

METHODISM IN GEORGIA: SOME EARLY CHARACTERS, CHARACTERISTICS, AND CONCERNS

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The history of Methodism in Georgia is a somewhat complex story, because even though the church's founder, John Wesley, visited Savannah in colonial days, the Methodist Episcopal Church was not established in that city until seventy years later, in 1807. Further, the Methodists of 1807 who established the work there were quite different from Methodists today, for after the Civil War the church underwent profound changes. The story of American Methodism between the Revolution and the Civil War is, for the most part, unknown, because studies have tended to focus either on the founders of the movement in Great Britain, or modern Methodism. The Americans of the Revolutionary and Early National periods were different from both.

Since John Wesley was in colonial Georgia briefly (1736-37), and his friend from his Oxford days, George Whitefield, made several trips to Georgia, the assumption has at times been made that there is a direct connection between those visits and the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784. Also, the settlers in colonial Georgia under the Trustees were forbidden to have slaves, and the importation of rum or "spirituous liquors" was prohibited. Some see in those prohibitions the basis for, or beginning of, the nineteenth century concern for prohibition of alcohol and abolition of slavery.

When the Methodists are discussed in historical accounts of the early nineteenth century, the statements which are made usually assert or imply that (1) the movement grew out of the work of Wesley and Whitefield in the eighteenth century, (2) they had no theology and preached a warm simple-minded emotionalism, (3) were uneducated and actually opposed to education, (4) were really not much different from the various forms of Calvinism which were popularized by Charles G. Finney and others like him. It is the contention of this paper that an examination of the journals, autobiographies, biographies and miscellaneous other writings of Methodists prior to the Civil War does not support those generalizations. Although by the middle of the nineteenth century the Methodist Church had grown so large that examples could be found to support almost any claim which one might choose to make about it, the men who built the church--not those who came and went quickly, but those itinerants who rode the circuits year after year--though they were not speculative theologians, did have a clearly defined theology, they were strong supporters of learning although formal education was a luxury available to very few, and they were radically different in their beliefs from the various versions of Calvinism. Finally, in the quest for that will-o'-the-wisp, the "American Mind," historians have almost always focused on Calvinism. But the minds of Americans in the

nineteenth century were conditioned by a strong belief in contingency--determinism had no place in their thinking. The opportunities which they saw before them in all aspects of American life represented genuine possibilities which depended on human responses to the challenges. The potential was there, but everything was contingent--there were no guarantees--nothing was predestined. Even if it could be argued that greatness was God's will for America, no one believed it would come without effort--Americans had to make it happen. The Calvinists were perplexed by that attitude, and tried various ways to accommodate their beliefs to the new spirit. But there is no process of ideological evolution which can take one from determinism to contingency--no clash of deterministic thesis and antithesis can produce a contingent synthesis. There is no syllogism which can presuppose determinism and conclude with contingency. They are antipodal concepts--they differ in the very ground on which theological or philosophical systems are constructed. The spirit of the nineteenth century was in the tradition of Wesleyan Arminianism--its introduction during the American Revolution was a revolution in itself--or perhaps more accurately, it was not a revolution for control of the theological superstructures, but a shaking of the very foundation on which they stood.

EARLY VISITS BY WESLEY AND WHITEFIELD

It is common knowledge that both John Wesley and George Whitefield were in colonial Georgia, and that under the Trustees, both slavery and rum were prohibited in the colony. It is also generally known that Methodism in the nineteenth century became strongly prohibitionist, and the development of abolitionist sentiments among northern Methodists led to the confrontation in 1844 which split the church. It is only logical to inquire if the colonial experiences of Wesley and Whitefield had any significant bearing on the post-Revolutionary development of the Methodist Episcopal Church. If so, what was it? If not, why?

Neither Wesley nor Whitefield was involved in the decision to ban rum and slavery in Georgia, and the subject in general has often been misrepresented. The cursory, and inaccurate treatment which colonial Georgia often receives can be illustrated by some examples taken from textbooks which are now being considered for adoption by colleges in the state. Joseph R. Conlin, in the third edition of his *The American Past. Part I: A Survey of American History to 1877*, (1990) says of the new colony:

Slavery was forbidden. Oglethorpe did not want to see the development of an elite such as dominated South Carolina. He also prohibited alcohol, believing that drunkenness was a major

source of crime and poverty in England.¹

In *A People & A Nation*, by Mary Beth Norton and others, a similar statement asserts that

The charter also prohibited the use of alcoholic beverages and forbade the introduction of slavery. Such provisions reveal the founders' intention that Georgia should be peopled by sturdy, sober yeoman farmers who could take up their weapons against the Indians or Spaniards at a moment's notice. None of the original conditions of the charter could be enforced, . . .²

Both statements are compounded of a mixture of fact and fiction. Neither rum nor slavery was mentioned in the charter, and an examination of the colonial records reveals that the opposition to slaves was based on purely practical considerations, not to promote any social ideal. The act of the Trustees which gave the prohibition of slavery the force of law specifically cited the danger of slave insurrection in time of war as the reason for not allowing them in Georgia. The Georgians were to protect South Carolina society, not reproduce it.

