The Life of Matthew Simpson

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The recent publication of Robert D. Clark's excellent life of Matthew Simpson highlighted the fact that we have greatly needed a new study and a fresh appraisal of this dominant leader of nineteenth century Methodism. The only other full-length biography of Bishop Simpson was written by Professor George R. Crooks of Drew Theological Seminary, and published in 1890. During the intervening sixty-six years, most of the history of the United States has been restudied and rewritten more than once. The scope of historical study has been enlarged to involve many factors which were overlooked in earlier days. Then, too, due primarily to the scholarly leadership of Dr. William Warren Sweet, American church history has been developed into a field of its own. All this has thrown new light on the lives of the men who were active in any period of our history.

It needs to be said that the art or science of biographical writing has gone through at least two revolutions since Crooks wrote of Simpson in 1890. In those days a biographer was supposed to "play up" the object of his study. It was his responsibility to make a hero out of him if possible. Eulogy was often resorted to while shortcomings were not to be revealed. Crooks fell into this mood. One glaring example must suffice. In the famous address at the funeral of Lincoln Simpson gave utterance to a vindictive appeal that certain military leaders be "doomed to a traitor's death." This, of course, was utterly out of keeping with Lincoln's spirit of "malice toward none, with charity for all." Crooks omits this harsh statement from his report of the funeral address.

Unhappily the reaction went too far and writers of biography were caught up in the debunking school of literature of a later day. If the man about whom they were writing had clay feet, the biographer drew special attention to them. When one of them wrote about "damaged souls," the reader learned more about the damage than he did about the soul. Someone with a high sense of critical humor described these writers as those who were willing to give "three sneers for anybody." Happily a reaction set in against that type of biographer also. Even the so-called realist now tries to give simply a faithful portrayal of the person under review as seen against the special setting of the day in which he lived.

Another change has come also in the writing of biography. It is
at present based on scholarly research such as was quite unknown when Crooks wrote. Obviously he prepared and wrote the life of Simpson on that margin of time which a busy professor in a school of theology could reserve for work of this kind. Aside from a general reference here and there, none of the writing of Crooks is documented. In comparison with this limited preparation, Clark took an entire sabbatical year free from other scholastic purposes to complete the research and to write this book on Simpson. There are twenty-five pages at the end of his book referring to documents to which the reader may turn for verification of statements made or judgments rendered.

It would be too much to expect that a biographical writer of 1890 could use the materials and methods available in 1956. Two comparisons may help us to see the reality of this. The photograph in which my face appears for the first time was taken exactly seventy years ago. I have a strong feeling that a modern photographer could do a much better job with the Smith family than was done in that far off day. A second comparison is more to the point. Frequently, when a man is showing pictures on the screen, some member of the family or friend will say, "I think you could focus that one a little better!" With a twist of the wrist the man turns the lens slightly backward or forward and then something happens to the picture. The details stand out more sharply and there is a depth and breadth to the picture which it did not have before. These two allusions may help one to see how the present-day biographer could and should give us a better picture of his object of study than one who wrote many years ago.

With these preliminary but necessary observations out of the way, let us see what sort of figure emerges as the biographer relates for us the life story of Matthew Simpson.

On April 5, 1834, Matthew Simpson saddled his horse and rode away on a trail which he was to follow until death came in 1884. He had just been appointed to a circuit of thirty-four churches which it will take him six weeks to cover. The dramatic element in the scene is that this youth of twenty-three has been a physician in his home town of Cadiz, Ohio, for a few months. Previous to that time he has spent three years of careful study under the guidance of an older physician in a neighboring village and has been admitted by the State to the practice of medicine at the age of twenty-two.

The decision to make this change in his professional life was not made hastily or unadvisedly. There were circuit rider preachers who visited in his home as well as a college professor who challenged the youth as to the possibility of his entering the ministry. There was the religious purpose of his own life into which he had entered calmly, though in the heat of a camp meeting revival. This was fol-
lowed by activity in the local church. One day he was called upon to preach and on the urging of his uncle did so. He discovered a strange satisfaction in the effort. His interest probably grew when he heard the aged Bishop McKendree tell the story of the Methodist Church. Almost before Matthew knew it, he was given a license to preach and sent out to supply here and there as occasion opened. Then he learned that his father, who died before he was five years of age, had joined his mother in prayer that their son might become a minister. These and other potent influences strengthened his purpose until he closed that door leading to the healing of the bodies of men, and opened this other one to become a “cure of souls.”

