The General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South met in Birmingham, Alabama, beginning Thursday, April 28, 1938. Among the matters of special interest to come before the conference was consideration of the plan to unite the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church. The debate and the vote on union were scheduled for Friday, April 29. When the day came the atmosphere in the General Conference was electric; everyone was aware of the importance of the issue before the body. The General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal and Methodist Protestant Churches had already approved the plan of union and so had the annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The vote in the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South was the last hurdle. If the vote proved favorable, Methodist union was assured. If the vote was negative, all was lost. Notwithstanding the fact that the annual conferences had voted overwhelmingly for union in their 1937 sessions, there was anxiety about the final outcome of the debate and vote in the General Conference. No doubt most of the delegates fully expected the General Conference to approve the plan of union by the necessary two-thirds majority and more. But it was well known that the opponents of the plan had come to Birmingham determined to resist to the end, even though most of them may have had no real hope of blocking the merger. The situation caused some uneasiness and anxiety among the friends of union in the General Conference.

The debate on the proposal for union began shortly after 9:00 o'clock on the morning of April 29, and, except for time out for lunch, it continued long into the afternoon. The opponents of union were given every opportunity to express their views, and many of them did. There were no parliamentary maneuvers to shut off debate or to hamper in any way the full expression of convictions by delegates on both sides of the question. Supporters and opponents of union alternated in addressing the conference. T. D. Ellis of the South Georgia Conference, general secretary of the board of church extension and for years a prominent leader in the Southern church, served as floor manager for those who favored union. During the day he moved up and down the aisles personally inviting delegates whom he knew to be opposed to union to take the floor and express their views to the conference.

Toward the end of the day the question was called for, the debate was closed, and the vote was taken. One by one the delegates voted
aye or no as their names were called by the secretary of the General Conference. Thus every member of the body put himself on record as either for or against the unification of American Methodism. During the long roll call there was almost breathless silence in the General Conference. When the result was announced the vote stood 434 for and 26 against union. Incidentally the aye and no votes were almost exactly the numbers predicted in advance by Bishop John M. Moore, one of the architects of the plan of union, and the one whose name, according to Bishop Edwin H. Hughes, will have to be written in letters of gold when the full story of the long struggle for Methodist union is recorded. The announcement of the outcome of the vote was greeted by long but restrained applause; the victors had no desire to make the vanquished feel that they were gloating. But even so in that moment those who favored union no doubt felt a mingled sense of relief, satisfaction, and joy.

On the evening of April 29, the General Conference delegates and visitors gathered to hear the fraternal delegates from the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Protestant Church. Bishop Edwin H. Hughes represented the former and Dr. James H. Straughn the latter church. At the time Straughn was president of the Methodist Protestant General Conference. A year later at the Uniting Conference he was elected a bishop in The Methodist Church.

Without doubt that evening with the fraternal delegates was the climax of the General Conference at Birmingham. The addresses delivered by Hughes and Straughn were appropriate, felicitous, eloquent, and sparkling with good humor. Hughes declared that he had written three different speeches in advance and had the manuscripts to prove it. He said he had come prepared for any eventuality. One address was to be delivered if the conference vote was favorable to union, the second if it was negative, and the third if the matter was to be postponed! The personal friends of Hughes and Straughn, and the ecclesiastical bodies they represented at Birmingham, had abundant cause to feel proud and grateful in view of the commendable manner in which they acquitted themselves on that occasion. At the close of their addresses they were given overwhelming ovations, and after adjournment so many people crowded onto the platform to express congratulations, gratitude, and best wishes that there was real danger of physical harm to both. Some friends actually formed a bodyguard to protect the two men. It was evident that the warm-hearted, friendly Southern delegates desired to express their appreciation and to claim Hughes and Straughn as their own, since at long last Methodist union was assured.

Bishop John M. Moore presided over the evening session with

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poise, dignity, and skill, and with a sure awareness of the historical importance of the occasion. At the close he asked the conference to sing “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.” Those participating had the feeling that that hymn had seldom if ever been sung with greater conviction, earnestness, and joy by a Methodist conference. Everyone seemed to feel the dramatic significance of the moment. It was indeed an epochal hour for American Methodism, and the people “rejoiced to see that day.”

Bishop Moore called on Dr. Straughn for the benediction. Straughn according to his own statement of what took place, “crossed the platform, asked Bishop Moore for his hand, then reached out to Bishop Hughes for his, and the three joined hands as in the photograph. At the suggestion of Bishop Moore the three repeated the apostolic benediction in unison.” Apparently the spectators did not immediately sense the full significance and symbolism of the act of the three leaders who stood with clasped hands and repeated the benediction in unison. So far as is known, no pictures were taken at the time. But by the next morning the dramatic significance of what Dr. Straughn and the two bishops had done had dawned on some minds. At an early hour telephones in the hotel rooms where the leaders were staying began to ring. The three men were brought together and pictures were taken of them in the pose they had assumed on the platform the evening before—Dr. Straughn standing in the center, flanked on the right by Bishop Moore and on the left by Bishop Hughes.

