

Mentors of Methodism, 1784-1844

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The growth of American Methodism from 14,000 members and forty-two circuits in 1784 to 1,068,525 members served by 3,988 itinerants and 7,730 local preachers in 1844 meant that the denomination had become numerically nearly one-half size larger than any other Protestant body.¹ From the Christmas Conference organization to the schism of 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church became an acknowledged religious and social force. An analysis of this record appearing in *The Methodist Quarterly Review* concluded "doubtless our denominational progress is attributable to a great many conditions, but our preaching has been the chief one."² But, despite this judgment, which is shared by many, the Methodist pulpit has not received the recognition which the achievement of the era justifies.³

The claim that preaching was the key to Methodism's early success necessitates the questions: who were the preachers and what did they preach? To answer, a study of the personal accounts and records, some private and others published, of the men who built Methodism reveals the inherent quality of their service as well as the content of their sermons. One of this number, George G. Cookman, described himself and colleagues as "poor and self-denying, and laborious . . . involving the sacrifice of health and frequently life."⁴ While another, Thomas A. Morris, stated that the content of their preaching spanned the theological spectrum from the doctrine of the Triune God to the general judgment, but special emphasis was placed upon "universal redemption, the help of the Holy Spirit, and eternal salvation for all men who would accept it."⁵ An understanding, therefore, of what motivated these men to labor "to save souls" and "to teach men to live well" is

¹ William W. Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840* (Chicago, 1946), 11, 45-46.

² "Methodist Preaching," *The Methodist Quarterly Review* (XXXIV, Jan. 1852), 67.

³ Among those who share this view are Anthony Atwood, *Causes of the Marvelous Success of Methodism* (Philadelphia, 1884), 40, 49; William L. Duren, *Francis Asbury* (New York, 1928), 139; Wade C. Barclay, *Early American Methodism 1769-1844* (2 vols.; New York, 1950), II, 430; etc.

⁴ George G. Cookman, *Speeches Delivered on Various Occasions* (New York, 1844), 77. Mr. Cookman immigrated from England and served in the Philadelphia Conference from 1826-1841.

⁵ Thomas A. Morris, *Sermons on Various Subjects* (Cincinnati, 1842), p. 30. Morris was elected bishop in 1836. See also "Methodist Preaching," *MQR* (XXXIV, Jan. 1852), 70-71.

to comprehend in part the chief reason for Methodism's dramatic success in America.⁶

Background

"Our fathers, more than any other modern ministry, preached *ad populum*. They came out from the people."⁷ This claim is supported by demographic evidence which shows that the preachers who served came from the various sections of the United States. Wilbur Fisk was born in Brattleborough, Vermont in 1792; from Washington County, Pennsylvania in 1775 came James Quinn; born in 1792 was James Sewell in Kent County, Maryland; and John Sale originated from Virginia in 1767.⁸ However, it was early noted among Methodists that a greater quantity of preachers came from the Maryland-Virginia area. It is generally known that Jesse Lee, William M'Kendree, Enoch George, Peter Cartwright, and a host of others came from Virginia. Indeed, Henry Boehm, a frequent companion of Francis Asbury, pointed out that some of the strongest men of the period sprang from the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Shadrack Bostwick, Caleb Boyer, William Beauchamp, Ezekiel Cooper, Hope Hull, Dr. William Phoebus, Stephen Martindale, Lawrence McCombs, Lawrence Lawrenson, Bishop Emory are but a few Boehm lists.⁹

One of the members of this group, Benjamin Lakin, typifies the group in several respects. Born in Maryland, he moved to Redstone County in southwest Pennsylvania. Here he heard Richard Whatcoat preach, probably on the theme that "God's free grace provides salvation" or that "Christ is the dispenser of the Holy Spirit by whose intervention all the benefits of the atonement are brought into contact with the soul of man." In any event, Whatcoat's preaching led Lakin to feel convicted of sin, make repentance, and experience regeneration or conversion.¹⁰ Afterward Lakin

⁶ "Ministerial Piety" by Thomas Thompson in *Sermons on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Cincinnati, 1847), n.p. For a similar view see Stephen Olin, *The Works of Stephen Olin* (New York, 1852), I, 266. Both Thompson and Olin were ordained ministers in the period under study.

⁷ Abel Stevens, *Essays on the Preaching Required by the Times* (New York, 1885), 125. Stevens was ordained in 1834.

⁸ J. Holdrich, *The Life of Wilbur Fisk, D.D.* (New York, 1842); p. 8; J. F. Wright, *The Life and Labors of James Quinn* (Cincinnati, 1851), p. 23; James Sewell, *Autobiography* (n.p., n.d.; Ms in Lovely Lane Chapel, Baltimore, Md.); James B. Finley, *Sketches of Western Methodism* (Cincinnati, 1854), 191.

