

# MINISTERS OF THE REVOLUTION: FRANCIS ASBURY

By TRACY EARLY

JOHN WESLEY HAD sent a few preachers over before Francis Asbury, another came on the same ship with him and some others arrived a little later. But when the American Revolution broke out, all the Methodist preachers that had come from overseas went home except one—Asbury.

The Revolution was not an easy time for American Methodism, then just in its beginning stages and not yet separated from its mother, the Anglican Church. And Wesley, leader of the Methodist movement, who was very English, had put out an embarrassing pamphlet.

As tension built between England and the colonies, Wesley at first had expressed sympathy for the American cause. But in 1775 he read Samuel Johnson's work, *Taxation No Tyranny*, which argued that a lot of people even in England paid taxes without getting to vote for a representative in Parliament, and that this could not properly be called tyranny. Anyway, how was it that so much liberty talk came from slave drivers?

Wesley was convinced, and he put out the substance of the pamphlet under his own name. Asbury defended Wesley by saying that he was showing loyalty to his own government and "had he been a subject of America, no doubt but he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American cause." But Asbury was "truly sorry that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America," though this did not alter his respect for Wesley as a religious guide. Later on, in the middle of the Revolution, Asbury's journal suggests he received "much instruction and great blessings of late in reading Mr. Wesley's works," and saw "a certain spirituality in his works which I can find in no other human compositions." The trouble was that "inconsiderate persons have taken occasion to censure the Methodists in America on account of Mr. Wesley's political sentiments."

Some good came out of it, however. After the war, Asbury found that Methodists had a head start on the Western frontier because a number of their people had moved there to escape controversy.

Asbury did not criticize the Wesley pamphlet on political grounds. It was not that he supported the American Revolution, any more than he opposed it. But his goal was getting the Wesleyan message to the American people, and Wesley had made this more difficult.

In coming to America, Asbury was responding to a sense of divine vocation. In England he had been one of the Methodist preachers for some five years. Then he felt a call to America. At the annual meeting of the preachers in 1771, Wesley asked for volunteers to serve in the colonies, and Asbury was one of two accepted. Aboard ship he wrote, "I feel my spirit bound to the New World, and my heart united to the people, though unknown."

In October of that year, Asbury, now 26 years old, arrived in Philadelphia, a man who had put his hand to the plow and would never look back. "When I came near the American shore," he wrote, "my very heart melted within me, to think from whence I came, where I was going and what I was going about. . . . I feel that God is here."

At times in his early years, his letters home indicated some uncertainty about whether his stay in America would be permanent. But he seems never to have made any serious plans to return, though the other preachers from abroad, some of them Tory in their thinking, might decide the prudent thing was to go back when the Revolution made normal activity impossible.

On September 22, 1777, Asbury wrote, "I met with brother George Shadford, who informed me that my brethren, Mr. Rankin and Mr. Rodda, had left the continent. So we are left alone." But Asbury himself had thrown in his lot with the American people, and this meant accepting their Revolution, whatever was to come of it.

Shortly after Asbury's arrival in 1771, he had preached in New York on the text, "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified." Keeping aloof from politics, he held staunchly



No "winter quarters" for the early circuit riders



hat he and Asbury together should serve as superintendents, an appointment Asbury refused to consider final until the American preachers approved it. Coke had already been ordained as an Anglican minister, and Wesley held a service conferring the office of superintendent. Asbury had never been ordained, so Coke ordained Asbury on December 27, 1784.

Wesley considered the office of superintendent as equivalent to that of a bishop, but he was nonetheless dismayed when the American superintendents started using the title of bishop, a tradition that has continued in the U.S. but never got started in England. "Men may call me a knave or a fool, a rascal, a scoundrel, and I am content," Wesley told "my dear Franky" in a sharp letter of 1789, "but they shall never by my consent call me bishop!"

