The sermons of John Wesley and George Whitefield were the benchmark for preaching in the Methodist movement in England in its formative years. As different as the sermons of these two men were, there were a great many similarities. Both preached to large crowds, often in the open air. Both preached extemporaneously. Although Whitefield's audience was primarily "middle class" and Wesley's was the "lower class," both preached in more urban settings than rural. Both Wesley and Whitefield were part of a new spiritual awakening in England which was influenced by their exposure to frontier preaching methods in America.

When we turn to Francis Asbury we have a slightly different situation. Asbury was born in England, a generation after the revivals of Wesley and Whitefield had begun, and was influenced by them as a child. At age eighteen he began preaching, his first opportunity coming at a women's prayer meeting hosted by his mother. Soon after he became a preacher in the Methodist preaching houses and by age twenty-one was an itinerant preacher in the Methodist preaching house circuit. His success in preaching was rooted in his passion for preaching and his determination to be heard, as he displayed neither a silver tongue nor a theological mind. His preaching was neither dazzling nor ground-breaking. Instead, it was solid, simple, direct and consistent. His extreme dedication to the task of Christian service is exemplified by his never marrying, believing marriage to be a hindrance to serving his call to preach. ¹

The twenty-six year old Asbury was sent by Wesley to America as an itinerant preacher. The need for Methodist preachers was two-fold.

---

¹Asbury bemoaned the fact that marriage removed so many itinerant preachers from the circuit. After hearing of Thomas Coke's marriage Asbury wrote, "Marriage is honorable in all—but to me is a ceremony awful as death. Well may it be so, when I calculate we have lost the traveling labors of two hundred of the best men in America, or the world, by marriage and consequent location." Journal II, 474.

All of the references to Asbury's journals specifically refer to Elmer T. Clark, Editor, The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury. Vols. I & II (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958). Volume III which contains Asbury's letters will not be utilized in this study, hence references will be made to Journal I and Journal II.
First, there was the need for traveling evangelists to call the people of this new land to repentance. Second, there was the need for itinerant preachers to hold together the Methodist society in the frontier. People were beginning to move west and were becoming separated from other Methodists. This was further complicated by the political tensions within the colonies and between the colonies and England. Itinerant preachers were needed to hold this movement together and to encourage people in the struggle to live a sanctified life.

The frontier was a new context for Methodist preaching. There were no preaching houses; there were no official gathering places for the Methodist society meetings. Asbury preached on improvised pulpits in the woods, in stables and taverns, from river banks and in peoples' homes. More importantly, there were often no roads to Asbury's destinations. His journal is filled with accounts of blazing trails and even crawling up mountain sides. Asbury and Thomas Coke were made the first Methodist bishops in 1784, and this inspired Asbury to travel even more than before as he felt a responsibility for each Methodist in the country. Of the estimated 14,600 sermons which Asbury preached from age 18 to 71, most were preached in America as an itinerant. His voice may have been heard by more people in America than any other human being in the eighteenth century. As did Wesley and Whitefield in England, Asbury set the standard for preachers and sermons in the new land.2

As mentioned previously, Asbury had neither the academic skills nor theological insight of Wesley nor the oratorical dynamism of Whitefield. His sermons were very simple and direct and his purpose was to teach. One pastor who heard Asbury preach numerous times commented, "His sermons resembled the lessons of an intellectual parent giving instruction to the children he so dearly loved."3 Likewise, Thomas Coke described Asbury as having "so much simplicity, like a little child; so much wisdom and consideration."4 Asbury's sentences were short and terse.5 His thoughts and organization were clear and straight-forward. Still as direct and simple as his sermons were, they often lasted from one to two hours.6

The content of Asbury's sermons was Bible exposition and application. The flow of his sermons moved from the understanding of the text to the application of the text.7 Because Asbury's itinerant schedule never guaranteed his return to any location, he preached the gospel in a nutshell,

---

4Atkinson, 294.
5Baker, 127.
7Baker, 127.
following the example set forward by Wesley in his Standard Sermons and his commentary on the New Testament. Although Asbury preached extemporaneously, his sermons fit into a general pattern. He often began by convicting the audience of sin, then high-lighted the expedience of repentance and justification, encouraged those who already had repented to persevere in good works, and held out for all the goal of sanctification. Frequently, Asbury used phrases from the sermon text as the main points of his sermons, each phrase chosen to fit into the above pattern.  

Asbury filled his time while traveling on horseback by reading. He read volumes of sermons, devotional works such as *The Imitation of Christ*, and numerous other religious volumes, but most often he read the Bible, frequently in Greek or Hebrew. His immersion in the scriptures led to sermons which were stocked full of biblical allusions and illustrations. Asbury followed no lectionary, but instead preached from what was most applicable to the situation or what he happened to be reading at the time. More frequently than not, Asbury chose a text which he hoped would strike fear into the hearts of his listeners.  