⁹ Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical* (New York, 1865), 79. For a similar view see William C. Larrabee, *Asbury and His Coadjutors* (Cincinnati, 1853). Boehm was a member of the Philadelphia Conference from 1802-1875.

¹⁰ *The Methodist Preacher*, ed. by S. W. Willson and E. Ireson. (2 vols., Boston, 1832), II, 172 & 189; Olin, *The Works of Stephen Olin*, I, 306. Additional evidence exists in the manuscript sermons of Joseph Rusling, Charles Cooke, William Ryland, John Baer, Samuel Bryson, and Louis R. Fechtige.

relocated in Kentucky where he felt the "call" to preach and entered the itinerant ranks in 1794. Although he was forced to locate when he married (a usual requirement), he reentered active service in 1800 and served many years, becoming a recognized leader in his conference. In his public speaking and writing he was noted for simplicity and clarity though he was a self-taught man, but in these characteristics he personified the "grass-roots" preacher.¹¹

Socially and economically the itinerants came from the middle class working element of society, though a few were from reasonably well to do families. Then, too, many knew what it was to suffer privation before entering the clerical calling, especially those who came from the frontier. Some of the occupations of these men before they became itinerants gives a clearer definition of their status. For examples, Christopher and Joseph Fry were carpenters, Michael Fry a boot and shoemaker, Joseph Carson a shoemaker, Simon Lauk a gunsmith, while James Sewell like a majority of his associates followed the plow.¹² A few, moreover, had prior military service. William M'Kendree of King William County, Virginia (the first native American elected bishop) served in the Revolution and William H. Raper, born in a blockhouse on the Pennsylvania frontier, distinguished himself in the War of 1812.¹³ The ones who came from more fortunate social and economic circumstances—Nathan Bangs, Martin Ruter, and Stephen Olin—were exceptions.

The religious background of these men is important, though in many cases the influences that played upon their early lives remain hidden. Of all the religious influences that are discernible, the Anglican or Protestant Episcopal is most frequently mentioned. A significant number of the early preachers were nominal Anglicans. William M'Kendree, Robert R. Roberts, John Emory, William Burke, and Jesse Lee are specific cases. Moreover, the evangelical Anglican priest, Devereux Jarratt of Bath Parish, Virginia, was influential in the lives of several future clergy including Jesse Lee and Enoch George. Then, George Whitefield and the Tennants were a dynamic influence and Freeborn Garrettson was won through their ministry. There were, in addition, a few from the Calvinistic and Puritan tradition of whom Thomas Ware and Nathan Bangs are examples.¹⁴ However, it was the evangelicals,

¹¹ Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 53-54.

¹² Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (4 vols.; New York, 1864), II, p. 94.

¹³ Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840*, 60; Finley, *Sketches of Western Methodism*, 99; W. H. Meredith, *Jesse Lee* (New York, 1909), 23.

¹⁴ Peter D. Gorrie, *The Lives of Eminent Methodist Ministers* (Auburn, 1852). Gorrie was received into full connection with the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1836.

whether within or without recognized religious bodies, that played the most prominent role. They, like the Methodists, emphasized that the foundation of all religion is the existence of God and that Jesus Christ was "very God" and "very man." Though man was constituted a free moral agent, Adam's act of disobedience affected his whole posterity.¹⁵ But, in spite of the theological affinity between Methodists and other evangelicals, trained ministers from other religious bodies did not join Methodism. At that time, Methodists were a despised group with little to offer a prospective minister but a lonely, large circuit in the wilderness.

Spiritual Qualifications

Of all the qualifications for a Methodist minister, conversion was most essential.¹⁶ The personal papers of the itinerants are filled with their own accounts of this experience. Daniel E. Reese is one who wrote "I knew, in the sight of God I was an abominable sinner." He believed that if he resisted the call to salvation he would be plunged into eternal sorrow. After a prolonged inner struggle he recorded that as "I walked down the street towards the Ebenezer meeting house, I appeared to be filled and surrounded with the presence and love of God."¹⁷ However, all conversions did not involve a protracted period of agonizing. The period of conviction which preceded conversion in the case of William M'Kendree was much shorter. But all reported a definite sense of sin which preceded conversion, and all were adamant about the change that had taken place in their lives. Once conviction was felt and conversion experienced, it is little wonder these subjects loomed large in sermon literature. Sin was rebellion against God for which one must feel guilt; Christ was the atonement which satisfied the claims of justice and opened the way of mercy. Then, there followed by faith regeneration or the new birth.¹⁸

A universally accepted criterion within Methodism for ministerial

¹⁵ "Christ and His Forerunner" by William Simmons in *Sermons on Miscellaneous Subjects*, n.d., n.p.; Henry B. Bascom, *Sermons from the Pulpit* (Louisville, Ky., 1850), 121; Morris, *Sermons on Various Subjects*, 206.

