As American Protestantism moved into the last quarter of the nineteenth century it was beset on all sides by a variety of forces that threatened its hegemony in American culture. The rise of industrialism and urbanization, the influx of immigrants, the intellectual challenge of Darwinism, the impact of reform and populist movements in politics threatened the status and security of Protestantism in America, and confronted it with issues which a predominantly rural past was an insufficient resource out of which to respond creatively. The rural atmosphere of the early nineteenth century, in which Protestantism had been reared, was changing rapidly and adjustments to the new environment were essential if evangelical Protestantism was to maintain its position in American culture.¹

The machinery of revivalism had long served Protestantism well in the shaping of American culture around evangelical norms. But to some, who still shared the Protestant hope of "a Christian America", new methods would have to be found to pervade the changing culture with the Protestant vision. Revivalism had not survived nineteenth century Protestantism without considerable criticism from those who rigorously opposed its methods and its theology, and as the century moved into its last quarter the voices of opposition swelled.² The machinery of the new assault on American society would not be the revival, but a movement in popular education informed by Protestant tastes and outlook. One of the most interesting and successful of such efforts to consciously turn away from revivalism and to draw upon the latest currents of American life and thought and apply them to the needs and message of the churches was the Chautauqua Institution, founded in 1874 by Lewis Miller, a prominent Midwestern businessman, and John H. Vincent, later to become a Methodist

¹ See Robert L. Handy, A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities (N Y., 1973), esp. chaps. 3, 4.

bishop.3

This remarkable experiment in popular education, culture, and religion was originally launched as a training center for Sunday school teachers on the shores of Lake Chautauqua in Western New York state. Any itinerant preachers with revivalistic impulses were forcibly banned from the Institution, and lectures on applying the latest educational techniques to teaching the Bible displaced fiery sermons on the soul’s salvation. From the beginning, both Miller and Vincent sought out the most able and best known figures in American education, religion and the arts to assist them in the training of Sunday school teachers, and from this modest beginning was to blossom a university with a theological school, the first book club in America (The Chautauqua Scientific and Literary Circle), an influential periodical (The Chautauquan), and an impressive center located at Chautauqua, New York. Theodore Roosevelt later described Chautauqua as “the most American thing in America”, and indeed through its appeal to a yearning in American life for popular education and culture, it came to represent for millions the very cultural, religious and artistic life of America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.4

The guiding force behind this unique institution was John H. Vincent, who, while he never graduated from college or theological school, nonetheless felt through his own experience as a Methodist minister the vital need to make available to the masses the educational privileges of the few. His own experience serving a variety of Methodist parishes in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Illinois had convinced him that there were millions of adults in the cities and the hinterlands of the country who had been forced by any number of circumstances away from the doors of the university and into the affairs of life too soon.

Vincent was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama on February 7, 1832, and moved five years later with his rather strict and pious Methodist family to a home on the Susquehanna River in Northumberland County in central

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3 The Chautauqua literature is awesome in quantity and no attempt will be made here to document its bibliography. See though the most recent account by Theodore Morison, Chautauqua: A Center for Education, Religion and the Arts in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1971), Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, The Story of Chautauqua (N.Y., 1921), Joseph F. Gould, The Chautauqua Movement, an Episode in the Continuing American Revolution (N.Y., 1961), Victoria Case, We Called it Culture, the Story of Chautauqua (N.Y., 1948), Hugh V. Orchard, Fifty Years of Chautauqua (Cedar Rapids, 1923), Rebecca Richmond, Invitation to Chautauqua (N.Y., 1953).

