In a letter to Thomas Butts dated 25 April 1803 Blake wrote:

I have a thousand & ten thousand things to say to you. My heart is full of futurity.¹ I percieve that the sore travel which has been given me these three years leads to Glory & Honour. I rejoice & I tremble ‘I am fearfully & wonderfully made’. I had been reading the cxxxix Psalm a little before your Letter arrived. I take your advice. I see the face of my Heavenly Father he lays his Hand upon my Head & gives a blessing to all my works why should I be troubled why should my heart & flesh cry out. I will go on in the Strength of the Lord through Hell will I sing forth his Praises. that the Dragons of the Deep my praise him & that those who dwell in darkness & on the sea coasts may be gathered into his Kingdom. Excuse my perhaps too great Enthusiasm (E, 729)²

The language and tenor of Blake’s letter are typical of the Evangelical Revival: ‘My heart is full of futurity’ suggests a hopefulness that hitherto in Blake’s writing has not been expressed so candidly; ‘sore travel’ pertains to the Puritan tradition of spiritual travail often expressed in terms of travel or wandering and is closely related to the doctrine of Christian Perfection. He professes that he will go on in the strength of the Lord through Hell, that is, overcome his spiritual travail through patient suffering. He rejoices and trembles, his ‘heart & flesh cry out’, suggesting at once jubilation and fear at his spiritual state, a paradox familiar to Evangelicals who lived in both fear of damnation and hope of redemption. He claims to see God, who has blessed all of his works, thereby betraying an intimacy between the human and the divine often associated with Evangelical enthusiasts. He prays for those who dwell in spiritual darkness, just as it is the role of the Evangel to pray for and guide the sinful towards their salvation.

This letter and others like it has led some scholars to the conclusion that Blake underwent a spiritual conversion or New Birth while at Felpham where he began to compose his final two illuminated poems, Milton and

M. Farrell, Blake and the Methodists
© Michael Farrell 2014
Jerusalem. According to Jesse, for instance, the auto-biographical elements of these poems signify a shift in Blake’s writing towards introspection which, coupled with his preoccupation with the central themes of regeneration and redemption, points to a religious conversion of sorts not unlike those found in Methodist conversion narratives, albeit not a conversion from unbelief to belief, but rather ‘a confirmation or crystallization of the content of one’s beliefs’ as part of a continually process of spiritual development.3

Blake moved to Felpham in 1800 and lived there for three years under the patronage of William Hayley. This is widely considered to be the turning point in Blake’s supposed retreat from radical politics to what Andrew Lincoln sees as ‘a new commitment to Christianity’,4 which was also suggested by Paley:

During his residence at Felpham and immediately afterwards, Blake had a series of visionary experiences that resulted in what can only be called a religious conversion. He joined no church or other religious group, although his experience corresponded to the idea of a ‘new birth’ expressed in the sermons of the Methodists Whitefield and Wesley. Blake incorporated his new spiritual views into The Four Zoas and his subsequent works as well.5

Paley is right to identify conversion as regeneration, which is indeed the central theme of Blake’s epic poems: in Milton it is the regeneration of the eponymous poet through the transforming power of the imagination; in Jerusalem, it is the re-awakening or rebirth of Albion as the spiritual four-fold city.6 Paley omits, however, to substantiate his implication that Blake’s conversion is strictly Methodist in nature. The problem, perhaps, lies in the fact that Wesley derived his theology from disparate sources and that Methodist doctrine is inherently eclectic. Elsewhere, Paley has linked Blake’s conversion to interpretations of the new birth in the writings of William Law, Jacob Boehme, and to Evangelicalism more generally.7

Ideas about what constitutes a new birth were not homogeneous in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and therefore the concept in itself is insufficient proof of Blake’s conversion to Methodism. Moreover, we simply do not have sufficient evidence to venture such an argument. Conversion necessarily entails a conversion to something (a set of beliefs or ideology) and it is significant that Blake did not join a church or any other religious sect during these years. The purpose of this final chapter is to interrogate what might be read as Blake’s turning towards to a more inward-looking religion with reference to two of Methodism’s fundamental tenets: regeneration (or ‘new birth’) and Christian Perfection. I shall also compare the ideas of imagination and spiritual sensation in the writings of Blake and Wesley respectively in an attempt to determine whether or not Blake’s ideas have links with specifically Wesleyan teaching. I shall conclude this chapter