

# From the Close of the General Conference in 1796, to the Commencement of the General Conference in 1800

by Nathan Bangs

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*The sermon highlights the growth and development of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States, with a focus on the challenges faced by Bishop Asbury and the impact of the gospel on people of color.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 11:30, Isaiah 6:8, Matthew 28:19, Acts 1:8, Romans 10:14, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Philippians 2:3, Colossians 3:23, 1 Thessalonians 1:8, 2 Timothy 4:7

**Topics:** "Methodist History", "Church Growth"

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## Description

In this sermon, Bishop Asbury's diligent efforts to spread the gospel across the continent are highlighted, despite facing physical limitations that required him to employ substitutes in conferences. The sermon also delves into the challenges faced by Methodist preachers in new territories like Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and the Western Reserve in Ohio. The narrative includes the establishment of Methodism in places like Upper Canada, Georgia, and the Mississippi Territory, showcasing the zealous missionary work of individuals like Calvin Wooster and Tobias Gibson. The sermon also touches on the growth of Methodism in regions like Ohio and the Western Reserve, emphasizing the importance of preaching sanctification and immediate conversion. The dedication and sacrifices of preachers like John Dickins, who managed the Book Concern in Philadelphia, and the fervent prayers of individuals like Francis McCormick and Philip Gatch in Ohio, are highlighted as pivotal in the expansion of Methodism.

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## Transcript

There were six annual conferences held this year, one of which was in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, the seventh that was held in New England. Three new circuits were returned on the minutes, namely, Pleasant River, in Maine; Sandwich, and Martha's Vineyard, in Massachusetts. This latter circuit included the island by that name belonging to the state of Massachusetts, about twenty-one miles in length, and was once the scene of missionary labors by some of our Puritan ancestors, who devoted themselves to the conversion of the aborigines of the country. But the fruit of these labors, though they abounded for a season, had long since disappeared; and among the white inhabitants who had taken their place, a few only welcomed the coming of a Methodist preacher; for we find that in 1798 no more than thirteen members of the Church are credited to Martha's Vineyard.

Though Bishop Asbury began the year with his wonted diligence, and set off upon his annual tour of the continent, yet his physical strength was not equal to the task, and he was compelled to yield, though with great reluctance, to the necessity of employing a substitute to preside in the conferences. He, however, in company with Dr. Coke, rode through several of the southern states until the doctor left the continent for Ireland.

The following remark shows the intimate and endeared friendship which subsisted between these two servants of God. Speaking of the doctor's departure, he says, "Strangers to the delicacies of Christian friendship know little or nothing of the pain of parting." After spending some time in Charleston, in consequence of his great debility, during which, however, he was busy in setting things in order, preaching when able, and assisting them in building another house of worship, he set off on his western tour. "On my way," he says, "I felt as if I was out of prison. Hail ye solitary pines! the jessamine, the red-bud, and the dog-wood! How charming in full bloom! the former a most fragrant smell." He succeeded in crossing the Cumberland Mountains in the state of Tennessee, but such were his bodily afflictions, that, through the advice and persuasions of his friends, he relinquished his intention of visiting the Kentucky conference, and made his way back as he was able to endure the fatigue of traveling, to the city of Baltimore. While in the state of Virginia, he made the following reflections: --

"My fever left me, as I thought, from Monday until Friday night. I am kept cheerful, but very weak. My diet is chiefly tea, potatoes, Indian meal gruel, and chicken broth. My reading is only the Bible. I cannot think much, and write only a few letters. I think of my charge, of the conferences, and the Church, and of my dear parents, who will probably outlive me. I must be made perfect through sufferings. I rest in rainy weather, and have to ride from eighty to one hundred miles in a week. The way we now go we have sometimes to ride thirty miles to get to a house." -- "I have traveled about six hundred miles with an inflammatory fever, and a fixed pain in my breast."

In this state of pain and weakness did this holy man of God pursue his work, through the various sections of our country, for the sole purpose of building up the Redeemer's kingdom. On the tenth of June he arrived in Baltimore, where he had every attention paid to him which Christian love and esteem could devise; and notwithstanding his physical sufferings, he employed his time, so far as his feeble health would allow, in preaching occasionally to the people, visiting the classes, and in organizing an African Church. By a suitable attention to medical advice, and the nursing care of his affectionate friends, he soon so far recruited as to be able to resume his itinerant labors. Accordingly we find him on his Northern course passing through Pennsylvania and New Jersey, (stopping long enough in the most important places to preach and meet the classes,) to New York, and thence he went on his way with an intention to meet the conference at Wilbraham in Massachusetts; but his fever increasing, he was obliged to stop at Tuckehoe, at the house of Bishop Sherwood where he was treated with great kindness. While here he makes the following reflections, which show the feelings of a sensitive heart, struggling under the burdensome cares of a superintendent of the Church, of an obedient and affectionate son, still panting for an enlarged sphere of usefulness in the world: --

