The Methodists and the Centennial of 1876

by Homer L. Calkin

The Centennial of American Independence — 1876 — was a time for celebrating, reviewing the nation's heritage and accomplishments and anticipating what the next century might bring. Before the year was over, most segments of the population had observed the anniversary in some manner. The range of activities was wide — an international exhibition for the "Arts, Manufactures, and Products of the Soil and Mine" at Philadelphia, state-wide days of prayer and fasting, histories of local communities being written, Fourth of July celebrations in small hamlets and large cities, special musical concerts and Martha Washington tea parties.

In some instances there were years of planning and preparation. For example, the United States Congress authorized the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1871, five years before it was to occur. Other events were held with little or no advance thought or organization.

The Methodist Episcopal Church was one of the first to act when it considered the matter at the General Conference of 1872. On May 8 the presiding bishop announced the establishment of a Committee on the Centennial of American Independence to draw up recommendations. J. W. Walden of the Cincinnati Conference was chairman of the committee which consisted of seven ministerial and two lay members.¹

In its report, which was adopted on June 1, 1872, the Committee outlined the reasons why Methodists should participate in commemorative ceremonies:

...it will be an occasion which our Church and people will seek, by appropriate religious services, to declare their faith in...the overruling providence of Almighty God, and especially that under his guidance our fathers, by their heroism and sacrifices, maintained the Declaration of Independence, and by their wisdom and devotion established our Republican institutions; ...our country has enjoyed during the century long intervals of peace, and an unprecedented prosperity; ...those arts and sciences and forms of industry which develop the resources of a land and elevate the character of the people have been fostered; ...the cause of education promoted, and our free-school system, the fruit of American Protestantism and the bulwark of American freedom; ...the nation has been led to abolish slavery and reinvest the emancipated with every civil and political right; ...our people ...have proven to the world that government may be permanent where man is free; and ...our Church has been protected in her religious liberty, and our people have shared in the common happiness and prosperity....²

². Ibid., pp. 388-9.
The plan that was developed and put into effect was at three levels — the General Conference, the annual conferences and the local churches. The Centenary of Independence was to be observed "by all our Churches and people" with special thanksgiving services between the first Sunday in June 1876 and the Fourth of July. The primary object of these services was "the spiritual improvement of our people, especially by reviewing what God hath wrought for our Nation, and by cultivating feelings of gratitude to him for the benefits of civil and religious liberties." Since the Methodist Episcopal Church "promoted[d] the welfare of the country by her educational institutions," it was resolved that a centenary collection would be taken to aid the cause of education.

Each annual conference was to provide for "a memorial discourse" in its session just prior to July 1876. At the General Conference of 1876 the Board of Bishops was to prepare an address and present it on the first day of the session. This address was intended to encourage all Methodists to engage in

the cheerful and devout observance of those special thanksgiving services which shall be the most appropriate and fervent expression of gratitude to Almighty God, of faith in Jesus Christ the Saviour and Ruler of the world, of love to our country, and loyalty to the free institutions which are based upon the immortal Declaration of Independence.³

The Methodist Protestant Church, in its 1875 General Conference at Princeton, New Jersey, noted that "the birth of a nation of freemen, on the 4th of July, 1776, has given to the world a type of civilization and an example of human progress before unknown." It was suggested that the members of the church could show appreciation of the "blessings of civil and ecclesiastical liberty and prosperity" they had by a "Centenary Offering." It was recommended and accepted that a sum of $200,000 would be raised. Of this $100,000 would form an endowment fund for Adrian College and the balance would be allocated for the publishing interests of the church, ministerial education, missionary purposes and church extension.⁴

The Evangelical Association held its General Conference in Philadelphia in 1875 and took notice of the fact that the Declaration of Independence was first promulgated in that city. The members of the Conference were told in the episcopal address,

We deem it proper to mention the approaching Centennial anniversary of the foundation of the Republic.... Inasmuch as this most blessed of all lands upon earth was the earthly birth place of the Evangelical Association, and the home of her earliest development, it becomes us...to celebrate, with Christian observance this epoch of

³. Ibid., pp. 389-90.
noble, soul elevating reminiscences, and to give expression to our acknowledgement for this precious inheritance.

The report of the Centennial Committee, as presented by the Rev. R. Dubs on October 23, stressed the point that "This country has been the defender not only of political and civil liberty, but, above all, of freedom of conscience." The report, which was adopted, recommended thanksgiving services in 1876 "for the establishment of the Republic" and the raising of at least $100,000 for educational purposes.

On May 1, the opening day of the 1876 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Bishop Edward G. Andrews delivered the Centennial Address of the Bishops. He urged all of the churches to comply with the order of the 1872 General Conference for celebrating the centenary of American Independence: "Throughout our whole communion let thanksgiving, prayer and memorial discourse declare and increase our gratitude to the Sovereign of nations...." The special religious services would not, however, keep Methodists from the secular celebrations by which the whole people mark the occasion. On the contrary, a community of history, of interests, and of destiny will insure a community of patriotic sentiment and action.

