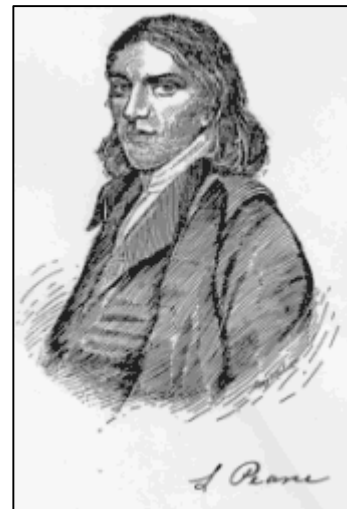


Scarcely known today, Samuel Pearce was in his own day well known for the anointing that attended his preaching and the depth of his spirituality. It was said of him that "his ardour ... gave him a kind of ubiquity; as a man and a preacher, he was known, he was felt everywhere."² William Jay (1769-1853), who exercised an influential ministry in Bath for the first half of the nineteenth century, said of Pearce's preaching: "When I have endeavoured to form an image of our Lord as a preacher, Pearce has oftener presented himself to my mind than any other I have been acquainted with." He had, Jay went on, a "mildness and tenderness" in his style of preaching, and a "peculiar unction." When Jay wrote these words it was many years after Pearce's death, but still, he said, he could see Pearce's appearance in his mind's eye and feel the impression that he made upon his hearers as he preached. Ever one to appreciate the importance of having spiritual individuals as one's friends, Jay has this comment about the the last time that he saw Pearce alive: "What a savour does communion with such a man leave upon the spirit."³



David Bogue and James Bennett, in their history of the Dissenting interest in England up to the early nineteenth century, have similar remarks about Pearce. When he preached, they said, "the most careless were attentive, the most prejudiced became favourable, and the coldest felt that, in spite of themselves, they began to kindle." But it was when he prayed in public, they remarked, that Pearce's spiritual ardour was most apparent. Then the "most devout were so elevated beyond their former heights, that they said, "We scarcely ever seemed to pray before'. "⁴ In fact, for some decades after his death it was not uncommon to hear him referred to as the "seraphic Pearce."⁵

Formative Years, 1766-1789

Pearce was born in Plymouth on 20 July 1766 to devout Baptist parents. Despite a good upbringing by his godly father, William Pearce (d.1805), and an equally devout grandfather-his mother died when he was but an infant- it was not until 1782, his sixteenth year, that he experienced the joys of conversion. A year or so later, on the day when he celebrated his seventeenth birthday, he was baptized and joined the Plymouth congregation in which he had been raised. It was not long after his baptism that the church perceived that Pearce had been endowed with definite gifts that marked him out as one called to pastoral ministry. So, in November of 1785, when he was only nineteen years of age and serving as an apprentice to his father who was a silversmith, Pearce received a call from the church to enter into the ministry of the Word.

The church recommended that Pearce first pursue a course of study at the Bristol Baptist Academy. From August, 1786 to May, 1789 Pearce thus studied at what was then the sole Baptist institution in Great Britain for the training of ministers for the denomination of which Pearce's church was a part, the Particular, or Calvinistic, Baptists. The benefits afforded by this period of study were ones for which Pearce was ever grateful. There was, for example, the privilege of studying under the godly Caleb Evans (1737-1791), the Principal of the Academy, and Robert Hall, Jr. (1764-1831), a reputed genius who would become one of the great preachers in Great Britain during the early decades of the following century.

Then there were the opportunities for the students to preach and try their wings, as it were. A number of years later Pearce recalled one occasion when he went to preach among the colliers of Coleford, Gloucestershire. Standing on a three-legged stool in a hut, he directed thirty or forty of these miners to "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." "Such an unction from

above" attended his preaching that day that the entirety of his hearers were "melted into tears" and he too, "weeping among them, could scarcely speak...for interrupting sighs and sobs."

Finally, there was the rich fellowship to be enjoyed with fellow students. Among the latter, one in particular became a very close friend, William Steadman (1764-1837), an intrepid church-planter who later played a major role in Baptist renewal in the North of England.