"The kindness of this Sherwood family is great; my dear mamma, and Betsy Sherwood, and Jonathan and Bishop also: if I had not been at home here, what additional distress of mind would have attended me! my friends also were welcome to come and see me. Sabbath day, at the widow Sherwood's, I had the pleasure of hearing our brother Matthias make a pointed, profitable, and powerful discourse. It is now eight weeks since I have preached -- awfully dumb Sabbaths! I have been most severely tried from various quarters; my fevers, my feet, and Satan, would set in with my gloomy and nervous affections. Sometimes

subject to the greatest effeminacy; to distress at the thought of a useless, idle life: but what brought the heavy pang into my heart, and the big tear to roll, that never rises without a cause, was the thought of leaving the connection without some proper men of their own election, to go in and out before them in my place, and to keep that order which I have been seeking these many years to establish. My aged parents were dear to me in their advanced age and dependent state: like myself, they have spent what they had to spare for many years, nearly forty, in keeping open doors for the gospel and people of God: this burden hath been laid upon them. I am happy that I can now ride a little every clear day for my better health, and can eat and sleep better. I am left too much alone: I cannot sit in my room all day making gloomy reflections on the past, present, and future life. Lord help me! for I am poor and needy; the hand of God hath touched me, and I think Satan forts himself in my melancholy, unemployed, unsocial, and inactive hours."

While the bishop was thus hindered from attending the conference in Wilbraham, it was some consolation to him to know that there were those in the Church who could supply his place, without material detriment to the cause. He Accordingly wrote to Jesse Lee, requesting him to attend the Conference in Wilbraham, which he did, and the conference made choice of him to preside over their deliberations. This duty he discharged to their entire satisfaction, doing all the business of an annual conference except the ordinations. Afterward, at the request of the bishop, and on the recommendation of that conference, Mr. Lee left New England and accompanied Bishop Asbury, with a view to aid him in his peculiar work, to some of the more southern conferences. After attending the Virginia conference together, the bishop, at the request of the conference, stopped to recruit his strength, now much wasted by sickness and fatigue, and Mr. Lee went on to attend the more southern conferences.

This year the city of Philadelphia was severely visited by an epidemical disease which hurried into eternity thousands of its citizens, and induced thousands of others to flee for safety into the country. On this account the conference which was to have set in that city was removed to Duck Creek, in the state of Delaware.

The number of locations still continued to embarrass the itinerancy, as not less than forty-three were returned this year "under a location through weakness of body and family concerns." How much more mighty in strength and comely in beauty would have been the Methodist Episcopal Church had she used the proper means to retain in her itinerant service all those men of God! Youth and inexperience were often called in to supply the lack of service occasioned by these premature departures from the regular work.

While the increase, though comparatively small among the members, shows the good effects resulting from a united effort to spread the knowledge of God our Saviour, the decrease in the number of preachers, as will be seen below, evinces a lamentable defect in securing the continued labors of all those who had entered the itinerating ranks.

Two preachers, namely, John Ragan and Albert Van Nostrand, closed their labors and life this year in peace, and went to their reward in glory.

#### Numbers in the Church

Last year and this, in the recapitulation of the numbers, I find them taken by states; and that the reader may see the relative strength of Methodism in the several states of the Union, I give them as they stand in the minutes for 1797.

Province of Maine --Whites: 616; Colored: 0  
New Hampshire -- Whites: 92; Colored: 0  
Massachusetts -- Whites: 905; Colored: 8  
Rhode Island -- Whites: 175; Colored: 2  
Connecticut -- Whites: 1,186; Colored: 15  
New York -- Whites: 4,612; Colored: 238  
New Jersey -- Whites: 2,438; Colored: 127  
Pennsylvania -- Whites: 2,900; Colored: 198  
Delaware -- Whites: 1,461; Colored: 823  
Maryland -- Whites: 6,982; Colored: 5,106  
Virginia -- Whites: 11,046; Colored: 2,490  
North Carolina -- Whites: 7,251; Colored: 2,071  
South Carolina -- Whites: 2,693; Colored: 890  
Georgia -- Whites: 1,022; Colored: 148  
Tennessee -- Whites: 534; Colored: 42  
Kentucky -- Whites: 1,740; Colored: 57  
Canada -- Whites: 792; Colored: 3  
Total This Year -- Whites: 46,445; Colored: 12,218  
Grand Total This Year: 58,663  
Grand Total Last Year: 56,664  
Increase: 1,999  
Preachers This Year: 262  
Preachers Last Year: 293  
Decrease: 31

It will be seen by the above enumeration, that there were upward of twelve thousand people of color attached to the Methodist Episcopal Church. These were chiefly in the southern states, and had been gathered principally from the slave population.

