters Found Among His Papers, Compiled by Grace C. Albee*. Canse Papers, Box 1, Folder 14, Washington State Historical Society, Tacoma, WA, 61.

³³ Robert Boyd even speculates that Perkins's evangelical fervor may have influenced the developments in "syncretistic Indian religions that arose on the Plateau in years following" Perkins's work at the Dalles. Boyd, *People of the Dalles: The Indians of Wascopam Mission : A Historical Ethnography Based on the Papers of the Methodist Missionaries*, 18.

and 40s there are many villages which did not fit neatly into any tribal structures. Many of these tribal structures were the creation of later European settlers.³⁴

Bible Translation

Perhaps nothing more distinguished the Oregon Methodist mission from all the other Native American missions Methodists had established between 1816 and 1850 than its effort to use Bible translation as an evangelistic tool. In his review of Methodist missionary work both east and west of the Mississippi River, Wade Crawford Barclay incorrectly noted that the only Methodist missionary who learned an Indian language well enough to preach in it by 1842 was the missionary to the Kansas people, Edward R. Ames. In fact, by January of 1839, Henry Perkins (and probably Dan Lee somewhat later) were preaching in Sahaptin and Kiksht-Chinook, respectively.³⁵ Elvira Johnson Perkins, the spouse of Henry, also had gained considerable fluency in Sahaptin along with her husband. Elvira Perkins's own assessment of her language-learning is in a June 1839 letter she sent to her sister, Mary Walker, who was serving as a missionary in Oregon with the Congregationalists. "We are getting along very well now in the Wallawalla language. Can converse on common subjects intelligibly, though not so fluently as after more... practice. Mr. P. gave the Indians a talk in it last sabbath." By 1843 a vocabulary list of 1200 Sahaptin terms had been created, a grammar was in the works, and a Bible translation into Sahaptin was well underway.³⁶

³⁴ Andrew H. Fisher, *Shadow Tribe: The Making of Columbia River Indian Identity*, The Emil and Kathleen Sick Lecture-Book Series in Western History and Biography (Seattle: Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest in association with University of Washington Press, 2010).

³⁵ Barclay, 175. Boyd, *People of the Dalles: The Indians of Wascopam Mission : A Historical Ethnography Based on the Papers of the Methodist Missionaries*, 186, 88.

³⁶ Henry Kirk White Perkins 1843-44 journal. Robert Boyd transcription, Oregon Methodist Missions Papers, Box MSS 017, University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, WA, 5-6. (Henceforth "Perkins Journal"), 30.

While there were few, if any, Methodist missionaries engaged in Bible translation efforts among Native Americans at this time, the Methodist Episcopal Missionary Society was not wholly uninterested in promoting North American indigenous language resources even quite early in its existence. Missionary Society minutes in December of 1834 describe that the Society had at least discussed the possibility of providing funding to “print an Indian vocabulary, and also a new edition of the hymns translated into Mohawk, together with some portions of the Methodist Discipline, particularly the formularies used for the Lord’s Supper, baptism and the marriage ceremony...”³⁷ While a decision to fund this translation and printing project was put off until a later meeting, the Missionary Society did agree to provide the funding for five hundred copies of a Chippewa grammar “prepared by our Indian brother John Summerfield” to be used in mission efforts among the Ottawas and Menomenes since those languages were closely related to Chippewa.³⁸

Among missionaries in the Pacific Northwest who, by 1840, included Roman Catholics, Congregationalists, and Methodists, there was a good deal of language-learning going on. By 1840 all of the major linguistic groups in the Pacific Northwest had working among them a missionary who could speak their indigenous language.³⁹ By this time Henry Spalding of the ABCFM gained facility in Nez Perce and created pictures to help him communicate in his sermons and created a speller in that language. Marcus Whitman also appears to have done some translation work into Northeast Sahaptin while Perkins was working on Columbia River Sahaptin. He and Perkins occasionally commiserated with one

³⁷ Missionary Society Minutes, December 17, 1834. Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1833-34. General Commission on Archives and History, Drew University, Madison, NJ.