Cannon Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, 1789-1799

Early in 1789 Pearce received and accepted a call to serve for a year's probation as the pastor of Cannon Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. He had supplied the Birmingham pulpit the previous summer as well as over the Christmas vacation. Impressed by Pearce's evangelistic zeal—a number of people were saved on both occasions—along with his evident ability to strengthen God's people in their Christian walk, the church sent their request to him in early February 1789. Five weeks later Pearce wrote back consenting to their request, and by June, his studies finished, he was with them. The following year he was formally called to be the pastor of what would turn out to be his only pastoral charge.

In his letter of acceptance, written on 18 July 1790, he told the Birmingham Baptists that he hoped the union between pastor and church would "be for God's glory, for the good of precious souls, for your prosperity as a Church, and for my prosperity as your minister." It is noteworthy that he placed "God's glory" in first place. If there was any concern that set the fundamental tone for his ministry it was this desire to see God glorified in his life and labours.

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

At the heart of his preaching and spirituality was that key-note of eighteenth-century Evangelicalism, the sovereign mercy of God displayed in the cross of Christ. Writing one Sunday afternoon to William Summers, a friend then residing in London, Pearce told him that he had for his sermon that evening "the best subject of all in the Bible. Eph. i.7-Redemption! how welcome to the captive! Forgiveness! how delightful to the guilty! Grace! how pleasant to the heart of a saved sinner!" Christ's atoning death for sinners, he went on to say, is "the leading truth in the N.T., ...a doctrine I cannot but venerate; and to the Author of such a redemption my whole soul labours to exhaust itself in praise."⁶ And in his final letter to his congregation, written on 31 May 1799, he reminded them that the gospel which he had preached among them for ten years and in which he urged them to stand fast was "the gospel of the grace of God; the gospel of free, full, everlasting salvation, founded on the sufferings and death of God manifest in the flesh."⁷

A great support to Pearce throughout his pastorate at Cannon Street was his closest friend, his wife Sarah. A third-generation Baptist, Sarah had met Pearce soon after his arrival in Birmingham, and they were married on 2 February 1791. Pearce's love for his wife clearly deepened with the passing of the years. Three and a half years after their marriage, he wrote to her from Plymouth: "O, my Sarah, had I as much proof of my love to Christ as I have of my love to you, I should prize it above rubies."⁸ And when Pearce was away from his wife the following year, 1795, on a preaching trip in London, he wrote to tell her that "every day improves not only my tenderness but my esteem for you." In another letter written a few days before this one, he called her "the dearest of women—my invaluable Sarah."⁹

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

One leading characteristic of Pearce's spirituality has already been noted, namely, his emphasis on the cross. "Christ crucified," his good friend Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) wrote of him, "was his darling theme, from first to last."¹⁰ A second prominent feature of his spirituality was his passion for the salvation of his fellow human beings. This passion is strikingly revealed in an incident that took place when he was asked to preach at the opening of a Baptist meeting-house in Guilsborough, Northamptonshire, in May, 1794. Pearce had spoken in the morning on Psalm 76:10 ("Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain"). Later that day, during the midday meal, it was quite evident from the conversation that was going on at the dinner tables that Pearce's sermon had been warmly appreciated. It was thus no surprise when Pearce was asked if he would be willing to preach again the following morning. "If you will find a congregation," Pearce responded, "I will find a sermon." It was agreed to have the sermon at 5 a.m. so that a number of farm labourers could come who wanted to hear Pearce preach and who would have to be at their tasks early in the morning.

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

Well, my brother, you shall have the secret, if it must be so. Just at the moment I was about to resume my seat, thinking I had finished, the door opened, and I saw a poor man enter, of the working class; and from the sweat on his brow, and the symptoms of his fatigue, I conjectured that he had walked some miles to this early service, but that he had been unable to reach the place till the close. A momentary thought glanced through my mind-here may be a man who never heard the gospel, or it may be he is one that regards it as a feast of fat things; in either case, the effort on his part demands one on mine. So with the hope of doing him good, I resolved at once to forget all else, and, in despite of criticism, and the apprehension of being thought tedious, to give him a quarter of an hour.¹¹

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

Given his ardour for the advance of the gospel it is only to be expected that Pearce would be vitally involved in the formation in 1792 of what would eventually be termed the Baptist Missionary Society, the womb of the modern missionary movement. In fact, by 1794 Pearce was so deeply gripped by the cause of missions that he had arrived at the conviction that he should offer his services to the Society and go out to India to join the first missionary team the Society had sent out, namely, William Carey (1761-1834), John Thomas (1757-1801), and their respective families. For an entire month preceding the meeting of the Society's administrative committee at which Pearce's offer would be evaluated, the Birmingham Baptist set apart one day in every week to secret prayer and fasting for direction. He also kept a diary of his experiences during this period, which Fuller later inserted verbatim into his Memoirs of Pearce and which admirably displays what Fuller described as his friend's "singular submissiveness to the will of God."¹²