At an early period of the Methodist ministry in this country, it had turned its attention and directed its efforts toward these people, with a view to bring them to the enjoyment of gospel blessings. The preachers

deplored, with the deepest sympathy, their unhappy condition, especially their enslavement to sin and Satan; and while they labored unsuccessfully by all prudent means to effect their disenthralment from their civil bondage, they were amply rewarded for their evangelical efforts to raise them from their moral degradation, by seeing thousands of them happily converted to God. These efforts added much to the labor of the preachers, for such was the condition of the slaves that they were not permitted, on working days, to attend the public administration of the word in company with their masters; and hence the preachers devoted the evenings to their instruction, after the customary labors of the day were closed. And although at first there was much aversion manifested by the masters toward these benevolent efforts to elevate the condition of their slaves, yet witnessing the beneficial effects of the gospel upon their hearts and lives, they gradually yielded their prejudices, and encouraged the preachers in their labors, assisted in providing houses to accommodate them in their worship, and otherwise protected them in their religious privileges. While, therefore, the voice of the preachers was not heard in favor of emancipation from their civil bondage, nor their remonstrances against the evils of slavery heeded, the voice of truth addressed to the understandings and consciences of the slaves themselves, was often heard with believing and obedient hearts, and made instrumental in their deliverance from the shackles of sin and the bondage of Satan. Those who were thus redeemed were enrolled among the people of God, and were consequently entitled to the privileges of the Church of Christ. In some of the northern cities, houses of worship were erected for their special and separate accommodation, and they were put under the pastoral charge of a white preacher, who was generally assisted by such colored local preachers as may have been raised up among themselves; for many such, from time to time, possessing gifts for edification, were licensed to preach the gospel to their colored brethren, and some of these have been eminently useful. In the more southern states, where the municipal regulations in respect to the slaves are more severe, some portion of the churches where the white population assemble is usually set apart for the blacks. Their behavior has generally been such as to insure the confidence of their masters and the protection of their civil rulers, though they labored under the disabilities incident to a state of servitude.

This year, ten months from the time the former house was consumed by fire, on the 19th of October, the new church in Light Street, in the city of Baltimore, was consecrated to the service of almighty God.

1798

There were seven conferences this year, so arranged that the bishops might begin their labors in the southern states in the winter season, and travel on north in the spring and summer months. One of these conferences was held in Readfield, in the province of Maine, for the accommodation of that part of the work.

Chenango, in the western part of New York, Vergennes, in Vermont, and Providence, in Rhode Island, were added to the list of circuits. The western section of the state of New York was, at this time, a new country, just filling up with inhabitants, and was generally destitute of the word and ordinances of Christianity. To supply them with these several young men full of zeal for the cause of God, were sent into this newly settled country, under the care of the Rev. F. Garrettson, to whom the charge of the Albany district was confided. As early as 1792, Mr. Garrettson had traveled through various parts of this new country, preaching to the people in their log houses, in barns, and often holding his quarterly meetings under the foliage of the trees. Aided as he was by those zealous and indefatigable young preachers who entered this field of labor, he was instrumental in extending the gospel and its attendant blessings into these destitute places; by these means those societies were established, which have continued to nourish and increase to the present time. Along the Mohawk river, as far as Utica, as well as the Chenango and

Susquehanna rivers, those pioneers of Methodism penetrated, and laid the foundation for those extensive revivals of religion which have blessed that region of country. We may form some judgment of the good effects of these labors and sacrifices from the fact that there were returned in the minutes for this year, including the Tioga, Wyoming, Saratoga and Seneca circuits, 892 members of the Church. Had equal zeal been manifested at this early period in building suitable houses of worship, as the work enlarged with the progress of the settlements, Methodism would have taken a stand here more firmly, and have exerted a much more hallowed and extensive influence over the population. As it was, however, the permanency of the work has been manifested by its steady growth and leavening effects on that flourishing part of the country; and more latterly the defect alluded to has been in a great measure remedied by the zeal and industry of those enlightened men to whom the oversight of the work has been committed.

A gradual extension of the cause was witnessed generally throughout our bounds, and much harmony and peace prevailed among preachers and people.

Numbers in the Church: Whites This Year: 47,867; Last Year: 46,445; Increase: 1,422 -- Colored This Year: 12,302; Last Year: 12,218; Increase: 84 -- Total This Year: 60,169; Last Year: 58,663 -- Increase: 1,506 -- Preachers This Year: 267; Last Year: 262; Increase: 5.

During the prevalence of the yellow fever in the city of Philadelphia this year, many estimable citizens were swept from time to eternity, and among others that eminent preacher of the gospel, John Dickins, whose useful services in the Church entitle him to a more special and lengthened notice than what has been given to some others.