¹⁶ Stevens, *Essays on the Preaching Required by the Times*, 124.

¹⁷ Daniel E. Reese, *Brief Account of the Birth, Life, and Spiritual Exercises of Daniel E. Reese* (Ms. in Lovely Lane Chapel, Baltimore, Md.), 18. For additional accounts of conversion of Fletcher Harris, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (Baltimore, 1837), 2 and Wright, *Life and Labors of James Quinn*, 23.

¹⁸ Morris, *Sermons on Various Subjects*, 205. "A Discourse on Future Punishment" by Timothy Merritt in *The Methodist Magazine* (New York, 1823), VI, 244; Sermon by Peter P. Sandford in *The Methodist Preacher*, II, 189.

service was the "call."¹⁹ By this, the individual felt he was designated by God to fill the office of minister. The degree to which this awareness of a divine commission was insisted upon is revealed by James Sewell in his diary. When he appeared before bishop and conference, he was pointedly questioned about his "call to and determination with relation to the work of the Christian Ministry in the M. E. Church."²⁰ It was stated emphatically that no man had a moral right to conference membership unless he was convinced he was called of God.

The "call" came, however, to different men in diverse ways. Shortly after his conversion Allen Wiley was deeply impressed with a sense of duty to preach and he responded.²¹ Others like Freeborn Garrettson, James Sewell, and James B. Finley were reluctant. Finley recorded that he wandered for three years before yielding to the "call." "One morning," he wrote, "I went out into the woods, and there told my Maker, if I must preach the Gospel, or go to Hell, that the latter must be my portion."²² Another who resisted until, in his words, "they (the brethren) threw the responsibility on me," was Henry Boehm.²³ In the final analysis, they all came to a similar conclusion to James Sewell, who exclaimed "*woe is me*" if I preach not the Gospel.

The "call" itself had two parts of which the first was the inner conviction that it was God's will for one to preach and the second was that one have natural ability to perform the service. Evidence of the latter could come as a consequence of people being convinced that an individual should preach or it could come, as in the case of Phinehas Price, as a result of success in leading a prayer meeting.²⁴ Or a travelling preacher might note a person with talent for prayer, leadership, or zeal and invite him to further develop his gift.²⁵ In these ways many an excellent public speaker or minister was discovered and the use of his ability encouraged. But,

¹⁹ Phinehas Price, "A Sermon" bound with *A Narrative of the Life, Travels, Preaching, and Suffering of Phinehas Price* (Philadelphia, 1843), 25. Price served 1813-1833 in the mid-Atlantic states area. See also William Beauchamp, *Letters on the Call and Qualifications of Ministers of the Gospel* (Nashville, Tenn. 1849).

²⁰ Sewell, *Autobiography* (n.p., n.d.), 10-11. Sewell was received into full connection in 1814.

²¹ Fernandez C. Holliday, *Life and Times of Rev. Allen Wiley, A. M.* (Cincinnati, 1853). Holliday was also received into full connection with M. E. church in 1834.

²² James B. Finley, *Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley* (ed. by W. P. Strickland; Cincinnati, 1853), 172. Finley received in the Western Conference in 1809 and served to 1856.

²³ Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical*, 33.

²⁴ Price, *A Narrative*, 17-18.

²⁵ William W. Sweet, *The Rise of Methodism in the West* (New York, 1920), 14. See also B. M. Drake, *Life of Rev. Elijah Steele* (Cincinnati, 1843), 17.

without natural endowment to supplement the inner "call" there was little hope for one to enter the Methodist ministry.

A prominent characteristic of all those who served successfully in the formative years was their inner devotion. Among the many known representatives of this feature, Francis Asbury was an undisputed leader until his death in 1816. In 1803, he wrote, "I feel wholly given up to do or suffer the will of God, to be sick or well, and to live or die at any time and in any place."²⁶ Asbury was by no means alone in this dedication. A lesser known circuit-rider in Virginia, John Pitts, reflected "sometimes in secret, I can find no language that will express the feelings of my heart, and the desires of my soul so well, as the words of the poet—'Swallow up my soul in love.'"²⁷ Another, William Burke, expressed his commitment in striking words: "It seemed as though there was a fire in my bones."²⁸ And still another itinerant in North Carolina mused day and night on how he might become a more becoming Christian.²⁹ Motivated with this type burning zeal, it is little wonder these preachers ignited the fires of Methodism everywhere they went by preaching on the subjects of sanctification, prayer, Bible reading, benevolence, and the joys of salvation.³⁰

