Ministerial Recruitment and Training in Early Methodism — Spirit-taught or School-trained

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INTRODUCTION

Controversy over ministerial training is perhaps contemporary to any age. In nineteenth-century Methodism this problem precipitated a violent controversy within the church. The success of American Methodism from approximately 1773 to 1813 was so extraordinary that its methods of ministerial selection and training were held by many Methodists as correct for any age and culture, but this view was not shared by all. These different opinions, supplemented by corollary factors, caused violent controversy from approximately 1830 to 1860; the feud even extended into the twentieth century.

The basic issue was how much of the minister's success depended upon God and how much depended upon human skill. Early Methodism held unequivocally that all true ministers were divinely called and endowed. Moreover, when one was called he must begin to preach immediately; to procrastinate was disobedience. The urgency of the call did not preclude preparaion *in the work,* but it did preclude preparation *for the work.* This concept entailed far-reaching implications. It demanded that ministerial candidates be selected with great care to insure that only God-called men were chosen. If, however, the candidate was God-called he could not fail to be successful, and likewise if he were unsuccessful then he could not have been divinely called. The carefulness in choosing is seen in the method of ministerial recruitment.

MINISTERIAL RECRUITMENT, TRAINING AND SUCCESS

The informal freedom of early Methodist gatherings was an important factor in recruiting ministers. In these a lay-member was free to pray, testify or exhort. When a member of the "society" showed unusual ability to speak in public he was given a license to exhort; if successful as an exhorter he could scarcely escape being urged to become an itinerant. Before enlisting such as an itinerant, however, a searching examination was made. The questions asked in the *Discipline* covered three areas: Did the candidate know God as Savior? Did he demonstrate that God had endowed him with the

ability to think clearly and speak convincingly? Had any persons been converted under his efforts?[1] These questions were asked of those who knew him. The candidate himself was also questioned concerning his salvation experience, his earnest striving for Christian perfection, and his knowledge of and willingness to conform to Methodist demands. If received he was pointedly reminded of his one objective as follows: "You think it your Duty to call Sinners to Repentance. Make full proof hereof, and we shall rejoice to receive you as a Fellow Laborer."[2] Even with this acceptance he was explicitly warned that the church was under no obligation to retain him; two years of successful ministry were required to allow consideration of ordination as a deacon,[3] and two more years before he could be ordained an elder.[4] Added to this was a strict character examination each year.[5]

The extreme difficulties of the task was another screening factor. Both food and clothing were often inadequate for good health and respectability. Abel Stevens wrote, "The system speedily killed off such as were weak of body, and drove off such as were weak of character."[6] Nearly half of the itinerants who had died by 1847 were less than thirty years of age.[7] Hardships were appalling. Elijah Hedding, later a bishop, said:

> One year I received on my circuit exclusive of traveling expenses three dollars and twenty-five cents; this was made up to twenty-one at the conference. My pantaloons were often patched at the knees, and the sisters often showed me great kindness by turning an old coat for me.[8]

Marriage was virtually impossible for the itinerants; to marry usually meant to locate and take up a secular vocation. At one time, when several did marry, Asbury commented, "I believe the devil and the women will get all my preachers."[9] Besides the poverty and hardships the itinerant also faced persecutions. Nuisance persecutions were commonplace and physical violence was not unusual.

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1. *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church,* (12th ed.; New York: T. Kirk, No. 48 Maiden Lane, 1804), p. 28.
2. *Ibid.,* p. 24.
3. *Ibid.,* pp. 24-25.
4. *Ibid.,* p. 21.
5. *Ibid.,* p. 16.
6. Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America,* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1864), I, 230, 231. (Hereafter referred to as *Stevens.*)
7. Halford E. Luccock and Paul Hutchinson, *The Story of Methodism* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1926), p. 229.
8. D. W. Clark, *Life and Times of Elijah Hedding* (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1855), p. 190.
9. William Warren Sweet, *Virginia Methodism* (Richmond Va.: Whittet and Witherspoon, 1955), pp. 154-55.