Andrews also recommended that Methodists, along with others, study and, insofar as possible, remedy the evils that threatened the national life. Some of these evils had come from defects in the American "political system and methods," some from "national antipathies," others from "antagonism of social classes," and still others "from the machinations of a foreign spiritual despotism." A spirit of concord, patriotism and wisdom should be invoked upon all people.

May they fitly introduce a century of larger civil good than the world has yet known—a century of wider intelligence and better morals, of liberty and order more perfectly allied, of confirmed unity, peace, and prosperity!

Ten days later Bishop Matthew Simpson had the honor of giving the prayer at the opening of the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. He praised God

for the founders of the Republic, for the wisdom with which they planned, and the firmness and heroism, which....led them to triumphant success.

He thanked God also for

social and national prosperity; for valuable discoveries and multiplied inventions; for labor saving machinery....for schools....for freedom to worship God according to the dictates of conscience; for a church unfettered by the trammels of state.

5. Evangelical Messenger, Oct. 21, 1875.
6. Ibid., Nov. 4, 1875; Philadelphia Inquirer, Oct. 25, 1875.
Simpson asked that "the new century be better than the past" and that "capital, genius, and labor" might be free of antagonism through the application of principles of justice and equity. He prayed for God’s benediction on the women of America, "May the light of their intelligence, purity, and enterprise shed its beams afar." He concluded his prayer by asking that "the mission of America, under divine inspiration, [may] be one of affection, brotherhood, and love for all our race! And may the coming centuries be filled with the glory of our Christian civilization!"  

The Bishop did not follow very closely the prayer he had written for the press. He was "evidently not as well used to writing prayers as to praying." His spoken prayer "was much better," some people thought, than the written one.  

The prayer was "comprehensive, fervent, and appropriate," "most impressive to most." According to one person, however, it was "actually... an 1,100 word speech." Most people who were in attendance at the Exhibition had to read his prayer in the newspapers, though, as he could be heard only a few feet from the platform.  

Methodist periodicals gave limited publicity to political and patriotic events of the Centennial year. The Christian Advocate published a series of "Centennial Pictures" during 1876, dealing with the principal military engagements during the American Revolution. Several of the papers also did some reporting on the international exhibition at Philadelphia.  

This latter activity gave Methodists considerable consternation because of two possibilities — opening the exhibition to visitors on Sundays and the sale of liquor on the grounds of the exhibition. Several annual conferences, districts and local groups, as well as the General Conference, took action on the questions.  

In October 1875 a group of Methodist preachers from Boston and its vicinity opposed opening the Centennial buildings on Sunday. They asked the U. S. Centennial Commission not to "by any act of yours suffer the reproach of certain European and nominally Christian nations, to come upon us, but... preserve to us inviolate and sacred... our holy Sabbath."  

The North Carolina District of the Methodist Protestant Church was concerned about disregard for the sanctity of the Sabbath and petitioned for the strict observance of the day. At the Baltimore Annual Con-
ference, the Rev. J. W. Cornelius presented a similar resolution since disregard for the Lord's day would tend "to injure us as a Christian people in the eyes of strangers visiting this national exhibition." 15

To members of the Central Pennsylvania Conference it did not appear "that any of the representatives of Europe, Asia, Africa, or any other part of the world, whether pagan, Mahomedan or Christian, have asked or expressed a desire to change the custom of this Christian nation." 16 A few days later the Philadelphia Conference expressed gratification that the management of the Centennial Exposition had assured them it would not be open on Sundays. 17

Both the Christian Advocate and Zion's Herald had editorials expressing pleasure at learning the exhibition would not be open. The latter thought that

this regard for holy time will [doubtless] strike many visitors from abroad as Puritanically rigid, but let us be true to ourselves, our Christian and American traditions....And why is this [proclaiming the sanctity of the Sabbath] not a part of our works, as well as to show our material progress?" 18

The Methodist Episcopal General Conference added its "hearty thanks" on May 5 to the Centennial Commission for "their prompt, united and decisive action" on closing both buildings and grounds on Sundays. 19

The question was not settled yet. Some people were urging the Centennial Commission to reverse its action. Among the reasons given were: religious men were divided on the method of keeping the Sabbath; because the exhibition was international, the United States ought not force its views on foreign guests; and the fight for a Puritan Sabbath had been a long and losing one. After refuting these points, an editorial in the Christian Advocate concluded: "May the second Centennial find our Sabbath still in force, both as a religious and as a national institution!" 20

The Christian Advocate had an alternative to suggest. It proposed that the grounds be opened for open-air services on Sundays, and the "tones of Christian song and prayer attract the loitering crowds." People might come because "they found nothing better in life" to do. 21

The Methodist Protestant had a different suggestion for visitors to Philadelphia. There were numerous model Sunday Schools that could be