Personal Example

While the spiritual qualifications of the itinerants provided the foundation for their zeal and service, it was firmly believed that unless their personal conduct supported and reinforced the ministerial services their work would be vitiated. Thomas Coke, who with Francis Asbury, superintended the church in its formative years delivered in sermonie form the personal standards for preachers. "Let your example," he proclaimed "under the grace of God, give you assurance of the fruit and success of your ministry: appear not occupied or touched with anything but their salvation: forget as it were, your own temporal interests; or never put them in the balance with the interest of their souls. Consider yourselves

²⁶ Francis Asbury, *The Journal of Rev. Francis Asbury* (3 vols.; New York, 1852), III, 123.

²⁷ John Pitts, "Letter" Sept. 27, 1809 (Ms. in Duke University, Durham, N. C.). Pitts served in the South from 1795 to 1821.

²⁸ Finley, *Sketches of Western Methodism*, 27.

²⁹ Peter Doub, "Letter" Sept. 13, 1818 (Ms. in Duke University, Durham, N.C.). From 1818-1869 Doub served in the Virginia-North Carolina area.

³⁰ Sermon by William Thacher in *The Methodist Magazine*, II, 3; William Ryland, "Sermons and Sketches," n.p., n.d. (Ms. in Lovely Lane Chapel, Baltimore, Md.); Harris, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 260; "Proper Use of the Mammon of Unrighteousness" by Andrew Carroll, n.d., n.p.; Sermon by Peter P. Sandford in *The Methodist Preacher*, 190.

as theirs."³¹ If this appears to be image-making, it was done in all sincerity and for the high purpose of leading men to spiritual salvation. In other words, a minister's example, in pulpit and personal conduct, should be complementary so that one observing him as well as listening to him would feel compelled to rise up and follow.

More specifically, the personal ideals to be emulated were piety, honor, unflinching integrity, courtesy, kindness, civility, respect, affection, and chastity. There was to be "nothing light in his (the minister's) words or actions, which would indicate a vacant mind." Indebtedness was taboo, "owe no man anything" was the admonition. Frivolity and fickleness had no place in their concept of the ministry.³² However exacting these ideals appear, those who lived and embodied them found that they did more to stimulate and develop Methodism than to stifle it. Thus it was natural that many a sermon focused on the subjects of diligence, sobriety, courtesy, humility, propriety, and charity. It was not enough to uphold the Sabbath and refrain from dancing, swearing, and gambling, for unless one grew in "the fruits of the Spirit" one might drift into spiritual shipwreck or backslide and fall into perdition.³³

In addition to the ideals for personal conduct there was a well developed set of standards for pulpit deportment. If they were to stand "on the heights of the shore, and cry out and point out the way to land, amid the tumults of the storm" and, to use another analogy, "sound the alarm through the land," they must do so in an appropriate manner.³⁴ This meant, in preaching, fidelity to the Gospel, proclaiming it without fear nor disguising the truth or keeping back part of it. Theologically one had a responsibility to focus on important doctrines and to state the effect of these when spiritually applied to the heart and enforced by one's conduct and disposition.³⁵ To realistically measure up to this criterion required

³¹ Thomas Coke, *Four Discourses on the Duties of the Gospel Ministry* (Philadelphia, 1798), 181.

³² For reference to support these statements see *The Methodist Preacher*, ed. S. W. Willson and E. Ireson. (2 vols., Boston, 1832), II, 144; *Sermons on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Cincinnati, 1847); n.p.; Henry B. Bascom, *Sermons from the Pulpit* (Louisville, Ky., 1850), 60; William M'Kendree, "Substance of a Sermon" (New York, 1817), n.p.; Holliday, *Life and Times of Rev. Allen Wiley, A.M.*, 190; *Christian Advocate and Journal* (Sept. 22, 1837; v. 12, #5), 20.

³³ Sermon by Enoch Mudge in *The Methodist Preacher*, I, 23; John Summerfield, *Sermons* (New York, 1844), 104; Sermon by T. A. Morris in *Sermons on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Cincinnati, 1847), 63; Sermon by Arron Lummus in *The Methodist Preacher*, II, 344.

³⁴ Stevens, *Essay*, 128.

³⁵ William Ryland, "Sermons and Sketches" (n.p., n.d.; Ms. in Lovely Lane Chapel, Baltimore, Md.) and *Christian Advocate and Journal* (June 28, 1839; V. 13, #45), 180. Wm. Ryland was received into the Baltimore Conference in 1802 and became a personal friend of President Andrew Jackson.

forethought, concentration, and study on the part of all Methodist preachers.