³⁸ Missionary Society Minutes, December 17, 1834. Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1833-34. General Commission on Archives and History, Drew University, Madison, NJ.

³⁹ Boyd, *People of the Dalles: The Indians of Wascoham Mission : A Historical Ethnography Based on the Papers of the Methodist Missionaries*, 186.

another on their translation challenges.⁴⁰ Whitman and Perkins were the first missionaries in the Pacific Northwest to begin a Bible translation project although neither finished one.⁴¹

Perkins's efforts at Bible translation provide an excellent vantage point for understanding Native American culture along the Columbia River, Perkins's own attitudes toward the cultures he was encountering, and ways his Bible translation effort was raising questions about his own beliefs about the Bible and how to teach various aspects of it. When one reads Perkins's 1843-44 journal one realizes that Perkins's curiosity about the cultures he was encountering was sometimes prompted by the translation task at hand and sometimes his routine activities with the Indians he interacted with seemed to raise questions about Scripture translation. There was a fluid interaction between text and context in his reporting about his translation work. I am going to address just two examples of translation challenges which seem to have challenged him the most or perhaps resonated with him the most based on what may be deduced from the text itself and an understanding of Perkins's life up to this point.⁴²

In the following August 14, 1843 journal entry he notes that he had finished the translation of the Lord's Prayer but was not happy with the way he translated, "Thy named be hallowed."

The natives have but one word for "hallowed" or sacred and this is applied in a manner, that I have had doubts about using it in conjunction with the name of our Heavenly Father. For instance, the "tu-a-ti-ma" or medicine men – as they are sometimes called by the whites – practice a sort of invocatory ceremony on the first arrival of the salmon in the spring. Before any of the common people are permitted to boil, or even to cut the flesh of the salmon

⁴⁰ Ibid., 186-93.

⁴¹ How far they each got in the translation work is also not known as their translations have not been found or no longer exist. **Note to self:** Additional research needed to confirm this. Further discussion on the contrasting experiences of ecumenical relations among Methodists with regard to Presbyterians and Congregationalists (with whom they collaborated) and Roman Catholics (with whom they strongly condemned) would also be helpful. I also encountered in a letter from Elvira Perkins at least one instance when she provided a meal for a Roman Catholic priest who was going through The Dalles. No mention was made of them engaging in any polemics. On Roman Catholic work in the Pacific Northwest see Christopher Vecsey, *The Paths of Kateri's Kin*, American Indian Catholics (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

⁴² In addition to the translation challenges discussed below, Perkins also mentions he struggled to find a culturally appropriate (and Christian) understanding of "Thy kingdom come," marriage customs in a polygynous context, prophethood, and a belief in the afterlife.

transversely for any purpose the “tu-u-ti” - medicine man of the village, assembles the people, and after invoking the “Tah” or the particular spirit which presides over the salmon and who they suppose can make it a prosperous year or otherwise takes a fish just caught, and wrings off its head. The blood, which flows from the fish he catches in a basin or small dish and sets it aside. He then cuts the salmon transversely into small pieces and boils. The way is thus opened for any one to do the same. Joy and rejoicing circulate through the village, and the people now boil and eat to their hearts content.

But I wish to call your attention to the blood. This is considered to be “aut-ni” – or as we should say sacred, or hallowed, or sanctified, i.e. it is sacredly set apart and carefully garded for five days, when it is carried out, waved in the direction in which they wish the fish to run and then carefully poured into the water. This is but one example of the use of the word. The verb shap,a,autsha of which autni is the adjective form, is also used for to prohibit.

Now if I knew the ideal meaning of the original word, which we translate hallowed previously to its being used in the sacred writings, I could pass some judgement upon the propriety of using the Indian word under consideration. The idea which any word naturally conveys to their minds and the associations with which it is connected, I find we cannot be too intimately acquainted with in conveying religious instruction to the natives. I would like much your advice on the subject.⁴³

This is the first translation challenge Perkins chooses to share with his correspondent, Pittman.