15. Minutes of the Baltimore Annual Conference, 1876, pp. 24-25; Evening Star (Washington, D.C.), Mar. 9, 1876.
16. Minutes of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, 1876, pp. 20-21; Christian Advocate (hereafter CA), April 6, 1876. (All citations to the Christian Advocate are to the New York edition unless otherwise indicated.)
17. CA, April 13, 1876. The Northern New York Conference also favored keeping the Exhibition closed on Sundays. Minutes of the Northern New York Conference, 1876, p. 67.
18. CA, April 13, 1876; ZH, May 4, 1876.
19. JGC, 1876, p. 110.
20. CA, June 1, 1876.
21. Ibid., June 29, 1876.
visited. Greatest care should be used in doing this, however. People should “not go as interrupters.” All speeches should be left at home, but one should be prepared to teach and discuss the lesson of the day. One should go “to see what may be learned for home uses. American Sundays and American Sunday-schools, fairly represented in the Centennial city, will exert an educating power on the world.”

Regarding the sale of liquor on the exhibition grounds, the Reverends G. G. Baker and R. W. Black of the Baltimore Conference presented a resolution on March 8, 1876. It was understood that the right to sell liquor had already been awarded. The resolution protested against the grant of such an unnecessary and humiliating privilege to a class of vendors whose only possible motive must be to realize material profit from this unholy trade in human hope and human souls.

One member of the Conference did not believe it should make pronouncements “upon the motives of men so strongly.” Baker replied, “I wish that we could make it stronger.” The resolution passed with no dissenting votes. A number of other conferences followed the same course as the Baltimore Conference.

On May 2 Hiram Price of the Upper Iowa Conference moved in General Conference for the prohibition of the sale of liquor at the Centennial. The next day Bishop Simpson announced a special Committee on the Observance of the Sabbath and on Selling Intoxicating Liquors. The Committee in its report, which was adopted on May 5, considered traffic in intoxicants “the fruitful source of a large part of the misery, pauperism, and crime which exists in our land.” Therefore, the exclusion of all such traffic on the grounds of the exhibition would have reflected honor on the Commissioners as well as the moral and religious people of the United States generally.

Meanwhile many annual conferences and ministerial bodies were following through on the suggestions of the general conferences to raise funds for educational purposes. Church periodicals were also campaigning in support of education. The Zion’s Herald, for instance, thought it was a “wise suggestion” to mark the first century of the Republic by “permanent religious monuments” in the form of stronger educational institutions.

22. Methodist Protestant, July 8, 1876.
23. Minutes of the Baltimore Annual Conference, 1876, pp. 24-25; Evening Star, March 9, 1876.
24. These included the Wilmington Annual Conference, Wilmington (Del.) Commercial, March 20, 1876; the Troy Annual Conference, Burlington (Vt.) Free Press and Times (Evening edition), April 18, 1876; ZH, April 27, 1876; the New York East Annual Conference, CA, April 20, 1876; and the Northern New York Annual Conference, Minutes of the Northern New York Annual Conference, 1876, p. 67.
26. JGC, 1876, pp. 70, 110.
The country owed "its thrift, its rapid development, its marvelous improvements, and its popular and permanent government" to the schools and churches. Therefore, during the Centennial year, "let each member take up a stone and lay it upon one of these schools of learning as a memorial."27

In November 1875 the Centennial Committee of the New England Conference met in Boston. After a careful survey of the educational position and needs of the Methodist Church in that area, they agreed unanimously to recommend the raising of funds for education.28

Zion's Herald in an editorial in March 1876 urged that, "a vigorous effort should be made to strengthen every Conference Seminary." The editor suggested that every Methodist in New England should "resolve to bear a part in the sacrifices of the Centennial year, that he may be able to rejoice in the results forever."29

A month later Dr. Cyrus David Foss, President of Wesleyan College, spoke at a meeting of the Education Society of the Troy Annual Conference. He discussed the growth of education during the previous hundred years, and he ascribed the wonderful results achieved by the United States to the advancement made in the cause of education. Foss used facts and figures to support his statements such as, "One-half of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and one-third of the members of the Continental Congress were college graduates."30

Some conferences had specific schools in mind. For instance, the Des Moines Annual Conference voted that an increase in the endowment of Simpson College should be the local object to which educational contributions should be applied.31 The Central New York Conference decided to raise a fund for Syracuse University,32 and the Detroit Conference appointed a committee of five to carry out its project of collecting a library for Albion College.33 The New Jersey Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church adopted a resolution to make an effort in all of its circuits toward increasing the endowment of Adrian College.34 In the Virginia Methodist Episcopal Conference, there was no educational institution under the direction of the conference. It was agreed, therefore, to use any centenary contributions for establishing such a school.35

On the other hand some conferences, such as the San Francisco, Southeast Indiana and the Upper Iowa Conference, voted that their

27. ZH, May 6, 1875.
28. Ibid., Nov. 18, 1875.
29. Ibid., March 16, 1876.
30. Burlington Free Press and Times, April 17, 1876.
32. Methodist, Oct. 9, 1875.
34. Minutes of the New Jersey Annual Conference (Methodist Protestant), 1875, p. 11.
35. Baltimore Sun, Feb. 29, 1876.
centenary funds should be used in advancing the general educational interests of the church. 36

