Francis Asbury and His Difficulties With John Wesley and Thomas Rankin *

By Albea Godbold

Francis Asbury was the towering figure in the beginning of American Methodism and in the organization and development of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Not counting several volunteer preachers from England, Asbury was one of the eight official missionaries sent to America by John Wesley between 1769 and 1773. At most all of the others labored only a few years as Methodist itinerants in this country. By 1778 every preacher officially appointed to America by Wesley had either returned to England or had ceased work in the Methodist connection. By contrast, Asbury, who arrived in 1771 when 26 years of age, stayed through the Revolution in spite of loneliness, misunderstanding, abuse and persecution, organized the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784 after getting the green light from Wesley, as we would say today, piloted that church through tempestuous times, raised up and trained hundreds of preachers who under his direction spread scriptural holiness to the farthest frontier cabins, and built the membership of the denomination to about 200,000—Asbury did all that before he died by the side of the road in Virginia in 1816, nearly 45 years after he had landed in America. By any standard of measurement, Asbury’s life was remarkable and his achievements were stupendous.

But now Asbury had his critics. Some of his associates differed with him, and they emphatically said so. They were as sure that Asbury was wrong in some of his plans and procedures as he was sure that he was right. A complete list of Asbury’s critics would certainly include the names of John Wesley, Thomas Coke, Thomas Rankin, William Glendenning, William Hammett, James O’Kelly, Jesse Lee, and others. In the interest of brevity this paper is limited to a consideration of the quarrels and complaints between John Wesley and Asbury, and Thomas Rankin and Asbury.

Between 1773, when Rankin came to America, and 1791, when Wesley died, Wesley and Rankin got along well with one another, but both found fault with Asbury. Asbury revered Wesley, and felt


It is often said that all of the preachers sent over by John Wesley, save Asbury, returned to England by 1778. Strictly speaking this is not accurate. At least one, James Dempster, stayed in America. He became a Presbyterian preacher. See Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, I, 138n.
sure that he would have had no difficulty with Wesley had not Rankin out of jealousy misrepresented him, his purposes, and his work to Wesley. During Rankin’s five years in America Asbury found it difficult to work with him, and after Rankin returned to England, Asbury complained bitterly about Rankin “prating malicious words” against him to Wesley.

Asbury and Wesley

Consider, first, the differences between Wesley and Asbury. Undoubtedly Wesley regarded Asbury as a good man with fine ability. It was Wesley who originally chose Asbury in 1771 for work in America over several other men who offered themselves for the assignment, and it was Wesley who elevated Asbury to the post of assistant, as he called his deputy in America, when Asbury was only 27. Wesley again designated Asbury as his assistant in 1783, and the next year he appointed him a joint general superintendent for America along with Thomas Coke.

But now almost from the beginning Wesley seems not to have been too sure of Asbury’s loyalty, and with Wesley unquestioned fidelity to him and his leadership was paramount. Within eight months, before Asbury had had time to prove his fitness for leadership as assistant in America, Wesley abruptly relieved him in favor of Thomas Rankin, a man nine years Asbury’s senior, whom Wesley was sending over. Wesley believed that Asbury, though demoted, should work cheerfully under Rankin. But Asbury said he did not “fit well” with Rankin. 2

In 1778, Rankin and other preachers returned to England, while Asbury alone of all the men sent over by Wesley remained at his post in America. Logically Asbury should then have succeeded Rankin as assistant, because there were still some twenty native born preachers and about 3,000 members in the American societies who needed a leader. But Wesley did not name a new assistant at once. Indeed, he did not designate anyone in that capacity until five years after Rankin had departed and two years after Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown.

Meantime, what happened concerning leadership of the Methodist movement in America during the Revolution and immediately afterward? In April, 1779, several of the preachers met with Asbury in the home of Judge Thomas White, Kent County, Delaware, and declared that Asbury should act as Wesley’s assistant in America. Did Wesley suspect that Asbury himself had prompted the preachers to choose him as their leader? We do not know. But in any event, Asbury quickly took control of the American Methodist movement,

2 Ibid., III, 553.
fashioned it largely after his own will, and remained its acknowledged leader as long as he lived.

Did Wesley know what was happening in American Methodism from 1778 on? There can be little doubt that he did. Asbury reported in writing to Wesley from time to time. Asbury soon made it clear to Wesley that he thought there ought to be an assistant in America clothed with the authority of official appointment by Wesley. Also, Asbury advised that it would not do to send over just any preacher from England as assistant; he said the man must know the preachers and the societies in this country.\(^3\) Plainly Asbury was suggesting to Wesley that he himself was the man for the job. However, Asbury’s letters also indicated that he would settle for John Wesley himself as the leader here. He urged Wesley to come over and devote the rest of his life to directing the rapidly growing Methodist movement in America.\(^4\)

