

FRANCIS ASBURY PROPHETIC ITINERANT AND DESIGNER OF AMERICAN METHODISM

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On the eve of the fourth of July, 1971, began the five-year celebration of the two-hundredth anniversary of our birth as a nation. Presumably the climax will come at a big national birthday party on July 4, 1976.

President Richard M. Nixon, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, and Speaker of the House of Representatives Carl Albert were the spokesmen on this inaugural occasion. An army choir sang "America the Beautiful," "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and "The Star-Spangled Banner." The program was conducted from the Archives Building on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D. C., where the great documents of our history are preserved. The three speeches were sober, judicious, and provided admonitions for our citizenry which, if heeded, will help to preserve as well as improve the nation's future. I found the occasion interesting and to a degree even inspiring. It was intensely patriotic, yet not offensively so, for its dignity and emotional restraint conveyed to me a sense of the abiding nobility of the ideals and basic purposes of our national life.

I decided, as my way of observing the fourth of July, to read, on the next afternoon, what Asbury had written in his journal for the year 1776. I wondered what this fourth of July might have looked like to a contemporary. I was curious about the whole year of 1776 as the total context for this red-letter day in history. I knew how careful Asbury was about keeping up with events through the daily

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1. *Journal*, September 9, 1776, Vol. I, p. 199, I have used: *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*. Ed. Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jack S. Payton, London: Epworth Press. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

entries in his journal. But you can imagine how surprised and disappointed I was to find that the fourth of July, 1776, was omitted. He made an entry in his journal on Friday, July the eleventh. But for the twelve days previous there is nothing at all.

News travelled slowly in those days. Though Asbury was in Maryland, close by Philadelphia, when the fourth of July came, there was no way for him to have heard immediately what our Founding Fathers did on that momentous day. Yet his meticulous journal winds its weary way, like the man who penned it, to December nineteenth, 1776, and still has no mention whatever of what happened in Philadelphia on July fourth. Was it that Asbury never heard? Not likely, for he heard most everything else. He kept well abreast of the military events; at least he knew enough about them to worry over them. Was he unpatriotic, still enough of an ardent Britisher to support crown over colony, and therefore preferred silence to salute about an event such as independence? To assume this to be the explanation is to be unfair to Asbury, for the only criticism I can find he made in writing of Mr. Wesley between 1771 and 1776 is the criticism of his attitude toward the Americans in their revolt against England. While he was in Pennsylvania he wrote in his journal: "I also received an affectionate letter from Mr. Wesley, and am truly sorry that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America—However, it discovers Mr. Wesley's conscientious attachment to the government under which he lived. Had he been a subject of America, no doubt he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American Cause."² Was Asbury just careless and indifferent, too preoccupied with what he was about at the moment to notice what was taking place about him? Perhaps there was some of this in his failure to record his thoughts on the events for which the fourth of July stood. This does not mean that in disposition Asbury was naturally indifferent, lackadaisical, or incapable of close observation. He had keen insight into most everything to which he gave attention. It means simply that he was indifferent to some things because at the time of their occurrence he was preoccupied with something else.

Asbury opposed war. Anything that promoted the conflict between England and the colonies was anathema to him, no matter

2. *Journal*, March 19, 1776, Vol. I, 181.

from what side it came. He feared many had already “so imbibed a martial spirit that they had lost the spirit of pure undefiled religion.”³ Norfolk, in Virginia, which he thought when he first visited it was excruciatingly hot, a heat he had never known in England,⁴ but which, when he had to leave, he admitted had pleased him more than any other place he had ever been,⁵ was burnt to the ground by order of the governor.⁶ “But alas!” he opined, “We hear of bloodshed and slaughter, many immortal souls are driven to eternity by the bloody sword. This is a grief to my soul! Lord, scatter them that delight in war, and thirst for human blood! It is well for the righteous that this is not their home. No: they are blessed with a pacific spirit, and are bound for a kingdom of peace”⁷

In this regard, I am afraid, Asbury did not see where the principles of the Declaration of Independence might well lead. He was blinded by the fury through which men had to go to achieve independence. And frankly, he doubted that it was worth the cost. He was alarmed by the military accounts from Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. His prayer was: May the Lord overrule, “and make all things subservient to the spiritual welfare of his church.”⁸ He used war and rumors of war solely to support his moral and spiritual lessons. When, for example, it was reported that the man-of-war was in the river, and the town was all in commotion, Asbury’s comment was:

