

UNPOPULAR RELIGION: BISHOP MILTON WRIGHT AND THE UNITED BRETHERN SCHISM OF 1889

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Milton Wright was born on November 17, 1828. The early nineteenth century had seen dramatic outpourings of the Holy Spirit in camp meetings, and conversions of blacks and whites, men and women, slave and free had changed the religious landscape. New churches emerged, especially Baptists, Methodists, and the United Brethren in Christ (UBC), whose members had little connection to traditional elites.

These were popular religious movements in that they took hold among the populace, especially those with limited access to political or economic power. But they were also unfashionable, refusing to participate in many of the popular sins of both patrician and plebeian. This unpopular religion prayed for and saw dramatic change through what it believed was the work of the Holy Spirit. That work necessitated a people set apart from the world and disdainful of its approval. That work required discipline to resist evil in society in all forms.

Wright's Conversion to Unpopular Christianity

Wright came from Yankee stock. His grandfather and father had left farms in Vermont and New York respectively in 1814 for the fertile land across the Appalachians.¹ His father met and married his mother in 1817² in Centerville, Ohio, south of Dayton, where they lived until 1821 when they bought land in the new state of Indiana. Both were “experimental Christians.” His mother had an evangelical conversion before Wright was born and had joined one the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC).³ His father experienced conversion when Wright was two. Wright described him as possessing “a strong intellect, a clear understanding, a discriminating accurate judgment; and a conscientiousness [*sic*], an integrity, and a firmness that gave stability

¹ Daryl Melvin Elliot, “Bishop Milton Wright and the Quest for a Christian America” (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1992), 19.

² Milton Wright’s grandmother, on his mother’s side, was reportedly the first woman of European descent to reside in Dayton, Ohio. See Elliot, 20; Milton Wright, Van Cleve Family, box 9, file 35, MS-1, Wright Brothers Collection, Special Collections & Archives, University Libraries, Wright State University, Dayton Ohio [WBCWSU]; Milton Wright, “My Father’s Life,” revised March 1912, box 9, file 1, MS-1, WBCWSU.

³ Elliot, 22. Wright’s mother took seriously her duty to care for the spiritual well being of her children. See Milton Wright, “My Christian Experience,” *Christian Conservator*, November 8, 1916, 2.

and tone to his life and character.”⁴ This his father “carried . . . in application to any church, party, or institution. In reform he was an age ahead of his times. He was one of the very first to take in total abstinence with all its attendants. He discarded Free-masonry with all its satellites.”⁵

This “uncompromising conscience” prevented Wright’s father from joining any particular denomination. He would not formally associate with a denomination that was not consistently antislavery. For this reason, he never joined his wife as a member of the MEC, which he considered compromised. “So conscientious was he about fellowshiping in error—especially a wrong,” wrote Wright of his father, “that he rather wished the church right than labor in it for its purification or its edification.”⁶

Wright’s own religious quest was typical for a boy in a converted family during the waning days of the second great awakening. “During those years, I attended the meeting of the several denominations near us. I was an earnest listener to preaching, and liked most of the preachers.” Even as a youth, though, he emulated his father as an ecclesial critic with a strong ethical core:

I did not believe in the rightfulness of “The mourners’ bench,” and could never have been reached by that. In matters of morality, I was upright and generally approved. In the main, I had my religious experiences all to myself . . . I attended the preaching of several churches. I did not approve the partiality of the God of the Calvinist, or of the water salvation of the Campbellite. I suppose I was known as one who lived up to his convictions.⁷

As a teen he became serious. “By the time I was fourteen years of age, I largely gave my thought to the subject of religion, and especially to my own salvation.” Then “one summer morning in June 1843,” the goal of any boy raised in conversionist Protestantism occurred. “When I was alone working in my father’s corn field [*sic*], as my mind pored on the subject of religion, the love of God arose in my heart, and I felt that joy that is unspeakable, and that peace that passeth all understanding.” He had received assurance. “From that time forth, I felt peace, through our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸

Wright’s conversion was independent of any particular church’s influence, “not in connection with any meeting.” Still, shortly after he felt “called to labor in some public way for the cause of God and humanity,” a conclusion he came to “not by voices or visions or signs, but by an impression that spoke to the soul powerfully and abidingly.”⁹ Following his father, Wright did not immediately join a church. He admired the Presbyterians, but not their Calvinism. He was doctrinally closer to the MEC, but they were unacceptable for their toleration of slavery and “the fact that he found that church

⁴ Milton Wright to Catharine Wright, October 21, 1861, box 3, file 7, MS-1, WBCWSU.

⁵ Milton Wright, “My Grand Parents and My Parents,” revised February 1912, box 9, file 1, MS-1, WBCWSU, 7–8.

⁶ Wright to Catharine, October 21, 1861.

⁷ Wright, “My Christian Experience,” 2.

⁸ Wright, “My Christian Experience,” 2. This narrative is reminiscent of United Brethren founder Martin Boehm’s (1725–1812) conversion.

⁹ Wright, “Ancestors,” revised 6 April 1913, box 9, file 1, MS-1, WBCWSU, 7–8.

largely filled by persons, who in his judgment, seemed to be there from motives of popularity.”¹⁰

A Worker for Unpopular Religion

In 1846, Wright encountered a preacher from the UBC.¹¹ Their preachers had reached what became the state of Indiana by 1808 and by 1830 had formed a conference. By 1846 the church had “made a major transition to the English language, with the use of German now being in the minority.”¹² Wright heard one of the leading UBC preachers in Indiana, John Morgan. Under his influence, he studied the discipline of the church and its doctrine, and decided that the UBC, “respectable, but not cursed with popularity, suited.”¹³

The UBC had little latitude with regard to separation from the world, especially the pressing social evil of the day. In 1821 the UBC discipline stated “all slavery, in every sense of the word is totally prohibited and in no way tolerated in our community.” Anyone who violated this prohibition was expelled,¹⁴ in contrast to the MEC, where his mother worshipped.¹⁵ UBC strictness on this matter was essential. Wright’s father, a staunch opponent of slavery, “loved liberty and intensely abhorred oppression.”¹⁶ The elder

¹⁰ Henry Adams Thompson, *Our Bishops: A Sketch of the Origin and Growth of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ as shown in the Lives of its Distinguished Leaders* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1903), 536.

