Interview with President William McKinley
by General James Rusling
January 22, 1903

Very interesting and appropriate to the second celebration of President McKinley's birthday since his martyrdom, is the following account of an interview with the late President.

It was my good fortune to be present at a memorable interview with President McKinley, at the White House, Washington, D.C., on Tuesday, Nov. 21, 1899, and at the request of many friends I beg to give the facts as follows:

The General Missionary Committee of the Methodist Episcopal Church had met in Washington the previous week, and was still in session there. The President had given us a handsome reception at the White House, assisted by his Cabinet and their wives, and Admiral Dewey and his wife, and a committee was appointed to draft a resolution expressive of our thanks for his courtesy, and present the same to him. The committee consisted of Bishops Bowman and Hurst, Drs. Upham and Buckley, and myself, and it fell to my lot to write said resolution, which was submitted to the other members for criticism, few changes being made. We chose Dr. Upham as our chairman, and repaired to the White House by appointment on said day, where we were received by the President in his private office.

His desk was covered with books and papers, and evidently he had been busily engaged on his message or in official correspondence, when we were ushered in. But he laid everything aside, and rising stood at his desk while Dr. Upham addressed him, with his usual felicity, stating the object of our visit and reading said resolution. The President replied briefly, and then as we were about to depart added:
"Gentlemen, just a moment. I have something I would like to say. And, first, just a word with you, esteemed Bishops. Last winter Congress increased the army by several regiments, but provided no chaplains for them. Now I believe in army chaplains, and in my next message am going to recommend that chaplains be authorized for all these new regiments; and I want the Methodist Church to have its fair share of these, but no more; and I want the very best men for these chaplaincies I can get. Now won't you help me out with these chaplains? I don't want any man under thirty years, nor over fifty years. No untried preacher. No worn-out preacher. But able-bodied, good chaplains. Now can't you Bishops devise some plan to give me good candidates? The Catholics manage to do that. When one of their men comes before me he has passed what is really a thorough Civil Service examination, and a moral and physical examination as well, and is indorsed by his responsible bishop and archbishop; and when I appoint him I know what I am doing, and get a good chaplain as a rule.

"But some time ago I appointed a Methodist chaplain, who came to me with letters and recommendations from half a dozen presiding elders, doctors of divinity, etc., as well as members of Congress and senators, and recently they have had to court-martial him for various misconduct, and I suppose we shall have to cashier him—greatly to my regret as a brother Methodist. Now I appeal to you, beloved Bishops, cannot you save me from such a thing hereafter? Why can't we arrange so that every Methodist application shall first be referred to your board or a committee of your board, and approved? And then I shall know where I stand when I appoint a Methodist chaplain."

Bishops Bowman and Hurst assented to this—the rest concurring—and we turned to leave. But again President McKinley earnestly said:

"Hold a moment longer! Not quite yet, gentlemen! Before you go I would like to say just a word about the Philippine business. I have been criticised a good deal about the Philippines, but don't
deserve it. The truth is I didn't want the Philippines, and when they came to us, as a gift from the gods, I did not know what to do with them. When the Spanish war broke out Dewey was at Hongkong, and I ordered him to go to Manila and to capture or destroy the Spanish fleet, and he had to; because, if defeated, he had no place to refit on that side of the globe, and if the Dons were victorious they would likely cross the Pacific and ravage our Oregon and California coasts. And so he had to destroy the Spanish fleet, and did it! But that was as far as I thought then.

"When next I realized that the Philippines had dropped into our laps I confess I did not know what to do with them. I sought counsel from all sides—Democrats as well as Republicans—but got little help. I thought first we would take only Manila; then Luzon; then other islands perhaps also. I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me this way—I don't know how it was, but it came: (1) That we could not give them back to Spain—that would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France or Germany—our commercial rivals in the Orient—that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government—and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain's was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died. And then I went to bed, and went to sleep, and slept soundly, and the next morning I sent for the chief engineer of the War Department (our map-maker), and I told him to put the Philippines on the map of the United States [pointing to a large map on the wall of his office], and there they are, and there they will stay while I am President!"
He said all this with great earnestness and impressiveness, as if he wanted us to remember it forever, and as only a great statesman and ruler like George Washington or Abraham Lincoln would have said it. And thinking he was now through, we all said good-bye, and turned again to leave—not wanting to take his time unnecessarily. But again President McKinley exclaimed:

"Don't go yet, please! Just a word more, friends; there's no hurry! It is not likely that we six gentlemen will ever meet again in this world—considering the chances of human life and the changes of time. No, it isn't at all likely! And before we part I just want to say to you, that whatever men may think about me, or not think, I am a Methodist, and nothing but a Methodist—a Christian, and nothing but a Christian. When I was a little child my dear old mother used to take me to Methodist prayer meeting and class meeting. When I grew older I early joined the Methodist Church and Sunday school, and then became a Sunday school teacher, and afterward a Sunday school superintendent, and member of the Epworth League." Here he paused briefly, and solemnly, but presently resumed with much feeling: "And by the blessing of heaven, I mean to live and die, please God, in the faith of my mother!"

And then, indeed, we said good-bye, and shaking hands all around finally departed—never to meet again on this planet. But let me cast this passing tribute as a wreath of roses upon his grave, and place this record here to his credit forever: We Americans are certainly fortunate in our great ideals and great Presidents.

It goes without saying that I was deeply impressed by this interview, and have often referred to it since both publicly and privately. Some other things were spoken of, but these three were the chief things, and I have given much of the President's language (ipsissima verba substantially), as I verily believe. It is submitted to the reader, and the men and times to come, as the very truth of passing American history.
Trenton, N.J.

[It should be added that General Rusling was appointed to draft the resolution presented to President McKinley on that occasion, which, however, was submitted to the other members for criticism, few changes being made.

The conversation was quite general for a few minutes before the President requested the committee, as it was about to depart, to remain a few moments, during which several things were said sufficient to form the materials for another interesting account.

The account given by General Rusling on the important subjects mentioned is substantially correct, as much so as any conversation could be made unless every word were taken down stenographically.

Concerning what President McKinley said with respect to army chaplains, we asked him on that occasion whether he would authorize the publication of his remarks in The Christian Advocate, and he said that he would do so.

In addition to what is above reported of his remarks upon the Philippine Islands, President McKinley placed in our hands and allowed us to read the original instructions given to the commission for guidance in making a final settlement with the Spanish government. These instructions, which had not been made public at that time, made a profound impression upon the committee.

It has been the good fortune of General Rusling to be present at two important conversations, the first being the famous one which President Lincoln had with General Sickles, about which as the result of various interviews of General Rusling and General Sickles there was much discussion, resulting in substantial agreement. The other was this, on which there will be no disagreement among the five who were addressed by President McKinley on that occasion.—[Editor Christian Advocate.]
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