Norton misunderstands the ruling, for it did not reflect the desire of the Trustees to have "sturdy, sober yeomen," but rather reveals the fact that they knew they did not have that kind of people in Georgia. The journal of the Earl of Egmont reveals that the Trustees selected the least competent of the applicants to send to Georgia at the expense of the Trustees.³ They would not do the menial tasks which needed to be done if there were slaves to do them. Oglethorpe obtained the services of some slave sawyers from Carolina, but had to send them back for as he said:

I sent away the Negroes who Sawed for us, for so long as they continued here our men were encouraged in Idleness by their working for them.⁴

Slaves were to be kept out of Georgia so (1) the colonists would have to do the physical labor for themselves; (2) there would be no danger of slave insurrection; and, (3) runaways from Carolina could not find refuge there, for any black in Georgia was immediately recognized as a runaway.⁵

There has also been considerable misunderstanding regarding the prohibition of rum. "Alcoholic beverages," referred to by Norton, is a modern term which is not found in the sources of this study. They spoke in much more specific terms when referring to such things. Rum, brandy, "strong water,"

"drams," "dram drinking," whisky, and "spirituous liquors," were used to refer to those products which had been distilled and, due to the high alcohol content, were more likely to cause drunkenness. It was that class of drink which was forbidden, not alcohol as such. Oglethorpe complained of the Indian traders who supplied the people of Savannah with rum. He declared to the Trustees: "I must either Suppress them or our People must be destroyed, we having lost twenty People within a month since the Drinking of Rum was come into fashion; whereas we lost but one Person in five months whilst I was here and kept the People from excessive Drinking."⁶ Oglethorpe cited the case of Thomas Millidge who developed a fever and died shortly after drinking rum punch. Others also died from fevers which resulted from drinking rum according to his report to the Trustees.⁷ He explained that

To remedy Drunkenness I gave a moderate Allowance of Wine, prohibited Rum and Staved such as I could find in Town.⁸

The Trustees provided for the licensing the sellers of wine, beer, and ale.⁹ They spent large sums of money on Madeira wine to send to Georgia to help persuade the colonists not to drink rum. On February 9, 1737, they paid one bill for £100, and again in July of the same year, they received another for £915, "called by Egmont, with some justice, 'a prodigious article.'"¹⁰

Any attempt to connect the legislation against slaves and rum in Georgia under the Trustees to later abolitionism and prohibition of alcohol is a mistake. The motivating concerns were radically different, and the former in no way led to or laid the basis for the latter.

In addition to the inaccuracies regarding slavery and rum, there are also problems with the attempt to link the work of Wesley in the 1730s, and Whitefield's evangelistic tours, to the Methodist Episcopal Church of the 1780s. John Wesley, who left Georgia in 1737 under duress and in disgrace,¹¹ was a quite different man from the one who thirty years later sent representatives to Maryland and New York to supervise the work that was developing there.

George Whitefield blazed his way through the colonies leaving in his path many admirers and many critics, but no organization. Nothing of Whitefield's work survived but the memories of some of his converts, for he alienated many religious leaders whom he should have seen as his allies. The young Whitefield, whose eloquence was matched only by his arrogance, put statements in print which would better have been left unsaid. Benjamin Franklin, who claimed that he had heard Whitefield so often that he could "distinguish easily between sermons newly compos'd, and those which he had often preach'd in the course of his travels,"¹² said that he believed "that if he

had never written anything, he would have left behind him a much more numerous and important sect, and his reputation might in that case have been still growing."¹³ Whitefield learned the power of the printed statement, and perhaps its danger, for he discontinued his journal in the 1740s when he was only 30 years old.

Even Bethesda, the orphanage in Georgia, was a failure. Whitefield, who was only 25 years old in 1740 when it was built, had gone against the advice of older and wiser men, such as Franklin, and had built an orphanage near Savannah. Franklin says regarding his own view: "I did not disapprove of the design, but, as Georgia was then destitute of materials and workmen, and it was proposed to send them from Philadelphia at a great expense, I thought it would have been better to have built the house here, and brought the children to it," and, Franklin continues, "this I advis'd; but he was resolute in his first project, rejected my counsel, and I therefore refus'd to contribute."¹⁴

Whitefield raised money for the enterprise in his preaching campaigns, and he expected the children to provide some of their own support through work on the land and in the production of cloth. As soon as the main building was occupied he set them to spinning and weaving. On Friday, June 6, 1740, Whitefield recorded in his *Journal* that "The children are industrious. We have now in the house near one hundred yards of cloth spun and woven."¹⁵ But he was in violation of British mercantilist policy which prohibited cloth manufacturing in the colonies. He could not operate looms in Georgia, so he bought a plantation in South Carolina, and slaves to work it, as a means of supporting the orphanage. He tried to persuade the Trustees to repeal the prohibition on slavery in Georgia, and was ultimately successful.¹⁶

But slavery did not prove to be the financial savior of Bethesda, and after the death of Whitefield in 1770, the property was left to the Countess of Huntingdon. When the pioneer Methodist preacher Jesse Lee visited the site thirty years later he found a grim scene of desolation and decay.¹⁷

The conclusion to which one is ineluctably led is that in the 1760s, when the immigrants in New York and Maryland began holding meetings in the style of the Methodist Societies in England and Ireland, that development did not represent a survival of the work of Whitefield, who had become alienated from the Wesleyans, nor was it related to anything which Wesley himself had done in the 1730s. It was a new religious movement which needs to be explored and explicated.

