

## CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP: THE GENERAL CONFERENCE OF 1792

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Yet one more bicentennial should be observed by United Methodists before the end of the twentieth century: the two hundredth anniversary of the first General Conference, which was held in Baltimore from November 1-15, 1792. There is good reason to note that event, not only because it marked the beginning of an unbroken succession of quadrennial meetings on the state of the church, but also because it witnessed a dangerous crisis in leadership in the growing but still struggling denomination. Here, for the first time, but not the last, Methodists were forced to deal legislatively with the personal tension between episcopal and parliamentary authority. The outcome determined the character of Methodism down to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

People, when contemplating the past through nostalgic lenses, tend to notice only the grand flow from the "founding parents," who in the process become paragons. The wild rapids of struggle, the rocks of peril, the conflicts of strong personalities, all become misty in the halo of innocence which surrounds early beginnings. Such has been the effect of hindsight on our understanding of the rise of Methodism. We have seen much of this tendency in recent bicentennials. The figure of Francis Asbury, circuit-rider *sans peur et sans reproche*, illustrates the fate of most founding parents, whether they be George Washington crossing the Delaware, Martin Luther posting the Ninety-Five Theses, John Wesley preaching salvation to coal miners, or Frances Willard demanding equal rights for women in the fight against Demon Rum. The role of Asbury invites reassessment.

Thus it is useful to revisit the first General Conference and observe the crucial conflict which came to a head there. We shall learn that Asbury, far from being the unquestioned leader of a church without stains or strains, presided over a contentious and potentially divisive body of

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<sup>1</sup>A curious oddity of history is that no minutes of this meeting survive. Its actions must be determined from the *Discipline* which was published afterwards and from unofficial records kept by participants. A careful reconstruction is provided by Thomas B. Neely in Lewis Curts, ed., *The General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1792 to 1896* (Cincinnati: Curts & Jennings; New York: Eaton & Mains, 1900), 1-51. Neely is also author of *A History of the Origin and Development of the Governing Conference in Methodism* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe; New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1892), in which Chap. XI deals with "The Quadrennial General Conference." Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Lane & Tippett, 1845, and other editions), I, 342-51, gives another account.

perhaps converted, but certainly not all sanctified, sinners, some of them ambitious as well. Halos, including Asbury's, were not clearly in evidence.

The church, had this conference turned out differently, might well have broken to pieces, at least geographically. It is worthwhile, therefore, to identify the forces at work. At stake were not only the authority of Bishop Asbury (and also John Wesley, now dead), but episcopal authority itself in tension with this new thing, a General Conference of all the preachers. There were no limits, literally no rules of the game. Until 1808 there was no constitution to govern the actions of either bishop or Conference.

As for Asbury, there was the succinct definition as stated in the Minutes of Conference, 1779, of the office then called "General Assistant"; "Q. 13, How far shall his power extend? On hearing every preacher for and against, what is in debate, the right of determination shall rest with him according to the Minutes." As for General Conference, the whole body of preachers gathered together was understood to be the fundamental authority in the foundation and government of the Methodist Episcopal Church. This body, acting as a constitutional convention, had brought the church into being and had elected one of their number to the episcopal office—even though Wesley had already appointed him. No wonder that Asbury, Wesley's man in America, felt threatened by the demand for a General Conference! No wonder that James O'Kelly, arch-critic of what he regarded as the Bishop's tyrannical style, took center stage on the second day of the Conference with his seemingly modest and innocuous proposal for an appeal by preachers from the bishop's appointment.

Here were two great forces, not irresistible but certainly unrestrained, primed against one another. And it took place at this first General Conference in 1792 in Baltimore. It is important to inspect the circumstances which led to this gathering.

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By 1790 there were several indications of instability in the new and unprecedented church, which still called itself a "movement" of "societies." Yes, it was growing. Yes, it was expanding. But it was becoming unwieldy. It was staggering along with the system of Annual Conferences established by Thomas Rankin in 1773. Theoretically there was one conference each year and the Minutes were published as a unit. Actually it took place in several regional sessions, each presided over by the bishops and each debating and acting on the same agenda. There was real danger that divisive tendencies would bring to the church problems similar to those of the United States under the Articles of Confederation. As Nathan Bangs put it, "There was danger from this state of things of a dissolution of the body, and the establishment of a number of separate and distinct communities, acting independently of each other."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Bangs, *History*, I, 343.

