

An Account of the Several Annual Conferences, and of the General Conference of 1792

by Nathan Bangs

The sermon recounts the growth and challenges of the Methodist Episcopal Church, highlighting the significance of the General Conference of 1792 and the reforms introduced to the Discipline.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:3, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 14:33, 1 Corinthians 14:40, Ephesians 4:3, 1 Timothy 4:16, 1 Timothy 6:11, 2 Timothy 4:2, 1 Peter 3:8, 1 Peter 5:2

Topics: "Church History", "Methodist Movement"

Description

Nathan Bangs preaches about the early struggles and triumphs of Methodism in America, highlighting the dedication of Bishop Asbury in traveling extensively to preach and extend the work of God, facing hardships and dangers along the way. As Methodism spread to newly settled territories like Tennessee, the preachers encountered challenges, including threats from Indians and harsh living conditions. The General Conference of 1792 was convened in Baltimore to address the need for unity and central authority in the Methodist Church, leading to the establishment of rules and regulations to govern the conduct of bishops, preachers, and members. The conference also witnessed the secession of James O'Kelly, who formed a separate party known as the 'Republican Methodists,' causing division and confusion but ultimately fading into obscurity.

Transcript

There were no less than eighteen annual conferences held this year, the particulars of which, however, it seem unnecessary to notice, except that the following new circuits were added: Scoperlong and Trent, in North Carolina; Highco, in the south; Oconee and Elbert, in Georgia; Staten Island and Tioga, in New York; Needham in Massachusetts; Providence, in Rhode Island; Cataraqua and Oswegotchie, in Upper Canada.

The above-mentioned eighteen conferences were attended by Bishop Asbury in about eight months, during which time he traveled through most of the states in the Union, preaching, as usual, almost every day, and suffering many hardships: but in the midst of all, he rejoiced in beholding the extension of the work of God in many places.

This year he passed into the state of Tennessee, and preached to the people in that newly settled country. And as this is the first account we have of the introduction of Methodism into that country, it seems proper to give some account of its early settlement.

The earliest settlements made in Tennessee were about 1770, by emigrants from North Carolina and Virginia; and the country was considered a part of the former state until the year 1790, when it was erected by congress into the "Territory south of Ohio;" and in 1795, Tennessee was admitted into the Union as one of the federal states.

As to the general state of religion and morals at the time the Methodist preachers first visited Tennessee, our information is very imperfect. It is to be presumed, however, that, as in most new countries, the means of grace were within the reach of but few, and that those hardy adventurers who first peopled the wilderness of this new territory were chiefly actuated by a desire to enlarge their earthly possessions, and not, like the pilgrims who first settled New England, to insure religious privileges, as these were fully enjoyed at home. Some idea, however, may be had, of the general state of society from the fact, that the tour of Bishop Asbury through the wilderness was in company with a guard, and amid "confused accounts of Indians," who, they feared, would intercept their path; and the following extract from his Journal, giving an account of his entrance from Tennessee into the state of Kentucky, will show some of the hardships which he and others had to undergo while carrying the "glad tidings of salvation" into this wilderness, and likewise exhibit some of the honors conferred upon this "strutting bishop," as some of his heartless revilers have called him. He says, --

"Wednesday 5. This morning we again swam the river," (namely, Laurel River,) "and the west fork thereof. My little horse was ready to fail. I was steeped with water up to the waist. About 7 o'clock, with hard pushing, we reached the Crab Orchard. How much I have suffered in this journey is only known to God and myself. What added much to its disagreeableness was the extreme filthiness of the houses."

Again he says, under date of May 1, --

"An alarm was spreading of a depredation committed by the Indians on the east and west frontiers of the settlements; in the former, report says, one man was killed; in the latter, many men, women, and children; every thing is in motion. There having been so many about me at conference, my rest was much broken I hoped to repair it, and get refreshed before I set out to return through the wilderness, but the continual arrival of people until midnight, the barking of dogs, and other annoyances prevented. Next night we reached Crab Orchard, where thirty or forty people were compelled to crowd into one mean house. We could get no more rest here than we did in the wilderness. We came the old way by Scagg's Creek and Rock Castle, supposing it to be safer, as it is a road less frequented, and therefore less liable to be waylaid by the savages. My body by this time was well tried. I had a violent fever and pain in my head; and I stretched myself on the cold ground, and borrowing clothes to keep me warm, by the mercy of God, I slept for five hours. Next morning we set off early, and passed beyond Richland Creek. Here we were in danger, if anywhere. I could have slept, but was afraid. Seeing the drowsiness of the company, I walked the encampment, and watched the sentries the whole night. Early next morning we made our way to Robinson's Station. We had the best company I ever met with -- thirty-six good travelers and a few warriors; but we had a packhorse, some old men, and two tired horses." He adds: -- "Through infinite mercy we came safe:" and then he exclaims, "Rest, poor house of clay from such exertions! Return, O my soul, to thy rest!"