¹¹The denomination had begun at an evangelical meeting at Isaac Long’s barn in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1767. The meeting had been organized by German Mennonites caught up in the spiritual excitement of America’s first great awakening. In attendance were Boehm, a Mennonite bishop, and a German Reformed preacher named William Otterbein (1726–1813). These men, whose ecclesial traditions in Germany represented persecuted and persecutor, had been touched by revival. After Boehm finished preaching, Otterbein approached him extending his hand, announcing “*Wir sind brüder*” (We are brothers). The two began cooperating in evangelistic efforts, organizing a connection of itinerant preachers, preaching and organizing faith communities among Germans. In 1800, the preachers held an annual conference. The thirteen preachers adopted the name of the church, and elected Boehm and Otterbein as bishops. In 1815, the church adopted a “Confession of Faith” based on one written by Otterbein in 1789. They were strongly Arminian in doctrine, but allowed considerable latitude with regard Christian ordinances, particularly baptism and foot-washing. See A. W. Drury, ed., *Disciplines of the United Brethren in Christ, 1814–1841, Translated and Reprinted from the Originals* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1895) 11–12.

¹² Elliot, 31.

¹³ Thompson, 536–537. See also A. W. Drury, *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ*, (Dayton, OH: Otterbein Press, 1953), 474.

¹⁴ Drury, *Disciplines*, 90–91.

¹⁵ Although originally viewing participation in the institution of slavery as immoral and deserving of expulsion, the MEC had compromised for the sake of what would prove an unsustainable unity. By the 1840s, its general conference had given up attempting to enforce the prohibition on members buying or selling slaves, leaving the matter to each annual conference. At one time General Conference was greatly exercised over a phrase in the General Rules on slavery. Should it read “the buying or selling” or “the buying and selling”? The time could certainly have been better used since several annual conferences were in fact ignoring the rule entirely. In 1844 the issue split the church into northern and southern branches.

¹⁶ Wright to Catherine, October 21, 1861, also quoted in Elliot, 42.

Wright frequently took his son to hear antislavery political candidates.¹⁷ During a quarterly meeting in April, 1847, in Andersonville, Wright responded to an invitation. Two months later he was baptized at his parents' farm by the pastor of the nearest UBC church.

Wright was licensed to exhort on April 27, 1850. Later that year, he was encouraged to "take a text," and preached his first sermon.¹⁸ He received a quarterly conference license in 1852 and was received into the White River Conference as a "licentiate" in 1853. Wright then began a course of study in preparation for ordination while working as a teacher from 1849-1855.¹⁹ Completing the course of study, Wright was examined, approved, and ordained on August 9, 1856, by Bishop David Edwards.²⁰

The Popularity of Secret Societies

As hands were laid on Wright, tensions over slavery, which would soon erupt in war, had permeated churches. The Wesleyan Methodist Church had separated from his mother's MEC in 1841 over toleration of slaveholding, and the MEC had split in 1844. While the UBC remained united on the issue of slavery, tensions were brewing concerning the growing popularity of secret society membership, which some perceived as a threat to Christian egalitarianism, transparency, even doctrine.

Secret societies (particularly Freemasonry) had entered American life in the late eighteenth century. By the 1820s the Masons had grown dramatically and included some of the most influential men in the country. The nature of these organizations meant that their meetings and rituals were secret. They were outside the political life of the nation, while binding together member politicians and businessmen.

Strong Christian resistance to secret societies began two years prior to Wright's birth. William Morgan (1774–1826) had disappeared after threatening to publish the secrets of the Freemasons in the local newspaper in Batavia, New York. Morgan had been a Mason, was down on his luck financially, and accepted an offer from a local newspaper publisher, David Cade Miller, in violation of the confidentiality promises he had made as a Mason.

Several members of the Batavia lodge published an advertisement denouncing Morgan, and an attempt was also made to set fire to Miller's newspaper building. On September 11, 1826, Morgan was arrested for non-payment of a loan and stealing a shirt and a tie. The sheriff was a Mason. When Miller learned of this, he paid the debt and secured Morgan's release. Morgan was then kidnapped and imprisoned by Masons in Fort Niagara. He then disappeared. Historian Paul Goodman recounts:

¹⁷ Milton Wright, "Facts and Dates," box 9, file 1, MS-1, WBCWSU, 2.

¹⁸ Thompson, 537.

¹⁹ Milton Wright's School Examinations, January 20, 1855, box 3, file 17, MS-1, WBCWSU.

²⁰ "Annual Conference Minutes of the White River Conference of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, 1847–1865." United Brethren Historical Center, Huntington University, Huntington, IN, 105–110.

Circumstantial evidence pointed to the Masons as Morgan's probable murderers. Dozens of suspect Masons in western New York escaped punishment or got off lightly, justifying apprehensions that masons exercised powerful influence in high places. Moreover, the tendency of Freemasonry to attract membership mostly from the upper half of the social structure gave grounds for thinking that it was a putative aristocratic elite aiming at aggrandizing wealth and power. Finally, Masonry's affinity for natural revelation, together with its latitudinarian view of Christian doctrine, furnished grounds for believing it was incompatible with revealed religion just as it was at odds with American republicanism.²¹

The negative publicity led many to leave the Masons. Nearly all evangelical denominations came to oppose Masonry as unchristian.²²

In 1829, the UBC passed a Resolution that prohibited church members from participation in secret societies.²³ This prohibition first appeared in the UBC *Discipline* in 1833:

Resolved, that Free-Masonry in every sense of the word, be totally discountenanced, and in no wise tolerated in our society, should any of our members continue to attend their lodges, or join as a member of Free Masonry in any of their processions, or otherwise join the fraternity, he will by so doing be no longer a member of this church.²⁴

When the church adopted its constitution in 1841 the prohibition became constitutional, on a par with slaveholding.²⁵ Wright's first appointment to the Andersonville circuit experienced scandal when Wright's predecessor had secretly become a Mason. He had denied the fact when confronted, but when proven he was forced to resign.

Holiness and the Power of the Holy Spirit

In 1853, the UBC created the "Home, Frontier, and Foreign Mission Society."²⁶ Thomas Connor, a missionary to Oregon came east in 1857 to raise support for the mission and preached on Wright's Andersonville circuit.²⁷ Wright volunteered. After traveling to New York from Dayton on July 1–2, 1857, Wright boarded the steamship *Illinois* bound for Panama. While crossing the jungles of Panama by train, Wright took ill. On the ship to San

²¹ Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826–1836* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 21.

²² This resistance to secret societies was part of a larger hope for America, birthed by the optimism of what God's Spirit was working through the Second Great Awakening. Christianity would purify not only individuals, but rid the country of other evils, like slavery, alcohol abuse, and all forms of tyranny, including that threatened by the members of secret societies. Charles Finney, whose activity as a revivalist made him famous during Wright's early life, eventually wrote a book which explained why leaving the Masons was essential for Christian faithfulness. See Charles G. Finney, *The Character, Claims, and Practical Workings of Freemasonry* (Cincinnati, OH: Western Tract and Book Society, 1861).

