Francis Asbury and Jacob Albright

by John B. Warman

It is my intent to look at the life of Jacob Albright side by side with that of Francis Asbury; to compare these two giants of the founding days of our nation and our church and to observe the similarities and differences. I do this because I feel it advisable that we take every opportunity to tie together the two great strands of the United Methodist heritage.

If, when all is concluded, you feel that I have dealt fairly and kindly with these so great ones, I will expect you to give me unusual credit. I am a child of the Methodist Protestant heritage. It was only with great difficulty that we spoke of bishops at all; let alone to say anything favorable about them. I was raised to think about tyrants, dictators, and bishops under one category. Albright and Asbury illustrate how very wrong that was.

Francis Asbury and Jacob Albright were of the same generation, with Albright being the younger by some fourteen years. Asbury was born in 1745 about four miles from Birmingham, England, the child of an English gardener and his wife. Jacob Albright was born in 1759; his parents were German-speaking, Evangelical Lutherans. Their farm was at Fox Mountain, three miles northwest of Pottstown, Pennsylvania.

When grown, the two men had certain similarities in appearance. Albright was taller than medium size, slender in build, and very graceful in movement. He had deep set blue eyes, a slightly bent nose, black hair but with a very fair complexion. Asbury was about the same height, five foot, nine inches. He was more rugged of body and of features, muscular from having spent his youth as apprentice to a blacksmith. He had a large mouth matched by a prominent nose. His eyes, too, were blue, deep set behind bushy brows and long eyelashes.

Both men were helped to conversion by a response to tragedy. For Asbury, tragedy's blow was light and glancing. For Albright, the tragedy was poignant and personal.

In Asbury's case, the only other child in the family, his sister, Sarah, was taken by death in infancy. The young parents, Joseph and Elizabeth, touched by this sorrow, began to consider the things of God. They opened their home and their hearts to the itinerant Methodist preachers. Thus as a boy, little Franky was made aware of the claims of God and of the need for conversion. At about age fourteen, he was awakened to his soul's deep need. He began to attend as many religious meetings as he could discover and walk to. He saw the Spirit fall upon others, but could not find it for himself and he wondered. Then, not in any meeting at all, but in private prayer in his father's barn, Francis found the sense of joy and forgiveness he had long sought and knew himself as a child of God.
For Jacob Albright the way was longer and the valley of the shadow far deeper. He was raised in the fellowship of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, learned his catechism, and was received into membership but without a religious experience of his own. When the Revolutionary War broke out he volunteered and served with honor. His brother, Ludwig, was killed in battle. He became a maker of brick and tile and earned the reputation of "an honest tiler." When he was twenty-six years of age, he married Catherine Cope. They were to have nine children, only three of whom lived to maturity. The young couple were hard working and happy, but in 1790 illness struck and several of their children died. Jacob was bleak and desolate of spirit and felt himself under the judgment of God. A minister of the Reformed Church, Anton Hautz, held the funeral and, being himself a converted man, spoke freely of the Gospel, and the heart of Jacob was touched. He became a seeker after God's pardon. It was a long and difficult search. Albright said of this time, "The feeling of my unworthiness increased daily, until finally, in my thirty-third year, upon a certain day in the month of July, 1791, it reached a crisis which bordered on despair. . . . As my heart realized this keen sense of sorrow, and as this resolution to reform passed before my soul, then I also felt the need of prayer. . . . I fell upon my knees, and tears of bitter sorrow flowed down my cheeks, and a lengthy and fervent prayer ascended to the throne of God for grace and the remission of my sins." 1 His prayer was answered, but only in part; he escaped despair, but he had not yet found joy. He continued to seek help from God and man. He visited a man named Adam Riegel, a preacher without a denomination. The two men explored the Scriptures and shared in prayer, and, in the house of Adam Riegel, Jacob Albright passed from death to spiritual life and received the assurance of the Holy Spirit that he was a child of God.