Let the present race of Methodist preachers and missionaries look at this picture, and learn from it how the fields were won by such veteran soldiers of the cross.

Having performed this journey through these newly settled countries, he returned to the older states, and attended the several conferences, as before stated, preparatory to the General Conference, which met in the city of Baltimore.

At these conferences, two preachers, namely, Beverly Allen¹ and Andrew Harpending were expelled from the Church for immoral conduct. Thomas Weatherford, Peter Massie, and George Browning had died in peace. Fourteen were located The work of God was generally prosperous, though the increase was not so large as in some former years, as may be seen by the following statement: --

Numbers in the Church: Whites This year, 52,109, Last year, 50,385; Increase 1,724; Colored This year, 13,871, Last year, 12,884; Increase, 987; Total This year, 65,980, Last year, 63,269; Increase, 2,711; Preachers This year, 266, Last year, 250; Increase, 16.

General Conference of 1792

As has been seen in the preceding pages, the general affairs of the Church had been conducted heretofore chiefly in the several annual conferences, which were considered only as so many parts of the whole body; for nothing was allowed binding upon all unless it were approved of by each and every of these separate conferences. It is true, that the Christmas conference of 1784, at which the Church was organized, was considered a general conference, because all the preachers were invited to attend, for the transaction of the important business then and there to be submitted to them; and therefore the acts and doings of that conference were considered to be binding upon the whole Church. As the work continually increased and spread over such a large and extended territory, it was found impracticable for all the preachers to assemble annually in one place, without too great a consumption of time and expense; and hence the practice which had been adopted of appointing several conferences in the same year in different parts of the country, for the convenience of both the bishop and the preachers; but as one of these conferences could not make laws for all the rest, nor yet all the rest for that one without its consent; and as it was not likely that so many independent bodies could be brought to harmonize in all things pertaining to the welfare of the Church; there was danger from this state of things of a dissolution of the body, and the establishment of a number of separate and distinct communities, acting independently of each other.

To prevent evils of this character, and to create a center of union to the entire body, the council had been instituted; but this unpopular measure, not answering the end of its organization, was by general consent dissolved, and a General Conference called in its place. This was, it seems, agreed upon by the several annual conferences which had been held this year.

This conference assembled in the city of Baltimore on the first day of November, 1792, and was composed of all the traveling preachers who had been received into full connection. As this was considered the first regular General Conference, and as those who composed it came together under an expectation that very important matters would be transacted, it seems proper to give a particular account of their acts and doings. Dr. Coke had returned from Europe, and presided, conjointly with Bishop Asbury, over their deliberations.

As there were no restrictions upon the powers of this conference, the entire Discipline of the Church came up for review and revision; but to prevent, as far as possible, any improper innovation upon existing rules, or the premature adoption of new regulations, they agreed that "it shall take two-thirds of all the members of the conference to make any new rule, or abolish an old one; but a majority may alter or amend any rule."

They soon had an opportunity to try the strength of this rule in preserving them from an innovation upon established usage, in respect to the power of stationing the preachers. With a view to keep up the itinerancy through the medium of an efficient general superintendency it had been established at the Christmas conference, and incorporated as a rule of Discipline, that the power of appointing the preachers to their several stations should be invested in the bishops. With this some had become dissatisfied; and at this conference the Rev. James O'Kelly, a very popular preacher in the state of Virginia, who had acted as a presiding elder in that district for several years, brought forward the following resolution: --

"After the bishop appoints the preachers at the conference to their several circuits, if any one think himself injured by the appointment, he shall have liberty to appeal to the conference and state his objections; and if the conference approve his objections, the bishop shall appoint him to another circuit."

This resolution elicited a very strong debate, which lasted for about three days, and was finally lost by a large majority. This gave great dissatisfaction to the mover and some of his particular friends, and the next morning he sent a letter to the conference, informing them that he could no longer hold his seat among them, because his appeal was rejected. With a view to remove his objections, and reconcile him to the present order of things, a committee was appointed by the conference to confer with Mr. O'Kelly and his partisans; but their labors were ineffectual, and they withdrew from the Church, and soon began to adopt measures for establishing a separate party.

