
THE
BALTIMORE CONFERENCE:

1844-1866.

BY THE REV. JAMES E. ARMSTRONG,
SECRETARY OF THE CONFERENCE.

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THE mooted question as to the place of beginning of American Methodism can hardly be considered one of sufficient importance to justify protracted discussion. Whether the first planting was by Philip Embury in New York, or by Robert Strawbridge in Maryland, makes but little difference so far as the subsequent events in the progress of the great religious movement are concerned.

Baltimore Methodists are content to rest their claim on the testimony of Bishop Asbury, taken from his Journal (April 30, 1801): "The settlement on Pipe Creek is the richest in the state. Here Mr. Strawbridge *formed the first Society in Maryland—and America.*" But it can be a matter of no possible doubt that the clear eye of Asbury saw in Maryland and Virginia the genial soil where the tree of Methodism would take deepest root, and spread its branches over the entire continent. During the first thirteen years of its planting it had thriven so far that, of the entire membership in the Connection, more than one-half were found in Maryland and Virginia. From 1776 Baltimore became the meeting place of the preachers. The Christmas Conference of 1784 was held there, and until 1840 the larger number of the General Conferences had their seat in the same city. It was Baltimore that sent out the pioneers to plant Methodism in Nova Scotia and New England. From the same center went the heroes into the trackless wilderness of the northwest and to the older settlements of the south, carrying a free gospel and a full salvation.

Perry Hall, the residence of Harry Dorsey Gough, a wealthy Methodist local preacher, near Baltimore, was the favorite resting place of Asbury. Of the ten bishops elected from 1800 to 1844 six were members of the Baltimore Conference at the time of their election, and four of these—George, Roberts, Emory, and Waugh—were "native and to the manner born." It is unquestionably true that Bishop Asbury regarded the type of Methodism which prevailed in Maryland and Virginia

as the nearest approach to Mr. Wesley's ideal; and it is equally true that the leaders at home, as well as the pioneers pushing out to the remotest parts of the country, not only held tenaciously to the original type, but stamped it indelibly upon the societies organized by them. The Baltimore Conference was not only the "mother of Conferences," but was also the purest source whence, during the entire century, have proceeded the doctrines of Wesleyan Arminianism and the Wesleyan polity. On all public and social questions affecting the moral and religious life of her people, particularly that relating to the institution of slavery, she never failed to adhere to the conservative position held until 1860 by the Methodist Episcopal Church. When the Conference boundaries were defined by the General Conference of 1796, not only what is now occupied, but also the northern neck of Virginia, West Virginia extending into Ohio, and Pennsylvania west of the Susquehanna River, were embraced in her territory, containing, in nearly equal proportions, free and slaveholding states. The situation was therefore unlike that of any other Conference. In such a case it was a matter of vital importance to the integrity of Methodism within her borders that she should continue to occupy her well-known position on the subject of slavery which the Church had always held.

To accomplish the true object of her mission she was compelled to keep her traveling preachers free from connection with slavery; and in order to have access to master and slave alike, she must also be above suspicion of sympathy with abolitionism. Difficult and delicate as was the task, the men of 1844 kept step with their noble and honored fathers. They stood firmly, not only for what they believed to be for the best interests of Methodism in their own Conference, but also for what they felt assured would best promote the general welfare. Hence, on the one hand, notwithstanding the complications which occasionally arose by reason of inheritance and of matrimonial alliances, they succeeded in keeping the traveling preachers untrammelled by the institution of slavery. The records from the very beginning show a consistent treatment of all cases that arose, the Conference steadily refusing admission on trial to any applicants who were involved in the difficulty, and dealing faithfully and considerately with those members of

the body who in any way became connected with it. In 1843 the report of five cases of traveling preachers who had become slaveholders was the occasion of the appointment of a committee of five, whose report* so clearly defines the position of the Conference that it may be quoted in full:

