

COMMENTS ON SELECTED THEMES

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In the epilogue to his 1989 study, *The Democratization of American Christianity*—a study widely held as an important contribution to American religious historiography—Nathan Hatch asked “Why do we have no modern critical biography of the indomitable Francis Asbury, one of the most revered and influential figures in the early republic?”¹ These twenty years later, Hatch’s student, John Wigger, has produced such a biography in the scholarly volume, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists*.

Francis Asbury’s towering influence in the founding decades of American Methodism has long been acknowledged, and his near ubiquitous American presence features him prominently in formal histories and in the narratives, memoirs, journals and letters that proliferated among early American Methodists. Wigger has thoroughly plumbed that proliferation and has traveled well beyond it in his effort to bring the comprehensive Asbury before us. Although it is possible to profit from reading only the text of this work, interesting and valuable bibliographic information will escape the reader who ignores the over one hundred pages of endnotes that are included.

At 418 pages of text (not including endnotes), one might think that the book would seem long. But by being divided into twenty-three digestible chapters, and through the liberal but judicious use of the words of Asbury and his contemporaries, the narrative moves along quite easily.

The text is organized chronologically, with certain themes or issues that transcend specific points in time discussed in greater detail at discriminating places in the narrative. This allows the reader an eased trek in following Asbury as he develops along with the nascent Methodist movement in America.

Francis Asbury was the last of the Methodist emissaries sent to North America by John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, before the Revolutionary War. When at the start of hostilities his predecessors returned to England, Asbury assumed leadership of the growing church. He devoted the remainder of his life to building the Methodist movement in the west, and because of his almost constant travel in superintending the work, he has been aptly dubbed “the Prophet of the Long Road.”² His impact on the American Methodist Church has been both profound and permanent—shaping, for ex-

¹ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale UP), 220.

² Asbury’s designation as “The Prophet of the Long Road” dates back at least as far as Ezra Squire Tipple’s 1916 biography, and has been in wide use since then. See Tipple, *Francis Asbury, The Prophet of the Long Road* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1916).

ample, the church's itinerant ministry and its episcopacy.

Wigger provides helpful information about and adds to the prevailing understanding of Asbury's British background. He rescues Asbury from the standard simplistic description of being a "blacksmith's apprentice," by documenting him instead as a metal worker's apprentice in the changing economics of England's Birmingham region. Asbury gains a full family of origin: father Joseph, mother Elizabeth, and older sister Sarah. From this family portrait, Wigger describes "Frank's" early contact with and conversion to Methodism, and persuasively leads the reader to understand how family dynamics influenced his conversion, his call to the preaching ministry, and particularly his decision to remain permanently in America. Wigger's descriptions of Sarah's early death, Joseph Asbury as a family disappointment (possibly through alcohol) and Eliza Asbury as an overprotective mother do not diminish Frank's courageous commitment to the American Methodists, but they do add a helpful human dimension to what has until now been understood as a decision prompted solely by spiritual considerations, ecclesiastical necessity or both.

The level of detail in the text is at times extraordinary, perhaps seen by some as excessive. I am convinced that Dr. Wigger is fully qualified to practice medicine—albeit at a late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century level. If you need a formula for a potion to dispel intestinal parasites or to know when "bleeding" is appropriate and how much bleeding is recommended for your malady, then Wigger will tell you, as he details Asbury's recurring ailments and the various treatments that miraculously did not end his life sooner. Some may ask if all this detail is necessary. Do we really need one and a half pages on William Ormand's personal struggle with the sin of masturbation (for which this North Carolina circuit rider will now always be remembered)? It may be a sign, though, that I am now so thoroughly a Methodist history geek that I welcome these details that humanize the early Methodist saints.

As thoughtful and meticulous as Wigger's work is, there remains room for some critical comments, observations and questions.