During the discussion which arose on the above resolution, as it necessarily brought up questions in which the character and conduct of Bishop Asbury were deeply involved, with a view to leave the members of the conference at full liberty to speak their sentiments without restraint, the bishop withdrew from the conference room, and sent them the following note: --

"My Dear Brethren, -- Let my absence give you no pain: Dr. Coke presides. I am happily excused from assisting to make laws by which myself am to be governed: I have only to obey and execute. I am happy in the consideration that I never stationed a preacher through enmity or as a punishment. I have acted for the glory of God, and the good of the people, and to promote the usefulness of the preachers. Are you sure that if you please your selves, that the people will be as fully satisfied? They often say, 'Let us have such a preacher,' and sometimes, 'We will not have such a preacher -- we will sooner pay him to stay at home.' Perhaps I must say, 'His appeal forced him upon you.' I am one -- ye are many. I am as willing to serve you as ever. I want not to sit in any man's way. I scorn to solicit votes. I am a very trembling, poor creature, to hear praise or dispraise. Speak your minds freely; but remember, you are only making laws for the present time. It may be, that as in some other things, so in this: a future day may give you further light. I am yours, &c.,

"Francis Asbury."2

As the secession of Mr. O'Kelly from the Methodist Episcopal Church was the first of any considerable magnitude which had happened, I shall, after having completed the account of the doings of the conference, endeavor to place it fully before the reader, together with its effects upon the Church, as well

as upon himself and his party.

As before said, this conference entered into a full review of the doctrine and Discipline of the Church, altering some old, and introducing several new regulations, some of the most important of which I shall notice. The following was made respecting the selection, consecration, and trial of a bishop: --

"Question How is a bishop to be constituted in future?

"Answers By the election of the General Conference, and the laying on of the hands of three bishops, or at least of one bishop and two elders.

"Question If by death, expulsion, or otherwise, there be no bishop remaining in our Church, what shall we do?

"Answers The General Conference shall elect a bishop, the elders, or any three of them, that shall be appointed by the General Conference for that purpose, shall ordain him according to our office of ordination.

"Question To whom is the bishop amenable for his conduct?

"Answers To the General Conference, who have power to expel him for improper conduct, if they see it necessary.

"Question What provision shall be made for the trial of an immoral bishop, in the intervals of the General Conference?

"Answers If the bishop be guilty of immorality, three traveling elders shall call upon him, and examine him on the subject; and if the three elders verily believe that the bishop is guilty of the crime, they shall call to their aid two presiding elders from two districts in the neighborhood of that where the crime was committed, each of which presiding elder shall bring with him two elders, or an elder and a deacon. The above-mentioned nine persons shall form a conference to examine into the charges brought against the bishop; and if two-thirds of them verily believe him to be guilty of the crime laid to his charge, they shall have authority to suspend the bishop until the ensuing General Conference."

Though a number of circuits had been given in charge to an elder, from the time of the organization in 1784, yet this had been done chiefly by the authority of the general superintendency, without any express enactment of the General Conference -- it was a usage which grew out of the exigencies of the case, the circumstances of the country, and the paucity of ordained ministers. As some had objected to this usage, and expressed doubts respecting the authority of the bishop to make such appointments, the present conference authorized the appointment of presiding elders by the bishop, who should change them at pleasure, provided, nevertheless, that he should "not allow an elder to preside in the same district more than four years successively;" and he was to receive his support out of any surplus money which might be found on a circuit, or if there were no surplus, he was to take his proportion with the several preachers on his district. For the particular duties of a presiding elder, see chap. i, sec. 5, of the Discipline.

Though temporary provision had been made for the wives of traveling preachers, yet until this conference no express rule existed giving them a claim upon the funds of the Church. A rule was now passed allowing the wife an equal claim with her husband, namely, "sixty-four dollars annually," the nominal amount which had been allowed to a traveling preacher, besides his traveling expenses.

It seems that heretofore the preachers had not been in the habit, nor was it considered lawful, to receive any thing for performing the marriage ceremony; but this prohibition was removed out of the way at this conference, by allowing them to receive whatever might be offered them by those whom they joined in matrimony.

The former usage respecting marriage fees, as well as the following question and answer, which were adopted at this conference; shows how exceedingly scrupulous were our fathers in the church on the subject of compensation for preaching the gospel; and if they deserve censure for any thing, we might feel disposed to administer a gentle rebuke for carrying self-sacrifice to such unreasonable, and, as is thought, unscriptural lengths; for it seems to have led the people to believe that their ministers should hardly "live by the gospel," or "those which wait at the altar should" not be "partakers with the altar."

"Question What plan shall we pursue in appropriating the money received by our traveling ministers for marriage fees?

