EARLY PROTESTANT MISSIONS AMONG THE BLACKFEET INDIANS: 1850-1900

by Howard L. Harrod

The social history of human institutions, especially in the early stages of their development, provides insight into their character which is otherwise unavailable. Without the aid of such a historical perspective neither the evolution nor the present shape of an institution can properly be understood. This point of view can be especially illuminating for the study of religious institutions, which are too often treated as if they were radically different from other social structures. For example, we may give too little attention to the deep historical conditioning of religious institutions, a factor actually common to all of man’s institutional life.

This study employs a historical perspective to illuminate the early planting and development of Protestant missionary institutions among the Blackfeet Indians. The period under consideration is the half-century between 1850 and 1900, when the Protestant church took shape among the Blackfeet in response to quite specific environmental circumstances. In the first section the human context within which the church was to grow is broadly sketched; the second section examines an early abortive attempt to establish Presbyterian missions among the Blackfeet; the third section analyzes the nature of informal Methodist evangelism in the 1870's and 1880's; and the last section focuses upon the form of Methodist institutions at the close of the nineteenth century. To understand the form which churches took in relation to these specific historical circumstances is to understand the church in a deeper way.

The Blackfeet

In 1850 the Blackfeet Indians roamed a vast, buffalo-covered plain stretching from the Saskatchewan River on the north to the Missouri River on the south. Bounded on the west by the Rocky Mountains and on the east by the mouth of the Milk River in the present state of Montana, Blackfoot country provided a secure economic base for the three divisions of the tribe—the Piegan, the Blood, and the Northern Blackfeet. Although they had been in contact with the
white man and his culture through the fur trade, in 1850 the Blackfeet were still a proud and independent people. Vigorous economic, political, social, and religious institutions gave both order and meaning to their lives. They were selective in their appropriation of western culture, especially the values and cultural patterns of the white man. They could readily see the utility of his guns and metal tools, but they could little appreciate his work habits and much of his alien life style. Thus in 1850 the Blackfeet took from western society what they considered useful for their lives, rejecting those parts of white culture which made no sense to them.

Between 1850 and 1900 the Blackfeet were shattered by events which affected all of the plains tribes. Although they had survived smallpox epidemics in 1781 and in 1837, the epidemic of 1870 was especially destructive. Furthermore, the liquor traffic associated with the fur trade took a heavy toll in individual life and seriously affected the internal structure of Blackfoot society. The year of the last smallpox epidemic was marked by military suppression in the United States, an event remembered in Blackfoot history as the Baker Massacre of 1870. Then in 1883 the Blackfeet were made totally dependent upon government rations by the disappearance of the buffalo. Rations were in such short supply during the winter of 1883-84 that starvation spread over the reservation. Thus while Protestant missions were first planted among the Blackfeet during a period of great cultural vigor, by the time these institutions became permanent in 1893 the Blackfeet were a broken people. The half-century of missionary expansion under consideration must be understood against this background.

Early Presbyterian Efforts

During the period of cultural vigor the Blackfeet were receptive to what they understood to be the white counterpart of their traditional medicine man—the Protestant missionary. When in 1856 the Presbyterian Board of Missions sent Elkanah Mackey and his wife to Fort Benton to establish a mission station among the Blackfeet, the Indians received them with openness. After making his purpose known to the tribal council, Mackey received the following reply from Lame Bull, one of the Blackfoot chiefs: “We are satisfied that the white men are our friends .... We desire them to come and teach us about the Great Spirit & tell us many good things.”

Mackey must have been encouraged by such a positive reception, especially after his long and tiring journey to Fort Benton from the East.

Hardly a month had passed, however, before the young missionary encountered severe difficulties. Learning that she was pregnant,

Mackey’s wife became quite apprehensive because there were no other white women at Fort Benton. Although the Indians treated her with kindness and respect, she remained in a “most distressing state of nervous derangement.” ³ The Mackeys finally concluded that they should return to the East, and they left the Blackfoot country without establishing any permanent missionary institutions. It was not until 1893, when permanent institutions were started by the Methodists, that Protestant missionaries were again formally present among the Blackfeet.