Then, Methodists were upset by a scandal, the notorious "leaving Mr. Wesley's name off the Minutes" in 1787. The Methodist Episcopal Church and its members had bound themselves to remain loyal to their English founder as long as he lived. But they had been riled by what they regarded as his high-handed actions in announcing a "general conference" for May of that year and appointing Richard Whatcoat to be a third bishop. In consequence, Wesley's name was not included in the disciplinary statement of leaders. Within two years this painful rift was patched up (if not quite healed) by a typical Methodistic solution: The question of authority was divided into two parts:

"Quest. 1. Who are the persons that exercise the episcopal office in England and America?

Ans. John Wesley, Thomas Coke, Francis Asbury.

Quest. 2. Who have been elected by the unanimous suffrages of the General Conference to superintend the Methodist connection in America?

Ans. Thomas Coke, Francis Asbury."

Again, a complicated dispute over the plan for the "Council" challenged the authority of Asbury. The Council was his idea; he was fully involved; the plan would have increased his power. Its collapse brought him into painful conflict with some of his most able and loyal supporters.<sup>3</sup>

And last, Methodists were saddened by news of the death of John Wesley on March 2, 1791. After a long career, at the age of eighty-eight, the founding father—"old Daddy Wesley"—was gone. Although the Americans had had their problems with their strong-minded leader, all they could feel now was a desolate sense of loss.<sup>4</sup>

It is just as well, considering all these unsettling events, that Methodists generally were not yet aware of a most controversial approach made by none other than the senior bishop, Thomas Coke, in April of that same year to Bishop William White of the fledgling Protestant Episcopal Church regarding a possible reunion with the parent church. When the exchange of letters was later made public, Methodists were quite upset.<sup>5</sup>

These factors add up to unsteadiness in leadership and direction. They all came to a head in the General Conference of 1792. At issue was the authority of Bishop Asbury, especially at the point of his appointive power. His authority came directly from John Wesley, but also from election by his peers. Thomas Coke, also a bishop, to employ a metaphor that would

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<sup>3</sup>An account of the Council may be found in *The History of American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), I, 429-32.

<sup>4</sup>Compare Asbury's Journal entry in Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (Abingdon Press, 1958), I, 673, with his letter to Jasper Winscom, August 15, 1788, *ibid.*, III, 62.

<sup>5</sup>Discussed in John Vickers, *Thomas Coke, Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969). More extensive attention is in Paul Blankenship, "History of Negotiations for Union between Methodists and Non-Methodists in the United States" (Diss., Northwestern University, 1965).

not have been well received in that assembly, was a "Joker" in the pack of cards, sporadically influential but frequently absent. At issue also, although not specified, was the authority of a "general conference" of the preachers. It had created the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784 and had elected as bishops those whom Wesley had already appointed. Were there no limits on what a General Conference could do? Apparently not.

Asbury was finally resigned to accept it. His Council had failed to gain recognition, and he didn't even want to hear it mentioned again. Three persons, well known and highly regarded, were active in promoting a General Conference, each for his own reasons. First was Bishop Coke, the senior bishop, well educated and scholarly, who had come to America with Wesley's special blessing and consecration. But he was in and out of the country, absent in England or Ireland. He got along with Asbury, but he was not at all sure of his administrative acumen. The Council was the last straw. He urged a General Conference as a more effective instrument of governance.

The second leader was Jesse Lee, chief agent of the spread of Methodism in New England, and (1810) author of the first comprehensive history of American Methodism. He was a most capable and influential presiding elder and a prime candidate for election as bishop. He became the first of a long line of distinguished "almost bishops." He was deeply imbued with American ideas of representative government, and thought that this most American of churches should reflect the principles of democratic participation in leadership (at least by the traveling preachers). He already once had been censured for his liberal ideas.<sup>6</sup> He protested against Asbury's Council from the beginning.

The third preacher was James O'Kelly, strong-minded presiding elder with a large following, especially in southern Virginia. He had for years opposed what he regarded as Asbury's authoritarian rule. Although he attended the first meeting of the Council, he quickly dropped out and stood opposed. In his case the drive for a General Conference was a means of opposing Asbury's authority. This opposition took on personal aspects and deeply affected both men. For example, in 1790 Asbury reported in his Journal that he had received a letter from O'Kelly: "He makes heavy complaints of my power, and bids me stop for one year or he must use his influence against me. Power! Power!"<sup>7</sup>

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And so the Conference met. On the second day O'Kelly moved that the appointive power of the bishop be limited by appeal to the Annual

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<sup>6</sup>*History of American Methodism*, I, 434.

<sup>7</sup>January 12, 1790, *Journal and Letters*, I, 620. O'Kelly's walkout and schism are discussed in *History of American Methodism*, I, 440-52.