Finally in 1783, as stated above, Wesley again named, or at least recognized Asbury as his assistant in America. Why did Wesley wait so long to confirm Asbury as assistant in America when in fact Asbury had already held the post by the vote of his brethren for more than four years and was widely recognized by preachers and laymen alike as their undisputed leader? There seems to be only one answer, Wesley was still not sure of Asbury’s loyalty to him as the founder and governor of Methodism both in Europe and America.\(^5\) The wording of Asbury’s Journal seems to confirm this. On December 24, 1783 Asbury wrote, “I received a letter from Wesley in which he directs me to act as General Assistant.” Asbury does not say that Wesley appointed him; Wesley directed him to act as assistant. Edward J. Drinkhouse\(^6\) rightly says that there is a difference between being appointed assistant and merely being directed to act in that capacity. He says Wesley knew that Asbury had been acting as assistant for a long time, and Wesley decided not to interfere with the situation. Moreover, there are indications that Thomas Rankin, who had served as a close confidant of Wesley ever since his return to England in 1778, was advising Wesley to go slow in giving the badge of authority to Asbury. But more about that later.

Now as is generally known, before the Revolution the Methodists in America were technically Anglicans, and they were supposed to go to that church for the sacraments. Wesley’s preachers were not ordained and therefore were not qualified to administer the ordinances. When the war came the situation changed. The Anglican clergymen were for the most part loyal to the crown and they re-

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\(^3\) Ibid., III, 31.
\(^4\) Ibid., III, 34.
\(^6\) Ibid., I, 241.
turned to England. The Methodists soon began to ask for the sacraments at the hands of their own preachers. Some of the preachers, particularly in the South, proposed to ordain themselves and proceed to give the people the sacraments. With considerable difficulty Asbury persuaded them to suspend their plan for one year while they appealed to Wesley for help. Asbury seemed to believe all along that Wesley could and would somehow arrange for the ordination of the Methodist preachers in America. As it turned out, they had to wait four years before Wesley acted.

In 1784, John Wesley ordained and commissioned Thomas Coke as a “General Superintendent” for America. Coke was a well educated, personable, persuasive clergyman of the Church of England who had cast his lot with the British Methodists. Wesley sent Coke to America with instructions to ordain Francis Asbury as a general superintendent. Coke and Asbury were then, according to Wesley’s plan, to serve as joint superintendents in America under Wesley as the leader and the governing mind of all Methodists everywhere.

It seems clear that whatever Wesley intended when he ordained Coke and sent him to America to help set up a Methodist church, he never had any intention of launching a denomination in the United States that would be completely independent of any higher ecclesiastical authority, certainly not independent of himself, his counsel, his governing hand, and his veto power as long as he lived, and not completely independent of British Methodism after he was gone. Wesley wanted the American Methodists to have the sacraments, and a form of worship, and a set of sound doctrines spelled out. But apparently he still expected the American Methodist societies to continue under his general direction in about the same way that the preachers and the societies in Britain were subject to his authority and guidance.

Now when Coke unfolded Wesley’s plan to Asbury, it seemed to take Asbury by surprise. Asbury says in his Journal that he was “shocked.” Apparently Asbury expected Wesley to handle the situation somewhat differently, although he does not say how in his Journal. Then Asbury, with sure confidence that he knew what ought to be done in America and how to go about it, proceeded to make one notable change in Wesley’s plan for American Methodism. Wesley had told Coke he was appointing Asbury a general superintendent, and he instructed Coke to ordain Asbury in that capacity. But Asbury announced that he would accept the office of general superintendent only if unanimously elected by the preachers! Hence the call for the Conference to convene in Baltimore on December 24, 1784. Now Asbury’s demand for election by the

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8 Ibid., III, 549.  
9 Ibid., III, 75.  
10 Ibid., I, 471.  
11 Ibid.
preachers may not seem like much of a change, but in view of what happened later it appears to be a profoundly significant alteration of Wesley's ecclesiastical blueprint for America.

As Wesley later pondered the consequences of Asbury's requirement that he be elected a general superintendent by the preachers, he might well have said in the words of the old saw, "I gave Asbury an inch, and he took a mile." For Asbury's stipulation meant, in the last analysis, that he was going to be amenable to the preachers in conference and not to Wesley in England! It meant that from that time forward the American Methodists would be independent of Wesley's control, something Wesley did not intend when he sent Coke to this country. This was true, as Wesley definitely learned in 1787, even though at Wesley's insistence the Christmas Conference of 1784 voted to adopt a paper saying that as long as Wesley lived the American Methodists would be subject to him in matters of church government.