One rather obvious circumstance hindered the Protestants: a married clergy was not well adapted to missionary activity in the Northwest during the 1850’s. The climate was too severe, the white population too sparse, and the land too lonely to sustain any but the most hardy. In this respect the Roman Catholic Church fared much better with a celibate clergy. As early as 1841 the pioneer Jesuit missionary, Pierre Jean DeSmet, baptized the first Blackfoot converts to Christianity.⁴ From these meager beginnings developed a vigorous missionary enterprise which, because the Jesuits were unencumbered by home and family, was more stable than early Protestant activity.⁵

Even though the Mackeys were forced to leave Blackfoot country, the Board of Missions of the Presbyterian Church had ambitious plans which are illuminating in the light of later Methodist missions. In addition to religious activities among the Blackfeet, the board contemplated a program of civilization with two major dimensions—educational and agricultural. The method of implementing the program involved inculcating work patterns indigenous to western society. For example, Walter Lowrie, secretary of the Presbyterian board, said, “No permanent benefit will result from any agency for the good of this people, unless they are taught the absolute necessity of supporting themselves, by cultivation of the soil. The mission farm will bring that fully before them.” ⁶ This was the same idea which motivated Methodist officials almost four decades later when they sent missionaries among the Blackfeet.

A major problem which plagued the Presbyterians, and later the Methodists, was lack of adequate funds. Walter Lowrie planned to construct a boarding school and estimated that the cost for beginning the project would be about $10,000, with an annual operating budget thereafter of about $6,500. In correspondence with the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Lowrie requested that the federal government pay three-fourths of both the initial costs and the annual budget.⁷ Apparently unable or unwilling to make a decision on Lowrie’s re-

⁵ See Mission Among the Blackfeet for a fuller analysis of this point.
⁶ Walter Lowrie to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, February 16, 1857, Klett, p. 350.
⁷ Ibid., p. 349.
quest, Commissioner Manypenny turned the problem over to his successor for action. His replacement did nothing, and in 1859 Lowrie commented sadly, "In these circumstances we have reluctantly concluded to give up this mission, at least for the present." It was well after the turn of the century before the Presbyterians entered Blackfoot country again.

Even though the attempt to plant Presbyterian institutions among the Blackfeet had been frustrated, semi-official evangelistic activity by Methodists began in 1872. It is important to understand the pattern of this work, for in it appear many of the motifs which characterized the permanent Methodist mission station two decades later. We must also recall that the decade between 1870 and 1880 was one of disease, liquor, conquest, and finally starvation for the Blackfeet. Thus Methodist institutions actually took their early shape at the nadir of Blackfoot life and culture.

Methodist Evangelism in the 1870’s and 1880’s

William Wesley Van Orsdel, a young Methodist preacher from Pennsylvania, went to Montana in 1872 and began preaching among the Blackfeet. He established good relationships with the Indians but soon concluded that his major ministry should be among the white settlers in Montana. Thus he spent the remainder of his long life founding Methodist churches throughout the state. Though he was loved by the Indians and even inducted into the tribe, other events, such as an important shift in government policy, had more significant long-range consequences for a mission among the Blackfeet.⁹

In 1870—the year when the Blackfeet were ruthlessly suppressed by United States troops and two years before Van Orsdel began his occasional preaching—President Ulysses S. Grant introduced a new policy for the administration of Indian reservations in the United States. Known popularly as the “Peace Policy,” it provided that Indian agents were to be recommended by religious organizations. In this way Grant hoped to improve both the quality of the personnel and the administration of the Indian reservations, as well as break the control of the War Department over Indian affairs. As a consequence of this new policy, the Blackfoot Agency was allocated to the Methodist Episcopal Church, along with agencies in California, Washington Territory, Oregon, Idaho, and Michigan.¹⁰ And upon

⁹ For a summary of the growth of Montana Methodism and Van Orsdel’s place in this history, see Wade Crawford Barclay, The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1845-1939 (New York, 1957), III, pp. 254-258.
¹⁰ U.S., Department of the Interior, Annual Report of the Commission of Indian Affairs (Washington, D.C., 1875), p. 172. Hereafter cited as Report, with the appropriate year. In addition to the Blackfeet, the Methodists were also assigned the Crow and Fort Peck reservations in Montana. See Barclay, p. 327n, for a list of Methodist agents serving on reservations in 1877.
the Methodists devolved not only the responsibility to recommend qualified agents but also the implied duty to engage in "missionary" activities—since the government policy comprised both civilization and Christianization of the Indians.

