EDUCATION AND THE REFINEMENT OF 19TH-CENTURY METHODISM IN THE MIDWEST

DOUGLAS MONTAGNA

The growth and development of American Methodism during the 19th-century is one of the most remarkable stories in the history of American religion. In 1776, Methodists comprised 3 percent of all church members in the United States and 34 percent by 1850. In absolute numbers the Methodists grew from 300 members in 1770 to 1,000,000 in 1844, and to 3,000,000 in 1910. They were as well represented in the Midwest as anywhere else. Not only did the church grow spectacularly, it also changed dramatically in both style and substance of worship. When the Methodists first came to the territory that would become Indiana and the Midwest at the turn of the 19th century, the term “Methodism” evoked images of an unlettered, shabbily dressed preacher shouting and flailing his arms and body in an attempt to frighten his equally unkempt audience about their impending damnation. By the late 19th century, the same term evoked images of a beautiful white frame church set on a well manicured lawn attended by well dressed, refined members of the local elite with a smattering of poorer people doing what they could to fit in. Emotional outbursts by congregants, which were once the preferred audience response, were now regarded with little more than condescension by church leaders such as John Vincent, one of the founders of both the Sunday School and Chautauqua movements. Both in terms of how the church presented itself to the outside world and to its own members, Methodism had undergone a remarkable transformation. This paper will argue that a field of endeavor not ordinarily associated with 19th-century Methodism—education—was more important to Methodism than is ordinarily believed and had much to do with the denomination’s growth and transformation.

I

To the extent the preachers who spread Methodism into the Midwest have attracted the attention of historians, it has been for their anti-intellectualism and their ability to preach effectively to the frontier population. This

1 Nathan Hatch, “The Puzzle of American Methodism,” Church History 63 (June 1994); 178.
2 John Vincent, The Revival and After the Revival (New York: Walden and Stowe, 1883), 47.
impression is misleading because pioneer preachers such as Peter Cartwright, James Finley, and Allen Wiley treasured education and spent much of their careers pursuing and promoting it. While none of the pioneer Midwest Methodist preachers acquired the type of education readily available to New England Presbyterian and Congregational ministers, all of them took pride in what they did learn and continued their education throughout their adult lives. Considering how impractical book learning must have seemed to people trying to survive on the frontier, the emphasis these preachers placed on education is striking.

Peter Cartwright understood how fortunate he was to become educated at a time and place, Kentucky in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when opportunities were rare. When his family achieved a measure of financial stability, they sent him to a boarding school. At school, Cartwright "learned to read, write, and cipher a little, but very imperfectly." He lamented the incompetence of his teacher, but at least acquired the basics of an education on which he built later in life. At age 17, when he first entered the Methodist ministry, he believed he needed more education in order to become an effective preacher. Against the advice of an older preacher, he entered another boarding school run by a Presbyterian minister. There Cartwright learned "all the branches of a common English education" and also the "dead languages." He wrote, "providence had opened my way to obtain a good education, which I had so long desired, and of which I had been deprived without remedy." Unfortunately, many of the Presbyterian students disliked Methodists and constantly harassed Cartwright about his religion. Eventually, Cartwright left school to resume his career in the ministry.

After two unsuccessful experiences with educational institutions, Cartwright continued his studies informally under the supervision of William McKendree, a presiding elder in the Western Conference. McKendree directed Cartwright in "a proper course of reading and study" by selecting literary and theological books for him and examining his progress at every quarterly visit. Cartwright recalled that McKendree loved to "instruct me in English Grammar." As a preacher, Cartwright believed education was his fourth priority behind preaching, meeting the classes, and visiting the sick. He owed more to McKendree for whatever he acquired in way of "attainments in literature and divinity, than to any other man."