Supplementing the careful selection and the rigorous screening there was provided a system of practical training which was most valuable to the beginner. The new candidate, according to regular procedure, traveled with a senior preacher. Here he observed and also frequently preached under his senior's observation. After a few weeks or months he was given a circuit of his own, and this too was a kind of school. Since he preached at a place only about once a month he could rework and re-preach a sermon until it was a highly effective message. It should not be assumed that the itinerants constantly repreached a few prize sermons; the records utterly fail to support such a view, but it is true that the circuit system allowed the new candidate to start with a minimum number of sermons. Moreover, in practical training the system superbly excelled school training. Living with the people, the itinerant learned their ways and thought habits; he spoke their language, even their provincialisms, and shared their viewpoints.

Besides the practical training which he received the itinerant also studied. The *Discipline* made it very clear that he was to read daily. While one must admit that the pressure of duties often made it difficult, still some made remarkable records. Anthony Atwood, who entered the ministry in 1825 said that the early preachers were "mostly great readers; constantly as a rule with a book in hand."[10] Peter Cartwright, who is often considered a bold illiterate said in his later years that he had "been an habitual reader all his life."[11] Asbury had a reading record that could scarcely be excelled, as did Jesse Lee. Between the Conference in May 1791 and the Conference in August 1792, besides reading his Bible, preaching 324 times, and attending to other duties, Lee read 5434 pages in other books, among them Aristotle's *Works.*[12] It must be admitted that some of the itinerants "murdered the King's English." One of them said that St. Paul was brought up at the foot of Gammel Hill. Benjamin Abbott[13] in preaching from the text "Thou art an austere man" spoke of the "oyster man."[14] This error, however, which seems to have been only in pronunciation, is no index to Abbott's ability. The conference minutes referring to his death read, "Perhaps he was one of the

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10. Anthony Atwood, *Causes of the Success of Methodism* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Association for the Promotion of Holiness, 1884), p. 17.
11. Peter Cartwright, *Fifty Years a Presiding Elder* (Cincinnati:Cranston and Stowe, 1871), pp. 214-15.
12. Leroy M. Lee, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Jesse Lee* (Richmond, Va.: John Early, 1848), p. 226.
13. George Peck refers to "Father Abbott" and could scarcely mean any other than Benjmin Abbott.
14. George Peck, *Past and Present—A Semi-Centennial Sermon* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1866), p. 28.

wonders of America."[15] Sweet writes of the western preachers as follows:

> Most of the preachers who followed the moving population westward were men of little education; but to say that they were ignorant men is far from the truth. They were uneducated in the same sense that Abraham Lincoln was uneducated; but like Lincoln, they became educated in the truest sense of the word.[16]

Especially their knowledge of the Scriptures was superb, and they used them with ease and appeal. Bishop Whatcoat knew the Scriptures so well he was called a concordance.[17]

Moreover, the itinerant faced his task with intense concern. He demonstrated his love by willingness to share the hardships of his listeners, and by kindly deeds, but his message brought his audience face to face with judgment day. There was no effort to charm his audience or display his powers; he measured his success by how effectively he moved people. Matthew Simpson said of his early efforts,

> I did not try to make sermons. I felt that I must at the peril of my soul, persuade men to come to Christ. I must labor to the utmost of my ability to get sinners converted and believers advanced in holiness. For this I thought and studied, and wept and fasted and prayed.[18]

Preaching was the ministers' paramount task, and with only one opportunity in perhaps a month the sermon must be effective, and it was. Jesse Lee's preaching was described as "plain and artless," but at the same time it was so moving that an unsympathetic New England audience compared it to that of George Whitefield.[19] Abel Stevens said of these early preachers,

> The fathers of Methodism were altogether a unique class. If they had not the polished instruments of learning, they possessed a singular knowledge of human nature, enlarged and vigorous sympathies, shrewd powers of argumentation, satire before which a demon might cower, and many of them an overwhelming elocution, the effects of which on the popular mind, are unparalleled in the history of eloquence.[20]

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15. Benjamin Abbot, *Cyclopedia of Methodism,* ed. Matthew Simpson (Philadelphia: Everts and Stewart, 1878), p. 10.
16. William Warren Sweet, *Methodism in American History* (New York; The Methodist Book Concern, 1933), p. 147.
17. Robert E. Coleman, "Factors in the Expansion of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1784-1812" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, School of Religion, State University of Iowa, 1954), p. 326.
18. George R. Crooks, *Life of Bishop Matthew Simpson* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), pp. 90-91.
19. Lee, pp. 221-22.
20. Abel Stevens, "Speech of Abel Stevens before the Maine Conference," *Zion's Herald,* XI (Sept. 9, 1840), 143.

