The Election of Bishop McKendree Reconsidered

by Joseph Mitchell

Methodists have often heard that William McKendree, the first American-born bishop, was elected to the episcopacy as the result of a sermon which he preached at the General Conference of 1808. I believe that the story of McKendree’s election has been misunderstood and needs to be reexamined. This process may not only lead to a new understanding of an early election, but it may shed light on the role played by incumbent bishops in subsequent elections.

The traditional story of McKendree’s election has appeared in several written versions during the last one hundred and fifty years. Nathan Bangs, early Methodist historian and a delegate to the 1808 General Conference, wrote the earliest account of McKendree’s election in his unpublished journal, “The Life, Christian Experience, and Gospel Labors of N. Bangs.” This part of Bangs’ journal was probably written in the middle or late eighteen twenties.¹

In his journal, Bangs included several details about the event. McKendree preached the sermon “one Sabbath morning” in Light Street Church, Baltimore. The church was “filled to overflowing” and the “second gallery at the end of the Church” was crowded with “colored people.” McKendree was “dressed in a very ordinary suit of clothes, with a red flannel shirt, which showed a large space between his small clothes and vest, and he appeared more like a poor country backwoodsman than like a preacher of the gospel.” Bangs felt “mortified” that they should appoint such an “ordinary looking man” to preach to the Conference. In his prayer, McKendree “hesitated,” “stammered,” and “seemed at a loss for words to express himself.” His text was from Jeremiah 8: 21, 22, “For the hurt of the daughters of my people am I hurt; I am black; astonishment hath taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?” McKendree described the disease with which mankind is afflicted and then showed the feeling that should be aroused by this understanding. He said that feeling was permitted on patriotic occasions such as the fourth of July.

¹ The original manuscript of Bangs’ journal is in the Drew University Library, Madison, New Jersey. Richard Herrmann, who did a doctoral dissertation on Bangs, has concluded that the part of the journal which tells of McKendree’s election was rewritten, with an eye to eventual publication, in the middle or late 1820’s. Richard Herrmann to Joseph Mitchell, February 1, 1972.
but that all feeling in religion was condemned. He talked with such emphasis about feeling that there was an outpouring from the "Holy One" which swept through the congregation. "A large, athletic looking man was sitting by my side, and he fell to the floor, as if shot through with a cannon ball." Even Bangs was nearly overcome. Bishop Francis Asbury was heard to say, "That sermon will make him a bishop." McKendree had come from the West "covered with a glory he had acquired from attending camp meetings." He had not much learning but was a man of strong intellectual power and acute understanding and was deeply devoted to God. "These things gave him favor in the eyes of the preachers and people, and singled him out for the first office in the gift of the church. . . ." ²

The first published version of the story appeared in 1839, four years after McKendree's death, in Bangs' *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*. In a much shorter account than he had included in his journal, Bangs touched on only a few of the items he had covered in the longer versions, and changed three of these. The sermon was preached on the Sabbath morning "previously to the day of his election" in Light Street Church. It had such an effect on the minds of all present that "they (italics mine) seemed to say, with one accord, 'This is the man of our choice, whom God hath appointed to rule over us.'" McKendree had been very important in the camp meeting movement which had been instrumental in promoting extensive revivals of religion.

And such was the confidence inspired in his wisdom and integrity, in his zeal and prudence in promoting the cause of God, and such a halo of glory seemed to surround his character, that the finger of Providence appeared to point to him as the most suitable person to fill the office of a superintendent.³

In 1863, Abel Stevens, another Methodist historian, published *Life and Times of Nathan Bangs*, D.D. Stevens used Bangs' unpublished journal as a basic source for his biography. In his account of McKendree's election, he followed quite closely the journal, supplementing this with some information from Bangs' *History*.

Stevens' biography copied Bangs' unpublished story about the time, place, congregation, McKendree's dress, Bangs' feelings, McKendree's opening prayer, and text. He deleted Bangs' description of how McKendree developed his sermon, but expanded the description of the impact of the sermon on the congregation.

---

As the preacher advanced in his discourse a mysterious magnetism seemed to emanate from him to all parts of the house; he was absorbed in the interest of his subject; his voice rose gradually till it sounded like a trumpet; at a climactic passage the effect was overwhelming.

Asbury was heard to say, “That sermon on Sunday morning will decide his election.” From Bangs’ History, Stevens took the comment about the “halo of glory” around McKendree’s head and the claim that it was his “piety, wisdom, and successful labors” which had “already directed attention to him as the man for the place.”

