

The General Conference of 1808

by Nathan Bangs

The General Conference of 1808 addressed concerns and proposals related to Dr. Coke's absence and his past proposal for union with the Protestant Episcopal Church.

Scripture: Proverbs 15:22, 1 Corinthians 12:12, 1 Corinthians 14:40, Ephesians 4:3, 1 Timothy 3:15

Topics: "Church Governance", "Methodist History"

Description

The General Conference of 1808, led by Bishop Asbury, faced important decisions regarding the organization and representation of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Dr. Coke's proposal for a union with the Protestant Episcopal Church was met with mixed reactions, leading to debates and ultimately rejection. The conference also considered the establishment of a delegated General Conference for more equal representation and preservation of church doctrines and rules. After much deliberation, the final decision was to compose the General Conference with one member for every five members of each annual conference, meeting every four years.

Transcript

This conference assembled in the city of Baltimore, May 1, 1808, and was composed of one hundred and twenty-nine members, namely, nineteen from the New York, seven from the New England, eleven from the Western, eleven from the South Carolina, eighteen from the Virginia, thirty-one from the Baltimore, and thirty-two from the Philadelphia conference.

For the first time since the organization of the Church in 1784, Dr. Coke was absent from the General Conference, and as Bishop Whatcoat had deceased, Bishop Asbury was the sole president of the conference. After the organization of the conference, by the appointment of a secretary and the adoption of rules for the government of its proceedings, the conference appointed a committee of correspondence, to take into consideration certain communications from the British conference, and from Dr. Coke, and to report thereon.

It will be recollected that, in accordance with the earnest request of the British conference, the General Conference of 1804 had agreed to the return of Dr. Coke to Europe, and that he might have liberty to reside there until this General Conference, unless sooner recalled by three of the annual conferences. After his return to Europe, and after his marriage, he made a proposal, as before related, to come over, and take up his permanent residence in America, on condition that the continent should be divided as nearly equal as might be, between him and Bishop Asbury, as the superintending bishops. Though this

proposition was not agreeable to the American preachers, and therefore was not acceded to by them in their reply to Dr. Coke's circular, yet it shows most manifestly the strong obligation which the doctor felt to fulfill his contract with the General Conference, and of his intention, provided his wishes were complied with, to make America his permanent residence in future.

It seems, however, that the answer to his circular gave him some uneasiness, from an apprehension that his American brethren were dissatisfied with his conduct. To remove, therefore, all cause of disquietude from their minds, and to explain more fully his views and wishes, he sent to this General Conference, the following letter:--

"To The General American Conference

"City of Durham, (England,) Nov. 10, 1807

"Very ear and greatly respected brethren. My absence from your solemn meeting calls for a minute explanation of my motives for absence, and my future views. I did not expect, during my different short visits to your connection, to have any thing to do in the management of your work, except the honor of presiding at your General Conference, and preaching in your pulpits. I never returned to England without your leave, from the time I offered myself to be wholly yours and whatever my own private judgment might have been, I should, in every instance, have considered your vote as the voice of God, if you had, on the whole, judged it best to have refused that leave. The last time I visited you, I came over without any expectation of returning. I settled my little affairs in this country, and brought over with me every thing I had, except those parts of my library which I should not soon want, but which I left in such a manner that on the shortest notice they might be sent over to me -- and also such copies of my commentary as I wished that my European brethren would be so kind as to sell for me. I did not take a decisive farewell of my brethren in Europe, as I was not sure whether you would, in your circumstances, as they respected Bishop Asbury, receive me as an efficient superintendent or bishop among you in any degree or manner: for this reason only I consented to carry over to you an address which contained a clause in it requesting my return to Europe. I should otherwise have strongly objected to the clause: however, I repeatedly gave very strong intimations, both to the British and Irish conferences, of the improbability of my return. I write not the above as if I did not highly prize my situation in the European connection. As general superintendent of their missions at home and abroad, as president of the Irish part of the connection, as having all their pulpits in the United Kingdom open to me when and as often as I please, and in many other respects possessing influence for great usefulness, I feel myself under unspeakable obligations to my European brethren. But I have made the above observations to convince you, that I held and kept my obligations and engagements to you, to strengthen your episcopacy whenever you pleased, most sacred. It is true, I wrote to you a circular letter, which, I now acknowledge, was out of order; and therefore I beg pardon for writing it: but I did not intend to be irregular. I hardly knew what to write in order to bring matters to an explanation. For I was assured that you yourselves, after due explanation, would not wish to draw me out of a very extensive and successful sphere of usefulness, merely to preach; and instead of strengthening the episcopacy, have less to do in the management of the work than the preacher who superintends the smallest circuit in America.

"And now, you will ask, 'What are we to expect from you.' I will answer with the most perfect candor. If it be your judgment and vote that my residence with you will probably assist to preserve your union; and you agree that I shall have a full right to give my judgment in every thing, in the general and annual conferences, on the making of laws, the stationing of the preachers, sending out missionaries, and every

thing else, which, as a bishop or superintendent belongs to my office, I will, on receiving your answer, settle our affairs with the utmost expedition, and come over to you for life. You may observe, I do not desire any decisive power. I want no new condition. I only want to be perfectly ascertained, that if I reside with you, I shall be authorized by you to fulfill my office in the way above mentioned; without which our reciprocal engagements would be a perfect nullity, and I should be entirely the same among you, except in the article of preaching. By this proposal I break no engagement: I want nothing but a an explanation, and a part of that liberty which I have in the European connection. In Europe, I give my judgment in the two conferences, and in the representative meetings for preparing the stations of preachers for the conference, as far as I judge it my duty, on every point, and have also a vote when we do vote on any subject. In missionary matters I am here allowed a negative; and my committee a negative; this last I do not desire in America; but I desire the power of doing extensive good. If this cannot at present be granted by the authority of the Genera Conference, you may insert me in your minutes as formerly: or you may first insert the resident bishop or bishops, and add a N. B., Dr. Coke (or Bishop Coke, as you please) resides in Europe, till he be called to the States by the General conference, or by the annual conferences; or if this be not agreeable, you must expel me, (for dropping me out of your public minutes will be to all intents and purposes an expulsion,) and leave what I have done for your connection to God alone: and though you forget me, God will not forget me.

"I do assure you, very dear and respected brethren, that I love and esteem you highly, and am, with most unfeigned sincerity, your affectionate and faithful servant,

"T. COKE.