“Alas, for fallen man! He fears his fellow creatures, whose breath is in their nostrils, but fears not Him who is able to destroy body and soul in hell. If fire and sword and a small distance can so alarm us, how will poor impenitent sinners be alarmed when they find, by woeful experience, that they must drink the wine of the wrath of God, poured out without mixture?”⁹

He felt his own vocation to be the best of all. And he defined that vocation with exactness. “What a noble and delightful employment

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3. *Journal*, April 23, 1776, Vol. I, 184.
 4. *Journal*, June 29, 1775, Vol. I, 159.
 5. *Journal*, January 24, 1776, Vol. I, 178.
 6. *Journal*, January 10, 1776, Vol. I, 176.
 7. *Journal*, September 5, 1776, Vol. I. 198–199
 8. *Journal*, April 30, 1775, Vol. I, 155.
 9. *Journal*, March 8, 1776, Vol. I, 180.

is ours, to be nursing immortal souls for realms of eternal glory.”¹⁰ He entrusted politics, the organization of society, and the affairs of state to others. He was able in the year 1776 to testify that his soul “was fixed on God as on its centre, though in the midst of tumult.

Glory to God! I can leave all the little affairs of this confused world to those men to whose province they pertain; and can comfortably go on in my proper business of instrumentally saving my own soul and those that hear me.”¹¹

Therefore, nowhere in his journal for the year 1776 do we find any mention whatever of the Continental Congress, the representatives there of the thirteen colonies, the Declaration of Independence, or the hope of a free and independent America. Instead, what we hear about are sin and sinners, congregations and revivals, “melting times” for the human heart, and the glorious salvation of people through the preached word.

Yet Asbury, who omits many of the affairs with which today his church is so greatly concerned, and mentions so much that we appear to have forgotten, is styled “the prophetic itinerant” and is reckoned by all to be “the designer of American Methodism” How can this have happened?

Any student of ecclesiastical history over any wide range of time and broad stretch of geography knows that a reciprocal process has marked the relationship of the church to the world and of the world to the church. Whenever anything has happened positively and constructively between the two, the church has influenced the world, and likewise, to an extent at least, the world has influenced the church. Christianity converted pagan Rome, and in doing so Christians discarded the speech and dress of oriental Jewery and adopted that of the society in which they were then living and working.

Asbury was more American than he himself realized. By taking no public notice of American institutions and social functions and perhaps being honestly unaware of their influence on him, he none the less shaped his movement in keeping with their demands. For example, he graciously accepted the Sunday Service with all its ritualistic details from Mr. Wesley at the hands of Dr. Coke only to discard it on the

10. *Journal*, December 11, 1775, Vol. I, 170.

11. *Journal*, March 26, 1776, Vol. I, 182.

frontier and put in its place the ready language of the people through spontaneous prayers and exciting testimonies. He called himself "Bishop" and indeed conducted himself as one just as surely as a mediaeval prelate and an Anglical Lord, but he gave up the vestments when Jesse Lee poked fun at his long black gown and little white bands. But most important of all, he showed without equivocation that he was truly American and knew the real meaning of the Declaration of Independence when at the Christmas Conference of 1784 he refused to allow himself to be consecrated for the General Superintendency until he had been elected to that office by the brethren.

President Nixon on the eve of the Fourth of July, 1971, quoted from one of the documents of our history that government is derived from the consent of the governed. Asbury accepted and illustrated this American principle for the Methodist Church just as surely and completely as our forefathers did for this nation. That is a part of the sociological reason why Methodism was the fastest growing religious movement and the Methodist Episcopal and Methodist Episcopal Church, South, were the most influential churches throughout most of American history. The other part of the same reason, for which Asbury also was responsible, is our connectional system, centralized, powerful, and effective, for it corresponds with a strong federalized republican government in which the executive branch has the authority to carry out its responsibilities. These two aspects of our church are superlative examples of the influence of the American Society on the Methodist Church and the Church's ability to adjust to her world. This new book by a man who served as senior editor of *Reader's Digest* entitled *Organizing to Beat the Devil, Methodists in the Making of America*¹² shows to even the superficial reader that the expanding Methodist Church in the nineteenth century was growing America in microcosm.

Though it is true that Asbury was influenced by his environment and that the church he organized shows unmistakably the impact of the world of pioneer America on it, at the same time Asbury influenced this country. His new church was one of the most powerful forces in shaping the character of people and the society they designed for themselves and their posterity to live in. This Republic would have been a

12. Charles W. Ferguson. N. Y.: Doubleday, 1971.

different and probably much less desirable country had Francis Asbury not loved it for Christ's sake and worked assiduously for its redemption.