The ethnographic detail with which he describes the salmon ceremony and his ability to see it as an important clue for understanding the nature of “the holy” among Columbia River peoples is striking as is the way that this ceremony raises questions for him about how words like “hallowed” or “holy” were used outside of biblical writings in ancient times.

For our purposes of understanding Henry Perkins’s missionary theory and practice one can imagine that the hallowed nature of the salmon ceremony was a challenge for him in ways that extended beyond the particular instance of translating the Lord’s Prayer. Preceding this account of the salmon ceremony Perkins also notes his frustration at conveying the importance of the fourth commandment – that of keeping the Sabbath day holy – to Indians who had such little regard for a day set apart every seven days where one does not work. It is also critical to bear in mind that any

⁴³ Perkins Journal. See Boyd, *People of the Dalles* for further ethnographic explanation of the salmon ceremony.

Methodist in the 1830s and 1840s – perhaps especially those from New England – would have been profoundly influenced by the holiness movement as it unfolded under the leadership of Timothy Merritt, LaRoy Sunderland, and others.⁴⁴ “Holiness” was literally the lifeblood of the Methodist movement during this time. Perkins likely believed at some level that if he did not get this right in his work among Columbia River peoples, his whole effort to instill what he thinks as central to the Christian faith – the experience of holiness – could be in jeopardy.

It is no mere conjecture that Perkins held in high esteem the Methodist doctrine of holiness. Perkins himself had a vivid experience of entire sanctification at a Monmouth, Maine Methodist camp meeting shortly before leaving for Oregon, probably in 1836.⁴⁵ His wife, Elvira Perkins, also noted in a letter just a month before Perkins wrote about his struggles with the Lord’s Prayer that she and Henry “take a publication called the *Guide To Christian Perfection* which we highly prize.”⁴⁶ The *Guide to Christian Perfection* had just begun publication in 1839 under the leadership of New Englander Timothy Merritt who at this point was arguably the primary spokesperson for Christian holiness in the Methodist Episcopal Church and was also a member of the Missionary Society’s board.

If Perkins’s struggles with how to translate the Christian conception of holiness were the first he mentioned to his colleague Pittman, the translation challenge that seemed to most perplex and exercise his thoughts came in his translation of Matthew 4:24: “And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with diverse disease and torments, and those which

⁴⁴ For more on Merritt and Sunderland see Glen Alton Messer, “Restless for Zion: New England Methodism, Holiness, and the Abolitionist Struggle, Circa 1789-1845” (Th. D. Dissertation, Boston University, 2006).

⁴⁵ He recounts this experience of entire sanctification in his autobiography, p. 25.

⁴⁶ Letter from Elvira Johnson Perkins to Mary Walker (her sister), July 4, 1843. Elkanah Walker Papers, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, WA MSS 503. Merritt’s major theological work on Christian Perfection was first published in 1825 but remained popular for many years. T. Merritt, *The Christian’s Manual: A Treatise on Christian Perfection, with Directions for Obtaining That State* (New York: N. Bangs and J. Emory for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1825).

were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatic and those had had the palsy; and he healed them.” It is the matter of demon possession in this passage that most vexed Perkins; he wrote about this translation problem for over six typed pages (in the Boyd transcription). Perkins does not go into this much ethnographic detail for any other translation challenge he encountered. He introduced the problem like this:

In translating the 24th verse of the 4th Chap. To day I have been met with the same difficulty which has often occupied my thoughts heretofore. What shall I say concerning those who it is said “were possessed with devils”? or, the demoniacs? The opinions of the Greeks, Romans, & Jews, with regard to evil spirits, or demons formerly, appear to have been almost precisely what the opinions of these Indians are now. I know not how to account for it.⁴⁷