This account, then, published almost fifty years after the event, is virtually identical to the unpublished story rewritten by Bangs about twenty years after an event in which he participated.

In 1867, Stevens’ published History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America. From Henry Boehm’s Reminiscences, which had been printed in 1865, Stevens supplied an exact date for the sermon, May 8th, and an exact time, half past ten. The rest of this account is copied from Stevens’ earlier biography of Bangs, but with two important modifications in the concluding paragraph.

McKendree’s general recognition as leader of western Methodism, together with his evident fitness for the episcopal office, doubtless led to his nomination (italics mine); but this remarkable discourse placed his election beyond doubt.

The use of the term “nomination” means that Stevens understood the Sunday discourse to be a kind of “trial sermon” preached by a man who was already widely discussed as a future bishop.

Stevens’ second modification is of more significance.

Asbury had formerly favored Lee’s appointment to the episcopate; McKendree had become endeared to him in the conflicts of the West, and he now saw reason to prefer him even to Lee. The Church had become rich in great and eligible men.

Setting aside the question whether Asbury had indeed ever preferred Jesse Lee of Virginia for the position, it is clear that Stevens understood Francis Asbury’s wishes in the matter of who would be a bishop were very important.

---

5 Abel Stevens, History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1867), IV, 446.
6 Ibid., 444-449.
In 1869, the first biography of William M’Kendree, Life and Times of William M’Kendree, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, was published. It was written by Robert Paine, one of the bishops of the Southern Methodist Church. Paine had been ordained by M’Kendree, and was a great admirer of M’Kendree’s continuation of the Asburyian kind of strong episcopacy. This biography was based, in part, on a diary, some journals, and other papers of M’Kendree. However, M’Kendree did not leave an account of his election to the episcopacy, so Paine had to use other sources for this important part of his biography. Paine mentions only one source by name, Bangs’ History, but his account is far more elaborate than the one which appeared in this work. In fact, it follows very closely the story as told by Stevens, first in his biography of Bangs and then in his History. Paine probably used Stevens’ published version of Bangs unpublished story, but, perhaps because of the ill feeling that characterized virtually all relationships between Southern Methodists and members of the Methodist Episcopal Church at this time, acknowledged a dependence only on Bangs.

Paine’s story is not simply a copying of Stevens’ account. He changed the date of the sermon, the composition of the congregation which heard it, the description of M’Kendree’s clothing, the development of the sermon, and the response to the preaching. He also added a letter from Bishop Thomas Coke to the newly elected Bishop M’Kendree.

According to Paine, the sermon was preached on the Sabbath before the General Conference began rather than the one after it convened. The congregation included, in addition to many strangers and a gallery filled with colored people, “most of the members of the General Conference.” M’Kendree wore “very coarse and homely garments, which he had worn in the woods of the West.” (Paine said nothing about a red flannel shirt.) He began his sermon with an introduction that “appeared tame,” with sentences that were “broken and disjointed” and with “very defective” elocution. At length, he introduced his main subject which was to show the “spiritual disease” of the “Jewish church.” Then he entered upon the second proposition “which was to analyze the feelings which such a state of things awakened in the souls of God’s faithful ambassadors. . . .” M’Kendree then spoke of “the blessed effects upon the heart of the balm which God had prepared for the healing of

---

8 Ibid., 196.
the nations . . . and he soon carried the whole congregation away with him into the regions of experimental religion."

The congregation was instantly overwhelmed with a shower of divine grace from the upper world. At first, sudden shrieks, as of persons in distress, were heard in different parts of the house, then shouts of praise, and in every direction sobs and groans. The eyes of the people overflowed with tears, while many were prostrated upon the floor or lay helpless on the seats. A very large, athletic-looking preacher, sitting by my side, suddenly fell upon his seat, as if pierced by a bullet and I felt my heart melting under emotions which I could not resist.

After this sudden shower, the clouds were dispersed, and the Sun of righteousness shone out most serenely and delightfully, producing upon all a present consciousness of the divine approbation; and when the preacher descended from the pulpit, all were filled with admiration of his talents, and were ready to "magnify the grace of God in him," as a chosen messenger of good tidings to the lost—saying in their hearts, "This is the man whom God delights to honor."  

Paine, like Bangs and Stevens before him, reported that Asbury said this sermon would make McKendree a bishop, adding that this "prophecy" was verified by his election on the 12th of May. He concluded his story of the election with a copy of a letter which Thomas Coke wrote to McKendree on October 5, 1808. Coke wrote not to "congratulate" McKendree "for I believe you regard not office nor honor any further than you may serve God thereby," but to express his regard for him and his pleasure at McKendree's being united to his "old and venerable brother, Asbury, in the great work" in which he was engaged.  

