THE CHRISTMAS CONFERENCE

By Warren Thomas Smith

Wesley's Emissaries Sail for America

A small vessel, the “Four Friends,” which departed from Bristol, England, Saturday morning, September 18, 1784, carried among its passengers three preachers: Thomas Coke, Richard Whatcoat, and Thomas Vasey. They came on a mission fraught with destiny. “At ten in the morning we sailed from King-Road for New-York. A breeze soon sprung up, which carried us with the help of the tides, about a hundred leagues from Bristol by Monday morning...” 1

The treaty officially ending the Revolutionary War had been signed in Paris, September 3, 1783. Now free from British rule, the American people were charting their unknown—and often dubious—future. Especially busy were the Methodists. For years there had been questions regarding the perpetuity of Wesley’s Methodist societies in America. Loosely organized and without an ordained clergymen, a multiplicity of questions arose, and chief among them were ordination and administration of the sacraments.

During the turbulent war years Methodism in America had grown, little thanks to Wesley’s Calm Address to Our American Colonies. In 1775 there had been 3,148 members in 10 circuits with 20 preachers. By 1784 there was an increase to 14,988 members, 46 circuits and 84 preachers. Very few of these Methodists were receiving baptism or the Lord’s Supper. (Methodists who received the sacraments did so from clergymen of other denominations.)

Thomas Coke, writing in characteristic grandiose terms, described the American situation:

The clergy [Anglican] abandoned their flocks; and in many instances the British missionaries [Methodists], following their example, forsook their spheres of action. Mr. Asbury alone, unterrified by the threatening sword, remained in his station. Surrounded by danger on every side, his vigor increased as his colleagues declined the work... 2

Perhaps one of the most revealing statements describing the religious climate in America is found in a letter written to John Wesley from the Anglican clergyman, Devereux Jarratt, June 29, 1773, who resided in Virginia.

Though we have no personal acquaintance, yet from what knowledge I have of you from common fame, and especially from your useful writings, I am induced to address you upon an affair of the last importance.

Virginia (the land of my nativity) has long groaned through a want of faithful Ministers of the gospel. Many souls are perishing for lack of knowledge: many crying for the bread of life, and no man is found to break it to them.

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We have ninety-five parishes in the Colony, and all, except one, I believe are supplied with Clergymen. But, alas!—you well understand the rest. I know of but one Clergyman of the Church of England who appears to have the power and spirit of vital religion; for all seek their own, and not the things that are Christ's! Is not our situation then truly deplorable? And does it not call loudly upon the friends of Zion, on your side the Atlantic, to assist us?

Many people here heartily join with me in returning our most grateful acknowledgments for the concern you have shewn for us, in sending so many Preachers to the American Colonies. Two have preached for some time in Virginia; Mr. Pilmoor and Mr. Williams. . . . But after all, what can two or three Preachers do in such an extended country as this? Cannot you send us a Minister of the Church of England, to be stationed in that one vacant parish, I mentioned above? . . . I wish you could see how matters are among us. This would serve instead of a thousand arguments, to induce you to exert yourself in this affair. . . . My dear friend and brother, I leave these things to your consideration: not doubting but, if in your power, you will help us. . . .

In their desire to administer the sacraments, a number of Methodist preachers in the south wished to take upon themselves the power of ordination. At the conference of 1777, at Deer Creek, Maryland, Thomas Rankin persuaded them to delay action.

The issue of ordination and the sacrament was raised again in 1778 at the conference meeting in Leesburg, Virginia. Most of those present were of the opinion that no vote should be taken until the following conference. There was no doubt, however, as to the growing sense of need among the men; they wanted to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper. They also saw no reason why they should not have ordination. Matters were rapidly coming to a head. Freeborn Garrettson saw that many were in favor of establishing an independent church as soon as possible. The next year, 1779, the conference at Judge Thomas White's in Delaware urged caution regarding any such steps. In May 1779, however, a group of preachers met at Broken Back Church, Fluvanna County, Virginia, and chose a committee of four, who would ordain themselves, then ordain others upon request. The 1780 conference requested Asbury to move to prevent any further such "ordinations."

September 3, 1780 Asbury implored Wesley, "This is the fourth letter I have written to you within the space of six months, . . . I must say our people are under great disadvantages. . . . If we had an itinerant clergyman all our wants of ordinances would be supplied, . . . if ever there should be peace between Britain and America, . . . nothing will prevent your coming and laying your bones in America as dear Mr. Whitefield has done . . . the people of God in America are dear to me." 5

Wesley had pleaded with Richard Lowth, Bishop of London, to ordain a preacher for America. August 10, 1780 he wrote Lowth

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asking him to ordain John Hoskins, who had introduced Methodism into Newfoundland in 1774. "But your Lordship observes, 'There are three ministers in that country already.' True, my Lord; but what are three to watch over all the souls in that extensive country? . . ." Chief objection to Hoskins was his failure to understand classical languages, to which Wesley gave his well known, and devastating, reply " . . . but your Lordship did . . . ordain . . . other persons who knew something of Greek and Latin, but who knew no more of saving souls than of catching whales." 6

John Wesley was ever mindful of the spiritual and theological qualifications of missionaries sent out to America. At no point is this demonstrated more clearly than in the letter which he addressed "To the Preachers in America" through Jesse Lee.

Bristol, October 3, 1783

Dear Brother,—I. Let all of you be determined to abide by the Methodist doctrine and discipline published in the four volumes of Sermons and the Notes upon the New Testament, together with the Large Minutes of the Conference.

2. Beware of preachers coming from Great Britain or Ireland without a full recommendation from me. Three of our travelling preachers have eagerly desired to go to America; but I could not approve of it by any means, because I am not satisfied that they thoroughly like either our discipline or our doctrine. I think they differ from our judgement in one or both . . .

3. Neither should you receive any preachers, . . . who will not be subject to the American Conference and cheerfully conform to the Minutes both of the American and English Conferences.

4. I do not wish our American brethren to receive any who make any difficulty of receiving Francis Asbury as the General Assistant. Undoubtedly the greatest danger to the work of God in America is likely to arise either from preachers coming from Europe, or from such as will arise from among yourselves speaking perverse things, or bringing in among you new doctrines, particularly Calvinism. You should guard against this with all possible care; for it is far easier to keep them out than to thrust them out.

Wesley was at last forced to take matters into his own hands. On Wednesday, September 1, 1784, he wrote, "Being now clear in my own mind, I took a step which I had long weighed in my mind, and appointed Mr. Whatcoat and Mr. Vasy to go to serve the desolate sheep in America." 8 Then, at 4:00 A.M., Thursday, September 2, 1784, in the home of John Castleman at 6 Dighton Street, Bristol, Wesley placed his hands on Thomas Coke, setting him apart as General Superintendent for America.

The Voyage to America

During the voyage Coke read biographies, devotional classics, and his Greek New Testament, and did some homework on ordination:

7 Ibid., pp. 190-191.
I have waded thro' Bishop Hoodley's Treatises on Conformity and Episcopacy; five hundred and sixty-six pages, octavo. He is a powerful reasoner, but is I believe wrong in his premises. In one place he allows the truth of St. Jerom's account of the Presbyters of Alexandria, who, as Jerom informs us, elected their own Bishops for two hundred years, from the time of St. Mark, to the time of Dionysius. In another place he makes this grand concession, viz, "I think not an uninterrupted line of succession of regularly ordained Bishops necessary."... But he really seems to prove one thing, That it was the universal practice of the Church from the latter end of the lives of the Apostles to the time of the Reformation, to invest the power of Ordination in a superior Church-Officer to the Presbyters.

