

From the Commencement of the Revolution in 1776, to Its Termination in 1783

by Nathan Bangs

The sermon highlights the challenges faced by the Methodist Church during the American Revolution and the importance of perseverance and faithfulness in the face of adversity.

Scripture: Psalm 27:1, Psalm 34:17, Isaiah 41:10, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 4:8

Topics: "Persecution And Faith", "Revival History"

Description

The Methodist preachers faced challenging times during the American Revolution from 1776 to 1783, with increased violence and persecution due to their stance on the war and political affairs. Despite difficulties and suspicions, they persevered in their Christian integrity, leading to great success in awakening and converting sinners. The war caused disruptions in circuits, but also led to revivals in some areas. The Methodists faced internal disputes over administering ordinances, with some preachers advocating for it. The war's end in 1783 brought peace and growth to the Methodist societies, with a revival in frontier settlements and brighter prospects for future usefulness.

Transcript

From the commencement of the Revolution in 1776, to its termination in 1783.

This year forms a memorable era in the history of these United States. The sanguinary conflict which had commenced in 1775 now broke forth with increased violence, and all hope of reconciliation was prostrated, only on condition of an acknowledgment on the part of Great Britain of the independence of the United States.

The fleets of England were in our harbors, and her soldiers were landed upon our shores. But what rendered a reconciliation hopeless was, that on the 4th of July, 1776, congress had declared the thirteen united colonies, which they represented, free and independent states.

This state of things rendered the situation of many of the Methodist preachers peculiarly trying, and more especially those of them who were known to be favorable to the British cause. As some of them, not taking the very seasonable advice given by Mr. Wesley in the letter above inserted, spoke their sentiments freely against the proceedings of congress and of the American states, they were subjected to some persecutions. And although only four out of the twenty-five preachers were from England, yet as these four

were leading men, the others were suspected of favoring the cause of Britain, and were therefore exposed to similar suspicions and treatment. Mr. Asbury, though among the most prudent of them all in his speech and conduct, says that on the 20th of June he was, "fined, near Baltimore, five pounds for preaching the gospel." But though it was with no little difficulty that they were able to travel some of the circuits, and obliged entirely to abandon others, yet conscious of their Christian integrity, the preachers persevered in their labors wherever they could find access to the people; and in many places their efforts were crowned with great success in the awakening and conversion of sinners; as is manifest from the increase of preachers and people before mentioned.

Among those preachers, raised up in this country, we find on the minutes for this year the name of Freeborn Garrettson, whose labors afterward contributed so much to the advancement of the cause of Jesus Christ in these United States.¹

1777. The fifth conference was held this year in the Deer Creek meeting house, Harford county, in the state of Maryland. The war at this time raged with great violence, so that by the marching and countermarching of armies, enlisting of soldiers, frequent skirmishes between the contending parties, some of the places, even where religion had prevailed to a considerable extent, were not visited at all by the preachers. Last year Norfolk in Virginia was abandoned, and this year no preacher was stationed in New York; nor do we find this city among the stations again until 1783, though there was a small society of members still there. The cause of this abandonment of the city for so long a time was, that the British troops had it in possession, and had converted the meeting house into barracks for the soldiers, so that it was not possible to occupy it for preaching regularly, even had a preacher been permitted to reside among them. Such are the fatal results of war, that scourge of humanity.²

But although these were the disastrous results of the war in some places, more particularly in the middle states, yet in others there were gracious outpourings of the Spirit, and revivals of the work of God, the southern states not being yet so much exposed to the ravages of this cruel warfare. In the Brunswick circuit, particularly, as well as the two circuits, Sussex and Amelia, which had been recently taken from it, and in some parts of North Carolina, the work of God continued to spread to a considerable extent. Though, therefore, there was a decrease of members on those circuits which were exposed to the depredations of contending armies, yet, when they came to the conference, they found an increase on the whole of 2047 members and 12 preachers, making the entire number in society to be 6968, and 36 preachers -- so mercifully did God own their labors for the salvation of souls. It was at this conference that those preachers who came from England took into consideration the propriety of returning home; but they finally concluded to remain a while longer, as the way seemed not yet plain for them to leave their American brethren. It seems, indeed, that as early as the month of January preceding, Messrs. Rankin and Shadford had seriously meditated on returning to England; for Mr. Asbury says, under date of January 22, that he met them at their request, and "found them inclined to leave America and embark for England." "But," he adds, "I had before resolved not to depart from the work on any consideration." About the middle of September, however, Messrs. Rankin and Rodda embarked for their native country.

Notwithstanding the prudent caution given to the preachers by Mr. Wesley, in which he advised them not to meddle with the political affairs of the country, they did not all abide by it, but some were very busy in exciting a spirit of disaffection toward the American cause. That they should have felt strongly inclined to favor the cause of their king and country is but natural, and might very well be pardoned on the score of national partiality; but that any professed minister of Jesus Christ should have descended from his high and holy calling to mingle with the combatants of that day in their warlike measures, is a fault for which

Christianity furnishes no apology. This, however, was the unhappy case with Mr. Rodda previously to his departure for England. While on his circuit he was detected in spreading the king's proclamation, and otherwise endeavoring to stir up a spirit of opposition to the American government. Fearing, however, the resentment of his enemies, by the assistance of some slaves he made his escape to the British fleet; and as Philadelphia was then in possession of the British army, he was sent thither, and from thence to his native land. His departure, therefore, was no cause of regret to the Methodists in this country.