During one of these days of prayer, fasting, and seeking God's face, Pearce recorded how God met with him in a remarkable way. Pearce had begun the day with "solemn prayer for the assistance of the Holy Spirit" so that he might "enjoy the spirit and power of prayer," have his "personal religion improved," and his "public steps directed." He proceeded to read a portion of Jonathan Edwards' life of David Brainerd (1718-1747), who had been a missionary in the 1740s to North American natives, a book that quickened the zeal of many of Pearce's generation. He then perused 2 Corinthians 2-6. Afterwards he went to prayer, but, he recorded, his heart was hard and "all was dullness," and he feared that somehow he had offended God.

Suddenly, Pearce wrote, "it pleased God to smite the rock with the rod of his Spirit, and immediately the waters began to flow." Likening the frame of his heart to the rock in the desert that Moses struck with his rod in order to bring forth water from it (see Exodus 17:1-6), Pearce had found himself unable to generate any profound warmth for God and his dear cause. How often does it happen that even among God's choicest saints, prayer is more of a burdensome task than a delight! In this case, though, God, as it were, came by his Spirit, "touched" Pearce's heart and quickened his affections. He was overwhelmed, he wrote, by "a heavenly glorious melting power." He saw afresh "the love of a crucified Redeemer" and "the attractions of his cross." He felt "like Mary [Magdalene] at the master's feet weeping, for tenderness of soul; like a little child, for submission to my heavenly father's will." The need to take the gospel to those who had never heard it gripped him anew "with an irresistible drawing of soul" and, in his own words, "compelled me to vow that I would, by his leave, serve him among the heathen." As he wrote later in his diary:

If ever in my life I knew any thing of the influences of the Holy Spirit, I did at this time. I was swallowed up in God. Hunger, fulness, cold, heat, friends and enemies, all seemed nothing before God. I was in a new world. All was delightful; for Christ was all, and in all. Many times I concluded prayer, but when rising from my knees, communion with God was so desirable, that I was sweetly drawn to it again and again, till my...strength was almost exhausted.¹³

The decision of the Society as to Pearce's status, however, was ultimately a negative one. Rightly or wrongly, when the executive committee of the Society met at Roade, Northamptonshire, on 12 November, it was of the opinion that Pearce could best serve the cause of missions at home in England.

Pearce's response to this decision is best seen in extracts from two letters. The first, written to his wife Sarah the day after he received the decision, stated: "I am disappointed, but not dismayed. I ever wish to make my Saviour's will my own."¹⁴ The second, sent to William Carey in India over four months later, contains a similar desire to submit to the perfectly good and sovereign will of God.

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

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

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

found of all that seek him, would assuredly direct the hearts of my brethren to that which was most pleasing to himself, and most suitable to the interests of his kingdom in the world. Between two and three hours were they deliberating after which time a paper was put into my hands, of which the following is a copy."The brethren at this meeting are fully satisfied of the fitness of brother P[earce]'s qualifications, and greatly approve of the disinterestedness of his motives and the ardour of his mind. But another Missionary not having been requested, and not being in our view immediately necessary, and brother P[earce] occupying already a post very important to the prosperity of the Mission itself, we are unanimously of opinion that at present, however, he should continue in the situation which he now occupies."

In response to this decision, which dashed some of Pearce's deepest longings, he was, he said, "enabled cheerfully to reply, "The will of the Lord be done;" and receiving this answer as the voice of God, I have, for the most part, been easy since, though not without occasional pantings of spirit after the publishing of the gospel to the Pagans."¹⁵

In the five remaining years of Pearce's earthly life, he expended much of his energy in raising support for the cause of foreign missions. For instance, Pearce was the preacher at the meeting which saw William Ward (1769-1823)-later to be one of the most invaluable of Carey's co-workers in India-accepted as a missionary with the Baptist Missionary Society. Those attending the meeting, which took place at Kettering on 16 October 1798, were deeply stirred by Pearce's passion and concern for the advance of the gospel. He preached "like an Apostle," Fuller later wrote to Carey. And when Ward wrote to Carey, he told his future colleague that Pearce "set the whole meeting in a flame. Had missionaries been needed, we might have had a cargo immediately."¹⁶