Arrival in America

The party "... safely arrived at New York, praised be God,..." Wednesday, November 3, 1784. After inquiring, they were taken to "... our friend [Stephen] Sands, with whom we make our abode..."

In New York, John Dickins was serving Wesley Chapel—the John Street congregation. The parsonage, which joined the church may have been the place where Coke... opened Mr. Wesley's plan to Brother Dickins, the travelling Preacher stationed at this place, and he highly approves of it, says that all the Preachers must earnestly long for such a regulation, and that Mr. Asbury he is sure will agree to it. Coke continued, "He presses me earnestly to make it public, because as he most justly argues, Mr. Wesley has determined the point, and therefore it is not to be investigated, but complied with." But no official announcement was made. Coke also learned "... the whole country has been, ..., expecting [Coke's party] and Mr. Asbury looking out for me for some time...." That evening Coke preached to "a serious, little congregation,..." Dickins had long been interested in building a Methodist school in America. Doubtless he and Coke discussed the possibility. Establishing a college was certainly one of Coke's fondest dreams.

Coke spent two more days preaching in New York, then set out by stage for Philadelphia, "... and was received most kindly by Brother Baker, merchant, in Market-Street." He preached Sunday, November 7 "... in the morning and afternoon in St. Paul's Church [Anglican] at the desire of Dr. Magaw, and in the evening to a large congregation in our own Chapel [St. George's]..." where he made the first public announcement of Wesley's plans.

Monday 8. Dr. Magaw and Dr. White, two of the Clergymen [Anglican] of this city made me a visit: Dr. White offered me his Church on the Sunday following.

Coke carefully avoided mentioning Wesley's ordination plans to the Anglicans. In writing to White in 1791, he offered his apology for this omission. Coke and Whatcoat then moved south, hoping to find Asbury.

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Saturday 13. I was most kindly received by Mr. Basset, one of the Executive-Council for the State of Delaware. He is not in society, but is building us a large Chapel. Here I met with an excellent young man, Free-born Garretson [sic]. He seems to be all meekness and love, yet all activity. He makes me quite ashamed, for he invariably rises at four in the morning, and not only he, but several others of the Preachers: and now blushing I brought back my alarm to four o'clock.13

Meeting of Coke and Asbury

The subsequent meeting of Coke and Asbury took place on Sunday, November 14, a few miles from Dover, Delaware, at Barratt's Chapel, where the midyear quarterly meeting was held and pastoral exchanges were to be made.14 Earlier Whatcoat had preached in the courthouse.

... About ten o'clock we arrived at Barrett's-Chapel [sic], so called from the name of our friend that built it, and who went to heaven a few days ago. In this Chapel, in the midst of a forest, I had a noble congregation, ... After the sermon, a plain, robust man came up to me in the pulpit, and kissed me: I thought it could be no other than Mr. Asbury, and I was not deceived. ... 15

This dramatic meeting, now marked by a bronze star in the floor of Barratt's Chapel, surely moved the congregation to tears. Asbury described the scene:

I came to Barratt's Chapel: here, to my great joy, I met these dear men of God, Dr. Coke, and Richard Whatcoat, we were greatly comforted together. The Doctor preached on "Christ our wisdome, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption." Having had no opportunity of conversing with them before public worship, I was greatly surprised to see brother Whatcoat assist by taking the cup in the administration of the sacrament. ... 16

Asbury knew nothing of the ordination plans. Obviously he had not yet received this important letter from Wesley:

Norwich
Octo. 31, 1784

My dear Brother,

Some weeks before you receive this, I hope you will see Dr. Coke (with his associates) & find him a man after your own heart, seeking neither Profit, Pleasure nor Honour: But simply, to save the Souls for whom Christ has died, & to promote his Kingdom upon earth. You are aware of the danger on either hand: And I scarce know which is the greater? One or the other, so far as it takes place will overturn Methodism from the foundation: Either our travelling Preachers turning Independents, & gathering Congregations each for himself: Or procuring Ordination in a regular way, & accepting Parochial Cures. If you can find means of guarding against both evils the work of God will prosper more than ever.

I suppose the Doctor & you have now considered at large, what Method will be most effectual, to fix the work on such a stable foundation as will not easily be overturned. If that good man, Mr. Ogden,17 cou'd be prevailed on, to join with you heart and hand, it might be of admirable service

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to the cause of God, & such a threefold [cord?—omitted] wou'd not soon be broken. But herein you must proceed with the utmost caution: Go on slowly, step by step, lest you sh'd put it into the power of any one to hurt you: Let not him that believeth make haste! I know not but he will do you most good, at a little distance. You will soon be able to judge whether this wou'd not also be the case, with regard to Mr. J—[illegible]. Admit none into the closest union with you, but those whose heart is altogether as your heart.

When you have once settled your plan with respect to the Provinces, you will easily form a regular connexion with our Society in Antigua on the one hand, & with those in Nova Scotia & Newfoundland on the other. John Hilton's is a very harmless performance. It will soon die & be forgotten. I don't believe Anthony Benezet [a Quaker school teacher of Philadelphia] ever recommended it. I shall be glad to see the Papers wCh you speak of. Probably they have a place in the Magazine.

Those who hoped for a division among the Methodists here, are totally disappointed. As to your having a Bishop from England in every Province, it will be long enough before that plan is brought into execution. Meanwhile, use y' means you have: Only with much circumspection & much Frayer! I am

Your Affectionate Friend & Brother
J Wesley

To / M' Francis Asbury / at M' Spragg's / in /
New York

A Conference Is to Be Held

Coke gives a florid account of the conclusion to the service at Barratt's Chapel, "... I administered the sacrament after preaching to, I think, five or six hundred communicants, and afterwards we held a love-feast. It was the best season I ever knew, except one in Charlemount in Ireland." 20

The preachers immediately went to Mrs. Barratt's home, where, according to Coke:

... After dining in company with eleven of our Preachers at our Sister Barret's [sic], about a mile from the Chapel, Mr. Asbury and I had a private conversation concerning the future management of our affairs in America. He informed me that he had received some intimations of my arrival on the Continent; and as he thought it probable I might meet him that day, and might have something of importance to communicate to him from Mr. Wesley, he had therefore collected a considerable number of the Preachers to form a council; and, if they were of opinion that it would be expedient immediately to call a Conference, it should be done. They were accordingly sent for, and after debate, were unanimously of that opinion.21

Coke's delightful optimism frequently glossed over unpleasant realities. There may have been strong opposition to the proposal. Edward J. Drinkhouse maintains that at first, six of the preachers were against Wesley's plan, and only four were in favor of it. Five additional men arrived, voiced approval, and it was then agreed to call a conference.22

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18 John Hilton may be the preacher who caused considerable controversy in Bristol and "had withdrawn from the itinerancy seven years earlier, ..." see Proceedings, ibid.
19 Quoted in Proceedings, ibid. This valuable letter is at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.
20 Coke, Journal, p. 16.
21 Ibid.
22 Edward J. Drinkhouse, History of Methodist Reform . . . (Baltimore, 1899), I, p. 275. This is given as a traditional story.
Asbury, in contrast to Coke, was the dour soul who once prayed "... Lord, make me more serious. ..." He, too, evidenced caution. While he had been in America since 1771, his background was English, and though he criticized a slumbering Establishment, he was reluctant to change it or withdraw from it. Asbury wrote:

... I was shocked when first informed of the intention of these my brethren in coming to this country: it may be of God. My answer then was, if the preachers unanimously choose me, I shall not act in the capacity I have hitherto done by Mr. Wesley's appointment. The design of organizing the Methodists into an Independent Episcopal Church was opened to the preachers present, and it was agreed to call a general conference, to meet at Baltimore the ensuing Christmas; as also that brother Garrettson go off to Virginia to give notice thereof to our brethren in the south.