The long time itinerant and presiding elder James Finley was even more explicit in his praise of the value of education. Finley's father was a Princeton-educated Presbyterian clergyman who did his best to bring education to the frontier. In the 1790s, the elder Finley opened a high school in Kentucky. According to the younger Finley, the school was the first of its

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5 Cartwright, 60.
6 Cartwright, 78.
7 Cartwright, 78.
kind in the region and flourished for a number of years. It also graduated "ten or twelve young men" who became Presbyterian ministers. Finley believed education to be essential for a successful society and that it was ordained as such by God. In his Autobiography, he wrote:

The mind of man on his entrance into our disordered world, is destitute of knowledge of every kind, but is capable of vast acquirements and prodigious expansion; and on this his happiness and usefulness depend. But it must be acquired by education. ... it was the purpose of God, in the very constitution of the human mind, that he should be wise.

Finley celebrated the proliferation of educational facilities in mid-19th-century America and warned parents that if their children fail to receive an education they would become the dupes of better-educated people. When Finley summarized the history of Methodist education, he argued that Methodists had always valued education, rumors and stereotypes to the contrary notwithstanding.

Allen Wiley was another long time itinerant whose career began during the frontier era who greatly valued education. His biographer, the mid-19th-century Indiana Methodist preacher Fernandez Holiday, praised Wiley as one of a group of preachers indispensable in promoting literature and education on the frontier. Even though circumstances permitted Wiley only to attain a "common school education," he continued a life-long habit of reading the Bible in "English, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew languages." Wiley became a "ripe scholar" and "profound theologian" through study on his own in the course recommended by Cartwright. Once Wiley became a presiding elder and influential in his own right, he published a series of recommendations to young and aspiring preachers in 1834 in the Western Christian Advocate. While he never proposed any kind of qualifying exam for a preacher, he stated the importance of education for a preacher in no uncertain terms. A successful preacher needs to be able to "perform the work of a public school teacher, or he will fall into contempt and consequent reproach." A minister had to be a "learned man in the present improved state of society." Not burdened by the sense of opposition between religion and science that would trouble future generations of preachers, Wiley went on to equate the study of the physical sciences with the Divine plan. He wrote, "We are so connected with the earth which we inhabit that ... every man, should be acquainted with its structure, its nature,...a knowledge of ...

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9 Finley, 30.
10 Finley, 41-42.
11 Finley, 386.
13 Holiday, 157.
geography, geology, and botany... and astronomy.”14 Like his fellow pioneer preachers, Wiley came of age in an environment that provided only limited opportunities to study such subjects and spent much of his adult life trying to make sure subsequent generations would not suffer the same level of cultural deprivation. In time, all three of these preachers and many others like them would support the establishment and administration of colleges in their annual conferences.

II

The Methodists originally lagged behind some of the other denominations in building colleges, but once they committed themselves to it they did so with energy and efficiency. Presbyterians and Congregationalists established twelve colleges by 1831, the year the Methodists established their first permanent college, Wesleyan College in Middletown, Connecticut.15 The number of colleges in the United States grew from nine at the time of the Revolution to 250 by the time of the Civil War, of which 180 are still in operation today.16 Although Methodists were relative latecomers to this movement, they were prolific once committed to it. Between 1832 and the Civil War, Methodists established thirty-four permanent colleges, one of which was Indiana Asbury. By the outbreak of the Civil War, only the Presbyterians with forty-nine colleges had founded more. Although most of the colleges were small, often boasting only a handful of graduates annually, this movement marked the beginnings of the modern American system of higher education.17 We may well wonder what caused the Methodists to participate so avidly in a movement to which they had previously been indifferent at best.

In the first place, the Methodist about-face was not quite as radical a break with the past as it seems. In addition to all the qualities and circumstances in early Methodism that discouraged involvement in higher education, there were also characteristics that would bring about a change of direction once circumstances changed. Wesley was an Oxford educated,