There are no extant copies of Asbury's sermons. There are, however, many descriptions of Asbury's preaching both by himself and others which give insight into the form and content of his sermons, none of which would give reason to believe that he was a great orator. There is one story of how Asbury preached following an unannounced preacher whom Asbury had invited. One of the people who heard them both knew only that Asbury was speaking. In commenting on the sermons he confused the two preachers and declared that the bishop was a fine preacher, but he did not like the old man [Asbury] who followed him. Equally telling is the amount of attention given by John Atkinson to Asbury's prayers in his

---

10Rudolph, 88.
11Tipple, 228. Asbury's favorite text was I Timothy 1:15, which he frequently preached, and almost always used on Christmas. He also regularly used II Peter 3:14 as it provided a firm foundation for building a sermon on sanctification. See Tipple, 228–232. An example of Asbury's choosing a text for specific situation can be found in Asbury's *Journal I*, 25 where he chose I John 1:23 as a sermon text for a divisive congregation. On occasions not requiring a special passage to be expounded, Asbury would simply preach what was on his mind at the time. In reading Asbury's journal, I found instances where he preached texts for a week or more chosen from one chapter of the Bible which happened to be his current topic of study. Most indicative of this method of choosing his texts is found in his journal entries for December 3–8, 1793. On December 3 he noted how wonderful were the sermons of Hugh Blair that he just read, especially his sermon on gentleness. Although in the following days he preached from various texts (i.e. II Cor. 12:15, Eph. 3:7–8), Asbury's sermons dealt with the gentleness of a minister. *Journal I*, 776.
12Tipple, 219.
13Rudolph, 90.
Centennial *History of American Methodism*. Atkinson noted how powerful, beautiful and stirring his prayers were, contrasted with the very brief description of his preaching which paled in comparison to his prayers.

Had he . . . been equally eloquent in preaching, he would have excited universal admiration as a pulpit orator. But when he was heard for the first time the power and unction with which he prayed would naturally raise the expectations of his auditors that they were liable to be disappointed with his preaching; for although he always preached well, in his sermons he seldom, if ever, reached that high comprehensive flow of thought and expression—that expansive and appropriate diction—which always characterized his prayers.14

Asbury himself acknowledged his oratorical limitations. L. C. Rudolph, in his analysis of Asbury’s preaching, remarks that Asbury had an objective and detached view of his own preaching, often resulting in an honest and somewhat humorous critique.15 Below are some examples drawn from Rudolph’s litany of Asbury’s self-evaluations.

- Losing some of my ideas in preaching, I was ashamed of myself . . . .16
- Preached twice—preacher and hearers too dull. Alas!17
- Bore a feeble testimony for nearly an hour.18
- I had very little life in preaching to a few dead souls.19

In spite of the fact that we have no copies of Asbury’s sermons there are glimpses of what appear to be sermonic prose in Asbury’s journal which preserve a morsel of how Asbury’s sermons may have sounded. One journal entry contains Asbury’s use of repetition as a rhetorical device. This selection from his journal exemplifies how Asbury used repetition to reinforce his theme and also to bring his audience to the point of decision.

I preached at John Beck’s, at four o’clock; my subject was 1 Cor. vii, 28–30. *The time is short*. It might have been true, considering how uncertain persecution then made, and was about more abundantly to make, life, to all the followers of the Lord Jesus; it may be especially true in pestilences, famines, and desolating wars. But the proverbial uncertainty, in all ages and in all lands, of the sublunary things which so deeply engage the thought and affections of unthinking mortals, shows the propriety of the apostolic admonition; for verily in this respect also, *the time is short*.

How many newly married pairs—parents with their children, upon whom they have just discovered, in their matured characters and upright conduct, the qualities and virtues which justify all their strength of affection—speculators upon the probabilities and possibilities of fortune, who risk credit and estate to become richer than their fellow-mortals—covetous persons, idolators, who labour and starve to make the golden heap a little higher;—how many of these find that *the time is short*; alas! too short for them! O, sinner, the time is short! Seeker, *the time is short*! strive—agonize to enter in.

---

14 Atkinson, 254.
15 Rudolph, 93.
16 Journal I, 379.
17 Journal I, 461.
18 Journal II, 16.
19 Journal I, 384.
Backslider, surely to thee the time is short! Believers, O faithfully combatting under the great Captain of your salvation, you will rejoice to remember the time is short. O, joyful consideration to those who have put on the Lord Jesus, and shall love his appearing—this time of suffering is short!29

Asbury displayed a good deal of skill in using a metaphor in the remnant we have of his funeral sermon for Thomas Coke, using Matthew 5:16 as a text he built his eulogy around the image of light.