Another circumstance tended not a little to excite a spirit of persecution toward the Methodists. A backslider, by the name of Chauncey Clowe, succeeded in enlisting about three hundred men for the British standard, and before he was detected, was the means of shedding blood. He was, however, arrested, and finally hung as a rebel against the government. In the course of the examination, it was found that only two Methodists were engaged in this plot; and the remarks of Governor Rodney, who was friendly to our cause, to those of our enemies who had assiduously endeavored to fix upon them the foul mark of toryism, put them to silence, and obtained for our friends temporary relief.

What made this war the more distressing was the fact, that in many parts of the country the people were divided among themselves in regard to the lawfulness or expediency of taking up arms against Great Britain. This led to domestic disputes, and not infrequently the father was against the son, and the daughter against the mother, and one neighbor against another. These things produced an irritation of spirit exceedingly unfriendly to the progress of pure religion. But that which exposed the Methodist preachers still more to the suspicions of their enemies, was the fact, that Mr. Wesley had published a pamphlet addressed to the Americans, in which he condemned their conduct, and justified the measures of the British cabinet. This well-meant endeavor of Mr. Wesley, though it may have had a good effect upon the societies under his care in Great Britain, had quite a deleterious influence upon the Methodists in this country. As some copies of this pamphlet found their way here, they tended to increase the irritation against the Methodist preachers, and to expose them to fresh insults. Though Mr. Wesley may be commended as a loyalist for his well-meant endeavors to convince the Americans that they were wrong in taking up arms against his king and country, yet we cannot but believe that he committed an error in thus interfering in the political affairs of this country, as it manifestly tended to increase the difficulties with which the preachers had to contend, without at all mitigating the evils resulting from the war which was then raging. Amid all these difficulties, however, Mr. Asbury stood his ground knowing that his "record was on high, and at his reward was with his God."

Speaking of the of Mssrs. Rankin and Rodda, he says, "So we are left alone. But I leave myself in the hand of God, relying on his good providence to direct and protect us, persuaded that nothing will befall me but what shall conduce to his glory and my benefit."

1778. On the 19th of May of this year the sixth conference was in Leesburgh, Va., at which time six new circuits were added, namely, Berkey, Fluvanna, James City, and Lunenburgh, in Virginia, and Carolina circuit in North Carolina was divided into three, called Roanoke; Tar River, and New Hope; and five of the old circuits, on account of the war, were left from the minutes; these were New York, Philadelphia, Chester, Frederick, and Norfolk. Though there was an increase in the number of circuits, yet there was a decrease of 873 members, the whole number being 6095; and also of the preachers 29, being 5 less than last year.

In order to insure obedience to the government, and to distinguish between friends and enemies, all were called upon to take an oath of allegiance to the state authorities in which they resided, and of course to

abjure allegiance to the crown of Great Britain. To the taking this oath many of the preachers had conscientious scruples, which exposed them to many vexations, and obliged some of them to leave their stations. Mr. George Shadford, whose labors had been so abundantly blessed to the awakening and conversion of souls, after keeping a day of fasting and prayer in company with Mr. Asbury for divine direction, took his departure this year for England, leaving behind him the savor of a good name, and many happy souls as seals to his ministry.

As Mr. Asbury could not persuade himself to take the required oath of allegiance to the state of Maryland, where he was in the first part of this year, he retired to the state of Delaware, where he found an asylum in the house of Judge White for nearly twelve months. While the storm of war was raging around him, and while all his English brethren had forsaken him and the flocks intrusted to their care, he determined to wait patiently until the tempest should subside, that he might again launch forth upon a calmer sea in quest of immortal souls. But though he was thus secluded from the pursuit of his enemies in the house of his friend and patron, Thomas White, Esq., he says, that except for about two months, when the necessity of the case compelled him, contrary to his most ardent wishes, to be silent, it was a "season of the most active, most useful, and suffering part of his life." Though he could not appear before the congregations on the Sabbath, he was wont to leave his retreat in the gloom of the night, and go from house to house to enforce the truths of the gospel; and notwithstanding the difficulties with which he and others had to contend in those times of trouble, they were gradually laying a foundation deep and broad, by their labors and sufferings, for that success which Methodism has since had in these United States.

But Mr. Asbury was not the only sufferer on this occasion. Mr. Freeborn Garrettson was at that time actively and successfully engaged in preaching the gospel in Queen Anne's county, in the state of Maryland. After having paid a visit to Mr. Asbury in his seclusion at Judge Whites, where he had an opportunity of preaching to a small company, he returned to Queen Anne's and preached. The next day, as he was on his way to Kent, he was met by one John Brown, formerly a judge of that county, who seized his horse's bridle; and notwithstanding the remonstrances of Mr. Garrettson, who assured him that he was on the Lord's errand, peaceably engaged in persuading sinners to be reconciled to God, Brown alighted from horse, seized a stick, and began beating Mr. Garrettson over the head and shoulders, in the meantime calling for help. As some were approaching, as he thought with a rope, Brown let go the bridle, when Mr. Garrettson gave his horse the whip, and thus cleared himself from the grasp of his persecutors. He was, however, soon overtaken by his pursuer, who struck at him with all his might, when Mr. Garrettson was thrown from his horse with great violence. Providentially a lady passed along with a lancet and he was taken to a house and bled, by which means he was restored to his senses, of which he had been deprived by the blows he had received, and the fall from his horse. He then began to exhort his persecutor, who fearing that death would ensue, exhibited some sorrow and great trepidation of heart, offering to take Mr. Garrettson in his carriage wherever he wanted to go. No sooner, however, did he perceive that the patient sufferer was likely to recover, than he brought a magistrate, more wicked than himself, both of whom, says Mr. Garrettson, "appeared as if actuated by the devil." The following is his own account of the termination of this affair: --