"Answers In all the circuits where the preachers do not receive their full quarterage, let all such money be given into the hands of the stewards, and be equally divided between the traveling preachers of the circuit. In all other cases the money shall be disposed of at the discretion of the district conferences."

And at the close of the section the following paragraph was added, which, however, has long since ceased to be a rule: --

"No minister or preacher shall receive any money for deficiencies, or on any other account, out of any of our funds or collections, without first giving an exact account of all the money, clothes, and other presents of every kind, which he has received the preceding year."

Though this rule was made with the very laudable desire to reduce all to as equal a level as possible, and thereby to prevent jealousies which might arise from one being more highly honored than another in pecuniary matters, it was soon found to have an unfavorable bearing in many respects; and as before said, was finally, and with good reason, erased from the Discipline.

With a view to prevent impositions, from unworthy persons obtruding themselves into societies where they were not known, the following advice was given to all who had the charge of circuits: --

"To warn all, from time to time, that none are to remove from one circuit to another, without a recommendation from a preacher of the circuit in these words: -- A. B., the bearer, has been an acceptable member in C., and to inform them that without such a certificate they will not be received into other societies."

This is a standing rule in the Discipline.

The rule respecting the method of settling disputes which might arise between brethren "concerning the payment of debts," was adopted at this time and afterward modified from time to time, until at the first delegated conference, which sat in the city of New York, in 1812, it was made as it now stands in the Discipline, chap. i, sec. 9. There can be no doubt but that this regulation has had a most happy effect in preventing expensive lawsuits and all those litigations in reference to matters which engender strife and alienate affection.

The section regulating the "method by which immoral traveling ministers or preachers shall be brought to trial, found guilty, and reprov'd or suspended, in the intervals of the conferences," was considerably modified at this conference; but it had been altered and amended from one General Conference to another, until 1836, when it was so amended as to read as it now stands in the Discipline, chap. i, sec. 18.

The resolution not to "receive a present for administering baptism, or for burying the dead," was passed at this conference; and it remained unaltered until 1828, when the words "receive a present" were exchanged for "make a charge." See chap. i, sec. 21.

The twenty-second section of the same chapter, relating to the manner of conducting public worship, was incorporated in the Discipline, and the twenty-fourth section of the same chapter so modified as to discourage the use of fugue tunes, and the attending of singing schools not under our direction.

As provision had been made for supernumerary preachers, the conference appended the following explanatory note respecting the character of such: --

"A supernumerary preacher is one so worn out in the itinerant service as to be rendered incapable of preaching constantly; but at the same time is willing to do any work in the ministry which the conference may direct, and his strength will enable him to perform."

Before the conference adjourned, they passed a resolution to have another General Conference at the end of four years, to be convened in the city of Baltimore, November 1, 1796, and that it should be composed of all the traveling preachers who should be in full connection at the time it was to be held.

It was very manifest from what had taken place at this conference, and especially from the temper and conduct of Mr. O'Kelly and his partisans, that a spirit of insubordination was abroad, and that a division of the body would be likely to result from an improper indulgence in speaking against the constituted authorities of the Church. To prevent, as far as practicable, the evils naturally resulting from the course of conduct to be apprehended from those dissentient brethren, and such as they might influence to a spirit of opposition, the conference very opportunely passed the following rule: --

If a member of our Church shall be clearly convicted of endeavoring to sow dissensions in any of our societies, by inveighing against either our doctrine or discipline, such person so offending shall be first reprov'd by the senior preacher of his circuit; and if he afterward persist in such pernicious practices, he shall be expelled the society."

This leads us to notice now more particularly the secession of Mr. O'Kelly, and the effects it produced upon the cause of religion generally in that part of the country where he more especially operated, and finally upon himself and his adherents. It has already been remarked that Mr. O'Kelly was a very popular preacher, of considerable age and standing in the Church, had acquired great influence in Virginia, and particularly over the minds of the younger preachers in his district.

The reasons which induced him to withdraw from the Church have been before stated. Mr. Lee says, that while he stood and looked at the old man as he took his departure from Baltimore, he felt persuaded that he would not long be idle, but would endeavor to put himself at the head of a party, which, indeed, soon came to pass. Mr. Lee moreover says, that a preacher informed him that O'Kelly denied the doctrine of the Trinity, as held by us; and that it was his intention to have had O'Kelly tried at the conference for preaching false doctrine; and therefore he believed that one cause of his leaving the connection was a fear of being

censured for his anti-Methodistical views in respect to this doctrine. However this may be, he soon raised a cry against the Church he had left, and poured forth his anathemas more particularly upon the head of Bishop Asbury, whose power in stationing the preachers he had so violently opposed. To these complaints Bishop Asbury replies, in his sententious style as follows: --

"I bid such adieu, and appeal to the bar of God. I have no time to contend, having better work to do. If we lose some children, God will give us more. Ah! this is the mercy, the justice of some, who, under God, owe their all to me and my tyrants, so called. The Lord judge between them and me."