4 For treatments of the so-called Chautauqua Movement see: Marian Scott, Chautauqua Canaan (N.Y., 1939), Charles F. Horner, Strike the Tent: the Story of Chautauqua (Philadelphia, 1951), Gay MacLaren, Morally We Roll Along (Boston, 1938), H. P. Harrison, Culture under Canaan (N.Y., 1958). The Chautauqua circuits were not connected officially with the Chautauqua Assembly of Chautauqua Institution.
Pennsylvania. He was never encouraged by his parents to acquire a higher education and this deficiency in his preparation for his chosen vocation in the ministry was to haunt Vincent all his life. "The reader can scarcely conceive the grief, made up of regret, discouragement, and mortification which this fact occasioned me through most of the years of my mature life... It has been my 'thorn in the flesh'." Thus his own experience was the source of the high valuation which Vincent placed on a college education and inspired him to work tirelessly encouraging "the average American citizen and parent" to acquire "the college outlook". Further, Vincent’s extensive travels, his lengthy and creative involvement in the Sunday School movement, his oratorical skills and personal charm equipped him to undertake the Chautauqua experiment.

His interest turned primarily to those in midlife and eager to acquire an education; those masses "from whom the light and influence of culture have been shut out" and who anxiously awaited the opportunity to study and to acquire the accoutrements of a liberal education. To the other side, university faculties were locked in their ivory towers and lacked the means for contact with the masses. In Vincent's vision Chautauqua Institution would act as that vital catalyst, bringing together the masses desiring a higher education and the resources of institutions of higher learning prepared to meet this desire. Clearly, something more than Sunday school pedagogy was at stake in this effort to bring the masses and the scholar together, to unite the popular and the intellectual; certainly one of the roots of mass education in America must be located here in the Chautauqua Institution and the vision of a Methodist bishop.

Among those masses of people most victimized by a too soon entry into their profession without benefit of proper training was the clergy. Again, from his own experience, Vincent had found himself riding the circuit and forced through the pressure of pastoral responsibilities to abandon his hope for a theological education despite his best intentions. He reports that he tried "to bring conscience and circumstances into line with my ambition and to break loose from the active ministry in order to complete a college degree. It was all in vain." Vincent discerned in his overworked and underpaid brethren of the cloth an excellent opportunity to provide a much needed service. The clergy would play a vital role in lifting the educational, cultural and artistic horizons of the masses, but how could they perform this

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6. Ibid. p. 37. See also H. Vincent, "A Study in Pedagogy for People who are not Professional Teachers" (N.Y., 1890).
function without proper training themselves? The sights of the masses would be no higher than those of the clergy, and only as both together were raised by education would the millennium be ushered in with all its splendor. The clergyman had an obligation to acquire an education befitting the enlightened expectations of the age, and this held no matter at what stage he was in his career. There was an integral relation between educational achievement of the masses, the progress of Christianity, and the fitness of the nation to receive the returning Christ. Specifically, theological education had an important function in elevating the pastoral office and bringing the clergy into closer relation with the people.  

It was Vincent's conviction that despite the growth of theological schools in America during the nineteenth century, all too many laborers went into the vineyard ill-equipped, and after a few years experience became downtrodden and discouraged because of the lack of proper ministerial training. Here then, through the Chautauqua Institution was an excellent opportunity to provide a theological education to those already serving churches and who because of circumstances would find it impossible to vacate the pulpit and take up residence at a theological school. A system of correspondence courses and short summer terms at Chautauqua would equip the candidate with credentials adequate for the discharge of his sacred office. Vincent was ecstatic about this prospect of upgrading the educational status of the clergy, and in 1881 the Chautauqua School of Theology was chartered with degree-conferring power.

Vincent assumed the presidency of the young school and seized the occasion of its opening to lecture at length on the nature of theological education. This non-lettered Methodist theological school president extolled the virtues of theological study, while at the same time he warned the "average minister" against giving too much time to this to the neglect of other more practical matters. While theology is a proper study, the minister needs more "to know the society to which he brings his power: elocutionary, intellectual and spiritual." In Vincent's mind to study man, nature and society was only another way of studying God, and he proceeded to rehearse the practical concerns that would distinguish the school: Hawthorne, Dickens, Shakespeare, Thackery, Eliot would be read and studied seriously.