FOUNDING OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

When Wesley returned to England after the fiasco in Georgia in 1737, he turned in his license to the Trustees and began his quest for his own spiritual

peace. The story of that odyssey has been told and retold too often to need repeating here, but during the quarter of a century which followed, the Methodist Societies evolved in England, and Wesley formulated the major tenets of his theological system. The position which Wesley maintained was essentially that of the Dutch theologian of a century and a half earlier, Jacob (or James) Arminius. Wesley's theology was embodied in his sermons, his *Notes on the New Testament*, and in the position statements in the minutes of his conferences. A statement in the minutes of the conference of 1770 precipitated a controversy with the Calvinistic followers of the Countess of Huntingdon which led to the writing of the *Checks to Antinomianism*, by John Fletcher, the close associate and intended successor of Wesley. Fletcher developed formal arguments for and explanations of the Arminianism of Wesley. Thus, by the time that the Methodists in America were becoming numerous enough to develop an organization, the Wesleyan Standards of theology were already clearly established. American Methodism, therefore, did not experience the internal theological debates which had plagued the English Methodists in the middle of the eighteenth century. Only those who accepted the theological beliefs of Wesley and Fletcher were accepted into the Methodist ministry.

The Arminianism of Wesley was not that of the seventeenth century Anti-Calvinists described so well by Nicholas Tyacke in his recent work *The Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c.1590-1640*,¹⁸ nor was it built on a detailed understanding of the complete works of Arminius, which were not available in English at that time. The key point of Wesley's disagreement with the Calvinists was in his adoption of the Arminian position that God, through his free grace, had made provision for the salvation of all mankind. Through God's prevenient grace, and due to no merit of his own, each individual could accept saving grace, but it could be rejected or neglected, which would result in eternal damnation. The distinctiveness of the Wesleyan position was not that it set good works in opposition to grace, but in maintaining the resistibility of grace. For the Calvinists, that would sacrifice God's sovereignty, and they bitterly denounced Wesley and his followers. Historians who failed to grasp that essential feature have often been confused, and some have concluded that there was no important difference between the Calvinists and Wesleyan Arminians, because the Methodists preached original sin and depravity, and salvation by free grace, as strongly as did Jonathan Edwards. One looks in vain for any Methodist doctrine which maintained that one could merit the grace of God through good works. Their opponents accused them of such a belief, and historians whose knowledge of the Methodists was gained through the writings of their opponents rather than the primary sources of Methodism, are often led into error.

The first meetings of what came to be the Methodist Episcopal Church

in America of which there are any records were in New York and Maryland. Each area has argued its case for primacy, but it is of little importance historically which antedated the other. It was not an intentional effort by Wesley, for he was operating within the context of the Anglican church, not creating a rival organization. In the early 1770s, however, Wesley responded to the requests from his followers in America, and sent some missionaries to preach to them and to organize them into societies. They did not constitute a separate church, but rather were societies within the established church. The Methodist preachers were only preachers—they did not baptize nor did they administer the Lord's Supper—members of the societies were to attend the Anglican Church for those ordinances.

Wesley responded to the need in America by calling for volunteers from his preachers in England. "From 1769 through 1774, twelve British Methodist preachers came to America, either by Wesley's appointment or with his consent but without appointment."¹⁹ Of those dozen men, only Francis Asbury stayed and made a permanent impact on American Methodism. When the Revolutionary War began, the British Methodist preachers who had not already left, with the exception of Asbury, made their departure, and Asbury went into virtual hiding. Although he resented that description of his wartime activities later, he did have to restrict his movements during the war.

At the end of the Revolution the first thing which the Methodists had to do was to let people know who they were and where they stood on the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. In many parts of the country they were completely unknown and were viewed in much the same light as the mainline denominations today view the cults. At the end of the American Revolution, there were approximately 14,000 Methodists in the independent states. Wesley recognized that there was now no religious authority established in America, so he felt free to ordain Thomas Coke and sent him to America to ordain Francis Asbury. In the week between Christmas 1784, and the New Year 1785, the Methodist Episcopal Church in America was created. Their ministers, ordained by Coke and Asbury, were authorized to administer the sacraments.