"With a stern look the magistrate demanded my name. I told him; and he took out his pen and ink, and began to write a mittimus to commit me to jail. 'Pray, sir,' said I, 'are you a justice of the peace?' He replied that he was. 'Why, then,' said I, 'do you suffer men to behave in his manner? If such persons are not taken notice of, a stranger can with no degree of safety travel the road.' 'You have,' said he, 'broken the law.' 'How do you know that,' answered I; 'but suppose I have, is this the way to put the law in force against

me? I am an inhabitant of this state, and have property in it; and, if I mistake not, the law says for the first offense, the fine is five pounds; and double for every offense after. The grand crime was preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, in which I greatly rejoice. My enemy,' said I, 'conducted himself more like a highwayman than a person enforcing the law in a Christian country. Be well assured, this matter will be brought light,' said I, 'in awful eternity.' He dropped his pen, and made no farther attempt to send me to prison. By this time, the woman who bled me came, with a carriage, and I found myself able to rise from my bed and give an exhortation to the magistrate, my persecutor, and others who were present."

From this time Mr. Garrettson went on his way rejoicing in all the mighty things which the Lord did by his instrumentality; for he wrought wonderfully by his means in the states of Maryland and Delaware, through both of which he traveled extensively, And many flocked to hear the word.

Mr. Joseph Hartley also, another traveling preacher, a man of great zeal and faithfulness, was apprehended in Queen Anne's county for preaching the gospel, who gave bonds and security to appear for trial at the next court. Being forbidden to preach, he attended his appointments; and after singing and prayer, stood upon his knees and exhorted the people, until his enemies said that he might as well preach, standing on his feet as on his knees. He went thence to Talbot county, where he was seized and committed to jail for "preaching Jesus and him crucified." This, however, by no means silenced him. The people collecting around the walls of his prison, he preached to them through the grates; and so powerfully was the word applied to their hearts, that some of them were deeply awakened to a sense of their lost and guilty state, and began earnestly to seek the Lord. This induced some of the inhabitants to remark that unless Hartley were released from prison he would convert the whole town. After keeping him confined for some time, he was set at liberty; but such had been the blessed effects of his preaching, that a powerful revival followed, which terminated in the establishment of a flourishing society in that place.

In the latter part of this year, Mr. Asbury ventured from his seclusion and preached the gospel of the kingdom in various parts of Delaware state with such freedom and success, that he remarks, the "gospel meets with such indulgence in this free state," that it "will become as the garden of the Lord, filled with plants of his own planting." The truth of this anticipation has been fully verified.

1779. -- Previously to the assembling of the conference, mentioned in the minutes for this year, the preachers in the more northerly states assembled at Judge White's, where Mr. Asbury had retired from the fury of his enemies, and there held a conference, with Mr. Asbury at their head, who now acted since the departure of Mr. Rankin and the other English preachers, by a vote of this conference, as the general assistant. Although this was considered as "a preparatory conference," yet if we take into consideration that the one afterward held at the Broken Back Church, in Virginia, was held in the absence of the general assistant, we shall see good reason for allowing that this, which was held under the presidency of Mr. Asbury, was the regular conference, and hence their acts and doings are to be considered valid.

This year was distinguished by considerable troubles in the societies. These arose principally from a desire manifested among the people in the south to have the ordinances administered to them. That we may understand this subject, it is necessary to remark, that the Methodist preachers, both in Europe and America, were considered only as lay-preachers, having never been separated to the work of the ministry by imposition of hands. Mr. Wesley's strong attachment to the established Church of England had induced him to oppose every thing which tended to a separation from her communion, or to a violation of any of her canons or ordinances. Hence, although frequently importuned to set apart some of his preachers by imposition of hands to the entire work of the ministry, he steadily resisted all such solicitations, exhorting

his people to go to the Church for the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper. Mr. Asbury, and those English preachers who had been associated with him in this country, had been educated in the Wesleyan school, and hence had sternly resisted all attempts to depart, in this respect, from the principles and practice of their founder.

As we have already seen, at an early period of Methodism in America, some of the preachers, and, probably through their influence, the people too, had manifested a strong desire to deviate from this course of conduct, and to have the ordinances among themselves. Mr. Asbury and his associates had resisted all such attempts at innovation, endeavoring to persuade the people to be content to receive the ordinances as they had done, from the hands of their parochial clergy. The question was agitated at the Deer Creek Conference, in 1777, where Mr. Rankin presided. Here the question was asked, "Shall the preachers in America administer the ordinances?" And after a full discussion, it was answered, "We will suspend them until the next conference." At the next conference, which was held in Leesburgh, Va., May 19, 1778, Mr. Asbury not being present on account of ill health, and Mr. Rankin and his British brethren having departed for England, Mr. William Watters, being the oldest American preacher, was called upon to preside. Here the question, "Shall we administer the ordinances?" was again discussed, and it was finally decided to "lay it over until the next conference."