Did Asbury fully comprehend what he was doing when he insisted on election to the general superintendency? There is not the slightest doubt that he did. At the time he wrote in his Journal, "If the preachers unanimously choose me, I shall not act in the capacity I have heretofore done by Mr. Wesley's appointment." 12 In other words, if elected by the preachers he intended to run the show his own way, to use a slang phrase. Soon afterward he wrote concerning the relation of American Methodism to British Methodism, "My sentiments are union but no subordination, connection but no subjection." 13 Moreover, Thomas Coke, who was always awed by Asbury's commanding personality and impressed by his great managerial ability, 14 later said he was sure that he himself as Wesley's representative at the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church, let the American Methodists go farther in separation from British Methodism than Wesley intended. 15

Why did Asbury coolly make the move in 1784 that took the American Methodists out from under John Wesley's control? Probably his motives were mixed. For one thing, in view of the distance, the time required for getting replies to correspondence, and the vastly different conditions in America, Asbury was sure that the American preachers and societies could not be effectively governed by someone living in England, not even by a man as great, good, and wise as John Wesley, and later Asbury said so in no uncertain terms. 16 Second, Asbury believed that the American Methodists were coming out of their childhood by 1784, as he put it, and could think and plan for themselves. 17 Third, he believed in all honesty

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., III, 63.
14 Drinkhouse, op. cit., I, 334, 387.
15 See letter from Thomas Coke to Bishop White, April 24, 1791. Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, III, 95.
16 Ibid., III, 63.
17 Ibid., III, 546.
that he knew better how to govern the American Methodists than anybody else anywhere.\footnote{When Asbury wrote Wesley on September 20, 1783, that it was thought that no person could manage the lay preachers in America unless he had been "at the raising of the most of them," and that no man could well make proper changes in their appointments, sending one here and another there, "unless he is always out among them," who aside from himself could he have had in mind? Who else at that time in England or America had the leadership qualifications he deemed essential? See Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, III, 31.} Fourth, he sensed that in view of the Revolution and the spirit of independence in this country, the Americans would not really accept an arrangement whereby they would be subject in matters of church government to control from England.\footnote{On August 15, 1788, Asbury wrote to Jasper Winscom in England, "I am sure that no man or number of men in England can direct either the head or the body here. . . ."}

Asbury knew the Americans had not forgotten that in 1775 Wesley put out a pamphlet entitled "A Calm Address to Our American Colonies," in which he said the colonies ought not to rebel against England, because the British government had the right to tax the colonists whether or not they had representation in parliament, and the right even to dispose of their property, liberty, and lives without their consent! The publication did not have a calming effect on the Americans. Asbury wrote in his Journal, "I am truly sorry that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America," and Asbury added significantly, "Some inconsiderate persons have taken occasion to censure the Methodists in America on account of Mr. Wesley's political sentiments."\footnote{Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, I, 181.}

Most students of Asbury give him credit for good judgment. We may say in retrospect that probably nowhere else does Asbury's judgment show up to better advantage than in the astute move he made in 1784 to free the American Methodists from British control at the very moment the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized.

Now of course Wesley endeared himself to the early American Methodists when he ordained Coke and made possible the launching of the Methodist Episcopal Church. For this they were profoundly grateful, and notwithstanding other acts of Wesley before and after 1784 of which they did not approve, they always regarded him with great appreciation and esteem. In 1787, when the American conference firmly rejected a command from Wesley, it still wrote him an affectionate letter and invited him to visit this country. In the last year of his life Asbury affirmed that Wesley was still "respected and loved by hundreds and thousands in America as a great apostolic man."\footnote{Ibid., III, 546.}
copal Church in America was organized. During that time he made some unsuccessful moves to assert, or to regain, a measure of control over the American Methodists. In September 1786, for example, he instructed Thomas Coke to call a General Conference of the preachers in Baltimore on May 1, 1787, and ordain Richard Whatcoat and Freeborn Garrettson whom he was appointing, the one to be a joint general superintendent with Asbury in the United States and the other superintendent for Nova Scotia. Wesley wrote Asbury in advance what he had done. Asbury made no attempt openly to oppose Wesley's move. Indeed, he ostensibly prepared to go along with Wesley's plan. He wrote a cool letter to Whatcoat saying that although he did not approve of the mode of his appointment he would work with him without claiming any superiority over him. But when the conference met, Asbury, whether he planned it that way or not, let his preachers "carry the ball," as we say, while he remained in the background.

When the conference convened, Thomas Coke, the presiding officer, read Wesley's letter. There was objection to Wesley's instructions. James O'Kelly opposed the confirmation of Whatcoat as a general superintendent on the grounds that he was too old and that he did not know the American wilderness. Coke declared that the conference would have to do as Wesley commanded because of the resolution adopted in 1784 to the effect that the American Methodists would be subject to Wesley in matters of church government as long as he lived.