The picture of the three leaders in that pose will be found today in the homes of many American Methodists, in various Methodist archives, on the plaque affixed to the Straughn Building at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D. C., in the Pfeiffer Library at West Virginia Wesleyan College, and in the windows of chapels and churches throughout the country. The picture symbolized at the moment the new spirit of unity which had become reality in American Methodism, and it will continue as a graphic reminder of Methodist unification.

Bishop Hughes wrote in his autobiography, “After the addresses and the closing word of Bishop John M. Moore, the three chairmen of the Joint Commission clasped hands; and a photograph that became a flashlight symbol of Unification was hung in a gallery of remembrance. It may be anticlimax to write of another fact. My right hand had not completed its work. The benediction being pronounced, the crowds swarmed toward the platform. With Northern energy and with Southern fervency, former Methodist Episcopal, Methodist Episcopal, South, and Methodist Protestant adherents did some general handclasping. My crushed and blistered fingers ceased to func-
tion for three full days. My left hand was compelled to find out what my right hand was in the habit of doing." 2

In his address delivered at the dedication of both the plaque and the historical room in the library at West Virginia Wesleyan College, Bishop Straughn said, "Following the two addresses... I yielded to a sudden impulse. Going over to Bishop Moore I asked for his hand, and, with a quizzical look on his face wondering what I was doing, I drew him over to Bishop Hughes. I asked for his hand and I put the two hands together. North and South together at last! In fact six strong hands were interlocked and two strong men, men of great brain and devotion, men who loved their own churches with desperation, but who loved Methodism more, these brave men looked each other squarely in the eye. The great congregation looking on sobbed in their singing, for they too knew that the old conflict was forever done. . . . The photographers had come and gone. But the next morning by seven o'clock the phone began ringing. 'Would we be willing to reenact the scene of the night before, etc., etc.? Three different sets of photographers did their full duty and flooded the papers. It took desperate work on my part to secure the negative.' 3

Possibly Dr. Straughn's sudden impulse to draw the two bishops to his side and clasp hands with them as the three pronounced the benediction together served to emphasize the role of the Methodist Protestant Church in effecting Methodist unification. Straughn, the two bishops, and a number of others at Birmingham were old enough to remember that in 1908 Thomas Hamilton Lewis, president of Western Maryland College and also president of the Methodist Protestant General Conference, delivered a powerful address before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, appealing eloquently for the reunion of the major branches of American Methodism. Two years later Lewis was equally eloquent in delivering a similar message before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, at Asheville, North Carolina. Lewis' fervent appeal was favorably received by both the North and the South, and without doubt it quickened longings and hopes which had grown slowly during the long years of Methodist separation. It is not too much to say that Lewis' serious plea for union before the two General Conferences was the first step in the twentieth century toward the formation of The Methodist Church which was consummated thirty-one years later at Kansas City.

At the suggestion of Bishop Hughes, another picture of the three leaders was taken at Kansas City in 1939. For that pose Bishop Hughes requested that he be permitted to stand in the center with Bishop Moore and Bishop Straughn on either side of him. It was

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1 Ibid., 294.
2 The West Virginia Wesleyan College
first suggested that Bishop Moore stand on Bishop Hughes' right for the photograph, but Bishop Moore preferred the left, saying that his own likeness would show to better advantage from that angle. Bishop Straughn then stood on the right. Instead of all three men clasping hands as in the Birmingham picture, Bishops Moore and Straughn joined hands and then Bishop Hughes placed his arms around the shoulders of the other two.

Possibly Bishop Hughes had in mind a picture which would symbolize the mother church welcoming the children home! It was quite well known that he always regarded the division of 1844 as a defection rather than a separation or division, notwithstanding the decisions of the courts and the statement issued following the Cape May Conference in 1876, all of which agreed that what took place in 1844 was the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church that was organized in 1784.

But regardless of the interpretations which may be placed upon the schisms of the past, the fact remained in 1939 that the divided Methodist household was reunited and the members of the family were rejoicing. The pictures of the three leaders taken in different poses at Birmingham and Kansas City both symbolized that union. These two symbolic pictures have had, and will no doubt continue to have, an esteemed place in the minds and hearts of American Methodists generally. They will serve as reminders that the long train of events which began early in this century finally brought three branches of Methodism together to form The Methodist Church in 1939.

In both instances the pictures express the spirit of good will, affection, and unity which had at last come to reality in American Methodism, and while both should be esteemed and treasured, this writer would say that it is well to remember that what took place at Birmingham in 1938 was the original inspiration. What happened there was spontaneous, and as such it was beautifully symbolic and historically significant. At the same time it is only fair to say that the second picture carries equal authority and importance in symbolizing the consummation of Methodist unification.