This "next conference" was the one we are now considering. Here the arguments in favor of administering the ordinances came up with double force. The war had separated them from Mr. Wesley; all the English preachers, except Mr. Asbury, had returned to England, and nearly all the ministers of the establishment, being unfriendly to the American cause, had also left their flocks and gone home; and most of those who remained were irregular in their lives and not evangelical in their preaching. In these circumstances, the children were left unbaptized and the people were destitute of the Lord's supper. They furthermore said, that as God had made them instrumental in the conversion of the souls of the people, so he had given them authority to administer his ordinances; and the people were exceedingly desirous "to have it so."

It was under these views and feelings that the brethren assembled in Fluvanna county, Va. on the 18th of May, 1779. Knowing something of the disposition which prevailed there on this subject, Mr. Watters was sent from the conference which had been held at Judge White's, to endeavor to dissuade them from carrying their design into execution. His efforts, however, were unavailing; for after deliberating upon the subject, they appointed a committee of some of the oldest brethren to ordain ministers. The members of this committee first ordained each other, and then proceeded to ordain others by imposition of hands. Those who were thus ordained, went out preaching and administering the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper to all who desired them, either for themselves or for their children; and thus was a breach made between the northern and southern preachers. These men, however, being pious and zealous, and withal much favored by the people for complying with their wishes, were very successful in their labors; but the preachers at the north mourned over them on account of their departure from what they very justly considered Wesleyan Methodism.

In consequence of this temporary division, there were two separate minutes taken in 1779, each conference passing its own resolutions, and stationing its preachers; but the numbers in society and of preachers are set down in the minutes of the Fluvanna conference. From these it appears, that, notwithstanding the ravages of the war, the opposition and persecution with which some of the preachers had to contend, and the dissensions among themselves respecting the ordinances, they had an increase of 2482 members and of 20 preachers; so greatly did the word God multiply and prevail in those troublesome times.

At these conferences they passed resolutions that "every exhorter and local preacher should go under the direction of the assistants where, and only where, they shall appoint -- that they should "meet the children once a fortnight, and examine the parents in regard to their conduct toward them" -- and after having elected Mr. Asbury as the general assistant, they inserted this question and answer:

"Question How far shall his power extend?

Answer On hearing every preacher for and against what is in debate, the right of determination shall rest with him according to the minutes." These resolutions were adopted at the conference held at Judge White's, in the state of Delaware. It seems, therefore, that they were not in the habit at that time of determining debatable questions by a majority of votes; but, in imitation of the practice of Mr. Wesley, after hearing all that could be said pro and con, the presiding officer decided the point.

The conference at Fluvanna determined to lengthen the time of trial of a preacher from one to two years, which has continued a standing rule to this day. They also declared that any preacher who received "money by subscription" was "excluded the Methodist connection." As these were the only rules which passed that body, except resolving to ordain ministers and to administer the ordinances, it is probable that they acquiesced in what was done by the other conference, which was held under the presidency of Mr. Asbury.

1780. -- The eighth conference assembled in Baltimore, April 24th of this year. That our readers may see the spirit by which they were actuated, the following questions and answers are inserted as I find them in the printed minutes: --

Question 7. Ought not all the assistants to see to the settling of all the preaching houses by trustees, and order the said trustees to meet once in half a year, and keep a register of their proceedings; if there are any vacancies choose new trustees, for the better security of the houses, and let all the deeds be drawn in substance after that in the printed minutes?

Answer Yes.

Question 8. Shall all the traveling preachers take a license from every conference, importing that they are assistants or helpers in connection with us?

Answer Yes.

Question 9. Shall brother Asbury sign them in behalf of the conference?

Answer Yes.

Question 10. Ought it to be strictly enjoined on all our local preachers and exhorters, that no one presume to speak in public without taking a note every quarter, (if required,) and be examined by the assistant with respect to his life, his qualification, and reception.

Answer Yes.

Question 11. Ought not all our preachers to make conscience of rising at four, and if not, yet at five: (is it not a shame for a preacher to be in bed till six in the morning?)

Answer Undoubtedly they ought.

Question 12. Shall we continue in close connection with the Church, and press our people to a closer connection with her?

Answer Yes.

Question 13. Will this conference grant the privilege to all the friendly clergy of the Church of England, at the request or desire of the people, to preach or administer the ordinances in our preaching houses or chapels?

Answer Yes.

Question 14. What provision shall we make for the wives of married preachers?

Answer They shall receive an equivalent with their husbands in quarterage, if they stand in need.

Question 15. Ought not our preachers, if possible, to speak to every person one by one in the families where they lodge, before prayer, if time will permit; or give a family exhortation after reading a chapter?

Answer They ought.

Question 16. Ought not this conference to require those traveling preachers who hold slaves, to give promises to set them free?"

Answer Yes.

Question 17. Does conference acknowledge that slavery is contrary to the law of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society; contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion, and doing that which we would not others should do to us and ours? -- Do we pass our disapprobation on all our friends who keep slaves, and advise their freedom?

Answer Yes.

Question 18. Shall we recommend our quarterly meetings to be held on Saturdays and Sundays when convenient?

Answer Agreed.

Question 19. Shall not the Friday following every quarter day be appointed as a day of fasting?

Answer Yes.