²³ Drury, *History of the United Brethren*, 344.

²⁴ Drury, *Disciplines*, 160.

²⁵ Article II, section 7: "There shall be no connection with secret combinations, nor shall involuntary servitude be tolerated, in any way." Drury, *Disciplines*, 206.

²⁶ Drury, *History of the United Brethren*, 435–436.

²⁷ *The Fourth Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Printing Establishment, 1857), 33.

Francisco, he was delirious with fever, and still sick when he boarded the ship to Oregon, arriving on August 6.²⁸

At the Oregon Annual Conference in September, he was assigned a circuit, but had to resign for health reasons.²⁹ Unable to itinerate, Wright accepted a position as principal of the new UBC “college” in Sublimity, Oregon. By mid-1858 he had recovered. At the May, 1858, annual conference, the trustees petitioned to have Wright reappointed to the college. Conference did, but also assigned him to the Sublimity circuit, with another preacher as an assistant. “I feel much interested in the prosperity of the cause,” he wrote. “O that the Lord would sanctify my heart and bless my labors to his own names glory.”³⁰

Wright was involved in several revivals from 1858–1859. He wrote to his parents in 1859, “I generally feel the spirit of preaching; and more success has seemed to attend my labors than at any former period in my life.”³¹ Revival, he believed, required dependence on “that word and the presence promised as the efficient means of carrying the Savior’s kingdom to the end of the world, and into the hearts of all people.”³² “Heralds of the gospel” must be “sufficiently impressed with power of ‘the sword of the Spirit.’”³³

During a camp meeting near Roseburg in August, 1859, he recounted:

While we were attending at the altar, Mr. Connor fell helpless to the ground. It was something very unexpected as he was supposed to be little liable to be carried away by his emotions. I was at the altar, and did not go to see him, for a few minutes. When I did go, Mother Mason, one of the saints of the coast, said to me, “Go away, Brother Wright, we do not want all our preachers to become ‘weak-minded,’” referring to a saying outside the church. I responded, “I do not think I am a very impressionable subject.” I felt a little doubtful about the expression, but made no apology. I went back to the altar, where the service had no particular form; and when standing by the mourners, engaged in silent prayer, my mind seemed to go upward, and presently I forgot,—and next I felt myself lying on the ground beside the man I had been standing with. I thought if his limbs were removed that I could move, but I soon found myself helpless. After awhile, the meeting was adjourned to a tent, and they carried us limp to it. After a time, I was asked if I would stand up. I attempted to arise but was limp. I asked where the mourners were, and the reply was, “They were all converted.” At this such a flood of tears poured from my eyes, as I never new in joy before. This state finally passed away.³⁴

²⁸ Milton Wright, “Oregon Correspondence: Trip from Aspinwall to Oregon,” *Religious Telescope*, November 25, 1857, 46. Hereafter designated as *RT*.

²⁹ While recuperating that summer and fall, Wright witnessed the political debate over whether Oregon would enter the union as a slave or free state. Slavery had entered Oregon in 1844. The UB, as outspoken opponents of slavery, endured persecution for their stance among slavery proponents. See M. M. Crow, “Letter from Oregon,” *RT*, July 22, 1857, 186. The matter was decided in the 1857 constitutional election. Oregon was a free state. See Milton Wright to E. M. Beauchamp, December 16, 1915, MS/8/Box 1, file 6, Milton Wright Collection, United Brethren Historical Center, Huntington University, Huntington, IN, 3–4.

³⁰ Milton Wright to William Wright, June 1, 1859, box 3, file 9, MS-1, WBCWSU.

³¹ Milton Wright to Dan and Catherine Wright, July 5, 1859, box 3, file 7, MS-1, WBCWSU.

³² Milton Wright, “Civilization and Christianity,” *RT*, February 22, 1871, 196.

³³ Wright, “Civilization and Christianity,” 196.

³⁴ Wright, “My Christian Experience,” 2.

“Instead of a feeling of high excitement,” Wright later described the experience as “a settled calm of most harmonious feeling. It seemed like heaven on earth, . . . the calmness of a heavenly joy.”³⁵ He had been “over-powered of grace divine, till I could not move—not a violent excitement but as sweet as heaven to my soul,”³⁶ “a feeling as calm and delightful as the summer skies.”³⁷ These “falling exercises” were common then among the “ablest and most staid in the church,” and “adhered” to Wright for a number of years.³⁸

In October, 1859, Wright returned to Indiana to court Susan Koerner, who became his wife, and never returned to Oregon. In 1860 he was assigned a circuit and in 1861, elected presiding elder in the Marion District. He served as presiding elder until August, 1864, when he requested location for one year, which the conference granted.³⁹ That location lasted only three months when he was called on to pastor the Dublin Circuit. In 1865 he was appointed to the four-point Williamsburg Circuit in Ohio, where, in March 1866, revival broke out. “More than 180 have been added to the church in about seven weeks, and upward of 75 in the past two weeks. The conversions have been in great numbers and many of them among the old and middle-aged. The Lord hath triumphed gloriously.”⁴⁰

Such work of the Holy Spirit, Wright believed, was necessary on earth for the coming of God’s kingdom, a “universal Pentecost” that would “complete the world’s salvation and thus usher in the Millennium.”⁴¹ As an Arminian, this dependence did not imply passivism on the part of God’s people, but complete active consecration regardless of popular opinion. Revival was attributed to the discipline of God’s people, including the UBC’s prohibition against membership in secret societies. “For my part, I want no better evidence of God’s approbation of that rule . . . The many thousands that have been converted . . . are a sufficient vindication.”⁴²

An Activist in Opposition to Secrecy

With the end of the Civil War and the criminalization of slavery, the “evil” of secret societies moved up the agenda of Christian activists. In 1867 Jonathan Blanchard, president of Wheaton College called for the organization of the National Christian Association (NCA) to counter the reviving threat of secret societies. Blanchard had been an ardent abolitionist, and like abolitionist societies the NCA would be a voluntary organization to oppose

³⁵ Wright, “My Christian Experience,” 2.

³⁶ Milton Wright to Lulu D. Crandall, July 4, 1911, Milton Wright File, The Methodist Library, Drew University, Madison, NJ.

³⁷ Wright to Beauchamp, December 16, 1915.