The standards of preparation for pulpit service were not less exacting than those for pulpit conduct. Before mounting the rostrum one was to avoid all unnecessary expense of spirit, voice, and strength; to eat less, not more; never to use tonics or clearers of the voice; go from one's knees to the pulpit; be punctual; let the mode of entry into the house of God be grave, dignified, and perfectly simple and unaffected; never in haste; guard against making the service too long (one-and-one-half to two hours was not unusual); and consider one's bearing at all times. Further, the capital admonition was "let every minister remember that God makes one of his hearers."³⁶ Based upon these precepts, the itinerants introduced a concept of respectability to many in American society. Moreover, this stringent code of conduct helped keep Methodism from degenerating into an extremist or irregular sect. However, had such ideals been flaunted or ignored, the progress and character of the denomination would have been altered.

Though a vast majority of the preachers emulated these ideals in their own individualistic way, there were some failures made the more noticeable because of their paucity.³⁷ A composite report of the severest cases of disciplinary action is given by Barclay as gleaned from earlier sources. In his list of 988 itinerants received into full connection from 1769 to 1806, Jesse Lee states that twenty-one were expelled. Nathan Bangs' compilation of 2,468 preachers received into full connection between 1769-1828, list fifty-seven who suffered expulsion.³⁸ There were other cases where less severe measures were taken to reform an erring member. For example, one preacher was reprimanded by his bishop before the conference for "his making proposals of marriage to the Sisters."³⁹ A traveling elder was disciplined for using "some improper words" and still another for "treating an elder with contempt."⁴⁰ Usually the charges involving a lesser offense meant location until an investigation either exonerated the chargee or substantiated the charge. In all cases, however, involving a charge of misconduct the preachers and bishops appeared prompt and decisive in their verdicts.

The faithful minister was by far typical among Methodists. James

³⁶ *Christian Advocate and Journal* (Dec. 1, 1937; v. 12, #15 and Dec. 30, 1831; v. 6, #18), 60 and 72.

³⁷ General Conference Minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1816 (Baltimore, Md.; Ms. in Lovely Lane Chapel, Baltimore, Md.).

³⁸ Barclay, *Early American Methodism 1769-1844*, II, 355.

³⁹ Sweet, *Rise of Methodism in the West*, 159.

⁴⁰ Finley, *Sketches of Western Methodism*, 90.

Quinn exemplifies the many like himself who was described by a biographer as one whom many readers will remember because of "his pastoral visits to their humble habitations, soon after their arrival in the new country, or their first settlement after marriage."⁴¹ His record of service as one who instructed, encouraged, and comforted amidst the privation of the frontier was written deeply on the lives of untold numbers of people. When the conditions which existed on the frontier are taken into consideration, the service of Quinn would have taxed the stamina of a Peter, Paul, or Apollos. It was, however, this quality of personal service which built the church. But, the reason these men served so faithfully was most eloquently expressed by one of their number, Henry B. Bascom, who wrote "the pulpit is destined to secure the conversion or seal the perdition of the world."⁴² Those who joined the travelling ranks were determined that the pulpit would be an instrument for the conversion of men and society.

Education

The absence of formal educational preparation was a recognized defect which conference elders and itinerants strove to overcome. A few like Freeborn Garrettson had received an excellent English education; others—John Emory, Wilbur Fisk, and Nathan Bangs—were college trained; but they were the exceptions.⁴³ Of the first twelve bishops, only two were college graduates. Thomas Coke was graduated by Jesus College, Oxford in 1768; John Emory completed studies at Washington College, Maryland in 1804.⁴⁴ The majority, however, were much like Fletcher Harris who wrote of his parents "they could only furnish him with an English education, and that mostly at home."⁴⁵ James Sewell of Maryland recorded that part of his education was acquired in county schools and part from a Presbyterian minister who taught him while both followed the plow.⁴⁶ Then, one of the best known itinerants, Peter Cartwright, summarized the status of formal training within the ministerial orders. "Among the thousands of travelling and local preachers employed and engaged," he wrote, "in the glorious work of saving souls, and building the Methodist Church, there were not fifty men that had anything more than a common English education, and scores of them not that; not one of them was ever

⁴¹ John F. Wright, *Life and Labors of James Quinn* (Cincinnati, 1851), 125. Wright was received into the Methodist ministry in 1815.

⁴² Bascom, *Sermons from the Pulpit*, 58.

⁴³ Abel Stevens, *The Life and Times of Nathan Bangs* (New York, 1863), 209.

⁴⁴ Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840*, 65.

⁴⁵ Fletcher Harris, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (Baltimore, 1837), n.p.