After Mr. O'Kelly set up for himself, he published a pamphlet, the contents of which it is not necessary at this day to recite, which was answered by the Rev. Mr. Snethen, in which the bishop is fully vindicated from all the aspersions of his enemies.

Though all the traveling preachers, except one, who withdrew with O'Kelly, returned to the Church, yet there were several local preachers, and a considerable number of private members, who became warmly attached to him, and they made several efforts to organize themselves into a church more in conformity to their notions of republican principles, until finally they renounced all creeds and confessions, and professed to take the New Testament alone for the role of their government, claiming the right, of course, to interpret it according to their own views of order and propriety; and as party politics ran high in Virginia at that time, they took the popular name of "Republican Methodists," with James O'Kelly as their head man.

In the latter part of the year 1793 they began to form societies on a plan which should exclude all superiority of one preacher over another, and at the same time promised to the people greater liberties than they could enjoy among their old brethren. This popular theme took with many, by which means hundreds of the people were induced to forsake the Methodist Episcopal Church, and to join the standard of revolt, so that in some places whole societies were broken up, and others divided and thrown into confusion, taking with them some houses of worship, while others were voluntarily left by our preachers, to avoid a thriftless contention.

As Mr. O'Kelly lived in the southern part of Virginia, the spirit of disaffection spread among some of the societies in North Carolina, infecting a number of local preachers, as well as several societies. What rendered this separation more destructive in its effects upon the interests of pure religion, was the bitterness of spirit with which it was conducted, especially in its hostility to bishops, and, as they called them, their servile creatures, the presiding elders -- though the leader of the party had himself been a presiding elder for several years. Such are the inconsistencies of fanaticism, when impelled on by personal animosity.

This spirit, under the guidance of such minds, could not do otherwise than produce disastrous results to the interests of true religion. Instead of contending against sin and its pernicious effects, the party seemed to exhaust all their powers against episcopacy, and those debatable points of church government and economy which have always elicited less or more of controversy, and which these disputants were least of all likely to set at rest. And this controversy had such an effect upon the minds of many who were not under the influence of a religious principle that they became deeply prejudiced against all religion; and thus the secession was doubtless a means of hardening them in their iniquity.

Finding at length that the title already assumed was not likely to answer the purpose intended, Mr. O'Kelly published a pamphlet in 1801, in which he called his party "The Christian Church." This device, however,

did not dissolve the charm by which those deluded men were induced to follow their leader, until a happy thought led them to conclude that by assuming such a title they proscribed all others from the Christian character; and thus becoming startled at their own exclusiveness, they began to contend among themselves, and then to divide and subdivide; until in a few years scarcely a vestige of them was to be found in all Virginia. So ended this secession from the Methodist Episcopal Church, which began in the obstinate attachment of a vain man to his favorite theory, and ended in the entire overthrow of his power and popularity, and carried along with it, as is greatly to be feared, many to destruction. But what were its effects upon the prime leader of the revolt? Though he succeeded for a time to draw off disciples after him, and to excite a deep-rooted prejudice against the General Conference and Bishop Asbury, he gradually declined in power and influence, lost the confidence and affection of the people generally, and finally died in comparative obscurity, leaving behind him a sad picture of human infirmity, and a melancholy evidence of the pernicious effects of cleaving so obstinately to a theory which, right or wrong, is condemned as inexpedient by a majority of the good men with whom he may be associated. As, however, Bishop Asbury bore such a conspicuous part in this controversy, and was made the butt of so many abusive epithets, it is pleasant to witness the Christian disposition he manifested toward his fallen antagonist near the close of Mr. O'Kelly's life. Under date of Friday, August 20, 1802, he says, --

"Mr. O'Kelly having been taken ill in town," (that is, the town of Winchester, Va.) "I sent two of our brethren, Reed and Wells, to see him, by whom I signified to him that if he wished to see me, I would wait on him: he desired a visit, which I made him on Monday, August 23. We met in peace, asked of each other's welfare, talked of persons and things indifferently, prayed, and parted in peace. Not a word was said of the troubles of former times. Perhaps this is the last interview we shall have upon earth."