As Asbury surveyed the situation in 1783 he commented in a letter to Wesley that in his view "the Calvinists on one hand, and the Universalians on the other, very much retard the work of God, especially in Pennsylvania and the Jerseys"²⁰ Asbury saw Methodism in the North as a middle way between the extremes which were developing in the rapid evolution of New England Calvinism. The controversy there regarding the doctrine of predestination had led to a number of attempts to make it acceptable. Some found a way to maintain "free will" by maintaining that one was "free" when he did what he desired to do. The determinism required by the Calvinists' understanding of the sovereignty of God was maintained by asserting that the affections or desires

were determined. Thus, one was free to do what he desired, but his desires were not his to control. Universalism was no less deterministic than other Calvinists, for they maintained that all were predestined ultimately to be saved.

METHODIST GROWTH IN GEORGIA

In the South, however, the religious conditions were quite different. Georgia was still on the frontier as late as the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and Methodism came to the state in the same way it did to Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio--by being carried there by missionaries from Virginia and Maryland. What they found was not Universalism or Deism in any significant degree, but simple paganism on the one hand, and Calvinists--mostly Baptists--on the other. George G. Smith says that in 1786, when the Methodists were making their first efforts in Georgia, there were, "as far as we can get the facts, three Episcopal churches without rectors, three Lutheran churches, three Presbyterian and three Baptist," and in those dozen congregations, "there were not 500 Christian people in all."²¹ That would be only .6 percent of the 80,000 people in the state.

Jesse Lee reported that when George Clark went to St. Mary's in 1799, "he found the people in different places entirely destitute of preaching of every kind; and when he went to preach he had to direct the people when to stand, when to kneel down, &c. Some persons who were grown to years, said they had never heard a sermon, or a prayer before in all their lives. I suppose the two counties where he travelled principally, i. e. Glenn and Camden, were at that time less acquainted with the public worship of God, than any other part of the United States."²²

Joseph Travis, who began his preaching career at the conference in Sparta, Georgia, in 1806, told of one of his colleagues, the Rev. James E. Glenn who "At a certain place . . . could get few to hear him--the neighborhood consisting chiefly of what are now called Hard Shell Baptists--great advocates for water, but loving it still better when well mixed with whisky." These were "especially opposed to the Methodists; and hence influenced all they could against Brother Glenn."²³ Glenn attracted a congregation by proclaiming that on a given day he was going to kill witches, for in regard to the people Travis states, "the greater part of them were ignorant and superstitious."²⁴ Glenn took for his text "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," and proceeded to attack three "witches"--"Calvinism, . . . Universalism, . . . and Infidelity."²⁵ Travis notes that it was an approach that could only be used effectively by a man of Glenn's personality, but after that, whenever he had an appointment in the community, the crowd turned out to hear him.

Although in the early stages of Methodist growth in Georgia, most of

the preachers came from other parts of the United States, there were those, like Tobias Gibson, who were native to the state. Gibson was born in Liberty county in 1771, and began preaching when he was twenty-one. According to the noted historian of Methodism in the nineteenth century, Abel Stevens, Gibson gave up a valuable estate to enter the ministry. He preached in Georgia and South Carolina for seven years before moving into the Holston region of Tennessee and then to the southern Mississippi Valley in 1799. He died there in 1804 from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-three. Two aspects of Gibson's short career are characteristic of many of the early Methodist preachers. They moved often, and frequently died young.

By 1796, when the Methodist Church was divided into Conferences, the South Carolina Conference, which included all of settled Georgia, reported 14,510 members.²⁶ The number of members in Georgia was not reported separately from South Carolina until the formation of the Georgia Conference in 1831, but Bishop Asbury was in Georgia in November, 1806, and tried to calculate the number of people reached by the Methodists in the state. He listed 130 congregations in Georgia and estimated that each reached about a thousand different individuals. He observed:

we preach to one hundred and thirty thousand souls in Georgia--to some of these once in a year, others once in a quarter, others in four, some in two, and by the labours of the travelling and local ministry, to some every week.²⁷

He stated further that there were about five thousand "in society." That is, five thousand who were full members, subscribing to the doctrine and subject to the discipline of Methodism.

The town of Sparta was the site of the Conference of 1806. It was there that the young Lovick Pierce was appointed to Augusta. Only twenty-one years old, he was given a task that would have been difficult for a man of mature years. Stith Mead had organized the first Methodist society there only seven years earlier, in 1799, and had had a meeting house there for only five years. The opposition was strong, according to the historian of Georgia Methodism, George G. Smith, who describes the situation and says of Pierce:

He had everything to learn. The people who went to church in Augusta, in the main went to the Methodist meeting-house--some to worship, many to mock; and the young men would take their places on the corners, and as the pale, thoughtful young preacher passed by them to his pulpit, they would roll up their eyes and groan in mockery.²⁸

The young Pierce became deeply depressed and was ready to quit the ministry, feeling that he had backslidden. An older man who understood the situation took him aside and counseled him to take a vacation. He followed that advice and sufficiently recovered to take an appointment in South Carolina the next year. Lovick Pierce recovered from that experience, but many of the young itinerants did not. The high number of "locations"²⁹ contains many who were simply defeated, and the fact is left unrecorded. Pierce went to South Carolina, then served as a chaplain during the War of 1812, but, because of the needs of his family, had to locate. He had begun to read medicine, and decided to go to the medical college at Philadelphia, from which he was graduated in 1816. Lovick Pierce had married Ann Foster in 1809, and when their son was born in 1811 they named him George Foster. While Lovick Pierce's ministerial career was interrupted by the needs of his family, George Foster Pierce was to become one of the most well-known and popular bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

George Foster Pierce was the first Methodist preacher to graduate from Franklin College in Athens. More often than not, historians have pointed to the increase in the number of college-trained ministers after the 1820s as a sign of change in the church's attitude toward education--more accurately it was a fulfillment of the dreams and hopes of the older generation which valued education but had not had the opportunity for formal training themselves.