P.S. -- My precious wife desires that she may not be considered in the least degree in this business. She is no hindrance to me in any thing, but a blessing in all things. We are always, as it were, I traveling, and I annually visit and preach at more places than I did for many years before my marriage."

There was further cause of dissatisfaction with Dr. Coke. It seems that, in the spring of 1791, Dr. Coke, on the eve of his departure for England, addressed a confidential letter to bishop White, bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church of Pennsylvania, in which he proposed a union between that and the Methodist Episcopal Church, on certain conditions, with which the officers of that Church did not see fit to comply. As several versions have been given of this affair, to prevent misunderstandings hereafter, I think it proper to give the letter of Dr. Coke entire. It is as follows: --

"Right Rev. Sir -- Permit me to intrude a little on your time upon a subject of great importance.

"You, I believe, are conscious that I was brought up in the Church of England, and have been ordained a presbyter of that Church. For many years I was prejudiced, even I think to bigotry, in favor of it; but through a variety of causes or incidents, to mention which would be tedious and useless, my mind was exceedingly biased on the other side of the question. In consequence of this I am not sure but I went further in the separation of our Church in America than Mr. Wesley, from whom I had received my commission, did intend. He did indeed solemnly invest me, as far as he had a right so to do, with episcopal authority, but did not intend, I think, that an entire separation should take place. He, being pressed by our friends on this side of the water for ministers to administer the sacraments to them, (there being very few of the clergy of the Church of England then in the States,) went further, I am sure, than he would have gone, if he had foreseen some events which followed. And this I am certain of -- that he is now sorry for the separation.

"But what can be done for a re-union, which I much wish for; and to accomplish which, Mr. Wesley, I have no doubt, would use his influence to the utmost? the affection of a very considerable number of the preachers and most of the people is very strong toward him, notwithstanding the excessive ill usage he received from a few. My interest also is not small; both his and mine would readily, and to the utmost, be used to accomplish that (to us) very desirable object; if a readiness were shown by the bishops of the Protestant Episcopal Church to re-unite.

"It is even to your Church an object of great importance, We have now above sixty thousand adults in our society in these States, and about two hundred and fifty traveling ministers and preachers; besides a great number of local preachers, very far exceeding the number of traveling preachers; and some of those local preachers are men of very considerable abilities. But if we number the Methodists as most people number the members of their Church, viz., by the families which constantly attend the divine ordinances in their places of worship, they will make a larger body than you probably conceive. The society, I believe, may be safely multiplied by five on an average to give us our stated congregations; which will then amount to three hundred thousand. And if the calculation which, I think, some eminent writers have made, be just, three-fifths of mankind are un-adult, (if I may use the expression,) at any given period, it will follow that all the families, the adults of which form our congregations in these States, amount to seven hundred and fifty thousand. About one-fifth of these are blacks.

"The work now extends in length from Boston to the south of Georgia; and in breadth from the Atlantic to Lake Champlain, Vermont, Albany, Redstone, Holstein, Kentucky, Cumberland, &c.

"But there are many hindrances in the way. Can they be removed?

Our ordained ministers will not, ought not to give up their right of administering the sacraments. I do not think that the generality of them, perhaps none of them, would refuse to submit to a re-ordination, if other hindrances were removed out of the way. I must here observe, that between sixty and seventy only out of the two hundred and fifty have been ordained presbyters, and about sixty deacons (only.) The presbyters are the choicest of the whole.

The other preachers would hardly submit to a re-union, if the possibility of their rising up to ordination depended on the present bishops in America. Because, though they are all, I think I may say, zealous, pious, and very useful men, yet they are not acquainted with the learned languages. Besides, they would argue, -- If the present bishops would waive the article of the learned languages, yet their successors might not.

"My desire of a re-union is so sincere and earnest, that these difficulties almost make me tremble; and yet something must be done before the death of Mr. Wesley, otherwise I shall despair of success for though my influence among the Methodists in these states as well as in Europe is, I doubt not, increasing, yet Mr. Asbury, whose influence is very capital, will not easily comply; nay, I know he will be exceedingly averse to it.

"In Europe, where some steps had been taken, tending to a separation, all is at an end. Mr. Wesley is a determined enemy of it, and I have lately borne an open and successful testimony against it.

"Shall I be favored with a private interview with you in Philadelphia? I shall be there, God willing, on Tuesday the 17th of May. If this be agreeable, I will beg of you just to signify it in a note, directed to me at Mr. Jacob Baker's, merchant, Market Street, Philadelphia; or, if you please, by a few lines sent me by the

return of the post at Philip Rogers's, Esq., in Baltimore, from yourself or Dr. Magaw, and I will wait upon you with my friend Dr. Magaw. We can then enlarge on these subjects.

"I am conscious of it, that secrecy is of great importance in the present state of the business, till the minds of you, your brother bishops, and Mr. Wesley, be circumstantially known. I must therefore beg that these things be confined to yourself and Dr. Magaw, till I have the honor of seeing you.

"Thus, you see, I have made a bold venture on your honor and candor, and have opened my whole heart to you on the subject, as far as the extent of a small letter will allow me. If you put equal confidence in me, you will find me candid and faithful.

"I have, notwithstanding, been guilty of inadvertencies. Very lately, I found myself obliged (for the pacifying of my conscience) to write a penitential letter to the Rev. Mr. Jarratt, which gave him great satisfaction: and for the same reason I must write another to the Rev. Mr. Pettigrew. When I was last in America, I prepared and corrected a great variety of things for our magazines, indeed, almost every thing that was printed, except some loose hints which I had taken of one of my journeys, and which I left in my hurry with Mr. Asbury, without any correction, entreating that no part of them might be printed which would be improper or offensive. But through great inadvertency (I suppose) he suffered some reflections on the characters of the two above-mentioned gentlemen to be inserted in the magazine, for which I am very sorry and probably shall not rest till I have made my acknowledgment more public; though Mr. Jarratt does not desire it.

I am not sure whether I have not also offended you, sir, by accepting one of the offers made me by you and Dr. Magaw, of the use of your churches, about six years ago, on my first visit to Philadelphia, without informing you of our plan of separation from the Church of England. If I did offend, (as I doubt I did, especially from what you said on the subject to Mr. Richard Dellam, of Abington,) I sincerely beg yours and Dr. Magaw's pardon. I will endeavor to amend. But, alas! I am a frail, weak creature.