John Young, a Methodist minister in the Oregon Conference, was the first Methodist-approved agent appointed among the Blackfeet under Grant's new policy. Since Young was agent from 1876 to 1884, an examination of his work is illuminating, especially as it indicates the shape of future Methodist institutions among the Blackfeet. For example, Young began philanthropic activity among children during the Christmas season, an activity which remains almost unchanged to the present day. In 1876 Young told the Blackfeet that they would have a special service on Christmas day. In preparation for this occasion, Young went to the trading post to purchase "... candies, raisins, nuts, etc. and some paper bags, and... made up one for each child with an assortment." The content of this Christmas service appears in Young's own detailed description. After the opening he gave a short narrative account of the

... Coming of the "Babe of Bethlehem" and why the day was annually held thro. the world by Christians as one of joy, good will, bestowing gifts, etc. and impressing the lesson that as the Great Spirit had shown his abounding love to us, we ought to manifest our gratitude by loving each other. At the conclusion each child was called forward and given one of our parcels.

At this time Young was assisted at the agency by another Methodist minister, Hugh Duncan. Apparently Duncan took up residence on the reservation at the suggestion of Francis Asbury Riggin, the presiding elder of the Helena District. Despite the lack of any consistent missionary policy in the Methodist Episcopal Church at this time, Young and Duncan continued in 1877 to develop and support various sorts of religious activities among the Blackfeet. For example, in this year Young himself contributed twenty-five dollars for religious education on the reservation. He described the first meeting

The practical consequence of dividing the reservations arbitrarily among the churches was Protestant and Catholic conflict. Since there had been Roman Catholic claims upon the Blackfeet from 1841 onward, friction on this reservation was inevitable. These clashes issued in the temporary expulsion of Roman Catholic missionaries from the reservation during Young's administration, but such actions merely drove Roman Catholic activity underground and did not seriously impede it. See Peter J. Rahill, The Catholic Indian Missions and Grant's Peace Policy (Washington, D.C., 1953), p. 42 ff. Correspondence too extensive to cite here is also contained in the Blackfeet Agency Archives in the Museum of the Plains Indian, Browning, Montana.

11 Barclay, op. cit., p. 327n. These early Methodist agents were usually ministers responsible to Annual Conferences, although their primary occupational responsibility was to the federal government. In a real sense, some of these men were "missionaries incognito," as appears upon closer examination of Young's activity.

12 John Young to General Clinton B. Fisk, December 30, 1876, Blackfeet Agency Archives, Museum of the Plains Indian, Browning, Montana. Hereafter cited as Archives.

13 Ibid.

14 F. A. Riggin to John Young, December 15, 1876. Archives.
of the Sunday school in glowing terms. According to him, the building was so full there was hardly any sitting room left—even on the floor.

We had singing, prayer and reading the Scriptures. A brief explanation of what was read. And . . . as this was the first S. School ever held here, a Short Statement of the object and importance of this mode of instruction to the young . . . We concluded with Singing and the repetition of the Lord’s prayer all kneeling. 16

A careful and sympathetic examination of Young’s correspondence reveals a man possessed of genuine concern for his “children,” the Blackfeet.

During this period, however, the Methodist Episcopal Church had insufficient personnel to implement any policies it might have had. The serious shortage of ministers rather naturally led to a concentration of limited resources upon the white population. In 1872 the Rocky Mountain Conference was created, but only four ministers were present at the first district conference in 1874. In 1879 the number remained at four—sufficient evidence that the church had too few clergy to minister to the white population, much less to undertake extensive work among the Blackfeet. 16 That Protestant resources were so limited and their institutions so weak was especially tragic at this point in Blackfoot history. For the Blackfoot social structure had been severely strained by conquest, liquor, and disease. Less than a decade after Young’s first Christmas service, their economy collapsed. Combined with other events, the disappearance of the buffalo was disastrous for the Blackfeet. It was at this time in their history that they needed strong institutional support, and yet it was at this same time that Young was limited to philanthropy and religious education.