He was a native of Great Britain, born and educated in the city of London. At what time he emigrated to this country is not stated; but it appears that in 1774 he was made a partaker of divine grace, and united himself to the Methodist society in Virginia. In 1777 he was admitted into the traveling ministry, and itinerated extensively though Virginia and North Carolina in the time of the Revolutionary war. For some cause he located in 1781, but two years after was readmitted into the conference, and was stationed in the city of New York, where he labored for several years acceptably and usefully. When the Book Room was established in the city of Philadelphia in 1789, he was appointed to its superintendence, and he managed its concerns with great skill and fidelity until his demise. For this station he was eminently qualified, not only on account of his strict fidelity, his theological attainments, and thorough acquaintance with the economy of Methodism, but also from his literary acquirements. His knowledge of the sciences was considerable, and besides his own language, he was familiar with the Latin and Greek. And, though not brilliant in his conceptions nor splendid as a preacher, he was of sound judgment, a close and conclusive reasoner, a plain, pointed, and successful preacher, always adapting, as nearly as might be, his discourses to the condition and circumstances of his hearers. As an evidence of the soundness of his views as a divine, may be mentioned the fact that the "Short Scriptural Catechism," which has been published for many years at our Book Room, was the production of his pen. And whatever may be said in behalf of others which have been since issued from the press, this is among the most excellent of them all, and should never be superseded by those of less intrinsic merit. It contains in fact a body of divinity in a few words, selected from the Holy Scriptures, arranged in due order, in the very phraseology in "which the Holy Ghost teacheth."

The accuracy and fidelity with which he discharged his duties as an editor, and also as a financier and bookkeeper -- for in each of these capacities did he serve while superintending the Book Concern in Philadelphia -- may be seen and appreciated by an inspection of the books of the establishment, by a

recurrence to the manner in which it prospered in his hands, and the typographical correctness with which the books were executed.

In the relations of husband and parent he sustained the purity and dignity of his station, mixing in all his deportment the tenderness of the warmest affection with the attributes essential to maintain his authority as the head of a family. In the relation of a father ever attentive to the best interests of his children, he devoted himself to their education, to training their minds to moral and religious duties, and to restraining them from those vices which corrupt the mind, and lay the foundation for present and future misery.

The state of his mind may be seen by the following extract of a letter which he wrote to Bishop Asbury a short time before his death. The reader will recollect that the yellow fever was then raging in Philadelphia with awful and destructive violence, sweeping into eternity thousands of his fellow-beings, while others, to escape from this devouring plague, were flying into various parts of the country. Notwithstanding these alarming aspects in the heavens and the earth around him, John Dickins remained, as a faithful sentinel, at his post, giving warning to the impenitent, and counsel and consolation to the trembling and dying believer. In the midst of these things, he says to Bishop Asbury: --

"My much-esteemed Friend and Brother -- I sit down to write as in the jaws of death. Whether Providence may permit me to see your face again in the flesh I know not; but if not, I hope, though abundant mercy, we shall meet in the presence of God. I am fully conscious that I am an unprofitable, a very unprofitable servant; but I think my heart condemns me not, and therefore I have confidence in God. Perhaps I might have left the city, as most of my friends and brethren have done; but when I thought of such a thing, my mind recurred to that Providence which has done so much for me, a poor worm, that I was afraid of indulging any distrust. So I commit myself and family into the hands of God, for life or death."

Soon after writing the above, he was seized with the raging epidemic, and on the 27th of September, 1795, he took his departure to a better world, in the fifty-second year of his age. During his sickness, which he contracted while visiting the abodes of wretchedness and administering the consolations of the gospel to the dying, he was saved from those awful agitations of body and mind which are usually the accompaniments of this fatal disease, and with great tranquillity of mind he entered into his Master's joy. From the testimony of his bereaved widow it appears that he said to her, on the first day of his illness, --

"I am very ill; but I entreat you in the most earnest manner, not to be the least discomposed or uneasy. Tell the children, I beg them not to be uneasy, for divine wisdom cannot err. Glory be to God! I can rejoice in his will, whether for life or death. I know all is well! Glory be to Jesus! I hang upon thee. Glory be to thee, O, my God I have made it my constant business, in my feeble manner, to please thee -- and now, O God, thou dost comfort me."

In this happy frame of mind did he meet the last enemy on his first approaches. Then clasping his hands together, he joyfully exclaimed, "Glory be to God! Glory! Glory be to God! My soul now enjoys such sweet communion with him, that I would not give it for all the world. Glory be to Jesus! O, glory be to God! I have not felt so much for seven years. Love him! Trust him! Praise him!"

Bishop Asbury bears the following testimony to the character of Mr. Dickins: -- "For piety, probity, profitable preaching, holy living, Christian education of his children, secret closet prayer, I doubt whether his superior is to be found either in Europe or America."