Indeed, his labors compassed the length and breadth of the land, and his itinerary was co-extensive with the bounds of the nation in his day. Every year in his episcopal visitations he visited most every state in the union. It is fascinating to take a map of the country in the early nineteenth century and on that map follow him, mile by mile, on an episcopal journey. In early September he would leave New York City, cross to Wilmington and Philadelphia, go south to Baltimore and thence, often by boat, to Norfolk, to work Virginia. He would go down to North Carolina near Raleigh and work out from there into the deep South visiting South Carolina and Georgia. Then, he would plunge westward into Tennessee and up through what was then the wilderness of Kentucky, returning to eastern Tennessee and over the west side of the Alleghenies through Virginia to Uniontown, Pennsylvania. From there he would cross the Alleghenies into the East by Laurel Hill and Cumberland to Baltimore and New York. From New York he would go up through Connecticut and Massachusetts to Lynn, pass back through the valley of Connecticut to Northampton, and over the Berkshire Hills to Albany. He would then take the Hudson Valley route to New York City, reaching there at the end of August. Thus he would have consumed an entire year in travel.¹³

The pattern was capable of almost infinite variety. It was reliably alike in one aspect, namely, that the Bishop got most everywhere in the span of a year. He had no episcopal headquarters. His office was wherever he happened to be at the time. It was more on the back of a moving horse than anywhere else.

When Wesley's missionary first landed at Philadelphia in 1771, he did not rent a house or hire lodgings in somebody else's home. He made no arrangements for his board either. He just set out riding, stopping for food wherever he might happen to be at meal time and sleeping wherever anyone would give him shelter when night fell. He took to the Long Road when he first reached America, and he was still on it forty-five years later when his last host Death reached him to invite him to his permanent home in heaven. He did not especially enjoy

13. A sample of this, with modifications made in relation to other years, is his itinerary for the period of September, 1791, through August, 1792. *Journal*, Vol. I, 693-728.

travel. It was hard on him and irksome to him. He confessed in the first year of the nineteenth century: "My soul hath been kept in quiet peace; but I feel the effects of riding a stiff, aged, failing horse, with a sore back, and my saddle is old and worn."¹⁴ Yet he never showed any disposition to discontinue travelling. "I have travelled so much," he said, "that it seems like confinement to rest one day; I hope I shall travel as long as I live; Travelling is my health, life, and all, for soul and body." "I am always on the wing," he explained, "but it is for God." In his annual travels he exceeded even Mr. Wesley, but then his territory was geographically larger and his work more extensive. A stranger met Asbury on the plains of Ohio and asked him where he was from. Asbury replied, "From Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, or almost any place you please."¹⁵ The man to whom he replied no doubt thought he was joking, but we know now that he was telling the straight truth. "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head."

Saint Paul said that he knew how both to be abased and to abound. Francis Asbury did too. He had a few nice homes which he delighted to visit. He was entertained with reverential respect at Perry Hall, near Baltimore, one of the most elegant dwellings in rural America. The Governor's mansion was open to him in the state of New York and in Ohio as well. Richard Bassett welcomed him in Delaware, and General Russell's wife, who was the sister of Patrick Henry, gave him hospitality in the West Virginia Heights. He found that Freeborn Garrettson's home on the Hudson River was always true to its name of "Traveller's Rest." It was that to him, and he loved it as Jesus must have loved the home of Martha and Mary at Bethany. There were simple places, too, where he found solace and strength. The Widow Boone's was one of them. Her family had been entertaining Methodist preachers for six and twenty years.¹⁶

But most of the time the Bishop was crowded into a one-room cabin where the family carried on its entire indoor life twenty-four hours in the day. It was kitchen, parlor, and bedroom—all three in one. English people love privacy. Asbury never got over this phase of old-

14. *Journal*, November 29, 1800, Vol. II, 267.

15. Ezra Squier Tipple, *Francis Asbury: The Prophet of the Long Road*, N. Y.—Cincinnati: The Methodist Book Concern, 1916. Pp. 158–159.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 173–174.

world life. He missed privacy more than anything else. He would try to arise before the family did in order to do his daily devotions, reading, and meditation alone. It is amazing that despite such conditions he usually got in three hours of private prayer every day¹⁷ and one hundred pages of reading before sundown.¹⁸ When the weather was dry and clear and warm, he would retreat to the woods for his intellectual and spiritual exercises. But in cold and falling weather, he had to isolate himself in thought in the midst of others. Like Saint Ambrose of Milan in the fourth century he could do intellectual work with people crowded all about him.