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14 Holiday, 158.
15 Donald Tewksbury, The Founding of American Colleges and Universities Before the Civil War, with Particular Reference to the Religious influences Bearing Upon the College Movement (Archon Books).
17 Tewksbury, 69; Natalie Naylor, “The Ante-Bellum College Movement: A Reappraisal of Tewksbury’s Founding of American Colleges and Universities,” History of Education Quarterly 13 (Fall, 1973), 261-276. This article qualifies some of the conclusions of Tewksbury (on whom Rudolph derives much of his ante-bellum information) but does not significantly alter his conclusions. An example is that by the early 1970’s, according to Naylor, only 176 of the ante-bellum colleges remained and that the public rather than the denominations had more to do with the establishment of the ante-bellum colleges relative to the denominations than Tewksbury suggests. See also, William Ringenberg, “The Old Time College, 1800-1865,” in Making Higher Education Christian: The History of Mission and Evangelical Colleges in America, ed. Joel Carpenter and Kenneth Shipps, (Christian College Consortium: St. Paul, 1987), 77-97.
fully ordained member of the Anglican clergy who read and wrote extensively throughout his life on a variety of topics. Even Francis Asbury, for all his opposition to colleges, read as much as his difficult itinerant life allowed. He made a determined and serious attempt to establish a school, Cokesbury College, in Abingdon, MD, which existed from 1785-1796. Thomas Coke, the other early American Methodist bishop, was also a formally educated Anglican clergyman. Like all other orthodox Protestant movements, the Methodists always believed the ability to read and understand the Bible was indispensable for salvation. Early Methodist Disciplines urged the preachers to read and educate themselves as best they could, provided it did not get in the way of evangelizing. Despite its well-known and exaggerated anti-intellectual stance, the early Wesleyan tradition also possessed an intellectual pedigree.

III

The impulses within Methodism encouraging intellectual pursuits were strengthened by the changing circumstances facing the denomination. Along with the continued success of Methodists during the early decades of the 19th century came increased attention and competition from other denominations. As the Methodists became a force in American religion, they found themselves under criticism from their rivals for their lack of education. As early as 1802, President Joseph McKeen's inaugural address at the Presbyterian-sponsored Bowdoin College argued that his college could do a great deal for the Methodists and Baptists, whose clergy were “illiterate vagrants who understood not what they say, nor whereof they affirm.” In 1814, Lyman Beecher issued an even more sweeping criticism of the Methodists’ poorly educated clergy. Without specifying Methodists by name, he lamented the shortage of college-educated ministers in the United States. He referred to an additional force of 1,500 uneducated ministers, undoubtedly referring to Methodists and Baptists, as “generally illiterate men, often not possessed even of a good English education, and in some instances unable to read or write. By them, as a body, learning is despised.” According to Beecher, uneducated preachers could not command the respect of their social superiors, causing the upper classes to grow contemptuous of religion to the great detriment of the larger society. Beecher feared that eventually “civilization will decline, and immoralities multiply.”

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19 Ashbury, 3:55, 758.
20 Rudolph, 70-71.
21 Lyman Beecher, “Address to the Charitable Society for the Education of Indigent Pious Young Men,” quoted in Sylvanus Duval, The Methodist Episcopal Church and Education up to 1816 (New York: Bureau of Publications, Columbia University Teacher’s College), 43. No date is given for Beecher’s address, although Duval speculated that it was delivered in 1814.
such as McKeen's and Beecher's were increasingly taken seriously by many Methodists as their membership became increasingly wealthy.

As the Methodists' rivals contested their success with increasing vigor, Methodist preachers often found themselves in polemical debates on the stump and in the burgeoning religious press, confronted at every turn by their rivals espousing the increasingly sophisticated Calvinism of Nathaniel Taylor or Campbellite theology. When the sons and daughters of hardscrabble pioneers began seeking middle class respectability, the Methodists recognized that improving the intellectual credentials of their clergy and building colleges had become essential to sustain success. The death of Asbury in 1816 allowed for a greater emphasis on ministerial education. Immediately after his death in 1816, the General Conference spoke to the issue of the poor academic and literary abilities of Methodist preachers. Considering the lack of concern on the subject expressed in official Methodist documents prior to this time, the language is unexpectedly urgent. The General Conference recognized a "manifest defect" in the intellectual qualifications of Methodist minister. Linking the pursuit of knowledge with education, the standard was set for the minister to "imbue his mind with every science ... intimately connected with the doctrine of salvation by Jesus Christ." The General Conference went on to state that the Methodist clergy had lost many potentially talented members because of the lack of emphasis on ministerial education and pledged to do something to remedy the situation.22