It was grief that unlocked the door to grace both for Asbury and for Albright, but Albright's journey was longer and the grief more terrible. Both found grace and gladness and both became witnesses to the power and the love of God.

Shortly after his conversion experience Francis Asbury became a local preacher in the Methodist societies. Of that time, he said, "Behold me now a local preacher!—[a boy—15 or 16] the humble and willing servant of any and of every preacher that called on me by night or by day; being ready, with hasty steps, to go far and wide to do good, visiting Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire, and, indeed, almost every place within my reach, for the sake of precious souls; preaching generally, three, four, and five times a week, and at the same time pursuing my calling [of blacksmithing]." 2 He was a local preacher

for about five years. When he was 21 or 22 years of age, he gave up his trade and entered the full-time itinerant ministry. After another five years, in 1771, in the “New Room in the Horse Fair” at Bristol he offered himself and was accepted by Mr. Wesley as a missionary to America—and so was assigned by the Conference to Methodist Circuit number 50, which was the whole continent of North America. Asbury became very much an American. When the Revolution came he made his decision and chose America. Asbury’s calling to preach was from the very beginning within the context of a gathered society, an already established institution.

For Jacob Albright, it was not so. While he was a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, his training and experience in that fellowship were not major factors in either his conversion or his call to preach. He was awakened to his soul’s need in the comparative privacy of a family funeral held in his own home. He was convicted of sin and granted some assurance while in private prayer in a barn. He gained the blessing of the Holy Spirit in the private home of a preacher without a denomination. So, too, his call to preach came while he engaged in private prayer. His preaching was not under the aegis of an institution; but by his preaching the institution was called into being.

After his conversion, Jacob Albright looked for a fellowship of faith in which he could nourish and feed his growing faith. He felt the Lutheran Church to be too formal and too critical of his newly won enthusiasm. In his search for a warmer fellowship he found the Methodists. He joined the Class which held its meetings in the house of Isaac Davies, whose farm adjoined Albright’s. Nevertheless, the Methodist society could not meet all of Albright’s spiritual needs. He had taught himself the English language, but it was his second language and he found it difficult to participate fully in the Methodist services all held in English. Moreover he had a great and growing compassion for his unconverted German-speaking neighbors whom he saw as sheep without a shepherd. It was out of this concern and compassion that his call to preach came. Listen to Jacob Albright as he himself tells the story:

"A burning love to God and all his children . . . pervaded my being. Through this love, which the peace of God shed abroad in my heart, I came to see the great decline of true religion among the Germans in America, and felt their sad condition very keenly. I saw in all men, even in the deeply depraved, the creative hand of the Almighty. I recognized them as my brethren, and heartily desired that they might be as happy as I was. In this state of mind I frequently cast myself upon my knees, and implored God with burning tears, that he might lead my German brethren into a knowledge of the truth, that he would send them true and exemplary teachers, who would preach the Gospel in its power . . . that they, too, might become partakers of the blessed peace with God and the fellowship of the saints in light. In this way I prayed daily for the welfare of my brethren. And while I thus held intercourse with God, all at once it
seemed to become light in my soul; I heard, as it were, a voice within, saying: 'Was it mere chance that the wretched condition of your brethren affected your heart so much? . . . . Is not the hand of Him visible here, whose wisdom guides the destiny of individuals, as well as that of nations? What, if his infinite love, . . . had chosen you, to lead your brethren into the path of life?' . . . I heard, as it were, the voice of God: 'Go, work in my vineyard; proclaim to my people the Gospel in its primitive purity,' . . . .' 3 That was Jacob Albright's call to preach.

Francis Asbury received his call to preach from within a gathered society of believers and his call was to be a missionary engaged in the extension of that society across a continent. Jacob Albright received his call to preach while he was as one without a shepherd, himself outside the gathered fold. His commission was to seek those others who had no shepherd and to call them into a new fold that they might no longer be lost and lone. These two calls—the call to serve and extend the Church and the call to seek and to serve lost persons—are both part of our heritage and to be true to the best we know we must hold them both together, failing neither the one nor the other.