It is to be hoped, therefore, from the manner in which this interview was sought and obtained, conducted and ended, that ere death separated them, old differences and animosities were forgotten, and that the God of mercy extended that mercy to Mr. O'Kelly which they, as is presumed, extended to each other, and that he now rests where his "iniquities are forgotten and his sins covered."

It may be proper to remark, however, that it was a long time before the societies in Virginia fully recovered from the deleterious effects of this secession. The spirits of many were exasperated against each other, brotherly love was greatly diminished, and as a consequence necessarily resulting from this state of things, the influence of the Church upon the public mind was much weakened and circumscribed, and the preaching of the gospel under these circumstances was not attended with its wonted effects. By a steady perseverance, however, these sad results of a pertinacious adherence to a favorite theory gradually subsided; and the cause of God, as proposed and advocated by the Methodist ministry, has since greatly prospered in that part of the country.

A few remarks will close the present volume.

Methodism had now existed in this country about thirty-six years, and numbered in its communion, including preachers and people, white and colored, sixty-six thousand, two hundred and forty-six souls. The entire population of the United States at that time was about four millions; if we allow three minors and others, who attended upon public worship among them, to each communicant, the population of the Methodist Episcopal Church would amount to about one hundred and ninety-eight thousand. According to the this estimation, about one-twentieth part of the entire population were brought under Methodist influence in the short space of thirty-six years. This, it should be remembered, had been effected from nothing, that is, we had no church members with whom to begin, except the few solitary emigrants from

Ireland, as noted in the second chapter of this work.

In this respect our circumstances were different from all the principal denominations in the country. From the very beginning of the settlements, the members of the English Church, the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, and the Baptists were here established, some of them in some of the colonies by law, and in others in conformity to the ecclesiastical organizations in the respective countries whence they came. They were, therefore, all here before us, peaceably enjoying all their immunities, civil and religious. Whereas when the Methodists arrived they had to begin every thing anew, and to contend with all sorts of opposition, and to work their way unaided by any human power, except so far as they were favored by those, from time to time, who were convinced of the truth of their doctrine, and the Scriptural character of their economy.

From these facts it is easy to perceive the vast advantages, so far as mere human agency is concerned, those denominations possessed over the Methodists. Those biases arising from religious habits, from education, and from legal protection, were all in their favor. The seminaries of learning, high and low, were under their control, and all the civil offices were filled by men belonging either to some one of these denominations, or from among those who had their religion yet to choose, or by such as were biased by infidel principles. And, moreover, for a period of eighteen years, which includes just one half the time we had had an existence here, the Methodists were but a society, and consequently were dependent upon other denominations for the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper. Yet, under all these disadvantages, they prospered abundantly, increased in number and strength, and had spread themselves over the length and breadth of the land.

Now the question which forces itself upon us is, To what were they indebted for this unexampled prosperity? It cannot be attributed to the influence they possessed over the public mind -- for, in fact, they had none, only so far as it was gained in the midst of obloquy and opposition, as their doctrine, character, and labors became gradually known to the people.

Neither can it be attributed to their learning or profound knowledge. Though their founders were both able and learned, yet the first missionaries who came to this country, though men of sound understanding and well read in the sacred Scriptures, were by no means learned, according to the common acceptance of that word; and as to those who were, from time to time, raised up here, some of them hardly understood their mother tongue correctly, and but few could boast of any thing more than a common English education. While they were men of strong common sense and sound judgment, and some of them possessed a great flow of natural eloquence, yet, having been taken chiefly from the common walks of life, they enjoyed none of those qualifications which arise from a classical and scientific course of study. They were, however, "mighty in the Scriptures," "full of faith and the Holy Ghost," and "needed not that any one should teach them which be the first principles of Christ," for they could call "him Christ by the Holy Spirit," having received the "witness in themselves that they were born of God."

These facts force us to the conclusion that their prosperity must be attributed to the blessing of God upon their labors. They, in fact, encountered a host of opposers. The entire religious community, as well as the vicious rabble and the infidel part of the community, were arrayed against them. The prejudices of education, of sectarianism, of the depravity of unregenerate sinners, and the rivalry of denominational jealousy, were in hostility to the progress of Methodism. Yet, in spite of all this mighty phalanx of opposing forces, it won its way among the people, converting thousands to its standard. We therefore say again, that its forward course can be accounted for only by supposing the sanction of the most high God upon

their labors.

But will God give his sanction to bad men? Surely he will not. Those men, therefore, who were engaged in this cause were eminently holy and good. They professed to have an experience of divine things upon the heart, and to be moved by the Holy Ghost to this work. They spoke therefore of the things which they had felt and seen, and God bore testimony to their word. Instead of amusing the people with mere speculative truths, they addressed themselves directly to the heart, aiming, above all other things, to effect a radical reformation there, knowing full well that a reformation of life would necessarily follow. It was this mode of preaching which gave such success to their efforts, and inspired the confidence of those who had an experimental knowledge of divine things.