Asbury's insistence that the authority of superintendents must derive from the American preachers meant that Coke would not exercise much authority, since his ties with them were so much weaker than Asbury's. After holding the fort for Methodism through the Revolutionary storms, Asbury was hardly disposed to share leadership with someone sent over after things became peaceful again. By his tireless labor, Asbury had gained an intimate knowledge of the people and the territory, and he consequently held a leadership position based on achievement.

Implying he should be left in charge, he had written Wesley the year before Coke was sent over, "No person can manage the lay preachers here so well, it is thought, as one that has been at the raising of most of them. No man can make a proper change upon paper, to send one here and another there, without knowing the circuits and the gifts of all the preachers." Coke stayed in America only a few months and thereafter was in the country just for occasional visits.

Asbury, never leaving, never marrying, never establishing a home anywhere, rode the American circuits—some 5,000 miles a year—until his death in 1816. He was so well known that a letter from England had only to be addressed to "The

Rev. Bishop Asbury, North America" and it would reach him. Wesley became famous for his remark, "The world is my parish," but Asbury rode a larger circuit than Wesley did, one that constantly enlarged as Asbury grew older.

The single-minded, totally dedicated bishop was not easy to get along with. Often his journal records that he spoke "plainly and closely to the people." And when preachers grumbled, he insisted that they take their assignments in spite of whatever might be bothering them. But he always did more than he asked of anyone else, and was constantly examining his own heart plainly and closely. As a result of

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## **TWO WEEKS BEFORE**

**Bearing a solitary vase**

**Of quiet, flat and unobtrusive bloom**

**The altar rests, anticipating**

**The joyful burden of massed white lilies**

**Trumpeting alleluia.**

**—Easter S. Wooldridge**

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his circuit rider system, there was hardly a crossroads or backwoods clearing that did not see Methodist preachers riding by and stopping to kindle the spiritual flames.

"There's nobody out tonight but crows and Methodist preachers," went the saying in bad weather.

This was Asbury's work. "I can leave all the little affairs of this confused world to those men to whose province they pertain," he wrote as Americans moved toward a declaration of their independence.

For a time during the Revolution, things got so difficult he could not do much traveling. "The minds of the people are so confused, and filled with the spirit and troubles of the times," he wrote, "that it does not appear to me as if God required me to treat with them on spiritual and eternal subjects, till they can, with some considerate calmness, pay attention to those momentous matters."

He refused to take the loyalty oath Maryland was insisting upon, and he found refuge in Delaware, where preachers were not required to take an oath. In February, 1778,



he took up residence with Judge Thomas White near Dover, and stayed there most of the next two years. Shortly after taking in Asbury, White was arrested at his house and held for a time. Asbury then left and found another place to stay, but warnings of further danger convinced him that it would be prudent to move on again.

"Accordingly, I set out after dinner, and lay in a swamp till about sunset," he wrote, "but was then kindly taken in by a friend." In less than a month, however, he was back at White's, and stayed there till the patriots came to realize he posed no danger and let him travel freely again.

Even during the period Asbury's movements were restricted, he continued to preach and teach when he could. And he made use of the time for study.

Though Wesley accepted men who had not been to college, he insisted that they study, and Asbury was always one to do more than was required. So he returned to books and spent the rest of his life getting the education he missed in his youth.

"My meditations in the Hebrew Bible have afforded me great pleasure," he wrote one July day in 1777. He read works of history, both church and secular. He studied the early church fathers, as well as later theologians and writers of his own time. In 1778 he was studying the New Testament in Greek and Latin.

But later he could travel again. And as the American armies progressed in their endeavors, so did the Methodists. In 1780 Asbury was able to write Wesley, "Many in the North and some in the South are daily coming home to God." After the war, he wrote his parents that "we have upwards of eighty traveling preachers and near 15,000 members." American Methodists, who numbered only 1,000 when Asbury arrived in 1771, had become a body of 200,000 at the time of his death in 1816.