Perkins then goes on to explain Sahaptin conceptions of a “skepma” or evil “spirit of some dead person,” the practice of creating a carved image of a “pat-ash” or “supernatural visitor” who can free an Indian of a dead person’s spirit, and the existence of “Tahma” who are usually animal-like spirits who represent dead ancestors and exert positive influence unlike the “skepma” who are only evil. Perkins also gives an account of the adolescent “spirit quest” which is common among many Native American peoples and has been documented extensively by others.⁴⁸

After several pages explaining these various dimensions of the Columbia River peoples’ spirit world Perkins recognizes that he has “written on unawares” and tries to summarize the nature of his problem to Pittman.

The difficulty in bringing such things before the people I find to be this – it is placing in their hands an argument in favour of present demoniacal possession, which I know not how to get over. A native will tell you that such & such – persons – are laboring under the influence of the spirits of some dead persons, & will die. You can see nothing in their case but the common symptoms of hypochondria, insanity, or monomania. The Indian, in spite of your medical disquisitions, philosophizing, etc., still persists in telling you that they are demons or “skepma” who have possession... Now what will you reply to him? If you admit that there was such a thing

⁴⁷ Perkins Journal, 18.

⁴⁸For more extensive ethnographic analysis of these phenomena Perkins describes see Boyd, *People of the Dalles*, 212-17.

as demoniacal possession in the time of Our Saviour you can hardly satisfy an Indian that there is not such a thing now. At least I have not arguments conclusive on this subject to satisfy either him, or myself.⁴⁹

Perkins goes on to explain that he is only aware of biblical scholars who claim a naturalistic explanation of epilepsy or other maladies in these stories in Matthew's Gospel and then asks Pittman, "If you have any good work on the opposite side of the question I should be much obliged if you would send it to me."⁵⁰

Just as the aforementioned case of grappling with the concept of "holiness" raised questions about the meaning of holiness in nonbiblical contexts for ancient Christians so also Perkins here needed to confront his own understanding – and perhaps faulty or incomplete understanding – of the biblical text because of what he observed of the ideas among the Columbia River peoples as being "almost precisely" the same as ancient Hebrews or Greeks. These two cases from Perkins's experience of Bible translation are not the only ones which suggest that they forced a re-evaluation or reform of his own Christian beliefs.⁵¹ That he was willing to have his own beliefs challenged and that he was willing to share his struggles with Methodists back east is also admirable for the openness he conveys not only toward Native American culture but also the missionary calling as a calling still needing the help of people back home in answering questions he is unable to resolve. That he was doing this at a time when the Oregon mission was facing increasing criticism back east is even more remarkable. His questioning and self-critical posture in these journal excerpts about Bible translation are strikingly different from the strident exhortations he employs elsewhere to which we now turn.

⁴⁹ Perkins Journal, 18-24.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Perkins is also impressed by some funeral customs and naming ceremonies of children. See also remarks on beatitudes. Doubtless his interest in death and dying stems from Perkins's own experience of having his parents and brothers and sisters all die during his adolescent years in Maine.

Recruitment Discourses

In Henry Perkins's 1843-44 journal entries that he sent to Pittman there are three sections where Perkins's focus is not to describe life on the Oregon frontier but rather to describe either what is needed in future missionaries who go to Oregon or to exhort readers to be more resolute in their financial support and theological beliefs about the importance of evangelistic mission. I call these sections of his journal "recruitment discourses" although they were never published for the purposes of recruiting additional missionaries to Oregon. Nonetheless, they illustrate a kind of working mission theory and an explanation of what Perkins at least sees as proper missionary motivation. These recruitment discourses comprise over fourteen pages of Perkins's journal (in its typescript version), and may be characterized in three types: the practical, the volitional, and the theological/missiological. These types are best understood not as mutually exclusive categories but rather as recruitment discourses with different intent and tone of argument.