Asbury and Slavery

Wigger documents both Asbury's opposition to slavery and his ambivalence in establishing and maintaining Methodism as an anti-slavery institution. We can follow Asbury from the slavery prohibitions set at the denomination's founding conference in 1784, through his discomfort in maintaining an anti-slavery stance at the expense of southern church growth and expansion, up through his growing comfort with the compromises that allow Methodist preachers greater access to slaves and their owners at the expense of abolition. I believe that Asbury had real anti-slavery sentiments that were compromised in part by his devotion to establishing and growing an enduring church institution. But there are complexities in Asbury's actions that are deeper and more puzzling than Wigger presents.

Wigger points out that, in 1783, Asbury refused to board at the home of Maryland Methodist John Worthington after seeing Worthington brutalize a slave. Wigger also quotes Asbury as writing, in 1798:

O, to be dependent on slaveholders is in part to be a slave, and I was free born. I am brought to conclude that slavery will exist in Virginia perhaps for ages; there is not a sufficient sense of religion nor of liberty to destroy it; Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians in the highest flights of rapturous piety, still maintain and defend it.³

Wigger explains that this was written in response to Asbury's lodging at the home of Edward Dromgoole, a former Methodist preacher turned planter. According to Wigger, Asbury was expressing frustration at Dromgoole's slaveholding, and, "since local preachers answered only to their quarterly conferences, Asbury had no direct authority over Dromgoole."⁴

We can appreciate Wigger's report of Asbury's conscience in respect to the slaveholding by these two Methodists. However, Wigger fails to point out that at least in the case of Dromgoole, Asbury's pangs of conscience either did not run deep or were short lived, for Asbury had a long, continuing relationship with him. After expressing his "frustration" in 1798, Asbury noted worshipping "at Edward Dromgoole's chapel" (4/7/1798, 4/16/1801), weeping with him (11/5/1798), visiting him (4/7/1804), lodging with him (2/24/1805), being visited by him (7/9/1808), corresponding with his "very dear Friend" (2/11/1807), and ordaining him as a deacon and elder (2/22/1813 and 2/12/1815); there is no evidence in Asbury's journal that the ordinations were conditional upon Dromgoole's emancipation of his slaves, or that having gained direct authority over him, Asbury used that authority to effect emancipation.⁵

In addition to the case of Dromgoole, what is not interrogated by Wigger is Asbury's apparent comfort with Judge Thomas White's status as a slaveholder while Asbury was a regular resident on his estate between 1778 and 1780. Similarly, Harry Gough was also a Maryland slaveholder who was converted under Asbury's preaching in 1775 and "was one of the largest slaveholders in Baltimore County, owning 51 slaves in 1798."⁶ His slaveholding status did not prevent Asbury from lodging with the Goughs from time to time, "taking the waters" with them at the spa in Berkeley Springs, Virginia, at least once and probably six times, or from proclaiming Prudence Gough as a "faithful daughter."⁷

I suspect as well that Rebecca Ridgely, another friend and supporter of

³ Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Vol. II* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1958), 151; John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 243.

⁴ Wigger, *American Saint*, 243.

⁵ Clark, *The Journal and Letters of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Vol. II*, 157, 177, 430, 462, 573, 723, 774, and Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Vol. III* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1958), 363-364.

⁶ Baltimore County Library. See http://www.bcplonline.org/info/history/hist_pe_founder.html, accessed 4/28/2010.

⁷ Wigger, *American Saint*, 91-92.

Asbury, may have been part of a slaveholding household (either her husband became governor of Maryland, or her father was governor). Is it true that Asbury was quite close to a number of slaveholders and was dependent upon them despite his “free born” status? And is it true that he rarely—if more than once—refused accommodations where the services he required and the wealth that supported him were provided by slave labor? Did he selectively push prominent Methodists to emancipate their slaves? Was it the manner in which particular Methodists treated their slaves that determined whether Asbury would tolerate them as slaveholders?

