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Elaine Harris  
*Whitworth University*

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Elaine Harris  
Dr. Beebe  
History of Christianity II  
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### The Love of Lady Huntingdon's Life

Wales appears a small, almost insignificant place to become the birthplace of a movement, yet it played an influential role in one of the many doctrinal disputes in Christianity. In the eighteenth century, a time when Calvinism and Arminianism were hotly debated, a sect of Methodism developed out of this place. Contrary to the popular teachings of the Wesley brothers, Calvinistic Methodism's presence spread beyond the borders of Wales, influencing some who would cling tightly to predestination doctrines to the end of their lives. Among these was Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon. In the wake of her husband's and sons' deaths, Lady Huntingdon completely dedicated her life to overseeing and funding these Methodist teachings. Being emotionally invested in this work, Huntingdon went to great lengths to insure the purity of this doctrine, even to the point of influencing a destructive schism. Due to her vivid conversion and deep convictions, Huntingdon's love for Calvinistic Methodism eventually led her to influence the first schism in Methodism.

In order to best understand Lady Huntingdon's role in Calvinistic Methodism, it is important to look at the movement itself. Common among lay people, a sort of "grass-roots" movement, Methodism attracted many followers due to its more emotional and spiritual practices.<sup>1</sup> In general, Methodism attracted women, which is likely due to the freedom this movement allowed for women to participate in evangelism with neighbors and friends.<sup>2</sup> Lady Huntingdon, like many others, soon became enamored by Methodist convictions.

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<sup>1</sup> David Ceri Jones, *A Glorious Work in the World: Welsh Methodism and the International Evangelical Revival, 1735-1750*, (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2004), 243.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

Typical of many movements in Christianity, Calvinistic Methodism grew from humble roots. Howell Harris, one of the major players in spreading Methodism in Wales, brought lay-preaching to the forefront. He too began with humble roots, and struggling to become ordained, resorted to “open-air preaching.”<sup>3</sup> Although his training lacked prestige, it compelled audiences and inspired many, including George Whitefield who would later use some of Harris’s tactics in his own preaching.<sup>4</sup> Both Harris and Whitefield adamantly supported doctrines of predestination; naturally, Lady Huntingdon promoted these same ideas when she joined the movement. As debates grew between Calvinists and Arminians, all three defended the Calvinistic form of Methodism.

Although an eventual split took place within Methodism, cordial relations at one time existed between Methodists of Calvinist and Arminian tendencies. This was the case with Lady Huntingdon and the Wesley brothers. Before tensions rose between the Wesley’s and Huntingdon, correspondence between the two was cordial, and Huntingdon addressed herself as Wesley’s “most unworthy and affectionate friend.”<sup>5</sup> Later, when the Moravians brought the “Stillness Controversy” to Huntingdon’s beloved Fetter Lane Society, she sought the aid of the John Wesley.<sup>6</sup> For Huntingdon, this little Society was the equivalent of what one may



Figure 1 Lady Huntingdon. Public Domain

<sup>3</sup> Richard W. Evans, “The Relations of George Whitefield and Howell Harris, Fathers of Calvinistic Methodism,” *Church History* 30, no. 2: 179-190, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> “The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon,” *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal (1827-1906)* 13, no. 1 (Oct 05, 1839): 1.

<sup>6</sup> “Selina, Countess of Huntingdon,” *National Repository, Devoted to General and Religious Literature, Criticism, and Art (1877-1880)* 2, (12, 1877): 540, Proquest ebrary.

consider a “home church” today<sup>7</sup>, which created a greater impetus to correct questionable teachings. One of the main concerns focused on differences between justification and sanctification, in which the Moravians took a more passive approach to the struggle one faces prior to conversion.<sup>8</sup> At this time Huntingdon welcomed Wesley’s arguments which emphasized the importance of action on the part of a believer.<sup>9</sup> The controversy ended in the Moravian exclusion of Fetter Lane Society,<sup>10</sup> the doctrines of John Wesley superseding those of the Moravians. Events such as these show the functionality of Huntingdon’s friendship, and for a time she went so far as to promote Wesleyan doctrine.<sup>11</sup> Considering the fact that both Huntingdon and Wesley were deeply rooted in the Anglican tradition,<sup>12</sup> this friendship was not too unexpected. Regardless, as time progressed, Huntingdon’s friendship with the Wesleys would break apart due to a schism that could not be reconciled.