Thereupon Coke received the shock of his life! The conference flatly refused to accept Whatcoat as a general superintendent. Garrettson, who seemed not to be enthusiastic about going to Nova Scotia anyway, was appointed by Asbury as presiding elder for the Peninsula in Maryland. It is surprising that the preachers did not express to Coke at that time the sentiment voiced by Nelson Reed nine years later. In the General Conference of 1796 there was objection to one of Coke's propositions on the ground that it was dictatorial. Coke, impatient of contradiction, tore up the paper, looked around at the preachers and said, "Do you think yourselves equal to me?" Reed arose, addressed Bishop Asbury and said, "Dr. Coke has asked if we think ourselves equal to him; I answer, yes, we think ourselves equal to him . . . and, more than that we think ourselves equal to Dr. Coke's king!" In any event, the 1787 conference, after refusing to obey Wesley and confirm Whatcoat and Garrettson as general superintendents, proceeded to rescind the 1784 resolution which said that the American Methodists would be subject to John Wesley in matters of church government as long as he lived.

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22 Ibid., III, 49.
23 Drinkhouse, op. cit., I, 327.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., I, 244.
as he lived. This automatically removed Wesley’s name from the American Minutes. Moreover, the conference criticized Coke, with the result that he signed a paper of abdication saying that when absent from the United States he would not exercise any government over the Methodist Episcopal Church and that when in this country he would do no more than ordain preachers and preside over conferences.\textsuperscript{26} John Atkinson well says that as a result of the 1787 conference Asbury really became “the governing mind of American Methodism.”\textsuperscript{27}

What did Asbury do while all this was happening in the conference in 1787? He says in his Journal that he did not do anything. Later he declared that in 1784 he was not in favor of the requirement that the American Methodists be subject to Wesley in matters of church government; he did not think it practical when Wesley was 3,000 miles away. Moreover, he says that Whatcoat and some others felt the same way about it.\textsuperscript{28} Then Asbury records that he was “mute and modest” when the item was adopted in 1784, and he was “mute” when it was expunged from the Minutes in 1787.\textsuperscript{29}

Wesley was upset when he learned what the conference had done. In a letter to someone, probably Beverly Allen, he blamed it all on Asbury, saying:

\begin{quote}
He flatly refused to receive Mr. Whatcoat in the character I sent him. He told George Shadford, “Mr. Wesley and I are like Caesar and Pompey: he will bear no equal, and I will bear no superior.” And accordingly he quietly sat by until his friends voted my name out of the American Minutes. This completed the matter and showed that he had no connection with me.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

Asbury says Wesley “was displeased that I did not rather reject the whole connection, or leave them, if they did not comply. But I could not give up the connection so easily, after laboring and suffering so many years with and for them.”\textsuperscript{31}

Wesley lived nearly four years after the 1787 conference. But he and Asbury were never again on good terms. Asbury deplored the misunderstanding, but under the circumstances felt there was little he could do to repair the breach.

Though Wesley’s attempt to regain control over the American Methodists in 1787 proved futile, the next year he dispatched a letter to Asbury sharply criticizing both him and Thomas Coke for allowing themselves to be called bishop. Wesley wrote:

\begin{quote}
I am a little afraid both the Doctor and you differ from me. I study to be little: you study to be great. I creep: you strut along. I found a school: you
\end{quote}

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\item[26] History of American Methodism, I, 425. 
\item[27] Atkinson: Centennial History of American Methodism, 84. 
\item[28] Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, II, 106. 
\item[29] Ibid. 
\item[30] Ibid., III, 75. 
\item[31] Ibid., II, 106. 
\end{footnotes}
FRANCIS ASBURY AND HIS DIFFICULTIES

a college! nay, and call it after your own names! O beware, do not seek to be something! Let me be nothing, and "Christ be all in all." How can you, how dare you suffer yourself to be called Bishop? I shudder, I start at the very thought! Men may call me a knave or a fool, a rascal, a scoundrel, and I am content; but they shall never by my consent call me Bishop! For my sake, for God's sake, for Christ's sake put a full end to this!

One may wonder why Wesley should have shuddered at the thought of being called bishop when for more than fifty years he himself had acted like a bishop in the church, doing everything that a bishop does, even to ordaining preachers toward the end of his life. In allowing themselves to be called bishop, Asbury and Coke were only making explicit what was implicit in Wesley's action when by ordination he made them general superintendents. Incidentally, the late Bishop Edwin H. Hughes claims, though so far as the writer knows there is no documentary evidence to support him, that after receiving Wesley's letter, Asbury replied that he was using the term bishop for two reasons: first, it was more scriptural; second, it was shorter. Asbury said he could save two souls while he was saying general superintendent!