³⁸ Wright to Crandall, July 4, 1911. At some point after moving back to the Midwest he found these experiences “hindering one in the ministry,” and he “endeavored to throw off such spells. After years, I did. The Spirit is sometimes ‘subject to the prophet’ (1 Cor. 14:32).” See Wright, “My Christian Experience,” 2.

³⁹ The reason for this leave of absence is unknown. See Elliot, 95.

⁴⁰ Milton Wright, “News of Our Work,” *RT*, March 21, 1866, 114.

⁴¹ Milton Wright, “The Millennium’s Approach,” *Christian Conservator*, December 1, 1887, 5.

⁴² A. A. Sellers, “But Can Ye not Discern the Signs of the Times,” *RT*, March 25, 1868, 226.

the evil of secret societies.

The controversy among UBCs began when Daniel Berger, editor of the UBC newspaper, the *Religious Telescope*, suggested in editorials that the UBC's restrictive clause might be modified, at least to allow membership in temperance organizations that kept membership secret to preserve anonymity.⁴³ Wright wrote several articles opposing Berger's willingness to water down the constitution's prohibition.⁴⁴

These articles got him noticed by anti-secrecy leaders in the church. Bishop Edwards, who ordained him, wrote to Wright. He encouraged Wright to write more articles for the *Telescope* and to "try [his] hand at drawing up" a rule "with scriptured [*sic*] references and reasons for nonfellowship [*sic*] with the dark concern."⁴⁵ In May, 1868, Wright attended the first national meeting of the NCA in Pittsburgh, where the UBC were strongly represented.⁴⁶ In 1869 the convention elected Wright to its executive committee.⁴⁷

That same year Wright was elected as White River Conference's delegate to General Conference in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. The major issue at the conference was secret society membership. A resolution was presented to make the repudiation of secret societies "advisory" but not mandatory for church membership. This proposal was quickly defeated,⁴⁸ and precipitated a three-day debate over whether to instead strengthen the discipline. The proposed language was:

We believe that secret societies are evil in their nature and tendency, (a secret society is one whose initiatory ceremony is a secret,) and any member or preacher of our Church who shall be found connected, in any way, with such a society shall be admonished to sever said connection If such offending person fails to comply with the admonition within six months after it is given, his name shall be erased from the record, and he be no longer considered a member of our Church; provided, that should the accused deny said connection, the case shall be tried according to sections nineteen and twenty of the *Discipline*.⁴⁹

In short, membership in a secret society would mean automatic removal from the rolls of the church without trial, unless the person denied their membership.

Wright gave the major speech in support of the language. Freemasons and Odd Fellows were, he argued, deistic and anti-Christian. He even quoted prayers and hymns from the organizations.⁵⁰ Nearly three-quarters of the

⁴³ Daniel Berger, "Personal," *RT*, June 30, 1869, 340. Daniel Berger, "Antisecret-Society Convention," *RT*, March 25, 1868, 228.

⁴⁴ Wright, "Duty of the Hour," *RT*, March 27, 1867, 226.

⁴⁵ David Edwards to Milton Wright, May 2, 1867, box 3, file 13, WBCWSU.

⁴⁶ UBC Bishop David Edwards was elected president at its first national meeting. "The National Antisecret-Society," *RT*, May 13, 1868, 284.

⁴⁷ Wright addressed the convention in 1870 and 1875, and, in 1876, was elected vice president.

⁴⁸ *Proceedings of the Fifteenth General Conference of the United Brethren in Christ Held in Lebanon, Penn., from the Twentieth of May to June 1st, 1869, Inclusive* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Printing Establishment, 1869), 61–63.

⁴⁹ *Proceedings of the Fifteenth General Conference*, 61.

⁵⁰ *Proceedings of the Fifteenth General Conference*, 107.

delegates adopted the stricter rule. Wright was elected editor of the denomination's newspaper, the *Religious Telescope*, replacing Berger.⁵¹

Without consulting Wright, however, the trustees of the publishing house persuaded Berger to stay as assistant editor and be allowed to publish opinions in favor of liberalization. Wright did not protest this move against the will of General Conference, which intended the denominational magazine to unambiguously reflect official teaching. However, it raised in his mind suspicions about the methods of those who favored liberalization.⁵²

Wright and his family moved to Dayton in 1869.⁵³ Wright believed the purpose of a church newspaper was to champion Christian morality. Those who remain silent in the face of social evil, he reasoned, "will find that being dumb with silence for convenience or policy's sake, though approved by man's wisdom, will not pass the final test."⁵⁴

We trust that our church organ will still, through evil report or good report, stand in the front ranks on every question of moral reform. On slavery, temperance, secret societies, and other moral questions, the *Telescope* has made a record, which it is to be hoped will never be reversed or tarnished.⁵⁵

The *Telescope* would not be by Wright's definition a popular periodical, would not reflect the "false tastes" and "sinful weaknesses" of the day, for the sake of "popularity." "Jesus did not thus pander; the Bible does not; but the unscrupulous editor does."⁵⁶

The acceptance of secret societies by many of America's Protestant churches seemed, to Wright, an example of decline. Such "enlightened liberality cedes away" the standards of Christianity. A minister who was complicit in weakening standards, he thought, should "be branded as a traitor to truth." He was "like Balaam, he loves the wages of unrighteousness" and "deserves the scorn of every lover of truth."⁵⁷ Perhaps most damning, "Secret Societies," he wrote,

... stand in the way of genuine revivals and the upbuilding of God's spiritual house. This is still more apparent when we consider that in time of protracted revival meetings in churches largely composed of secretists, many of its members, and even some ministers, are at times away attending the lodge with its worldly associations, its trifles, its profane oaths, its legal righteousness for salvation, and its Christless worship. No wonder if the revival languishes or takes on a form of salvation as Christless as that of the lodge.⁵⁸

Wright was labeled an ignorant "cut-throat"⁵⁹ by the *Dayton Daily*

⁵¹ Berger, "Personal," 340.

⁵² Milton Wright, May 29, 1869, *Diaries 1857-1917*, (Dayton, OH: Wright State University Libraries, 1999) 52-53.

⁵³ The Wright's bought a house at 7 Hawthorn Street in the new suburb of West Dayton.

⁵⁴ Milton Wright, "Dumb with Silence—Psalm 39:2" *RT*, July 18, 1866, 181.

⁵⁵ Milton Wright, "Our New Volume," *RT*, September 8, 1869, 4.

⁵⁶ Thompson, 543.

⁵⁷ Milton Wright, "The Church and Secret Societies," *RT*, December 11, 1878, 2.

⁵⁸ Wright, "Influence of Secret Societies," 4.

