DUKE UNIVERSITY AND THE METHODIST TRADITION

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Ever since William F. Buckley, Jr.'s 1951 work, *God and Man at Yale*, a debate has raged openly in the United States and beyond regarding the "secularization" of once-Christian institutions of higher learning. Proponents of universities free of church ties have argued that religion hinders the free exchange of ideas, the growth of scientific research, and the open expression of differing student personalities. Critics of secularization feel that by shedding years of Christian tradition, universities go adrift without a moral compass or a true appreciation for the historical pillars upon which they were founded.

As with so many of its counterparts, Duke University faces these questions. Undoubtedly once a solidly Christian school—and in particular a Methodist school—it now exhibits the characteristics of a modern, secular university. Its solid ties to the church amount to an overtly Christian divinity school, with a decisive United Methodist bent, and a traditional, informal tie between the university Board of Trustees and the North Carolina Annual Conferences of United Methodism. This paper explores to some degree the journey the school has taken to this point, and also asks the important question, Is Duke still a United Methodist university?

I

In its earliest days the institution which would someday become known as Duke was operated mainly by Christians, and more specifically, by Methodists. However, that does not mean it was automatically a Methodist institution. Indeed, for some years during its early history it was not officially recognized in any way by Methodism, but was merely a manifestation of that church's belief in educating the populace, as expressed by the people of a certain locality.

The humble beginnings of the institution are well known. At least three small schoolhouses were built in the 1830s by residents of northwestern Randolph County in order to teach their children by means of traveling schoolmasters who passed through periodically. Brown's Schoolhouse, built on land belonging to a man named John Brown, was utilized by both a...
Methodist and a Quaker community, and was in existence by at least 1838. It is important to realize that from the start the tiny school was not formed by a Methodist Conference or even, for that matter, by a particular church, but was instead the creation of a group of neighbors. This gave the institution, from the beginning, a strong sense of independence which would be a continuing trademark.

The first permanent teacher for the school was Brantley York, who was not only a teacher, but also a Methodist local preacher. York, who was from the Randolph County area, was on good terms with both Methodists and Quakers. In 1838 he gave a public address suggesting the establishment of a more permanent institute – an academy – and his idea was well received. At his own suggestion, the new institution was called Union Institute Academy, since it was formed by a union of both Methodists and Quakers. Thus, in its earliest form, the institution was not unidenominational. However, that was soon to change, as by the early 1840s Quaker children began to leave the school, largely due to the formation of a new Quaker boarding school nearby, and due to tensions among the children themselves, who were not especially open to each other’s backgrounds.

Union took a definitive bent toward Methodism when Braxton Craven came aboard as the new teacher in 1841, at the age of 19. Though raised as an orphan in a Quaker home, Craven had converted to Methodism and had been licensed to preach by this point in his life. He became principal in February 1842, after York was hired at another school. Craven deepened his ties to Methodism during the 1850s, when he was ordained a deacon in 1852 and elder in 1856. He was accepted into “full connection” in 1859. Craven’s career at the fledgling institution was to last until his death four decades later.

Union Institute operated as a secondary school, but Craven eventually wanted to move it up in status to a school for the education of future teachers. Later Craven would see the education of future ministers as the school’s essential role. Craven himself drafted a bill for the state legislature to change Union Institute into a Normal School, a state-sponsored school for teacher training. The bill passed in January 1851. Normal would receive state funding and certain state officials would be ex officio members of the Board. However, unlike the case for the University of North Carolina, Normal was not a complete state institution and maintained a fair amount of autonomy.

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4 Chaffin, 41-43.
5 Chaffin, 51-52.
6 Chaffin, 54-62.
7 Chaffin, 66.
8 Chaffin, 93.
Such autonomy allowed Craven to approach the North Carolina Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), that very same year with a proposal that Normal be allowed to educate ministerial candidates free of charge. The Annual Conference accepted the proposal and endorsed the school, thus beginning an unofficial connection.\(^9\)

This unofficial relationship was soon to become an official one, however. Craven was a savvy administrator and, as the 1850s progressed, he could tell that the state’s preference for Chapel Hill was profound, leaving Normal with severe limitations as the stepchild institution. Thus, Craven began making overtures to the MECS. However, he would find that the MECS would do no better over the years in providing the school with funding, a situation which both stymied its growth and left it highly independent as the years passed.\(^10\)

