Methodism and Early Methodist Theological Education

By Daniel L. Marsh

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Two errors concerning The Methodist Church are repeatedly made in common parlance. The first is that The Methodist Church was founded by John Wesley, and the second is that Methodism, by comparison with other denominations, is an educational laggard.

Somebody asks quickly: “Who was the founder of The Methodist Church if it was not John Wesley?” The answer to that question is important, not only because error is worse than ignorance, but also because this particular error aids and abets our Roman Catholic friends in their increasingly aggressive attack upon us. They tell ill-informed persons that the “True Church”—by which they mean only their own—was founded by Jesus and His apostles in general, and Peter in particular, while The Methodist Church, they assert, was founded seventeen hundred years later by the very human John Wesley.

I never call the ecclesiastical body whose titular head resides in the Vatican “the Catholic Church” or “the Holy Catholic Church” for the simple reason that to do so would not be honest! It is only a part—the Roman part—of the Catholic Church. When Jesus said, “Upon this rock I will build my Church,” He announced the formation of a fellowship bound together by the faith which Peter had confessed, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The apostolic Church had an amazingly rapid growth. When it had spread over the whole known world, its followers accurately spoke of it as the catholic, or universal, Church.

For the first three hundred years, the Church remained fairly true to the ideals of the Savior and the teachings of the apostles. Then the Church began to decline in morals through the love of money, the love of power, worldliness and sensuality. The truest followers of Jesus cried aloud against wickedness in the Church. But only sporadic improvements were made until the devout and intelligent monk, Martin Luther, appeared upon the scene. The whole Church felt the shock of this dynamic reformer; but the controlling powers of the Church loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

The goal aimed at by Luther and his associates was to reform
the Church—to remove its faults and abuses, and to restore it to its early Christian practices. They were called Protestants. Most people think that “Protestant” means that they protested against something. The word is derived from the Latin protestari, which means to bear witness, to testify to some truth, to assert some conviction.

A large part of the Church in central, northern, and northwestern Europe (including Britain) followed the leaders of the Reformation in protesting against the superstition, hypocrisy and worldliness which had crept into the Church, and in witnessing for the New Testament doctrines such as the sufficiency of the Scriptures for salvation, justification by faith, and the priesthood of all believers. Let it be kept in mind that the Protestants were as truly Catholic—Holy Catholic—after the Reformation as they had been before the Reformation, or as were those who remained in the unreformed Roman part of the Church.

The Reformation had done much, but it did not go far enough. After about a hundred years of terrible persecution and of seesawing in the Church of England, a body of reformers arose within the English Church who sought to purify it in ritual and doctrines and life. They were Protestants of the Puritan brand; but still members of the Holy Catholic Church.

Unfortunately, the Puritans held to Calvinistic Theology, which represented God’s decrees as harsh and absolute. If people are made to believe that God’s eternal purpose foreordains some persons to be saved and others to be damned they are likely to “go to the devil” by the choice of their own free wills which they are told they do not possess. Add to this Theology the cold and sterile formalities of the Established Church and the horrible immoralities which emanated from the Court, and you can imagine the ignorant, superstitious and sinful eighteenth-century England which was stirred to its depths by the Wesleyan evangelical revival. Wesley believed that the grace of God could transform every life that received it. He preached conscious acceptance with God, victory over sin, and daily growth in holiness. He talked to the people about “forgiveness,” “redemption,” “hope,” and “love.” And the people—rich and poor, high and low—heard him gladly. Lecky, the historian, declared: “Wesley’s sermons were of greater historic importance to England than all the victories by land and sea under Pitt.”

Wesley sent some of his converts to America, where the revival spread its wholesome influence throughout the length and breadth of the land.

