LOST LETTERS OF BISHOP ASBURY

ROBERT DREW SIMPSON

More than 40 years ago while doing research for my Ph.D. dissertation on the life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson, I found a tantalizing note in Abel Stevens' Sketches From the Study of a Superannuated Itinerant, published in 1853. The note referred to a collection of letters and autographs which Stevens had seen in the Garrettson mansion at Rhinecliff, NY. He reported seeing a collection of letters to Garrettson from many early Methodist leaders, including John Wesley and Francis Asbury, as well as letters and autographs from “national heroes” who frequently corresponded with Catherine Livingston Garrettson’s prominent family. He reported that this part of the collection included letters from both George and Martha Washington.

To have at hand hitherto unknown letters from early Methodist leaders would obviously be a significant resource. But after careful research, I concluded that this collection had either been broken up or lost.

Two years ago, however, Elizabeth Swain, the archivist at Olin Library, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut told me of a collection of Garrettson letters at the Wesleyan University Library. A close examination of these letters proved them to be the lost collection which had gone unexamined for more than 125 years. The letters preserved in two leatherbound scrapbooks, proved to be the letters to Garrettson from 33 Methodist leaders. Elsewhere in the library through the Livingston connection, are 115 letters and autographs from national and international leaders including seven Presidents of the United States.

Most interesting to me were the 9 unpublished, indeed, lost letters of Bishop Francis Asbury written to his intimate friend and “son in the Gospel,” Freeborn Garrettson. The letters were written over a period of 29 years—1785, 1786, 1791, 1803, 1805, 1811, and 1814 only one year before his death. They are significant because they reveal Asbury’s personal attitudes and actions respecting several aspects of church and ministry. Excerpts from these letters document his views and are especially useful because he wrote in a frank, intimate manner. Garrettson was one of Asbury’s closest personal friends. It was Asbury’s preaching that helped convert him, and the Garrettson home in Rhinecliff, New York became

99
a second home to Asbury, who called it "Traveler's Rest." Indeed, in one of his letters Asbury calls Garrettson "My dear Son" (January 5, 1811).

Of course, it is the substance of these lost letters that is most significant for contemporary Methodists. Immediately one is struck by the frequent instances of advice and counsel Asbury offers concerning the practice of ministry and directions for the development of the Methodist work.

The first two letters—September 2, 1785 and September, 1786—were written from New York City when Garrettson and Joseph Cromwell were serving in Nova Scotia as the first missionaries appointed outside the United States by the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church. These letters offer particular insight into Asbury's views concerning how the outreach of the church in a mission setting might be more effective. Near the top of Asbury's list is a warning to stay clear of controversy. This was not easy advice for Garrettson to follow given the political tensions growing out of the American Revolution and the religious opinions rife in that period. Many persons in Nova Scotia were of British origins or were Loyalists who had fled the colonies. As a matter of fact strong attempts were made to label Garrettson a Loyalist in order to discredit his efforts. The appeal Asbury makes for organization is also an interesting emphasis. His strong urging that Garrettson confer regularly with co-workers, that circuits be organized and that the results of the work be reported in the American Minutes shows Asbury's confidence in structure and order. He counseled Garrettson in the letter of September 2, 1785:

We must expect to meet with difficulties in planting the pure gospel in a new Country when the Tares have been scattered first. You have nothing to do but to maintain the purity and power of the doctrine of Christ with as little controversy as possible, both in publick, and private. . . . Perhaps it might be well for you to meet together, and sit in a little Conference, lay out your work in circuits, take the numbers, send a regular account to our Conference to be printed with our Minutes. Our last Minutes were incomplete. The Dr. [Coke] went off in such hast that he carried away some of the papers.

But for all the interest in the Nova Scotian mission Asbury appears to have had some strong reservations about the future support for such work. His letter continues:

I have paid for the Books you carried with you. We received and expended near, yea upwards of 300 pounds last Conference, and were greatly straightened on account of Eighty pounds expended in Missions. If they want preachers for the future in Nova Scotia they must support them, or they must come Home. We cannot pay their expenses, and support them while there.