James King, and Michael H. R. Wilson, also finished their course and entered into their Master's joy.

Twelve were located; and for the first time, four were returned as supernumerary preachers this year. These were, John Smith, Thomas Morrell, Enoch Mudge, and Henry Willis.

1799

This year there were only six conferences, the first of which was in Charleston, S. C., January 1, and the last in the city of New York, June 19, 1799.

As John Dickins, the book steward, had gone to his reward, by the recommendation of the Philadelphia Conference, Bishop Asbury appointed Ezekiel Cooper, to superintend the Book Concern, which was still carried on in the city of Philadelphia.

This year was distinguished by several revivals of religion. In Upper Canada a gracious revival had commenced in 1797, chiefly through the instrumentality of Calvin Wooster, whose fervency of spirit led him forth in the work of reformation in a most remarkable manner, and with singular success. In company with Samuel Coate, he volunteered his services as a missionary to this distant field of labor, and after enduring almost incredible hardships on their way, for they lodged no less than twenty-one nights in the wilderness, they arrived in safety just in time to attend a quarterly meeting on the Bay of Quinte circuit. After the preaching on Saturday, while the presiding elder, Darius Dunham, retired with the official brethren to hold the quarterly meeting conference, brother Wooster remained in the meeting to pray with some who were under awakenings, and others who were groaning for full redemption in the blood of Christ. While uniting with his brethren in this exercise, the power of the Most high seemed to overshadow the congregation, and many were filled with joy unspeakable, and were praising the Lord aloud for what he had done for their souls, while others "with speechless awe, and silent love," were prostrate on the floor. When the presiding elder came into the house, he beheld these things with a mixture of wonder and indignation, believing that "wild-fire" was burning among the people. After gazing for a while with silent astonishment, he kneeled down and began to pray to God to stop the "raging of the wild-fire," as he called it. In the meantime, Calvin Wooster, whose soul was burning with the "fire of the holy Spirit," kneeled by the side of brother Dunham, and while the latter was earnestly engaged in prayer for God to put out the wild-fire, Wooster softly whispered out a prayer in the following words, "Lord, bless brother Dunham! Lord, bless brother Dunham!" Thus they continued for some minutes -- when, at length, the prayer of brother Wooster prevailed, and Dunham fell prostrate on the floor -- and ere he arose received a baptism of that very fire which he had so feelingly deprecated as the effect of a wild imagination. There was now harmony in their prayers, feelings, and views; and this was the commencement of a revival of religion which soon spread though the entire province for as brother Dunham was the presiding elder, he was instrumental in spreading the sacred flame throughout the district, to the joy and salvation of hundreds of immortal souls.

Calvin Wooster was a man of mighty prayer and faith. Frequently was his voice heard, by the families where he lodged, in the night season, when rising from his bed while others slept, he would pour out the desire of his soul to God, in earnest prayer for the salvation of souls. Such, indeed, was the strength of his faith in God, and the fervency of his spirit, as well as the bold and pointed manner of his appeals to the consciences of his hearers, and particularly to the wicked, that few of these could stand before him -- they would either flee from the house, or, smitten with conviction, fall down and cry aloud for mercy while, in the midst of these exercises, the saints of God were shouting forth his praises.

Nor was he alone in this work. The other preachers caught the flame of divine love, and were came forward under its sacred impulses in their Master's work. Many instances of the manifestations of divine

power and grace might be narrated, which go to illustrate the authority by which these men of God spoke in his name; one of which I will relate.

At a quarterly meeting in the Bay of Quinte district, as the preacher commenced his sermon, a thoughtless man in the front gallery, commenced, in a playful mood, to swear profanely, and otherwise to disturb the congregation. The preacher paid no attention to him until he was in the midst of his sermon, when, feeling strong in faith and the power of His might, suddenly stopping, he fixed his piercing eye upon the profane man, then stamping with his foot, and pointing his finger at him with great energy, he cried out, "My God! smite him!" He instantly fell, as if shot through the heart with a bullet. At this moment such a divine afflatus came down upon the congregation, that sinners were crying to God for mercy in every direction, while the saints of God burst forth in loud praises to his name. Similar instances of God's gracious presence were not uncommon in those days in that country, as they have been related to the writer on the most unquestionable authority. Indeed, this great work may be said to have been, in some sense, the beginning of that great revival of religion which soon after spread through various parts of the United States.

The doctrine more especially urged upon believers was that of sanctification, or holiness of heart and life, -- a complete surrender of the soul and body, all their powers and affections, to the service of God -- and this was pressed upon them as their present privilege; depending for its accomplishment now on the faithfulness of God, who had promised to do it. When this baptism of the Holy Ghost which fired and filled the hearts of God's ministers at that time, and which enabled them so to speak that the people felt that their words were with "demonstration and power," and they could not well resist the influence of those "thoughts which breathed," and those "words which burned."