Not only did he have to share a room with others but sometimes a bed as well. He was of such nature that he contracted every communicable disease about him. He had colds constantly and frequently could not preach because of a "putrid, sore throat." As he came out of primitive Kentucky, he developed a skin disease, presumably the seven-year itch. It did not last that long, however.

He was poor and underpaid and had to accept hospitality wherever he could get it. Though no ecumenist, he stayed once with a Presbyterian minister, detesting all the while his theories of election. He even put up in a tavern because the owner offered him hospitality. That night he gave a lecture to the customers, and the tavern-keeper and his wife were deeply affected and showed some concern about their souls.¹⁹ One Easter Sunday he rode up to a large, inviting-looking house, but when the occupants offered him some brandy to drink he made a hasty retreat.²⁰

Not only did Asbury suffer privation and hardship throughout his ministry, but he risked personal danger and discomfort in the performance of his mission. In the year 1777, while the camp fever raged among the troops,²¹ decimating their military strength,²² Asbury's chaise was shot through on the way to Annapolis, Maryland. A ferryman cursed him after a ride in a flatboat across the Deep River because Asbury had no silver coin to pay him for the ride.²³ He was always in

17. *Journal*, December 8, 1776, Vol. I, 206.

18. *Journal*, July 29, 1776, Vol. I, 195.

19. *Journal*, July 15, 1776, Vol. I, 192.

20. Tipple, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

21. *Journal*, January 7, 1777, Vol. I, 227.

22. *Journal*, February 4, 1777, Vol. I, 230.

23. Tipple, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

danger. Wolves followed him. His old horse fell again and again. He got lost in the swamps of South Carolina at night as he forded the Catawba River; he landed among the rocks and even in a whirlpool. His horse skidded on ice. He and his beast were beaten down by a hail storm. He was pursued by ruffians, and a bullet grazed his head as he road through a forest.²⁴ The dear man was constantly abused as, for example, when "Mr. Chase, not contented with his unkind and abusive letter" kept on "exerting all his unfriendly force," that is influencing as many people as he could against Asbury so that he had to admit, "I feel myself aggrieved."²⁵

Despite this Asbury kept his head above water. He managed himself as well as his career. He was able to travel on horseback as many as three hundred miles in six days and five hundred miles in nine days.²⁶ Indeed, when he was sixty-six years old, he calculated he had travelled five thousand miles per year for the past seven years.²⁷ He was not strong physically. He was almost never well. Sickness and disease plagued his every step. How did he do it? How did this frail man carry out so successfully such a stupendous mission? Asbury himself gives the answer. He wrote early in his career and proved what he had written all the way: "When the mind is reconciled to duties and difficulties, then that which was hard becomes easy."²⁸

The outcome of these prodigious labors was the Methodist Episcopal Church. Despite Mr. Wesley's claim that he alone was the founder of Methodism and that Asbury in America was only the elder brother in a family of many sons,²⁹ there would have been no Methodist Church as we know it without Asbury. Indeed, Mr. Wesley had not intended his followers ever to separate from the Church of England. Only the exigencies created by the war and the birth of the new nation forced him to do what he did in 1784. What came out of 1784 was not Mr. Wesley's doings at all but rather was the result of the strong leadership Bishop Asbury gave to the American brethren. They were now

24. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

25. *Journal*, June 1, 1774, Vol. I, 117.

26. Tipple, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

28. *Journal*, December 10, 1776, Vol. I, 206.

29. Luke Tyerman, *Life and Times of Rev. John Wesley*. N. Y.: Harper and Brothers, 1872. Vol. III, 438.

self-confident enough to feel no longer dependent on directions from over-seas. They refused outright to ordain Brother Whatcoat a General Superintendent when Mr. Wesley instructed them to do so. Indeed, Wesley's desire for it delayed Whatcoat's election to the episcopacy. He did not become a bishop until after Mr. Wesley's death, and the choice was freely made by the brethren. Freeborn Garrettson never became a bishop, though he, too, had been Mr. Wesley's choice.