A second biography of McKendree was published in 1924. It, too, was written by a bishop of the Southern Methodist Church, E. E. Hoss. Claiming to base his work on Bangs' History and Paine's Biography, Hoss actually used Paine's book for his primary source, supplementing it at one point with some information from Stevens. For example, Hoss made the same mistake that Paine did with regard to the date of the sermon, writing that it was preached on the Sunday before the General Conference began rather than the Sunday after it convened. Hoss, an arch-segregationist, did not mention, as had all the previous writers, that the congregation to

---

9 Ibid., 193-199.
10 Ibid., 199-202.
which McKendree preached included a gallery filled with colored people. He did include the fact, which Paine had left out, about McKendree's red flannel shirt but dramatized its significance by writing that it “became distinctly visible” when McKendree “grew animated” in his preaching. The remainder of this version was taken almost word by word from Paine's biography.  

The story of McKendree's election has appeared in other twentieth century Methodist writings, but in much briefer forms. In his collection of materials on Methodist bishops, Bishop Frederick DeLand Leete wrote simply that McKendree “preached at his first General Conference, 1808, so powerfully that Asbury said, ‘That sermon will make McKendree bishop.’ It did.”  13 In the three volume History of American Methodism, the election is put in the context of the General Conference debate over the establishment of a delegated General Conference and the discussion of whether or not a diocesan type of episcopacy should be established. The author of this section, Frederick Norwood, says that McKendree's election was “epoch making” and that McKendree was a “rough but powerful figure” who “amazed the congregation in Light Street Church when he preached in homemade clothes fresh from the western frontier” and who “brought everyone to the realization that there was a new leader of a new generation.”  14 In a recent issue of Methodist History, Albea Godbold wrote that “William McKendree was elected bishop in 1808 after many of the General Conference delegates heard him deliver a powerful sermon.”  15

No matter how the story has been told, Methodists have understood it to be saying that McKendree was elected a bishop as a result of a sermon which he preached at a General Conference. But is this what the story says? Indeed, it is possible to understand the story in quite another way. For light on this question, we are indebted to the New Testament form critic, Vincent Taylor. Taylor has written that stories in the gospels can be divided into “stories” and “pronouncement stories.” In the latter, the narrative part simply provides a kind of setting for one of Jesus' teachings and it is the “pronouncement” rather than the details of the story that is important. I believe the story of McKendree's election is really a Methodist “pronouncement story.” Then its meaning is not to be found in the

---

12 Ibid., 106-111.  
details about when, where, to whom the sermon was preached. It is not to be found even in the description of the sermon and the response of the congregation to it. The meaning is to be found in the "pronouncement" that stands at the end of the story. "Asbury was heard to say, 'that sermon will make him a bishop.'" The story tells not how a sermon made McKendree a bishop but how Francis Asbury made McKendree a bishop by pronouncing his evaluation of a sermon, and, more importantly, his estimate of a man who preached the sermon.

This interpretation of how McKendree came to be a bishop does not rest merely on the claim that the well-known story of his election is a "pronouncement story." It is also supported by an examination of the "situation in life" and two claims about that situation. First, Francis Asbury wanted William McKendree to be elected bishop. Second, Francis Asbury was able to get the delegates to the 1808 General Conference to elect the man of his choice.

It seems that Francis Asbury first met William McKendree shortly after the Christmas Conference in 1784. McKendree was born in King William County, Virginia, in 1757, and, like Asbury, had very limited schooling. He joined a Methodist society when he was nineteen but was then "thoroughly converted" when he was thirty. This conversion came under the preaching of John Easter on the Brunswick Circuit in Southside Virginia. A year later, in 1788, he joined the Virginia Conference and was appointed helper on the Mecklenburg Circuit, also in Southside Virginia.16

During the first four years of his ministry, McKendree’s presiding elder was James O’Kelly, whom he accompanied to the 1792 General Conference. Not only did McKendree go with O’Kelly to that Conference, he left with him when the Conference overwhelmingly rejected O’Kelly’s proposal to give ministers the right to appeal their appointments to the annual conference.17

When the General Conference adjourned on November 15, 1792, Asbury left Baltimore and a few days later met the Virginia preachers at Manchester, a few miles south of Richmond. At this Conference McKendree’s written resignation from the ministry was given to Asbury, but the absent McKendree was still appointed to the Norfolk Circuit. A few days later, on his way south to North Carolina, Asbury met McKendree and convinced him to withdraw his resignation and go to his appointment.18 Thus began a personal association between Asbury and McKendree that climaxed with McKendree’s election as the fourth American Methodist bishop.