The Practical Appeal

Perkins's practical appeal for missionaries comes out most strongly toward the beginning of his journal and its purpose is straightforward. He wants missionaries who are, first and foremost, good linguists. In making this appeal he laments how, only now, after five years of missionary service, he was able to read to the Native Americans at Wascopam a completed chapter of the Bible. "O, when will they be able to read it themselves! The work among this people is but just now begun. The whole process of

education is still to be gone through with. The preaching of the gospel has done much, but much still is left undone.”⁵²

Perkins goes on to explain his linguistic context and needs for more workers. In his particular location at The Dalles along the Columbia River Perkins noted that he believed there were two tribes with two languages “entirely distinct from each other.”⁵³ Perkins asks for two men who are “well versed in the principles of language,” “have succeeded in acquiring a foreign tongue,” “have an ear that can readily distinguish sounds,” and have the “vocal organs” such that they can also easily pronounce foreign languages. He goes on to explain that he is providing such detail and such high requirements so that the “little funds the church will spare, be not misapplied.”⁵⁴ He was aware of the grumbling back east about the massive financial outlays directed toward mission in Oregon – more than any other place in American Methodist mission history to date.⁵⁵

Perkins then explains that the mission in Oregon needs two men for each language because, as he puts it, “the Christian needs society.” He further clarifies the importance of this by drawing a comparison to shipbuilding yards with which he is doubtless familiar in his native Maine. He notes that the teams of men working together in building a ship would not be nearly so productive if they were separated from one another. He then addresses what he imagines is a possible objection on the part of a future reader who might ask, “Have we not sent men enough to Oregon to supply each tribe with a sufficient number of missionaries?” Perkins continues,

I answer, we have no reason to complain perhaps for want of numbers. Neither shall I complain any way, But will simply state as a fact, that no tribe as yet has been supplied with proper labourers. By a proper labourer, I mean one who is both able & willing to do the work assigned

⁵² Perkins Journal, 24.

⁵³ There would have been many more languages at The Dalles than this at certain times of the year.

⁵⁴ Perkins Journal, 25.

⁵⁵ Loewenberg, "The Missionary Idea in Oregon: Illustration from the Life and Times of Methodist Henry Perkins," 152.

him.” He adds a foreboding note of urgency that “unless a new state of things is speedily entered upon,” the mission may “terminate in bitter disappointment.”⁵⁶

Over a week later, on September 8, 1843, Perkins writes his most depressing journal entry confessing that he has been “too much the prey of melancholy feelings to be in a mood to interest my friends by the writing of composition. Melancholy is one of the many things which peculiarly unfits me for labours among the heathen.” Clearly, here we have Perkins at one of the low-points of his time in Oregon. His friend, Dan Lee, has just left to return to New England, and another co-worker, Henry Brewer, has just left for supplies at the Willamette Mission. Perkins is lonely. He explains that his melancholy is also caused by the sickness and death of Native Americans that he is witnessing on a regular basis due to the “ague and bilious fever... making fearful ravages.”⁵⁷ Perkins goes on to explain that while he has some medicines he does not know medicine himself and asks for a physician to help him. Here Perkins makes reference to a physician in England who worked for prison reform, Dr. John Howard, and exclaims, “O, we want Howards for missionaries.” A contemporary of John Wesley, Dr. Howard was praised by Mr. Wesley for his work among prisoners.⁵⁸

We cannot know how Perkins imagined that this appeal for missionaries would have been communicated to a wider audience by Charles Pittman who received the journals or even that he would have done so. It is nonetheless clear that he is not only writing to Pittman for his own personal interest. Perkins wants linguists, people who work well “in society,” have medical skills, and who do not suffer as he does from melancholy. One can imagine that Perkins would not have wanted his own struggles with

⁵⁶ Perkins Journal, 27.

⁵⁷ Perkins Journal, 28.