The education of the young Simpson for the ministry was unique. He gained his education “without let or hindrance” from the schools. At seventeen, he spent just two months in college. He therefore was an alumnus of no college, unless it was the circuit rider’s “Brush College.” He was in what we call a high school less than a year, taken in because two students of his own age discovered how much better he could translate Latin into English without training than they could after study. Then he studied Grammar, Arithmetic and Geography in a public school. When he was three years old, two sisters taught him to read.

Three uncles helped him on his way. Simpson was like Bishop McConnell who was, as I heard him say, accused of having an uncle to meet every occasion. One uncle of Simpson was an editor. He employed the boy to set type and gave him an opportunity to write. A second uncle, who was clerk of the county court, employed him to copy legal documents and opened the way for him to attend court so that he might see the judge and the lawyers in action during a lawsuit. The third uncle, Matthew by name, was a teacher and he admitted the boy for a time into his semi-private school. Even more, he served as the boy’s tutor throughout the early years and the man’s mentor until he had risen to high position in the Church.

However, largely by his own efforts, Matthew gained a reading knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, Italian, Spanish and French. He read widely in the scientific volumes that were available, paying special attention to chemistry, geology and botany. Wherever books could be found, he borrowed them and devoured their contents.

This then, in brief, was the early preparation of the young Methodist minister to whom family and friends said “Good-bye,” as he rode away from home on that April day in 1834 to meet his first congregation of four men and eleven women. Certainly no one knew how far he was to go as a “traveling elder” in the Methodist Episcopal Church.
In July of that same year, he was admitted to the Pittsburgh Annual Conference and appointed junior preacher at First Church, Pittsburgh. He, with another man of his own age and an older man, served two churches and two so-called preaching places. What happened during the year is not quite clear, but as another conference drew nigh, the bishop and the presiding elder had agreed to send young Simpson to a somewhat out of the way village. A leading layman, however, came to the young man’s defense, and through his influence, Simpson was appointed as pastor of one of the two churches which heretofore had made up the Pittsburgh charge. He began with four hundred members and ended the year with an additional one hundred. The most important event of that year, for him, was the wooing and winning of Ellen Verner, the daughter of a Methodist layman. She became his wife and proved to be an adequate companion through the years. With him she went at the end of the second year, as the law of the Church required, to Williamsport for their new appointment. His pastorate there was cut short by an invitation to become a member of the faculty of Allegheny College.

Matthew Simpson went to his new position as professor of natural science, with high hopes. His dream was to teach so as to “make the pulse of the students beat faster.” For this task he prepared with great care. While the teaching load might seem heavy for these days, Simpson found much time to read in the college library of 8,000 volumes. There were only fifty students, the administration was not well organized and funds were limited. Simpson was called upon unexpectedly to become vice-president, loaded with administrative duties and charged with solicitation of money. However, he could not secure payment of his own salary of $550 a year. Therefore, almost in a mood of desperation, he accepted a call to become the president of Indiana Asbury, afterward DePauw University, having previously refused an offer to be professor of mathematics in that institution.

During this second period, which extended from 1839 to 1852, he was a college president for nine years and an editor for four years. In these eventful years he became conscious of his power as a speaker. He also became aware of a certain ability to lead men and movements. The first months at Indiana Asbury proved to be a time of mutual disappointment. Greencastle was a rather out of the way community, where satisfactory lodging for the president and his family was difficult to find. The school was limited to academy students and met in a frame house. The building designed for the college was still only “half built against the sky.” Overcoming all these discouragements, the young president set to work to complete
the college building, prepare a catalog, and enroll the first college class of eleven young men.

The college trustees were disappointed that he looked so young; he was only twenty-eight, but intimated to his critics that time would soon overcome that handicap. Added to his youthfulness was his unprepossessing appearance. These limitations led somebody to say that they would need to discount his recommendations at least "twenty per cent." Disappointment on the part of the trustees and friends was quickly dispelled as they heard Simpson speak. Shortly after his arrival an opportunity opened for him to preach at the local church. Those who came saying, "He won't do," went away saying with great enthusiasm, "He will do."

This same favorable impression was created at the session of the annual conference where he was asked to give an address on The Hundred Years March of Methodism. The brethren at once declared him to be the prince of pulpit ministers. A year later, he was to win even greater plaudits from the great company of people who came to his inaugural where he spoke for more than two hours. Henry Ward Beecher, with home he had not yet locked horns, as he did later, suggested that the address should be printed and mailed to every family in the State of Indiana.