More preachers were needed in America. Not only were the preachers spread thin to carry on the ever expanding work on the eastern seaboard and west of the Alleghenies, but Asbury carried the episcopal supervision alone until 1800 when Richard Whatcoat was elected bishop. This was an obvious pressure for Asbury as he said later in this letter: "I am clear we must make as many Deacons and Elders as we can with propriety and consistent with our form of Church government." And then he outlined
his ideal plan for Methodist organization, a plan never to be realized: “Every Deacon should have the special charge of one Circuit, an Elder of three, a Bishop, a diocese of six Circuits, then everything would be in place, and the people well supplied with ordinances.”

Closing the letter of 1785, Asbury offered a kind of apostolic word of counsel which laid strong emphasis on the importance of consultation and agreement through common meetings. Asbury had his own problems with threatened divisions, such as those that surfaced in the Societies over the question of the ordinances. As a matter of fact Garrettson had worked shoulder to shoulder with Asbury in settling that problem. No doubt Asbury was aware from other sources that Garrettson was being challenged, even persecuted, by various groups, particularly a group of Calvinists called Allenites. The potential effect of such a challenge is division among followers and preachers alike. Therefore, it is no wonder that Asbury underscored acting by consultation and united councils. His letter spelled it out.

Do not fail to meet together, tho it should be attended with difficulties, act by united councils, strive to be [in common], let not Satan divide, don’t Lord it over one another, but live and love as brethren, bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the Law of Love. Fear nothing so much as division among yourselves continually guard against it.

One year later, in September 1786, Asbury wrote a final letter to Garrettson in Nova Scotia. The work had gone very successfully, and Garrettson apparently felt the need to build “Houses” (churches). Asbury, the conservative economist, laid out strong counsel and opinions for him to consider. He wrote: “I give it as my advice for you not to be so anxious about Building Houses you will find it easier to get into debt than to pay.” At this point he cautioned about the extreme danger of becoming dependent upon the rich. Respecting building debts he said:

You will make rich men necessary and they will rule you and impede your discipline if you are not well aware. We groan under heavy debt in (New) York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore and it weakens the hands of the poor among us and strengthens the hands of the few Rich, to oppose our strictness of discipline. And I wish you to be well on your guard, or you will repent it too late, don’t be hurried into anything of the kind. If you do not take care you or your successors will repent it. . . . My general counsel is Preach the pure gospel in all its parts, and keep up a strict discipline among both Preachers, and people that is the way to do good.

It is interesting, however, that Asbury’s profound concern for the negative influence of “Rich” Methodists did not deter him in his previous letter, in reporting on the status of Cokesbury College, to encourage the support of the wealthy. He wrote: “Our college is raised one story High. If you have any wealthy friends that can spare a little it will be very acceptable.”

In closing his 1786 letter Asbury finally counseled Garrettson in the way of spiritual nurture as well as encouraging the people in this regard. The focus here is not only on prayer both in private and in public, but also
his advice to press for sanctification. The Wesleyan view was no doubt what Asbury had in mind, that is, understanding sanctification as the whole gradual progress following new birth which may increase “more and more unto the perfect day” (Prov. 4:18). See Wesley’s sermon “On God’s Vineyard,” The Works of John Wesley, Sermons, Vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 503-517. He wrote:

My dear Brother above all things keep close to God in prayer, keep the — hour morning and evening. Let nothing prevent. Bear your charge and preachers faithfully on your heart before God . . . You will do well to press sanctification on all believers, and promote as much as may be the spirit of prayer in Societies, in families, in private, then God will bless you. I expect we shall shortly see each other in heaven if we are faithful.

Freeborn Garrettson returned from Nova Scotia in 1786, facing John Wesley’s directive that the General Conference elect him General Superintendent of all the Methodist work in the British North American provinces and the West Indies. Coke carried the orders, and the Conference at first concurred, only to change its mind the next day. Garrettson was appointed instead by Asbury to carry Methodism from New York City to the Canadian border. He did this with eminent success and by 1791, the date of the next letter, the Bishop offered stern advice regarding the direction of the work. One excerpt reveals his very strict policy. Asbury called for tighter discipline not only in Garrettson’s area, but also in Methodism in general.