⁵⁸ Sean McConville, *A History of English Prison Administration, vol. 1, 1750-1877* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 79. I have previously written about Howard’s contributions as well in Benjamin L. Hartley, Glen A. Messer and Kirsten Oh, “‘Get on the Cart!’: Wesleyan Discipleship in an Age of Endemic Incarceration,” in *Thinking Theologically about Mass Incarceration: Biblical Foundations and Justice Imperatives*, Edited by Antonios Kireopoulos, Mitzi J. Budde & Matthew D. Lundberg. National Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission Theological Series. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2017.

depression to be communicated to a wider audience beyond Pittman himself, but we cannot know that for sure. Surely Pittman would have shared this journal with the rest of the Missionary Society board. Was Perkins so desperate for help in his translation and preaching ministry that he was willing to risk an even wider circle of Methodists knowing this about himself?⁵⁹

The Volitional Appeal

While these practical needs for missionaries were the first ones mentioned in Perkins's 1843-44 journal, they do not constitute the majority of his recruitment writing in these journals. It is Perkins's exhortations – where he often raises an objection to the missionary vocation he thinks a reader may have and then answers the objection – that seemingly go on and on in his journals and are the surest piece of evidence that at least excerpts of these journals were intended for a much wider audience than Pittman himself or the members of the Missionary Society. Two different kinds of exhortations may be discerned in Perkins's writings. I will first discuss his exhortations that primarily exhort his would-be readers concerning their willingness to commit to a missionary vocation and then discuss those that make a more intellectual appeal based on common theological or missiological objections.

Perkins's first and perhaps most powerful exhortation in his journal follows a rich ethnographic description of burial and funeral practices among two different tribal groups – the Chinooks and the Walla Wallas. Doubtless his fascination with this aspect of Native American life is also a reflection of the fact that Perkins had experienced the death of both parents and three siblings – all to tuberculosis –

⁵⁹ Important to further research how common public expressions of suffering from melancholy were at this time.

before the age of 18.⁶⁰ He communicates a sense of being genuinely impressed by Native American beliefs surrounding death.

It is hard telling what notions the natives have formerly had of a future state of existence their mythology, however, & their legends & traditions all lead us to the conclusion that they believed in the immateriality, & immortality of the soul, thus placing themselves in the scale of intelligence far above a certain class of our own countrymen.⁶¹

It is at this point that Perkins then launches into his exhortation: “This very item, however, makes an Indian’s death bed, one of wildness, & distraction, & fills it with a gloom, & terror which can never be felt by those blest with the light of the gospel. Alas, what is man without this!”⁶² Perkins then presents an image at the end of days of “whole nations in solid column, to meet us face to face, before a fiery [sic] judgement bar! There is no withdrawing now from the sight – or from that startling truth. ‘You knew your duty to them, but ye did it not.’” Perkins then adopts the voice of a Christian who had neglected to evangelize the lost and is filled with regret. “Alas, it is now too late, too late! All is over & gone!”⁶³

Perkins continues to describe people who failed to serve the “heathen world” even though in their younger years had committed themselves to do so. He condemns the would-be missionary who instead chose a life of luxury or put forward other excuses like marriage, or a purchased piece of land. He also refutes the notion that the problem is with the church that does not send missionaries for lack of money and criticizes those who say that they “are such brilliant lights that the church cannot spare them” at home. He also criticizes a fear of suffering which may keep people from serving as missionaries.

⁶⁰ Henry Kirk White Perkins, *A Portion of the Autobiography of Rev. Henry Kirk White Perkins with the Addition of Letters Found Among His Papers, Compiled by Grace C. Albee*. Canse Papers, Box 1, Folder 14, Washington State Historical Society, Tacoma, WA, 8

⁶¹ Perkins Journal, 51.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Perkins Journal, 52.

These appeals to the would-be missionary's volition are not entirely lacking in theological content. Concern for Native Americans dying and going to hell should be, in Perkins's view, a motivation for missionary service as is a kind of implicit theology of suffering, but Perkins seems to mostly be appealing to his reader's will rather than intellectual objections in these recruitment discourse examples.