Up until this point, Randolph-Macon College had been the main recognized training ground for ministers from the North Carolina Annual Conference, despite its location in Virginia. However, personal feuds within the denomination began to break down the relationship, leaving a perfect opening for Craven and his college. He and the Board of Trustees worked diligently in 1856 to lay the groundwork for Normal’s \textit{entree} into the position of official North Carolina Methodist college. In November 1856 Craven offered their case to the Annual Conference, which referred it to committee. Though the committee did not give the idea a favorable report, the floor did, and the motion was passed by a nearly unanimous vote.\(^11\) For the first time ever, the church, through the Annual Conference, would elect the members of the Board of Trustees. Likewise, Normal became the official college of the North Carolina Annual Conference.

Having changed its status from a state-sponsored teaching college to a church-connected school for both preachers and teachers, the name of Normal was simply no longer appropriate. Therefore, a committee was set up to institute a new name. The choice was Trinity, after Trinity College, Cambridge. The name was officially changed, by law, with a new charter in February 1859. The new charter, among other things, gave certain controls over the estate to the North Carolina Conference, created a self-perpetuating Board of Trustees which nominated members who were then to be elected by the Conference, repealed all official ties to the state, and forbade the sale of wine and the establishment of games of chance and billiards within two miles of the campus.\(^12\)

Chaffin points out that, “The reorganized board of trustees and the first one under the charter of 1859 reveal how completely the Methodists controlled Trinity.”\(^13\) The Board included twelve ministers and twenty-two

\(^9\)Chaffin, 94-95.
\(^{10}\)King, interview.
\(^{11}\)Chaffin, 168-171.
\(^{12}\)Chaffin, 175-177.
\(^{13}\)Chaffin, 179.
“influential laymen.” In the same year, Craven was named the first President and was brought into full connection of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

The Civil War brought difficult times to Trinity. Craven’s work to keep the school alive was further complicated by infighting within his denomination. Ironically, a New York transplant to North Carolina, the Rev. Robert S. Moran, led a personal crusade against Craven during the very heart of the Civil War, eventually forcing his resignation from the college in November 1863. The next year Trinity had but one graduate and the college was vacant from April 1865 until January 1866, when Craven was persuaded by the Board to come back and resurrect the school.

Despite the incredible task of refurbishing the buildings, enlisting faculty, and convincing families to send their children back to the school during Reconstruction, Craven was successful. He kept the struggling school together through another decade and a half, despite continued shortcomings in Conference giving, an adherence to the policy of accepting destitute students on repayment terms, free tuition for ministerial candidates and the children of ministers, and the general economic bleakness of the times. He managed all this while fending off attacks from his critics. However, death finally took Braxton Craven from his college in November 1882, leaving behind a shaken campus unsure not merely of its future, but even of its continued existence.

II

The Board was not willing to see Trinity die simply because of the death of its greatest leader. In 1883 the Rev. Marquis L. Wood was elected its new President. An active missionary and North Carolina Methodist minister, Wood began to utilize the districts of the Methodist Conference in order to raise money for the college, organizing fund-raising rallies for Trinity. However, even these efforts were not successful, and in December 1884 Wood resigned.

A Committee of Management took power at this point, consisting of J.W. Alspaugh, Julian S. Carr, and James A. Gray. Chaffin tells us, “The three new administrators of Trinity were well known among the Methodists of North Carolina as ‘excellent, influential and wealthy laymen’ who had long been concerned about the educational activities of the Church.”

Trinity was about to undergo a major change both in leadership and direction. After a lengthy delay, the Board finally chose as the new President John

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14Chaffin, 238.
16History and Government of Duke University, 10.
17King, interview.
18Chaffin, 350-351.
Franklin Crowell in April 1887. Crowell, a northerner, was educated at Yale and came to Trinity (sight unseen) from Pennsylvania. Beyond this, he was not a Methodist, but a Presbyterian. In addition, he was also a mere 28 years old. To say the least, Crowell had to prove himself in his new position, and despite problems along the way, he largely did just that.

Before moving further, we must examine a separate story, beginning over a century earlier and ten miles north of Durham, North Carolina. There the local residents built a small meetinghouse to accommodate visiting preachers of various denominations. Among the families involved in the life of this meetinghouse were the Dukes. Near the turn of the century the decision had to be made among the people around that countryside – what denomination would the little meetinghouse be? Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Quaker? The people eventually decided upon Methodist, and so it was that twelve–year–old Washington Duke was converted under the preaching of a Methodist circuit rider during the 1840s, beginning a lifelong relationship with the MECS.