8 Assembly Herald, vol. 6, no. 14 (Aug. 15, 1881), p. 2. This was the official daily organ of the summer sessions of the Chautauqua Assembly, now the Daily Chautauquan. A complete set is on file at Smith Library, The Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua, N.Y. The Assembly Herald carried notices of the daily activities of the Assembly, the coming and going of dignitaries, complete copies of most lectures and sermons, announcements for colleges and seminaries, as well as advertisements for carriages, tents, cosmetics, piano-forthes, sewing machines, etc.
a course in Christian Sociology would demonstrate the need for clerical involvement in social issues. emphasis would be placed upon sermon preparation and elocution. and an archaeological museum would provide divinity degree candidates with first-hand information on the Holy Land. While the address is not among Vincent's most eloquent deliveries, it does stand as an illustration of the deadly earnestness with which the task of upgrading the educational level of the parish minister was taken.

Assisting Vincent in the school's opening years was Luther T. Townsend, a Dartmouth College and an Andover Seminary graduate, and professor of Sacred Rhetoric at Boston University. With Townsend's assistance. Vincent added some distinguished names to the school's faculty in the effort to provide sound training in biblical languages, systematic theology, historical theology, philosophy, and the relation of religion and culture. Most notable among these was the young and ambitious William Rainey Harper, principal of The Chautauqua School of Hebrew and who perhaps more than any other single figure tirelessly organized and oversaw the Chautauqua System of Education. Harper was later to apply his experience at Chautauqua in correspondence schooling and mass education to the founding of and the philosophy behind the University of Chicago.

While Harper held forth in sacred languages, the redoubtable Lyman Abbott hailed his course in Human Nature as "nothing like it in any other theological seminary." and as designed to make theology less abstract and more practical by engaging the student not in theories of human nature but in "how to read men". In historical theology the candidate came under the tutelage of the distinguished church historian Philip Schaff, who had his students read Volume 1 of his own History of the Christian Church, as well as The Apostolic Fathers and the Fathers of the Second Century by George A. Jackson. The Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism by Gerhard Uhlhorn. George P. Fisher's The Reformation, and selected biographies of Augustine. Luther. Knox. Wesley and Edwards. New Testament Greek was taught by Alfred A. Wright, while W. Cleaver Wilkinson taught courses in Literature and Art. Special courses were offered in The Relation of Body and Soul. Eloquence. Industrial Economy and Trade, and in Jurisprudence.

These courses were taught by faculty members from a variety of institutions, including Northwestern University and Boston University. In

9. See for example, the Announcement on The Chautauqua School of Theology, 1881. A set of bulletins announcing the requirements, courses and faculty of The Chautauqua University and the Chautauqua School of Theology is on file at Smith Library. See also A. F. Besor, Chautauqua Publications, a historical and bibliographical guide (Chautauqua Press 1934).

short, by 1881 Vincent had done a commendable job in attracting the services of a distinguished faculty willing to operate on the correspondence method and to visit Chautauqua for summer lectures, and in the same year the school could boast some 330 students engaged in theological study. In addition, visits to the Institution by such luminaries as A.A. Hodge of Princeton, Borden P. Bowne of Boston, James Strong of Drew, and Bishop Foster of Boston exposed the divinity degree candidate, who was fortunate enough to make it to Chautauqua for the summer term, to some of the finest lecturers of the time.11 Finally, the cost was held to a minimum so that, for example, Schaff’s course in historical theology cost $10.50, which included lesson outlines and mailing.

From the beginning Vincent sought to make it clear that theological education at Chautauqua was not designed to supplant or compete with established theological seminaries. He emphasized that the school “does not invite to its curriculum students who can attend the seminary. It especially invites those clergymen who in youth and for any cause were crowded past the doors of the college and the seminary into the pulpit, where they must now remain. The majority of clergymen in this country belong to this class. To them especially The Chautauqua School of Theology offers its unparalleled opportunities.”12 Most numerous among these clergy who had been “crowded past the doors of the college and the seminary into the pulpit” were of course Vincent’s fellow Methodist preachers, and he sought to integrate the Methodist Episcopal requirements for ordination and Conference membership into the Chautauqua curriculum. It must have been a source of distress to him when reports started coming back from students that the courses were too difficult and the cost too high.