"I will intrude no longer at present. One thing only I will claim from your candor -- that if you have no thoughts of improving this proposal, you will burn this letter, and take no more notice of it (for it would be a pity to have us entirely alienated from each other, if we cannot unite in the manner my ardent wishes desire.) But if you will further negotiate the business, I will explain my mind still more fully to you on the probabilities of success.

"In the meantime, permit me, with great respect, to subscribe myself, right reverend sir, your very humble servant in Christ,

Thomas Coke. Richmond, April 24, 1791. "The Right Rev. Father in God, Bishop White."

The following is Bishop White's answer: --

"Rev. Sir -- My friend, Dr. Magaw, has this day put into my hands your letter of the 24th of April, which, I trust, I received with a sense of the importance of the subject, and of the answer I am to give to God for the improvement of every opportunity of building up his Church. Accordingly, I cannot but make choice of the earliest of the two ways you point out, to inform you, that I shall be very happy in the opportunity of conversing with you at the time proposed.

"You mention two difficulties in the way of the proposed union. And there are further difficulties which suggest themselves to my mind. But I can say of the one and of the other, that I do not think them

insuperable, provided there be a conciliatory disposition on both sides. So far as I am concerned, I think that such a disposition exists.

"It has not been my temper, sir, to despond in regard to the extension of Christianity in this new world: and in addition to the promises of the great head of the Church, I have always imagined that I perceived the train of second causes so laid by the good providence of God, as to be promoting what we believe to be his will in this respect. On the other hand, I feel the weight of most powerful discouragements, in the increasing number of the avowed patrons of infidelity, and of others, who pretend to confess the divine authority of our holy religion, while they endeavor to strip it of its characteristic doctrines. In this situation, it is rather to be expected, that distinct Churches, agreeing in fundamentals, should make mutual sacrifices for a union, than that any Church should divide into two bodies, without a difference being even alleged to exist, in any heading point. For the preventing of this, the measures which you may propose cannot fail of success, unless there be on one side, or on both a most lamentable deficiency of Christian temper.

"I remember the conversation you allude to with Mr. Dellam: I hope I did not express myself uncharitably, or even indelicately. As to personal offense toward me, it is out of the question: for I had not at that time any connection with St. Paul's Church. But this, as well as the other parts of your letter, may be discoursed of at the proposed interview. Therefore, with assurance of the desired secrecy, and with requesting you to accept a like promise of candor to that which I credit from you, I conclude myself at present Your brother in Christ,

"And very humble servant,

"W. W."¹

It will be perceived that the above correspondence was considered by the parties concerned as altogether confidential, and was so kept, according to Bishop White's account of the transaction, until the summer of 1804, when he communicated the fact, in answer to their inquiries, to the Rev. Simon Wilmer, of the Protestant, and the Rev. John McClaskey, of the Methodist Episcopal Church. "The matter being variously reported," says Bishop White, "a copy of the letter was, after some lapse of time, delivered to the Rev. Dr. Kemp, of Maryland, and at last published in a controversy raised in the diocese."

The letter being thus made public, it is not strange that many of the friends of Dr. Coke, and of the Methodist Episcopal Church, to whom these things were unknown until now, should have been dissatisfied with Dr. Coke, and demand from him an explanation. Thus called from him the following letter to this General Conference²: --

"Near Leeds, (Yorkshire,) Jan. 29, 1808.

"To The General American Conference

"My Very Dear Brethren: -- I wrote to you a letter about two months ago, directed to the care of my dear brethren, the Messrs. Cooper and Wilson, in which I briefly opened my mind to you concerning my relation toward you, observing, to this purport, that if you judged that my being with you would help to preserve your union, if I was allowed to give my opinion or judgment on every station of the preachers, as far as I chose, and also upon every thing else that could come under the inspection of the bishops or superintendents, you might call me; and we would settle our affairs in Europe as soon as possible, and sail for America, and be with you for life. Without your compliance with the latter point, viz., in respect to a

full right of giving my judgment, I should be so far from being useful in preserving union, that I should merely fill the place of a preacher.

"But there is one point more which I must also notice. I find that a letter which I wrote to Bishop White in 1791 has been animadverted upon, though, if I mistake not, the letter itself has not been published.

"There are very few of you who can possibly recollect any thing of what I am next going to add. Many of you were then only little children. We had at that time no regular General Conferences. One only had been held in the year 1784. I had, indeed, with great labor and fatigue, a few months before I wrote this letter to Bishop White, prevailed on James O'Kelly and the thirty-six traveling preachers who had withdrawn with him from all connection with Bishop Asbury, to submit to the decision of a General Conference. This conference was, to be held in about a year and a half after my departure from the States. And at this conference, held, I think, the latter end of 1792, I proposed and obtained that great blessing to the American connection, a permanency for General Conferences, which were to be held at stated times. Previously to the holding of this conference, (except the general one held in 1784,) there were only small district meetings, excepting the council which was held at Cokesbury College either in 1791 or 1792. Except the union which most justly subsisted between Bishop Asbury on the one hand, and the preachers and people on the other, the society, as such, taken as an aggregate, was almost like a rope of sand. I longed to see matters on a footing likely to be permanent: Bishop Asbury did the same: and it was that view of things, I doubt not, which led Bishop Asbury, the year before, to call and to endeavor to establish a regular council, who were to meet him annually at Cokesbury. In this point I differed in sentiment from my venerable brother. But I saw the danger of our situation, though I well knew that God was sufficient for all things. I did verily believe then, that, under God, the connection would be more likely to be saved from convulsions by a union with the old Episcopal Church, than any other way -- not by a dereliction of ordination, sacraments, and the Methodist discipline, but by a junction on proper terms. Bishop White, in two interviews I had with him in Philadelphia, gave me reason to believe that this junction might be accomplished with ease. Dr. Magaw was perfectly sure of it. Indeed, (if Mr. Ogden, of New Jersey, did not mistake in the information he gave me,) a canon passed the house of bishops of the old Episcopal Church in favor of it. Bishop Madison, according to the same information, took the canon to the lower house. 'But it was there thrown out,' said Mr. Ogden, to whom I explained the whole business, 'because they did not understand the full meaning of it.' Mr. Ogden added, that he spoke against it, because he did not understand it; but that it would have met with his warm support, had he understood the full intention of it.