Was Wesley justified in his criticisms and his attitude toward Asbury? The answer seems to be no. Could Asbury have accepted in toto Wesley's plan for the American church in 1784? Yes, but it would probably have been a mistake for American Methodism. Could Asbury have compelled the American conference in 1787 to comply with Wesley's instruction concerning Whatcoat? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. If he had demanded compliance, the conference might have overruled him.

Asbury had the highest regard for Wesley and always spoke of him with esteem and affection. He said that Wesley was an apostolic man endowed of God to do a great work in the world. Though Asbury felt Wesley had made a mistake in writing against the Americans in the Revolution, he still said Wesley should be treated with respect. In 1791, when Asbury received the solemn news that Wesley was dead, he spoke of him as "that dear man of God" and declared that Wesley was the greatest man of his generation.

Asbury greatly desired to maintain the good will and esteem of Wesley, and he perceived the wisdom and the value of harmonious relations between American and British Methodism. But at the same time Asbury saw clearly, as Wesley, Coke and some others did not, that the American Methodists would not submit to control from England, and he acted accordingly.

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34 Drinkhouse, op. cit., I, 329, thinks Asbury could easily have persuaded the conference to obey Wesley.
35 Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, I, 673.
All things considered, Asbury deserves credit for his realism, his honesty, and his practical wisdom in his dealings with Wesley and British Methodism. The differences between Asbury and Wesley were pronounced, and given the circumstances in Britain and America at the time, perhaps the break between them was unavoidable. It may be that Asbury’s famous quip, quoted above, was after all an accurate appraisal of himself and Wesley: he and Wesley were like Caesar and Pompey; Wesley would bear no equal, and Asbury would have no superior. Both men were ecclesiastical leaders of the first rank. It is unfortunate that their relations were not cordial to the end. Even so we may say that the stature of neither man was really lowered by the difficulties that arose between them.

Asbury and Rankin

Turn now to Asbury’s relations with Thomas Rankin. For the most part Asbury took criticism from others in his stride, including that from John Wesley, and with the passage of time he forgot and forgave. But he was not so magnanimous with Rankin. Rankin’s faultfinding upset Asbury as a young man, and from then on Asbury found it difficult if not impossible to feel kindly toward Rankin.

Rankin was born in Scotland in 1736. He served as an itinerant under Wesley eleven years before coming to America at the age of 37. He was known as a strict disciplinarian. Wesley commissioned Rankin as his “General Assistant” in this country because he felt he could depend on Rankin to direct the work here as he himself did in England.

Asbury intended to cooperate with Rankin as the new leader, but their relationship quickly became strained. Years later Asbury claimed that Wesley when sending Rankin to America said he wanted Rankin, George Shadford, and himself to be as one and act by united counsels. But who, asked Asbury, could do that with Rankin? Tension arose between Rankin and Asbury over matters of administration, and for a year or so it increased. Rankin’s remarks about Asbury in his autobiography are casual, suggesting that at the time he was objective in dealing with his younger associate. But Asbury’s Journal says that Rankin could be furious. At times Rankin certainly wrote pointed letters to Asbury. For his part, Asbury tried to be restrained in what he said about Rankin, but one can read between the lines in his Journal that occasionally he was really provoked with Rankin.

Soon after Rankin arrived in America both men were writing to Wesley about their mutual differences, and apparently each was

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36 Ibid., III, 553.
37 In comparing the restraint of Rankin’s autobiography with the impetuosity of Asbury’s Journal, one should bear in mind that Rankin’s autobiography was written many years later while Asbury’s Journal was written day by day in the heat of the battle, so to speak.
hinting that the other ought to be recalled or sent to another country. In December, 1774 Asbury says he prepared a letter to Wesley which he read to Rankin so that Rankin "might see I intended no guile or secret dealings." 38 Rankin did not reciprocate when he wrote to Wesley. Thus Asbury's frankness shows up better than Rankin's secretiveness.

Wesley, backing up his assistant, soon wrote Rankin to send Asbury home. For some unexplained reason Rankin did not communicate Wesley's instruction to Asbury, and the latter stayed in America. Rankin may have been afraid of an unfavorable reaction from Asbury and his friends, or he may have concluded that he himself would prefer to go back to England and leave Asbury here. In the end that is what he did.

From the beginning Rankin was not enthusiastic about America and as time passed he was less so. Methodism was not as strong here as he had supposed. There was too much emotionalism in the Methodist meetings to suit him. 39 As the Revolution approached he was strongly pro-British, and he made the mistake of publicly advocating that the Methodists stand by the mother country. 40 In some circles this aroused the suspicion that all Methodists in America were Tories. Asbury, wiser and more practical than Rankin, studiously refrained from saying anything about the political situation, even though he favored the Colonies against England in the conflict. In comparison with Rankin, Asbury's commitment to America and American Methodism shows up well.