Although adamant personalities on both sides influenced this break, Lady Huntingdon showed herself particularly uncompromising on the subject. Part of this stubbornness was due to the nature of Huntingdon’s conversion, and out of this experience Huntingdon developed a theology and conviction of Calvinist doctrines. Examining Huntingdon’s early life and the transformation that took place at her conversion, one sees the powerful experience upon which Huntingdon built her theology.

From an early age, Huntingdon was noted to have been a pious child, sensitive enough to be greatly moved by events such as funerals.<sup>13</sup> As time went on, Selina transitioned into a

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Mark K. Olson, "The stillness controversy of 1740: tradition shaping scripture reading," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 46, no. 1: 120-133.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> John R. Tyson, “Lady Huntingdon’s Reformation,” *Church History* 64, no. 4 (12, 1995): 580..

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Mark K. Olson, "The stillness controversy of 1740..."

<sup>13</sup> “Selina, Countess of Huntingdon,”

different form of piety and aimed to achieve salvation on the basis of works and self-righteousness. Huntingdon had the privilege of being born into a wealthy family, causing her to rely on generosity to gain salvation.<sup>14</sup> Until Huntingdon battled a nearly fatal illness, she was unable to come to a deeper understanding of the justification by faith. Suffering in her sickness, Huntingdon received care from her friend Lady Hastings, who had encouraged Selina to attend Whitefield's sermons prior to her illness.<sup>15</sup> Seeing selflessness and joy of her friend juxtaposed against her illness, Huntingdon overwhelmingly realized her own depravity and discovered grace in Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> Huntingdon experienced a profound image of being chosen, and she saw herself as a "brand plucked from the burning."<sup>17</sup> This image laid the foundation for Huntingdon's extreme emphasis on justification by grace, a conviction deeply rooted in the emotion of her experience.<sup>18</sup> This invariably propelled her in her decisions in the Calvinist-Arminian controversies.

Huntingdon's conversion, coupled with a friendship with George Whitfield, led Selina to shift from her prior affinity with Wesley's doctrines. After regaining some health, Huntingdon attended Whitefield's sermons whenever possible.<sup>18</sup> Eventually, Huntingdon became better acquainted with Whitefield, eventually leading to a meeting in which he expounded on the merits of predestination for two hours.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, Whitefield convinced Huntingdon, and a friendship grew between the two. Whitefield would later serve as Huntingdon's chaplain,<sup>20</sup> and as he neared death, Whitefield entrusted his orphanage in Georgia to Selina's care.<sup>21</sup> From here,

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<sup>14</sup> "The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon," *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal (1827-1906)* 13, no. 1 (Oct 05, 1839): 1.

<sup>15</sup> "Selina, Countess of Huntingdon."

<sup>16</sup> The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> John R. Tyson, "Lady Huntingdon's Reformation."

<sup>19</sup> "The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon."

<sup>19</sup> David Ceri Jones and Eryn Mant White, *The Elect Methodists* (Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales Press, 2012), 154.

<sup>20</sup> "Selina, Countess of Huntingdon."

<sup>21</sup> David Ceri Jones and Eryn Mant White, *The Elect Methodists*, 162.

Huntingdon had the theological base necessary for fiercely defending her beliefs, to the extent that her friendship with the Wesley's would become nonexistent.

This is not to say that the Huntingdon neglected her friendships with the Wesleys immediately upon befriending Whitefield. In the beginning of the predestination controversy, Huntingdon remained cordial amidst disputes, even after the initial split between Calvinist and Arminianism positions within Methodism. In keeping with her hospitable character, Huntingdon welcomed Charles Wesley and his wife Sarah into her home, nursing Sarah Wesley back to health when she fell ill.<sup>22</sup> Although the relationship eventually reached a point beyond reconciliation, Huntingdon's intentions were not malicious, but grounded in an overwhelming and reckless conviction.

Huntingdon's fierceness became apparent only after the debut of the pamphlet wars. Both Huntingdon and Wesley assaulted each other on the basis of doctrine, beginning with Wesley's *Minutes* which directly attacked Huntingdon's character.<sup>23</sup> Her initial response resulted in "copious weeping,"<sup>24</sup> and the sting of this attack sprang Huntingdon into action. From here angry, immature responses were flung back and forth between the two, and after a while words turned to action. For Huntingdon, her strong convictions led her to arguably rash decisions.