"I had provided in the fullest manner, in my indispensably necessary conditions, for the security, and, I may say, for the independence of our discipline and places of worship. But I thought (perhaps erroneously, and I believe so now) that our field of action would have been exceedingly enlarged by that junction, and that myriads would have attended our ministry in consequence of it, who were at that time much prejudiced against us. All these things unitedly considered, led me to write the letter, and meet Bishop White and Dr. Magaw on the subject in Philadelphia.

"But it may be asked, why did I not consult Bishop Asbury, before I took these steps? I answer, It was impossible. I was at and near Philadelphia, and he was somewhere in the south. We had finished our district meetings, and he was to be in the state of Maryland about the time of my sailing for England. I wanted that every thing should be prepared against my return, God willing, in about a year and a half, for further consideration -- that Bishop White, &c., should have time to consult their convention -- and that I might also lay the matter before Bishop Asbury, and correspond with him upon the subject, and after that, if proper, bring the business before the General Conference, which was to be held in order to take into

consideration James O'Kelly's division. Before I sailed for England, I met Bishop Asbury at New castle in the state of Delaware, (from which place I went on board,) and laid the matter before him, who, with that caution which peculiarly characterizes him, gave me no decisive opinion on the subject.

"The next objection (and, I think, the only important one remaining) is the following: 'If you did not think that the episcopal ordination of Mr. Asbury was valid, why did you ordain him? Was there not duplicity in this business?' I answer,

I never, since I could reason on those things, considered the doctrine of the uninterrupted apostolic succession of bishops as at all valid or true.

I am of our late venerable father Mr. Wesley's opinion, that the order of bishops and presbyters is one and the same

I believe that the episcopal form of church government is the best in the world, when the episcopal power is under due regulations and responsibility.

I believe that it is well to follow the example of the primitive church as exemplified in the word of God, by setting apart persons for great ministerial purposes by the imposition of hands, but especially those who are appointed for offices of the first rank in the church.

"From all I have advanced, you may easily perceive, my dear brethren, that I do not consider the imposition of hands, on the one hand, as essentially necessary for any office in the church; nor do I, on the other hand, think that the repetition of the imposition of hands for the same office, when important circumstances require it, is at all improper.

"If it be granted that my plan of union with the old Episcopal Church was desirable, (which now, I think, was not so, though I most sincerely believed it to be so at that time,) then if the plan could not have been accomplished without a repetition of the imposition of hands for the same office, I did believe, and do now believe, and have no doubt that the repetition of the imposition of hands would have been perfectly justifiable for the enlargement of the field of action, &c., and would not, by any means, have invalidated the former consecration or imposition of hands. Therefore, I have no doubt but my consecration of Bishop Asbury was perfectly valid and would have been so even if he had been re-consecrated. I never did apply to the general convention or any other convention for reconsecration. I never intended that either Bishop Asbury or myself should give up our episcopal office, if the junction were to take place; but I should have had no scruple then, nor should I now, if the junction were desirable, to have submitted to, or to submit to a reimposition of hands in order to accomplish a great object: but I do say again, I do not now believe such a junction desirable.

"I have thus simply and candidly, though in few words, told you my whole mind on this subject. I do not consider my solemn engagements to you invalidated by any thing I have done, or you have done. But I charge you by the glory of God, and by every tie of love, gratitude, and candor, that you take no step which may injure my character. And now I conclude with assuring you that I greatly love and esteem you; that it is a delight to me to pray for your prosperity, and that I am your very affectionate brother and faithful friend,

T. COKE."

These letters, having been read in the conference, were referred to the committee of correspondence, who reported the following answer to Dr. Coke: --

"Baltimore, May 25th, 1808

"Very Dear and Much-Respected Brother: -- Your letters of Nov. 6th, 1807, and Jan. 29th, 1808, together with the address of the British Conference to our General Conference, were severally read to us in our open conference; and the different subjects therein contained were seriously and solemnly considered, in all their various bearings and connections.

"We have answered the address of the British Conference in a separate letter from this, which you, as one of that body, will see. We have complied with their request, in agreeing that you may continue with them, till you are called to us by the General Conference, or by all the annual conferences respectively.

"Your two letters were respectfully received and had a salutary effect upon our minds. The reasons which you have assigned for some former transactions, and the ingenuous candor which you have manifested, in frankly acknowledging and declaring the motives and inducements that led you to those measures; together with your affectionate acknowledgment that in certain cases you were mistaken as to your views of some of the points in question; as likewise your manifest friendship and good will to this connection and your American brethren, and your evident solicitude to retain a place and standing among us; taking these circumstances collectively, they had a great influence upon some of our minds, in removing certain suspicious fears, which had been imbibed, rather unfavorable to your standing among us.

"You may be assured that we feel an affectionate regard for you; that we gratefully remember your repeated labors of love toward us; and that we sensibly feel our obligations for the services you have rendered us. We hope that no circumstance will ever alienate our Christian affection from you, or yours from us. We wish to maintain and to cultivate a good understanding and brotherly unity with you, and with all our European brethren. In full conference, of near one hundred and thirty members, we entered into a very long conversation, and very serious and solemn debate, upon sundry resolutions which were laid before us, relative to your case. Probably on no former occasion, in any conference in America, was so much said in defense of your character and to your honor as I ministerial servant of God and of his church. Your worth, your labors, your disinterested services, fatigues, dangers, and difficulties, to serve your American brethren, were set forth pathetically, and urged with the force of reason and truth, in an argumentative manner and our candid and impartial judgments were constrained to yield to the conclusion, that we were bound by the ties of moral and religious obligations to treat you most respectfully, and to retain a grateful remembrance of all your labors of love toward us. During the debate your name was mentioned, and your character spoken of with much respect and affection. Our deliberations and arguments on this head terminated to the adoption of the following resolutions, viz: --

Resolved, That the General Conference do agree and consent that Dr. Coke may continue in Europe till he be called to the United States by the General Conference or by all the American conferences respectively.

Resolved, That we do retain a grateful remembrance of the services and labors of Dr. Coke among us; and that the thanks of this conference are hereby acknowledged to him, and to God, for all his labors of love toward us, from the time he first left his native country to serve us.

