In December of 1793 John Ryland, Jr. (1753-1825) became principal of Bristol Baptist Academy, the fourth to occupy that position since the school had begun to actually operate in 1720. Although there had been financial provision for the Academy since 1679, it was not until Bernard Foskett (1685-1758) came to Bristol as principal in 1720 that the school became a reality. Foskett was followed as principal by Hugh Evans (1713-1781), who served the Academy from 1758 till his death twenty-three years later, and his son, Caleb Evans (1737-1791), principal from 1781 to 1791. The younger Evans had also served as tutor for much of his father’s tenure as principal, and he appears to have been the driving force behind the founding of what is known as the Bristol Education Society in 1770. This Society sought to provide the Academy with a broader and more solid financial footing, and to ensure that its students received a well-rounded liberal education. The eighteenth century was a time of great intellectual ferment and significant advances had been made across a wide number of fronts in science, astronomy, medicine, and geography. The Academy was forthright in its refusal to give its students an insular education and not to expose them to the intellectual challenges of the day.

In a statement issued by Hugh and Caleb Evans at the time of the founding of the Bristol Education Society in 1770, they stated that:

The importance of a liberal education, more especially to candidates for the
Christian ministry, is so exceedingly obvious, that one might almost think it
impossible that any considerate, intelligent person should not be convinced
of it.

Yet, as this statement went on to indicate, there were Baptists who were
not so convinced and who were openly hostile to the idea of formal
theological education. They regarded any attempt to produce an educated
ministry as fundamentally dishonouring to the Holy Spirit; for, from their
perspective, it implied that the ministerial gifts of the Spirit were not suffi-
cient for the task. In the words of Hugh and Caleb Evans:

It has been suggested by some that learning is designed to perfect the work of
the Spirit of God.

For instance, the deacons of the Baptist Church in Westbury Leigh,
Wiltshire regarded:

Human learning in a pastor with feelings of suspicion, and entertained the
strongest aversion to those whom they termed "men-made" ministers. ... The
Bristol Academy ... presented the nearest object of mistrust to the
members at Westbury Leigh. ... They could never bring themselves to
regard this seat of human learning with any degree of complacency; and they
scorned, as they said, "to go down to Egypt for help".

Now, for much of the eighteenth century the Calvinistic Baptists were in
a state of decline. The strong opposition to formal theological education
in such quarters as Westbury Leigh may well be seen as a contributing
factor to this decline. As Daniel Turner (1710-1798), pastor of Abingdon
Baptist Church, wrote to his friend, Samuel Stennett (1727-1795), a Bap-
tist pastor in London, in 1769:

The Baptist Denomination ... in my opinion is upon the Decline. Useful solid
ministers are taken away, & few likely to fill up their places. Many Churches
are destitute: Useful Learning is rather discouraged amongst us. A Confident
Assurance goes farther with many, even well meaning people, than good
sense, learning and piety.

Thus, in response to this prejudice against academic preparation for
ministry, the Evanses declared:

5 Cited ibid., p. 130. On this anti-intellectualism among eighteenth century Baptists, see
also Olin C. Robinson, "The Particular Baptists in England, 1760-1820" (Unpublished D.
Phil. Thesis, Oxford University, 1963), p. 172-176; D. M. Himbury, "Training Baptist
6 John Clark Marshman, The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward (London:
8 Cited Moon, Education for Ministry, p. 130.