As the pamphlet wars raged, one of Huntingdon's major courses of action concerned the purging of the beloved Trevecca College of all Wesleyan influence.<sup>25</sup> Due to Lady Huntingdon's privileged financial circumstances and her approval of lay preaching, Trevecca College thrived off of her support and ordained many lay preachers.<sup>26</sup> Considering Huntingdon's zeal for doctrines such as predestination and justification by faith alone, Wesleyan influences threatened

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<sup>22</sup> John R. Tyson, "Lady Huntingdon's Reformation."

<sup>23</sup> David Ceri Jones and Eryn Mant White, *The Elect Methodists*, 156.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>26</sup> John R. Tyson, "Lady Huntingdon's Reformation."

the stability of Calvinistic Methodism. After the infamous *Minutes* encounter, Huntingdon began to micro-manage Trevecca College, requiring the aspiring preachers to prove themselves faithful to predestination doctrine or otherwise be expelled.<sup>27</sup> As students determined whether or not to



Figure 2 Trevecca College. Public Domain, Photo Credit: The National Library of Wales

stay at Trevecca, the college eventually resulted in a severe bent toward justification by faith alone, with no middle ground or moderation. Led by her strong convictions, Huntingdon ended up weakening the education and training offered at Trevecca, which produced narrow-minded students.<sup>28</sup> Even Howell Harris, the so-

called founder of Calvinistic Methodism, became uncomfortable with the attitudes and teaching coming from the students of Trevecca College.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, this was not the only area in which Huntingdon's convictions ended in a weakening that which she had previously helped establish support.

In addition to her financial support and doctrinal management of Trevecca College, Huntingdon also helped build a group of chapels, which she called the Connexion. This too saw a deterioration with the split in Methodism, although the effects were not as severe as those seen in Trevecca. Her desire to build these chapels stemmed from her desire for a physical place of worship.<sup>30</sup> Although Calvinistic Methodism began with humble roots in the open air, it was likely that Huntingdon's love of the Anglican Church translated into the construction of buildings for worship. Considering her personality, it was not surprising that by the end of

<sup>27</sup> David Ceri Jones and Eryn Mant White, *The Elect Methodists*, 156-157.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>30</sup> Cynthia Immogen Hammond, 2006. "'Dearest City, I am Thine': Selina Hastings' Architectural Vision." *Women's Studies* 35, no. 2: 145-169.

Huntingdon's life her Connexion consisted of more than sixty chapels.<sup>31</sup> Huntingdon threw herself into this work after the untimely death of her husband and two sons, allowing her to put in the necessary time and energy.<sup>32</sup> For the most part, Huntingdon's building of chapels was harmless; it was her management of them that caused harm.

Similar to the Trevecca College, Lady Huntingdon's management prowess allowed her to appoint and oversee chaplains for each chapel.<sup>33</sup> As the controversy evolved between the Calvinists and the Wesleyans, Huntingdon's



Figure 3, Chapel at Hampshire, Public Domain, Photo Credit: Michael Ford

influence over her chapels weakened the potency of her work, giving Wesley grounds to attack and criticize Huntingdon.<sup>34</sup> This inspired continued retaliation on the part of Huntingdon, once again displaying her deep conviction concerning her beliefs.

As part of Huntingdon's reprisal in response to Wesley, she edited all the hymnbooks used in her chapels. When authorizing a hymnbook for her chapel in Bath, Huntingdon originally included several of Charles Wesley's hymns, "hymns that Huntingdon herself once enjoyed."<sup>35</sup> Yet even in music, Huntingdon was convinced of what sacrifices must be made in order to purport her Calvinistic stance. Her doctrine becoming narrower, Huntingdon cut Wesley's hymns from her book, publishing a new hymnbook which became the primary source used in Connexion chapel worship.<sup>36</sup> This action was a harsh blow against the Wesley brothers' doctrine considering the amount of theology conveyed through the singing of hymns.<sup>37</sup> Even in the preface to her collection of hymns, Huntingdon's language clearly evokes her theological stance

<sup>31</sup> John R. Tyson, "Lady Huntingdon's Reformation."

<sup>32</sup> "The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon."