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

By mid-December, 1798, Pearce could not converse for more than a few minutes without losing his breath. Yet still he was thinking of the salvation of the lost. Writing to Carey around this time, he told him of a plan which he had formed to take the gospel to France that he had been mulling over in his mind. At that time England and France were locked in a titanic war that would last into the middle of the second decade of the next century. "I have been endeavouring for some years," he told Carey, "to get five of our Ministers to agree that they will apply themselves to the French language, ...then we [for he was obviously intending to be one of the five] might spend two months annually in that Country, and at least satisfy ourselves that Christianity was not lost in France for want of a fair experiment in its favour: and who can tell what God might do!"¹⁷ God would use British evangelicals, notably Pearce's Baptist contemporary Robert Haldane (1764-1842), to take the gospel to Francophones on the Continent when peace eventually came, but Pearce's anointed preaching would play no part in that great work. Yet his ardent prayers on behalf of the French could not have been without some effect. As Pearce had noted in 1794 "praying breath" is never lost.

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

daily prayers for each other!"¹⁸

Sarah and the children had gone to stay with her family in Alcester, twenty or miles or so from Birmingham. But by mid-May Sarah could no longer bear being absent from her beloved. Leaving their children with Birmingham friends, she headed south as fast as she could travel in mid-May, where she stayed with her husband until the couple slowly wound their way home to Birmingham in mid-July. By his time Samuel's voice was so far gone that he could not even whisper without pain in his lungs. His suffering, though, seemed to act like a refiner's fire to draw him closer to Christ. "Blessed be his dear name," he said not long before his death, "who shed his blood for me. ... Now I see the value of the religion of the cross. It is a religion for a dying sinner. ... Yes, I taste its sweetness, and enjoy its fulness, with all the gloom of a dying-bed before me; and far rather would I be the poor emaciated and emaciating creature that I am, than be an emperor with every earthly good about him, but without a God."¹⁹

He fell asleep in Christ on Thursday, 10 October 1799. William Ward, who had been profoundly influenced by Pearce's zeal and spirituality, well summed up his character when he wrote not long before the latter's death: "Oh, how does personal religion shine in Pearce! What a soul! What ardour for the glory of God! ... you see in him a mind wholly given up to God; a sacred lustre shines in his conversation: always tranquil, always cheerful. ... I have seen more of God in him than in any other person I ever met."²⁰

Endnotes

1. For the following sketch of the life of Pearce, two books have been especially helpful: that written by his close friend, Andrew Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce, A. M.* (Clipstone, 1801); and that written by a grandson who was also the grandson of William Carey, S. Pearce Carey, *Samuel Pearce, M. A., The Baptist Brainerd* (London, n.d.).
2. F. A. Cox, *History of the Baptist Missionary Society* (London, 1842), I, 54.
3. *The Autobiography of William Jay* (Edinburgh, 1974), 372, 373.
4. *The History of Dissenters* (London, 1833), II, 653.
5. See, for example, John Angell James, *An Earnest Ministry the Want of the Times* (London, 1848), 272.
6. Carey, *Samuel Pearce*, 97-98.
7. Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 123-124.
8. S. Pearce Carey, "Love Letters of Samuel Pearce", *The Baptist Quarterly*, 8 (1936-1937), 96.
9. Letters to Sarah Pearce, 7 September 1795 and 31 August 1795 (Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford University).
10. *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 140.
11. Cox, *History of the Baptist Missionary Society*, I, 52-53.
12. *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 59. For extracts from the entire diary, see *ibid.*, 39-57.
13. *Ibid.*, 55.
14. *Ibid.*, 35.
15. Letter to William Carey, 27 March 1795 [*Missionary Correspondence* (London, 1814), 26, 30-31].
16. Andrew Fuller, Letter to William Carey, 18 April 1799 [*Letters of Andrew Fuller*, typescript transcript, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford]; William Ward, Letter to William Carey, October 1798 [cited S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey*, ed. Peter Masters (London, 1993), 172].
17. Cited Carey, *Samuel Pearce*, 189.

18. Letters to Sarah Pearce, 20 April 1799 and 3 May 1799 (Angus Library).
19. Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 141.
20. Cited Carey, *Samuel Pearce*, 188.