Question 20. Does this whole conference disapprove the step our brethren have taken in Virginia? [giving American Methodist ministers authority to perform the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper -- DVM]

Answer Yes.

Question 21. Do we look upon them no longer as Methodists in connection with Mr. Wesley and us till they come back?3

Answer Agreed.

Question 22. Shall brother Asbury, Garrettson, and Watters attend the Virginia conference, and inform them of our proceedings in this, and receive their answer?

Answer Yes.

Question 23. Do we disapprove of the practice of distilling grain into liquor? Shall we disown our friends who will not renounce the practice?

Answer Yes.

Question 24. What shall the conference do in case of brother Asbury's death or absence?

Answer Meet once a year, and act according to the minutes.

Question 25. Ought not the assistant to meet the colored people himself, and appoint as helpers in his absence proper white persons, and not suffer them to stay late and meet by themselves?

Answer Yes.

Question 26. What must be the conditions of our union with our Virginian brethren?

Answer To suspend all their administrations for one year, and all meet together in Baltimore.

On the minute respecting slavery, Mr. Lee, in his History of the Methodists, remarks, that "it was going too far, and calculated to irritate the minds of our people, and not to convince them of their errors." Of this the conferences were subsequently convinced, as they found it necessary to relax in their measures against slave-holders, without, however, attempting to justify the system of slavery itself.

By these, minutes, it will also be seen that the preachers of that day set their faces against "distilling grain into liquor," determining to "disown those who would not renounce the practice."

From this it may be seen that the Methodist conference set itself against the use of alcoholic liquors long before the temperance movements, which have so distinguished the present days, and which have conferred such lasting blessings upon the community. What a pity there should ever have been any relaxation either in the phraseology or enforcement of this rule! But that which affected them the most vitally was, the resolution respecting their Virginia brethren, who, it should be noted, did not convene with the Baltimore conference, but held one of their own in Virginia; but as their proceedings are not upon record, we cannot say what they did. As, however, this conference forms a very important item in the history of Methodism, in which Mr. Asbury took such a deep interest and agency, I will give his own account of the whole affair, as I find it recorded in his Journal under date of May 8th, 9th, 10th 1780.

"We rode to Granger's, fifteen miles, stopped and fed our horses. These people are full of the ordinances; we talked and prayed with them, then rode on to the Manakin-town ferry, much fatigued with the ride; went to friend Smith's, where all the preachers were met. I conducted myself with cheerful freedom, but found there was a separation in heart and practice. I spoke with my countryman, John Dickins, and found him opposed to our continuance in union with the Episcopal Church. Brother Watters and Garrettson tried their men, and found them inflexible.

"Tuesday 9. -- The conference was called: brother Watters, Garrettson, and myself stood back, and being afterward joined by brother Dromgoole, we were desired to come in, and I was permitted to speak. I read

Mr. Wesley's thoughts against a separation -- showed my private letters of instructions from Mr. Wesley -- set before them the sentiments of the Delaware and Baltimore conferences -- read our epistles, and read my letter to brother Gatch, and Dickins's letter in answer. After some time spent this way, it was proposed to me, if I would get the circuits supplied, they would desist; but that I could not do. We went to preaching; I spoke on Ruth ii, 4, and spoke as though nothing had been the matter among the preachers or people; and we were greatly pleased and comforted -- there was some moving among the people. In the afternoon we met; the preachers appeared to me to be farther off; there had been, I thought, some talking out of door. When we, Asbury, Garrettson, Watters and Dromgoole, could not come to a conclusion with them we withdrew, and left them to deliberate on the condition I offered, which was to suspend the measures they had taken for one year. After an hour's conference, we were called to receive their answer, which was, they could not submit to the terms of union. I then prepared to leave the house, to go to a near neighbor's to lodge, under the heaviest cloud I ever felt in America -- O! what I felt! -- nor I alone, but the agents on both sides! -- they wept like children, but kept their opinions.

"Wednesday 10. -- I returned to take leave of conference, and to go off immediately to the north; but found they were brought to an agreement while I had been praying, as with a broken heart, in the house we went to lodge at; and brothers Watters and Garrettson had been praying up stairs where the conference sat. We heard what they had to say -- surely the hand of God has been greatly seen in all this: there might have been twenty promising preachers, and three thousand people, seriously affected by this separation; but the Lord would not suffer this -- we then had preaching by brother Watters on, 'Come thou with us, and we will do thee good:' afterward we had a love-feast; preachers and people wept, prayed, and talked, so that the spirit of dissension was powerfully weakened, and I hoped it would never take again."

This unhappy affair being thus amicably adjusted, the preachers went to their respective fields of labor with renewed courage; and although the clouds of war still hung lowering over all the land, and often threatened them with showers of persecution, yet those who became personally acquainted with them were so thoroughly convinced of the purity of their motives and conduct, and some of those being among the most influential men in the country, they threw around them the shield of their protection. Mr. Asbury being let loose from his confinement, traveled extensively through the southern counties of Virginia and some parts of North Carolina, exerting all his powers to promote the cause of God, and particularly to heal the divisions which had arisen from the disputes respecting the ordinances. Though the preachers all agreed to suspend their use for the present, yet a few of them being not a little pleased with their self-created authority, submitted to the measure with great reluctance, and many of the people surrendered their supposed privileges not without a struggle. Through his influence, however, and that of Mr. Garrettson, and some other influential men of peace and union, the breach was finally healed, and peace and love reigned throughout their borders.