"Perhaps Asbury's greatest contribution to the structure of the new church," according to Umphrey Lee and W. W. Sweet, "was made in his refusal to concur in any plan to organize a Methodist church in America that did not rest on the vote of the preachers. ... By Asbury's act the General Conference became the governing body of the American church."

At the outset, it was made clear that if a new church was to be formed, it would be through the motions, at least, of the democratic process, and not by fiat of John Wesley. It may be that Asbury was thinking of the difficult relations he had experienced with Thomas Rankin. Rankin had been sent to America in 1773, empowered by Wesley to be his General Assistant in charge of the preachers and the societies. Rankin's administration which continued for five years was helpful in some ways but unfortunate in others. It was definitely unsatisfactory to Asbury. Therefore, in 1784 Asbury maneuvered for an independent American Methodist church. He desired connection with but no subjection to British Methodism. Coke was impressed with Asbury, saying, "I exceedingly reverence Mr. Asbury; he has so much simplicity, like a child, so much wisdom and consideration, so much meekness and love; ... so much command and authority ... exactly qualified for a primitive bishop."

The decision was made; a conference was to be held. "We therefore sent off Freeborn Garrettson," said Coke, "like an arrow, from North to South, directing him to send messengers to the right and left, and to gather all the Preachers together at Baltimore on Christmas-Eve."

One of the best sources on what happened at the Christmas Conference is Jesse Lee's A Short History of the Methodists, though

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25 Coke, Journal, in The Arminian Magazine (Philadelphia, 1789), I, p. 244. There are a number of changes in the several editions of Coke's Journal.
26 Coke, Journal, p. 16.
regrettably it is not an eye-witness account. Lee blamed Garrettson for not notifying all the preachers about the call for the conference.

Mr. Freeborn Garrettson undertook to travel to the south, in order to give notice to all the travelling preachers of this intended meeting. But being fond of preaching by the way, and thinking he could do the business by writing, he did not give timely notice to the preachers who were in the extremities of the work; and of course several of them were not at that conference. 27

Garrettson himself said, “I set out for Virginia and Carolina. . . . My dear Master enabled me to ride about twelve hundred miles in about six weeks.” 28

Adam Fonerden, a local preacher in Baltimore, wrote Stephen Donaldson on November 28, 1784, “We have three English preachers arriv’d . . . [they] are to Organize us as a Church, to have a Liturgy & administration of ordinances. But as this is not to be forc’d upon us, but left to our Choice. . . .” 29

The Pre-Christmas Tours

“Mr. Asbury has also drawn up for me a route of about eight hundred or a thousand miles in the meantime . . .” noted Coke. This tour filled Coke’s time until the conference and provided an introduction to America. Asbury’s “Black Harry”—Harry Hosier—was the guide. During “. . . this little tour,” Coke said he “baptised more children and adults” than during a lifetime if “stationed in an English parish.” 30

Whatcoat was busy riding and preaching in Maryland. Asbury set out in another direction. “Tuesday [November] 16, Rode to Bohemia Manor where I met with Thomas Vasey, . . . .” 31 The two then went down the western shore of Maryland. “We rode twenty miles to Frederick quarterly meeting, where brother Vasey preached on ‘The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.’ . . .” 32

Asbury in his usual solemn fashion, noted, almost with personal misgivings:

Friday, [November] 26. I observed this day as a day of fasting and prayer, that I might know the will of God in the matter that is shortly to come before our conference; the preachers and people seem to be much pleased with the projected plan; I myself am led to think it is of the Lord. I am not tickled with the honour to be gained—I see danger in the way. My soul waits upon God, that he may lead us in the way we should go! Part of my time is, and must necessarily be, taken up with preparing for the conference. 33

Asbury then wrote to his parents:

29 MS letter, in Lovely Lane Museum, quoted in The History of American Meth-
My dear Father and Mother:

I write a few lines to let you know I am in health. . . . I was thankful to God that I heard of your welfare by Brother Whatcoat who is safe arrived to help us, I was made joyful above measure at the arrival of our British Brethren. We are greatly rejoiced that if we are not worthy to have Mr. Wesley, (whom our Preachers and people venerate if possible, more than the Europeans,) we are favoured with the man of his right hand, Dear Dr. Coke,—if only for a few months. . . .

Plans for the Conference

"Tuesday [December] 14" Asbury joined Coke "... This side of the Bay: between us we have got about one thousand pounds sterling subscribed for the College." 35 Very likely the two inspected the site for the college. "I met Dr. Coke at Abingdon," said Asbury. "Mr. Richard Dallam kindly taking him there in his coach;... We talked of our concerns in great love." 36 Dallam was to become one of the first trustees of Cokesbury College.

As the conference drew near, Asbury expressed less and less reserve regarding the new office he was about to assume. He even sounded a happy note: "Wednesday [December] 15. My soul was much blest at the communion, where I believe all were more or less engaged with God. I feel it necessary daily to give up my own will. The Dr. preached a great sermon on, 'He that loveth father or mother more than me', &c." 37 Coke and Asbury "... set off for our valuable friend's Mr. G [Henry Dorsey Gough]. His new mansion-house [Perry Hall], which he had lately built, is the most elegant in this State. . . ." 38

Coke, Asbury, Whatcoat, Vasey, and William Bleck spent the week of December 17 to December 24 making plans, using Wesley's Large Minutes as a guide. "Here I have a noble room to myself, where Mr. Asbury and I may, in the course of a week, mature everything for the Conference," 39 wrote Coke.

Asbury commented, that on Saturday, December 18, he "spent the day at Perry Hall, partly in preparing for conference." He added that he read the "third volume of the British Arminian Magazine. . . ." He, Coke and the others continued their conversations "until Friday, the twenty-fourth." 40

The Conference

"... We then rode to Baltimore . . .?" observed Asbury, with characteristic terseness, "where we met a few preachers." 41 Whatcoat tells us "... it was a severe frost; . . ." Fortunately, the

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34 Asbury, Letters, III, p. 39. While the year is not given, there can be little doubt that it is 1784.
36 Ibid. Also see Phoebus, op. cit., p. 21.
37 Ibid.
38 Coke, Journal, p. 22.
39 Ibid. Also see Phoebus, op. cit., I, pp. 473-474.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
Baltimore Methodists provided a new stove for Lovely Lane Chapel and thoughtfully put back on the benches.42

The conference opened at 10 a.m., Thomas Coke presiding. "On Christmas Eve we opened our Conference, . . . I admire the American Preachers. We had near sixty of them present. The whole number is eighty-one. They are indeed a body of devoted, disinterested men, but most of them young. . . ." 43 Youthfulness was a marked characteristic of this assemblage. Our fathers in the faith were not greybeards.