Nor were they less assiduous to press upon the unconverted the necessity of immediate and instantaneous conversion, or a present justification by faith in Jesus Christ -- warning them in the most faithful and affectionate manner of the imminent danger of delaying one moment to repent of their sins, and surrender their hearts to God. O what awful sensations ran through the assemblies while Calvin Wooster, and others of a like spirit, were denouncing the just judgments of God against impenitent sinners, in such pointed language as made the "ear to tingle," and the heart to palpitate! Nor were they less affected while these men of God portrayed in such lively colors the beauty and amiableness of religion, the ability and willingness of the Lord Jesus Christ to save them, and concluded by urging them, in the most earnest manner, and with the most affectionate and pathetic strain of eloquence, to accept of pardon and invitation without a moment's delay.

"We are not to suppose that this work went on without opposition. In that country there was a marked line of distinction "between the righteous and the wicked," there being but few formal professors of religion to interpose between the two classes. And such was the general state of society, that those who did not embrace religion felt themselves at liberty to manifest their hatred to its doctrines by open acts of hostility, by scurrilous speeches, and in some instances by personal violence. But in the midst of the obloquy and reproach heaped upon the servants of God, they held on their way, boldly proclaiming the sacred truths of the gospel; and, not infrequently, some of the boldest opposers of the truth no sooner came within its hearing, than they were forced to yield to its authority, when they willingly bowed their necks to the yoke of Jesus Christ. One instance among many others I will relate. A stout opposer of the Methodists, hearing that his wife was in a prayer-meeting, rushed violently into the room, seized the wife, and dragged her to the door, when, attempting to open it, he was himself seized with trembling, his knees failed him, and he fell helpless upon the floor, and was fain to beg an interest in the prayer of those very people whom he had so much despised and persecuted. He rose not until the Lord released him from his sins and made

him a partaker of his pardoning mercy. This very man afterward became an itinerant minister, with whom I was personally acquainted, and had the relation of these facts from his own lips.

All, however, were not so fortunate. The Rev. James Coleman, calling to visit a woman under conviction for sin, while talking with her, was assailed by her husband, who struck him on the forehead so violently, that he carried the mark for a considerable time; and then, to add to the enormity of the offense, raised the scandalous report that Mr. Coleman was holding improper discourse with his wife, which, indeed, was believed by many, until the real cause was revealed, namely, the man's hatred to true religion.

This seems a suitable place to notice the introduction of Methodism into the state of Ohio, which was received into the Union in 1802. It is said that the first settlement in Ohio was commenced in the town of Marietta in 1788, by emigrants from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. What is called the "Western Reserve," was chiefly settled by persons from Connecticut, who purchased the lands of that state about eight years after the first settlement was made. Like all the other new territories in our western wilderness, the settlers were at first destitute of the ordinances of religion, though many of those who removed to Ohio carried their Bibles with them, and retained the religions impressions which they had received at home.

It seems that about the year 1796, Francis McCormick, a local preacher, emigrated from Virginia, first to Kentucky, but not liking his situation, removed to what was then called the Northwestern Territory, now Ohio, and settled on the Little Miami, near where the town of Milford now stands. Having no associates like-minded with himself, he went to work in the name of the Lord, and was instrumental in forming a class of ten members, including himself and the members of his family. Being encouraged by this success, he began holding meetings wherever he could gain access to the people, and soon succeeded in forming two more classes, one at brother Ramsey's, on the Obannon's Creek, and another at brother Nutt's near Columbia, each consisting of about ten members. In these labors, though much opposed by the thoughtless and some bigoted professors of religion, he enjoyed much of the presence of the Lord, and often rejoiced over returning prodigals to their Father's house.

Being attached to the itinerant plan of preaching the gospel, Mr. McCormick made several attempts to procure a regular preacher, but could not succeed, because there were not preachers enough to supply the circuits already formed and forming in Kentucky and Tennessee, and at the same time to answer his call. At length he was joined in his labors by Philip Gatch, who was among the first Methodist preachers raised up in America, for his name appears in the minutes as an assistant in 1774, and was stationed at that time on Frederick circuit in Maryland, his native state. He was now a local preacher, having desisted from traveling in 1778 -- and moving into this new country, became an efficient agent in building up the cause of God. They were soon after joined by some other pious families from various parts of the older states; and in 1799 they were visited by the Rev. John Kobler, from the Hinkstone circuit, in Kentucky. In company with brother McCormick, he traveled up the Little Miami to the Mad river, as far as there were any settlements, and then down the Great Miami river. They met with some opposition from a few bigoted professors of religion, with whom they disagreed on some doctrinal points, but in general the people appeared ripe for the gospel; and thus these visits laid the foundation for that flourishing state of Methodism which has been witnessed in this thriving part of our country. They were soon after regularly supplied with preaching, and though the inhabitants, from their ignorance of the real character and motives of the preachers who came among them, seemed at first afraid to receive them into their houses or to hear them preach, yet they gradually succeeded in gaining their attention and confidence, and in bringing many of them from "darkness into the marvelous light of gospel."