During much of the early history of Normal and Trinity, Washington Duke was dealing with personal tragedy and misfortune – the death of two wives, the death of a son, the Civil War. However, by the time of Crowell’s presidency of Trinity, Duke was beginning to thrive in the tobacco industry. Crowell had hopes of making Trinity a bigger player in the educational scene of North Carolina and the South, and he felt certain that in its Randolph County setting this development would not be possible. It seemed to Crowell that the future of the South lay in industrialization, and thus Trinity College should be in an industrial center. This idea was widely accepted by many trustees and students, and during the late 1880s and early 1890s plans went ahead for the removal. Durham’s bid, which was accepted, was aided by Washington Duke and Julian S. Carr, both important Methodist laymen. Indeed, the entire motivation behind donating the money and land necessary for Trinity’s move was based upon a faith in Methodism. As William E. King puts it, “This is not a development story but a church story.”

Dr. E.A. Yates, then pastor of Trinity Methodist Church in Durham, was instrumental in gaining the interest and cooperation of his congregants, Duke and Carr, on Trinity’s behalf.

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19It should be noted, however, that Crowell became a “local preacher” in the MECS shortly after arriving at Trinity, and by 1892 was admitted into full connection into the brand new Western North Carolina Conference. Thus, he became a Methodist during his time as President. (Chaffin, 471)
20Chaffin, 384-385.
21Dr. William K. Quick, visiting faculty, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 4, 2003.
22Chaffin, 495.
24King interview.
25King interview.
26Benjamin Guy Childs, Centennial History of Trinity Methodist Church (Durham: Seeman Printery, 1961), 22.
Of Washington Duke, Chaffin states:

As a loyal citizen of Durham as well as a church member, Washington Duke aided in the organization of Methodist churches and generously supported them. He was recognized throughout North Carolina as a ‘loyal Methodist layman’; and since the amassing of his great fortune, he ‘had been for several years fixing his mind upon some large benefaction to the educational work of his church and town.’

His son, James Buchanan Duke, “Often remarked that his father claimed ‘that if he amounted to anything in life it was due to the Methodist circuit riders who frequently visited his home and whose preaching and counsel brought out the best that was in him.’” Finally, William K. Quick makes it clear that Washington Duke was no mere Sunday Methodist, but was completely committed to his church and to its mission in this world:

As the Word became flesh in Bethlehem – so it became flesh in Washington Duke’s life. What faith that Word produced – simple – yet adventurous and confident, showing us nothing is possible unless you believe! A real faith which has more to do with holiness than happiness and produces integrity, unselfishness, courage, generosity!

Such was our Founder’s faith!

Such was the tie of Duke University’s namesake to Christianity and to his chosen denomination.

Trinity’s first years in Durham were hard ones, however, in no small part due to the inability of the MECS to provide it with the funding it needed. This was a problem which had plagued the college for years and which showed no signs of relenting. Trinity suffered greatly during this period, and Crowell received the brunt of anger over the situation, whether he deserved it or not. In 1894 Crowell left Trinity and moved north again.

III

Crowell’s successor was to be one of Trinity’s strongest connections to Methodism yet, John Carlisle Kilgo. The son of an itinerant preacher, Kilgo was himself a minister in the South Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. As a Methodist financial agent for Wofford College, Kilgo had been successful, whereas the North Carolina Methodists had not. Coming to Trinity in 1894, Kilgo swept into the presidency with a personality of conviction and strength. “He was a commanding, fighting, preacher-president, and his personality, containing a curious mixture of the idealistic and the practical, was to dominate and to drive the college forward.”

21 Chaffin, 495.
28 Chaffin, 495.
29 Quick, sermon.
31 Porter, 55.
32 Porter, 54.
Through his public speeches, articles, and other means, on behalf of Christian education as an ideal, Kilgo increased both Methodist morale and Methodist attention toward Trinity. Kilgo’s efforts and personality slowly put Trinity on a more sturdy footing. This was due in no small part to his ability to convince the Duke Family to continue endowing the college. Through Kilgo’s efforts and the support of the Duke Family, Trinity made a complete turnaround which would prepare it for a period of continued growth.