Wesley was an ordained clergyman in the Established Church of England, and that Church was a segment in the Protestant section of the Holy Catholic Church. At first, Wesley regarded his converts as members of the Established Church; but because he
was, as Buckle declared, “the first of ecclesiastical statesmen,” he
demned it meet and proper to organize them into a society of their
own, which became The Methodist Church, one of the related units
of the Protestant division of the Holy Catholic Church. John Wesley
was a man of vast knowledge and of wide experience. In his riper
years, when his knowledge had been transmuted into wisdom in
the alembic of experience, he said: “I firmly believe that I am a
scriptural episkopos as much as any man in England or in Europe;
for the uninterrupted succession I know to be a fable, which no man
ever did or can prove.” The Methodist Church went still further
than the Reformation in restoring the pristine virtues and the primitive practices of New Testament Christianity. Therefore, The Meth-
odist Church is a vital and incontestable part of the Holy Catholic
Church which was founded by Jesus and His apostles.

Strictly speaking, John Wesley was not the founder of The Meth-
odist Church. If anyone feels that he must have some words to de-
scribe Wesley’s relation to The Methodist Church, let him use some
such word as “generator,” or “producer,” or “organizer,” or “estab-
lisher,” or “originator,” or “builder,” or, best of all, the “informing
genius of Methodism,” remembering always the words of St. Paul:
“The Foundation is laid already, and no one can lay another, for it
is Jesus Christ Himself.”

Now, concerning the other popular error, viz.: that The Methodist
Church is not as much devoted to education as are some other
Christian denominations. How do you account for that erroneous
idea’s gaining currency? Let me answer by saying that I see four
distinguishing marks of Methodism, three of which are so spectacu-
lar that they attract attention away from the fourth one. The first is
its intense evangelism. It is the herald of a passion. Thus Theodore
Roosevelt, in his history of The Winning of the West, describing
the heroic deeds of a frontiersman by the name of Mansker, says:
“like many another fearless and ignorant backwoods fighter, became
so much impressed by the fiery earnestness and zeal of the Meth-
odists that he joined himself to them, and became a strong and help-
ful prop of the community whose first foundations he had helped
to lay.”

The second characteristic of Methodism is its leadership in move-
ments for reform—its passion for liberty, justice, righteousness.
Green, the great historian of the English People, says, “One of the
noblest results of the Methodist revival was the steady attempt,
which has never ceased from that day to this, to remedy the guilt,
the ignorance, the physical suffering, the social degradation, of the
profligate and the poor.”

The third characteristic of Methodism is its organizational genius.
Methodism is a great dynamic organism, characterized by coura-
geous progressiveness, by an ability to make quick answer to need,
by an easy adjustment and readjustment to meet changing conditions, by adaptation and appropriation and practical efficiency. Even in its religion it has always emphasized life and experience more than mere intellectual assent to creedal dogma. This practical bent, this test of experience, this emphasis upon reality, this organizational genius of adaptation and adjustment to meet changing conditions and to answer to new needs have served the country well. Thus when no church had enough professionally trained preachers to meet the religious and moral needs of the ever-shifting frontier, "Methodism with its 'lay ministry' and its 'itinerancy' could alone afford the ministrations of religion to the overflowing populations of many of the great states of the West."

The fourth characteristic of Methodism is its emphasis upon education—the diametrical opposite of the second error which I named at beginning of this paper, namely: the detraction that Methodism, by comparison with other denominations, is, or at least was in its early days, an educational laggard.

The unvarnished truth is that The Methodist Church has exercised a greater educational influence than any other ecclesiastical institution in the past two hundred years. Emerson's oft-quoted apothegm, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man," is not always literally accurate; but it is suggestive. Cervantes reminds us that "comparisons are always odious and ill taken." Therefore, I shall not compare leaders in The Methodist Church with leaders in other denominations; but I shall outline the cultural attainments of Wesley, and let comparison with anybody else be made by anyone who wishes to do so.