Despite the desperate shortage of Methodist ministers in Montana, there were still some church officials who believed that vigorous missionary institutions ought to be developed on the reservation. Commissioner of Indian Affairs Hoyt quoted one of these officials in his correspondence to Agent Young in 1879. The enthusiasm of this church official was unfortunately not matched by reservation realities, although he did express what he thought to be the perspective of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church:

We concluded that our [church] should at once go forward in the matter—judiciously using the means the Govt. appropriates and supplement them with funds from the church. Please give me such information as to number of teachers we ought to provide for and such other details as may enable our committee to promptly undertake this work. 17

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16 John Young to General Clinton B. Fisk, December 30, 1876, Archives.
17 Cited by Commissioner Hoyt in a letter to John Young, October 1, 1879, Archives.
Such high ideals could not be translated into institutional reality by the Methodists, even though Duncan was on the reservation. Therefore, neither Duncan nor Agent Young was able to establish permanent Methodist institutions. Their work, even though it was motivated by sincere concern for the Blackfeet, could not be supported financially by the church. At this point in the nineteenth century the boards and agencies of the church did not have either sufficient budgets or power to translate policy into meaningful action. Thus, though the Methodists had formal responsibility on the reservation, as late as 1882 the Commissioner of Indian Affairs wrote to the Indian Bureau of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, “The denomination from which these Indians have a right to expect missionary help has, until the present time, failed to meet its responsibilities, and repeated appeals to it have been disregarded.”

A Permanent Methodist Mission

As transportation and communication improved in Montana and as the rudiments of civilization began to appear, the presiding elders found it increasingly easy to recruit ministers. In 1880 37 ministers came to Montana, and 12 of them stayed for the remainder of their lives. In the decade and a half following 1890, 140 Methodist ministers were appointed to churches in Montana. The establishment of permanent Methodist institutions among the Blackfeet thus corresponded with the period of increasing civilization and population growth in the Northwest.

In 1891, 160 acres of reservation land was granted to the Brooklyn and Bay Ridge branches of the Women’s National Indian Association. E. S. Dutcher and his wife arrived in 1893 as employees of the Association to establish the first permanent Protestant mission among the Blackfeet—over fifty years after DeSmet had baptized the first Blackfeet and just ten years after the starvation winter of 1883. Dutcher was a member of the West Nebraska Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church who upon arriving at the reservation was transferred to the North Montana Mission. In July, 1894, the mission work among the Indians was transferred to the Methodist Episcopal Church from the Women’s National Indian Association...
and was placed under the administration of the Methodist Missionary Society.

The new mission was on land adjoining the agency boarding school located on Willow Creek. The land had changed little since buffalo days, its vast reaches punctuated only by the magnificent peaks of the Rocky Mountains in what is now Glacier National Park. Historically this was the homeland of the Blackfeet, but now it was occupied by strange people and alien institutions. Dutcher was the representative of one of these institutions, and Agent Steell reported in 1893 that Dutcher was busily “... engaged in completing a residence for himself and family. A chapel is to be erected soon.”

Commenting upon the purpose of the mission as he understood it, Dutcher wrote that it was designed to be “... an industrial object lesson to the Indian and a place where the pure and simple truths of the gospel are taught.”

Certainly Dutcher was able to translate the first part of his purpose into reality. He was a vigorous farmer, and his agricultural yield was phenomenal: in one year he produced 12,000 pounds of potatoes, 3,000 pounds of rutabagas, 1,000 pounds of turnips, 150 heads of cabbage, and 50 pounds of beets in the mission garden. Surely this must have exceeded even the hopes which Lowrie had held for Presbyterian agriculture almost four decades earlier.

Even after the collapse of their traditional institutions the Blackfeet were not impressed with the demonstration of the Protestant work ethic. However, they did begin to participate in the life of the church. Though defeated, they still remained selective in relation to the white man’s culture, being more positive toward his religion than toward his work habits. In his journal Van Orsdel reported that on Easter Sunday, 1894, over 100 Blackfeet and about 20 whites were present at the worship service. Fourteen children were baptized and five persons participated in the Lord’s Supper, although only one of these was an Indian. This participation, if Van Orsdel’s estimates are correct, represented actually only about five percent of the reservation population, and thus did not signify great institutional strength.