Alumni also played a part in this activity. In 1876 the alumni of Boston Theological Seminary undertook to raise $40,000 to endow a Centennial alumni professorship. 37

The General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1876, in adopting the report of the Committee on Centennial Observances, added its weight to that of the annual conferences and others. It requested that all members and friends of the Methodist Episcopal Church be invited on July 2 “to make contributions for the cause of Christian education both by collections and subscriptions.... Let the aggregate swell to millions of dollars. Let all our institutions feel the mighty impulse....” 38

Aside from this, a number of special Centennial actions were taken by various groups of Methodists. The Baltimore Conference adopted a resolution which favored the pastors gathering historical incidents, traditions and other materials relating to their several congregations and transmitting such historical notes to the Baltimore Methodist Historical Society. 39 The Wilmington Conference appointed a committee to arrange for taking a centennial picture of the members of the conference in group form. 40

Is it not that these resources shall be developed? That the immense material wealth hidden in our soil and our mines shall be brought out? That this broad and beautiful country shall be filled with teeming millions of people, developing themselves and leading the world to a higher and purer civilization? If so, then here is a work for you and me.

The Laymen's Electoral Convention of the Baltimore Conference was concerned with the split in the Methodist Church. Therefore, they adopted a resolution which favored the restoration of “the harmony and union of the Methodist Church, so that the centennial year will be distinguished by an event never equalled in the history of the Methodist Church.” At the same time they instructed their lay delegate to General Conference to resist any change in the episcopacy or any effort to making the presiding eldership elective. 41

Individual churches conducted special events during the Centennial. The 24th Street Methodist Episcopal Church in New York held a “Grand Centennial Fair” from March 7 to March 10. Useful and fancy articles were for sale; there were “music and interesting exercises” each evening.

36. San Francisco Chronicle, Sept. 22, 1875; Indiana Journal (Indianapolis), Sept. 18, 1875; Dubuque (Iowa) Times, Sept. 29, 1875.
37. ZH, June 15, 1876.
38. JGC, 1876, pp. 225-6.
39. Baltimore Sun, March 9, 1876.
40. Wilmington (Del.) Daily Commercial, March 17, 1876; Methodist, March 25, 1876.
41. ZH, March 16, 1876; Evening Star, March 4, 1876; Methodist, March 18, 1876.
Admission was ten cents. The object of the Fair was to liquidate “an embarassing floating debt.”

The ladies of the Centenary Methodist Episcopal Church in Des Moines gave their Centennial sociable on June 27. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, their ladies and others were scheduled to wait on tables and serve ice cream, raspberries, cakes and candies. The proceeds were to be applied on the subscription of the Ladies’ Mite Society toward liquidating the church debt.

The ideas of Methodist preachers and writers regarding the significance of the Centennial, the meaning of the past and the expectations for the future were conveyed to the membership of the church in three ways. First, there were the Centennial sermons preached at the various annual conferences. Secondly, many churches complied with the suggestion of a special service near July 4, 1876. And third, the editors of various church publications wrote extensive editorials pertaining to various aspects of the anniversary of American Independence.

The editor of the Christian Advocate found “the great variety in these Centennial discourses” at the annual conferences to be interesting. He had heard or read “some dozen, no two alike.” He continued, “What a grand volume the seventy-six would make, and how sure of being printed in one hundred years. In 1876, seventy-six conferences; in 1976 how many will there be?”

Enoch G. Wood of Moore’s Hill, an Indiana college, spoke on “The First Century of American Independence” at the 1875 Southeastern Indiana Conference in Indianapolis. He reviewed the progress made in the various arts and sciences during the past century and built a “glowing future” for the United States. Whatever progress was to be made in the next century “must have its beginning in education and in virtue. These alone build strength, endurance and permanence.” He wished that he might live to see the end of the “glorious century” that was about to start, but that was “not vouchsafed” for him. Wood dwelt largely upon the “special need of education to a free people who do their own thinking and where each man is a sovereign in himself.”

The following evening W. C. Smith preached a different type of sermon at the Indiana Conference, also meeting in Indianapolis. He told his large audience that the hand of the Lord was no more manifest in the history of the children of Israel during the first hundred years in Palestine “than in the history of this Nation since the fourth day of July, 1776.”

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42. Methodist, March 4, 1876.
43. Iowa State Register (Des Moines, Iowa), April 12, 1876.
44. CA, April 27, 1876.
45. Indiana Journal, Sept. 16, 1875.
46. His text was Psalm 126:3 — “The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad.”
Smith then spoke briefly of the revolutionary war, the success of which he attributed to the righteousness of the cause and the prayers of the colonists.

He went on to say that the American government had made some mistakes — "grievous sins." One was slavery which had been overthrown in the late war, "but though the body of slavery is dead, its spirit is alive." The second great evil was intemperance and traffic in intoxicating liquors. All that the nation was getting in return for millions of dollars and a hundred thousand lives was "tears, sighs, groans, poverty, wretchedness, dissolutions, woes, alms-houses, jails, penitentiaries and murders."  