As with the two calls, so with the two itinerancies. Listen as Ezra Tipple speaks of the journeys of Asbury: "Take an atlas and follow him on the map as he makes a typical journey. Leaving New York in the early part of September, he proceeds by Philadelphia, Wilmington, Baltimore, Alexandria, Petersburg, and Norfolk in Virginia; Raleigh, North Carolina; and Charleston, South Carolina, to Washington in Georgia. Returning through South Carolina, he enters North Carolina; passes on to the western counties; crosses the mountains to the Holston River, in Tennessee; plunges into the Kentucky wilderness as far as Lexington; returns to the Holston; passes up the west side of the Alleghenies, over a most mountainous region, through the whole breadth of Virginia, to Uniontown in Pennsylvania; crosses the Alleghenies by Laurel Hill and Cumberland to Baltimore; goes on to New York; proceeds directly through Connecticut and Massachusetts to Lynn; passes west across the valley of the Connecticut, by Northampton, and over the Berkshire Hills by Pittsfield, to Albany, and then down the valley of the Hudson to New York, where he arrives on the 28th of August, 1792. In later years his episcopal circuit was even more extended." 4 How widespread! How far flung! Year by year widening the borders and extending the Church—the work of a missionary.

By comparison how circumscribed in both years and geography were the labors of Jacob Albright. Asbury came to America in 1771 and immediately began to travel and continued so until his death in 1816—a total of 45 years. Jacob Albright did not begin his travels until near the

3 Yeakel, op. cit., pp. 48-49.
4 Tipple, op. cit., pp. 162-163.
end of 1796 and he died, while yet a young man, in 1808. In those twelve years he sometimes visited Virginia, where many German families had moved, but primarily he labored in Pennsylvania. He first established his work in Lancaster, Dauphin, and Berks Counties and later, led by the Holy Spirit, traveled in Bucks, Northampton, Northumberland, and Centre Counties. There he was the evangelist to those German peoples who were, because of language, neglected by the other evangelical bodies. In that region—narrow as it was—and in that time—brief as it was—Albright won more than three hundred conversions. These were his sheep and he knew their names, the state of their families, and the condition of their souls. In this large parish, for so it was, he came again and again to his own: he was pastor to those who had no pastor. That they came spontaneously to speak of themselves as "Albright's People" reveals the warmth of the pastoral bond.

Asbury moved in the large circle; Albright in the small. The work of Asbury was extensive as he labored in missionary fashion to spread Scriptural holiness across the land. The work of Albright was intensive as he labored to make lives holy, to deepen and warm the spiritual lives of those who had no other pastor. Our Church needs both the wide circle of Asbury and the deep spirituality of Albright.

There is a strange anomaly. Asbury's name shines brightest among those on the Methodist side of our heritage, but his influence is limited to the American branch of our Church. Not so with Jacob Albright. Last May, when Mrs. Warman and I were in Germany, one of the places we visited was the Jacob Albright Retreat House. The man, whose life and labors centered in this section of Pennsylvania, raised up a people who carried the Gospel in his name back to their homeland.

Francis Asbury lived and died a bachelor. The Church was his only wife and all his children. There had been a girl in England, but neither her mother nor his approved of the match and it never came to be. Once in America the work claimed his whole life—"What woman," he said, "would put up with a husband who was home but one week of fifty-two?"

Jacob Albright was husband and father and despite his travels, was faithful to his family responsibilities. Historians have not been kind to Catherine Cope Albright. Jacob once said to a friend, "It makes a person feel sad, to go out into the world to preach repentance and conversion, when one's own family is yet unconverted, but I still have hope for my Sarah [daughter]." Yet Catherine must have been a remarkable woman. She managed the family, ran the farm, and, in her husband's absence, handled the sale of brick and tile. Periodically, Jacob would return from his travels, make a batch of brick and tile, and leave them for his wife to sell. When he died, at age forty-nine, he left an estate of nearly four thousand dollars—a very goodly sum for that day; he and Catherine must both have managed well. She was never happy with his itinerancy, but what wife and mother would be happy about frequent, long continued
absences and labors that wore away his life before its normal time. Catherine never joined her husband’s movement. Grief drove Jacob to questionings and spiritual search. Catherine’s grief, we may suppose, was as great and deep, but she was more of an accepting nature. Her Reformed Church was sufficient for her soul’s need. The tension was there, but so was the love; and the marriage endured.