<sup>33</sup> John R. Tyson, "Lady Huntingdon's Reformation."

<sup>34</sup> David Ceri Jones and Eryn Mant White, *The Elect Methodists*, 160.

<sup>35</sup> David Ceri Jones and Eryn Mant White, *The Elect Methodists*, 160.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 159

and her view of the purpose of hymns, that they might “alarm the secure, and comfort the several wants of all.”<sup>38</sup> Her seriousness is also communicated in this simple hymnbook preface through the extremity of language used to convey the passing vanities and fragilities of life. Whether keenly aware of death through the passing of her husband and sons and her own illness, Huntingdon reminds readers that “none of the nearest or dearest friends can help (one) on a dying bed.”<sup>39</sup> Huntingdon was not one to complete any task half-way, and any area of worship was carefully examined in order to promote her convictions. As time progressed, this practice became more unsustainable, which eventually led to a deterioration of Huntingdon’s efforts.

Conflicted by her beliefs, the end of Huntingdon’s life was characterized by schisms and financial struggles. One of the greatest and most emotionally challenging splits Huntingdon endured was that with the Anglican Church. The Anglican Church and its piety, her love from an early age,<sup>40</sup> became frustrated with Huntingdon’s method of chapel building and establishment.<sup>41</sup> Faced with little other choice, Huntingdon regrettably left the church to whom she devoted most of her life. Her zeal not only led to her influencing the split within Methodism, but also within the larger sphere of the Church of England.

In addition to her painful resignation from the Anglican Church, Huntingdon, once well-endowed, faced insurmountable financial troubles. The Trevecca College, in which she invested both money and energy into, lost academic integrity and soon struggled to pay taxes and rent.<sup>42</sup> By 1788, the college hosted a measly ten students and was left with only two invalid horses.<sup>43</sup> Her work in dire straits, the Lady Huntingdon who once supported and provided loans to a large

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<sup>38</sup> "The Countess of Huntingdon's Preface to Her Excellent Collection of Hymns." *The Spiritual Magazine; Or, Gospel Treasury (1813-1814)* 1, no. 000001 (01, 1813): 34.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> "Selina, Countess of Huntingdon."

<sup>41</sup> John R. Tyson, "Lady Huntingdon's Reformation."

<sup>42</sup> David Ceri Jones and Eryn Mant White, *The Elect Methodists*, 183.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

number of chapels<sup>44</sup> seemed to lose financial wisdom in the heat of controversy. In an effort to keep her various institutions afloat, Huntingdon resorted to selling her jewels,<sup>45</sup> but despite her best efforts her establishments continued in steady decline. From her conversion to the bitter end, Huntingdon pursued what she held to be true, even to the point of destructive consequences.

As Calvinistic Methodism continued to become overshadowed by the Wesley brothers, Huntingdon's remaining efforts showed the detrimental effects of deep, unrelenting convictions. Though there were attempts at reconciliation between the Wesley's and Huntingdon, her distress over the state of their relationship disturbing, but in the end neither party was willing to concede or relinquish their beliefs.<sup>46</sup> Any attempts at reconciliation on both ends ultimately failed. Huntingdon began with admirable intentions, and much of the work she accomplished benefited the communities of England and Wales. Her deeply convicting conversion in addition to the teachings of Whitefield provided a foundation for Huntingdon's doctrine. Although Huntingdon possessed resource and management skills, some might suggest she squandered her abilities and gifts by misusing them for the desire to see the prevailing of Calvinistic Methodism. Huntingdon obviously became carried away in her work.

Actions inspired by zeal similar to Huntingdon's call into question the benefit of acting upon strong convictions. Undoubtedly, there is a time and a place for fervor; even Huntingdon demonstrates this in the initial stages of the work she began. Nevertheless, Huntingdon pursued her convictions to the schismatic deterioration of Calvinistic Methodism. As an example to the rest of us, Huntingdon exemplifies the need for interpersonal wisdom in order to successfully build a movement. With Huntingdon, her convictions led to contradictions. Considering the

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<sup>44</sup> John R. Tyson, "Lady Huntingdon's Reformation."

<sup>45</sup> "Selina, Countess of Huntingdon."

<sup>46</sup> David Ceri Jones and Eryn Mant White, 161.

history of Christianity, Huntingdon proves to be another imperfect follower who left behind a legacy of negative consequences.

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