Alfred Brunson of the West Wisconsin Conference drew parallels between the Israelites entering Canaan and the Pilgrim fathers establishing a government in America. He also made "some telling points on the efforts of the foreigners to destroy our free schools and break up the sanctity of our Sabbath."  

Before the Baltimore Conference, J. A. McCauley, President of Dickinson College, preached a sermon that was "eloquent and full of patriotic fervor and gratitude to God." He said "the 4th of July, 1776, was not only the birth day of liberty, but religion, too, was then loosed from its bonds."  

Henry W. Warren’s sermon at the New York East Conference was on the "political and spiritual progress of the human race." He discussed the past success of the world in its moral progress and, with "moving eloquence sketch[ed] the present and future work of the Church."  

The central theme of Alpha J. Kynett, Corresponding Secretary of the Church Extension Society, before the Upper Iowa Conference was "that a nation can live and prosper only as it is obedient to and co-operates with the will of God." In the course of his talk he touched upon the temperance question, the propriety of incorporating into the constitution a recognition of God and the Bible as the supreme law of the land, the public school system, and the needs of educational institutions, including those of the Methodist Church.

Kynett stressed that the United States was as yet only in its childhood as a nation. "But who believes that a century is the limit of our national life? or two, or three or five? On the other hand, we must not feel too confident that as a nation we are to be immortal...."

"God has given us a goodly heritage. We have here the most fertile soil and the grandest and most beautiful scenery — of any country in the world." In looking to the future Kynett, in answer to the question of God’s will concerning America, asked:

47. Indiana Journal, Sept. 17, 1875.
49. Evening Star, March 6, 1876; Minutes of the Baltimore Annual Conference, 1876, pp. 20, 23.; ZH, March 23, 1876.
50. ZH, May 11, 1876; CA, April 27, 1876.
Let us see to it, ...that our nation is with God; with Him in a clear full recognition of the sacredness and supremacy of His laws; with Him in action, carrying out His Providential purposes concerning us — the whole nation sweeping on with the great current of His wonderful designs, until as a people we shall realize what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God concerning this Great Republic.51

“Our Bible and our Liberties" was the title of B. B. Hamlin’s Centennial sermon before the Central Pennsylvania Conference. He saw the glory of the previous hundred years as being a century of the grandest realizations; a period, the coming in of which marks decisively an advanced stage in the history of human enfranchisement; the beginning, indeed, of the process of the development of liberty, as something practical, as a mighty destiny-shaping force in the world.

Hamlin thought that, politically, no finer result was possible than that realized by the American people. Gradually, the full realization of civil and political liberty had been going on in the United States. The process had been inaugurated with the Declaration of Independence and the war which followed. Conditions had not always been favorable. Interruptions had occurred and the result endangered, “yet as often have the great underlying forces of truth and right asserted themselves.... By the wisdom and valor of three full generations has its development been stimulated and... guided to its ultimate conclusion.”52

He considered that gradually people had come to realize that “the religious idea is the moulding force of all civilizations, the generating principle of all political constitutions, that it is the pillar of fire going before and guiding the nations in their march across the ages.” In the Bible was the only authoritative declaration of “the right of man to be free.” It was the “only true and original bill of human rights; ...the great charter of our liberties; God’s own summary of all the rights and privileges natural and inalienable to humanity.”53

Hamlin stressed a number of other points in his sermon. The Bible freed the conscience and thus freed man. It was impossible for people who were slaves ecclesiastically to be free politically. Hence, all decisive movements toward civil liberty have included “the assertion of the right of the moral nature of man.” Liberty, Hamlin thought, had to be organized — exist, not simply in spirit or in idea, as a subtle, ethereal essence, venting itself in idle talk and fruitless aspirations, but as a mighty working practical force, unfolding in permanent results, asserting itself in all the forms and institutions of an actual government.54

The elements in the greatness of America were obvious. Her resources were without limit.

52. Minutes of the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference, 1876, p. 117.
53. Ibid., pp. 118-21.
54. Ibid., pp. 126, 130.
The vastness of her territorial domain, the salubrity of her climate, the fertility of her soil, her mineral wealth, her commercial advantage, her teeming population, her exemption from famine...must inevitably bear this country of ours onward to a position of influence and power unrivaled by any on the face of the earth.