The strong tone and the timing of this statement, immediately after Asbury's death, indicates that a substantial number of Methodist clergymen had long been dissatisfied with his policy on ministerial education but had chosen not to press the issue and draw the ire of their revered patriarch. The General Conference of 1820 followed up the statement of its predecessor by recommending that "all the annual conferences ... establish, as soon as practical, literary institutions, under their control, in such a way and manner as they think proper."23 In 1824, the General Conference reaffirmed the recommendation and in 1828 urged the establishment of more seminaries. While not calling for colleges per se, these declarations used the terms literary institutions, seminaries, and colleges almost interchangeably. Exactly how the Methodists would improve the intellectual ability of their preachers was not clear as the denomination began shifting its policies, but circumstances would encourage the option of liberal arts colleges rather than seminaries or academies.

The college movement changed Methodism in many ways. The experience of Indiana Asbury University—now called DePauw University and typical of denominational colleges—shows how colleges impacted the development of Methodism. As was the case with many other antebellum

22 Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1816 (Cincinnati: Curts and Jenning, 1900), 149.
23 Journal, 1820, 208.
colleges, Indiana Methodists and the people of Greencastle had a difficult time keeping Indiana Asbury open. In its first year, the college had one professor and its first graduating class in 1840 had four members. Gradually, the faculty increased in size to three in 1839 and eight by 1847. By the late 1840s, graduating classes numbered in the twenties and thirties and total attendance, including the prep school, numbered several hundred. Despite heroic efforts from its agents, the college narrowly avoided financial collapse during its early years. Founded in the same year as a financial crash, Indiana Asbury spent its infancy in the midst of a national depression which was especially difficult in Indiana. From 1837 to 1843, the college steadily increased its debt, reaching $4,610 in 1842. In addition to the deficit, the college fell behind in faculty salaries to the considerable sum of $3,500, aggravating the difficulties of attracting qualified professors when the college could offer only low salaries. Only a determined effort by the Indiana Annual Conference and the college administrators saved the college. Each Methodist family in the state was asked to contribute a dollar per member, more agents were placed in the field, and more scholarships sold. By 1848, the college temporarily attained financial stability, due in large part to the return of prosperity and the strenuous efforts of the Indiana Methodists. Experiences such as these could only make the college more dependent on the wealthy. The college changed its name from Indiana Asbury to Depauw after the Civil War because its solvency was maintained through the donations of one man, Washington C. Depauw, one of the richest men in the state at that time.

For both students and faculty, Indiana Asbury served as a springboard into the nation’s elite. Based on what information is available, the graduates of Indiana Asbury generally had successful careers in the professions. An 1858 analysis of 162 graduates showed that one fourth of them entered the ministry and another one fourth became lawyers. Fourteen more became college or academy presidents, five served on the Indiana Asbury faculty, eight were teaching at other colleges, two had already been in the United States House of Representatives, and one was in the Senate. In the years after the Civil War, the graduates of Indiana Asbury were even better represented in government. From 1877 to 1879, there were three Indiana Asbury graduates serving in the United States Senate and four in the United States

26 George Manhart, *Depauw Through the Years*, 2 volumes, (Greencastle: DePauw University), 1:121.
27 Manhart, 157, Mark Noll, “Christian Higher Education in the New Republic,” in Carpenter and Shipp, *Making Higher Education Christian*. Noll writes, on page 69, “Throughout the nineteenth century, a bachelor’s degree remained more of an ornament of the upper middle class than a doorway to intellectual growth and economic success.” At least in the case of the Indiana Asbury graduates, their college degrees and experiences seemed to have helped them achieve in life.
House of Representatives. Five more Indiana Asbury graduates served as governors of states or territories, and one graduate served in the cabinet. Numerous other graduates worked in state governments and held lower offices in the federal government. Eli Lilly, the founder of the pharmaceutical company, attended Indiana Asbury’s prep school.28