My Dear friend push prayer meetings as much as possible. Keep close love feasts [i.e. only examined members admitted] and be very searching in Band meetings, of the preachers at the Quarter meetings. Local and traveling preachers, the exhorters and steward leaders also. Oh my Brother let us purge the Sanctuary.

It is difficult to understand what exactly Asbury had in mind. But the context is very suggestive. It appears that discipline had grown lax not only among the laity, but also among the clergy as well. It could be that the desire to evangelize and increase the number of converts led, as it does in any time, to a lowering of standards. The call for closed love feasts and a more careful scrutiny of all of those in the fold is quite clear. But the clearest word is the call, “let us purge the Sanctuary”.

From time to time in these letters Asbury sounds very much like a concerned bishop of any era reporting on the work as he sees it. We often hear complaints today that church leadership is too much focused on statistics. It is interesting that in most of these letters Asbury was careful to record the number of converts and the size of Conferences as well as geographical spread. But one excerpt in the 1805 letter written from Rembant Hall in South Carolina combines statistics with the broader view of church growth.

I am late returned from my visit through the Western states. Georgia, Charleston, and to this place. When I survey the Western part of our continent, the rich land,
In 1811 as the New Year began Asbury again writes with optimism about Methodism’s growth and promise not only in America, but also in Europe as well. It is a rather remarkable report as he says:

Our Western Conference gave us 22 stationed preachers. Increase of members of Society, 4000. Our Southern Conference 82 stationed preachers. Increase of Society, upwards of 2000. The whole western part of our Empire from 1800 or near 2000 miles, and our preachers are spread out on, and over the Spanish Lines. Camp meetings prevail. Our prospects are beyond expression good West and South. The stream spreads as wide as the United [States], and wider (Oh, may it be deep). In Europe Bible Societies, missionaries, the Methodists vie with ancient and modern times and people; Dr. Coke is indefeateful; collected (report says) 5000 pounds sterling in one year himself. The Methodists are pushing into every possible door in Europe, at home and abroad.

Indeed, he had a wide view and vision for Methodism. Asbury’s reference in the previous letter to camp meeting points up the high regard in which he held that mode of evangelism. It fit the Methodist strategy. Note his words from his 1805 letter: “One great good flows from camp meeting the Brethren sweetly mix and blend their spirits, and form a happy fellowship. The Traveling and the Local Ministry fight side by side in the glorious cause under the Captain of our great Salvation, this brings on a blessed union in the two great bodies of our Ministry.” Then, carried away with enthusiasm, he mixed his metaphors as he characterized the impact of camp meeting. “Camp Meetings are like the great plough that tears all up by the roots. These meetings are our forts and fortifications our warships and gondoliers, these holy meetings are our soldiers, these temporally and spiritually will keep far our foes, of all kinds and keep peace and liberty at home.”

But of all the insights these letters offer concerning the progress of early American Methodism, the most touching is the personal view they offer of Asbury himself. Here is a person wholly committed to the Methodist work. He never married. He never returned to his homeland or his parents. His family was made up of the preachers like Garrettson and Methodist lay people who opened their homes to him. In these letters we see him strong in discipline, and narrow in some of his social attitudes. For example, he condemned the use of secular “musik” among the Methodists; it was a sin. This condemnation indicates that Asbury was a man of strong opinions. In his letter of January 24, 1811 he spoke of the Africans in Charleston, South Carolina using music in the preacher’s house, and viewed it as “Sin of a serious dye”. To show his general displeasure he told Garrettson: “I disapproved of musick at your house.”
We see him suffering from intense travel as well as from growing ecclesiastical and political pressures. His broken health arouses our compassion and admiration.

As early as 1786 Asbury reported:

My infirmities come on fast. I am often sick and lame. Since Conference I have hobbled out as far as Ohio. The prospect of religion softened all my toil ... Twenty-three years I have been a free and willing servant and slave to the Methodist interest. I hope to live and die so. All I can show are debts, old age and many infirmities ... I know not what the Lord will do with me whether he will lay me aside or employ me, and this I am not anxious about.

In January 1811 Asbury reflected on his own ministry now closing. He appeared to be confident in what he had done, but there was clearly some disappointment in the “political” attitudes of the upcoming generation of preachers.