These small Protestant beginnings might have been greatly strengthened had the early Methodist ministers been more adequately trained. However, the problem of training was not unique...
to the Blackfeet reservation; inadequate training of personnel was characteristic of all Methodist Indian missions from the 1870’s onward. One interpreter of this period indicates that “Indian missionary work was highly specialized, which to be carried on efficiently required missionaries trained for the task, but the [Methodist Episcopal] Church had neither plans nor facilities for such training.”

In the area of communication the consequences of untrained missionaries appeared most noticeably. For example, unlike the Roman Catholics, who became experts in the Blackfoot language, the early Methodist ministers had to speak through interpreters. Even though the Blackfoot agent reported in 1893 that a total of 582 Blackfeet out of a population of 1,956 could speak English, knowledge of the language would have been a significant advantage to the missionaries. Even for the English-speaking Blackfeet, knowledge of their traditional language would have demonstrated a closer identification with them. As it was, Dutcher and his wife had to depend upon interpreters to communicate their obvious sincerity and concern to the non-English-speaking population. Despite these deficiencies, it is clear from Van Orsdel’s report of Indian participation that their efforts did not go completely unrewarded.

More serious than their ignorance of the Blackfoot language was the lack of systematic preparation for their task. To this day, Indian missionaries are not required to have special training in the culture and history of the groups to whom they are to minister, much less knowledge of such disciplines as sociology or culture anthropology. Because the problems were so complex and the social change so devastating on the Blackfoot Reservation, the Protestant lapse in ministerial training was all the more serious. Because they were not often sensitized to the human context, their action was tragically inappropriate, and they often engaged in activities and held attitudes which had quite negative, though unintended, consequences.

For example, Methodist officials gave approval to an ethnocentric government policy which placed undue strains upon an already disorganized Blackfoot social structure. This was the period of “forced acculturation,” when Indians were to be made over in the image of white society. One part of this policy attempted to transform the Indians from communal people to independent yeomen on the soil. Such an attempt was especially difficult among tribes like the Blackfeet who had no heritage of agriculture but were originally nomadic hunters. Three years after the establishment of the Methodist reservations in the United States.

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27 Barclay, p. 363.
29 Allen B. Rice, Executive Secretary, Section of Home Missions, Division of National Missions of the Methodist Church, Personal Interview, January, 1964.
30 This policy was institutionalized in 1887 in the General Allotment Act which provided, among other things, for the breaking up of tribally-owned lands on the reservations in the United States.
odist mission under Dutcher, however, Agent Steell was coercing Blackfeet to conform to this government policy:

It was difficult to get them to break up the communal life and scatter out, each one for himself, and build a home on some favorable location. Many of them went willingly, but others only after they found that so long as they persisted in the old ways, the agent would give them nothing beyond their bare rations. 31

Such coercion was evidently not opposed by Dutcher, and it continued until the end of the century. As late as 1908 F. A. Riggin, Dutcher's presiding elder and successor, could speak of what he considered the "beneficent" government control over the Indians. He thoroughly approved when "Children of all ages are taken from the tepees and as much as possible of the Indian life is trained out of them and as much as possible of our life is developed within them." 32 The attempt to inculcate an agricultural ethos was a failure—despite the coercion. The observation made by Alexander Culbertson, a fur trader with some twenty years of experience when he wrote in 1853, was still true at the turn of the century: "It is evident the day is far off when the Blackfeet will turn the Sword into the Ploughshare and make the wilderness bud and blossom like the Rose." 33

In the half-century between 1850 and 1900, however, Protestant missions to the Blackfeet Indians had evolved from the abortive efforts of the Presbyterians through the unofficial activity of Agent Young to the visible Methodist ministry of Dutcher. An institutional foundation was laid which was to continue until the present, but it was an institutional form which had tensions and ambiguities, as well as positive characteristics. At the close of the nineteenth century these contradictory tendencies were clearly visible: on the one hand, Methodist institutions had been firmly established among the Blackfeet, and the men sent to the reservation were well-intentioned and sincere in their purpose. On the other hand, none of these men was well trained, and they often approved and supported government policies which involved coercion of the disorganized Blackfeet. Most tragic of all was the inability of Protestant missionaries to create institutional forms which were appropriate to the needs of Indians who had experienced almost total cultural disintegration.

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