Indiana Asbury University had to recruit people from outside the state to staff the school. Suddenly, Methodists with college educations were in great demand and this increased the importance of a college education to career advancement in the Methodist clergy. Indiana Asbury recruited Matthew Simpson from Ohio to serve as President of the University, which he did successfully from 1840 to 1847. His successful tenure catapulted Simpson from an obscure educator/preacher to national prominence. He later served as editor of the widely circulated Western Christian Advocate and as a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church. As editor and bishop, he championed causes such as anti-slavery, women’s suffrage, collegiate ministerial education, and a more refined style of worship. The Methodist Episcopal Church came to embrace these developments in no small part because of Simpson. He was also a friend and confidante of Presidents Lincoln, Grant, and Hayes. Colleges helped make Methodists part of the national elite and as such their worship style became increasingly refined and less emotional.

IV

Another way in which education helped change Methodism was through the Sunday school movement, of which the Methodists were ardent supporters. By the 1820s, evangelically inspired Sunday schools had been established throughout the nation. Like their predecessors, the evangelically inspired schools began in the eastern seaboard cities, but unlike them they quickly spread to all regions of the country. In contrast to the merchants and industrialists who founded earlier Sunday schools, the creators of the newer form were committed evangelicals, many of whom had been converted in early 19th-century revivals and hoped to pass on their experiences to their students. While self-discipline, proper behavior, and literacy were important to the newer Sunday schools, the prospect of converting children was at least equally central. By the 1820s, many evangelicals, including Methodists, now believed children could be converted, or at least be made more susceptible to conversion, through religious education. The emphasis upon converting children was a major change in Protestant thought, which traditionally thought ages 20 to 40 were the most likely time for a conversion experience. One of early Methodism’s most valuable characteristics was its willingness to embrace new ideas, especially when those “new ideas” led to expanded membership rolls. Methodist leadership used the press to publicize enthusi-

28 Manhart., 160-165.
astically accounts of Sunday school revivals and conversions. In 1827, *The Christian Advocate and Journal*, the Methodists' leading newspaper, boasted that at a New York Sunday school in 1827, "many of [the students] are awakened... We also learn that three of the teachers have lately experienced religion." When the Methodist Sunday school union decided to include a child's magazine as part of Sunday school curriculum, the goal of the magazine was to "lead the infant mind to the knowledge of God our saviour." Lessons consisted largely of memorizing catechisms and singing songs that warned of the perils of death without conversion. The *Child's Magazine* hoped to publish "essays, anecdotes, narratives, accounts of the conversion and happy deaths of children ...." Sometimes the death of children could bring about overall revivals of religion. The *Christian Advocate and Journal* published an account of a three-and-a-half year-old girl who died after a prolonged illness. After praying and urging those around her to do likewise, she met her fate "with a pleasant countenance, and without a groan,... commenced her long last sleep." The young child's faith in the face of death "led to a gracious revival of religion in the neighborhood." The gloomy prospect of an unregenerate death remained common through much of the antebellum period.

The numerous accounts of Sunday school conversions were not mere propaganda or boasting. Over the course of the antebellum era, Sunday schools replaced preaching-based revivals as the most prolific source of new Methodists. Sunday schools had the added benefit of being particularly suited for bringing the children of members into the fold—a new concern for a young church entering a more mature phase. Methodist leadership recognized what had been transpiring and one preacher estimated in 1857, "the number of conversions in the schools was equal to half the entire net increase of the membership of the church." The writer went on to speculate that "a comparison of the last ten years would exhibit an average result still more striking." Sunday schools would also change what was meant by conversion.