It is probable that Asbury never met the American Quaker John Woolman, who left for England (5/1/1772) shortly after Asbury’s arrival in North America (10/27/1771). Nevertheless, given the extensive travels of each of these men, it is quite probable that Asbury learned of Quakers who knew and were influenced by Woolman.⁸ Slavery disturbed Woolman’s conscience as well, but for him, his sense of ethics and personal integrity had him avoid whenever possible the purchase or use of products produced by slave labor. In addition, if necessity required him to lodge in a home maintained by slave labor, he would pay for the privilege, including directly compensating the slaves attending him.⁹ There seems to be absolutely no indication that Asbury’s scruples about slavery came near to matching those of Woolman or others of his day. Had his scruples and manner of opposing slavery approached those of Woolman, might Asbury have had the success in removing slaveholding from Methodists that scholars have credited Woolman as having among Quakers?¹⁰

Wigger points out that, perhaps due to Asbury’s influence, Judge Thomas White, Asbury’s patron, protector and host for many months during the Revolutionary War, did provide in his will for the emancipation of his slaves.¹¹ However, freeing them upon his death certainly suggests he saw no urgency in doing so and may well have had his eyes more on his own eternity than on true justice for the black persons under his charge. Could this have been Asbury’s influence also? Asbury would not have been the only early evangelical “abolitionist” who was prompted more by concern for the souls of slaveowners than by deep concern for the plight of slaves.

Richard Allen

In a subsection of Chapter 14 of *American Saint*, the history of Richard Allen is ably summarized, but aspects of his relationship with Asbury are left unstated. Allen, the first African American to be ordained a deacon in

⁸ Asbury mentions numerous encounters with Quakers, especially in his early years in the colonies. See Clark, *The Journal and Letters of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Vol. I* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1958), 16, 24, 27, 28, 40, 50, 54, 57, etc.

⁹ Phillips P. Moulton, ed., *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* (New York: Oxford UP, 1971), 9, 38, 156-158.

¹⁰ For example, see Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985), 9, 10.

¹¹ Wigger, *American Saint*, 243.

the Methodist Episcopal connection and the founding bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, had important and significant ties to Asbury. As Wigger points out, Allen and company were treated badly at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, and John McClaskey, the presiding elder, tried to stop the creation of a separate African American church. Nevertheless, Allen *insisted* on remaining Methodist! I am convinced that his optimism was based in part on his relationship with Asbury and other white Methodist preachers. In the midst of the bad, there was also the good. Wigger writes:

Asbury's support for Bethel came with certain expectations. He agreed to back Bethel only after Allen assured him that "our colored brethren are to be governed by the doctrine and discipline of the Methodists."¹²

Was this arrangement any different from those made at the establishment of other Methodist meeting houses, black or white? Was the creation of Bethel and its inclusion as a Methodist church anywhere near as controversial as the creation of Academy Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia? Did Allen have to be forced to accept Asbury's leadership?

Asbury did not share McClaskey's view that a separate African American church was a problem; he even preached the dedicatory sermon at the opening of Bethel on June 29, 1794.¹³ Allen had respectful and even warm relationships with a number of white Methodists: Whatcoat, Abbott, Morant, Ellis, Cooper, Dickens, Mifflin, Garrettson—why not Asbury?¹⁴ Allen was under no obligation to purchase a \$90 horse for Asbury in May of 1804.¹⁵ Despite Asbury's insensitivity in inviting Allen to tour the south with him while Allen slept in the carriage, Allen apparently held no grudge.

Sanctification

I was disappointed that Wigger's book gives scant attention to the issue of sanctification. I recognize that for Methodists today the term is seen most as an isolated relic that is dragged out of hiding once a year in the ordination process, but that certainly was not the case two hundred years ago; sanctification was a very active category in the salvation promoted by early Methodists. Asbury noted in his journal with thanksgiving the day on which he believed Freeborn Garrettson received sanctification.¹⁶ Asbury struggled with his own sense of being sanctified, criticized himself for not stressing it appropriately in his preaching, and finally resolved to promote sanctification regardless of his own experience with it.¹⁷ Eventually, in the absence of a great, dramatic epiphany, he declared that he must in fact have

¹² Wigger, *American Saint*, 251.