Some places, however, were much disturbed and distressed on account of the war, which now raged with increased violence. In consequence of the continual marching and countermarching of the armies, both of friends and enemies, some of the circuits were abandoned, and others but partially supplied. And although general protection was extended to the preachers, in conformity to the principles of civil and religious liberty for which the United States were now contending, yet there were not wanting individuals who, from various pretexts, stirred up a spirit of persecution against the Methodists. To those who were deeply interested in the success of our arms and who were actuated only by the blind impulses of human nature in its depraved state, it was provoking to find a people in the midst of them led on by a number of active and zealous preachers, who were from principle averse to war; for such was the case in respect to most of

the preachers and people denominated Methodists. Add to this the fact, that their first leaders were directly from England, some of whom had not concealed their partiality for their mother country, and all under a leader who had boldly advocated the cause of his government, and denounced the Americans as rebels, it is no wonder that any one who wished to raise the wind of persecution against a Methodist preacher, need only shout Tory, and his wish was accomplished. To this disgraceful practice some resorted, and thereby gratified their unreasonable opposition to the men whom they inwardly hated on account of the spirited manner in which they rebuked them for their wickedness. Among others who suffered in this way, the most conspicuous was Mr. F. Garrettson. On the 27th of February of this year, after preaching to a numerous and attentive congregation in Dorchester county, he was seized by his enemies, and finally committed to prison. Though he suffered much in body in consequence of having no other bed than the floor, with his saddle bags for his pillow, with two large windows open upon him yet he enjoyed great spiritual consolation in prayer and meditation, reading and writing, and was not a little comforted by the visits and prayers of his friends and pious acquaintances.

Before, however, his trial came on, Mr. Asbury went to the governor of Maryland and interceded behalf of Mr. Garrettson; and the governor of Delaware state, being a great friend to the Methodists, sent a letter of recommendation to the governor of Maryland, who immediately set him at liberty. Though the enemies of the cross of Christ in Dorchester county were much dissatisfied with his liberation, yet the authority of their governor prevailed over their opposition, and Mr. Garrettson immediately recommenced his favorite work of preaching the gospel, and "the word of the Lord," says he, "spread through all that country, and hundreds, both white and black, experienced the love of Jesus," so that not far from the very place where he was imprisoned, he soon after preached to a congregation of not less than three thousand people, and many of his bitterest persecutors were among the happy converts to the truth.

From the minutes of the conference it appears there was a decrease of members of seventy-three, and of preachers seven; the number being, preachers forty-two, members eight thousand five hundred and four.

1781. It seems that the conference this year was begun at Choptank, in the state of Delaware, April 16, and adjourned to Baltimore, to the 24th of the same month. The following are assigned as the reasons for this measure: -- "To examine those who could not go to Baltimore, and to provide supplies for the circuits where the Lord is more immediately pouring out his Spirit." With a view to secure greater unanimity of sentiment and action, thirty-nine out of fifty-four preachers set their names to a paper, expressive of their determination to "preach the old Methodist doctrine, and strictly to enforce the discipline as contained in the notes, sermons, and minutes published by Mr. Wesley," and "to discountenance a separation among either preachers or people."

They also passed a rule respecting local preachers, forbidding their traveling circuits without consulting Mr. Asbury, or the assistant near where he resides; also providing that no excluded person should be readmitted without giving evidence of repentance; and a third making it the duty of preachers to read often the Rules of the Societies, the Character of a Methodist, and the Plain Account of Christian Perfection.

This year the following rule was adopted for settling disputes which might arise between brethren in their dealings with each other: "Let the assistant preacher at quarterly meeting consult with the steward, in appointing proper persons to examine into the circumstances, and if there be any suspicion of injustice, or inability in the referees, to appoint men of more skill and probity, and the parties to abide by their decision, or be excluded the society." They likewise appointed the first Thursday in June, September, January, and April, as days of general fasting.

For the first time, the following question and answer were recorded: --

"Question Who desist from traveling this year?

"Answer John Dickins, Isham Tatum, William Moore, Greenberry Green, Daniel Ruff."

Notwithstanding the ravages of the war, which raged this year with most violence in the southern states, the Lord greatly blessed the labors of his faithful and devoted servants, particularly in the states of Maryland and Delaware, as well as in some parts of Virginia and North Carolina; but some of the circuits in these latter places were so harassed with hostile armies, that they were not accessible to the preachers; and many of the members, though much averse to war, were obliged to serve in the American army, by which means some lost their lives, others made "shipwreck of faith and a good conscience," and all were less or more injured in their religious character and enjoyments. Those who were so entirely opposed to war from principle as utterly to refuse to fight, were whipped, or fined and imprisoned, and persecuted in a variety of ways. And such were the anxieties manifested by the people respecting the final issue of the contest, particularly in Virginia, where the bloody conflict was renewed this year with increased violence, that when they did assemble for divine worship, their conversation turned more upon the political situation of the country, and the probable results of the war, than upon religion; fathers and mothers were anxious for the fate of their sons who were in the army, and wives for their husbands.

But though these things exerted an injurious influence upon individuals, and in some places upon whole societies, yet, as a body, they prospered, so much so that the increase was not less than two thousand and thirty-five, and of preachers twelve.