Whereas the Baltimore Conference is located in a territory partly slaveholding and partly nonslaveholding; and whereas a preacher who is a slaveholder, and known to be such (no matter under what circumstances), would not be kindly received, and could not make himself useful in the greater proportion of our appointments; and whereas the General Superintendents must sooner or later be under the necessity of stationing the preachers in view of their relation to slavery, thus producing a new and most anomalous state of things among brethren; and whereas the Baltimore Conference occupies an intermediate and central position between the two great divisions of slaveholding states and Conferences on the south, and nonslaveholding states and Conferences on the north and east, it is therefore deemed of vital importance to the interests of Methodism that this Conference firmly maintain the integrity of its character for constancy and consistency unimpaired, retaining and preserving that fair model of Methodism transmitted to us by our fathers, to serve as a beacon light elevated far above the stormy elements of contention and strife, which unhappily are raging around her by most bitter controversies concerning abolition and pro-slavery; and whereas the Discipline of the Church declares that "whenever any traveling preacher becomes an owner of a slave or slaves, by any means, he shall forfeit his ministerial character in our Church, unless he execute, if it be practicable, a legal emancipation of such slaves conformably to the laws of the state in which he lives;" therefore,

Resolved, That the above-named brethren, and all others similarly circumstanced, be, and they hereby are, most affectionately and earnestly urged and required to take measures within the Conference year to free and rid themselves of the relation of master to their slaves.

The five cases were all satisfactorily adjusted, as were all others, with only one exception, the case of F. A. Harding, whose appeal was taken to the General Conference of 1844.

On the other hand, with equal and unvarying unanimity did the Conference resist the aggressive interference of the abolition agitators. In 1836 the declaration was "opposition in every part and particular to the proceedings of the abolitionists," and of determination "to have no communion with any press, by whomsoever conducted, in the interest of the abolition cause." † In 1839 a resolution was unanimously adopted that "the members of the Baltimore Conference are decidedly opposed to the

* Journal, p. 220. † *Idem*, p. 67.

vexed question of abolitionism being agitated in any of the Conferences." * In 1840 the entire body (126) voted against concurrence with the resolutions from the New England Conference on the subject of slavery.† In 1844, on the presentation of the circular from the Genesee Conference, requesting the alteration of the rule on slavery, the vote (148) was unanimous for nonconcurrence. The delegation elected to the General Conference at this session was composed of the foremost men. Alfred Griffith had sat in the General Conference of 1816 with Nelson Reed, George Roszel, Enoch George, Joshua Wells, and Henry Smith; John Bear in 1824 with Soule, Hitt, and Roszel; Henry Slicer, C. B. Tippet, and John Davis had been together in 1832; John A. Collins had already been trained in two General Conferences; T. B. Sargent, N. J. B. Morgan, J. A. Gere, and George Hildt were worthy colleagues. Thomas B. Sargent was elected secretary, and served also on the famous committee of nine that prepared the Plan of Separation. Slicer, Morgan, Tippet, Sargent, Collins, Davis, and Gere voted for separation; Griffith, Bear, and Hildt against it. The only negative vote on the third resolution, recommending the division of the property, was that of Alfred Griffith. It was clearly understood that the brethren who voted in the negative were influenced simply by their intense desire to avoid any seeming sanction of disruption. Then came the "tug of war." Baltimore was not included as a Conference in the invitation to take part in the Louisville Convention of 1846, "but for other and weightier reasons" declined to send delegates to that Convention.‡ Had the Baltimore Conference adhered to the Church in the South in 1845, her Pennsylvania territory would have unquestionably gone, with its twenty-five thousand members, to the Methodist Episcopal Church. But a more disastrous result would have followed—the convulsion of her entire territory in Maryland and Virginia. The preachers knew the sentiment of their people, and the result proved it. Of course there was defection. The northern neck of Virginia, embracing the counties of King George, Westmoreland, Richmond, and Lancaster, went South by vote in a body carrying a membership of about one thousand, and became a part of the Virginia Conference. But that was the sole infraction of her territory. Maryland sustained

* Journal, p. 130. † *Idem*, p. 148. ‡ *Idem*, p. 343.