17 Ibid., 138.
18 Ibid., 141.
In late 1793, after preaching in Norfolk and on the Union Circuit for about a year, McKendree rode with Asbury from Virginia to South Carolina. He spent part of 1794 on a circuit in South Carolina and then returned to Virginia to the Bottetourt Circuit. In 1795, the thirty-eight-year-old McKendree, a traveling preacher for only six years, was made presiding elder over a Virginia district, and thus became one of Asbury's trusted lieutenants. This happened a mere three years after McKendree had apparently left Methodism.  

From 1795 to 1800, McKendree served districts in the Virginia and Baltimore Annual Conferences. On more than ten occasions Asbury heard McKendree preach, so that the 1808 sermon was not a new experience for Asbury. McKendree attended the 1800 General Conference, which, among other things, elected Richard Whatcoat to the episcopacy. McKendree was not very active in the public debates of that Conference, but he did serve on one committee that drafted a pastoral letter on slavery.  

In late 1800, McKendree was appointed presiding elder of the Kentucky District. The Western Conference, consisting of the states of Kentucky and Tennessee and made up of one district, had been created by the General Conference of 1796. By 1800, there were about 3,500 Methodists in the region. Appointed to serve with McKendree in 1800 were fourteen preachers. McKendree arrived in the west just in time to share in the great revival which was characterized by the widespread use of camp meetings. By 1808, there were five districts in the Western Conference, with more than sixty preachers and sixteen thousand members. When neither Whatcoat nor Asbury could make it to the 1804 Annual Conference, McKendree was elected to preside over the Conference, conducting all the business except ordination. For these eight years, then, McKendree was virtually bishop of the west.  

Occasional references in Asbury's *Letters and Journal* also suggest the growing closeness between McKendree and Asbury. Perhaps the clearest indication of Asbury's feeling for William McKendree is found in a letter which Asbury wrote to Edward Dromgoole, a

---

19 Ibid., 144-145.
20 Ibid., 144-147.
22 *Journals of the General Conference, 1796-1838* (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1855), 39, 41. The other members of the Committee were Jesse Lee and Ezekiel Cooper.
24 Ibid., 312.
25 Ibid., 258.
local preacher in Virginia, on February 11, 1807. Richard Whatcoat had died in July, 1806, leaving the entire episcopal responsibility on Asbury's shoulders. (Thomas Coke spent most of his time outside of the States and had never provided resident episcopal supervision.) Before Whatcoat's death, a proposal had been made that a special General Conference, made up of seven delegates from each of the seven annual conferences, be convened in order to elect a successor. This plan, as endorsed, if not proposed, by Asbury, had been soundly defeated in the Virginia annual conference. At the same time, some of the ministers were beginning to talk about changing the episcopacy from a general to a diocesan one, but Asbury would have none of this.

Asbury began his letter to Dromgoole with a description of the thousands that had been added to the church, largely as the result of camp meetings. He then told him of the plan to strengthen the superintendency which had been defeated by the action of the Virginia conference. “I have done what I thought, but if I am called away ere long, and all the conferences become separate and independent, I am clear.” Asbury believed, with some justification, that the Methodists could be held together only as long as there was a general superintendency. Asbury had wished to give up some of the work he had to do, but he considered himself “a servant, and a martyr, if need be to the cause of God,” so he would not draw back from his responsibilities. “One thing is and will be secured. We are missionaries, while I move others will. . . .” After telling Dromgoole he would be pleased if he wrote him, Asbury referred to William McKendree.

I enclose a ten dollar bill for Father McKendree, sent by dear Billy (italics mine). I suppose it is good, but you will keep the number. I

26 Edward Dromgoole was a local preacher living on the Greensville Circuit in Virginia; he had traveled from 1774 to 1780 and from 1783 to 1786. J. Manning Potts, Elmer T. Clark, and Jacob S. Payton, editors, op. cit., III, 363.

27 Whatcoat had been elected bishop in 1800. Most of his time had been devoted to preaching and he rarely shared with Asbury in the business of making appointments. See L. C. Rudolph, Francis Asbury (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), 212.

28 Coke spent only about three years in the United States between 1784, when he and Asbury were elected superintendents, and 1808. See John Vickers, Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), passim.