In 1807, according to Jesse Lee, the first historian of American Methodism, they were able to get a work established in Savannah. The occasion was a general revival in the state for he reported that in that year "Religion prospered greatly in the state of Georgia . . .," and, "On the 19th of April this year we formed a society in Savannah, which was the first regular Methodist society we ever formed in that city." Lee further notes that "It was just 70 years from the time that Mr. John Wesley formed a society, and in the same place, which only continued for a short time, during his stay among them."³⁰

The post-Revolutionary period brought hard times for the Methodists in Georgia, but in the 1820s, the Era of Good Feeling in politics was accompanied by progress in religion. In 1823, according to George G. Smith "the corps of preachers in Georgia was a strong one," and included William Capers, who was stationed at Milledgeville and placed in charge of the Creek Indian Mission. The Methodists made an effort to reach the Creeks with their message, but were generally unsuccessful. The white population had increased in the regions east of the Flint and southeast of the Chattahoochee, and were in the process of gaining control of the land still occupied by the Indian tribes. Capers was in his prime and became well known as he traveled around the state in the interest of the mission.³¹ William Capers, however, was to be

remembered not for the unsuccessful work among the Creeks, but his more influential work among the slaves. He was also an advocate for the cause of education.

EDUCATION

From the earliest days, the Methodists in Georgia were concerned about education. Abel Stevens, in his classic study of Methodism, cites a report by Bishop Coke in 1789 that there were at that time 2011 in society in Georgia, an increase of 784 in one year.³² He further states:

we agreed to build a college in Georgia, and our principal friends in the state have engaged to purchase at least two thousand acres of good land for its support. For this purpose there was twelve thousand five hundred pounds' weight of tobacco subscribed in one congregation, which will produce, clear of all expenses, about one hundred pounds sterling.³³

The college was never built, but the desire and effort illustrate the general attitude toward education in the Methodist Episcopal Church of that period. Far from being opposed to education the way they are often represented as being, the diaries, journals, autobiographies and biographies tell of a deep desire for learning. What is clear, however, is that they challenged the prevailing view regarding what should be included in a proper education. In the early national period there was a change taking place in education in America which is familiar to those involved in education in the last decade of the twentieth century. The existing canon was being challenged, and in fact, the drilling of students in the Greek and Latin classics was already anachronistic by 1800. What was considered to be an adequate education for a minister through the eighteenth century, left him totally unprepared for needs of the people of the early nineteenth. A "good English education" was desired by the Methodists, who, like other Americans outside of New England, were quick to question the values of the educational authorities.³⁴ Why did a preacher need to be able to read the Greek and Latin classics? Was the Gospel so complex that its proclamation required more than the ability to read and understand the English translations? They understood that the insistence on classical education for a preacher was to meet the demands of the congregation, not those of the Gospel.

William Capers was one of the preachers who was active in the promotion of the cause of education.³⁵ Ironically, his name comes up often, when historians look for a quotation to show that the Methodists were hostile to education. No doubt some of them were, but the way it is presented in many

of the historical accounts is completely misleading. William Warren Sweet, the chronicler of Methodism fifty years ago, for example, refers to Thomas A. Goodwin who was the first college graduate in the Indiana Conference. Sweet says that Goodwin "states that the presiding elders were afraid to show too much favor to a college man, and that on several occasions he was actually demoted for no other reason than that he was a college graduate."³⁶ Sweet uncritically accepts Goodwin's explanation of his lack of success, and builds on it to make the point that the Methodists of that period were opposed to education. He connects the Indiana situation to the case of William Capers of Georgia. Sweet states that

William Capers was the first college-trained man to join the South Carolina Conference, and his experience was much the same as was that of T. A. Goodwin. His presiding elder advised against further literary preparation and warned him. "If you are called to preach, and sinners are falling daily into hell, take care lest the blood of some of them be found on your skirts."³⁷

An examination of the source of that quotation, however, gives a quite different perception of the conversation between Capers and his presiding elder, William Gassaway. Capers called Gassaway "that most godly man and best of ministers,"³⁸ and states that it was he who first invited Capers to "ride" with him, that is, to accompany him on his circuit and exhort. Capers accepted the invitation, and began his own preaching career. Capers had left South Carolina College, not to preach, but to read law, for the requirement for admission to the bar was that one study for three years with a practicing lawyer. When he began preaching he quickly became conscious of his need for preparation for the task. Gassaway's approach was that which had been followed since the beginning of the Methodist Church in America. "The brief methodistic course of brother Gassaway was, to study and preach, and preach and study, from day to day."³⁹ The early Methodist preachers traveled with their saddle bags full of books by Wesley and Fletcher, as well as works such as Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, Russel's *Seven Sermons*, and Alleine's *Alarm*. They would read Wesley's sermons and Fletcher's explanation of doctrine while they were riding, and then preach what they had read at the next preaching point. On and on, day after day, they acquired a thorough knowledge of Wesleyan Arminianism. The Methodist approach to the study of theology was very much like the study of law. A young preacher's presiding elder was to him what a practicing lawyer was to a law student. The question was not whether to get an education, but what kind of education was appropriate. Sweet makes it appear that they simply

preached their own feelings and intuitive insights. That is simply not the case.