The Oxford Doctor charmed, if he did not awe, the preachers. Thomas Ware commented:

Dr. Coke, on his way to the Christmas Conference, passed through our circuit. I met him . . . in Queen Anne's [County], on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and was not at first at all pleased with his appearance. His stature, his complexion, and his voice, were those of a woman rather than of a man; and his manners were too courtly for me, so unlike the grave, and as I conceive, Apostolic deportment of Mr. Asbury. He had several appointments in our circuit, to each of which I conducted him; and before we parted I saw many things in him to admire, and no longer marvelled as at first, at the selection the father of the Methodists had made of a man to serve us in the capacity he sustained.44

Awe was not so great as to prevent the young preachers from opposing Coke when they deemed it necessary.

Wesley's "Circular Letter" was read as the first order of business:

Bristol, September 10, 1784

1. By a very uncommon train of providences many of the Provinces of North America are totally disjointed from their Mother Country and erected into independent States. The English Government has no authority over them, either civil or ecclesiastical, any more than over the States of Holland. A civil authority is exercised over them, partly by the Congress, partly by the Provincial Assemblies. But no one either exercises or claims any ecclesiastical authority at all. In this peculiar situation some thousands of the inhabitants of these States desire my advice; and in compliance with their desire I have drawn up a little sketch.

2. Lord King's Account of the Primitive Church convinced me many years ago that bishops and presbyters are the same order, and consequently have the same right to ordain. For many years I have been importuned from time to time to exercise this right by ordaining part of our travelling preachers. But I have still refused, not only for peace's sake, but because I was determined as little as possible to violate the established order of the National Church to which I belong.

3. But the case is widely different between England and North America. Here there are bishops who have a legal jurisdiction: in America there are none, neither any parish ministers. So that for some hundred miles together there is none either to baptize or to administer the Lord's supper. Here, therefore, my scruples are at an end; and I conceive myself at full liberty, as I violate no order and invade no man's right by appointing and sending labourers into the harvest.

4. I have accordingly appointed Dr. Coke and Mr. Francis Asbury to be

Joint Superintendents over our brethren in North America; as also Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey to act as elders among them, by baptizing and administering the Lord's Supper. And I have prepared a Liturgy little differing from that of the Church of England (I think, the best constituted National Church in the World), which I advise all the travelling preachers to use on the Lord's Day in all the congregations, reading the Litany only on Wednesdays and Fridays and praying extempore on all other days. I also advise the elders to administer the Supper of the Lord on every Lord's Day.

5. If any one will point out a more rational and scriptural way of feeding and guiding these poor sheep in the wilderness, I will gladly embrace it. At present I cannot see any better method than that I have taken.

6. It has, indeed, been proposed to desire the English bishops to ordain part of our preachers for America. But to this I object; (1) I desired the Bishop of London to ordain only one, but could not prevail. (2) If they consented, we know the slowness of their proceedings; but the matter admits of no delay. (3) If they would ordain them now, they would expect to govern them. And how grievously would this entangle us! (4) As our American brethren are now totally disentangled both from the State and from the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again either with the one or the other. They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church. And we judge it best that they should stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has so strangely set them free.46

Liturgy

"Two basic documents were adopted by the conference." One was John Wesley's abridgment of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, which he renamed The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America. It contained:

The Order for Morning Prayer, Every Lord's Day
The Order for Evening Prayer, Every Lord's Day
The Litany
A Prayer and Thanksgiving to be used every Lord's Day
Collects, Epistles and Gospels to be used through the Year.
The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper
The Ministration of Baptism of Infants
The Ministration of Baptism to such as are of Riper Years
The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony
The Communion of the Sick
The Order for the Burial of the Dead
Select Psalms
The Form and Manner of Making and Ordaining of Superintendents, Elders and Deacons:
The Form and Manner of Making of Deacons
The Form and Manner of Ordaining of Elders
The Form of Ordaining of a Superintendent
Articles of Religion.46

One of the most important sections was Wesley's revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles, reduced to Twenty-Four. These, with one article "Of the Rulers of the United States of America" added, were accepted by the conference.

46 Wesley, Letters, VII, pp. 238-239.
46 Wesley, Letters, VII, pp. 238-239.
46 The History of American Methodism, I, pp. 216-217. Baptismal services, both for infants and adults, are given in full, pp. 217-221.
I. Of Faith in the Holy Trinity; II. Of the Word, or Son of God, who was made very Man; III. Of the Resurrection of Christ; IV. Of the Holy Ghost; V. Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation; VI. Of the Old Testament; VII. Of Original or Birth-sin; VIII. Of Free-will; IX. Of the Justification of Man; X. Of Good Works; XI. Of Works of Supererogation; XII. Of Sin after Justification; XIII. Of the Church; XIV. Of Purgatory; XV. Of speaking in the Congregation in such a Tongue as the People Understand; XVI. Of the Sacraments; XVII. Of Baptism; XVIII. Of the Lord’s Supper; XIX. Of both Kinds; XX. Of the One Oblation of Christ, finished upon the Cross; XXI. Of the Marriage of Ministers; XXII. Of the Rites and Ceremonies of Churches; XXIII. Of Christian Men’s Goods; XXIV. Of a Christian Man’s Oath. A twenty-fifth article, “Of the Rulers of the United States of America” was added as number twenty-three. 47

From the original Thirty-Nine Articles, Wesley omitted:

III. Of the going down of Christ into Hell; VIII. Of the Three Creeds; XIII. Of Works before Justification; XV. Of Christ alone without sin; XVII. Of Predestination and Election; XVIII. Of obtaining eternal Salvation only by the Name of Christ; XX Of the Authority of the Church; XXI. Of the Authority of General Councils; XXIII. Of Ministering in the Congregation; XXVI. Of the Unworthiness of Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacrament; XXIX. Of the Wicked, which eat not the body of Christ in the use of the Lord’s Supper; XXXIII. Of excommunicate Persons, how they are to be avoided; XXXV. Of Homilies; XXXVI. Of Consecration of Bishops and Ministers; XXXVII. Of the Civil Magistrates. 48

Speculation has arisen regarding possible changes made by Coke in Wesley’s original design. Drinkhouse insists that Coke possessed the “little sketch” mentioned by Wesley which was never made public. Others have charged Coke with tampering with the Apostles’ Creed, omitting the “descended into hell” clause. 49

In all probability Coke brought the Sunday Service from England, printed but unbound, thus saving duty on books. It has been discovered that in the process of having the pages bound, one page at least, was reprinted omitting certain manual acts in the baptismal service. Was this Coke’s doing? Some believe that John Wesley intended the manual acts to be printed, and that Coke deleted them. (Coke had supervision of the printing of the Service.) Wesley later discovered the omission and probably had new pages reprinted and inserted in the copies. Wesley wrote Walter Churchey, June 20, 1789, “... Dr. Coke made two or three little alterations in the Prayer-Book without my knowledge. I took particular care throughout to alter nothing merely for altering’s sake...”. 50

Many preachers did not accept the Sunday Service, Jesse Lee among them. Lee wrote that “... some of the preachers... had been long accustomed to pray extempore... they could pray better, and with more devotion while their eyes were shut,... After a few years the prayer book was laid aside,...”. 51

Lee also makes this telling observation: “The Superintendents,
and some of the Elders, introduced the custom of wearing gowns and bands, but it was opposed by many of the preachers, . . . who looked upon it as needless and superfluous.” 52

**Discipline**

The second document adopted by the conference was a *Discipline*, to be written and published by Coke and Asbury in 1785 as *Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D. and the Rev. Francis Asbury . . . composing a Form of Discipline*. It appeared as a thirty-five page book with eighty-one questions and answers. In form, it followed Wesley’s *Large Minutes* of 1780. A sampling of the questions and answers gives the tenor of the first *Discipline*. 53

At the beginning, deference was shown John Wesley as well as a willingness to be on good terms with the English brethren, but a frontier spirit of independence was unmistakably clear.