Resolved, That Dr. Coke's name shall be retained in our minutes, after the names of the bishops, in a 'N. B. Dr. Coke, at the request of the British Conference, and by consent of our General Conference, resides in Europe; he is not to exercise the office of superintendent among us, in the United States, until he be recalled by the General Conference or by all the annual conferences respectively.'

"Your name is accordingly printed in the minutes which were put to press after the adoption of the above resolutions.

"We have elected and set apart our beloved brother Wm. McKendree to the office of a bishop or superintendent, and he has entered upon the duties of the office. Our venerable Asbury is yet spared among us, and, although he bears the weight of more than threescore years, he is able to travel and visit all the annual conferences. May his life be long preserved for God's glory, and the service of his church!

"We have, upon the whole, had great peace, harmony, and unity, during our sitting in General Conference: we expect to close in a few days; and we trust in God that all things will work together for the divine glory and the promotion of the blessed work of religion.

"Our next General Conference is to be May 1st, 1812, in New York, and is to be composed of a select number, of one for every five members belonging to the annual conferences respectively.

"We judge it proper to inform you, that our brother Ezekiel Cooper has voluntarily resigned his office as editor and general book steward. It was the wish and desire of the General Conference, that he should continue to serve the connection in that important department; but he has given us a final answer, that he declines the appointment, and wishes another to be appointed to take his place. The conference have accordingly accepted his resignation, and voted their thanks to him for the great services he has rendered in that department, for nine years past; and they have also voted their full approbation of his conduct in the management of the book business, greatly to the advancement of that concern, and to the benefit of the connection.

"We have now chosen our brethren John Wilson and Daniel Hitt, the editors and general book stewards, who are to carry on the business in New York as usual. You will therefore consider and understand, that our brother Ezekiel Cooper, of his own voluntary choice, has resigned, and is released from any responsibility in any account you may have with the Book Concern; and that all your accounts and business with that department or the agents thereof are to be transferred to and done with the said John Wilson and Daniel Hitt in future.

"We have had a glorious work in various parts; we had an addition last year of 7,405; our connection now amounts to more than 150,000. Surely the Lord is with us.

"We hope, dear brother, that you will bear us in mind before the throne of grace. We shall certainly pray for our brother Dr. Coke, his beloved wife, and all our European brethren. May the Lord long preserve your life, and bless you with, every necessary favor of Providence and grace to complete your felicity in time and through eternity!

"We are, very dear and much-respected brother, yours affectionately in the bonds of the gospel and unity of the Spirit of grace.

"Signed in behalf and by order of the General Conference."

The following resolutions also passed the conference in relation to his case: --

"The committee to whom was referred the case of Dr. Coke, taking into consideration the circumstances of the case, as it respects the request of the British Conference, the relative situation of the doctor, and the most prudent measures for us to adopt, in order to promote and perpetuate a good understanding and Christian unity between us and our European brethren, are of opinion we should comply with the request made in the address of the British Conference for the doctor's continuance with them; and also, that we should respectfully retain the doctor's name in our minutes, agreeably to his request in his second proposition on that head -- therefore, your committee report the following resolutions: --

"Resolved, That the General Conference do agree and consent that Dr. Coke may continue in Europe 'till he be called to the United States by the General Conference, or by all the annual conferences respectively.'

"Resolved, That we do retain a grateful remembrance of the services and labors of Dr. Coke among us and that the thanks of this conference are hereby acknowledged to him; and to God, for all his labors of love toward us, from the time he first left his native country to serve us.

"Resolved, that Dr. Coke's name shall be retained in our minutes after the names of the bishops, in a 'N. B. Dr. Coke, at the request of the British Conference, and by consent of our General Conference, resides in Europe: he is not to exercise the office of superintendent or bishop among us in the United States, until he be recalled by the General Conference, or by all the annual conferences respectively.'

"Resolved, That the committee of correspondence be, and are hereby directed, to draft two letters, one to the British Conference, the other to Dr. Coke, in answer to their respective letters to us; and therein communicating with them respectively the contents of the above resolutions.'

The following address, referred to in the letter above inserted, of the British to the American Methodist General Conference, will show the state of feeling existing between the two bodies, and the earnest desire the former had for the continued services of Dr. Coke: --

"Very Dear Brethren in the Lord: -- The pleasing, account you gave us, in your last address, of the prosperity of religion in the United States, calls on us for the most lively expressions of thankfulness to God, who has so wonderfully displayed his love among you; the more so, as we have heard, by very recent accounts, that the operations of divine grace are continued, with increasing effect, on the hearts of thousands in your highly-favored country. May the Lord still prosper his blessed work, till the whole earth is filled with his glory!

"While we ascribe all the good that is done to God alone, as the sole fountain of light and life, we do not forget the instruments which it pleased him to employ. The names of Asbury and Whatcoat are mentioned in our assemblies with the greatest respect and affection. Mr. Whatcoat, we are informed, is called to his eternal ward. This is, doubtless, a very great loss to you, though to him an unspeakable gain. Yet, you well know, that the glorious Head of the church, who saw good to remove him, can supply his place with a pastor after his own heart, equally qualified to superintend his mourning flock. The venerable Mr. Asbury, whose praise is in all the churches, is still with you, -- a burning and a shining light. We never lose sight of the zeal he showed for the salvation of souls, at the hazard of his life, during the war on the continent, when all others forsook it and fled. To speak our sentiments on this subject, might pain his mind; we therefore restrain ourselves, being well assured that he needs no encomiums of ours to recommend him

to you! May his last days be crowned with increasing success in his great ministerial labors!

"Respecting our union, dear brethren, we think of no separation from you, save the great Atlantic. Our doctrine, and manner of spreading the gospel, are the same, and we mutually rejoice in each other's welfare. On this principle, we conclude, that you will greatly rejoice to hear of the flourishing state of vital godliness among us. In this kingdom, so long distinguished by every privilege congenial to real religion, there has been this year an increase of above seven thousand members to our Society, near a thousand in Ireland, where the missionaries have been greatly blest in their arduous undertaking, particularly in weakening the destructive influence of the man of sin and, we trust, in hastening the total overthrow of idolatry and superstition.

"What you have said concerning our present worthy secretary, the Rev. Dr. Coke, is no matter of wonder to us, who have long known his value, the honor which our Lord has put upon him, and have enjoyed the fruit of his labor. By a vote of our conference this day, he was requested to continue with us, in case his engagements with you, which he has repeatedly stated to us, should admit of it.