Hamlin concluded, however, that great as these resources might be, "they would avail but little to national greatness in the absence of that highest good of the State, civil and political liberty." This was the one great force in the nation, stimulating it to action and to enterprise. Liberty "takes off restraint; arouses the soul; elicits its dormant powers. This is the secret of our country's unprecedented advancement during the last hundred years." 55

On January 1, 1875, William L. Harris, secretary of the Board of Bishops, wrote a letter addressed to ministers and members of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He reminded them of the action of the 1872 General Conference which recommended a special service in June or July 1876. Harris pointed out that it should be a most pleasant duty "to call the attention of their congregations to the historic evidences of God's most gracious dealings with us and with our forefathers." He also urged the ministers to impress upon the minds of their congregations "the important truth that the Divine Being metes out to both nations and individuals the prosperity and happiness which is allotted them." 56

Following the Episcopal Address on May 1, 1876, the General Conference adopted the report of the Committee on Centennial Observances, chaired by E. O. Haven. All preachers and people were urged "to render this celebration worthy of our profound and inexpressible gratitude to Almighty God...for the protection of this nation, for the strength and spread of Christian doctrine and experience, and for the growth and influence of the Church of Christ in these lands." The report also reminded people that, "while our hearts are full of patriotism and gratitude to God, and trust in him for the future," it should not be forgotten that the battle of Christianity against "ignorance, and corruption, and infidelity, and false religion" was not over yet. It was also requested that all preachers read the Episcopal Address to all congregations on Sunday, July 2. 57

The Board of Bishops had prepared a program for religious services at the local church level during the Centennial. Most annual conferences approved this and adopted it as their own. For instance, the New York East Conference voted that, on the day of the observance, there should be a "social meeting" from 8:30 to 10:00 a.m., with the reading of suitable scripture lessons selected from the Old and New Testaments, singing and prayers. This was to be followed by voluntary remarks touching "National Providential blessings, or gracious personal benefits." At the usual hour for

55. Ibid., p. 137.
56. CA, Dec. 9, 1875.
57. JGC, 1876, pp. 225-6; Daily Christian Advocate, May 12, 1876.
the morning service, an appropriate sermon was to be preached. In the afternoon a children's meeting should be held with services "calculated to inspire patriotic and religious sentiments." 58

The local churches not only responded to instructions such as these, but special donations for the occasion were in evidence in many places. Many churches, such as Roberts Park Methodist Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, were "redolent of fragrance and patriotism." 59 In Newark, New Jersey, a miniature Liberty Bell was hung above and behind the pulpit at the 8th Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church. The motto "Free Country" was over the bell and a large American eagle under it. To the right of the choir was a banner "Free Gospel" and to the left, "Free Schools." 60

The sentiments expressed in the many Centennial sermons varied greatly, as might be expected, from church to church; most, however, touched upon the importance of religion in the establishment and growth of the United States.

Frederick Woods, preaching at Bromfield Street Church in Boston in 1875, stressed that "a Democracy without religion is more dangerous than a despotism." The liberty for which Washington and others fought was not one which shouted, "'I may do as I please,' but which... acknowledges the subordination of individual rights to social justice, and submits to personal restraint for the public good...."

In conclusion Woods said:

A hundred years! What are they in a nation's life? Nothing. We have only begun the race.... A hundred years are not enough to assure us of the future. We must be true. Who can doubt that this nation is the child of God? The guiding hand is discernable, from the starting of the Mayflower to the Centennial. 61

"It is proper that our Centennial anniversary should be a jubilee. Let bells ring, cannons roar, and all the people shout," said Dr. J. H. Bayliss of Indianapolis. There was more to this centenary of independence "than mere noise," however. There were lessons to be learned as people looked back "over the way we have come and forward over the way we have yet to travel." The vast power of the United States brought with it "vast responsibilities and, possibly, vast peril."

"What are the safeguards of our republic?" Bayliss asked. He discussed three ways this could be done.

First — Intelligence. An intelligent understanding of our institutions is indispensable to good citizenship.... We must improve the characters and conditions of those who come to us. One element of power to do this is intelligence — the school-house and school-master, and the newspapers....

58. Minutes of the New York East Annual Conference, 1876, pp. 30-31. For similar actions see also Minutes of the Wilmington Annual Conference, 1875, p. 37; and Minutes of the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference, 1876, p. 43.

59. (Indianapolis) Indiana Daily Sentinel, July 3, 1876.

60. Newark (New Jersey) Daily Courier, July 3, 1876.

61. ZH, July 8, 1875.
Secondly, we must have conscience as well as intelligence. Conscience among men in power and men out of power: in the White House, in Congress, in the courts, in the State governments, and in political parties. Intrigue is not statesmanship. Power bought by moral power never lasts. If a political party simply desires to retain power the surest way to do so is to do right. Retribution is sure to come to the wrongdoers.... Wrong cannot succeed in the long run....

Thirdly, we must have a pure religion. Religion defines and emphasizes the idea of accountability to God. Make every man in this republic a Christian and it would be safe.... The foundations of governments are principles, not acts; their safety is in character, not in expediency.

Frank E. Jewell of San Francisco preached on an intriguing subject, "The American Century Plant: the history of its growth and production." He likened the growth of the United States to that of the century plant which had finally blossomed. Its leaves had been carried to every city and hamlet in the land and "the spears of red, white and blue are gleaming all over the country." The plant had taken root in soil especially prepared for it; it then extended itself across the country from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Jewell indicated that the enterprise of the American people was "proverbial the world over. I am reminded that nearly all of the inventions of the last hundred years have been given to us by the inhabitants of our land." In addition "the political fruits of this century plant have been reaped by nearly every nation on the earth." In conclusion, he emphasized that "there never was a heritage so great as this germ of civil and religious freedom. There was never a realm so great. God is in the midst of it all. Angels are contemplating this glorious land."63

The people of Louisville, Kentucky, heard a discussion by J. S. Chadwick of Trinity M. E. Church of the wisdom and power of God in early American history; the providential geographical position of the United States; the material prosperity and varied resources which had been developed; the peculiar form of government adopted and perpetuated in the American Republic; the high educational status of the nation; and the spread and power of religion.