The Theological Appeal

Perkins's final recruitment discourse raises more intellectually-oriented theological questions which may hinder people from engaging in missionary service. The first theological objection Perkins introduces as a reason for many to not consider the missionary vocation is the "noble savage" argument mentioned earlier. It comes after a section of his journal where Perkins discusses a translation challenge to render terms of contempt in Matthew 5:22 into Columbia Sahaptin. In doing so he writes about his efforts to learn about the kinds of people and behavior that are treated with the most disdain by indigenous persons in his region. He then reflects that "the same inherent depravity fastens upon all[,] teaching us conclusively that the whole human race is descended from one head & all deserving of a like doom."⁶⁴ He criticizes those who have a romantic view of Native Americans and challenges them to find

one heathen soul without the light of revelation, who has the love of God in his heart, And if they cannot find one single heathen soul who loves God – the Christian's God – The God of holiness, let them cease forever to talk of heathen as subjects of heaven of which love to God is the essence: and let them forever cease to talk of them as holy: for what holiness can there be without love to God? The bible knows of none.⁶⁵

Perkins's second theological argument immediately follows from his refutation of the noble savage argument and is based on correcting theological error not with regard to the human condition (the "noble savage" argument) but on the nature of God who

⁶⁴ Perkins journal, 60.

⁶⁵ Perkins Journal, 61. Perkins repeated reference to holiness here is also noteworthy item for discussion above.

will manifest himself only to [Native Americans] in love & compassion; who is too good to punish, too merciful to be just; who will see men trample on all his laws, serve the devil all their lives lo long, & die like brutes, & throw over then all at last the broad mantle of his charity, & receive them to his bosom. Such a God is unknown in Scripture History...⁶⁶

Perkins refutes this for another paragraph before entering into his final – and most lengthy – condemnation of theological error that simply asserts, “Many of the heathen will be saved” without making an argument based on theological anthropology or the nature of God. Here Perkins seems to get most passionate:

I fear it is only another way of saying “I love my money – I love my ease – I love my country – I am resolved to live while I live & gratify myself in the enjoyment of the blessings I possess, & the heathen may go to destruction for all me” I hope I am mistaken, I hope it is far otherwise, I would I may find those who make this assertion the first to step over, & take a turn at labour among them.⁶⁷

Perkins goes on for a full seven (typescript) pages of hortatory discourse seeking to motivate missionary commitment in a similar manner and closes by reminding his readers that we only have “[a] few ages more & all that can be done for this poor world, will have been done.”⁶⁸ Perkins does not say that the end of the world is immanent here even if it is not in the distant future – a similarly deferred eschatological argument that Mr. Wesley also put forward. He also closes with an appeal for his readers to not only remember the people of Oregon but those “in this pitiable condition” around the world. “Not a thousand not a million, not here, & there an isolated country, but behold, they cover the globe!”⁶⁹ Perkins’s recruitment discourses draw to a close then on this more universalistic appeal with a vision far beyond that of the Oregon mission.

In Perkins’s theological appeals that we see toward then end of his journal we learn that he had a rather multi-faceted theology of mission that included concern for people who may go to hell if they

⁶⁶ Perkins Journal, 61

⁶⁷ Perkins Journal, 62.

⁶⁸ Perkins Journal, 66.

⁶⁹ Perkins Journal, 68.