⁴⁶ Sewell, *Autobiography*, n.p.

trained in a theological school or Biblical institute.”⁴⁷ Though Cartwright does not provide a statistical table for his generalization, it is impossible to disagree with his statement after examining numerous primary sources.

The picture painted by Cartwright can be misleading, however. For instance, the first *Book of Discipline* adopted in 1784 directed preachers to study five hours a day and to preach at definite intervals on the subject of education.⁴⁸ This directive was taken seriously and the evidence is abundant in the diaries and personal papers of numerous preachers. “I resolve,” decided James Sewell, “upon every opportunity that was offered me to improve my mind by reading and study and my heart by prayer.”⁴⁹ The volumes of William Colbert’s journal are replete with references such as “reading some in Stackhouse History of the Bible and writing,” “reading Doctor Coke’s excellent advice to the Methodist Ministry,” “reading the News, my Bible, and Fletcher and Benson against Priestly,” and “began reading Johnson’s Lives of the Poets.”⁵⁰ Thomas Mann, while serving an extended circuit in North Carolina, wrote “finished reading my Bible which is the 21 time.”⁵¹ Then, as a young man serving in the deep South, Elijah Steele stated, “after reading my usual portion of Scripture, I commenced Ruter’s Church History.”⁵²

The Methodist itinerants not only devised their own courses of self-education and improvement, but they also wrote their commitment to education into General Conference legislative action. In 1800, each presiding elder was instructed to supply his district with books. This greatly assisted ministers who became authorized book agents approved by the General Conference. The period before sales was obviously an opportunity for an inquiring preacher to examine and read the materials he was promoting and thus benefit from them. Moreover, a policy evolved whereby on the larger circuits, a younger man was assigned with an experienced one, designated junior and senior preachers. In this way a great deal of sophrosyne and savvy was passed on in conversation and

⁴⁷ Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, ed. by Charles L. Wallis (New York, 1956), 267. Cartwright served in the West from 1804 to 1872.

⁴⁸ Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840*, 65-66.

⁴⁹ Sewell, *Autobiography*, (50).

⁵⁰ William Colbert, “A Journal of The Travels of William Colbert. . . .” (8 vols.; typed copies of Ms. in St. George’s Methodist Church, Philadelphia, Pa.). III, 31, 35; IV, 183; V, 195.

⁵¹ Thomas Mann Diaries (1805-1830); (7 vols.; Ms. in Duke University, Durham, N.C.).

⁵² Benjamin M. Drake, *Life of Rev. Elijah Steele* (Cincinnati, 1843), and James B. Finley, *Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley* (Cincinnati, 1853), 196, 326.

by example.⁵³ Beyond these methods, there were also lists of recommended books to be read headed by the Bible. Among the others listed were works by Wesley, Coke, Clarke, Benson, and Henry. Buck's *Theological Dictionary* was specifically recommended. In history, Josephus, Rollin, Gibbon, Robertson, and Ramsay are most frequently named. The Arts and Sciences were highly recommended as well as Philosophy. Indeed, Nathan Bangs urged the study of the Greek and Latin languages along with the other disciplines.⁵⁴ Based upon this interest it is natural that the Methodist Church adopted a general educational policy and by 1860 had been instrumental in acquiring thirty-four colleges located in nineteen states.⁵⁵

Moreover, the itinerants appear to have been relatively faithful in fulfilling the General Conference directive to preach on the subject of education. A theme that occurs fairly frequently in the sermons on education was a call for literary institutions under Christian control. Another described education as that which gives "polish" and "develops beauty and value" in a person. In the same vein, many sermons were preached to support Sunday Schools, the Bible and Tract societies, home and foreign missions; all of which contributed to education. But, there is no evidence in the sermonic literature that in this era when Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, and Thaddeus Stevens were establishing and strengthening common-schools, the Methodist preachers concerned themselves with this problem.⁵⁶

Conditions

The conditions under which these men labored deserves consideration to give an added life size dimension. People then as now were interested in politics and the period included some controversial elections and personalities. Although the itinerants preached a theology and an ethic conducive to the rise of democracy, the preachers as a rule avoided involvement with political issues and did not disclose their personal opinions. Henry Boehm gives an account of the presidential election of 1800 in which Federalism and Democracy were talked about everywhere. "Such was the excitement that it separated families and friends and

⁵³ Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840*, 45.

⁵⁴ Nathan Bangs, *Letters to Young Ministers of the Gospel* (New York, 1826), 17, 26.

⁵⁵ Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840*, 66-67.