Following are some of the entries in Asbury's Journal concerning Rankin. "I received several letters today, some of which revived my spirits, but one from Mr. Rankin gave me pain" (Aug. 12, 1774). "My mind was troubled on account of a conversation which had passed between Mr. Rankin, Mr. S., and myself" (Aug. 15, 1774). "Tidings came today of some dissatisfaction between Mr. Rankin and the people in Philadelphia. But my duty is before me; I have my own business to mind" (Sept. 10, 1774). That sounds like a letter from a modern day layman to a former pastor to the effect that the present preacher is not doing so well! "They brought me a letter from Thomas Rankin who thought himself injured; but I am determined to drop all disputes as far as possible" (Sept. 23, 1774). "I spoke my mind to Mr. Rankin, but we did not agree in judgment" (Dec. 4, 1774). At the time Asbury believed he ought to go to Baltimore. But Rankin as his superior forbade it. Asbury, noting that all things work together for good to them that love God, proposed to accept everything as it came, including Rankin. But his good resolution did not last long. Shortly afterward he wrote in his Journal,

38 Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, I, 140.
39 Strickland: Life and Times of Francis Asbury, 100.
40 Atkinson, op. cit., 25.
“What need can there be for two preachers here (Philadelphia) to preach three times a week to about sixty people?” (Dec. 14, 1774). “The conduct of Mr. Rankin is such as calls for patience” (Jan. 12, 1775). “Mr. Rankin keeps driving away at the people, telling them how bad they are, with the wonders which he has done and intends to do. It is surprising that the people are not out of patience with him. If they did not like his friends better than him, we should soon be welcome to take a final leave of them” (Jan. 18, 1775). “I saw Brother Strawbridge and entered into a free conversation with him. His sentiments relative to Mr. Rankin correspond with mine. But all these matters I can silently commit to God, who overrules both in earth and heaven” (March 11, 1775).

In the summer of 1775, Rankin proposed to return to England and take all the preachers with him, leaving the American Methodists to shift for themselves. When Asbury received word of Rankin’s intention he fairly exploded with righteous indignation. He expressed dismay that the preachers should take so lightly their responsibility as shepherds of the flock. He pointed out that there were 3,000 Methodists in America who were apprehensive about what would happen to them if all the preachers left, and he declared that no matter what Rankin and the other preachers did, he would stay in America regardless of the consequences to himself.

Asbury’s letter had the effect of therapeutic shock treatment. Rankin soon wrote they had decided to stay. Rankin did remain nearly three years longer. Then he slipped away without notifying Asbury. Perhaps he did not want to get another letter from Asbury about shepherds forsaking the flock in time of danger. Years afterward when Rankin wrote his autobiography he did not mention his departure from America in 1778. Perhaps Frank Baker is right in saying this may mean that in retrospect Rankin himself had come to regard his action as an inglorious retreat.

Now as already indicated, when Rankin returned to England he resumed cordial relations with Wesley. This continued to the end; he was present when Wesley died in 1791. But now if Rankin was a trial to Asbury as his superior in America, he was equally disturbing to Asbury as Wesley’s close associate and confidant in England, because Asbury soon had reason to believe that Rankin was misrepresenting him to Wesley and poisoning Wesley’s mind against him. For this Asbury never forgave Rankin; it rankled in Asbury’s mind as long as he lived.

We know that Asbury unburdened himself in at least two long letters on the subject of what he considered Rankin’s unfortunate and unfair influence on John Wesley to the detriment of good rela-

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42 Ibid., I, 163.
43 Ibid., III, 63n.
44 See Asbury’s letter to Joseph Benson, January 15, 1816. Ibid., III, 543.
tions between Wesley and Asbury and Wesley and the American Methodists in general. Asbury wrote one of the letters to Jasper Winscom in 1788 and the other to Joseph Benson in 1816. Winscom was an old friend, later a Methodist itinerant, with whom Asbury had worked before leaving England for America. Benson was for many years a preacher and leader in British Methodism. In both letters Asbury refers to Rankin as "Diotrephes," an appellation taken from the Third Epistle of John, verses 9 and 10 which read in part:

I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge my authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, prating against me with evil words.

Asbury was certain that Rankin was prating against him and that Rankin did not recognize his authority. Asbury says to Winscom, "You may be sure I have had it on all sides, and I believe Diotrephes has got the ear of old Daddy too. He sometimes prates against me with malicious words." As already suggested, Wesley's long delay in naming or recognizing Asbury as his assistant in America after Rankin returned to England was due in part to Rankin's objection to Asbury. Drinkhouse declares it is inferable from one paragraph in Wesley's letter of October 3, 1783 "that the returned missionaries [Rankin and others] had talked freely their prejudice against Asbury among the preachers" [in England].