I feel it is not with me as in years past the 50th year of my social exercises, 46th year of my traveling; 40th year in America, 66th year of my life ... (I have with great pleasure stepped out of the presidential chair, not to return.) But to hear the murmurs of the preachers, see their tears, and discontents; I wish as much as may be, prevented by timely information. I am not at liberty to consult anyone, but all are at Liberty, to write anything and everything.

Later in that same month, Asbury commented:

We must exercise patience, when our younger Brethren want to push away our feet. I feel unspeakable pleasure to take away my feet from the Chair of the Presidency in all our Conferences. I rejoice to see it better filled, and with more honor. We must learn to rise, shine, decline, and set with Dignity. It has been the weakness of some great good men in church and state, not always to know when to step down a Little, and stop.

His letter of February 15, 1814, the last of these nine lost letters, was written only one year before his death. He wrote from Norfolk, Virginia of various concerns which were on his mind. They range widely from “the poor Africans”, “the Creek Indians”, and the missionary thrust of the church. There is a fatherly concern for Mary, the Garrettsons’ daughter, whose spiritual life was giving the Garrettsons some anxiety. Again, he was troubled by his own rapidly failing health. But his concern was not so much for himself as his lack of physical strength to do for others as he had always done. With lonely feelings he concluded his letter: “Oh my Brother there is no cure for old age ... I am so weak. Sometimes I can hardly pray in families. I feel, and fear like being in the way, a mere Bill of Cost! Am ever yours in the Gospel.”

By way of summary, the counsel Asbury gave Garrettson in these letters interestingly portrays a man who believed that the mission and outreach of the church must be integrated with a plan for discipline for spiritual growth. But if the church was to flourish, there needed to be harmony among the leaders. Division and controversy had to be avoided if at all possible. Asbury knew whereof he spoke, for he had already seen
O'Kelley and others splinter the church. He witnessed sharp disagreement with others over the appointment process and questions of church polity. Nonetheless he walked a tight line, remaining firm and yet striving to rise above a spirit of divisiveness.

These letters also focused Asbury's vision for the Methodist Episcopal Church. According to these letters he held the view that Methodism was spiritually kin to the first century church. He saw the church spreading like a fire across the continents. His was an evangelical spirit powerfully rooted in the Word preached, and vigorously expressed through camp meeting, which he believed to be the premier vehicle for evangelism. True to his vision camp meeting remained such a vehicle well into the 20th century, and continues today in many parts of Methodism.

Especially interesting is the cameo portrait these nine letters paint of the personality of the man. At least three characteristics are evident.

For one, we see Asbury's deep devotion and loyalty to his colleagues as well as the church. This is illustrated by the relationship he enjoyed through the years, for instance, with Garrettson. They had marked differences about church discipline and practice as well as life style. For instance, Garrettson was far less autocratic. He saw himself, though Methodist, still an Episcopalian. He was always on the side of more democratic methods such as the election of Presiding Elders and the right to have a voice in one's appointment. These opinions were always in opposition to Asbury, and nearly caused Garrettson to leave the Methodist Church. They expressed these differences clearly to each other. And yet to the end Asbury treasured Garrettson's friendship, sharing with him his deepest concerns.

It is evident, secondly, that Asbury operated from a strong sense of authority. His view of Methodism was that of "order, order", as he said. One of the most telling lines in the letters is his directive: "Let us purge the sanctuary." At every level he was, with the strong hand of discipline, seeking a pure church—lay and clergy alike. Based on the evidence of these letters we can assume that he saw the pure church as one marked by evangelistic fervor, strong in the Wesleyan doctrines of justification and sanctification, and given much to prayer.

Finally, there is no question, nonetheless, that the Asbury revealed in these letters is also a very human person needing support, understanding, and appreciation. The frequent references to the burden of travel, the pain of illness, and the encroachment of age are all a cry for affirmation and awareness of just how much he had given. No less appealing are the signs of personal hurt he felt as the politics of a growing institution passed him by, and he "stepped down" from episcopal leadership.

We do learn much from a person's letters, and these letters are no exception. They offer a fresh view of the humanity of Asbury, and shed important light as well upon the beginnings, the struggles, and the changes in the church he helped found.