"Our conference has been numerous, and many important subjects have been brought before us; but, thanks be to God, we have been graciously preserved from the evil one, and are drawing toward a conclusion in the utmost harmony and love.

"That the eternal God may be your refuge, and the everlasting arms be underneath you; and that the good will of Him who dwelt in the bush may be ever manifested among you, is the earnest prayer of; very dear brethren, yours, in endless love.

"Signed, in behalf of the conference,

"John Barber, President. "Liverpool, August 11, 1807."

The answer of the General Conference to this is as follows: --

"Baltimore, 25th May, 1808

"Very Dear Brethren and Fathers in Christ: -- Your very affectionate address 'to the Methodist General Conference in America,' has been read in our conference, and afforded us great consolation. Feeling with you that 'our doctrine and manner of spreading the gospel are the same,' that we are united under one glorious Head, suffering in the same cause, and traveling to the same world of rest, we cannot but rejoice in your prosperity. Yes, brethren, we rejoice to hear that the great Head of the church has owned your labors, and given hundreds and thousands of precious souls to your labors and prayers. But above all, we feel constrained to return thanks to the Father of lights for presiding over your conference, and enabling you to draw to a close in harmony and love; and again to go out into the hedges and highways, the towns and cities, and lift up your united voice for the recovery of a lost and sinking world. O brethren, if God so wonderfully owned and blest the labors of the few that first engaged in spreading the gospel on the itinerant plan in your highly-favored land, so that 'a little one has become a thousand,' what may we not expect from the labors of hundreds and thousands, provided they continue equally pure in doctrine, holy in life, and zealous for the glory of the Redeemer's kingdom?

"We also, in this highly-favored country, have cause of unceasing gratitude and love to our common Lord, for his boundless love toward us. Although we have had a vast extent of country to travel over, in many parts stupendous chains of rocky mountains to climb, and uncultivated regions to explore, yet hitherto we

have been kept one; and our labors have been crowned with success beyond our most sanguine expectations. Not only in our towns and populous cities, and the country adjacent to the Atlantic, have we seen the pleasure of the Lord prosper in our hand; but also to the westward beyond the river Ohio, to the Mississippi and the Missouri, we have seen the travail of the Redeemer's soul coming borne to God. In those places where but a few years ago the wild beast of the forest prowled after his prey, and the tawny savage lurked in wait to murder the innocent, now houses are raised for the worship of God, precious souls have been converted by hundreds and thousands, and the songs of Zion are heard. Truly the wilderness and the solitary place have become glad, and the desert blossoms as the rose. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

"Our numbers are still increasing; we added more than seven thousand members to our societies the last year. There are now upward of one hundred and fifty thousand members within the bounds of our charge. The prospects are still opening and pleasing. The fields are white unto the harvest. Our missionaries in the interior and upon the frontier have been successful. But we wish to rejoice with trembling. All the honor and praise be ascribed to God for ever.

"Your request for the continuance of our beloved brother Dr. Coke among you has been taken into the most serious and solemn deliberation in our conference; and in accordance with your request, a vote has passed that he may continue with you until he may be called to us by all the annual conferences respectively, or the General Conference. We are, however, not insensible of his value, or ungrateful for his past labors of love. And we do sincerely pray that the everlasting God may still be with him, and make him a blessing to hundreds and thousands of immortal souls.

"Our venerable father, Mr. Asbury, is still spared to us; and notwithstanding he carries the weight of threescore and three years, he has been enabled regularly to visit all the annual conferences, and to preside in our General Conference. We esteem this a peculiar blessing.

As the pious Whatcoat is taken from us to his eternal reward, we have elected and set apart our beloved brother William McKendree, who has been well tried and found faithful in the work of the ministry nearly twenty years, to fill his place as joint superintendent with Mr. Asbury. And we hope that the mantle of Elijah will rest upon Elisha. Our conference has been large, and business of the greatest importance has come before us; but through the infinite goodness of God we have been preserved in union, and are now drawing toward a close in harmony and love.

"Respecting our union, brethren, we can say with you, we know no separation save the Atlantic. And we wish, so far as circumstances will permit, ever to cultivate the most cordial affection.

"And now, dear brethren and fathers, praying that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ may be your guide and support in life and death, and that we may all meet in our Father's house above, we remain yours, in unceasing love.

"Signed by order and in behalf of the conference."3

As a variety of conflicting commentaries have been made on these proceedings, and especially upon the letters of Dr. Coke, some of them discreditable to his character, and others to the character of the Methodist Episcopal Church, it seems proper to subjoin a few remarks, with a view to set the matter in a just point of light, referring the reader, for a more full vindication of those transactions, to the book entitled, "An Original Church of Christ," and to the "Defense of our Fathers." Let it be remembered then,

That the letter of Dr. Coke to Bishop White was his own simply, for which no one is responsible but himself, for he consulted not the General Conference at all, nor even Bishop Asbury or Mr. Wesley. Nay, it appears from the letter itself that Dr. Coke was fully sensible that Bishop Asbury would be averse to the plan of the union between the two Churches. If, therefore, there be any thing reprehensible in the letter or in the plan proposed, neither the Methodist Episcopal Church, Bishop Asbury, nor Mr.

Wesley is to be held responsible for it, as neither the one nor the other was at all consenting to the proposition. But, It seems that Dr. Coke himself designed his letter only as preparatory to an interview on the subject with Bishop White, should the proposition be favorably viewed by the latter. It was, therefore, purely a confidential communication from one friend to another, the writer requesting Bishop White to burn the letter in case he should not view the subject favorably; and even if he should, the preliminaries were to be discussed afterward, and the whole subject submitted to the General Conference, whose negative would have nullified the entire proceedings.

The letter, therefore, should be considered only as an incipient step towards a union which the writer greatly desired as a means, according to his judgment at the time, of realizing a greater amount of good than could be in their separate action. If, therefore, the end proposed could have been realized without any sacrifice of principle, or the use of unlawful means, it might have been sanctioned by all good men in each communion, without any impeachment of either motive or judgment.

In the estimation of Bishop White himself, as appears from his answer to Dr. Coke, such a union might have been effected without any dereliction of duty on either side, provided the terms of the compact could have been made mutually agreeable. Futurity alone can fully declare whether the motive in making or rejecting the proposition were most in accordance with the Divine will, or most conducive to extensive and permanent good. In any, and in every event, the severe censures which have been cast upon Dr.