It has been said that God gave his sanction to their labors. We do not wish to be misunderstood upon this subject. We do not infer the blessing of God upon the labors of a ministry merely because proselytes are made. Mohammed made proselytes to his false religion by the power of the sword faster than Jesus Christ did by the power of his miracles and the purity of his doctrine. And any impostor, or mere formal minister, by the fascinating charms of his eloquence, or the cunning artifices to which he will resort, may succeed in proselytizing others to his party without at all benefiting their souls, or reforming their lives. The mere multiplication of converts to a system is no proof of itself that it has the sanction of the God of truth and love.

We have not, therefore, enumerated the communicants of the Methodist Episcopal Church as an evidence, of itself, that its ministry were moving in obedience to God's will, and in the order of his providence. Though they had been as "numerous as the sands upon the seashore," had they been destitute of righteousness, they would be no proof that the instruments of their conversion were sent of God.

But what we insist upon is, that these men preached the pure doctrine of Jesus Christ, and that those who were converted by their instrumentality were really "brought from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God" -- that such a reformation of heart and life was effected as resulted in a uniform obedience to the commands of God; and that those who were brought under the doctrine and disciplinary regulations of this Church, brought forth the "fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" -- thus giving evidence that they were indeed "born of the Spirit," and enjoyed His witness of their adoption into the family of God.

We speak of them as a body. Though it is not probable that there were many hypocrites who came among them -- there being no temptation to such to identify themselves with them -- yet there were doubtless some such, and others who imposed upon themselves and others; and some who apostatized from the faith -- these could not do otherwise than reproach the cause they had espoused. But whenever such were discovered, if they could not be reclaimed from their wanderings, the strict discipline which was enforced cut them off from the communion of the faithful; and thus was the Church freed from the responsibility of their conduct, and kept pure from their corrupting example. By this faithful preaching of the word, and enforcement of discipline, the main body was kept in a healthy state, and presented a living example of the purity and excellence of their religion. This was a resistless argument in their favor.

Another thing which made them more extensively useful was, their itinerating mode of preaching the gospel. Had these ministers confined their labors to insulated congregations, as most of the ministers of other denominations did, they never could have realized that diffusive spread of evangelical religion which

actually accompanied their efforts. Had John Wesley, instead of going forth into the "highways and hedges" to call sinners to repentance, settled himself over a parish, Methodism had been either "hid in a corner," or never have had an existence. It was his itinerating so largely, and preaching wherever he could find access to the people, which gave such efficiency to his efforts, and such a wide spread to the gospel by his instrumentality.

But in this country especially, many parts of which were newly settled, and therefore but sparsely populated, had not those preachers carried the gospel to the people by traversing the country, they had remained destitute of the means of salvation. We may, therefore, attribute the success which attended their labors to the blessing of God on an itinerant ministry -- on a ministry which went everywhere preaching, "not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit, and with power." This it was which enabled them to "reach even beyond themselves," in preaching the gospel of Christ, and of gathering thousands of souls into his fold.

These men devoted themselves entirely and exclusively to this work, remembering, as their Discipline admonished them, that it was "not their business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society, but to save as many souls as possible; to bring as many sinners as they can to repentance, and with all their power to build them up in holiness, "without which they cannot see the Lord." It was this diligence in their calling, of being in soul and body devoted to it, which enabled them to accomplish so much in so short a time, and that, too, in the midst of reproach and opposition.

It was, indeed, this very devotion, this diligence, these zealous efforts in the cause of their divine Master, which provoked much of the opposition which they had to encounter. The lukewarm clergy were aroused to indignation at seeing themselves rivaled by those whom they affected to despise on account of their erratic habits and inferiority in point of literature and science. And as these zealous itinerants made their pointed appeals to the consciences of sinners, denounced the just judgments of God upon hardened offenders, their ire was often kindled against those who thus "reproved them in the gate." Wherever these flaming messengers of Jesus Christ came, they disturbed the false peace of the lukewarm, awakened the conscience of the sleeping sinner, and gave him no rest until he surrendered his heart to Christ. They not only "preached in the great congregation" "in the city full," but "into whatever house they entered," they addressed themselves personally to its inmates, urging them to be "reconciled to God;" and they accompanied all their efforts by earnest prayer, both public and private, that God would sanction their labors by sending upon them the energies of the Holy Spirit.