Sweet does a similar thing with Peter Cartwright. He asserts that Peter Cartwright compared educated preachers to 'lettuce growing under the shade of a peach tree; or to 'a gosling that has got the straddles by wading in the dew,'⁴⁰ Sweet lifted that statement out of a paragraph in Cartwright's *Autobiography*. Cartwright said:

I do not wish to undervalue education, but really I have seen so many of these educated preachers who forcibly reminded me of lettuce growing in the shade of a peach-tree, or like a gosling that had got the straddles by wading in the dew, that I turn away sick and faint. Now this educated ministry and theological training are no longer an experiment. Other denominations have tried them, and they have proved a perfect failure; and is it not strange that Methodist preachers will try to gather up these antiquated systems, when enlightened Presbyterians and Congregationalists have acknowledged that the methodist plan is the best in the world.⁴¹

Cartwright was arguing that the Methodist approach of learning by doing was superior training for the task to be done than the proposed alternative. He argued, not for ignorance, but that the existing system of formal classical education did not work. It did not prepare men for the tasks which they faced either on the frontier or the farms and villages of an overwhelmingly rural America. The Cumberland Presbyterians had said the same thing. Further, he asserted, "If Bishop Asbury had waited for this choice literary band of preachers, infidelity would have swept these United States from one end to the other."⁴² Cartwright cites his own experience in contrast to the formal education of theological schools. He had been converted in the revival of 1801 and soon after started to preach. In describing the conditions he said that

We had at this early day no course of study prescribed, as at present; but William M'Kendree, afterward bishop, but then my presiding elder, directed me to a proper course of reading and study. He selected books for me, both literary and theological; and every quarterly visit he made, he examined into my progress, and corrected my errors, if I had fallen into any. He delighted to instruct me in English grammar.⁴³

Sweet not only missed the point of the debate over the appropriate education for the ministry, but in his concentration on the alleged opposition to

education he missed something even more important for understanding the Methodist position relative to the Calvinists. The statement taken from the conversation between Gassaway and Capers came at the end of a long conversation, part of which is recorded by Wightman in his biography of Capers. The discussion had gone back and forth between the two men, Gassaway conceded that by following Capers proposal to go school and study divinity "he might learn more theology, and be able to compose a better thesis, but insisted he would not make a better preacher."⁴⁴ Regarding a sermon, Gassaway insisted

that to reach its end, it must be more than a well-composed sermon, or an eloquent discourse, or able dissertation. It must have to do with men as a shot at a mark; in which not only the ammunition should be good, but the aim true. The preacher must be familiar with man to reach him with effect."⁴⁵

There were no more diligent students of human nature in America than the Methodist preachers, and they were possibly the best psychologists in the country at that time. They not only talked to the people on a personal basis about their deepest feelings, hopes and fears, but they lived in their homes and saw from within how their families functioned as they traveled from one preaching point to another. Capers said that Gassaway concluded that the effectiveness of preaching depended largely "on the naturalness and truthfulness of the preacher's postulates; arguing to the sinner from what he knows of him, the necessities of his condition, appealing to his conscience, and recommending the grace of God."⁴⁶ After the young Capers had made his argument for the benefits of more formal education the matter was concluded. Capers recalled that

he thus answered me: 'Well, Billy, it is only supposition, after all. And if you are called to preach, and sinners are daily falling into hell, take care lest the blood of some of them be found on your skirts.' Sure enough, it was only 'supposition.' The true question was as to usefulness, not eminence; and with respect to *that* matter, at least, I could only *suppose*, and could not certainly know, that it might be better for me to desist from my present course and adopt another. Here then ended that difficulty about the exclusive study of divinity."⁴⁷

The discussion from beginning to end was an effort to determine what was the best course of action for the young William Capers. Gassaway was not

trying to save Capers from the evils of education, but to determine the appropriate training for his particular vocation. The important point which Sweet missed is in that last statement attributed to Gassaway. There is a clue to a vital characteristic of Methodism, for Gassaway pointed out, and Capers did not doubt, that the eternal destiny of some men depended on the preachers reaching them with the gospel in a convincing way. That aspect of their theology precludes any effort to identify them with the Calvinists, "moderate" or otherwise.