Wesley was a profound Oxford scholar; but he did not wear his culture as a flower to adorn himself, but used it as a tool to build a better world. No other man in the 18th century did so much to create a taste for good reading and to supply it with books at the lowest prices. During his unparalleled apostolate he traveled 250,000 miles and preached 40,000 sermons. Yet he managed to do a prodigious amount of literary work. He wrote short English, French, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew grammars; a Compendium of Logic; extracts from Phaedrus, Ovid, Virgil, Horace, Juvenal, Persius, Martial, and Sallust; an English Dictionary; commentaries on the Old and New Testaments; a short Roman History; a History of England; an Ecclesiastical History; a Compendium of Social Philosophy; and a Christian Library of fifty volumes for the benefit of his itinerant preachers. He edited the Imitation of Christ, and the principal works of Bunyan, Baxter, Edwards, Rutherford, Law, Madame Guyon, and others; endless abridged biographies; an abridged edition of Brooke's novel, The Fool of Quality; a Compendium of Physic—not to speak of collections of psalms, hymns, and
tunes, his own *Sermons* and *Journals*, and a monthly magazine which still goes on. His works were so popular that he made 30,000 pounds, every penny of which he distributed in charity during his life. He founded an orphans' home at Newcastle, charity schools in London, and a dispensary in Bristol. Under his direction the Conference in 1770 adopted resolutions which provoked the indignation of his orthodox Calvinistic friends—that the heathen who had never heard of Christ could be saved if they feared God and worked righteousness according to the light they had. And he believed Marcus Aurelius would be saved; and spoke of the "execrable wretches" who wrangled at the various church councils. He took upon himself with the utmost reluctance the responsibility of organizing a separate church. But the most striking feature of his life as a theologian was his readiness in the last resort, whatever it cost him, to adapt his creed to facts.

A perusal of the diaries, Journals and letters of early Methodist leaders, in America as well as in Britain, reveals that those worthies stood for a liberal and useful education, valuing it both as an intellectual experience and also as a tool. The preachers worked with sacrificial devotion to get as good an education as possible for themselves, and at the same time they were always making good reading matter available to the lay members of their churches. They produced saints, but made them better citizens as well.

Those early Methodist preachers in America were students, heroes, martyrs, saints. I do not remember when I have been more moved than I was in recently reading every word in Asbury's Journal... over 1,600 pages of Journal and 600 of letters. Asbury had no formal education after he passed his thirteenth birthday, and yet he became one of the best educated men in America while being one of the hardest workers that ever lived. How did he do it?

Numerous daily records in Asbury's factual Journal reveal his determination to acquire an education. He was a student all his life, while he rendered an unbelievably self-sacrificing service to his God, his Church, and his country. During his ministry, Asbury traveled a total of 275,000 miles on the wilderness trail, through malaria-ridden swamps, from one settlement to another. He traveled on through heat and cold, through drenching rain and driving snow—he traveled on with sore throat, aching head, burning with fever. He drove his frail body on and on, from Maine to Georgia, from New York to Tennessee, from the wilderness of Kentucky to New England. He preached some 16,500 sermons. Starting out without much formal education, he read diligently and discriminatingly. His saddle was his study, and his saddlebags his library. He became a good scholar and a Bible student, with some knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew languages. He was a man of prayer. As an administrator,
he excelled, bringing order out of a chaotic condition in an infant church and on a godless frontier.

Let me repeat that not only did the early Methodist circuit riders require themselves to gain an education through reading, but they also made good literature available to their people. For example, Robert Williams, a lay evangelist, printed and circulated at his own expense Wesley's Sermons throughout the country. The Conference in 1773 decided that the publishing of literature to be used by the Methodists should be taken over by the Conference itself, declaring that any profits should be used in making up the deficits in preachers' poor salaries and for the relief of worn-out preachers. It was in fulfillment of the determination to make good literature available to Methodists that the Methodist Book Concern (now called The Methodist Publishing House) came into being. Asbury, of course, was vitally related to it. John Dickins, one of the more highly educated Methodist preachers imported from England, played an important part in making it a permanently going concern. Asbury records in his Journal on the 6th of May, 1813, that he had made his will, and left his estate of two thousand dollars to the Book Concern. This money, he says, he had "inherited from dear departed Methodist friends." It was in pursuit of this same purpose to offer every possible educational opportunity to the people called Methodists that they published and distributed the Arminian Magazine (later called the Methodist Magazine), and with a view to furnishing the poorer class in the community with religious reading formed the "Tract Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church."