**Question 2. What can be done in order to the future Union of the Methodists?**

A. During the Life of the Rev. Mr. Wesley, we acknowledge ourselves his sons in the Gospel, ready in Matters belonging to Church-Government, to obey his commands. And we do engage after his Death, to do every Thing that we judge consistent with the Cause of Religion in *America* and the political Interests of these States, to preserve and promote our Union with the Methodists in *Europe*.

The Revolution was very much in the background of Methodist thinking. The break from England, both in church and state, had made Americans free to govern themselves.

**Question 3. As the Ecclesiastical as well as Civil Affairs of these United States have passed through a very considerable Change by the Revolution, what Plan of Church-Government shall we hereafter pursue?**

A. We will form ourselves into an Episcopal Church under the Direction of Superintendents, Elders, Deacons, and Helpers, . . .

**What was the mission of the new church?** Did it have a special God-given calling? **Question 4** asked, “What may we reasonably believe to be God’s Design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?” **Answer,** “To reform the Continent and to spread scriptural Holiness over these Lands.”

John Wesley had done his work well. Discipline was to be a marked characteristic of Methodism in both the Old and New Worlds. If one wished to attend meeting, one had to be a disciplined member in good standing.

**Q. 11 . . . How often shall we permit strangers to be present at the meeting of the society?**

A. At every other meeting of the society in every place, let no stranger be admitted. At other times they may; but the same person not above twice or thrice.


Attendance at love-feasts was not to be taken for granted. Casualness in participation was unthinkable. “How often shall we permit strangers to be present at our Love-feasts?” “Let them be admitted with the utmost caution,” was the warning. “And the same person on no account above twice, unless he becomes a member.”

Membership was not easily come by. Sincerity of purpose had to be demonstrated. “How shall we prevent improper persons from insinuating into the society?” “1. Give tickets to none,” was the instruction, “till they are recommended by a leader, with whom they have met at least two months on trial.” A further word of caution was, “2. Give notes to none but those who are recommended by one you know, or till they have met three or four times in a class.”

The time and place for the reception of new members became very significant. “When shall we admit new members?”

A. In large towns, admit them into the society on the Sunday following the quarterly meeting. Then also read the names of those that are excluded. In country places, it has always been a custom to admit persons into our society, at any time when the circuit preacher who has the charge of the circuit is present.

New terms needed definition. Wesley had sent the American Methodists a superintendent. What was he to be? What was his role in the life of the church? “What is the Office of a Superintendent?”

A. To ordain Superintendents, Elders, and Deacons; to preside as a Moderator in our Conferences; to fix the Appointments of the Preachers for the several Circuits: and in the Intervals of the Conference, to change, receive or suspend Preachers, as Necessity may require; and to receive Appeals from the Preachers and People, and decide them.

The same question was raised regarding an elder. “What is the Office of an Elder?” His duty was “To administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and to perform all the other Rites prescribed by our Liturgy.”

Next, the question was asked, “What is the Office of a Deacon?” “A. To baptize in the Absence of an Elder, to assist the Elder in the Administration of the Lord’s Supper, to marry, bury the Dead, and read the Liturgy to the People as prescribed, except what relates to the Administration of the Lord’s Supper.”

Duties and privileges of the helper were listed, and as in the case of a deacon, there was emphasis on his limitations regarding the administration of the communion. “What is the Office of a Helper?” “A. 1. To preach. 2. To meet the Society and the Bands weekly. 3. To visit the sick. 4. To meet the Leaders weekly. . . . N.B. No Helper, or even Deacon, shall on any Pretence at any Time whatever administer the Lord’s Supper.”

Participation in the communion was regarded as an act of such meaning that it must not be taken for granted or presumed upon. “Are there any Directions to be given concerning the Administration of the Lord’s Supper?” The answer was clear, “. . . 2. Let no Person who is not a Member of the Society, be admitted. . . . without a Sacrament-Ticket, . . . .”
Education became very much a part of the Methodist vocabulary. Question fifty-one asked, "... What shall we do for the Rising Generation?" "A... 5. Preach expressly on Education. 'But I have no Gift for this.' Gift or no Gift, you are to do it; else you are not called to be a Methodist Preacher."

A word on preaching was in order. "What is the best general Method of Preaching?" The answer suggested three essentials, "1. To convince; 2. To offer Christ: 3. To build up: And to do this in some measure in every Sermon."

What of buildings? A firm rule was drawn up and it was to be adhered to rigidly. "Q. 74. Is any Thing advisable with regard to Building? A. Let all our Chapels be built plain and decent; but not more expensively than is absolutely unavoidable: Otherwise the Necessity of raising Money will make Rich Men necessary to us...."

Of special interest is Question 42, "What Methods can we take to extirpate Slavery?" A... We view it as contrary to the Golden Law of God on which hang all the Law and the Prophets, and the Unalienable Rights of Mankind, as well as every Principle of the Revolution, to hold in the deepest Debasement, in a more abject Slavery than is perhaps to be found in any Part of the World except America, so many Souls that are all capable of the Image of God. every Person concerned, who will not comply... shall have Liberty quietly to withdraw himself from our Society within the twelve months succeeding the Notice given."

Much of Methodism's opposition to slavery dated from Wesley's "Thoughts Upon Slavery" of 1774, "... Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion." The 1780 conference in America had boldly stated "... slavery is contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature."

The conference of 1783 had firmly resolved, "let every assistant deal faithfully and plainly..." with each local preacher who owned slaves. The conference in the spring of 1784 voted to expel members who "buy and sell" slaves.

Every member in our society who has slaves, in those states where the laws will admit of freeing them, shall, after notice given him by the preacher, within twelve months, (except in Virginia, and there within two years) legally execute and record an instrument, whereby he sets free every slave in his possession, those who are from forty to forty-five, ...

Naming the Church

Asbury plainly stated that "... it was agreed to form ourselves into an Episcopal Church, ... and to have superintendents, elders, anddeacons..."

John Dickins proposed the name Methodist Episcopal Church in America, and it was adopted.

When the Discipline was prepared, it was noted, "... following the counsel of Mr. John Wesley, who recommended the episcopal
mode of church government, we thought it best to become an episcopal church..."

Asbury continued his record, "... When the conference was seated, Dr. Coke and myself were unanimously elected to the superintendency of the Church, and my ordination followed, after being previously ordained deacon and elder,..."