In 1803, John Collins, a local preacher from New Jersey, settled on the east fork of the Little Miami: his labors were greatly blessed among the people, and through his instrumentality several young preachers were raised up for the itinerancy, who became eminently useful. In 1807 brother Collins joined the traveling ministry, and has continued his useful labors to the present time. Through his and the labors of others who united with him in this work, circuits were formed, and societies established in that part of Ohio along the banks of the Great and Little Miami rivers, Mad River, Cesar's Creek, in Urbana and Xenia, Derby and Paint Creeks, so that in 1807 an annual conference was held in Chillicothe, at which time there were in the Ohio district 3683 members, and 17 preachers.

In the Western Reserve, Methodism is about co-eval [contemporary] with the earliest settlement of the country. The first society was formed in Deerfield, in 1801, by a few persons who had emigrated from Massachusetts, namely, Lewis Day, Lewis Ely, their families, and a few others. The next year a society was formed, in the town of Hubbard, at George Frazier's, an emigrant from the Eastern Shore of Maryland. In the same year, Henry Shaul, an exhorter, and afterward a local preacher, moved from Georgetown, Pa., having previously traveled nearly forty miles through the woods to visit the brethren in that place, and settled in the town of Deerfield. About the same time William Veach and Amos Smith, local preachers, settled in Hubbard, and helped to build up the society; and Obed Crosby, a local preacher, established himself in the town of Vernon. These opened the way for the introduction of Methodism in the Western Reserve.

In 1803, Shadrach Bostwick, who had been a traveling preacher for several years in the eastern conferences, was stationed as a missionary at Deerfield, which was at that time connected with the Baltimore conference. He was the first regular preacher sent to the Western Reserve, and he succeeded in forming a small circuit among the new settlements, which he traveled by following Indian trails and marked trees, from one little settlement to another, and at the next conference he returned sixteen Church members. For want of roads and bridge, he was compelled to desist from traveling in the winter months. He continued his labors until 1805, when he located, and the few appointments he had secured were connected with the Erie circuit, then under the charge of David Best and Joseph A. Shackelford. In this way the work commenced in this section of the state of Ohio, and it has continued from that day to this gradually and sometimes powerfully to advance, keeping an even pace with the progress of the settlements and the improvements of society.

In many other parts of the country the work of God greatly prospered. The delightful harmony which prevailed among preachers and people, and the efforts which were made to extend the blessings of the gospel into the new settlements, east, west, north, and south, gave a vigorous impulse to the general cause, and became a means of bringing hundreds into the fold of Christ.

In the month of January of this year, George Clark was sent to St. Mary's, in the state of Georgia. He found the people in general quite destitute of the gospel, and consequently ignorant of its requisitions, some having arrived to maturity without the privilege of ever hearing a sermon or even a prayer. He bestowed his labors chiefly on the people in Glenn and Camden counties, and so unacquainted were they with Divine worship that he found it needful to teach them the very first elements of Christianity, even when they should kneel, and when sit, in time of public worship. His labors, however, were so sanctioned of God; that before the year closed, many of the people became constant hearers of the word, while a number of others were truly converted to God and thoroughly reformed in their lives. The first Methodist society in the town of Augusta, Ga., was formed in the month of December of this year under the labors of Stith Mead. Some time after this they succeeded in building a commodious house of worship, and the

society has gradually enlarged its borders from that day to this.

This year, Tobias Gibson volunteered his services as a missionary to Natchez, in the Mississippi Territory. Though this territory was not received into the confederacy as an independent state, until the year 1817, yet the people from several of the older states had emigrated into its bounds, and were forming settlements in various places along the banks of the Mississippi River, the chief of which, at that time, was the town of Natchez. Like other new settlements, they were generally destitute of religious privileges, and in danger of being carried away in the stream of moral pollution. Tobias Gibson, being released from his regular work, in consequence of ill health, feeling his mind drawn toward the people in that western country, set off to pay them a visit. Though he found them under the influence of different religious creeds, so far as any religious influence was felt, they received him as a messenger of God, and his labors were blessed to the awakening and conversion of souls. The report of his labors and success at the next conference was highly satisfactory, and accordingly, in 1800, his name appears on the minutes for Natchez, with eighty members in the church. He continued in this country until his death in 1804.