¹³ Clark, *The Journal and Letters of the Rev. Francis Asbury*, Vol. II, 18.

¹⁴ The text says "In 1778 or 1779 Freeborn Garrettson preached the sermon that led to Allen's freedom" (Wigger, *American Saint*, 246). The exact date was November 19, 1779; see Simpson, *American Methodist Pioneer*, 159. I thank David Wills for pointing this out to me some years ago.

¹⁵ Clark, *The Journal and Letters of the Rev. Francis Asbury*, Vol. II, 432.

¹⁶ Clark, *The Journal and Letters of the Rev. Francis Asbury*, Vol. I, 344.

¹⁷ Clark, *The Journal and Letters of the Rev. Francis Asbury*, Vol. I, 297, 299, 324.

been sanctified.¹⁸ I have no conclusions here, but would have loved for the book to provide some insight on this critical issue. What really was the role of sanctification for Asbury and his preachers? How optional was it? Did it take on less significance in the early years of the nineteenth century, waiting for Phoebe Palmer to resuscitate and reclaim it?

Money

I wish the rich detail on medical issues were matched just a bit by some more detail on finances. The new United States used both pounds and dollars, with individual states issuing their own currencies. I have no idea what the exchange rates were, how they may have varied from state to state, and how to note the wealth and poverty of Methodist preacher income against prevailing wage rates.

Foreign Missions

No mention is made in the book of Asbury's acquiescence to the will of John Wesley and the appeal of William Black, a British born Methodist emigre in Nova Scotia, to supply preachers to Canada. Surely Canadians had souls in need of salvation, and the Canadian mission field could easily have been included as Methodist territory, along with the thirteen states to the south. Nevertheless, Asbury insisted on only soliciting volunteers for service before eventually abandoning Canada as a field of service for preachers under his charge. Wesley defined the world as his parish, but British born Asbury defined his world more narrowly.

Conclusion

I offer a word of caution to fans of Thomas Coke, Wesley's personal envoy who presided over the formal organization of the American Methodist church, ordained its first preachers—including Asbury—and carried the title of Bishop in the United States. Coke's contributions to early American Methodism, though perhaps well-intentioned, were at times quite problematic and perhaps even potentially dangerous to the movement. These aspects of Coke as revealed in the Wigger text make Asbury's actions and continuing input into the American church even more central to the development of the Methodist movement.

Asbury's intellectual life, despite his lack of formal seminary training is clearly discussed, and adds an important component to conventional depictions of him being solely practical, with little theological sophistication. His pragmatism in establishing the church was certainly—even surprisingly—an *informed* pragmatism. Wigger also makes a strong case that, in addition to names like Nathaniel Taylor and Charles Finney, the name of Francis Asbury ought to be added to the list of folks who did much to promote the revivals and camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening. I am intrigued by the

¹⁸ Clark, *The Journal and Letters of the Rev. Francis Asbury*, Vol. 1, 556.

suggestion, and look forward to hearing the reaction of other scholars to this insight.

Wigger describes Asbury in his later years as “ruling with an iron fist” as he makes decisions on where to station preachers, and then proceeds to detail the care with which Asbury took into account the various individual needs of preachers and the particularities of the various circuits. Asbury may have jealously guarded his right to have the final word on stations, but he does not come across as cruel or senselessly autocratic.

I highly recommend this well done text on a pivotal figure in early American Methodism. Overall, the portrait of Francis Asbury that is presented is one in which he cares deeply about his responsibilities before God, his responsibilities for the Methodist Church, and his obligations to his preachers and the people—both churched and unchurched. The rich picture that emerges is one in which Asbury is not simply heroic, but is also wonderfully human.