Shortly after his inauguration, Simpson assumed leadership in the Methodism of Indiana, as well as of the college of which he was president, since the life of the college was in part dependent upon the strength of the Church. He soon found that while there were five or six times as many Methodists in the State as there were members of any other denomination, his group was utterly ignored by the governor and other political leaders in the making of appointments. In calling this disparity to the attention of the governor, the young president suggested that a Methodist layman be appointed as a member of the board of trustees of the State University. There is some uncertainty as to who made the unhappy remark that "no Methodist was qualified to preside over a literary institution." However, it is clear that such a remark aroused the ire of most Methodists who heard it repeated. When Simpson found no other recourse open to him, he joined with a few other Methodist leaders and proceeded to nominate a layman for the governorship and in the end elected him to that high position.

It was during this controversy that involved denominational rivalries and theological differences as well as political antagonisms, that Simpson and Beecher found themselves arraigned on opposite sides. Without trying to justify this adventure in the political arena, it is sufficient to say that thereafter Methodism came into a new day in Indiana. The leadership of Matthew Simpson led to his election as head of the General Conference delegation in 1843.
In historic Conference the Plan of Separation for the division of the Church, which he so greatly loved, was agreed upon. Simpson’s own attitude on slavery had been hesitant and uncertain. Something deep within him recoiled against slavery. This attitude was supported by his uncle Matthew who pressed him into taking a more aggressive stand. On the other hand, Simpson felt the weight of what the bishops and other leaders were doing in their desire to preserve the unity of the Church. In that respect, they were like Lincoln with the Union itself, quite ready to resist the abolitionist and his drastic claims, and anxious to placate so far as possible the extremists on both sides. Their first desire was to keep the Methodist Episcopal Church united. However, by the time the Conference met in 1844, young Simpson had veered more strongly in the direction that his uncle Matthew would have him go and voted for the Plan of Separation.

Simpson emerged from that General Conference as a recognized leader quite competent to take his place on the national stage in both Church and country. He was marked as one destined to lead in the affairs of the Church, and in a still larger way as a leader in the social and political life of the country. Even though he attended as a friendly visitor the organizing Conference at Louisville in 1845, where the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was born, the leaders of that group never forgot the things he had said at the General Conference in 1844, as well as before and after that Conference. These, of course, were brought more keenly to memory by some of the unhappy things he said and did in the tense and difficult days of the Civil War, or “the War between the States,” and the reconstruction period that followed thereafter. Simpson was never able to enter into those preliminary conversations with leaders of the South, which finally led to unification nearly a hundred years later.

During the quadrennium of 1844-48, Simpson defended his action at the General Conference of 1844 and was sent once more as a delegate to the session of 1848. That body recognized his ability by electing him as editor of the Western Christian Advocate, displacing his old friend and teacher, Professor Elliott. Little need be said concerning his work as editor, which added little to his reputation except as he traveled and won favor by his power as a preacher. Near the end of the four years of editorial work, he moved to Pittsburgh, intending to return to the pastorate, if he were not elected bishop, as some had freely predicted he would be.

The third and longest period in Simpson’s life extends from 1852, when, at forty-one years of age, he was elected a bishop, until his death in 1884. The chief business of the General Conference of 1852 was the election of four additional bishops to superintend the Methodist Episcopal Church, which then had 750,000 members and
5,000 preachers organized into 39 annual conferences. Long before Conference met, it was recognized that Simpson was one of the most likely possibilities for the bishopric. He was elected on the first ballot with 110 out of a total of 173 votes.

Methodism’s expectation that its bishops would travel throughout the connection was more of a reality then than now. This responsibility was gladly accepted by Simpson. At an early date he made the journey to California and Oregon to supervise Methodist activities in those fields. By the year 1857, his colleagues appointed him to visit Ireland and England for certain anniversary occasions. He was also asked to oversee Methodist work in Germany and Scandinavia. In Liverpool, his eloquence broke down the typical reserve of the English people until cries rang out, “Hear him! Hear him!” Such demonstrations of appreciation were repeated again and again. These official travels were extended to Constantinople, Beirut, and Jerusalem, from which city he traveled the length and breadth of the Holy Land. Afterward he visited Egypt, Greece, Italy and France. A serious illness developed on this journey and precluded the fulfillment of his dream to publish a book about his travels.