A revolution had taken place under the leadership of a man who carried no sword and held no political office. It was not the Revolution of Washington, Adams and Jefferson, but a revolution nonetheless. And it transformed the religious landscape of America. □



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and faithfully to that position.

His journal, which he started when he left for America, says little about the issues that had the colonies at war with their mother country. At least, that is the case in its present form. The year before his death, Asbury "buried in shades all that will be proper to forget" while helping an editor prepare the journal for publication, and the journal manuscript was later lost in a fire. So it is possible that he recorded some political judgments during the Revolution that he thought it wise to cross out in light of later developments.

But the journal as we have it shows that during the critical year of 1776, though Asbury was constantly traveling about and talking with many people, he expressed virtually no thoughts on the political situation then absorbing American attention. He tells of being laid up with a sore throat from June 28 to July 9, and there is no reference then or later to the document approved by the Philadelphia Congress on July 4.

In October, 1781, when the war was coming to a close with the defeat of Cornwallis at Yorktown, Asbury was far removed from the battle—in body and in mind. "I left the city of Philadelphia," he wrote the day Washington was working out plans to receive the British surrender the following afternoon. "In the evening I visited a German woman in distress for her soul. We spent an hour in prayer, and God

set her at liberty." It was a different kind of liberty than Washington was gaining.

When Asbury saw the Revolution coming, he did not see something to endorse or to oppose, but a storm blowing obstacles in his way. He was trying to get Americans to deal with issues that he considered more important than whether they were to continue under the rule of George III. In the spring of 1776 Asbury was finding, "to my grief, that many had so imbibed a martial spirit that they had lost the spirit of pure and undefiled religion." But he kept working.

"My present mode of conduct," he wrote in late July of 1776, "is as follows—to read about a hundred pages a day; usually to pray in public five times a day; to preach in the open air every other day; and to lecture in prayer meeting every evening."

On New Year's Day in 1778 he recorded, "Though the weather has been very cold for several days, I have had to ride, sometimes a considerable distance, and preach every day." Still, his mind was not on politics. For one thing, he preached a funeral sermon that January 1 for a girl whose mother had been buried only a week before. So he was led to reflect that "death, like a conqueror, spareth none on whom he seizeth."

After his last associates from overseas sailed to England in March, 1778, Asbury wrote, "I was under some heaviness of mind. But it was no wonder: three thousand miles from home—my friends have left

me—I am considered by some enemy of the country—every one able to be seized by violence, and abused. However, all this is but a trifle to suffer for Christ, and the salvation of souls. Lord, stand by me!"

When war news forced itself on Asbury's attention, his customary reaction was not to make a judgment favoring either England or the colonies, but to take war incidents as jumping off points for comment on spiritual matters. If we exercise so much care to protect our property and bodies, he wrote after viewing preparations to defend Norfolk, should we not take even more care to protect our souls?

A journal entry for July 31, 1776, expresses doubt that the British could send over enough troops to subdue the colonies. But it goes on to conclude, "O that this dispensation might answer its proper end, that the people would fear the Lord, and sincerely devote themselves to his service! Then, no doubt, wars and bloodshed would cease."

ASBURY had been devoutly religious from his youthful days, growing up in Handsworth, near Birmingham, the son of a gardener for well-to-do families. He later recorded that he had been "awakened" at 13, that later during a time of prayer "the Lord pardoned my sins and justified my soul," and that from the age of 16 he began taking a leadership role and then preaching at Methodist meetings in his area. At about 21 he was accepted as one of Wesley's preachers, who did not have to be ordained or college educated, and he received circuit assignments.

He was the sort of man who had to be constantly at work, and when he began his service in America, his dedication was complete, so much so as to make things difficult for some other Methodist preachers. They had shown a tendency, he found, to settle down in cities like New York and Philadelphia to serve a single congregation, and get comfortable. Asbury shook them up and insisted that they get out riding circuits.

The year after Asbury arrived in America, he was appointed by Wesley to head the work in the colonies.

After the Revolution, Wesley sent over Thomas Coke with instructions