⁵⁶ "Christian Liberality" by Leonard B. Gurley in *Sermons on Miscellaneous Subjects*, 439; Summerfield, *Sermons*, 151; "Proper Use of the Mammon of Unrighteousness" by Andrew Carroll in *Ohio Conference Offering*, 98; "A Brief Sketch . . ." by John P. Durbin in *Christian Advocate and Journal* (Oct. 16, 1829; v. 4, #7), 25.

members of the church," he wrote. Boehm reported that he was pressed on every side to identify with one political party or the other, but refused. His justification which was apparently the reason of other itinerants was simply that the fulfillment of his mission was too important to be sidetracked by a temporal, partisan issue.⁵⁷

The period was also one marked by constant population migrations of varying intensities, but involving a persistent movement into the ever advancing frontier. In his journals, Asbury gives vivid descriptions of the economic poverty and sheer desperateness of many who were on the move. While traveling, he wrote, "(one) sees men, women, and children, almost naked, paddling barefoot and barelegged along, or laboring up the rocky hills, while those who are best off have only a horse for two or three children to ride at once."⁵⁸ Hunger was an ever present enemy and the lack of shelter while traveling was frequently noted. Thus, when a circuit-rider reached his charge, especially in the West, the population was generally of the ruder sort with many close to barbarism. Add to this the threat of Indian attack which existed in many areas and it is not surprising to discover a preacher, John Strange, who rode from fort to fort armed with a rifle in order to fill his appointment with some degree of security.⁵⁹ Fortunately, after 1825 in many parts of the Northwest territory conditions were decidedly improved.

Under the hardships of frontier life, it is not surprising that preaching on the judgment, hell, and heaven was a tremendous success. Their hopes and fears were projected into the future and coupled with the desire for a better future life and fear of disaster. When heaven was portrayed in sermons as a literal place where there would be "mansions, riches, and pleasures for all," it made a profound impression. Likewise, the descriptions of hell as a portion of the universe where punishment in different degrees awaited sinners, had a powerful impact upon audiences. But, beyond these scenes, the millennial concept that "the kingdom of Jesus Christ is to be established in this world" served to inspire believers into action.⁶⁰ This belief in a new world order in which

⁵⁷ Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical*, 65. See also *Christian Advocate and Journal* (Sept. 5, 1828; v. 3, #1), 4. This is very similar to Wesley's advice to Methodists in America during the Revolution. John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. by John Telford (8 vols.; London, 1931), VI, 142.

⁵⁸ Asbury, *The Journal*, III, 132.

⁵⁹ Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, III, 292-3; Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 164; Wright, *Life and Labors of James Quinn*, 115.

⁶⁰ Wilbur Fisk, "The National Preacher." (New York, 1929), IV, 196; Bascom, *Sermons from the Pulpit*, 165; Harris, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 62.

righteousness would be dominant enabled many self-sacrificing itinerants to persist in the face of insuperable odds.

The size of the circuits were often sufficiently large to discourage one who went with less than a conviction that the Almighty was with him. Asbury himself set the pace by averaging 6,000 miles traveled on horse-back a year.⁶¹ In 1802, Robert R. Roberts was assigned the Erie Circuit in Western Pennsylvania which became in time the Erie Conference. To the Lancaster Circuit in Pennsylvania was appointed Phinehas Price in 1815 when it was about three hundred miles in circumference and contained thirty preaching places. Indeed, it was not unusual for a circuit to be three to six hundred miles in length with as many as twenty or thirty preaching points.⁶² This meant the men who rode circuits were away from home for weeks at a time.

Moreover, the frequency of preaching was a staggering task itself. One to four times a day was the number Freeborn Garrettson reported. In a career cut short John Summerfield estimated he preached five to ten discourses a week.⁶³ A presiding elder in the West, reported having preached 208 sermons in little more than a year, but this does not necessarily mean the total number of times he preached because under itinerant conditions a sermon was used several, perhaps many times.⁶⁴ After fifty-five years a Methodist preacher, Peter Cartwright, calculated he had preached 14,600 times. It is, therefore, not surprising that Anthony Atwood who was himself admitted a conference member in 1825 said "as a rule, Methodist ministers are worked harder than those of any other church in this country."⁶⁵

An unpredictable force which confronted the itinerant throughout his service was the weather which frequently produced or contributed to unhealthy conditions. On one occasion Phinehas Price lamented "my rides are long and the weather is cold, and I have travelled till I have frozen one of my ears." Later, he recorded his ministry was temporarily interrupted because of "the measles" and again "the mumps," but lastly he related, "taken with dysentery."⁶⁶ So fraught with peril to health and life was the itinerancy that it contributed to the fact that almost one-half the

⁶¹ Stevens, *Essays*, 145-6.

⁶² William C. Larrabee, *Asbury and His Coadjutors* (Cincinnati, 1853), 280; Price, *A Narrative of the Life*, . . . ,63; William W. Sweet, *Circuit-Rider Days in Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1916), 32.