Thomas Ware, in his article, "The Christmas Conference of 1784," provides an interesting glimpse of the proceedings:

The order of things devised by him [Wesley] for our organization as a church, filled us with solemn delight. ... We did, therefore, according to the best of our knowledge, receive and follow the advice of Mr. Wesley, as stated in our form of Discipline. After Mr. Wesley's letter, appointing Dr. Coke and Mr. Asbury joint superintendents over the Methodists in America, had been read, analyzed, and cordially approved by the conference, a question arose what name we should take. I thought to myself, I was content that we should call ourselves the Methodist Church, and so whispered to a brother that sat near me. But one proposed, I think it was John Dickins, that we should call ourselves the Methodist Episcopal Church. Mr. Dickins was, in the estimation of his brethren, a man of sterling sense and sterling piety; and there were few men on the conference floor heard with greater deference than he. The most of the preachers had been brought up in what was called the Church of England; and all being agreed that the plan of general superintendency was a species of Episcopacy, the motion was carried, without, I think, a dissenting voice. There was not, to the best of my recollection, the least agitation on this question. Had the conference indulged the least suspicion that the name they were about to take, would in the least degree cross the views or feelings of Mr. Wesley, it would have been abandoned; for the name of Wesley was inexpressibly dear to the Christmas Conference, and to none more so than to Asbury and Coke. ...

Ordinations

Drinkhouse raises the question of visitors attending the conference sessions. Large crowds did attend the preaching services, but what of the business sessions? Drinkhouse's view is "... during the deliberations Wesley's and Asbury's method of closed doors was observed." He cites Alexander McCaine's observation, "We have never seen any document which would justify us in saying that sittings and deliberations of that Conference were conducted with open doors."

If McCaine is correct, this means that preachers alone not only selected those who were to be ordained, but did the selecting in an atmosphere of executive sessions. Laymen, it would seem, did not so much as observe the voting. Several paintings of the Christmas Conference—the ordination of Asbury, chiefly—show Henry Dorsey Gough present. But this would have been a preaching service, not a time for debate on matters of business.

Francis Asbury was thus unanimously elected, and Thomas Coke unanimously received, as superintendents by the conference. "Mr. Asbury was appointed a superintendent by Mr. Wesley, yet he

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66 Minutes, 1785.
would not submit to be ordained, unless he could be voted in by the conference: when it was put to vote, he was unanimously chosen...."

Asbury was ordained deacon on Christmas Day. On the twenty-sixth he was made elder. Coke preached A Sermon on the Godhead of Christ. Later the message was printed and dedicated "... to the Rev. Francis Asbury, Superintendent, and the Elders, Deacons and Helpers of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America." Using John 1:1 as the text, Coke began his rather tedious sermon with a reference to Athanasius Contra Mundum, "The Great Defender of the Divinity of our Lord, had the whole stream of the Christian world to cope with.” Coke went on to say that reason alone could not prove the divinity of Christ:

Can you explain how the grass grows, or the sun shines? Can you unfold to us the nature of that union which subsists between Matter and Spirit? Can you discover how the small supersicies [sic] of the optic nerve display to the mind the whole hemisphere at once? ... how much more the nature of God and the mode of his existence."

On December 27 Coke set apart Francis Asbury for the office of superintendent. He was assisted by Vasey and Whatcoat, and, at Asbury’s request, Philip William Otterbein, pastor of the German church in Baltimore. Coke provides an interesting comment, "(Brother Asbury has so high an opinion of Mr. Otterbine [sic], that we admitted him, at brother Asbury’s desire, to lay hands on brother Asbury with us, on his being ordained bishop.)”

Coke prepared Asbury’s ordination certificate:

Know all men by these presents, That I, Thomas Coke, Doctor of Civil Law; late of Jesus College, in the University of Oxford, Presbyter of the Church of England, and Superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America; under the protection of Almighty God, and with a single eye to his glory; by the imposition of my hands, and prayer, (being assisted by two ordained elders,) did on the twenty-fifth day of this month, December, set apart Francis Asbury for the office of a deacon in the aforesaid Methodist Episcopal Church. And also on the twenty-sixth day of the said month, did by the imposition of my hands, and prayer, (being assisted by the said elders,) set apart the said Francis Asbury for the office of a deacon in the aforesaid Methodist Episcopal Church. And on the twenty-seventh of the said month, being the day of the date hereof, have, by the imposition of my hands, and prayer, (being assisted by the said elders,) set apart the said Francis Asbury for the office of a superintendent in the said Methodist Episcopal Church, a man whom I judge to be well qualified for that great work. And I do hereby recommend him to all whom it may concern, as a fit person to preside over the flock of Christ. In testimony whereof I have hereunto

*Lee, op. cit., p. 89.

"Thomas Coke, L.L.D., The Substance of a Sermon on the Godhead of Christ. Preached at Baltimore in the State of Maryland, on the 26th day of December, 1784 before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. (London: J. Paramore, 1785.) p. 7. This is one of two Coke writings later to be translated and published in Welsh.

set my hand and seal this twenty-seventh day of December, in the year of our Lord 1784.

Thomas Coke


Richard Whatcoat wrote of the action of the conference:

... we agreed to form a Methodist Episcopal Church, in which the Liturgy should be read, and the sacraments administered by a superintendent, elders, and deacons, ordained, by a Presbytery, using the Episcopal form, as prescribed in the Rev. Mr. John Wesley’s prayer book. Persons to be ordained are to be nominated by the superintendent, elected by the Conference, and ordained by imposition of the hands of superintendent and elders; the superintendent has a negative voice.

Adam Fonerden gives an interesting interpretation of ministerial orders:

... It being now well known that in primitive times the Office of Presbyter or Elder which are synonymous [sic] Terms, & Byshop [sic] were one and the same with only this Small difference that the Chief or prime presbyter was sometimes called a Byshop. With us, the Superintendent answers to Byshop, who is to have the Oversight of all & we think it is a better name, because modern Byshops being Lords are generally devourers of the flock, & a Curse to the people. & the very Name conveys a disagreeable savour. Our Elders answer to presbyter which are the same in office, and Deacons are to assist the Elders in administering the Lords Supper, & may baptise [in] the Elders Absence.

Dr. Coke spoke of the preachers in glowing terms. “The spirit in which they conducted themselves in choosing the Elders, was most pleasing. I believe they acted without being at all influenced either by friendship, resentment, or prejudice, both in choosing and rejecting.”

Thirteen preachers were elected elders. Freeborn Garrettson and James O. Cromwell were ordained for Nova Scotia. Jeremiah Lambert was ordained for Antigua in the West Indies. Beverly Allen was elected to elder’s orders but was not ordained until the conference was held at Major Green Hill’s home in North Carolina, the latter part of April, 1785. Henry Willis was also elected to elder’s orders, but not being present, was ordained a few weeks later by the superintendent and one elder. The other elders were


Three men were elected to deacon's orders. Of these John Dickins and Ignatius Pigman were present, and Caleb Boyer was absent.

Asbury noted incorrectly, twelve "... elders were elected, and solemnly set apart to serve our societies in the United States, one for Antigua, and two for Nova Scotia..."  

Regrettably we do not have a list of those in attendance. Coke, Asbury, Whatcoat and Vasey were stellar figures and, of course, were present. In all likelihood, the following were present: William Black, LeRoy Cole, James O. Cromwell, John Dickins, Reuben Ellis, Joseph Everett, Edward Dromgoole, Freeborn Garrettson, William Gill, William Glendenning, John Hagerty, Thomas Haskins, Richard Ivey, Jeremiah Lambert, James O'Kelly, William Phoebus, Ignatius Pigman, Francis Poythress, Nelson Reed, and Thomas Ware.  