The doctrines, too, which they principally insisted upon, had a direct tendency to produce the desired effect upon the heart and life. While they held, in common with other orthodox Christians, to the hereditary depravity of the human heart, the deity and atonement of Jesus Christ, the necessity of repentance and faith; that which they pressed upon their hearers with the greatest earnestness was, the necessity of the new birth, and the privilege of their having a knowledge, by the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, of the forgiveness of sins, through, faith in the blood of Christ; and as a necessary consequence of this, and as naturally flowing from it, provided they persevered, holiness of heart and life. On this topic they dwelt with an emphasis and an earnestness peculiar to themselves. The doctrine itself, though held by most orthodox churches, as is manifest from their articles of faith and formularies of religion, was allowed to sleep in their books, or was not brought before the people with that prominence which its importance demands, and with that particularity and definiteness which its vitality in the Christian system renders essential to the success of the gospel ministry.

But on this vital point the Methodist ministers bent their whole force. If they pressed upon the sinner a sense of his depravity and actual guilt, it was to make him feel the necessity of repentance and forgiveness. If they presented to him the death of Christ, as the meritorious cause of the sinner's salvation, it was to encourage him to look to that source for pardon in his blood. If the Holy Spirit was spoken of as the helper of our infirmities, and as a leader into all truth, it was that he might be claimed by the penitent sinner as the sealer of his pardon, and as a witnesser of his "acceptance in the Beloved." Thus all the doctrines of the gospel were brought to have a bearing on this point, that all who were induced to "seek after God" might have no rest until they found "redemption in his blood, even the forgiveness of sins."

By preaching this doctrine everywhere, to all classes of people, making it prominent in every sermon, and exhibiting it as the common privilege of all penitent sinners to experience, they were blessed of God in their labors, and rejoiced over returning prodigals to their Father's house.

From all these facts -- and that they are facts is attested by every person who is at all acquainted with our history -- we conclude that this work was eminently the work of God. Who will say it was not? Whoever does this must also say, that men by mere human effort, unassisted by the Holy Spirit, may turn more sinners from the error of their ways, and bring them into all holy living, than all the clergy in the country beside! Or else they must deny that sinners were thus converted from the error of their ways. But to deny this, would be to fly in the face of the plainest facts on record -- facts attested by thousands of witnesses. And to assert the former, that such a reformation may be effected by human persuasion alone, is to deny the necessity of the gospel to reform sinners from their sinfulness -- it is, in fact, saying that the gospel is a "cunningly devised fable," totally unnecessary for the salvation of a lost world. For if sinners may be reformed by means of "enticing words of man's wisdom," then may we dispense with the gospel, with the blood of Christ, and the energies of the Holy Spirit. But as all orthodox Christians acknowledge the indispensable necessity of these to renovate the sinner's heart, and to make him holy all manner of conversation, it follows most conclusively, that the reformation which accompanied the labors of the Methodist ministry was the work of God.

Hence we have a right to infer that, to insure a continuance of his sanction upon our future efforts, all we have to do is to "walk by the same rule, and mind the same thing." Thus living and working, the same benevolent Being who guided, protected, and so abundantly blessed the labors of our fathers in the gospel, will not fail to pour upon us and our children the blessings of his salvation.

ENDNOTES

1 The end of this unhappy man reads a fearful lesson to all those who presume to trifle with sacred things. In the notice we have taken of the rise and progress of Methodism in Charleston, South Carolina, we have seen that Mr. Allen brought a great reproach upon the Church in that place by his apostasy. What the particular sin was by which he thus wounded the cause of God, I am not informed; but from a notice of him in Bishop Asbury's Journal, vol. ii, page 184, it appears that in the bishop's estimation he had been "going from bad to worse for seven or eight years," speaking hard things against the bishop among the people, and writing to Mr. Wesley and Dr. Coke, and thereby stirring up prejudice in their minds, as is presumed, against Bishop Asbury. On this account, says the bishop, "I have had my opinion of him these nine years, and gave Dr. Coke my thoughts of him before his ordination."

It seems he was at length arrested and committed to jail for shooting the Marshall of the district, Major Forsyth, through the head while the Marshall was attempting to serve a writ upon him. This happened two

years after his expulsion. Of the particulars of his death I have not been able to find any account.

2 As this question respecting the power if the bishops to appoint the preachers to the stations has frequently been agitated in the conference, at a suitable time I shall endeavor to state it fully and fairly, with the substance of the argument, for and against it, until it was finally set at rest in the year 1828.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/nathan-bangs/an-account-of-the-several-annual-conferences-and-of-the-general-conference-of-17/>

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