Another device to bring education to the Methodists in this ever-shifting frontier of the young United States of America led to the establishment of Sunday schools. Robert Raikes, an Englishman of Gloucester, generally is given credit for having established the first Sunday school. However, as a matter of historical fact, a young Methodist lady by the name of Hannah Ball had a Methodist Sunday school at High Wycomb fourteen years before Raikes opened his at Gloucester. Asbury is uniformly given credit for having established the first Sunday school in America.

All the foregoing efforts were primitive and practical, but they did not offer opportunity for formal higher education. Therefore the Methodist passion for education led these early believers of the kingdom of God on this continent to found colleges. In that immortal 1784 Christmas Conference where The Methodist Church was organized, an enormous amount of business was transacted during its ten-day session. At that time the delegates asked themselves what did they require themselves to do, and answered by saying: "To reform this continent and to spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land." One way in which they sought to fulfill this twofold purpose was by the establishing of schools. They remembered how
John Wesley, referring to a school he had established, declared that he would either have a Christian school or none at all. They aimed to fulfill their avowed purpose by having Christian schools.

The first school established by them was Ebenezer Academy (in Virginia), the plan for which was made by Asbury and Dickins. The college that has received the greatest fame was authorized by the organizing Conference in 1784, and was named Cokesbury in honor of Bishops Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury. That was Methodism’s beginning in institutions of higher learning, and its sacrificial support of such institutions still exists.

During the first hundred years of the existence of The Methodist Church, starting with 1784, it established and conducted 85 literary institutions, 58 private schools, 61 classical seminaries, 56 colleges and universities, and 6 theological institutions, a total of 266 educational institutions. The reason for establishing so many was that the means of transportation were slow and inadequate, and moreover, a large part of the following of The Methodist Church were poor pioneers. Therefore, in order that the Church might provide educational opportunities for its people, it built institutions of learning near to the people.

I should say that the foregoing figures do not include any schools that were established by the Southern branch of the Church after the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844. I have not had access to those statistics. Neither do my statistics include institutions established by the Methodist Protestant Church after its separation from the parent Church in 1828.

The foregoing figures testify that while the Church was carrying on its most successful evangelistic campaigns, while it was exercising leadership in great reform movements, such as the abolition of slavery, it was at the same time devoting itself with equal zeal to the promotion of education. At the General Conference of 1820, the Methodist preacher, Martin Ruter, offered and defended his history-making resolution recommending that each Annual Conference in The Methodist Church should have within its bounds an educational institution. That sparked the movement that was to make The Methodist Church the pioneer educational advance in every part of the nation. The reason for the Church’s active interest in this field is indicated by the assertion of the Indiana Conference in 1832 that, next to the religion of the Son of God, it considered the lights of science best calculated to lessen human suffering and to increase human happiness.

Methodism has furnished a disproportionately large number of presidents of state universities. No one among them was superior to Edmund Janes James, the one-time great President of the University of Illinois. He spoke with emphasis about the value of denominational education, saying, “Our civilization would be unfor-
tunate indeed were it not for our institutions of Christian learning. . . . Education without religion is unnatural, abnormal, and dangerous.”

When Methodism celebrated the first centennial of its work in America in 1866, its form of celebration was to put on a financial drive to secure money for Methodism’s educational program. The total amount subscribed was approximately nine million dollars. One of the most valuable by-products of the celebration was the formation of the Board of Education.