Some idea may be formed of the difficulties he had to encounter and the privations he endured, from the fact, that after traveling six hundred miles, much of the way through the wilderness, to Cumberland River, taking his saddle and traveling equipage into a canoe, he paddled himself down the Cumberland into the Ohio River, and thence into the Mississippi, a distance of upward of seven hundred miles more, to the town of Natchez. Four times he traversed the wilderness, a distance of six hundred miles, being conducted by some friendly Indians on his devious way. The burning love of God which impelled him on in this work, filled his mouth with persuasive arguments in behalf of the gospel, and made him instrumental in leading many a wanderer back to his Father's house. When so worn down by his excessive labors and exposure, as to be unable to pursue his work with the wonted vigor, he came to the conference, and so earnestly plead the cause in behalf of those people, that in 1803 another, Moses Floyd, was sent to his help, and by their patient and indefatigable labors in this newly settled country, they laid a foundation for the erection of that superstructure of Methodism which has since reared itself in those western wilds.

No less than twenty-nine preachers located this year, and ten were returned supernumerary. The following had died: --

John N. Jones and William Wilkerson, both of whom were natives of Virginia, the former having traveled eight, and the latter five years. They had been zealous and faithful, and died in the Lord.

Hezekiah Calvin Wooster also took his departure to another world this year. We have already seen something of his character in the notice we have taken of the work of God in Upper Canada. His name is "like ointment poured forth," to many in that country, and he used to be spoken of as an extraordinary messenger of God, sent to declare his counsels unto a fallen and rebellious world. After exerting all his powers of body and mind in beseeching sinners to be reconciled to God, he returned home with the fatal consumption fastened upon his lungs. But even while in this feeble state, so reduced as not to be able to speak above a whisper, this whisper, being announced to the congregation by another, was frequently attended by such a divine energy and unction, that sinners would tremble and fall under the announcement, while the people of God felt the holy anointing running through their souls. It is said, indeed, that his very countenance exhibited such marks of the Divine glory that it struck conviction into the hearts of many who beheld it.

"Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth." Though Hezekiah Calvin Wooster could not be regarded as a man of more than ordinary talents as a preacher, yet, such was the holy fervor of his soul, his deep devotion to God, his burning love for the souls of his fellow-men, that he was the happy instrument of kindling up such a fire in the hearts of the people, wherever he went, particularly in Upper Canada, that all the waters of strife and opposition have not been able to quench it. This testimony I consider due to such departed worth. The grace of God wrought mightily in him, and great was his glorying in the cross of Christ -- nor did he glory in aught else -- for he was as much distinguished for his humility, his deadness to self, and to self-applause, as he was for the fervor of his spirit, the strength of his faith, and the boldness and pointedness of his appeals to the consciences of the people.

That he enjoyed "perfect love," was demonstrated, not only from the fact of his having recorded the time when he received this great blessing,<sup>2</sup> but also and more especially from the whole tenor of his life, his constant self-denial, his watchings and fastings, and from the "fruit of the Spirit, love, faith, meekness, patience, gentleness, long-suffering, and charity," which shone out conspicuously in all his deportment, in the temper of his mind, and the words of his lips.

It could not be expected otherwise than that such a man should be prepared to meet his "last enemy" with firmness, and to "rejoice in hope of the glory of God," when drawing near to the termination of his earthly career. Accordingly, when so exhausted as to be scarcely able to speak, on being asked by his father if his confidence was still strong in the Lord, he answered with holy triumph, "Yes, strong! strong!" And a short time before his eyes were closed in death, he said, "The nearer I draw to eternity, the brighter heaven shines upon me." He thus "fell asleep in Jesus" on the 6th of November, 1798, in the 28th year of his age and the fifth year of his ministry. Though his race was short, it was brilliant -- its brilliancy arising not so much from the splendor of his talents as from the purity of his motives, the fidelity of his private and public life, and the holy and burning zeal with which he pursued his vocation until sickness and death put a stop to his activity. And when he sunk under the cloud of death, he left such a trail of light behind him, as shall, it is humbly hoped, never be extinguished. Such honor God puts upon those who honor him.

Numbers in the Church: Whites This Year: 49115; Last Year: 47,867; Increase: 1,248 -- Colored This Year: 12,236; Last Year: 12,302; Decrease: 66 -- Total This Year: 61,351; Last Year: 60,169 -- Increase: 1,182 -- Preachers This Year: 272; Last Year: 267; Increase: 5.

#### ENDNOTES

1 In this he was under a mistake, as he lived to pay a merited token of respect to both his parents on occasion of their death.

2 The following was found among his papers after his death: -- "Hezekiah Calvin Wooster was born May 20, 1771. Convicted of sin October 9, 1791. Born again December 1, 1791. Sanctified

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Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/nathan-bangs/from-the-close-of-the-general-conference-in-1796-to-the-commencement-of-the-gene/>

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