no loss save one small society near Baltimore. The conflict was more serious in that part of Virginia lying south of the Potomac River and east of the Blue Ridge. Societies were divided and set up against each other, and Methodism received great damage. It is fair to presume that the loss of six thousand nine hundred and fifty-nine members from 1844 to 1848 did not represent a transfer of that number from one great division of Methodists to the other, but that a large proportion was an actual loss to Methodism, many seeking rest and quiet in other communions. But who could estimate the loss to the Connection had the Conference taken the opposite course? Her action in 1846 was simply the sequel of her entire previous history. No unbiased reader can consider it without the deepest conviction that it was the outcome of the most earnest desire to pursue a consistent course for the conservation and protection of the flock which the Great Shepherd had placed under her keeping. The adherence to the Methodist Episcopal Church was given with a distinct and emphatic condition: "*It is determined not to hold connection with any ecclesiastical body that shall make nonslaveholding a condition of membership in the Church,** but to stand by and maintain the Discipline as it is." This action, by a unanimous vote of one hundred and eighty-eight, was not intended to serve a temporary purpose. The uniform position of the Conference "to keep the traveling preachers in its own body free from slavery" was consonant with "its well-known and established utterances" in reference to a test of membership in the Church which neither Christ, his apostles, nor John Wesley had required. The Discipline, as it had been for more than a half century in respect to this particular question, was still to be the guiding star for all time to come. If such radical change as was threatened should come, they would stand ready to maintain, at any cost, their adherence to the word of God, and their fealty to the flock they had served so long and faithfully. "May we not," they say in their pastoral address, "safely wait for the development of such alteration of the Discipline" as had been predicted? "Will not the Baltimore Conference be as competent to take the necessary measures which such a crisis might require at any future time as it is now?"

* Italics in the Journal of 1846.

For four years the defection continued. Then the tide turned; and from year to year the growth was steady, until, in 1855, the numbers went beyond those of 1844, reaching an aggregate of seventy-six thousand one hundred and fifty-five. Then came the necessity, arising from the size of the body, for division, and the East Baltimore Conference was set off, embracing the Pennsylvania territory, upper Maryland, and a part of Baltimore city. At the same time the shadow of impending evil began to darken the sky. The General Conference of 1856 gave token of the coming storm which burst in all its fury on the border in 1860. The character of the discussions on the subject of slavery in 1856 at the General Conference held in Indianapolis had deepened the fears of the preachers and renewed the excitement in the popular mind throughout the Conference territory. At the session of 1860, in Winchester, Va., memorials from southwestern Virginia were presented, urging decisive action upon the Conference. The report of the committee, which was unanimously adopted, declared that "our whole Church in the bounds of our Conference has our SOLEMN PLEDGE, and our brethren in the North are well acquainted with our oft-repeated declaration. . . . The Conference disclaims having the least sympathy with abolitionism. On the contrary, we are determined not to have connection with an ecclesiastical body that makes nonslaveholding a condition of membership in the Church, and we are opposed to any inquisition upon the motives underlying the relation of master and slave. No action of the General Conference can influence us to violate our principles and practice as indicated in the foregoing declaration, but we will stand by the rights of our people to the last extremity."

In less than three months after the adjournment of the Conference the fatal blow fell. The General Conference of 1860 at Buffalo, N. Y., inserted a new chapter in the Discipline, virtually making the unscriptural test of membership. Then it was that preachers and laymen in every part of the Conference met together and adopted, with a unanimity rarely witnessed, the most earnest and positive appeals to the Annual Conference to fulfill its pledges. In every issue of the *Baltimore Christian Advocate* resolutions were published by Dr. Bond from Quarterly Conferences in Maryland and Virginia, declaring that the

time had arrived for promised action. The laymen of Baltimore, and from various parts of the Conference territory, one hundred and eighteen in number, met in convention in Eutaw Church, Baltimore, December 5, 1860. After reciting the grievances and the unanimous action of the Conference in relation to them, the convention passed resolutions asking the Conference "to redeem the pledges given from time to time to our people, and sunder a connection now merely nominal, which is full of strife, and positively death to all hopes of peace or the advancement of Christianity in our midst." The Hon. John S. Berry (president of the convention), the Hon. J. Armistead Carter, Judge Hugh Lenox Bond, W. P. Conway, Esq., C. B. Tebbs, Esq., W. R. Woodward, Esq., and J. C. Harkness, Esq., were appointed a committee to present their petition to the ensuing Conference.* The seven presiding elders, together with the same number of representative laymen, called a laymen's convention composed of delegates from all the districts of the Conference, to meet at Staunton, Va., at the time of the Conference session, and to express the views of the Church in a respectful memorial. The Conference was ready to fulfill its repeated declarations, and, in the absence of any formal request, would doubtless have done so. They received the resolutions from the lay brethren as a full indorsement of their proposed action.