THEOLOGY

Some writers have tried to minimize the differences between the Methodists and the Calvinists in the period under study. They speak of "moderate Calvinism" and at times leave the impression that "moderate Calvinists" no longer believed in predestination. But the moderate Calvinists merely shifted determinism from the will to the affections which controlled the will, thus they could talk about "free will" in the pulpit, and assert predestination in their private conversations. But even if one who identified with the Calvinist tradition could assert that an individual could in some way influence his own "election," no Calvinist of any type could ever under any circumstance believe that one human being could be responsible in any way for the eternal destiny of another. The Wesleyan Arminians did.

The conclusion was inescapable. According to the Wesleyans, prevenient grace had given the power to choose to all men. Each one could accept or reject saving grace. Thus, if the preachers were effective in persuading them to accept grace and be saved, they would ultimately reach heaven. If the preachers failed, if they missed an appointment to preach or if for some reason they were not effective, there might be some individual who would never again have an opportunity to hear the gospel. That was the driving force which motivated those men to fulfill their appointments regardless of circumstances, and to preach to only one person if that was all who came.

The Calvinists who came to accept "means" for reaching the masses, did not follow the line of reasoning that the Methodists did. God might use human means to achieve his purpose to save a particular individual, but if one preacher failed, God would achieve his purpose to save that person in some other way. No one for whom Christ died, they were certain, can be lost. It was the element of ultimate contingency--not just in the means, but the final outcome--which placed an unbridgeable gulf between the Wesleyan Arminians and the Calvinists.

But how was doctrinal consistency to be maintained? The Congregationalists and the Baptists were unable to prevent a wide variety of

beliefs from being proclaimed from their pulpits, for each congregation was an autonomous entity. There were two unique factors in the Methodist system which, when combined with the strong episcopal government, served effectively to prevent theological deviation. One was the itinerant system itself which required the movement of preachers every two years. The frequent movement of preachers emphasized the relationship of the preacher to the Conference--his peers--rather than his relationship to a particular congregation. Thus, a popular preacher could not build a congregation around himself and become independent of the general church. It also provided a check on deviations from the doctrines of Wesley and Fletcher, for if a young preacher did not fully understand the theological implications of some of the things he said, there were those in the congregation who had heard others preach, and they would quickly challenge him on the point. The preacher in charge of the circuit would be made aware of the problem, and if necessary, the presiding elder would be informed. If it involved only a misunderstanding, the erring preacher would have the doctrine explained by the older ministers. If the preacher in question had developed opinions which were inconsistent with the Wesleyan standards, he left the church. That was usually done quietly, but there were times when ministers had to be expelled. The system made it easy for preachers to leave without being humiliated--they simply "located."

"Location" is the other feature which helped preserve doctrinal consistency. When a preacher felt that he could no longer stay in the itinerant ministry, he would request the Conference for a "location." The writers of the histories of the church and the biographies of the ministers of that period generally blame the lack of financial support, particularly for married ministers, for the high number of locations. While that was clearly the reason for many, it cannot account for all, and what they do not point out, is that the high turnover in the ministry virtually eliminated schism over doctrinal issues. Men began to preach when quite young, imitating the ministers whom they had heard and admired in both the style and the content of their preaching. They also read Wesley's sermons and Fletcher's *Checks*. While they were in most cases thoroughly instructed in the essential points of Wesleyan theology, they were not speculative theologians who were inclined to go off in their own direction in the matter of belief. If for any reason they did, they left the church, usually by choice, but if necessary by force. As a result, from Maine to Georgia, the Methodist Church had the most homogeneous preaching to be found in any of the denominations in America.

CONCLUSION

The limits of time and space preclude the kind of extensive treatment

which the topic deserves, but some points have been made which are of great importance for understanding the subject. Methodism in Georgia was not a continuation of the early eighteenth-century work by Wesley, nor was it indigenous to the state, but an extension of the Methodist Episcopal Church which was organized in 1784 in Baltimore. The message preached was consistent with the Methodist preaching in other parts of the United States, and in many cases by men who moved from one area to another. The doctrines which they proclaimed were not derived from one of the mutant versions of Calvinism from New England, but were based on Wesleyan Arminianism which was antithetical to some key assumptions of Calvin.

The Georgia Methodists were interested in education from the beginning, as is clear from their attempts to create Methodist institutions before the necessary resources were available, and in the way they took advantage of the limited opportunities which they had, and encouraged further education on the part of their children. As soon as it was possible, and long before it was easy, they established Emory at Oxford (1836), and the Wesleyan Female College in Macon (1836).

Their theology was one of responsibility and possibility, and it struck a resonant note in the minds of many Americans. Its appeal was strong to an expanding society, and the success of other denominations to a great degree depended on their ability to echo the Methodist message. But the society in which Methodism developed was changing as it expanded. New forces were at work by mid-century which altered the nature of the denomination and its message. It was the largest denomination by the 1840s, and its division over the issue of slavery contributed to the tragic political events which soon followed.

