



Francis Asbury

1745 – 1816

As he embarked for America in 1771 the twenty-six year old wrote in his journal, “Whither am I going? To the New World. What to do? To gain honour? . . . To get money? No. I am going to live to God, and to bring others to do so.”

Francis Asbury grew up in the Birmingham area of England, where Methodism flourished, as it customarily did wherever the human ravages of the Industrial Revolution were worst. Only two years before Asbury’s birth, nearby Wednesbury had seen dreadful riots, memories of which would be healed wholly only in heaven. Homes had been pillaged, shops looted, bodies broken, women raped. For more than a century Methodists in this area would preserve hacked furniture as a tribute to the courage and sacrifice of their fore-parents in faith.

An intellectually gifted boy, Asbury was set upon so viciously at school that he had to be withdrawn, only to become servant to a vulgar, affluent family whose riches were matched by their ungodliness. Escape was provided when he was taken on elsewhere as an apprentice metalworker.

When he was sixteen Asbury became aware of a deeper work of grace within him and he began to preach, speaking up to five times per week, walking several miles to get to each appointment. In order both to preach and to retain his livelihood he found it necessary to rise at four o’clock in the morning and retire at midnight, a practice he

employed for the rest of his life.

His abilities widely known now, he was assigned to assist James Glassbrook, himself a forceful Methodist minister. Glassbrook had been a travelling-companion to John Wesley, and no doubt informed his protégé of what had befallen him and Wesley in their roving together. For instance, an Irish magistrate had flailed vindictively at Glassbrook with his walking-stick until he had broken it over the minister's arm; he was irate that the latter had protected Wesley against a mob which the magistrate himself had incited!

Meanwhile, help was needed desperately in America. In 1771 Wesley challenged, "Who will go?" His word became the Word of the Lord as Asbury stepped forward. (Four "affectionate sisters," as they described themselves, wrote his mother of their dismay at this turn of events!) His last service on English soil found him preaching on Psalm 61: "From the end of the earth I will cry unto thee."

In no time he reflected the practicality of American life, putting behind him the Old World's concern for pretentious titles and social position. Concerning slaveowners who would not free black serfs he announced without hesitation, "God will depart from them." A minister was someone who did the work of the ministry and was manifestly used of God in that work; to forsake the ministry for a less rigorous job and expect to retain the title of "Reverend" was ridiculous. Ordination at the hands of the church conferred nothing; it merely acknowledged that someone had been ordained at God's hand already.

At the same time, Asbury was upset at the scarcity of qualified preachers, and startled that many without qualification assumed that none was needed. Like Wesley before him, Asbury insisted that those claiming a call to preach must study five hours per day or return to shop and farm. When resisted by older ministers whose ardour had diminished and who preferred to minister amidst comfort, Asbury stated, "I have nothing to seek but the glory of God; nothing to fear but his displeasure. . . . I am determined that no man shall bias me with soft words and fair speeches." He sought no comfort for himself as he preached everywhere: a widow's rented room, a tavern, a cabin filthy as a stable, an orchard, a paper-mill, before a crowd at a public hanging or a wagon carrying men to their execution. When many Methodist clergy left America during the Revolutionary War Asbury remained—and never renounced his British citizenship!

In 1784 Wesley named him superintendent of the entire Methodist work in America. Yet Asbury realized that Old World authoritarianism had no place in the New; he had his colleagues elect him superintendent—a clear indication that ministry in the New World needed new wineskins. (“Superintendent” was translated “bishop” in America, a title Wesley opposed inasmuch as it suggested spiritual sterility, worldly pomp, and a measure of wealth inexcusable in any Christian!)

Asbury’s work took him far afield. He crossed the Allegheny mountains sixty times, often through trackless underbrush. No house provided shelter at night. His rheumatism, worsened by repeated drenchings and cold winds, left his feet grotesquely swollen; someone would lift him onto his horse, his dangling feet unable to get through the stirrups. Incapacitated as well by asthma and pleurisy in the last two years of his life, he had to be carried like a child everywhere.

When urged to give up travelling he replied that “Come” had always been the operative word he used with younger preachers, never “Go.” He loved the young ministers as his family, naming them aloud before God in anguished prayer, interceding for them in view of the suffering they could not avoid.

Under his leadership Methodism had grown from 5000 members in 1776 to 214,000 at his death. Little wonder that in 1787 a letter addressed to “The Revd. Bishop Asbury, North America” had found its way to him.

When reminded that he had been unable to stand up to preach for the last seven years of his ministry—only one of the hardships he had endured for the sake of the Kingdom—he replied, “But what of this? I can trust in nothing I have done or suffered. I stand alone in the righteousness of Christ.”