He urged his congregation to "be grateful for the land which God has given us, the Constitution bequeathed to us, the Government given to us anew, as preserved amid unprecedented trial." He concluded by suggesting: "Before the world in this centennial, let us pledge our sympathy and aid to the cause of liberty, of good laws, of humanity, of true religion, of universal brotherhood and peace."64

In Indianapolis, the Rev. G. De La Matyr preached on June 25, 1876 at Roberts Park M. E. Church on "The Place of Our Government in the Dream of Nations." The next week he preached on "Our National

62 Indiana Journal, July 3, 1876.
63 San Francisco Chronicle, July 2, 3, 1876.
64 Methodist, July 29, 1876.
Responsibility.” In this latter sermon, based on the 67th Psalm, he first viewed the state of the nation at that time.

He then asked, “What are our responsibilities and what is our task?” To which he replied,

The first and most pressing duty is to elevate the moral sentiment of the freedman and of the masses of foreigners coming to this country. The church must lead in this work; it has responsibility in this matter of educating the masses.... The first grand purpose of this teaching is to carry into practice the principles of our constitution and to protect in equal rights all our people. The second is to develop a people combining all the races of man under one banner and under one God.65

At the Metropolitan Methodist Episcopal Church in the nation’s capital a three-day observance was held. On Sunday, July 2, J. P. Newman preached a sermon on the fathers of the American Revolution, “drawing instruction from their devotion to principle, and steady unwavering trust in the goodness of God.” The next evening a patriotic love feast was held until midnight when the Centennial was “ ushered in with singing and the chiming of bells.”66

Dr. Newman, “imbued with a patriotic desire to properly celebrate our National birthday,” arranged an interesting program for the Fourth. Thomas L. Tullock, who presided, opened the program at 9:00 a.m.: “The advent of a new century affords occasion for thanksgiving; for deep and joyous meditation, and while we contemplate the past, may we be profited by its teachings and incited to redoubled vigilance and duty.”

Senator George G. Wright of Iowa was the orator of the day. He said the first thing that everyone should do was to “give thanks to the Ruler of all nations, the Dispenser of all national as well as individual good.” Wright stressed the need in the United States for men — “bold, independent, firm men, of true courage. We need to dethrone the tricksters whenever found; the scheming and selfish casuist, who says my faith is your faith, my principles your principles, and therefore give me power.”67

Newman, in his sermon, drew “a lively picture of this day, one hundred years hence.” He said “this church would stand then and be as celebrated as were the ones now in Philadelphia and Alexandria, where the Great Washington used to worship.” In the course of his remarks he made reference to the fact that President and Mrs. U. S. Grant were present.68

Original poems were read, as well as the proceedings of the Continental Congress of July 1776 and the Declaration of Independence. Musical numbers included “America,” “Star Spangled Banner” and “Coronation Hymn.” A collection was taken for the unfinished Washington Monument. Afterwards, as one person reported, “We all went

65. Indiana Daily Sentinel, June 24, July 1, 1876; Indiana Journal, July 3, 1876.
66. Methodist, July 15, 1876; Evening Star, July 3, 1876.
67. Evening Star, July 5, 1876.
68. Ibid.; ZH, July 13, 1876.
home, pleased with ourselves, with our country, with our President, our minister, with the orator, poets, singers and readers..."  

The editors of the various Methodist periodicals also had considerable to say about the significance of the Centennial. One writer in Zion’s Herald set the tone for many editorials that were to follow. He saw the close of the first century “a fitting time” to review the past, to analyze the state of Christianity at the start of the second century, and to study the force and sweep of new influences and the drift of prevailing thought.  

The Methodist greeted the New Year with an editorial, “1876”. As a nation the United States had come a long way “through perils to power and prosperity, undreamed of, unhoped for, when we were born....If telling the story of growth were the best use for this day we should reach the night with the half still untold.”  

The editor felt that the work ahead, instead of what had passed, should command the attention of the people. “The year 1876 has among its most sacred duties the obliteration of division lines, and the reunion of estranged hearts.” A number of evils needed to be reformed in the next quarter of a century. “A depreciated currency; vast corporate debts; an imperfect civil service; widespread contempt for our public life; vast and irresponsible powers in great corporations and the public press” were a few of the greater evils that could not be cured “in one year or ten.”  

Others were concerned that “the evils which have disfigured our nation’s escutcheon threaten to become permanent.” Slavery was the only one that was gone forever. There was still “intemperance, corrupt literature, profanity, bribery, and a host of other vices, with which to contend....Our Government cannot endure everything. There is some limit to the power of resistance of even a great nation.”  