Conference. Asbury, acutely aware that the motion was pointed directly at him, removed himself to allow free debate. His instincts led him to write a letter to the Conference, in which he pled humility ("I have only to obey and execute. . . . I am a very trembling, poor creature to hear praise or dispraise"). But he warned that, if they decided wrongly, "a future day may give you further light."<sup>8</sup> No one was left in any doubt as to where Bishop Asbury stood.

In the three-day debate that ensued the lines were drawn and the issue clarified, in spite of parliamentary maneuvers and confusions. Some minds were changed. Bishop Coke, observing this assembly of earnest Christians seeking to discern God's will, was impressed by the high level of articulate debate.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Ware, one of the preachers who at first had found merit in O'Kelly's proposal, decided that it created more problems than it solved.<sup>10</sup>

The motion was voted down. Unwilling to continue under this episcopal system, he withdrew to form a splinter church of his own. His later career and the schism are not relevant to this discussion. In resolving the tension, therefore, the General Conference decided not to impede the appointive power of the bishop. It would remain for later administrative adjustments to provide consultation and negotiation in such matters.

But at the same time it proceeded to legislate for the church. It made itself into a quadrennial body, answerable for its actions only to the people called Methodists. Since these so far had no general voice except in this General Conference *of preachers*, it was in fact answerable, as it were, only to God. Many decades would pass before the body would broaden to include lay representatives. Over a hundred years would pass before women were included.

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Thus came into being the General Conference as a body which would meet quadrennially from 1792 to 1992. It *could* (until 1808) do anything, although it *did* not attack either Asbury or the episcopal office. In 1808 it bound itself by a restrictive rule that it would "not change or alter any part or rule of our government, so as to do away with Episcopacy or destroy the plan of our itinerant general superintendency."<sup>11</sup> This became part of what Methodists call their Constitution.

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<sup>8</sup>November 8, 1792, *Journal and Letters*, III, 112-13.

<sup>9</sup>Coke, *Extracts of the Journals* . . . (London, 1793), 163.

<sup>10</sup>Ware, *Sketches of the Life and Travels*, 220 f., quoted in *History of American Methodism*, I, 438.

<sup>11</sup>See the Restrictive Rules in any Discipline.

This self-imposed restriction did not end the tension. There were ways of affecting authority without “changing or altering.” There have been strong-minded bishops all along, and some General Conferences have been restive if not unruly. The fundamental issue—dual final authority—had to be faced from time to time, notably in the General Conference of 1844, which debated the fate of Bishop Andrew and his slaves. That even *that* issue is not yet entirely resolved is illustrated by the peculiar treatment given in the standard *History of American Methodism* (1964).

But the General Conference of 1792 did solve the immediate problems. Jesse Lee, in his prototypical *A Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America*, averred that “the proceedings of this General Conference gave great satisfaction to our preachers and people, and the divisive spirit which had been prevailing in different parts of our Connection was considerably checked.”<sup>12</sup> Bishop Neely in his classic work on the General Conference described it as “the supreme legislative, judicial, and executive power of the Church. . . . To this quadrennial General Conference, constituted as before stated, bishops and ordained ministers, preachers and people, Conferences and Churches, were to be subject. Its authority was to touch the highest official in the general Church, as well as the humblest member of the local Church. It was to make the laws, to interpret the laws, and, directly or indirectly, to execute the laws. It represented the Church—it was the Church for all these purposes.”<sup>13</sup>

This may well be true until it was modified by later arrangements which accompanied reunion in 1939 and merger in 1968. But there remained the bishop, who, whether he wanted it or not, wore the same hat as Francis Asbury (even though he might not be able to fill his shoes). And the mantle of John Wesley still hangs around his shoulders. It may hang heavy, but it can serve as armor for combat. The tension still exists: on the one side is the authority, as founder, of “Old Daddy Wesley,” who never called himself bishop but was what he himself called “a scriptural episcopos.” On the other side is the authority of the people called Methodists expressed through their elected representatives in General Conference.

Was the rise of General Conference yet one more expression of the Americanization of Methodism? Was the democratic spirit spilling over into the councils of the church? Perhaps. But it also embodies something fundamental to the Methodist movement from its beginnings: the need, voice, and will of the people. Wesley himself from time to time recognized this voice as the voice of God, even if he heard it from the mouths of lay preachers and women. It was inevitable, therefore given the essential

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<sup>12</sup>Lee, 193.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas B. Neely, *A History of the Origin and Development of the Governing Conference in Methodism*, 330.

nature of General Conference as a representative body, that in due time the voices of laymen as well as preachers, and women as well as men, would there be heard.

We are left to speculate on the significance of the curious parallel between quadrennial General Conferences and quadrennial presidential elections, always in the same year. That United Methodism is American is indubitable. The real question is, has it in the process lost something essential to the Christian faith?