Others who may have been present were Thomas Bowen, Philip Bruce, William Cannon, Thomas S. Chew, Adam Cloud, Philip Cox, Joseph Cromwell, Thomas Curtis, Samuel Dudley, Ira Ellis, Michael Ellis, Jonathan Forrest, Thomas Foster, Lemuel Green, Matthew Green, Thomas Jackson, William Jessup, Wilson Lee, William Lynch, George Mair, John Major, Enoch Matson, John Moriarty, Moses Park, William Partridge, Caleb Pedicord, James Riggin, William Ringold, Samuel Rowe, Isaac Smith, Richard Swift, John Tunnell, James White, and Joseph Wyatt.  

Alexander McCaine, noting that most of the preachers were "young men," said, "Of these one had travelled 10 years; three, 9 years; three, 8 years; eight, 7 years; four, 6 years; six, 5 years; eight, 4 years; thirteen, 3 years; eight, 2 years; and eleven, 1 year."  

William Black commented, "Perhaps such a number of holy, zealous, godly men never met together in Maryland before."

The two superintendents participated freely in the debates. Thomas Ware said of Coke, "He was the best speaker in a small circle or on a Conference floor I ever heard."

Asbury's summary of the conference is tantalizingly brief: "We spent the whole week in conference, debating freely, and determining all things by a majority of votes. The Doctor preached every day at noon, and some one of the other preachers morning and evening. We were in great haste, and did much business in a little time."

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70 Quoted in Drinkhouse, I, p. 279, from "Letters on M.E. Church," 185, pp. 77-78.  
Dissent

Asbury’s enigmatic comment on “haste” is the basis for Drinkhouse’s statement that the conference business had all been pre-arranged by the superintendents, and was thus conducted in a dull, perfunctory manner. “It is evident . . . . the business was ‘cut and dried’ before the Conference assembled. Perhaps not a thing was done that either Coke or Asbury or both had not matured at Perry Hall.” Drinkhouse continues his accusations that the preachers merely rubber stamped the superintendents’ proposals:

The Conference registered their pleasure. Not that dissentients were wanting, but the whole denouement was such a surprise, the salient advantages such as all desired, as it secured ordination and the sacraments with a church organization; and as they were impressed that the whole was Wesley’s suggestion and recommendation, the last allegation alone, for the time at least, overslaughed all open criticism, and brought with it an outward show of unanimity. 73

Dissenting voices were heard prior to, during the conference, and in the days following. Thomas Haskins, who came to the conference with an uneasy mind, felt the action premature and urged delay. It should, he insisted, be placed “. . . . at the feet of the Conference, and submitted till our next June Conference to the consideration & mature deliberation of the preachers. . . . Ought we not in the meantime as generous & dutiful Sons of the Episcopal Church to Whom we have from time to time publicly professed ourselves to be United—to lay what Mr. Wesley has proposed before as many of her Clergy as possible? . . . Ought not the Clergy to be invited to our next Conference?” 73

Two Episcopal clergymen, John Andrews and William West, rectors in Baltimore, sought to “prevent the separation” from the Established Church. Drinkhouse, not without personal prejudice against both Coke and Asbury, disparages the two superintendents. He quotes a valuable letter written by John Andrews to William Smith at “Baltimore, December 31, 1784” in which a meeting between “Mr. West, Dr. Andrews, Dr. Coke, and Mr. Asbury” is described. The interview was arranged during the days just before or at the very beginning of the Christmas Conference. As Andrews tells it, Dr. Coke met them as planned, at “. . . six in the evening, and brought with him Mr. Goff [Gough] and Mr. Asbury.”

Andrews and West had seen Wesley’s letter of September, 1784, written to Asbury and his fellow American preachers. The Episcopalians expressed eagerness that arrangements for consolidation of Methodism and the Episcopal Church be made. As a proposal, they offered William White’s plan of 1782:

The plan of church government which we had instituted in this state was very simple, and, as we trusted, a very rational plan: that it was to be

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72 Drinkhouse, op. cit., I, p. 287.
exercised by a convention consisting of an equal number of laity and clergy, and having for their president a bishop, elected by the whole body of the clergy.

It was suggested that Coke might be consecrated a bishop, "... we could see no impropriety in having two bishops in one state, one of which might always be elected from among the people called Methodists, so long as that distinction should be kept up among them." Nothing was said, however, regarding Asbury. Coke's reply to the proposal was that the whole matter would need to be placed before John Wesley. "Thus ended our negotiations," concluded Andrews, "which served no other purpose than to discover to us that the minds of these gentlemen are not wholly free from resentment, and it is a point which among them is indispensably necessary, that Mr. Wesley be the first link of the chain upon which their church is suspended." 74

James O'Kelly complained "Thomas and Francis were our superintendents as President elders, according to John's appointment, but they were not elected by the suffrage of Conference, although it is so written in the book of discipline." 75 O'Kelly's lament is part of a lengthy discussion by Drinkhouse as to whether Coke and Asbury were actually elected to their offices. "There is no evidence," says Drinkhouse, "that Coke's credential as 'superintendent' was read to the Conference." 76 Argument from silence is but one of many means used by Drinkhouse in attempting to discredit Coke and Asbury and to picture the Christmas Conference as a thoroughly undemocratic assembly.77

January 1, 1785, Haskins wrote in his Journal: "Our Conference ended, I feel myself uneasy. Oh how tottering I see Methodism now—But thou Oh Lord art able to make her strong and establish her on the top of the Hills. Keep Oh Keep us from dissensions among ourselves, here our danger lies." 78

Devereux Jarratt highly resented the action of the conference in establishing an independent church. He also wrote scathingly about Thomas Coke's ordination papers, saying that he laughed when he saw them. He wrote Edward Dromgoole on May 31, 1785:

My not being at the Conference, was not owing to want of inclination, but not being invited by either of the Superintendents, I imagined my company was not desired; ... If ever I was worthy of the love and esteem of Mr. As-

75 Drinkhouse, op. cit., I, p. 284.
76 Ibid., p. 280.
77 The burden of proof lies upon Drinkhouse. For all his efforts, he fails to establish his case.
78 Sweet, op. cit., p. 22.
bury or any Preacher in connection with him, I am so still. For I am the same in principle and practice as I was the first Day he ever saw me. . . .

The Conference Closes

Thomas Coke was jubilant! "The Lord was peculiarly present, whilst I was preaching my two Pastoral Sermons. God was indeed pleased to honour me before the people . . . . the weather was exceedingly cold, and therefore we thought it best to indulge them by preaching one hour later [6 o'clock rather than 5 A.M.] than usual, . . . And our morning congregations held out to the last." 70

To facilitate the large attendance, simultaneous evening services were conducted at Lovely Lane; at Point Chapel "(a chapel about half a mile out of town)," and also at Otterbein's German Church. 81

"One of the week-days at noon," wrote Coke, "I made a collection towards assisting our Brethren who are going to Nova Scotia: . . . fifty pounds currency, (thirty pounds sterling.)" 82

Richard Whatcoat wrote, "We ended our Conference in great peace and unanimity, on the 2nd day of January, in the year of our Lord, 1785. May the good Lord follow our endeavours with a never ceasing shower of heart-reviving love!" 83

A traditional story is that upon adjournment, the preachers were so eager to be about the business of the new church that they rushed out of Lovely Lane Chapel without bothering to bid each other goodbye. In truth, the task of Methodism was just starting, and much was to be done. Optimism prevailed as the newborn church breathed, stirred vigorously, and started a rapid and phenomenal growth.