Fortunately or unfortunately Simpson became known as a man who had influence in Washington, especially with Lincoln, whom he had met in Springfield. Consequently, the bishop was bombarded with requests from those seeking office or preferment. Here we may point out that this biographer deflates somewhat the myth of Simpson’s unique influence with the War President. I was brought up on the tradition that it was largely due to the urgent pleadings and immediate prayers of Simpson that Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. It is clear that Simpson had suggested that such action should be taken early in the War days, but it is also true that many others made the same suggestion. Furthermore, Simpson was on a long journey to the West Coast many weeks preceding the issuance of the Proclamation and could not have had a vital part in the final decisions leading up to its issuance. In similar vein, it must be noted that Lincoln’s tribute to what the Methodist Church had done during the War was given not to Simpson but to Bishop Ames. However, it is true that Lincoln regarded Simpson highly, sought his counsel on many occasions, frequently asked that he pray with him as well as for him, and always made an effort to hear him.

As so often happens with ministers who embark on political or other activities outside their immediate concern, Simpson’s zeal carried him beyond what might be regarded as appropriate. While these appointments were sought to give his Church fair representation, the facts show that the Methodist laymen who secured appointments through his assistance were a very close personal friend, a
former student who was a favorite, and in the days of President Grant, his own son-in-law. We cannot look with pride either on the way he used political and even military power to place Northern men in churches whose pulpits had once been occupied by brother ministers from the South. Nor can any Methodist enthuse over the fact that he became known in reconstruction days as the high priest of the Radical Republicans and resorted to an extension of episcopal power to throw the weight of the General Conference of 1868 on the side of the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson. It is easy to see, of course, how a man like Simpson, with extremely strong feelings, could be carried beyond the point where he had expected to go. He doubtless was able to rationalize everything that he did in the light of the customs and passions of the day in which they were done.

Simpson gave considerable attention to the improvement of the architecture of Methodist buildings. Likewise he considered it a matter of interest to develop a more dignified type of worship service. He stood against the effort to saddle a rented pew system on the church of the West. When the issue of the admission of laymen to General Conference seemed to face defeat, he resorted to methods of influence that went beyond the code which the bishops had set for themselves in such matters. He could not be neutral in this and other issues as he saw them.

At one point his contribution to Methodism cannot be exaggerated. That was his advocacy of an educated ministry. As a junior preacher in Pittsburgh he had risen to the defense of the educational ideal as implemented in the Conference Course of Study. His conviction came into play when editors as well as other educated leaders made common cause with men like Cartwright against the idea of theological schools. He challenged these opponents and resisted their attacks vigorously. At a critical time, he accepted the Presidency of Garrett Biblical Institute and moved the episcopal residence to Evanston in order to strengthen that institution and the cause it represented. Schools of theology have never had a better protagonist than Matthew Simpson. Here it may be noted in passing that in the fall and winter, 1878-1879, he gave the Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, being the first Methodist to do so.

Reports indicate that usually people were disappointed when Simpson rose to speak, both his voice and appearance being against him. But a change took place as he warmed to his theme. His capacity to dominate a crowd held true whether the listeners were at a camp meeting, a college convocation, conference session, a patriotic occasion or a political rally. He attained the same effects. In 1883, he spoke on the same platform with Ambassador Lowell in a memorial service for President Garfield at London and held his
crowd spell-bound. He became probably the most sought after speaker in the Church, if not in the entire nation. On one occasion Lincoln suggested that Simpson be the speaker instead of the President, who had been invited.

And so we come to the end of our appraisal of Matthew Simpson. We have seen him start on a ministry he was to follow for fifty years and have watched him as “an eagle in his flight.” To me, the reading of Clark’s interpretation has been a rewarding experience. At times, I have been reminded of two occasions when I saw Warner Sallman make a reproduction of his painting of Christ before an audience. At first, he made a few bold strokes with crayons of certain colors. These seemed to have little meaning until he added other strokes in other colors. They modified the form and color of what he had drawn first. Then he added yet other strokes and other colors, developing one feature after another until finally that “one face” appeared in rich fullness and stately splendor on the canvas before us. So, beginning with the infancy of this man, who was destined for great things, there has been added paragraph and page and chapter until a life-size portrait of the genius is revealed in the full stature of his total greatness.