Sunday schools were at the heart of theological controversies concerning the spiritual potential of children. Over the course of the 19th century, a profound shift in how children were viewed took place. The old Calvinist belief that children were obstinate, lazy, and generally sinful gradually gave

way to a romantic view of childhood in the older denominations. For Methodists, however, such a profound transformation was not necessary. Methodists believed children were neither good nor bad until they learned the difference between right and wrong and had been exposed to the teachings of Christ. At that point, a person became a moral free agent capable of choosing or rejecting what was right. The Calvinists "caught up" with the Methodists when Lyman Beecher questioned the notion of infant damnation and Nathaniel Taylor argued people only sinned when they willfully did wrong, replacing the traditional Calvinist position that even the virtuous acts of an unregenerate person were a "beautiful abomination." With the publication of Horace Bushnell's *Views on Christian Nurture* in 1847 the Calvinist tradition produced a thinker who not only stood Calvinism on its head, but also challenged the traditional evangelical concept of conversion held by Methodists and the other evangelical groups. The traditional evangelical view held that dramatic experience was necessary for true conversion. Bushnell's work challenged this view.

Bushnell's notion of Christian nurture posited that children who grew up in a proper Christian home did not need a conversion experience in order to be saved. They were Christians from the time of their earliest memories. Although his message was directed at parents and not Sunday school teachers, Christian nurture nevertheless had a profound impact on Sunday school education. According to Bushnell, inculcating Christianity in children should not be a matter of waiting for a conversion experience, but rather the provision of enough exposure to religion at an early enough age that the child could not remember the time before becoming a Christian. Accepting the pietistic notion that religion was a matter of emotion and affection as opposed to intellect, Bushnell argued that since children were capable of purer and more genuine emotion than adults, children were especially suited for true faith. He criticized evangelical Protestantism for its reliance on revivals, arguing that the church grew stale and superficial when simply waiting for revivals to infuse life into the congregation. He called this brand of Christianity, i.e., waiting around for revivals and either ignoring or perfunctorily practicing religion between revivals, "ostrich nurture" because of the manner ostriches lay their eggs in the sand and ignore them. Overreliance on revivals absolved parents of the responsibility of raising their children in a consistently loving and Christian manner infusing every moment with divine presence.

Methodists began espousing sentiments similar to Bushnell's at approximately the same time as publication of his *Christian Nurture*. In 1849, Stephen Olin, president of Wesleyan University, called into question the

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36 Not all Calvinists accepted the ideas of Taylor and Beecher—the split in the Presbyterian denomination was at least to some extent over these new twists on Calvinism.
38 Bushnell, 4.
necessity of a conversion experience. In describing the religious potential of children, he echoed Bushnell’s notions:

They grow up Christian. They are sanctified from the womb. Even their childish prattle savors of Divine things; and they pass on to the attainments and functions of mature piety by gradation so easy and imperceptible that it may not be possible to fix the day of their espousals to the Saviour.39

John Vincent, who would be among the leaders of the pan-evangelical Sunday school movement, shared Bushnell’s suspicion of revivals. Growing up in rural Pennsylvania in the 1840s, Vincent recalled how the revivalistic religion he was exposed to in his youth horrified him with “the terrors of hell” and the Millerite fear that the world was about to come to an end. In his short treatise on revivals, The Revival and After the Revival, Vincent pointed out that “wise and Godly men ... believe that many so-called great revivals have been followed by reaction, and that there have come after such periods barrenness and disaster to the church.”40 He even attacked evangelists, “...successful evangelists are but men ... often very ordinary and weak men.”41 Male and female evangelists came under Vincent’s criticism. Surprisingly, while many Methodists disagreed with Vincent’s views on revivalism, he was not an especially controversial figure.

The Methodist clergy, acting to fulfill their own vision of what they wanted their denomination to become, deserve far more credit for Methodism’s transformation from a small countercultural sect to a large, thoroughly respectable and refined mainline denomination. Showing the mid-19th-century midwest Methodist clergy’s commitment to educating a substantial portion of the population and how this commitment contributed significantly to the denomination’s transformation is a start to giving them their due in shaping their region’s and nation’s culture. This transformed version of Methodism would arguably have the Wesleyan tradition’s greatest impact on American history. Not only were they a powerful force in the college building and Sunday school movements, the Methodists would go on to play significant roles in giving both sides legitimacy during the Civil War and in advancing social reform movements such as temperance and prohibition, women’s rights, and the Social Gospel.

41 Vincent, 52.