In Retrospect

Criticism and problems did not cease with adjournment of the conference. As various issues arose, charges and counter charges were made. Thomas Ware, writing in retrospect in 1832, expressed amazement and regret that scathing denunciations had been directed against the two bishops:

Had I, at the close of the Christmas Conference, been told that, in some future time, even before I should go the way of all flesh, men would arise calling themselves Methodists, who would report, and even put forth their most skillful exertions to make the world believe that Asbury and Coke did, from sheer ambition, conspire against Mr. Wesley, whom they professed so much to love and honor, and on him surreptitiously father a spurious Episcopacy, and thereby with falsehood stain, not only the fame of the man Wesley, but the first page of their Discipline, to be perpetuated throughout all future generations, I should have said, No, surely that can never be, that from ourselves men should arise who could excogitate, or even retail, so foul a slander:—that be far from them." 84

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70 Ibid., p. 23.
74 Phoebus, op. cit., p. 23.
80 Ibid., p. 23.
82 Coke, Journal, p. 23.
Obviously, the issue uppermost in the minds of many critics was the authority of the superintendents—so soon to be retitled bishops. How did so much power come to be lodged in their hands? Drinkhouse, for example, feels it started with Wesley, who disliked democratic procedure. "Of nothing, perhaps, had Wesley such a dread as suffrage or voting. He never allowed it." With the passing of time, criticism often turned to personal resentment against those holding the office.

Freeborn Garrettson, in writing to Alexander McCaine, September 29, 1826, gives his recollections of the conference. He, like Ware, writes in retrospect, as he answers several questions:

... I am fully of opinion the Christmas conference was authorized by Mr. Wesley to organize themselves under an episcopal form of church government. Dr. Coke did receive ordination to the superintendency by the laying on of the hands of Mr. Wesley and the presbyters present, and had directions to consecrate Mr. Asbury. Mr. Wesley's letter in the discipline satisfies me, and I have seen from his pen where he asserts his opinion in favor of episcopacy as the best form of church government. ... Remember Mr. Wesley speaks of a moderate episcopacy, in which I do most cordially agree.

With regard to your second query, nearly forty years have passed away, and I cannot charge my memory with every minutiae; however, instructions were communicated from Mr. Wesley, and as we were all young, humble, happy, and sincere, and well pleased with what he offered, (would to God we were all so now,) I doubt not but that we followed his wishes to a punctilio.

With regard to your third query, actions speak louder than words. Dr. Coke was ordained deacon and presbyter, and Mr. Wesley laid hands on him a third time for the general superintendency in our church, and directed the setting apart Asbury for the same office; and in the year 1787, he appointed two others to be set apart for the same office. The word bishop in the primitive church was as simple as that of elder or presbyter, and perhaps more so; but it rose by slow degrees, ... Mr. Wesley designed we should have a moderate episcopacy, and therefore he gave us the word superintendent instead of bishop; and the change of the word was cause of grief to that dear old saint, and so it was to me.

William Watters wrote in his Autobiography, "We formed ourselves into a separate Church." He continued:

This change was proposed to us by Mr. Wesley after we had craved his advice on the subject, but could not take effect until adopted by us; which was done in a deliberate, formal manner, at a Conference called for that purpose, in which there was not one dissenting voice. [italics not in original] Every one, of any discernment, must see from Mr. Wesley's Circular Letter on this occasion, as well as from every part of our mode of Church Government, that we openly and avowedly declared ourselves Episcopalians, though the doctor and Mr. Asbury were called Superintendents.

William Phoebus recalled the Conference in glowing terms. "We assembled at the city of Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, and received Thomas Coke, LL.D., with his testimonials from the greatest man to us in the world." Continuing the superlative,
Phoebus states, "He proceeded to form the first church that ever was organized under a pure republican government, and the first that was ever formed in this happy part of the world." 88

Cokesbury College

The Christmas Conference set in motion a number of institutional wheels, and some started turning immediately following adjournment. Cokesbury College is a noted example. At the initial meeting with Asbury, Coke said, "... He and I have agreed to use our joint endeavours to establish a School or College on the plan of Kingswood-School." 88 The conference "... proceeded on some resolutions to build a College at Abingdon ...," wrote Whatcoat.

At the close of the conference, the superintendents published a plan for erecting the college. "It is to receive ... the sons of the elders and preachers of the Methodist church, poor orphans, and the sons of the subscribers, and of other friends ... The institution is also intended for our young men who are called to preach." 90

The site chosen was near Abingdon, Maryland, twenty miles from Baltimore. On Wednesday, January 5, 1785, Coke noted, "I now gave orders that the materials should be procured for the erecting of the College." 91

The cornerstone was laid on Sunday, June 5, 1785. A large crowd assembled, and Bishop Asbury, wearing gown and bands, assumed his place and announced his text, Psalm 78: 4-8. He wrote, "... I stood on the ground where the building is to be erected, warm as it was, and spoke ... [We will not hide them from their children,...] 92

Coke's Anti-Slavery Campaign

During the six months immediately following the Christmas Conference, Coke, bolstered by conference action, engaged in an almost single-handed war on slavery. He became a gadfly, stinging some Methodists to action, others to withdrawal. He started by calling names, including Devereux Jarratt, charging "... he has twenty-four Slaves ..." 93 In Virginia, Coke noted, "I now began to venture to exhort our Societies to emancipate their Slaves." The campaign continued until spring.

May 25, 1785, Coke and Asbury called on George Washington at Mt. Vernon, and Coke wrote:

... He received us very politely, and was very open to access ... we ... opened to him the grand business on which we came, presenting to him our petition for the emancipation of the Negroes, and intreating his signature ... He informed us that he was of our sentiments ... he did not see it proper to sign the petition, but if the Assembly took it into consideration, would signify his sentiments to the Assembly by a letter." 94

88 Ibid.
89 Coke, Journal, p. 16.
93 Coke, op. cit., pp. 32-33.
94 Coke, op. cit., p. 45.
Coke’s zeal may have carried him too far, too soon. At the Baltimore Conference, June 1, 1785, he capitulated, saying, “We thought it prudent to suspend the minute concerning slavery...”

_Coke Returns to England_

Coke had planned to visit both Nova Scotia and the West Indies, but pressing duties called him back to England. Before sailing he dispatched James O. Cromwell and Freeborn Garrettson for Nova Scotia. Alas, poor Jeremiah Lambert, planning to go to Antigua, died of tuberculosis.

Amid tears, Coke and the American preachers exchanged goodbyes. “On Thursday [June 2, 1785] the Doctor took his leave of America for this visit.” Asbury wrote, “We parted with heavy hearts.” Coke would return, nonetheless, for eight more visits.

Asbury had now started his almost ceaseless riding up and down the continent. Coke had embarked on another of his many voyages. Preachers and laymen were busily engaged in conquering a geographical and spiritual wilderness. The new Methodist Episcopal Church in America had now set sail on her maiden voyage. Rough seas lay ahead, but she was a seaworthy vessel.

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96 Ibid., p. 46; also see Minutes, 1785. 98 Asbury, _Journal_, I, p. 490.