The most convincing evidence of the ability of the early Methodist preachers is the membership gains which they made. In 1773, at the first Methodist Conference in America, the membership was 1160,[21] in 1784 it was 14,988, in 1800 it was 65,181, and in 1810 it was 174,560. This made Methodism the largest denomination in the United States. By comparison in gains from 1775 to 1810 Methodism gained 5,443 per cent as against the Baptists who had the next highest gains of 700 per cent, while some denominations gained very little, and one actually lost.[22]

In the light of such amazing gains it is not surprising that Methodists generally were enthusiastic about their method of ministerial training, and looked down upon the contemporary college trained ministers.

FORMAL MINISTERIAL EDUCATION, BUT SPIRITUAL DECLINE

Methodism's first attempt at supervised study for ministers in America was a study course adopted in 1816. The major reasons for its adoption were apparently a sudden drop in gains in membership, too many early locations, and in some cases, heretical preaching. The average gain per preacher in the decade from 1801 to 1810 was 24.93 members per year, but in 1814, the church actually lost 4.626 members per preacher, and in 1815 the gain was only .051.[23] Such a sudden decrease would naturally cause great concern. To remedy the situation a raise in salary was voted for the preachers to prevent early locations, and the study course was adopted to help train new candidates.

One might assume that at the 1816 General Conference, the church unanimously felt that increased education was the answer to its problem. Such an assumption is far from the truth. Early Methodism viewed formal school training with distrust and fear, and the study course undoubtedly was voted with reluctance by some, with the thought of it merely being a help to the *Discipline's* urge to study by others. As the nation was caught in the great educational thrust of the second and third quarter of the nineteenth century, Methodism was divided. It was impossible for her not to face educational problems because of the general educational expansion. Schools were being established and Methodist youth were attending them. Too often the instructors were not favorable to Methodism; thus prejudices were built up which opposed expansion. Academies and colleges

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21. Stevens, I, 161.
22. Ivan Howard, "Controversies in Methodism Over Education of Ministers up to 1856," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, School of Religion, State University of Iowa, 1965), p. 50.
23. Howard, p. 54.

were attracting Methodist young people, who frequently were lost to the church. Hence the church felt compelled to put Methodist teachers in the public schools, and also to establish schools of her own.

In 1820 the General Conference voted that each Annual Conference establish a school or schools of its own, and the danger of losing its young people became a sufficient reason for strong emphasis on schools and education within the church.[24] Methodism was slow in entering the educational race, but once it had entered it became most aggressive. One can probably date its first successful academy at 1818, but between 1820 and 1860 it founded more academies than any other denomination.[25] Along with the academy program, there was also a college building program. By 1860 the Methodists had thirty-four colleges.[26] These schools and colleges sent back to Methodist churches formally educated members, often leaders in the community and the church. It was only natural that such should want educated ministers.

As the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century passed, other changes besides educational advancement were taking place within Methodism. The church was abandoning its early singularities or customs and its early zeal. The *Discipline,* which was designed to hold Methodism to its early purpose and practices, was violated in many ways, whereas earlier it had been strictly enforced. The freedom and joyous expression in worship was vanishing. Camp meetings were being abandoned, and in places Methodists were dressing and living like the world.[27] The educational problem became involved with these changes because those favoring formal ministerial education were looked upon as favoring the other departures from early practices. Thus there emerged two groups which we denominate as "old school" and "new school." The "old school" held to early practices while the "new school" favored changes. That there were many exceptions to this correlation is admitted, but the feeling too often existed that the choice was between being godly and uneducated or ungodly and educated. It needs to be conceded that both sides had reasons for suspicion. Methodism was abandoning its early spirituality. The class meetings were being deserted until by 1862 it was estimated that only one-fourth of the members attended, although class attendance was still demanded by the *Discipline.*[28] The hearty singing of early Methodism was being