The American system of church government is radically different from the British. Although both have undergone changes in the course of history, the one rests on the foundation Wesley laid, while the other is the expansion of the Asbury model. Asbury provided America first with the concurrent conference plan whereby one annual conference was held in two or three sessions, the last session of which took place in Baltimore and where the final vote on issues of polity and discipline was taken. Earlier sessions would be held in other places such as South Carolina and Virginia, and at these sessions preachers for circuits in these regions were appointed. The concurrent conference plan was abandoned in 1787. The General Conference was instituted in 1792. It was an assembly of all the travelling preachers in full connection. In 1808 it was transferred into a delegated body with representatives of the various regions of the church. Each section had its own annual conference where appointments were made. Asbury's organizational mind guided the process whereby this new structure was formed.³⁰

Under him, also, the office of presiding elder was devised whereby collections of circuits into districts were provided with close and constant supervision, and the travelling preachers found a pastor in the elder who supervised their work.

Bishop Coke's wings were clipped at the conference of 1787, so that Asbury stood alone as the episcopal leader of American Methodism until the opening of the nineteenth century. Even when Whatcoat was elected bishop and later when McKendree was elected to that office as the first native American to become bishop, Asbury still directed the affairs of the church, and these men were no more than his assistants, as he and Rankin had been Wesley's in colonial days before the Revolutionary War.

30. *The History of American Methodism*. N. Y.—Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964. Vol. I, 423—440.

Practically everything we know today of our Methodist connec-tional system is derivative of Asbury. In fact, this Administrative Council that is being discussed as a possibility in the Structure Com-mittee is not new. Asbury devised one himself to help him govern the church, but it was too small and autocratic to suit the brethren and he was forced to abandon it as unworkable and accept the supremacy of the larger General Conference.³¹

The appointive system was his greatest contribution to church government. Like any other bishop, he had a rough time with it, but its efficiency and its basic fairness guaranteed its survival and has made it, even now, the most effective arrangement for ministerial deployment that has yet been devised.

He wrote as follows to the conference when it was debating the merits and demerits of the appointive system. He excused himself from the session over which Bishop Coke presided.

“I am happy in the consideration that I never stationed a preacher through enmity, or as a punishment. I have acted to the glory of God, the good of the people, and to pro-mote the usefulness of the preachers. Are you sure, that, if you please yourselves, the people will be as fully satisfied? They often say, ‘Let us have such a preacher;’ and sometimes, ‘We will not have such a preacher.’ Perhaps I must say, ‘his appeal forced him upon you.’ I am one—ye are many. I am as willing to serve you as ever. I want not to sit in any man’s way.”³²

The preachers saw the force of the Bishop’s reasoning. They were con-vinced that he could place them better than they could place them-selves. They voted overwhelmingly to leave the appointive power in the Bishop’s hands. That is where it has remained from that day to this. More than anything else this has been the genius of American Methodism, and also the chief temporal reason for its amazing adapta-bility and remarkable success.

To be sure, Asbury was a rigid disciplinarian. He organized a church. Yet he treated it as if it were a society or a sect. He did not want just anybody as a member of his church. “It is manifestly our

31 Tipple, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 259–260.

duty to fence in our society, and to preserve it from intruders," he wrote. "Otherwise we should soon become a desolate waste."³³ "We will have a holy people, or none."³⁴ Once when he was constantly interrupted in sermon by the frequent coming of people who were late, he frankly told them that he would rather they would stay at home than come in such an irregular manner.³⁵

But this "sect complex" was a hang-over from the early days—one of Asbury's eccentricities. It heightened interest in him; it did not detract from him. It was not strong enough to keep Methodism from being a church. Rather it was outweighed by his discernment of the importance of the episcopacy, which put Methodism in the main stream of Catholic Christianity and which makes it even now a bridge spanning the chasm between the Protestant and Roman and Orthodox lands.

Judging Asbury by the remarks in his journal on the Revolutionary War and American Independence, he would not qualify as having been fervently patriotic. This is all he said about the separation from England: "I heard the news that peace was confirmed between England and America. I had various exercises of mind on the occasion; it may cause great changes to take place among us, some for the better, and some for the worse. It may make against the work of God, our preachers will be far more likely to settle in the world; and our people, by getting into trade and acquiring wealth, may drink into its spirit."³⁶

Nevertheless he proved to be one of our greatest patriots. He served his country best by making so many of her citizens good. He set an altar to God in every major city and lighted fires to God's glory in the hills and in the valleys of rural America. Because of his travelling and preaching over the whole country, he was known to more people by sight than any other person in America during his day.

Perhaps he, rather than any statesman or politician, contributed most to the new nation, for what he gave to our people moth and rust could not corrupt and thieves could not steal from them. He gave them God; and when they knew what they had from him, they realized it was enough.

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33. *Discipline*, 1798, p. 154.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

35. *Journal*, November 24, 1776, Vol. I, 205.

36. *Journal*, April 5, 1783, Vol. I, 440.