Among others who contributed to advance the cause of God was the Rev. Mr. Jarratt, before mentioned. He attended the conference, preached to the people with great power and acceptance, gave his advice in matters of importance, and administered the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper. Of his services Mr. Asbury makes honorable mention in his Journal for this year. After speaking of preaching in his barn he says, Mr. Jarratt seemed all life, and I determined to spend himself in the work of God, and visit what circuits he could."

This year has been rendered famous in the annals of our country by the capture of the British army under the command of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia. This event gave a pleasing hope to the friends of peace on both sides of the Atlantic -- and to none more than to the Methodists -- that this war, which had so long desolated the continent, would soon come to an end; while American patriots hailed this as an auspicious event, bringing with it a sure pledge of future prosperity.

1782. The tenth conference commenced in Ellis's preaching house, Va., April 17, and by adjournment in Baltimore, May 21. This was done to accommodate the preachers; but as that held in Baltimore was the oldest, nothing that was done in the Virginia conference was considered binding, unless sanctioned by this conference.

Preachers this year, 59; (Preachers last year, 54); Members, 11,785; (Members last year, 10,539); Increase in Preachers, 5; Increase in Members, 1,246.

The appointment of Mr. Asbury by Mr. Wesley as general assistant was reconfirmed at this conference by a unanimous vote, After passing sundry rules for the better regulation of themselves and the people of their charge, the following was entered upon the minutes: --

"The conference acknowledge their obligations to the Rev. Mr. Jarratt, for his kind and friendly services to the preachers and people, from our first entrance into Virginia, and more particularly for attending our conference in Sussex, in public and private; and advise the preachers in the south to consult him and take his advice in the absence of brother Asbury."

At this conference they re-resolved to abide by the decision formerly made, not to administer the ordinances. To supply this deficiency, Mr. Jarratt proffered his services, attended some of their quarterly meetings, administered the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper, and otherwise assisted them in their work of spreading the gospel among the people. Hence the above acknowledgment of his services.

Only two circuits, Lancaster, in Pennsylvania, and South Branch, in Virginia, had been added during the past year. Nor do we find any thing special in reference to the general state of the societies; but there was a considerable outpouring of the Spirit in the northern parts of Virginia and in some parts of Maryland. For the first time they determined when and where the next conference should be held, namely, in Virginia the first Thursday, and in Baltimore the last Wednesday in May. Considering the state of the country, the societies in general were prosperous, and much united together.

1783. On the 6th of May the eleventh conference assembled at Ellis' preaching house in Virginia, and by adjournment in Baltimore on the 27th of the same month.

Preachers this year, 82; (Preachers last year, 59); Members, 13,740; (Members last year, 11,789); Increase in Preachers, 23; Increase in Members, 1,955.

We find them at this conference ordering the sum two hundred and sixty pounds to be raised for the support of the preachers' wives. The following rules were passed on the subject of slavery, and on the manufacturing and drinking spirituous liquors: --

"Question What shall be done with our local preachers who hold slaves contrary to the laws which authorize their freedom in any of the United States.

"Answer We will try them another year. In the meantime, let every assistant deal faithfully and plainly with every one, and report to the next conference. It may be necessary to suspend them.

"Question Should our friends be permitted to make spirituous liquors, sell, and drink them in drams.

"Answer By no means. We think it wrong in its natural consequences and desire all our preachers to teach our people, by precept and example, to put away this evil."

The first Thursdays in July and October were appointed as days of thanksgiving "for our public peace, temporal and spiritual prosperity, and for the glorious work of God:" and the first Fridays in January and April were set apart as days of fasting and prayer.

After appointing the next conference to be held in the city of Baltimore on the fourth Thursday in May, 1784, they ordered that "the assistants and those who were to be received into full connection," should attend. This is the first time that we find on record any rule respecting who should attend the conference.

Richard Garrettson, Micajah Debruler, and Samuel Watson, desisted from traveling.

They could not but be thankful to the great Head of the Church for sending peace in their borders, by which means the restraints which had been imposed, in many places, upon the preachers were taken off,

and they were therefore permitted to travel wherever they pleased, and to preach the gospel to whomsoever they might find willing to hear it. The consequence was that their borders were greatly enlarged on every hand, both in the older and new settlements.

On hearing this glorious news, Mr. Asbury, who, perhaps, had suffered as much as any of the preachers for conscience' sake, makes the following reflections:

"April 5, I heard the news that peace was confirmed between England and America. I had various exercises of mind on the occasion: it may cause great changes to take place among us; some for the better and some for the worse. It may make against the work of God. Our preachers will be far more likely to settle in the world; and our people, by getting into trade and acquiring wealth, may drink into its spirit. Believing the report to be true, I took some notice of it while I treated on Acts x, 36, at brother Clayton's, near Halifax, where they were firing their cannon and rejoicing in their way on the occasion."

These certainly are very chastened exultations in a man who had suffered so much from the calamities of war, and must, therefore, have enjoyed some bright anticipations from the return of peace; but they show with what moderation he received every temporal mercy, lest it might, by its abuse, become an occasion of a sinful conformity to the spirit and temper of this world.