Staunton, Va., was, on the 13th of March, 1861, the place of an assemblage unique in the history of Methodism. One hundred and sixty preachers, and as many laymen, made a heavy strain on the hospitality of the little mountain city. But the generous people were equal to the emergency. Every available home in all the Churches was open, and the hearts of all beat in truest sympathy and brotherly love for a sister Church so sorely bestead. The laymen were considerate, remaining in session only long enough to reach a deliberate conclusion, urging the Conference to immediate and decisive action, and then adjourned.

Not so with the Conference. The history of a century lay behind them. Fidelity to that history gave to this critical hour a meaning for them of weighty responsibility. A vital principle was involved. It lay at the very basis of all true

* Journal, 1860.

Christian life. Not a single man among them questioned that principle. They were a unit in asserting it. The only question with them was the mode of its application. They must take time for deliberation. There must be calm discussion. They all believed the act of the General Conference to be subversive of the dearest rights of Christian men. Opinions differed as to what was best to be done, and the divergence was serious. Plans were presented, all looking to the same end, but there was no factional division. The motives of none were impugned. The debates were singularly free from personalities. The great leaders of 1844 were for the most part absent. Three of them had gone to join the fathers who had passed away, and five were in the East Baltimore Conference. Alfred Griffith, N. J. B. Morgan, Norval Wilson, William Hamilton, William B. Edwards, E. R. Veitch, David Thomas, L. F. Morgan, J. S. Martin, John Lanahan, W. G. Eggleston, S. S. Roszel, S. Register, and J. H. Waugh were among the leaders in debate and action.

Bishop Scott presided. No situation could have been more trying. It was one without precedent. Separation was evidently a foregone conclusion, and the temper of the Conference could not be misunderstood. But the bishop proved equal to the occasion, and at the close of the session there was unanimous concurrence in rendering him due praise for "ability, impartiality, and kindness." Grave in manner, dignified in bearing, conciliatory in spirit, and prudent in administration, he successfully held the body to its course without compromising his high official position or committing himself to any action that might have subjected him to animadversion by the chief tribunal of his Church. Criticised, indeed, he was by the more radical editors and others in the far north, but his official acts at the Conference in Staunton, 1861, have never, so far as we have known, been questioned by his General Conference. No less than fourteen questions of law bearing on the new chapter were proposed. He discovered the utmost tact in his replies. The discussion on the various plans presented took a wide range, but its real issue centered on the alternative of immediate separation, or delay with a view of securing the coöperation of the border Conferences in the proposed action. A committee of fifteen was appointed on the sixth day of the session

so consider the memorials that had been presented. They met, and finally reported that they could not agree. Then a "Peace Conference" of six was ordered, who the same day reported, recommending "that the majority pass such plan as in their judgment may be considered best calculated to meet the necessities under which we are placed, without the concurrence of the minority; that the minority be permitted to enter protest upon the Journal without opposition from the majority, and that both parties receive their appointments in the usual way from the bishop; that all controversy during the year be prohibited, and that the Conference disclaims any imputation of the motives of the brethren who feel constrained to protest against the action of the majority as to the soundness of their views on the subject of slavery, and their fidelity to the interests and peace of this Conference."* This paper was adopted unanimously, and the doxology was sung with grateful rejoicing.