For sixteen years Kilgo served as president of Trinity College, and when he retired, it had the largest endowment of any Southern college, and had assets to the amount of one and a quarter million dollars. In the same period academic standards were raised beyond those of the average Southern college or university, and Trinity College by 1903 could boast of a modern library building and adequately equipped laboratories.33

It must be noted what these circumstances did and did not owe to Methodism. It did not owe much to the Methodist organization itself. The North Carolina Conference (now two Conferences) had historically been a poor supporter of Trinity, and the rapid change in fortunes did not mirror any great change in that trend. This development did owe a great deal to certain Methodist people. It owed a great deal, obviously, to President Kilgo and to the Duke Family, as well as to various other generous church members of both great and modest means. Finally, it also owed a great deal to the bedrock concepts of Methodism (and the American expression thereof), which supported education and the development of forward-looking institutions of higher learning.

Furthering the historic ties between Methodism and the institution, Kilgo was elected a Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in May 1910, necessitating his retirement from Trinity.34 His successor, William Preston Few, was also a South Carolina native, had been educated at Harvard and brought many new educational ideas with him to Trinity, where he was dean at the time of Kilgo’s resignation. Few came from a long Methodist line and his own personal faith would shape much of his vision for the school.

Few’s career as a church layman was well documented:

He was always active in the work of the Methodist Church and in educational organizations.... He was for many years a steward in the Duke Memorial Methodist Church in Durham, and he was a regular attendant at the Sunday morning and evening services, ‘a twister,’ he said. It was alleged by some critics that he became a shrewd ecclesiastical politician. At the time of his death he had been a member of the Educational Commission of the Methodist Church since 1898, a member of the General Sunday School Board since 1914, and he was usually a delegate to the General Conference. In 1938 it was reported that he was absent from the North

34 Porter, 172.
Carolina Conference for the first time in thirty-nine years. For many years he was personally responsible for the distribution of funds provided by James B. Duke for retired Methodist ministers and their widows and orphans, and he took particular pleasure in forwarding to Mr. Duke the letters of appreciation from the recipients.35

However, despite his deep commitment to the church, Kilgo also was a firm believer in educational independence for the institution. His stance on Trinity's legal and operational independence from Methodism was tested from 1912 to 1915, by a movement within the denomination to strengthen control over its affiliated colleges and universities.

This movement started because of legal questions regarding Vanderbilt, which up until this time had firmly been an MECS institution. The church, however, was asserting a veto power over the decisions of Vanderbilt’s Board and this controversy caused the church to begin seeking firmer legal commitments between itself and its schools. Included was a demand that three-fourths of all trustees of such schools be elected by the church. Trinity, of course, had only two-thirds of its trustees elected in this manner.

With these issues being hotly debated (the Vanderbilt case went to the Supreme Court of Tennessee), Few and Kilgo took the preemptive action of suggesting that the Duke brothers issue a statement regarding their family’s gifts to Trinity:

"Following the example of our father we wish to state that all of our gifts have been made to Trinity College with a distinct knowledge that it is the property and under the control of the Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, within the bounds of the state of North Carolina, and it is to promote the interest of the college under this ownership and government that we have made all of our gifts to it."36

In 1914 the denomination did begin a public examination of Trinity’s charter, and found it to be out of compliance with its recent rules on what constituted a connectional college. Here Kilgo stepped in: “He said, no, the Church did not own the College, but the two North Carolina Conferences did. The Conferences could, and on occasion had, refused to elect trustees. There could be no change in the charter without Conference approval. He cited the stipulation in Washington Duke’s gifts and the recent statement of his sons.”37 Other commentators saw through this explanation to the real fact that Duke’s trustees owned the college and the Conferences had little more than confirmation power over a self-perpetuating board. However, through a series of correspondence and through some friendly voices within the denomination, Few managed eventually to quell this line of discussion, convincing those involved that to propose sudden changes to Trinity’s charter would scare off contributors and harm the college in the short-run.38 Thus, Trinity managed to keep its status as a “Methodist College” without losing

36Porter, 195-196
37Porter, 196.
38Porter, 197.
any of its real, legal, and operational autonomy.

After the First World War, a number of factors combined within a short time to bring about the establishment of the Indenture of Trust creating Duke University. The establishment of Duke out of Trinity College is far too heavily documented to restate here. However, the role of the MECS in that change must be discussed.