⁶³ Stevens, *Essays*, 220.

⁶⁴ *Christian Advocate and Journal* (Sept. 19, 1834; v. 9, #4), 16.

⁶⁵ Atwood, *Causes of the Marvelous Success of Methodism*, 103.

⁶⁶ Price, *A Narrative of the Life*, . . . , 71, 73, 80. See also Peter Doub, "Letter to Wm. Compton, Oct. 17, 1822" (Ms. in Duke University, Durham, N.C.).

preachers whose deaths are recorded prior to 1800 died before age thirty. Nor was there much improvement by 1844 when the record shows that approximately one-half those who had fallen died before age thirty-three.⁶⁷

There was an added factor of mental strain or fatigue which disabled some men. In one of the few recorded cases, James Sewell described himself: "my mind preyed upon itself until I was wasted flesh, gloomy in spirit and frequently on the brink of despair."⁶⁸ Another well-known preacher, Francis Poythress, was noted by James Finley as one "whose removal to a new field, among strangers, and subjection, if possible, to greater hardships than he endured on his former fields, . . . , preyed heavily upon his system, shattering his nerves . . . and his mind, . . . became alike shattered and deranged."⁶⁹ How many men suffered like or different experiences is impossible to guess, but the itinerancy required unusual soundness of mind as well as body if the man was to fulfill his calling. The remarkable part of the traveling ministry is that there were few cases of severe or extended disorders recorded.

The lack of financial support was an inexcusable hardship inflicted upon the preachers. "Our support was very limited and we were sometimes strained for means to live upon," disclosed one circuit-rider.⁷⁰ It was expecting a lot for a man to measure up to the standards of discipline, piety, and industry required of Methodist ministers and then fail to meet their basic needs. As late as 1820, circuit-riders received little pay worth mentioning.⁷¹ The depression of 1819 left everyone in dire straits, but a few like Peter Cartwright and William Burke established farms to maintain their support. It is unmistakably clear that the neglect to plan for decent financial support of the ministry was a serious mistake, a serious defect in the itinerant system.

Closely related to what was almost a vow of poverty was a requirement to maintain celibacy. That which brings happiness into the lives of many men, marriage, was practically denied to the itinerant. Asbury's view on the subject of marriage carried weight throughout the denomination. He wrote, "marriage is honorable in all, but to me it is a ceremony awful as death. Well may it be so, when I calculate we have lost the travelling labors of two hundred of the best men in America, or the world by marriage

⁶⁷ Abel Stevens, *The Life and Times of Nathan Bangs* (New York: 1863), 124-5; Barclay, *Early American Methodism 1769-1844*, II, 426.

⁶⁸ Sewell, *Autobiography*, (21).

⁶⁹ Finley, *Autobiography*, 131.

⁷⁰ Sewell, *Autobiography*, (35); Finley, *Autobiography*, 94.

⁷¹ Sweet, *Circuit-Rider Days in Indiana, 1916*; Charles A. Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting* (Dallas, 1955), 21 gives the pay scale.

and consequent location.”⁷² Thus, there evolved a traditional regulation which was intended to prevent preachers from marrying. The standard advice on the subject was “take no step toward marriage, without first consulting with your brethren.”⁷³ Moreover, during most of the period the reception of a married preacher into an Annual Conference was an unheard of event and if after achieving membership a man got ideas about marrying he was expected to serve four years before contemplating marriage. To justify this position, it was pointed out that St. Paul and our Lord sanctioned the celibate state.⁷⁴ The first four bishops set the example as bachelors, but on the pragmatic side support was small and the circuits large so that when a man married it usually required location.

Conclusion

The life of a Methodist preacher was a long, hard, up-hill march. Rewards were not forthcoming in this life. But, motivated by the conviction that their commission was from a power beyond themselves they achieved a record of service that ranks with the distinguished accomplishments of Christian endeavor. If “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,” then it is an equally valid claim that the self-denying sacrificial service of the preachers of American Methodism is the foundation of the denomination. Preaching a gospel that was as individualistic as the hopes of those to whom they ministered, they related successfully the message that the grace of God was free and whosoever would claim it would find peace of soul. An increase in Methodist membership of over seven hundred percent during the period demonstrates that these were vital men in their time. Their sagacity in matters of religion enabled them to present the Christian cause convincingly and impressively at a time of ferment in nation and church.

⁷² Asbury, *Journal*, III, 196.

⁷³ Wright, *Life and Labors of James Quinn*, 77.

⁷⁴ *Christian Advocate and Journal* (Nov. 10, 1837; v. 12, #12), 48.