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24. Howard, p. 109.
25. Francis I. Moats, "Educational Policy of the Methodist Church Prior to 1860," (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, the Graduate College, State University of Iowa, 1926), p. 95.
26. William Warren Sweet, *Religion in the Development of American Culture,* 1765-1840 (New York: Scribner's 1952), p. 165.
27. Howard, chapter 3.
28. John Miley, "Art. IV, Class Meetings," Methodist Quarterly Review, XLIV (Oct., 1862), 606.

pushed out by choirs and unfamiliar songs were purposely chosen to prevent the congregation from participating.[29] Moreover this was a direct violation of the *Discipline.* Henry Ward Beecher tells of his disappointment in attending a Methodist service in 1857 with the expectation of hearing some "good old Methodist" singing.

> Imagine my chagrin when . . . up rose a choir . . and began to sing a montonous tune. The patient congregation stood up to be sung to as men stand under rain when there is no shelter. . . . How I longed for the good old Methodist thunder! One good burst of old-fashioned music would have blown this modern singing out of the window like the wadding out of a gun.[30]

Methodist perculiarities in dress also began to vanish. Kneeling during public prayer was being abandoned, amens and shouts began to be less frequent. The quarterly conferences became more mere business sessions rather than heart-searching evangelistic meetings. The enforcement of the *Discipline* was lax. In 1841 an article appeared in *The Christian Advocate and Journal* which actually belittled the *Discipline.* After naming a number of things which Methodists were doing, the writer added:

> We know these things are not exactly approved in the *Discipline.* But, la me! Whoever reads that? Whoever dreamed that the *Discipline* was anything? Whoever thought that the *Discipline* was to be enforced? Pshaw, pshaw, Brother Story you must be deranged, or such a thought never would have entered your mind.[31]

In some of the eastern cities and perhaps in the cities generally, the concept of the mission of the church was changing. An article in the February 8, 1866 *Christian Advocate* pointed out that during the lifetime of some of the older members, the church had changed from a mission to the masses to a parish system for their own membership. Along with this the preaching had changed, the ruggedness and pointed warnings had disappeared or shrunk to minimal proportions. As early as 1828 an article appeared in *Zion's Herald* which portrayed the change and the differing attitudes between "old school" and "new school" proponents. It read:

> "A very fine sermon indeed," said my friend, as we left the church.
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> "A very excellent preacher!" I sighed, but made no reply; yet I thought as I walked along, were I to write aught on that preacher, it would be Ichabod! Ichabod! The glory is departed.

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29. Harmont, "Church Music," *Christian Advocate and Journal,* XI (Feb. 3, 1837), 96.
30. Beecher, "Henry Ward Beecher on Methodist Singing," *Central Christian Advocate,* I (Oct. 7, 1857), 157.
31. J. B. B. "Administration of Discipline," (*Christian Advocate and Journal,* XVI (Oct. 13, 1841), 33.

> When I first knew Lucretius he was a young man full of faith and zeal. . . . Then he cared not to please the fastidious ear with the graces of finished composition, or seize on the admiration, and dazzle the mind of the tasteful hearer, by fanciful sketches and brilliant flights—Oh no; he stood forth as a watchman on Zion's walls; he gave the trumpet a certain sound.[32]

The dislike of theological schools by early Methodists is almost beyond present day imagination. Colleges were suspect by many within Methodism, and as a means of selling the idea of colleges strong promises were made to eliminate any idea that the colleges were in any sense theological schools. One plea for colleges said, "It must be distinctly understood that this plan does not contemplate schools for the education of ministers."[33] Indiana Asbury University was founded with the promise that they were not founding a "manufactory in which preachers are to be made."[34] So strong was the dislike and distrust of theological schools that religious subjects were not taught in Methodist colleges until about 1840. The West wanted a "rough and ready" type of preacher. The itinerants fitted this pattern, whereas college men were looked upon as softies. Besides, the idea generally prevailed until after the Civil War that circuit training was superior to school training.