The editor of the Christian Advocate felt that the people should approach the second hundred years with a spirit that was “largely introspective. There are errors enough to correct; and evils still cling to us that will require....care to cast off. We have been too firm believers in our destiny.” He thought the United States was still on trial, and the nation needed solidification. “It needs to meditate on the past, that it may know how to act when the future leads us up to its great battle-fields.”  

In looking forward over the next century, the editor of Zion’s Herald made some predictions that have proved to be amazingly accurate.  

Progress in the next one hundred years will probably become the most noticeable in other provinces than the material world, as in the past. We do not, indeed, believe that invention is yet exhausted in the line of labor-saving machines, or of locomotion; there will be great discoveries, doubtless, made in machinery. Fuel and fire will be

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69. ZH, July 13, 1876.  
70. Ibid., May 20, 1875.  
71. Methodist, Jan. 1, 1876.  
72. CA, July 13, 1876.  
73. Ibid., July 6, 1876.
replaced by other substances or elements. Great facilities will be found for increasing
the material comforts of man. Our houses, our architecture, warming, lighting,
ventilation and furnishing will be improved. Our private carriages as well as field
ploughs may yet be drawn by engines, and be governed as easily and more safely than
horses. Indeed there is no limit to the possibilities of the human mind, with its facile
servant, the human hand, in this direction.

However, he felt that greater progress would be made by making
certain that the youth of the land received a broader and richer education.
These carefully trained minds must have a place in which to develop. Some
would be drawn to public offices.

We shall have thoroughly educated statesmen, who, when the present reaction against
simply partisan politicians reaches its crisis and results, will be sought after to fill the
responsible places in the government. Cultivated, Christian statesmen...will soon
produce a perceptible change in the character and conduct of our legislature.

Other well trained people would move into other fields — the physical
sciences, literature, the arts. “There is an ocean beyond. In these directions
our busy and thoughtful students, in years to come, will take possession in
the name of their fair country, of broad and still unexplored domains.”

There was still better and more extensive work to be done in the area
of morals and religion. “There remaineth yet very much land to be
possessed.” Intemperance, human reforms, charity and evangelical ser­
vices at home and abroad were some of the problems to which attention
must be given. 74

No editor overlooked the place and importance of the church in the
life of the people of the United States. Many suggestions were made
regarding the challenge that was ahead for Christians. These admonitions
during the Centennial of 1876 are equally valid for the Bicentennial of
1976.

In an editorial, “Work for the New Century,” the editor of the
Christian Advocate emphasized that the true spirit of obedience to God
must begin in the home. After this, this spirit

must go into the schools, the churches, the counting rooms, the workshops, the fields,
and the ballot-boxes, until in every part of our land, and in every class of our people,
there shall be seen all that loyalty to God and love of righteousness that exalteth a
nation — which distinguished our fathers when our ship of State first went out from
her old colonial moorings, a hundred years ago. 75

The Zion’s Herald suggested ways in which the Fourth of July could be
celebrated:

Let rejoicings, then, fill the land! We confess to a deeper personal sympathy with the
more intellectual and spiritual forms of expressing our thankfulness and happiness. It
has seemed to be eminently becoming that, at such an hour, we should enter the
temples of religion and offer praise to Almighty God for His distinguishing mercies.

But let those that enjoy the more pronounced experiences of public joy ring the bells,

74. ZH, July 13, 1876.
75. CA, July 13, 1876.
march to the cadence of music along the streets, and thunder from the loud-voiced guns! But to God be all praise.\(^{76}\)

A week later the same paper set forth a role for the church in its editorial, “Beyond the Fourth”:

If the Christian Church is true to herself, without the slightest recognition on the part of the State, she will become a serving leaven throughout the land. She will still make us a Christian nation, preserve the public school from being diverted into a sectarian propaganda, purify and inspire the public conscience, defend the sanctity of the Sabbath and marriage covenant, renew the old virtue of downright honesty in commercial life, and bring down upon the land, by her hallowed services and ardent prayers, the benediction of Almighty God.\(^{77}\)

The *Methodist Protestant* viewed a hundred years as “an infinitesimal point in the eternity of duration,” but God has had his guiding hand in all. In the United States the tree of liberty had been planted by our forefathers, and here it continued to flourish. In looking to the future, the editor saw the possibility of greater glory.

...if public virtue shall continue to be something more than a mere titular guardian, and that other legend of one of the original thirteen States — *Virtue, Liberty and Independence* — shall preserve its sequence of meaning, if an open Bible shall continue to reflect its divine light upon the consciences of the people, then may our future be more glorious than our past, and the centennium of 1976 find the whole North American continent embraced in the confederation of the United States, and *E Pluribus Unum* be true of a homogeneous and God-fearing people. This we believe is our destiny.

Meanwhile the Fourth of July would continue to be “the great national holiday.” Therefore, “let the day be devoted to the encouragement of brotherhood among ourselves and the fraternity of nations.”\(^{78}\)

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76. ZH, July 6, 1876.