⁵⁹ Milton Wright, "Secret Societies," *RT*, April 12, 1871, 252.

Herald, but he took comfort from a comment by Charles Finney, shortly before the great evangelist's death. Finney wrote, "If the United Brethren Church desire to succeed, it must be willing to be unpopular for awhile on questions which it believes to be right."⁶⁰

Defense of Unpopular Discipline

After their defeat in 1869, those in favor of liberalization on the issue of secret society membership argued that for the UBC to be successful in urban contexts, it needed to adapt to the city culturally. The church must accept members who are members of secret societies, or it will lose "hundreds of men of piety and influence."⁶¹ Wright saw this as different definitions of success. Success could "mean increase in numbers, wealth or popularity. Again it may mean purity, nearness to God, fruitfulness of heart and life in all that is good, success in winning souls to Christ and advancing the saints in holiness." For true success, the church needed to protect itself from "popular sins" like secret societies.⁶²

After the 1873 General Conference again maintained the provision against secret societies, a group of ministers founded a newspaper in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.⁶³ The *United Brethren Tribune's* main agenda was to oppose the anti-secret society rule in the discipline. In their first issue, an editorial argued that the rule against society membership

brings us into merited disrepute before the more intelligent classes of the country, stands as an almost insurmountable barrier to our entrance into cities, divides and destroys many of our long established churches, alienates brethren, and, contrary to the Bible, . . . attempts to put fetters on the conscience and reason of men made in the image of God.⁶⁴

One of the paper's founders, Reverend William Slaughter, was indeed a Freemason. In 1875 the lodge gave him a full masonic funeral. Wright wrote that this was "no surprise" since Slaughter's "fierce denunciation of our law on secrecy and of all who seek its enforcement was in perfect consistency with his lodge affiliation, and we are never surprised to find such to be Masons in fact as well as in heart."⁶⁵

Resistance to the prohibition, however, was growing. More urban eastern conferences began openly ignoring the rule, admitting secret society members into the church. Such defiance infuriated Wright. "Any attempt of an individual society to make or unmake such rules," he wrote, in an article entitled "Law Principles," "is usurpation, insubordination, rebellion. It comes from a heady spirit, and tends to distraction and anarchy." He compared

⁶⁰ "Rev. Charles G. Finney," *RT*, August 25, 1875, 380.

⁶¹ L.S. Grove, "United Brethren in the Cities," *RT*, December 4, 1867, 98.

⁶² Milton Wright, "Logical Results of Repeal," *RT*, August 23, 1876, 380.

⁶³ These included Henry Garst, William McKee, Zebedee Warner, Daniel Eberly, and William Slaughter.

⁶⁴ William McKee, "What We Propose," *United Brethren Tribune*, September 1873, 4.

⁶⁵ Milton Wright, "Buried by Freemasons," *RT*, September 29, 1875, 4.

these urbane UBCs to confederate upholders of the sin of slavery.⁶⁶ Wright even implied that Bishop Jonathan Weaver aided the conferences he oversaw in ignoring the discipline.

Weaver then wrote a response published in Wright's *Religious Telescope*, trying to stake out a centrist position:

There are two parties. Wise Christian counsel will harmonize all the elements, while fiery dictatorial assaults will divide and ruin. Those who feel called of God to drive the wedge may strike, if they choose; I shall be content to strive, by the blessing of God, to help this Church over the chasm. No man, living or dead, ever heard me say a word in favor of secret societies; and yet because I may not interpret every item of law just as the editor does, the implied charge of insubordination, rebellion, usurpation, treason, self-conceit, trickery, and dodges is laid at the door.⁶⁷

In response to this controversy, the *Tribune* wrote about Wright that "the only pity is that he was not born in time to enjoy all the glories of the old Spanish Inquisition. That would have afforded him an ample field for the display of his peculiar genius."⁶⁸

Two other issues championed by the *Tribune* were lay participation and proportional representation in General Conference. Liberalizers hoped thereby to increase the number of delegates from urban eastern conferences. Wright supported these proposals but resisted combining them with the issue of secret societies. Knowing that they might work toward the favor of the liberalizers, he wrote, perhaps naively, "if a principle is right it is safe to recognize it and adopt it."⁶⁹

Wright became convinced of a plot to take control of the church, having seen a letter by "conspirators," which laid out a plan to liberalize the church's teaching. First, they would take over the general institutions of the church: its schools, boards, and publishing house. Then they would create sectional conflict between conferences. Finally, pressure would be put on younger ministers to join the liberalizing cause, and any opposition would be attacked.⁷⁰

At the 1877 General Conference, Wright and other conservatives went on the offensive and proposed that church members automatically forfeit membership when they join a secret society. A local class no longer had to take action to expel them. The pastor could simply erase the lodge member's name from the roles. Wright argued that secret societies were competing religions, incompatible with Trinitarian Christianity. Mason's were no different from "the Mormon Society or the Unitarian Society."⁷¹

The proposal read:

1. Any member or preacher who shall connect himself with a secret society shall

⁶⁶ Milton Wright, "Law Principles," *RT*, August 19, 1874, 372.

⁶⁷ Jonathan Weaver, "Law Principles," *RT*, August 26, 1874, 377.

⁶⁸ "The Telescope and Bishop Weaver," *United Brethren Tribune*, September 15, 1874, 170.

⁶⁹ Milton Wright, "Pro-Rata Representation," *RT*, April 18, 1877, 236.

⁷⁰ Milton Wright, "The Manly Governor," *RT*, February 9, 1876, 156.

⁷¹ Milton Wright, "Attack by False Interpretations," *Richmond Star*, December 1884, 2.

- be regarded as having thereby declared that he prefers such society to the fellowship of our church and shall be considered as having withdrawn from the Church.
2. No person shall be permitted to join our church while holding membership in a secret society. If any member or preacher, at the time of the passage of this rule, be connected with a secret society, and does not discontinue such connection within six months thereafter, his failure to do so shall be regarded as a refusal to comply with the condition of membership as found in our Constitution (Article II, Section 7) and his severance from the Church shall be entered on the church records.
 3. If any member or preacher connected with a secret society shall deny or conceal such connection he shall be tried in the manner as set forth in the sections of our Discipline relating to the trial of members, and trial of preachers, to determine the facts in the case.
 4. In cases of withdrawal from the Church, as recognized and set forth in this rule, the preacher in charge shall announce the facts to the class, and see that the records of the Church correspond with the facts. If the person be a member of the quarterly or annual conference, the conference to which he belongs shall see that a record of the fact and manner of withdrawal is made upon its journal.
 5. It shall be the duty of the pastor to instruct our people upon the evils of secret societies, and to endeavor to prevent them from being ensnared in such evils, and, so far as possible, to reclaim all who may have joined any secret order
 6. Provided, that in case a member has been deceived and thereby drawn into any of those societies commonly called minor orders, he may be borne with for a reasonable time, if time shall not extend beyond the twelve months in any case.⁷²

Despite opposition, a substantial majority, seventy-one to thirty-one, adopted the rule.