On Saturday, March 23, the tenth day of the session, the final action was taken. The throng which had waited daily on the discussions now filled every available space. The protest expressing the sense and judgment of the Conference against the action of the General Conference was adopted. Then followed the proposition of N. Wilson, containing this declaration: "That we will not longer submit to the jurisdiction of said General Conference, but declare ourselves separate and independent of it." On the motion to adopt, Bishop Scott declined to put the question to the Conference, or to resign the chair. The excitement became intense. Members rose to their feet and crowded to the front. "On motion of N. Wilson, the secretary of the Conference was called upon to put the question to vote, and the secretary [Rev. John S. Martin] responded to the call."† An amendment, offered by S. Regester, adding to the resolution the sentence, "Still claiming to be, notwithstanding, an integral part of the Methodist Episcopal Church," was adopted. Upon a call of ayes and noes, the question prevailed by a vote of 87 ayes; no, 1; declined to vote, 41; reserved their votes, 3.‡ The subsequent action looked to a possible convention of Conferences nonconcurring in the action of the General Conference during the year, into which the

* Journal, 1861. † *Idem.* ‡ *Idem.*

Conference pledged itself not to enter without guarantees of "disavowal of the act of the General Conference, and the most thorough and satisfactory redress."

Within one month from the close of this eventful session of the Baltimore Conference the civil strife began. The military lines were drawn through the heart of the Conference territory, which became the seat of war during the entire period of its continuance, and all concert of action was hindered. But the Conference representing the majority held its sessions at the regular time every year, preserved intact its minute business, and considered carefully every matter that could conserve its interests, and promote the welfare of the Church.

At Harrisonburg, Va., March 14, 1862, about forty preachers met in Conference. E. R. Veitch was elected president, and J. S. Martin secretary. They reaffirmed the action of the Conference in 1861, pursued, as far as practicable, the regular order of business, and received the appointments at the hand of the president, no other changes being made than those absolutely necessary.

On the 19th of March, 1863, the Conference met at Churchville, Va., reëlecting E. R. Veitch president. Forty-three members were present. They unanimously agreed "that the failure of the Annual Conferences, during the time limited by the Conference in 1861, to comply with the conditions of reunion, gave final force to the act of separation; and that, inasmuch as the minority had, in their protest recorded in the Journal of 1861, agreed with the majority as to the evils entailed by the action of the General Conference of 1860," differing "*only* as to the *mode* of obtaining relief," assuring "our people that by the tone of response by the sympathizing Conferences our course at the next session shall be controlled," etc., they were now placed on the same ground with the majority. Without regard, however, to any course the minority might pursue, they maintained that "the action of the majority in 1861 was the action of the Conference," and that "all members of that body, wherever located, who adhere to and abide by the action at Staunton in 1861, constitute the active portion of the Baltimore Conference."

These declarations were reaffirmed at the Conference held at Bridgewater, Va., in 1864, presided over by the venerable Norval Wilson. They asserted that "we are a separate, distinct,

and independent Church within ourselves, and are the only legally constituted and organized representatives of the Baltimore Annual Conference, and in nowise complicated or responsible for the acts of the so-called Baltimore Conference holden north of the Potomac River, and that we are wholly free from and independent of the jurisdiction and authority of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the North."*

The next session of the Conference was held in Salem, Va., March, 1865. The session was distinguished by the ordination, by Bishop Early, of the candidates who had been elected to deacon's and elder's orders. The next month the war ended. Then to our tried and suffering preachers came the severest test of their fidelity to principle. What should they do in this darkest hour? Their territory in Virginia laid waste, their people reduced to poverty and entirely disheartened, the conditions in Maryland so radically changed by military and political control that not only was there the absolute loss of Church property and Conference funds, but the corresponding loss of membership made the prospect gloomy in the extreme. But the great body of our people were true to the polity of Methodism—namely, the episcopacy, the itinerancy, and the connec-tional system. Hence their eyes turned to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The call by their bishops during the summer of 1865 for a meeting of the General Conference in May, 1866, crystallized sentiment within the bounds of the Baltimore Conference.

