

The Memorable Conference of 1788

Rev. George W. Lybrand (1888)

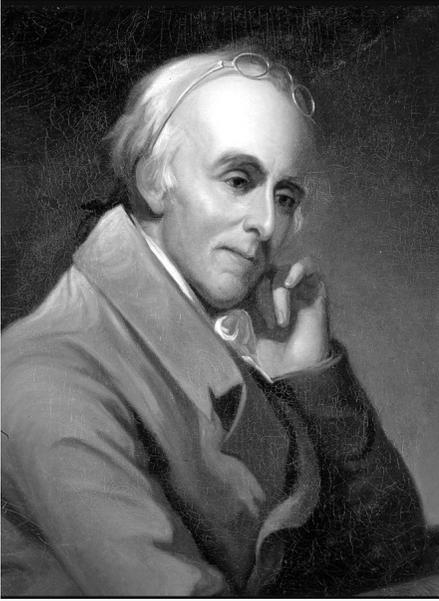
Editor's note: The following article appeared in the Philadelphia Methodist of July 28, 1888, and was prepared by conference historian, George Lybrand. It documents that a conference was held in Philadelphia in 1788, despite the fact that the official records do not show it. This was important because the Philadelphia Conference had decided to begin numbering its sessions based on a conference held within its geographic bounds that year.

No reference to the meeting of this conference is made in the published *Minutes of Conferences*. For information that such a conference was held we are indebted to *Asbury's Journal*, the life of Rev. Jesse Lee and the diary of the Rev. Ezekiel Cooper (*Light on Early Methodism*, by George A. Phoebus, DD). But for these invaluable records of early Methodism we would be ignorant of the fact that such a conference was held, yet it was a memorable Conference. I quote from *Asbury's Journal*:

Pennsylvania, Sunday, September 21, 1788. I preached with some satisfaction morning and evening in Philadelphia. On Monday our Conference began, and held until Friday, 26. Saturday, 27, we left the city.²¹

Rev. Jesse Lee was in attendance at this conference. Mr. Asbury earnestly desired him to receive ordination. He commenced to travel in 1783, but was not ordained until 1790. His name appears this year in the list of elders. His biographer says it is in several respects an interesting fact, that during the session of this conference the celebrated Dr. Rush visited it and delivered an earnest and animated address on the use of ardent spirits, taking the broad ground then so strongly occupied by the conference, and since so signally taken and maintained by the temperance reformation, that total abstinence is no less the demand of our nature than it is the rule of our safety. He insisted that allowable cases requiring their uses were very few and seldom occurring, and when necessary but very little ought in any case to be used, and he be-

²¹ Clark, *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, I:580.



Dr. Benjamin Rush (1746-1813)

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 this, Bishop Asbury, the Rev. Dr. McGaw, “a Church clergyman,”<sup>23</sup> and Mr. Cooper dined with Mr. Fitzgerald. The Conference was convened again at three o’clock PM, when Drs. Rush and Clarkson met with the preachers, by invitation, to express their sentiments respecting the effect of spirituous liquors upon those that drink them. In describing this meeting Mr. Cooper says:

At three o’clock the conference met, and Dr. Rush and Dr. Clarkson met us, in order to give their sentiments respecting the effects of spirituous liquors. They bore a great testimony against it, judging that spirituous liquors never did any good, except in a very few cases, but that they were the greatest poison to both body and soul of anything we had in our land. Dr. Rush said he found, by observation, that a great many disorders were principally created by the use of spirits. He further said that he, for some time, had had the

sought the conference to use their influence in trying to put a stop to the use as well as to the abuse of ardent spirits. It was a noble effort of a noble philanthropist. It had the effect of producing fear where great caution had long existed.<sup>22</sup>

From the diary of Rev. Ezekiel Cooper: “The session of the Philadelphia Conference was held in that city on the 23rd day of September, 1788.” It was attended by Mr. Cooper, though he was too unwell to take an active part in its deliberations. On Thursday, the third day of the session, the ordination sermon was preached. Four persons were ordained, and the Lord’s Supper was administered. After

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<sup>22</sup>Lybrand is citing Leroy M. Lee, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Jesse Lee* (Louisville: John Early, 1848), 211.

<sup>23</sup>That would be Rev. Samuel McGaw (1735-1812), rector of Philadelphia’s St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, 1781-1812.

care of the mad people, and had discovered that two-fifths of them were brought into their madness by the use of spirits. He judged it much the best not to use them at all.<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Rush was a member of the Continental Congress. He advocated and signed the Declaration of Independence. In 1785, he planned the Philadelphia Dispensary, the first in the United States. He was so successful in the treatment of the yellow fever in 1793 that he was believed to have saved the lives of 6,000 persons. His body is interred in the burial ground attached to Christ Church, Second Street below Arch, with this inscription on the monument: "Dr. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence, died April 9, 1813, aged 68 years." "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" (Matthew 25:23). Dr. Rush wrote and published a pamphlet of 50 pages, entitled *An Inquiry on the Effect of Ardent Spirits*.

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<sup>24</sup>George A. Phoebus, *Beams of Light On Early Methodism in America: Chiefly Drawn from the Diary, Letters, Manuscripts, Documents and Original Tracts of Ezekiel Cooper* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1887), 84.