As the educational level of the nation advanced and as Methodism moved farther from its early spiritual zeal, the demand for school-trained ministers increased. The first theological school was attempted by a group in New England in 1839. By 1847 it was operating with a reasonable degree of success, and in 1858 a second theological school was founded in Evanston, Illinois. Both of these were established counter to the desire of a large majority within Methodism, and served to increase the ill will between old school and new school groups. Moreover, each side was critical because the church had declined in effectiveness as compared with other denominations. In the decade from 1801 to 1810, Methodism had increased 168 per cent and Presbyterianism increased 42.8 per cent, but in the decade from 1841 to 1850 Methodism increased 38.6 per cent and Presbyterianism 66.7 per cent.[35] The division within Methodism over education, slavery, and spiritual issues was no doubt a large factor in this decline.

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32. Isha, "A Sketch from Life," *Zion's Herald*, VI (April 16, 1828), 64.
33. A Methodist, "On Education," *Christian Advocate and Journal*, II (March 21, 1828), 113.
34. Sweet, *Methodism in American History*, p. 223.
35. Howard, p. 50.

OLD SCHOOL, NEW SCHOOL MISTAKES

Looking at the controversy through the perspective of more than a century, one wonders at the mistakes of both groups. Old school proponents failed to see that spirituality and zeal were not necessarily joined to a certain method of ministerial training. They also overlooked the fact that an advance in the general education of many of the members made necessary an advance in the education of the ministers. Besides this they overlooked the radical effect of the change from circuits to stations. Perhaps this change was unnecessary; it is true that old school advocates opposed it. Nevertheless the circuit system of early Methodism was vanishing and with its disappearance the young candidate faced a difficult task and faced it without the help of the original system. Two or more sermons a week to the same congregation, plus other ministerial duties, plus attempting to complete a study course, was no small task. It seems that in too many instances the preaching was not what early Methodist preaching had been. Certain churches not infrequently demanded of the Bishop the preacher of their choice, which only added to the problem.

Not all the faults, however, lay with old school advocates. The gains of the other denominations were in no small measure attributable to the reviving effect of early Methodism and their adoption of early Methodist practices. Moreover, the city churches within Methodism which were demanding school-trained ministers, were showing the lowest gains at a time when city populations were mushrooming. Added to these facts, it can also be said that they had moved farthest from Methodism's evangelistic zeal. They were ceasing to be missions to the masses, and too often had departed from the demands of the *Discipline* and early Methodist singularities. Evidence seems to assert that the demand for school-trained ministers was partly a dislike of the early pointedness in rebuking sin, and the demand for a total separateness from worldly practices. The weekly heart searching of the class meeting was rejected. A preacher who could inform his hearers in a polished manner was quite often demanded. Old school advocates were not unaware of these delinquencies and they lumped the spiritual decline and the educational demand together and rejected both.

The controversy seems to be far removed from us, but the writer feels that it has a message for today. First, the mistake of old school devotees of attaching major importance to a minor feature should warn us lest we make a similar mistake. With Wesley as the founder of Methodism, one wonders how this group in the mid-nineteenth century could have held education as unnecessary or even harmful. Moreover, in keeping religious teaching out of the Methodist colleges in the 1820's and '30's they created a situation which promoted to

no small degree the early founding of theological schools. Veering too far to the right they escaped one danger only to create another.

The error of new school advocates was more tragic and should have been more apparent to them. The number of ministers graduated from Methodist theological schools in the third quarter of the nineteenth century was negligible compared to the total number of Methodist ministers. Besides, the real objection of old school advocates to the schools was their fear that they would become promoters of heresy, denying Methodism's heritage. A return to the essentials of early Methodism by the city churches and new school leaders would have gone a long way toward allaying those fears and could well have joined the two groups together in a spiritual and educational program which would have restored Methodism to her early place of leadership.

As one views the scene today, he cannot fail to accept the fact that old school fears were justified.