Coke, and the unwarrantable conclusions respecting the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church, are not justified or sustained by the facts in the case, however much we may deprecate the making or rejecting the movements of either party in the premises. The most weighty objection, however, to Dr. Coke, in making the proposal, is, that he thereby expressed a doubt of the validity of his own ordination, and of course of those on whom he had laid his hands. The reader is requested to notice that this objection has been raised by the Protestant Episcopalians who consider presbyterial ordination invalid, and who profess a belief in the uninterrupted succession of a third order in the church, denominated bishops, made such by a triple consecration; but as this belief is founded upon no substantial proof, as such an order cannot be traced, nor therefore insisted upon as essential to constitute a valid ministry, the objection itself can have no solid foundation; more especially as Dr.

Coke himself says expressly, in the above letter to The General Conference, that he had no confidence in the doctrine of succession, and therefore considered his consecration by Wesley and others as perfectly valid. But Dr. Coke's letter above quoted, sets this matter at rest by the most explicit avowal on this point. In whatever sense Bishop White might have understood him, it is manifest that Dr. Coke never meant to insinuate that his own ordination by Mr. Wesley, or that of those who had received it at his hands, was wanting in any thing to make it valid. This is a contradiction put upon the letter of Dr. Coke not authorized by the letter itself, and is expressly contradicted in the one he addressed to the General Conference.

But as before said, whatever error may have been committed in this affair, the Methodist Episcopal Church is not accountable for it. It is believed that Dr. Coke betrayed too much precipitancy in reference to

this subject -- that his great desire for extensive usefulness led him to make the proposal, which he did without due consideration -- that before he thus committed himself to those who were watching him, with perhaps some jealousy, he should have consulted and obtained the consent of his worthy colleague, as well as Mr. Wesley's and the General Conference. It is, moreover, highly probable that Dr. Coke misunderstood the views of Mr. Wesley, when he told Bishop White that had he foreseen some things, he would not have gone so far. No other intimation, so far as I have been able to learn, was ever given that Mr. Wesley ever repented of what he had done for his American brethren. His last letter to Ezekiel Cooper, but a few days before his death, and the record he made in his journal in reference to this business, both prove that Dr. Coke labored under a mistake when he said this. What Mr. Wesley said in regard to Mr. Asbury's calling himself a bishop, and to Cokesbury College, no more proves that he repented of what he had done, than it does that a father is sorry that he has a promising son, merely because he finds it necessary to chastise him for his good.

It should be observed that Dr. Coke does not say in his letter to Bishop White that he had authority from Mr. Wesley to say that the latter regretted the steps he had taken in the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church, but gives it as his opinion only that such were Mr. Wesley's views and feelings.

The fact is, Dr. Coke had become alarmed -- unnecessarily so, as subsequent events proved -- from the disposition manifested by O'Kelly and his partisans, fearing that a convulsion would take place in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and that they would become scattered abroad. To prevent such a calamity, Bishop Asbury proposed the council, which had but an ephemeral existence, and did not answer the design of its institution, to which neither Dr. Coke nor O'Kelly was agreed, the former submitting to it from deference to Bishop Asbury, proposing in the mean time a General Conference as a substitute, which was brought about in 1792, at which time O'Kelly withdrew.

Under these alarming apprehensions for the safety of the church, Dr. Coke made the proposition for a union with the Protestant Episcopal Church, from a hope of enlarging the sphere of usefulness for his Methodist brethren, by creating a concentration of action for the ministry of both communions, and thereby inspiring more public confidence in the cementing principles of Christianity and the stability of its institutions. As, however, his fears were groundless, so the union proposed was both impolitic and unnecessary he himself lived to see and acknowledge.

It is hoped, therefore, that we may hear no more of the doubts of Dr. Coke respecting the validity of his ordination. And whatever errors he may have committed in this affair, let them find an apology in that common frailty of human nature from which none are exempt -- the imperfection of human judgment -- and be buried in the same tomb in which the remains are deposited which once shrouded a spirit of no common mold -- a spirit actuated by the noblest principles of philanthropy, piety, and faith.

We claim not for Dr. Coke perfection or infallibility of judgment; but we do claim for him an unsullied reputation, a purity of motive, guiding and actuating an extended desire for usefulness to his fellow-men, and which a close and critical inspection of his character and conduct makes to shine out with increased luster and a more enduring brightness. And if the same amount of goodness can be awarded to those who have made this vindication necessary -- if the same apology for merely human weaknesses will serve to set off their virtues in the same conspicuous light -- we shall rejoice in anticipating, by the abounding mercy of God in Christ Jesus, our eternal union with them all, in ascribing honor and glory to Him who hath washed them and us in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God for ever and ever.

There was another very important matter submitted to this General Conference. We have already seen in the preceding chapter, the efforts which were made by Bishop Asbury and most of the annual conferences, to convene a delegated General Conference in 1807, but that the measure was defeated by the vote of the Virginia conference. Not despairing of accomplishing an object so desirable in itself; the subject was presented to this General Conference in the following memorial: --

"Very Dear Brethren: -- We are as one of the seven eyes of the great and increasing body of the Methodist Episcopal Church in these United States, which is composed of about five hundred traveling, and about two thousand local preachers, together with upwards of one hundred and forty thousand members; these, (with our numerous congregations and families, spread over an extent of country more than two thousand miles from one end to the other, amounting, in all probability, to more than one million of souls, which are, directly or remotely, under our pastoral oversight and ministerial charge,) should engage our most sacred attention, and should call into exertion all the wisdom and talents we are possessed of; to perpetuate the unity and prosperity of the whole connection, and to establish such regulations, rules, and form of government, as may, by the blessing of God in Jesus Christ, promote that cause of religion which is more precious to us than riches, honor, or life itself, and be conducive to the salvation of souls, among the generations yet unborn. The fields are white unto harvest before us, and the opening prospect of the great day of glory brightens continually in our view, and we are looking forward with hopeful expectations for the universal spread of scriptural truth and holiness over the habitable globe. Brethren, for what have we labored -- for what have we suffered -- for what have we borne the reproach of Christ, with much long-suffering, with tear: and sorrow -- but to serve the great end and eternal purpose or the grace of God, in the present and everlasting felicity of immortal souls?