When the Annual Conference assembled in Alexandria, Va., February 7, 1866, one hundred and eight preachers were enrolled. Of these, seventy-six had been present in 1861 at Staunton, and nine came from the East Baltimore Conference. The remaining number were those who had been admitted during the war or during the session of the Conference in 1866. Rev. Norval Wilson was elected president, and Rev. John S. Martin secretary. On the second day of the session the Conference, upon a call of ayes and noes, by a vote of eighty ayes unanimously adopted the following preamble and resolution:

Whereas the regular annual sessions, in the strictest sense thereof, of this Conference were prevented for several years by the existence of civil war in the country, so that it was impossible for us earlier to complete the

* Journals. 1863, 1864.

course of action inaugurated by this body at its session held in Staunton in 1861; and preferring, as we do, the connectional principle of Church government, including episcopacy as an element thereof; and believing that any further continuance of Conference independency would be prejudicial to the efficient working of our itinerant system; and whereas the animus and practice of the Methodist Episcopal Church are such as to make it improper for us to resume our submission to the said Church; and the organization, doctrine, and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, fully according with our own views of what constitutes a scriptural branch of the Church of Christ; therefore,

Resolved, by the Baltimore Conference, in Conference assembled, That, in pursuance of the action of this body in 1861, we do hereby unite with and adhere to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and do now, through the president of this Conference, invite Bishop Early to recognize us officially, and preside over us at our present session.*

Bishop Early was introduced, and, upon invitation by the president, N. Wilson, took the chair, presided during the session, and at the close announced the appointments. The pastoral address embodies so fully the aim and spirit of the Conference that it may not be out of place to quote its most forcible and pertinent passages:

The Baltimore Conference has proposed ecclesiastical union with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the proposal has been frankly accepted, so far as it could be without the action of the General Conference of that great Methodist body.

An act so important would require long and detailed explanation to others; it needs little to you. You will see in it the logical conclusion of enforced circumstances, the consistent conduct of honest men, and the spiritual fruit of Christ's religion. To you this change of relation will appear, as it is, not the beginning, but the ending, of the new and unknown way by which God has been pleased to lead us away from the domination of politico-ecclesiastical confederations to the liberty of Church fellowship, the love of the brethren, and the consciences of those to whom he would make us the messengers of salvation. To the public, time would fail to give the information which they should have. But many will inquire of you, and through you we will put one argument to that common sense which rarely fails in due time to ascertain and support the good and the true.

The single argument of our sincerity is that all the world could give—much that it has given us—solicited us to a conduct opposite to that which we have chosen. By submitting to the Northern Methodist authorities, we would have entered into as much rest as the Demases who forsake Jesus for the present world. Our churches would not only be secured to us, but exuberant bounty would repair them from the injuries of war, and fill them with everything necessary for worship—except the presence of the Lord. Missionary money, ostensibly appropriated for the Christianization of the South, would be the gracious reward of our conversion.

*Journal, 1866.

By union with the Northern Church we save everything but our honor; by going South we save nothing else. The Church, South, has no material benefit to give us. They are, as we are, very poor. A partnership with them is a communion of distress, a fellowship of suffering. Now we ask men to explain our conduct upon any other principles than those whose inspiration comes from the things that are invisible and eternal. The reply, of course, will be that political sympathies determined us; but that accusation is false. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, is, in this respect, a noble monument of Christian consistency. Neither her General Conference, nor her Annual Conferences, nor her bishops have presumed in the name of God to cheer on resistance to the Federal Union. Not one word of that Church has committed her as a party to secular strife. It was her aim to hold up the cross in the midst of the war of human passions, to keep a living coal on the altar of God amidst the very floods of revolutionary deluge, and to exalt the crown of Christ the higher as popular idols were lifted up. This we, in our lot, ever essayed to do. We believe that Christ's kingdom is not of this world. Evil, and only evil, has ever come from every ecclesiastical departure from this fundamental truth. We believe that from this truth the Northern Church has gone away; the Southern Church has not. We believe that one is on the way to secularization; the other to spirituality and usefulness. We believe that one is expecting a mixed success from money and material force; the other comes out of the wilderness leaning only on Christ, and her eye is single. We have made our choice with a unanimity which is itself a demonstration of its propriety, and now we come to you. Will you receive us as before in your confidence and love?

The answer to this appeal lies all along the thirty years that have succeeded this memorable epoch in the history of the Baltimore Conference.