While no elaborate claims were made for this experiment in correspondence schooling, and incidentally one of the first of its kind in the nation, still the advantages to the particular class of clergy to which it was directed were noted. Correspondence education had the advantage of compelling the student to express himself in writing and thereby cultivate the habit of more exact statement. This in turn led, according to Vincent, to a greater accuracy of knowledge because one was permitted a slow and thoughtful study of the properly assigned lesson. One proceeded at his own pace, leading to an independence in study and greater confidence in one’s abilities as a scholar. Finally, it was a simple fact that not everyone could get to a university campus, that it was a physical impossibility, in which event one’s own hearth must be turned into a campus. On the other hand, the

11 Many of these summer lectures are recorded . . . chautau... in the Bulletin of Theological Bulletin of Theological

12 Chautauqua School of Theology Bulletin (1880), p. 5–6.
disadvantages of correspondence courses included the absence of the personal magnetism of the instructor, the lack of class spirit, and the impossibility of impromptu suggestions of the teacher. Further, correspondence could make writing a drudgery, tempt one to dishonesty, and because of its exacting requirements be discouraging to some.13

While many enlisted with enthusiasm in the course of study, few in fact were able to compete it, and by 1894, thirteen years after the school's charter was granted, only 17 students had been granted Bachelor of Divinity degrees: the school dropped its degree-granting powers in 1898. Thus Vincent's vision of a theological education for hundreds of untrained Protestant clergymen was never fully realized and the Chautauqua School of Theology remained a relatively short-lived enterprise. But the Bishop's faith in education for the clergy and for the masses, who for one reason or another had been denied it, never wavered and mass education continued to be his dream. The years of his active episcopacy, 1888-1904, saw him involved not only with Chautauqua but in a variety of movements designed to elevate the educational status of the parish clergy under his jurisdiction. To turn every pastor's study and every sitting room in every home across the nation into a college was his ideal. Chautauqua was to assist in this, and in his 1894 report to the Board of Trustees. Vincent noted that "the finger of Chautauqua seemed to be placed on the pulse of the age, to recognize the various signs of life, and to follow promptly every tendency of the great American people toward a higher personal, intellectual, social, industrial, political, ecclesiastical and spiritual life."14

To the time of his death in 1920, Vincent's faith in education remained undaunted, for it alone was that which was "the power of a new life", stimulating the best elements in man, pruning the character, leading to self-discovery, and unleashing the powers of the individual. The soteriological significance of education was manifest, and only when the resources of higher education were made available to all men, "then may the nation turn to God and say 'These souls thou gavest me in feebleness, and behold I have given them strength: they were ignorant and I have taught them: they were in bondage and I have given them liberty: they were in depths and I have lifted them up to the heights'. When that day comes the nation with her alliance of powers domestic, ecclesiastical, educational and industrial shall welcome to the earth the king who comes out of the heavens to reign in righteousness."15 That the Chautauqua Institution would

15 "An Alliance for Popular Education", address by J. H. Vincent in the Assembly Herald (August 12, 1884), p. 2
contribute significantly to this preparation for the millennium was never doubted by its Methodist co-founder.

To make available "the college outlook" for the masses yearning for learning, to tap the vast reservoirs of adult education, and to provide for inadequately trained clergymen an incomparable opportunity to make up the deficiency in their education were goals that Vincent hoped to attain through the Chautauqua University and its School of Theology, and the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle. Vincent worshipped at the shrine of mass education and envisioned its symmetrical diffusion throughout the land. Resisting the realities of pluralism he looked to the public school system and to a network of church-related colleges and universities to maintain what the churches alone were losing grasp of—the hegemony of Protestantism in American Culture. Chautauqua itself was designed to assist American Protestantism in its adjustment to a new environment, and while the name university was dropped because it was "felt to be misleading and likely to do harm rather than good to the work of Chautauqua," nevertheless the Institution and the movement continued to leave its impression upon American culture. Together the people and clergy would be lifted to new horizons, higher levels of cultivation, greater advancements in literary taste, all shaped by evangelical Protestantism. Any discussion of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Protestantism's adjustments to that culture which does not include reference to this remarkable experiment in popular education and religion is somewhat incomplete.

16 Chautauqua Yearbook (1895), p. 11.