Drinkhouse further says that Rankin and all the returned missionaries opposed Wesley's ordinations for America on the ground that in view of Asbury's ulterior purposes the American Methodists would separate from Wesley and go their own way. Rankin's distrust of or prejudice against Asbury was voiced when he heard that the 1787 conference in Baltimore had renounced the promise to obey Wesley and had dropped the great man's name from the Minutes. Rankin exclaimed, "That is Frank Asbury's doing."

Wesley died in 1791 and Rankin in 1810. Three months before his own death in 1816, Asbury dispatched the long letter mentioned above to Benson in England. It is regarded as perhaps the most important of Asbury's epistolary writings. In the letter Asbury defends Wesley's ordinations on the ground that Wesley was an apostolic man who for years had exercised the office of an apostle by admitting, stationing, and governing preachers. Since ordination is also the function of an apostle, and since the Methodists in America looked to Wesley for ordination, it was therefore logical, orderly,  

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15 Ibid., III, 60-64.  
16 Ibid., III, 543-552.  
45 Ibid., III, 63.  
46 Drinkhouse, op. cit., I, 228.  
47 Frank Baker insists that this nickname for John Wesley indicates affection and not ridicule. Ibid., III, 62n.  
48 Ibid., III, 63.  
49 Ibid., I, 240.  
50 Ibid., I, 240, 256.  
51 Ibid., I, 240, 256.
and scriptural for Wesley in the end to ordain. The ordinations brought blessing to thousands, causing them to praise God for the wisdom given to Wesley and the Christmas Conference of 1784 in forming a truly apostolic church in America. Therefore, says Asbury, J. H. Whitehead’s *Life of Wesley* ought to be corrected “or suppressed as containing a defamation” of Wesley and the whole body of American Methodists. The slander, according to Asbury, is Whitehead’s claim that Wesley’s ordination of Coke was spurious and that it took place only because Wesley was old and feeble and subject to flattery and persuasion.52

Asbury writes to Benson of Wesley’s displeasure toward him and the American Methodists, only to exonerate Wesley and lay all the blame for the great man’s disapprobation and jealousy on Rankin! Asbury says that “from the time of the Revolution to his death [Wesley] grew more and more jealous of myself and the whole American connection. . . . It appeared that we had lost his confidence almost entirely.” Wesley, says Asbury, “rigidly contended for a special and independent right of governing the chief minister or ministers” in America, including the right to remove them from office and from the American continent if he saw fit! Efforts were made, according to Asbury, to explain to Wesley that by its constitution the American church insisted on electing its own officers, especially its superintendents. But, he adds, “We were told, ‘Not till after the death of Mr. Wesley’ ” could that constitution become fully effective. Referring to Wesley’s demand in 1784 that the American Methodists adopt the pledge to be subject to his government as long as he lived, Asbury intimates that he did not like it; he seemed to regard it as impractical, unnecessary, and uncalled for. Apparently Asbury looked on the stipulation as an expression of Wesley’s distrust of him and as an attempt to keep him and the American Methodists in line. He goes on to say that it would have been poor strategy to set up a Methodist church in America to be governed by Wesley in England when Wesley was so unpopular with American politicians and the enemies of Methodism in this country. Then comes the exoneration of Wesley:

I spare the dead. . . . I perfectly clear him [Wesley] in my own mind, and lay the whole business upon Diotrephes [Rankin]. . . . Little did I think that we had such an enemy that had the continual ear and confidence of Mr. Wesley. This I believe from good testimony, eye- and ear-witnesses, who, some years after, when they saw that my mind was so deeply afflicted that I did not get clear of it for some years after Mr. Wesley’s death. Dr. Coke and John Harper [an Irish preacher who went first to the West Indies and then to the United States] told me what they had seen and heard and known and felt. Dr. Coke said that as often as Mr. Wesley went to see Diotrephes, he came back with his mind strangely agitated and dissatisfied with the

52 *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, III, 548-549.
American connection; that he did not know what to do to put him to rights; and the counsel of Diotrephes, in a full conference, was in substance this: "If he [Diotrephes] had the power and authority of Mr. Wesley, he would call Frank Asbury home directly." John Harper was the man who was present in the conference [Manchester 1787] and heard this advice given and told me several years after in America with his own mouth. 53

Asbury observes that Wesley had his troubles, and adds, "No wonder, when he was told, and possibly made to believe [by Rankin of course] that no sooner had he granted the Americans what they wished than they declared themselves independent of him." 54