Let us now take a more precisely focused view of theological education in early Methodism. I have told you that Wesley assembled a Christian library of fifty volumes for the benefit of his itinerant preachers. It was also expected that the itinerant Methodist preachers, in both Britain and in America, should make themselves thoroughly acquainted with Wesley’s greatest doctrinal sermons.

Apart from theological schools, the greatest arrangement for theological instruction ever devised by any church was what came to be known in Methodism as the Conference Course of Studies. We find the germ of such studies in one question of the Conference in 1781—three years before the Church was formally organized. The question was: “Ought not the preachers often to read ‘The Rules of the Societies,’ ‘The Character of a Methodist,’ and ‘The Plain Account of Christian Perfection,’ if they have got them?” The answer was: “Yes.”

The Conference Course of Studies became more and more important, receiving greater and greater attention through the years. After 1816 the Conferences were responsible for the conduct of the Courses of Study. In 1844 the General Conference legislated that the Course should be extended to four years. In 1916, one hundred years after the Course of Study had been instituted, the General Conference enacted legislation which created the General Conference Commission on Courses of Study. It guaranteed that no man could get into the Methodist ministry without having at least a bowing acquaintance with the doctrines which he was to preach.

We come now to Theological Schools per se. The first one to be established in American Methodism is the present Boston University School of Theology. It came into being in 1839. A new spirit swept through Methodism in the preceding year’s celebration of the first centennial of Methodism as such. Historians like to date the birth of Methodism from the 24th of May, 1738, which was the date of John Wesley’s heart-warming experience at the Aldersgate meeting.

On April 24, 1839, a “Convention of ministers and members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in New England” was called “to consider the expediency of establishing a Methodist theological institution.” The meeting was held in Bromfield Street Church, continu-
ing in session for two days, and ended by earnestly recommending that a theological institution be established. Therefore Boston University, when it speaks accurately, dates its origin from 1839.

There were two reasons why the School was not opened in Boston. The first was that in those days the idea prevailed that embryonic preachers could be better trained for their work in a quiet rural community distant from a big city. The second, and probably the main reason, was that there was a Methodist Seminary in Newbury, Vermont, and that Seminary and the citizens of Newbury extended a very attractive invitation to the newly founded School of Theology to locate in Newbury. This it did.

The Theological Society of Newbury Seminary was organized on September 11, 1840. Osmon C. Baker, the first man to have matriculated at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, was made the head of the new organization. The object of the Society was ministerial training. The School was given the name of “The Newbury Biblical Institute.”

The Newbury Biblical Institute had a hard time financially. They called to their help one of Methodism’s great men of that day. I refer to Dr. John Dempster. He worked hard in raising money. While he did not succeed in getting very much, he did save the institution from total collapse.

In the spring of 1847, the citizens of Concord, New Hampshire, invited the School to move to Concord, and they made available to it the First Parish Meetinghouse; that is, the church that had been used by the Congregationalists. Since the Congregationalists had acquired a new building, their historic earlier building became the home of the School of Theology. At that time the name of the school was changed to the “Methodist General Biblical Institute.” It conducted a regular three-year course.

The School at Concord rendered the Church distinguished service, there is no gainsaying that. But a conviction was growing that the best place to train men to become effective ministers of the Gospel was in a larger center of population. Therefore, they began to consider moving to Boston, which they did in 1868. Here the School changed its name again, now being known as the “Boston Theological Seminary.” It was first located on Pinckney Street, then on Bromfield Street, and still later on Mt. Vernon Street. Its final move came in 1949.

It so happened that the three most influential Trustees of the Seminary were Lee Claflin, Isaac Rich, and Jacob Sleeper. When it moved to Boston, William Fairfield Warren, a scholarly young Methodist preacher, was made President of the Seminary. In 1869, the Trustees of the Seminary decided that they wished to establish a university, and that the Seminary should continue its existence without interruption as a School of Theology in the University.
William Fairfield Warren, President of the Seminary, was elected President of the newly established University. The first Dean of the School in its University setting was James E. Latimer. He was renowned as one of the greatest and truest scholars in any school or denomination in America at that time.