The early Methodist preachers were single men and for them marriage meant the end of itinerancy. The early Evangelical preachers knew what it was to hold in tension the respective claims of calling and of family. Then and now, the ordained ministry is a calling that demands such time and effort that it is hard to balance with the conflicting claims of family life. Catherine had often to be both mother and father to her brood. Jacob had to bear the loneliness of not sharing the lives of his children; sons Jacob and David and daughter Sarah. Many a pastor shares that loneliness.

Both Francis and Jacob labored long as laymen in the Church. At the Christmas Conference of 1784, Asbury was ordained deacon one day and elder the next, and consecrated as Superintendent the day following. Albright was ordained by his peers in 1803; seven years after he commenced his traveling ministry and only five years before his death. The certificate attesting to that ordination is an interesting one for what it says of the character of the one being ordained. It reads, “We, the undersigned, as Evangelical and Christian friends, declare and recognize Jacob Albright as a truly Evangelical minister in word and deed, and a believer in the universal Christian Church, and the communion of saints. To this we testify as brethren and elders of his society. Given in the State of Pennsylvania, the 5th of November 1803.” Signed by John Walter, A. Liesser, and 14 others. Friend-believer—brother—minister evangelical in word and deed; this is high praise. It was just such an ordination as that of Paul and Barnabas—as R. Yeakel reminds us.5

Asbury and Albright both are evidence that God speaks through committed lives without tarrying for the laying on of human hands. It is the common glory of the strands of our heritage that there is no false dichotomy between laity and clergy.

In 1816, at the conclusion of the Tennessee Conference, Asbury set out for Baltimore where the General Conference was to be held. Ezra Squier Tipple says, “after the adjournment of the Conference, the Man Without a Home started on the Long Road once more. He could not go home—he had no home; so he just kept going.” 6 But not for long. On Sunday, March 31, 1816 after a quiet worship service in his sick room, he inquired after a “mite subscription” to provide for the superannuated

5 Yeakel, op. cit., p. 88 ff.
6 Tipple, op. cit., p. 292.
preachers, and then quietly left the long road for his heavenly home. When he was consecrated in 1784, the Methodist Episcopal Church had 80 preachers and a membership of 15,000. When Asbury died there were 500 traveling and 2,000 local preachers and a hundred and forty thousand (140,000) members. The missionary, Francis Asbury had extended the Church.

Eight years earlier Jacob Albright had similarly ended his labors. He was on his way home from Linglestown in Dauphin County when he became too ill (from "quick consumption") to travel further. He stopped at Muehlbach (now Klinefeltersville) at the home of George Becker. As he entered the house he said, "Have you my bed ready, I have come to die." A few days later he bade his friends farewell. R. Yeakel says, "He gratefully praised his Maker for his providential care over him, and for the guidance of his hand, through which he was led to experience peace and joy, and a living hope through faith in God. No one present remained unaffected." It was said "... during the time he bade adieu to his friends with great joy, the house seemed to be filled with the power of God." It was the 18th of May, 1808.

Jacob Albright had called into being a Church fashioned from lives neglected by older communions. He died in trust that God would preserve that which God had planned. Earlier he had told John Dreisbach: "If it is the will of God that you should be and remain a Church, then he will also provide for you in this respect: men will appear among you who will be able to accomplish that which I shall not be able to do. It is the work of God, and it is in his hands, he will also provide for it." 

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7 Yeakel, op. cit., p. 117.
8 Ibid., p. 103.