The Methodist societies, however, soon began to witness the beneficial results from this termination of hostilities, in the enlargement of their work, and in the facilities afforded to the preachers to itinerate through the country. During the war many had moved from the more immediate scene of the conflict to the back settlements, where they were destitute of the word and ordinances of religion. On the return, of peace, these were visited by the preachers, while the older circuits, some of which had been either entirely, or partially abandoned during the war, were now regularly supplied; and the consequence of these salutary movements was, a more diffusive spread of the gospel, and the bringing the societies into greater compactness and order under their disciplinary regulations. Hence pure religion greatly revived in almost every direction, while several additional laborers entered the field of itinerancy. That success attended their labors is manifest from the fact that the increase to the numbers in society was, as before stated, one thousand nine hundred and fifty-five, and that eleven new circuits were taken into the work. These were Caroline and Anamessex, in Maryland; Allegheny, Cumberland, and Holstein, in Virginia; Guilford, Caswell, Salisbury, Marsh, Bertie, and Pasquotank, in North Carolina; Norfolk and New York, which had been left destitute in consequence of having been in possession of the British troops, were again supplied with preachers.

The intercourse between England and the United States being restored on the return of peace, it was feared that men of exceptionable character might be induced to emigrate from that to this country, and endeavor to palm themselves upon the people as Methodists or preachers. To prevent impositions of this sort, the present conference passed the following rule: --

"We will not receive them," (European Methodists) "without a letter of recommendation, the truth of which we have no reason to doubt."

They were much strengthened in this resolution by receiving, in the latter part of this year, the following letter from Mr. Wesley: --

Bristol, Oct., 1783

Let all of you be determined to abide by the Methodist doctrine and discipline, published in the four volumes of Sermons, and the Notes upon the New Testament, together with the large minutes of conference.

Beware of preachers coming from Great Britain or Ireland without a full recommendation from me. Three of our traveling preachers here eagerly desired to go to America; but I could not approve of it by any means; because I am not satisfied that they thoroughly like either our discipline or our doctrine; I think they differ from our judgment in one or both. Therefore if these or any others come without my recommendation, take care how you receive them.

Neither should you receive any preachers, however recommended, who will not be subject to the American conference, and cheerfully conform to the minutes both of the American and English conferences.

I do not wish our American brethren to receive any who make any difficulty on receiving Francis Asbury as the general assistant.

"Undoubtedly, the greatest danger to the work of God in America is likely to arise either from preachers coming from Europe, or from such as will arise from among yourselves, speaking perverse things, or bringing in among you new doctrines, particularly Calvinian. You should guard against this with all possible care, for it is far easier to keep them out than to thrust them out.

"I commend you all to the grace of God, and am your affectionate friend and brother,

"John Wesley."

It was not to be expected that all who made profession of religion should adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour, nor that all who professed to be called of God to preach the gospel should stand fast in their calling, giving no occasion of offense. Mr. Asbury, in his Journal for this year, gives an affecting account of the apostasy and sudden death of Isaac Rawlings, who had been employed for eight or ten years as a preacher, but who furnished evidence of his instability at various times. He finally, after striving in a secret way, to make a party for himself, left the connection, and he and his adherents took possession of the Forest chapel. He was, however, soon forsaken by his followers, and became irregular in his life, lost the confidence of the public, and after having spent some hours in writing a defense of himself against some scandalous imputations which had been cast upon his character, mounted a "mettlesome horse, and had not rode many yards before he was thrown to the ground and died on the spot." "I had said," says Mr. Asbury, "I think he cannot stay long, because he did pervert the right ways of the Lord."

1784. -- On the 30th of April, the twelfth conference began at Ellis's chapel, in Virginia, and closed at Baltimore on the 28th of May following.

Preachers this year, 83; (Preachers last year, 82); Members, 14,986; (Members last year, 13,740); Increase in Preachers, 1; Increase in Members, 1,248.

David Abbott, James Thomas, James Mallory, and John Coleman, desisted from traveling; and Henry Medcalf and William Wright had died. This is the first time we find an account taken of those who had died, and nothing more is said of them than simply to record their deaths.

Among other things, they passed resolutions to collect money by a general yearly subscription in every circuit toward building new chapels, and discharging the debts on those already erected -- to carry the rule passed last year on slavery into execution, except in Virginia -- to improve the singing, by keeping close to Mr. Wesley's tunes and hymns -- and to conform to his advice respecting receiving European Methodist preachers, as expressed in the preceding letter.

There was a considerable revival this year in some of the frontier settlements, and the prospects of future usefulness were brightening every day, the preachers and people feeling the beneficial effects of the new government, which had been established after the loss of so much blood and treasure.

Mr. Lee, in his History of the Methodists, informs us that to this time they had not printed the minutes, but preserved them only in manuscript. They have since, however, been collected and printed; and it is from these printed minutes that the principal facts in respect to the doings of the conferences have been taken.

ENDNOTES

1 As it is my intention to give a condensed account of such preachers as were any way eminent for their labors, sufferings, and success, when their death is noticed, no more will be said of them in the thread of the history than is necessary to a connected account of the work which was carried on by their instrumentality.

2 It is said, however, in a memoir of the Rev. Mr. Mann, a preacher who afterward went to Nova Scotia, that for a considerable time during the war, at the request of the trustees and leaders, he held meetings in the chapel in New York, until he was relieved by the coming of Mr. Spragg, a regular traveling preacher, who came from Philadelphia, after the British took possession of that city. Through the labors of those men of God a small society was kept together, notwithstanding the difficulties with which they had to contend in those troublesome time.

3 This refers to a partial separation which took place in Virginia on account of the ordinances.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/nathan-bangs/from-the-commencement-of-the-revolution-in-1776-to-its-termination-in-1783/>

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