29 J. Manning Potts, Elmer T. Clark, and Jacob S. Payton, editors, op. cit., II, 506, 508, 530.

30 See letter from Francis Asbury to Nelson Reed, December 10, 1807; letter from Daniel Hitt to Nelson Reed, December 10, 1807; and letter from Francis Asbury to Elijah Hedding, December 14, 1807 in J. Manning Potts, Elmer T. Clark, and Jacob S. Payton, editors, op. cit., III, 377-381.
took it from the South Conference. Billy was well and doing well, he sees as do others with me.\textsuperscript{31}

In a letter filled with complaints and uncomplimentary remarks about the actions of some of the preachers, Asbury’s references to “dear Billy” were highly suggestive of his feeling for William McKendree on the eve of the 1808 General Conference.

But simply because Asbury liked McKendree did not necessarily mean that he wanted him to be a bishop. Certainly there were other preachers that Asbury liked and who, perhaps as importantly, thought as he thought on questions of church polity. When the 1808 General Conference convened, there were fewer than 600 traveling ministers in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and only about half of these had travelled as many as four years.\textsuperscript{32} Some 129 of the four-year men actually attended the General Conference of 1808.\textsuperscript{33} We may safely assume that any new bishops would be chosen from this smaller group that gathered in Baltimore in May of that year.

While we have no information about which men were discussed prior to the actual balloting in 1808, we do have the names of those who received votes in this important election, and related developments at the Conference clearly show which of these men Asbury preferred. McKendree received 95 of the 128 votes cast and was elected. In a distant second, with 24 votes, was Ezekiel Cooper, Book Agent of the Church, a member of the New York Conference. Jesse Lee, veteran member of the Virginia Conference who had come within a single vote of election to the episcopacy in 1800, had four votes; Thomas Ware, who had been at the Christmas Conference in 1784 and had served in the West as well as in and around his home state of New Jersey, a member of the Philadelphia Conference, had 3 votes; and Daniel Hitt, who had travelled with Asbury in 1807, a member of the Baltimore Conference, had 2 votes.\textsuperscript{34} It would seem then that McKendree’s only competition was Ezekiel Cooper. But Cooper would never have been Asbury’s choice for the episcopacy. Not only had he been out of the preaching ministry for almost a decade (he had been Book Agent since 1799), but he represented a group within the Church who felt its future was with a settled pastorate in the cities of the country. Furthermore, Cooper was the leader of the movement for a diocesan episcopacy, a change which

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., III, 363-365.
\textsuperscript{32} Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York: Mason and Lane, 1840), I, 1773-1828.
\textsuperscript{34} See unpublished Minutes of the 1808 General Conference at the Baltimore Conference Historical Society, Lovely Lane Museum, Baltimore, Maryland.
Asbury believed would be the end of American Methodism. There can be no doubt that McKendree, not Cooper, was Asbury's personal preference for the episcopacy.\textsuperscript{35}

But, of course, Asbury did not have the formal authority to make McKendree a bishop. This power was finally in the hands of the delegates to the General Conference.\textsuperscript{36} Could Asbury get them to elect the man of his choice? Did he have the power to sway the authority? The Conference’s answer to the question of reorganizing the episcopacy indicates that Asbury did have this power.

As early as December, 1807, a plan for dividing the Methodist Episcopal Church into dioceses with a bishop for each diocese, making Asbury a kind of archbishop, was being generally discussed among Methodists. In this same period, Asbury was voicing his objection to the proposed change. In December, 1807, he wrote to Nelson Reed, presiding elder of the Baltimore district:

\begin{quote}
I am not at liberty to say what I will do, 6 conferences, to meet this winter, in 4 months. Oh what a toil! But I sincerely think I shall never be an arch superintendant much less an arch Bishop. Rather like great George Washington, let me peaceably retire and lay my commission at the feet of the General Conference, and after the rapid race from 16 to 63, be supernumerary, superannuated or located.

I have had very little upon paper; (more from you than any one) about the Superintendency, those that have talked with, think as I think, as followers, that there should be one, two or three of the most confidential men of the American connection, elected by the General Conference, to locate these men annually to the seven conferences and that they should do their best to attend every conference, and all that are or shall be in the union, every year; and visit the seventeen states
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} Cooper, however, was the choice of Thomas Coke. See letter from Coke to Cooper, September 8, 1808 at Garrett Theological Seminary.