That night, conservatives met in Woodland cemetery to strategize about the election of bishops, creating a list of candidates. Wright was elected on the second ballot, along with two other conservatives.⁷³ Wright was sent far from Dayton, assigned to all the territory west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains. He initially attempted to maintain his residence in Dayton, but eventually moved his family to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in June of 1878.⁷⁴

Bishop Wright

After their 1877 defeat, liberalizers became more determined to organize. A “Central Committee” called for a general convention in Dayton. In May, 1878, sixty-five ministers representing one-fifth of the conferences met at First United Brethren Church. They passed resolutions condemning the conference’s actions against secret societies and calling for lay delegates and proportional representation (both of which were thought to help the pro-secrecy cause).⁷⁵

⁷² *Origin, Doctrine, Constitution and Discipline of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Printing House, 1877), 79–82.

⁷³ Jonathan Banchar, “A ‘Successor of the Apostles,’” *Christian Cynosure*, June 14, 1877, 8.

⁷⁴ Wright, June 3–12, 1878, *Diaries*, 69–70.

⁷⁵ C. I. B. Brane, “The United Brethren in Christ,” *United Brethren Observer*, June 4, 1878, 2. Wright makes no mention of this meeting in his diary, although he was still living in Dayton at the time. ee Wright, May 5–31, 1878, *Diaries*, 68–69.

Even as bishop, Wright continued working for the anti-secrecy movement. Wright had welcomed the National Christian Association convention in 1877 in Dayton⁷⁶ and was elected president of the Illinois state anti-secrecy organization that same year.⁷⁷ Perhaps unwisely, he became involved in Blanchard's attempt to organize an association of "United Churches of Christ" that would include anti-secrecy churches from all denominations,⁷⁸ but excluding those that tolerated "heathen worships by its members in the lodge."⁷⁹ At Wright's urging, Blanchard dropped the idea of "united" churches in favor of a looser association to "prevent all appearance of forming a new sect."⁸⁰

The Illinois state anti-secrecy convention appointed a committee chaired by Wright, which recommended forming "a league or alliance of all such Christians and churches as exclude secret societies" to raise funds to start mission churches in areas where anti-secrecy was weak. Wright was clear that the association was intended for "independent churches, and anti-secrecy members of pro-secrecy churches,"⁸¹ not for congregations that were part of anti-secrecy denominations like the UBC. "We distinctly disclaim all desire or purpose to form a new denomination or to interfere with such churches and denominations as are free from the lodge-leprosy."⁸² Nonetheless, given the conflict, many UBCs saw this as a threat to the denomination, even as an attempt to form an Associated Churches "of Blanchard."⁸³

The Conservatives Fracture

In 1881, the tide began to turn. Wright claimed a group of pro-liberalization delegates had met in Chicago on their way to the 1881 General Conference in Lisbon, Iowa. Instead of focusing on the secrecy rule, they pushed for proportional representation and control of general boards and agencies. The law against secret societies could likely then be changed at the following general conference.⁸⁴ Their plan was successful. Proportional representation was approved, increasing representation from more urban eastern conferences, where the rule against secrecy was often ignored. Control of most boards passed to the liberals. Wright was not reelected bishop.

Wright's rejection for the episcopacy reflected a division among conservatives. Several opposed him for not being radical enough. Following the

⁷⁶ J. W. Hott, "National Christian Association," *RT*, October 31, 1877, 44. Wright, October 24, 1877, *Diaries*, 62.

⁷⁷ R. "Illinois State Convention," *RT*, December 4, 1878, 4.

⁷⁸ "The United Churches of Christ," *Christian Cynosure*, July 16, 1874, 8.

⁷⁹ "The United Churches of Christ," *Christian Cynosure*, September 9, 1875, 8.

⁸⁰ "The Associated Churches of Christ," *Christian Cynosure*, January 16, 1879, 8.

⁸¹ "Associated Churches," 8.

⁸² "The Illinois State Convention," *Christian Cynosure*, November 28, 1878, 5.

⁸³ Jonathan Weaver, "That Weak Article," *RT*, March 12, 1879, 2.

⁸⁴ Jonathan Blanchard, "An Explanation," *Christian Cynosure*, March 30, 1882, 8. See also *Proceedings of the Eighteen General Conference of the United Brethren in Christ. Held in Lisbon, Iowa, from the Twelfth to the Twenty-sixth of May, 1881, Inclusive* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1881), 167.

General Conference, these radicals formed the “United Brethren Association Opposed to Secret Societies,” headed by Lewis Davis of Union Biblical Seminary, W. O. Tobey, and William Dillon, advocating increased agitation.⁸⁵ The bishops, they believed, had lost legitimacy, by tolerating lodge membership while claiming to enforce a discipline that prohibited it. They began to publish an alternative journal, *The United Brethren in Christ*.

Wright moved to Indiana and led moderate conservatives while serving as the presiding elder of the Dublin District. To promote his views, he published two periodicals, the quarterly *Reform Leaflet*, and the monthly *Richmond Star*. The *Star* pledged to work “with the general officers of the church . . . always acknowledge and maintain the rightful authorities.”⁸⁶ Even Wright’s friend Blanchard thought Wright was naïve in his respect for authority. He needed to show “the people that those now in office are violating their sacred trust.”⁸⁷

Blanchard believed the “only cure for this lodge cancer is the knife.” He suggested that UBCs committed to the discipline leave the “lodgedevils” and form a new denomination with Wright as the leader.⁸⁸ Wright responded that he would instead “continue in the regular work of the church,” and had “full confidence in the triumph of those church principles held by a large majority of our ministers and people.” “Guile,” he wrote, “may have gained some temporary advantage; but guileful ecclesiastical victory is the precursor of utter defeat. The Lord omnipotent reigns.”⁸⁹

A Popular Victory

By 1885, General Conference was weary of the conflict. Many who had formerly supported the rule now believed that changing times demanded changing attitudes in the church. If an action were not specifically forbidden in scripture, they argued, the church could tolerate a diversity of opinions among its membership. For Wright and more staunch conservatives, who believed lodge worship denied the Trinity as well as Paul’s command to “renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully” (2 Cor 4:2), this line of argument was unpersuasive.