"When we take a serious and impartial view of this important subject, and consider the extent of our connection, the number of our preachers, the great inconvenience, expense, and loss of time, that must necessarily result from our present regulations relative to our General Conferences, we are deeply impressed with a thorough conviction that a representative or delegated General Conference, composed of a specific number, on principles of equal representation, from the several annual conferences, would be much more conducive to the prosperity and general unity of the whole body, than the present indefinite and numerous body of ministers, collected together unequally from the various conferences to the great inconvenience of the ministry, and injury of the work of God.

"We therefore present unto you this memorial, requesting that you will adopt the principle of an equal representation from the annual conferences, to form in future a delegated General Conference, and that you will establish such rules and regulations as are necessary to carry the same into effect.

"As we are persuaded that our brethren in general, from a view of the situation and circumstances of the connection, must be convinced, upon mature and impartial reflection, of the propriety and necessity of the measure, we forbear to enumerate the various reasons and arguments which might be urged in support of it. But we do hereby instruct, advise, and request every member who shall go from our conference to the General Conference, to urge, if necessary, every reason and argument in favor of the principle, and to use all their Christian influence to have the same adopted and carried into effect.

"And we also shall and do invite and request our brethren in the several annual conferences which are to sit between this and the General Conference, to join and unite with us in the subject matter of this memorial. We do hereby candidly and openly express our opinion and wish, with the firmest attachment to the unity and prosperity of the connection; hoping and praying that our chief Shepherd and Bishop of our

souls, the Lord Jesus Christ, may direct you in all wisdom, righteousness, brotherly love, and Christian unity.

"We are, dear brethren, in the bonds of gospel ties, most affectionately yours, &c.

"By order and in behalf of the New York conference, without a dissenting vote.

"(Signed) Francis Ward, Sec'y. "Coeyman's Patent, May the 7th, 1807."

This memorial, it seems, had been submitted to several of the annual conferences, and concurred in, as appears by the record, by the New England, Ohio, and South Carolina conferences; and, accordingly, it had been requested, that as full a representation as practicable, should attend the present session of the General Conference, that a full expression of the voice of the several annual conferences should be heard in regard to this measure.

After the memorial was read, it was referred to a committee of two members from each annual conference, chosen by the representatives of each conference from among themselves; and the following members composed the committee: --

New York Conference -- Ezekiel Cooper, John Wilson; New England Conference -- George Pickering, Joshua Soule; Western Conference -- William McKendree, William Burke; South Carolina Conference -- William Phoebus, Josias Randle; Virginia Conference -- Philip Bruce, Jesse Lee; Baltimore Conference -- Stephen G. Roszell, Nelson Reed; Philadelphia Conference -- John McClaskey, Thomas Ware.

On Monday, the 16th, the committee presented the following report, which, after a long debate, was rejected by a vote of 57 for and 64 against it: --

"Whereas, it is of the greatest importance that the doctrine, form of government, and general rules of the United Societies in America be preserved sacred and inviolable and whereas every prudent measure should be taken to preserve, strengthen, and perpetuate the union of the connection:

"Therefore, your committee, upon mature deliberation, have thought it advisable that the third section of the form of Discipline shall be as follows, viz: --

SECTION III "Of the General Conference The General Conference shall be composed of delegates from the annual conferences. The delegates shall be chosen by ballot without debate, in the annual conferences respectively, in the last meeting of conference previous to the sitting of the General Conference. Each annual conference respectively shall have a right to send seven elders, members of their conference, as delegates to the General Conference. Each annual conference shall have a right to send one delegate in addition to the seven, for every ten members belonging to such conference, over and above fifty, so that if there be sixty members they shall send eight; if seventy, they shall send nine, and so on in proportion.

The General Conference shall meet on the first day of May, in the year of our Lord 1812; and thenceforward on the first day of May, once in four years perpetually, at such place or places as shall be fixed on by the General Conference from time to time. At all times when the General Conference is met, it shall take two thirds of the whole number of delegates to form a quorum. One of the general superintendents shall preside in the General Conference; but in case no general superintendent be present, the General Conference shall choose a president pro tem. .

The General Conference shall have full powers to make rules, regulations, and canons for our church, under the following limitations and restrictions, viz: "The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our articles of religion; nor establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine. "They shall not lessen the number of seven delegates from each annual conference, nor allow of a greater number from any annual conference than is provided for in the fourth paragraph of this section.

"They shall not change or alter any part or rule of our government, so as to do away episcopacy, or to destroy the plan of our itinerant general superintendency. "They shall not revoke or change the general rules of the United Societies. "They shall not do away the privileges of our ministers or preachers of trial by a committee, and of an appeal. "Neither shall they appropriate the produce of the Book Concern, or of the Charter Fund, to any purpose other than for the benefit of the traveling, superannuated, supernumerary and worn-out preachers, their wives, widows, and children.

"Provided, nevertheless, that upon the joint recommendation of all the annual conferences, then a majority of two thirds of the General Conference succeeding, shall suffice to alter any of the above restrictions." After discussing this report for one whole day, it was, by a vote of the conference, postponed until the reconsideration of the question respecting the manner in which the presiding elders should thereafter be appointed. After it was decided that they should continue to be appointed as heretofore by the bishops, on Wednesday the 18th, the consideration of the report was resumed, and after some debate the entire report was, as before stated, rejected by a majority of seven votes.

The rejection of this report was a source of much regret and disappointment to most of the older preachers who were present, and particularly to Bishop Asbury, as they clearly saw the necessity of adopting some plan by which the doctrines of the church, its form of government, and its general rules, might be preserved from deterioration, and also by which a more equal representation from the several annual conferences should be secured. These things led to further consultation upon the subject, and it issued finally in the adoption, almost unanimously, of the following regulations and limitations: --

Question Who shall compose the General Conference, and what are the regulations and powers belonging to it?

Answer

The General Conference shall be composed of one member for every five members of each annual conference, to be appointed by seniority or choice, at the discretion of such annual conference; yet so that such representatives shall have traveled four full calendar years from the time they were received on trial by an annual conference, and are in full connection at the time of holding the conference.

The General Conference shall meet on the first day of May, in the year of our Lord 1812, in the city of New York, and thenceforward on the first day of May once in four years perpetually, in such place or places as shall be fixed by the General Conference from time to time; but t

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