Other schools of theology have been developed. I am not talking about them for my subject is "Methodism and Early Methodist Theological Education." Boston University School of Theology had carved out a history of seventeen years before any other school of theology was established. Garrett Biblical Institute was founded in 1856, and Drew Theological Seminary in 1866. All others have come into existence in later years.

The faculty of this School, especially after it became a part of a great University, was most distinguished. William Fairfield Warren was an internationally renowned scholar. Borden Parker Bowne, the long-time head of the Graduate School and Professor of Philosophy in the School of Theology, was acclaimed by more than one competent European philosopher as America's foremost philosopher. Henry Clay Sheldon, a universal scholar, was the Professor of Systematic Theology and Church History. Professor Hinkley G. Mitchell was probably the foremost Old Testament scholar in America at the beginning of this century. If you will keep in mind that these men and others equally great composed the faculty during the closing years of the 1800's and the opening years of the 1900's, you will understand why Methodism was not rent by the Modernism-Fundamentalism controversy that wrought such great damage in other denominations. The reason was that a large part of the leadership of The Methodist Church had been trained under Bowne, Warren, Sheldon, Mitchell, and others. Dr. Lynn Harold Hough, the distinguished Dean, now Dean Emeritus, of another School of Theology, once declared that Boston University was the only Methodist institution that from its beginning had had a reputation of intellectual respectability. The product of the School learned to be open-minded, intellectually honest, to hold every question up against the light on different levels, to know that the truth would not hurt anything that was true, and that the truth would ultimately prevail.

Another name that I have mentioned illustrates another thing in Methodist theological education. From the beginning, Bishops were given the responsibility of seeing that courses of study were given proper consideration in all the Conferences. When schools of theology were established, the Bishops were given the responsibility of passing upon appointments made to the faculty. If they disapproved, it was the equivalent of a veto.

In the opening years of the present century, Professor Hinkley
G. Mitchell, who had received his training under the great German scholars (and the German scholars were the greatest of that day), introduced into American theological study what was known as Higher Criticism. It is a commonplace today, but in those days persons unacquainted with what it really was could get much excited about it. Therefore, when Professor Mitchell was renominated for another five-year term, the Bishops refused to approve. Two results followed their refusal.

The first was that Methodism lost the scholarly Mitchell. The second was that the 1908 General Conference relieved the Bishops of the responsibility of passing upon appointments to the faculty of Boston University School of Theology.

Great changes have taken place not only in Theological education, but also in the ministry. Change in means of transportation. Instead of floundering through miasmatic swamps or clambering up wild mountain trails on horseback, we travel over superhighways in smoothly gliding automobiles, or by jet planes through the air at a speed faster than sound.

Change in our books. Instead of intellectually masticating, digesting and assimilating a few good books and tracts which we carry in saddelbags, we intellectually gormandize a plethora of books on every subject that strikes our fancy.

Change in education. Instead of education consisting of only a few years of intermittent or desultory study beyond the grades, plus boneing on episcopally chosen hard subjects while traveling circuits of a hundred miles or more, we have four years of liberal arts education, plus at least three years of professional training under the tutelage of world famous scholars.

Change in the ministry. Instead of ministering in cabin, barn or grove to little groups of widely scattered backwoodsmen, rude and uncouth, often drunken and illiterate, for which we receive our expenses and a salary of sixty-four to eighty dollars a year, we live in good parsonages, with the conveniences of civilization, receive salaries of many times sixty-four to eighty dollars a year, and serve congregations of respectable and appreciative people who worship in comfortable churches.

The changes are many. All things change. We change. Heraclitus, the philosopher, taught that “there is nothing permanent except change.” But God remains, and “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” By just as much as preachers are better equipped today than they were a hundred years ago, by that much better should they serve God and those who need Him.

“Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou, who changest not, abide with me.”