The prohibition could not merely be abolished since it was included in the 1841 constitution. Liberalizers made two proposals. First, they advocated the formation of a “Church Commission” of twenty-seven ministers and laymen, who would prepare a new constitution and a new confession of faith. Second, they proposed a major clarification of the 1877 rule. The proposed clarification defined secret societies concerning their impact on the individual character, not about secret initiation rites. It read:

⁸⁵ “United Brethren Reformer,” *Christian Cynosure*, September 15, 1881, 7.

⁸⁶ “Editorial Notes,” *RT*, March 8, 1882, 377.

⁸⁷ Blanchard, “Explanation,” 8.

⁸⁸ Jonathan Blanchard, “Ichabod,” *Christian Cynosure*, June 9, 1881, 9.

⁸⁹ Milton Wright, “A Card,” *Christian Cynosure*, June 16, 1881, 12.

A secret combination, in the sense of the constitution is a secret league or confederation of persons holding principles and laws at variance with the word of God and injurious to Christian character, as evidenced in individual life, and infringing upon the natural, social, political, or religious rights of those outside its pale. Any member or minister of our church found in connection with such combination shall be dealt with as in other cases of disobedience to the order and discipline of the Church.⁹⁰

Such a proposal would undoubtedly allow membership in groups like the Grange and temperance groups. In practice, it meant that even members of the Freemasons, and Odd Fellows, would never be expelled.

Wright saw the commission as an “unprecedented attempt . . . to shake the Constitution.”⁹¹ The General Conference, the highest legislative body in the church, was the only body that could submit constitutional changes to the membership for ratification. It could not legitimately delegate its constitutional responsibilities by forming a committee of twenty-seven unelected individuals. “When there is so general an expression by this conference in favor of the submission of some constitutional question to the people,” argued Wright from the floor, “I would vote in its favor, but in view of the fact that I deem it unconstitutional, I protest against it.”⁹² Despite of Wright’s passion, the plan for the commission was passed by a vote of seventy-eight to forty-two.

Conservative Reaction

Following their defeat, radical and moderate conservatives put aside their differences. They issued a formal protest to the General Conference, signed by Wright and thirty-two other delegates.

Whereas, We believe that this body in its action in forming a commission for the revision of our confession of faith and the constitution of the Church, has transcended its constitutional authority, and instituted an illegal plan (not provided in the constitution) for change, and legislated a rule not in harmony with the constitution, but equivocal and capable of varied construction in order, as we think, to make it ineffectual and worthless; therefore, we determine to stand by the constitution and never to submit to any change therein, unless it is effected in harmony with its provisions; and we hereby earnestly and solemnly protest against all such action.⁹³

Their unity was enough to get Wright elected bishop again. The *Dayton Daily Journal* reported that even “a number of liberals excused themselves for voting for him by stating that his election would send him clear across the Rocky Mountains, where he would not disturb them.”⁹⁴

Of the twenty-seven selected for the commission, only Wright and Bishop John Dickson (both included by virtue of office) could be counted as conser-

⁹⁰ *Origin, Doctrine, Constitution, and Discipline of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1885), 82–83.

⁹¹ Wright, May 14, 1885, *Diaries*, 221.

⁹² *Proceedings of the Nineteenth General Conference*, 207. The General Conference also passed a motion calling for a Christian America. Those on the conservative side, feared that the version of Christianity being advocated was so compromised that it would make little impact.

⁹³ *Proceedings of the Nineteenth General Conference*, 249.

⁹⁴ “United Brethren,” *Dayton Daily Journal*, May 27, 1885, 2.

vatives. Wright had no intention of participating. When the commission began meeting in Dayton in November, Wright was preaching a revival on the west coast. The commission first announced that they would meet in closed session. Wright's son Wilbur thought it appropriate that "a body meeting to legislate secrecy in, should also legislate in secret."⁹⁵ When he learned that visitors were allowed, Wilbur, along with his brother Lorin, began attending to report to their father.

Conservatives called for a "constitutional convention of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ," to gathered in Hartsville, Indiana, in August, 1885. They elected officers and appointed permanent committees.⁹⁶ They also agreed to publish a new paper, the *Christian Conservator*, merging Wright's *Richmond Star* and the more radical *United Brethren in Christ*. In July, 1886, at their second general convention in Fairmont, Indiana, conservatives formed the "General Association of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ." This was for all practical purposes a denomination within a denomination. Although Bishop Wright refrained from active participation, his son Reuchlin was elected secretary.⁹⁷

The Fairmount convention had three main objections to the work of the commission: 1) the revision of the confession was unconstitutional; 2) the new constitution was to be ratified by two-thirds of those voting instead of the constitutionally required two-thirds of the membership, and 3) legislative authority had been illegally conferred to the commission. Conservatives decided to boycott the referendum so as not to give it legitimacy.⁹⁸ They also published a petition in the *Christian Conservator* that could be signed by supporters. Signed petitions would be presented to the 1889 General Conference.

In March, 1887, a "National Congress" of Christians opposed to secret societies met in Chicago and Wright played a central role. His address, entitled "The Influence of Secret Societies on the Churches," was published in Blanchard's *Cynosure*. "Lectures should come like the voice of doom to secrecy in every town and in every community," Wright proclaimed:

Sermons full of love of righteousness, and just as full of hatred of iniquity, must be preached from every faithful pulpit in the land . . . It is light and life only that are wanting to bring the reign of secrecy to an end. The Lord will help those who are zealous for him and for the salvation of Zion.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, liberals in the denomination began to play hardball with Wright. The treasurer of the missionary society stopped payments to Wright's Oregon Conference, which had openly opposed the Church's commission. The editor of the *Religious Telescope*, J. W. Hott, prohibited anyone who

⁹⁵ Wilbur Wright, "Scenes in the Commission," *Christian Conservator*, February 23, 1888, 2.

⁹⁶ "Minutes of the Constitutional Convention," *Christian Conservator*, August 15, 1885, 2-3.

⁹⁷ "Minutes of the United Brethren Constitutional Convention, Held at Fairmount, Grant County, Indiana, July 20-22, 1886," *Christian Conservator*, August 5, 1886, 4.

⁹⁸ "Minutes of the United Brethren Constitutional Convention," 4.

⁹⁹ Milton Wright, "The Situation," *Christian Cynosure*, February 16, 1888, 1.

contributed to the *Christian Conservator* to be published in the *Telescope*. He also limited debate on the merits of the commission in the denomination's paper, not allowing discussion of its constitutionality.¹⁰⁰

Editorials in the *Conservator* became more strident than before.