\textsuperscript{36} In the first \textit{Discipline} of the Methodist Episcopal Church, two slightly different ways for choosing superintendents for the Church were given. In a note on Question 26, which described the Office of a Superintendent, it was stated that “no person shall be ordained a Superintendent, Elder or Deacon, without the Consent of a Majority of the Conference and the Consent and Imposition of Hands of a Superintendent. . . .” Had this pattern been followed, Methodist superintendents might have been picked by a process involving nomination by the incumbent superintendents and then confirmation of these nominations by the Conference. However, Question 29 of the first \textit{Discipline} outlined another procedure for the selection of bishops. “If by Death, Expulsion or otherwise there be no Superintendent remaining in our Church, what shall we do? The Conference shall elect a Superintendant, and the Elders or any three of them shall ordain him according to our Liturgy.” In the third \textit{Discipline}, published in 1787, the note to question 26 was eliminated and a slightly different version of Question 29 made its appearance. “How is a Bishop constituted? By the election of a Majority of the Conference, and the laying on of Hands of a Bishop, and the elders present.”
and ten (territories) as oft as possible, and have their eyes and ears in every part of the Connection. This is the true Wesleyan Superintendence, this is the essence of the General Assistancy, this was formed in the constitution of 1784 and has been in operation ever since.37

Between the writing of this letter and the convening of the General Conference, Asbury met the preachers in the South Carolina, Virginia, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and New England Annual Conferences.38 It is safe to assume that one of the issues he discussed with them was the nature of the episcopacy and his own strong convictions in favor of a general superintendency.

The debate on the episcopacy at the General Conference of 1808 began on Tuesday, May 10. The real argument was between those who wanted to elect one or two new bishops who would have equal authority and power with Asbury and those who wanted to choose six new bishops, whom Asbury would supervise as a kind of archbishop. Discussion of this issue continued for parts of three days, with more than twenty men participating in the debate. The only real support for the new plan came from delegates from the New York and Philadelphia Annual Conferences. Ezekiel Cooper was the most important spokesman for this group. He seconded the motion which called for a total of seven bishops and closed the debate for the reformers. Allied against them, and with Asbury, were at least twelve of the leading members of most of the annual conferences. The vote finally came on Thursday afternoon about 3 o'clock. With Francis Asbury in the chair, only sixteen men, all of them from the Philadelphia and New York Annual Conferences and many of them veteran preachers, voted for seven bishops.38 Asbury, as usual, had prevailed. The General Conference then voted almost unanimously to elect one new bishop. Balloting began immediately, with the results indicated above.

Asbury was against a diocesan episcopacy. The General Conference of 1808 voted overwhelmingly against such an episcopacy and

37 J. Manning Potts, Elmer T. Clark, and Jacob S. Payton, editors, op. cit., III, 377-78.
38 Ibid., II, 563, 565, 566, 567, 568.
39 See the unpublished Minutes of the 1808 General Conference. Frederick A. Norwood has written that this same manuscript journal "records that McKendree himself favored Cooper's plan for seven bishops and wanted Asbury to be one of them along with six others." [See "The Church Takes Shape" in The History of American Methodism (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), 477.] However, the passage on which Norwood bases this claim is almost illegible. My own reading of the passage is that McKendree did say he believed Mr. Asbury was ready to relinquish some of his power and might consent to be one of seven bishops but that he (McKendree) was of the opinion that only 1 or 2 more bishops should be elected. What is absolutely clear in this manuscript is that McKendree was not one of the sixteen men who voted for the Cooper plan.
then, with hardly a pause, elected Asbury’s personal choice as bishop.

It would seem then that no sermon made McKendree bishop. Francis Asbury made him bishop, using McKendree’s sermon to make the pronouncement about his preference for the position. That this was the case is conclusively demonstrated by Asbury’s comment in his Journal about the 1808 General Conference’s decision. He wrote that the Conference did little except change the rule for representation for future General Conferences and elect William McKendree “assistant bishop” (italics mine).40

John Wesley chose Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury to be the first superintendents of American Methodism and then told them what he had done; the Christmas Conference of 1784 simply ratified his action. Francis Asbury nominated William McKendree to be his assistant in 1808, using a preaching service to make known his choice; the General Conference then confirmed his nomination. Since that day, incumbent bishops, denied the privilege of direct participation in the election of other bishops, have had to find their own ways of accomplishing what Wesley and Asbury did, but the discussion of these actions will have to be postponed until another day.

40 J. Manning Potts, Elmer T. Clark, and Jacob S. Payton, editors, op. cit., II, 569-70.