Asbury tells Benson how Rankin, because of his pro-British sentiments, disobeyed the instructions of both John and Charles Wesley not to talk about political matters in America when the Revolution was imminent. Rankin, says Asbury, "was positive beyond all description that the Americans should be brought back to the old government, and that immediately." Of Rankin's proposal in 1775 to take the preachers back to England, Asbury says, "It appeared to me that his objective was to sweep the continent of every preacher that Mr. Wesley had sent to it . . . . He told us that if we returned to our native country, we should be esteemed as such obedient, loyal subjects that we should obtain ordination in the grand Episcopal Church of England and come back to America with high respectability after the war." 55 Laconically Asbury adds, "Francis did not believe it." In the letter to Winscom in 1788 Asbury, writing on the same subject, said that Rankin prated against him with malicious words "because I was bold to stay when he like a coward ran away, not only through fear, but hope of gaining preferment in the church or state." 56

Why did Asbury so vehemently condemn Rankin after both Wesley and Rankin were dead? Apparently it was because Asbury so greatly desired to maintain the esteem and good will of John Wesley while the latter was alive, and he believed that Rankin had turned Wesley against him. Asbury wrote Benson, "I can truly say for one, that the greatest affliction and sorrow of my life" was the jealousy of Wesley toward him and the whole American connection. 57 Ashbury believed, on the testimony of Thomas Coke and John Harper, that Rankin, after his return to England, had the ear of Wesley and that he greatly influenced Wesley's mind against him and the American Methodists. And Asbury wanted Benson and the British Methodists and indeed all posterity to know that he blamed Rankin and not Wesley for the unfortunate turn of events. Also, Asbury wanted to affirm that he and the American Methodists were loyal to John Wesley and to Methodist principles.

53 Ibid., III, 546-547.
54 Ibid., III, 553.
55 Ibid., III, 547.
56 Ibid., III, 63.
57 Ibid., III, 545.
Was Asbury justified in his severe indictments of Thomas Rankin? Probably not. True, Rankin's dislike and distrust may have influenced Wesley to hesitate five years before elevating Asbury to the post of assistant in America in 1783. Rankin may have opposed Asbury's ordination, his appointment as a general superintendent, and the setting up of a Methodist Church in America. And Rankin may have advised Wesley in 1784 to demand that the American Methodists in organizing their new church should be subject to Wesley in matters of church government as long as he lived. But it is doubtful if all the blame for Wesley's attitude toward Asbury and the American Methodists can be placed on Rankin. After all Wesley himself was notoriously strong willed and independent. He had a habit all his life of listening to the advice and counsel of others and then making up his own mind. And even if Rankin did oppose Asbury's promotion from 1778 on, the fact remains that Wesley did make Asbury his assistant in 1783, did appoint him general superintendent in 1784, and did decline to try to recall him to England in 1787 as Rankin advised. Also, other factors largely beyond the control of Asbury, Wesley and Rankin entered into the situation during and after the Revolution which made it unlikely that the relations between Wesley and Asbury and Wesley and the American Methodists would have been entirely harmonious even if Rankin had not been around. Thus we are forced to conclude that as time passed Asbury should have been less censorious of and more objective in his attitude toward Rankin.

Apparently Asbury was too anxious to clear himself of any blame for Wesley's attitude toward him and the American Methodists. In view of Asbury's own self-confidence, his conviction that he knew better than any other man what to do with and for American Methodism, and his own zest for leadership and power; in view of Wesley's imperious mind and self-confidence; and in view of the conditions prevailing between England and the United States (they fought two wars during Asbury's 45 years in this country), Asbury should have realized that completely smooth and happy relations between himself and Wesley and between British and American Methodism were hardly possible.

Furthermore, since Asbury as he grew older had a sense of history and a conviction that his own mission was apostolic in character, he should have realized that history would write his own name in large letters while that of Rankin would be relegated mostly to the footnotes as just one of the men who happened to be associated with such towering figures as himself and John Wesley.

In closing his long letter, Asbury told Benson that he could make such use of the contents as seemed appropriate to him. Since Asbury already had premonitions of death at the time, he might also have said to Benson that the curtain was descending on his forty-five
year record of dedicated service to the kingdom of God in America, and that he would leave it to posterity to pass such judgment on that record as seemed proper.

Posterity has appraised the man Francis Asbury and his work. He was human and therefore not perfect. But when he died at the home of George Arnold near Fredericksburg, Virginia, on March 31, 1816, he left in his Journal a dramatic record of nearly half a century of prodigious, consecrated labor that amazes all who read it. He bequeathed to the nation and the world the American Methodist Church which to this day bears the stamp of his genius. The annals of church history from the days of St. Paul the Apostle to the present time contain few if any more impressive chronicles of unremitting toil, fuller devotion, more complete self-sacrifice, more grandly inspired ecclesiastical plans, or greater downright achievement for good in the kingdom of God than the story of the life and work of Francis Asbury.