As the largest church, it attracted people to its membership who were not concerned about the spiritual quest to "flee the wrath to come," which was the only requirement of the early members. When it became socially, economically, and politically advantageous to be a member of the same church as the mayor, the councilmen, and the leading businessmen, as well as the local schoolteachers, the requirements of probationary membership, class meetings, and strict conformity in dress and entertainment were quietly ignored and then abandoned. The Civil War was a watershed in Methodist history, and a century of change occurred within a single generation. The early emphasis on doctrine and discipline was lost and the "circuit rider" was rendered irrelevant either by being placed on a pedestal as a monument to the past, or ridiculed as a relic of it. Other concerns dominated the minds of the post-war generation, and the Methodists increasingly blended in with the homogenized God-and-country Protestantism which was characteristic of the end of the nineteenth century.

NOTES

¹Joseph R. Conlin, *The American Past. Part I: A Survey of American History to 1877*, 3rd ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 52.

²Mary Beth Norton, et. al., *A People & A Nation: A History of the United States*. Third Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 58.

³See *The Journal of the Earl of Egmont*, ed. Robert G. McPherson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1962), 10, where Egmont records: "30 poor persons examin'd, and 4 noted down to be sent next Embarkation: the rest rejected, because able to earn their bread in England, tho' poorly."

⁴*The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia: Original Papers, Correspondence to the Trustees, James Oglethorpe, and Others, 1732-1735*, Vol. 20, edited by Kenneth Coleman and Milton Ready (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1982), 28.

⁵See Allen D. Candler, ed. *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, (Atlanta: The Franklin Printing and Publishing Company, 1904), 1: 361, for the account of a report by a "Capt. Massey" who "told the Trustees that, since the Establishment of Georgia, the Price of Lands has been greatly rais'd in Carolina, and the Plantations there increas'd. That Georgia is a fine Barrier for the Northern Provinces, and especially for Carolina; And is also a great Security against the running away of Negroes from Carolina to Augustine, because Every Negroe at his first Appearance in Georgia must be immediately known to be a run away, since there are not Negroes in Georgia."

⁶*Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁷W. J. Rorabaugh in *The Alcoholic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 38-39, states that in the 1740s a link was discovered between a disease, the West Indies Dry Gripes, which is now known to have been caused by lead poisoning, and rum consumption. Lead was used in the equipment used for distilling rum in the Caribbean.⁷

⁸Candler, *Colonial Records of Georgia*, 28.

⁹*Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁰Phinizy Spalding, *Oglethorpe in America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 44.

¹¹See Patrick Tailfer, et. al., *A True and Historical Narrative of the Colony of Georgia, With Comments by the Earl of Egmont*, ed. Clarence L. Ver Steeg (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1960), 67. Egmont said that if Wesley had not left the colony of his own accord, the trustees would have recalled him for his behavior.

¹²Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, With a New Introduction by Lewis Leary (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 103.

¹³*Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁴Ibid., 102.

¹⁵George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 432.

¹⁶See James D. Essig, *The Bonds of Wickedness: American Evangelicals Against Slavery, 1770-1808* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 10, 11, 14. Whitefield "never attacked the institution of slavery itself," (p. 11) and "Neither Whitefield, Davies, nor any other leading figure of the Great Awakening ever denounced the practice of holding slaves." (p. 14) And furthermore, "In 1748, Whitefield begged the trustees of Georgia to allow the importation of slaves so that their labor might be used to support his orphanage in the colony." (p. 14)

¹⁷Occasionally one finds a statement to the effect that Whitefield's orphanage is still in operation. Methodist historians like to emphasize continuity (Haygood S. Bowden begins his *History of Savannah Methodism From John Wesley to Silas Johnson* with Abraham leaving the land of Ur.), but the orphanage built by Whitefield cannot be said to have survived in any meaningful way. Mrs. C. B. Howard in *Paths That Crossed: Or, Glimpses into the Early Days of Methodism and of Georgia* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1885), says that "Bethesda, the 'house of mercy' he founded one hundred and thirty-four years ago, still remains," but acknowledges that, "True, the flames had twice destroyed the buildings, and for a series of years the enterprise appeared forever ended; . . ." The claim to continuity rested on the fact that "In 1854 the board of managers of the Union Society of Savannah, Georgia, bought a portion of the original tract, and on the exact spot where Whitefield's orphanage once stood was erected a home for the friendless boys under their care."

¹⁸For a good description of that conflict in the reigns of James I and Charles I, see Nicholas Tyacke, *The Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c.1590-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). Also important on this subject is Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971).

¹⁹J. Manning Potts, "Methodism in Colonial America," Sections 1-2, in *The History of American Methodism*. Three Volumes. Edited by Emory Stevens Bucke, et. al. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 80.

²⁰Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3 vols., ed. Elmer T. Clark, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 3: 30.

²¹George G. Smith, *The History of Methodism in Georgia and Florida*, Fourth edition, (Gainesville, GA: No publisher, 1881), 27.

²²Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America; Beginning in 1766, and Continued till 1809. To Which is Prefixed A*

³⁸Wightman, *Life of William Capers*, 76.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 223.

⁴¹Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, ed. Charles L. Wallis (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 64.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³*Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁴Wightman, *Capers*, 84.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Ibid.*