The present effort to legislate . . . an alliance with the Baalistic worship of the lodge, is displeasing to the Holy Ghost . . . More of the anointing of the Holy Ghost and less place-seeking and scheming and planning to put down and raise up men, and by various manipulations to run the Church on a broad worldly gauge, will restore peace again to the borders of our be-loved Zion.¹⁰¹

Furthermore, Wright believed, true or not, that liberals were padding the rolls of the church with secret society members (thanks to the weakened 1885 clarification of the 1877 rule) in anticipation of the church-wide referendum.¹⁰²

The November, 1888, referendum ballot made it clear how leaders wished voters to vote. The "Plan of Submission" approved in 1885 called for the ballot to have both "yes" and "no" printed behind each proposal. But when the ballots were distributed, "no" did not appear on the ballot. This, combined with the conservative boycott, gave liberalizers a clean sweep.

The results were announced in early 1889 in the *Telescope*.¹⁰³ The *Conservator* reported the same results tinged with sarcasm. "By suppression of facts, by equivocation, by concealment, by a one-sided ticket, by allowing illegal votes, they have secured 46,947 votes out of a membership of over 200,000." The article concluded by pointing out that had the 1841 constitution (still technically in effect) been followed 132,000 votes would have been required for adoption.

The 1889 General Conference

In May of 1889, the only other conservative bishop, Bishop Dickson, announced that he would accept the results of the referendum for the sake of denominational unity.¹⁰⁴ Wright was the lone bishop in opposition. Days before the May, 1889 General Conference, Wright's sons, Orville and Wilbur, published an article in their newspaper, the *West Side News*, positing that "if the new constitution is . . . declared to be the organic law of the church, it is expected that a division of the denomination will be the result." The article explained the conservative's position:

The present constitution is the only valid organic law of the church, and as the new work has not been adopted in accordance with [the present constitution] provisions, it still remains the constitution of the church, and those who place themselves under the new constitution thereby withdraw from the United Brethren Church, and form a

¹⁰⁰ Milton Wright, "Defense of Oregon Conference," *RT*, March 30, 1887, 197, and "Conventions for 1887," *Christian Conservator*, January 13, 1887, 2.

¹⁰¹ William Dillon, "The Holy Ghost," *Christian Conservator*, January 12, 1888, 4.

¹⁰² Milton Wright, "It Has Not Materialized," *Christian Conservator*, July 4, 1900, 3.

¹⁰³ "Vote of the Commission," *RT*, January 23, 1889, 53.

¹⁰⁴ John Dickson, "Submission or Division—Which?" *RT*, May 1, 1889, 281.

new church, entirely distinct from the old.¹⁰⁵

Thus, as Wright would later argue on the floor of General Conference, liberals were the schismatics. Those who held to the 1841 constitution were the true United Brethren in Christ.

When General Conference opened on May 9 in York, Pennsylvania, conservatives knew there was no possibility of keeping all UBCs in one anti-secrecy church. Their goal was to establish the illegitimacy of the new constitution. They presented petitions with 16,282 signatures protesting the work of the commission and debated its legitimacy. When the debate was ended, Wright stood and explained his vote. "Believing as I do that this whole movement is not wise, believing as I do that it is not constitutional, and believing as I do that this act will change this church on the first day, the 13th day of May, into a new church, I vote 'No.'"¹⁰⁶

Wright left the York Opera House that Saturday afternoon and did not return. The conservatives knew that sometime on Monday the new constitution would be declared to be in effect, and they did not want to be at the conference when the "illegal" act was committed. At 8:00 that morning, Wright caucused with fellow conservatives. A representative brought word that the constitution was proclaimed at 10:30 am. Conservatives, led by Wright, relocated to an Opera House, rented for this eventuality, to continue the "true" United Brethren in Christ General Conference.

Wright, as the only "loyal" bishop, opened the conference. After prayer, he said:

We have met here this afternoon under solemn and somewhat strained circumstances. I am not unmindful of your tears, brethren, and of your expressions of the deep trials under which you are placed by the transactions of the General Conference a few days ago.

He concluded with the words:

And now where we are we stand, and look to God for his guidance and for his help. We come not in the spirit of malice. That spirit pervades not the hearts of our brethren. But we come with tears; we come with sorrow. We come as if a part of our household had gone from us, and left us, even in the minority. And we do not come to speak bitter words, nor with the spirit of malice. It is enough to say that we feel bound my God to do what we do. We are assembled here for the purpose of continuing the *real General Conference, as it is, in the sight of the constitution and in the sight of God.*¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

Wright's opposition to secrecy was consistent with the UBC of his youth.¹⁰⁸ The revivalist church Wright had joined did not bend to popular

¹⁰⁵ "United Brethren General Conference," *Dayton West Side News*, May 11, 1889, 1.

¹⁰⁶ *Official Report of the Debates and Proceedings of the Twentieth General Conference of the United Brethren in Christ, Held in York, Pennsylvania, May 9–22, 1889* (Dayton OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1889), 165.

¹⁰⁷ Milton Wright, "Bishop Wright's Address," *Christian Cynosure*, May 23, 1889, 9. See also Dillon, "General Conference," 4.

¹⁰⁸ Drury, *History of the United Brethren*, 475.

opinion or taste. “The power and efficiency of the church” penned the editor of the *Conservator* in 1888, “is not measured by money, genius, or learning, but by the presence and power of the Holy Ghost.”¹⁰⁹ They were a minority, who had stood for principle, for fairness, for the 1841 constitution and confession, for staunch resistance to “popular sins,” and for Holy Spirit renewal of individuals and society.

The growth of the middle class in the late-nineteenth century and the power of the Gilded Age optimism, had made a church that would “brave the battle, ascend the steeps, and spread the fires of reformation until the moral wilderness is cleared away,”¹¹⁰ seem quaint. The UBC modernized to accommodate increasing pressure from more politically and economically advantaged memberships. They eased the restrictions that separated them from their worldly neighbors, and popularity.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ William Dillon, “The Holy Ghost,” *Christian Conservator*, January 12, 1888, 4.

¹¹⁰ Milton Wright, “Let us Break the Chains of Indolence,” *RT*, February 4, 1857, 89.

¹¹¹ Neither group recovered the scope or influence of earlier days. New constitution UBC merged with the Evangelical Church to form the Evangelical United Brethren in 1946, which was absorbed by the much larger Methodist Church to form The United Methodist Church in 1968.