do not accept the Gospel but extended to a discussion of theological anthropology, the nature of God, reflections on eschatology, and an argument against a belief that all will be saved. With regard to the latter, it is possible that Perkins is also responding to the growing appeal of universalism in his New England context at this time. Perkins's final appeal to the missionary cause around the world is also noteworthy. He would have doubtless been aware of the missionary efforts of Methodists and other Christians around the world. The first Methodist missionary to Liberia, Melville Cox, was sent just a few years before Perkins arrived in Oregon. Cox and Perkins shared a common love for the Methodist academy at Kent's Hill in Maine.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Henry and Elvira Perkins made important contributions to mission among Native Americans in Oregon. Perkins's notes on Bible translation suggest that he was probably the leading missionary linguist in this first generation of Methodist missionaries. The letters of his spouse, Elvira Perkins, in this regard has not yet been thoroughly studied, but a preliminary review of her letters suggest that she was Perkins's active co-worker in mission work and thus significantly contributed to the revival and reform efforts as well. Judging from the correspondence and other materials that have been preserved, Henry and Elvira Perkins very well may have been the most effective missionary couple in the first generation of Methodist ministry in Oregon. Perkins maintained an evangelize-then-civilize outlook on his missionary vocation in Oregon, but he did not do this to the complete lack of concern for the physical welfare of Native Americans with whom he worked. One might even say today that Perkins's missionary

⁷⁰ Unsurprisingly, Missionary Society Minutes sometimes discuss Oregon mission matters in the same meetings that they discuss plans for Liberia.

outlook was “holistic” in its scope. He earnestly desired missionary physicians to come out to help him, and clearly was heartbroken at the death of so many of the Native Americans around him. He and Elvira also wrote admiringly to Elvira’s sister about a Native American boy who lived with them as “part of the family” for quite some time.

With regard to revivalism and reform in Perkins’s Bible translation efforts we see a missionary who is quite open to reforming his own ideas about the Bible and the nature of ancient Christian and Hebrew culture. His ideas about Bible translation raise a host of other questions as well. How does his translation work compare to other Methodist missionaries of Perkins’s generation or of the generation that immediately follows his? How does Perkins’s experience of Bible translation compare with that of the Hawaiian missionaries whom he met on his way to Oregon who were employed in similar work? Are there similarly rich ethnographic descriptions of indigenous peoples’ language and culture in other regions where Methodists worked which warrant further study by historians of Methodism as well as historical anthropologists? What can be gleaned from these missionaries’ accounts about language and culture with regard to the development of early Methodist mission theory?

Finally, in Perkins’s recruitment discourses we gain a fascinating and multi-faceted glimpse into an early Methodist mission theory that covers practical needs for linguistic and medical specialists as well as arguments for the validity of the missionary vocation more broadly. It is not only fear of hell for unconverted Native Americans that motivated the Perkins family to work as hard as they did. Henry Perkins’s beliefs about the human person (regardless of ethnicity), the nature of God, eschatology, and the global scope of the missionary endeavor were all important reasons for Perkins to advocate for missionary revival among Methodists.

The Methodist missionary project among Native Americans in Oregon has mostly been considered a failure; after their departure no sustained Native American church directly resulted from

their efforts. Institution-building of this sort through Native American converts was surely the original intent of Methodist missionaries in the Pacific Northwest. More study is needed of subsequent Native American Methodist pastors in the Pacific Northwest to discern if the work of Perkins and other first – generation missionaries were completely forgotten or if aspects of their contribution persisted in new forms.⁷¹ Even if the mission in Oregon may be judged a failure, this brief study of the Perkins family’s missionary experience suggests that there is still much to learn about their experience. When the Perkins family left Oregon there was no one to continue their work with anything approaching the extent of their cultural and linguistic knowledge or vibrant curiosity. It would not be until after the creation of reservations in the mid-1850s in the Pacific Northwest that once again we see a Methodist preacher or two with as sympathetic a posture toward Native American culture as Perkins had in the late 1830s and early 1840s.⁷²

⁷¹ Conference journals from the 1850s and 1860s provide some biographical information about Native American pastors from this period in Oregon and Washington, but additional details about them and their ministries appears scarce.

⁷² James H. Wilbur’s work among the Yakima may qualify as nearly equaling Perkins’s own level of cultural appreciation for Native American life. Older studies of Wilbur’s life do a very poor job of evaluating his work among Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest, but basic biographical details for Wilbur are available in Wm D. Fenton, "Father Wilbur and His Work," *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 10, no. 2 (1909).