At this point in the institution’s history, its fundamental independence from the church is made manifest. The definitive changes which occurred in 1924 and the years following – involving a change in name, a great expansion in land, the establishment of new schools, and others – were decisions to be made by the Board of Trustees, without any concurrence necessary from the denomination. The new charter of course effectively kept the status quo regarding the church’s role in the life of the Board of Trustees: “Translated into practical terms, the formal or legal relationship that Trinity College had with Methodism came down to an arrangement concerning two thirds of the trustees, an arrangement that was continued without modification when the university was organized.”

Despite the oppressive atmosphere which existed just a decade earlier between the school and its denomination, when it came to this metamorphosis there was really nothing the denomination could do or say. It had no power over Trinity, and it would have no power over Duke. The institution was an independent body, even if its ties to Methodism were deep and cherished.

However, even if the MECS had no legal hold on the new Duke University, it did have a definitive connection to the school which remained through the great change. Just as in the past, the real connection between the church and the school was not denominational, but personal. During the early years of the new university, this tie was perhaps especially expressed in the person of President Few. Nowhere is the vision and reality of this moment in history better articulated than by Durden:

Perhaps the most fundamental reason Few cherished the ties with Methodism is that he and a large number, perhaps most, of those associated with him in the leadership and governance of Duke University hoped to build an institution that would be distinctive in several ways. One of them had to do with religion, broadly and non-denominationally conceived. That the university took from Trinity its motto, Eruditio et Religio (Education and Religion); that the tall Gothic chapel stood on the highest ground of the campus and dominated the structures around it; that the School of Religion was the first of the professional schools to be organized – all of these, plus many other bits of evidence too numerous to mention, pointed to one central fact: without religious tests prescribed in its charter or statutes for either faculty or students, Duke University, in Few’s words, stood for ‘a conception of religion as comprehending the whole of life and of education as having to do with all the powers and

40 Durden, 205-206.
capacities of our human nature.' To bring the two together in the generous service of humanity was the overarching aim of Duke University, and the tie with Methodism was the historic symbol of that aim.

What we are witnessing at this moment is, perhaps, the birth of a new model for the Methodist university. Fronting the rise of secularism in education, Few’s Duke was meant to blend the new worlds of knowledge so quickly being generated with solid appreciation for the importance of religion in reaching out to the needs of the world. Duke was not simply meant to be a place of Christian education, as was Kilgo’s Trinity, nor was it meant to become an institution committed solely to the pursuit of knowledge such as the large universities of the Northeast. It was to be something new which blended these pursuits for the betterment of the region, the nation, and the world. It was to be the new Methodist university.

Few died while holding the office of President on October 16, 1940 at Duke Hospital. He had been President of Trinity and Duke for three full decades and had been associated with the institution as a teacher, dean, or President for 44 years. His was the first body to be interred within the Duke Chapel crypt. He was not the last prominent lay member of the Methodist tradition to hold the title of President, but his death certainly did mark a break with the past which the school might not have fully realized at the time. Never again would the role of the church be so prominent in the life of Duke.

IV

It is difficult to answer the question, “What makes a university United Methodist?” As we have seen, it was not even always easy to answer that question in relation to the earlier forms of Duke. Was Union Institute, when simply operated by a group of laity, Methodist? Was Normal College, when training teachers for the State of North Carolina, Methodist? Was Trinity College, endorsed by the North Carolina Annual Conference and yet essentially independent operationally and financially from the church, a Methodist college? Casually, the answer has historically been “yes.” Is Duke University, a large research institution with no legal constraints under the church, a United Methodist university? Perhaps the answer is still “yes.”

Continuing in the direction first set by President Few, Duke does, in fact, attempt to bridge the worlds of the church and the academy. The church continues to be a vehicle whereby the research university can be a player for good in the world (not to say that, in Duke’s case, only United Methodism can act as such a vehicle, but United Methodism can act as one of many vehicles). Likewise, the research university stands as the fruition of the work...
of generations of clergy and laity, who labored to make learning available to a wider audience. As such, it also represents a field of opportunity for engaging the world at all levels, from medicine to law to business.

Through its deep tie to United Methodism via the Divinity School, and through its continuing dialogue with the denomination through the Board of Trustees, Duke University provides an excellent opportunity for the two worlds of academia and church to continue in tandem into the future, for the good of all involved. With this mind set, we can retain the heart and soul of Charles Wesley's famous plea:

Unite the pair so long disjoin'd
Knowledge and vital piety;
Learning and holiness combined,
And truth and love let all men see.43

"Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."