The Gospel light in all its fullness of grace and power, the reflected light of that Light of the world, manifested in faith and in obedience in every grade and class of believers. Ministers should be resplendent like a city illuminated in the light; a great light amidst churches of darkness and slumber; like Doctor Coke, whose effulgence beamed forth in missions, in labours in Europe, in America, in isles of the sea and in Asia.21

In one other example we can see how scriptural allusion became a central strand in the fabric of Asbury's sermons. Asbury's use of scripture to interpret scripture will be noted later, but here we notice how thoroughly steeped in biblical vocabulary Asbury's sermons were.

I preached in Lexington on Zeph. iii, 12, 13: “I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord.” The true character of God's people—tempted, grieved, poor in spirit. Their strong confidence in Jehovah; in all his attributes perfections, promises; in all his sacred offices and near relations to his own people. Well guarded by a supreme love of God, and a love of their fellow-men, this people shall not transgress the law in its word nor in its spirit.

Nor shall they deceive; for the deceitful tongue is changed by the grace that changed the deceitful heart. As a flock, their souls shall feed and fatten on the privileges and ordinances of the Gospel, whilst other flocks of the hireling shall starve and be scattered: the flock of God shall be led into green pastures by the Great shepherd, and they shall lie down, undisturbed by that which shall distress others, assured that they shall never perish, neither shall any be able to pluck them out of his hand.22

This passage is full of biblical images: from Psalm 23 to the Beatitudes and is indicative of the style of Asbury's preaching.

From the material provided by Asbury within his journal, and those scattered references we have to Asbury's preaching from other sources, it is possible to outline the hermeneutic with which Asbury operated.23 Asbury's study of the scriptures, theology, sermons and especially the writings of early Methodism influenced his understanding of both the scriptures and preaching. What follows is an outline of Asbury's hermeneutic,

---

20 Journal II, 787-8. There is a description of another of Asbury's sermon conclusions by Rev. Henry Smith who described Asbury as repeating “Come back! Come back! Come back!” In Smith's description Asbury “raised his voice and cried aloud . . . raising his voice higher at every repetition.” See Atkinson, 291. This oratorical device may have been a common characteristic in Asbury's preaching.
21 Journal II, 792.
22 Journal II, 793.
23 Of the over 1,500 references to sermons in his journal, Asbury recorded slightly over 150 of his sermon outlines. Many of these sermon outlines provide little more than the main points along with the text he preached.
in many ways a synthesis of these influences.\footnote{The parsing of Asbury's hermeneutic into its primary and secondary influences is beyond the scope of this paper. A part of this work however, has already been done in Lang's, \textit{Francis Asbury's Reading of Theology: A Bibliographical Study}, (see note 9). In this work Lang provides an overview of Asbury's theology and its influences, as well as an exhaustive list of all of the references cited in Asbury's Journals.} I would argue that Asbury had two principal elements on which all the other principles were based. These primary principles were propositional organization and allegorization, as I will define them.

\textit{Principal Element 1—Propositional Organization}

Prominent in Asbury's record of his sermons is a consistent method of moving from text to outline. Asbury frequently chose a phrase from the sermon text and then defined it. Each definition was a main point of the sermon, either a biblical exposition or application. One example is Asbury's recollection of his sermon on II Corinthians 5:2.

"Knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men." "The Lord"—that is, the Son of God, in all his attitudes and perfections; his offices and character; his perfect Deity in heaven his humanity on earth; the maker and redeemer of mankind; and as their Judge, manifesting his uprightness in the eternal punishment of bad angels and bad men. "Terror of the Lord"—in death, the resurrection and general judgement. "Terror"—in the recollection of what the sinner had done to offend God, grieve the Holy Spirit—what he had done to bring contempt upon religion and its ministers, and the unoffending followers of the Lord Jesus. "Terror"—in the consideration of the certainty of his punishment being eternal. "Persuading men"—by all that is desirable in religion, and all that the truly pious enjoy—by all the glories of heaven, and all the horrors of the remediless perdition.\footnote{Journal I, 788.}

Other examples can be found in his sermon on John 3:16, in which he organized his sermon into four parts, each being a definition: 1) the nature of man, 2) the nature of God, 3) the nature of faith and 4) the consequences of believing.\footnote{Journal I, 308.} A third example this organizational format can be seen when one phrase of a text is taken alone and the implications of that phrase is developed and defined. This technique is exemplified in his sermon on Acts 20:28 delivered at a Quarterly Meeting, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves," from which he developed the following definition of taking heed.

\begin{enumerate}
  \item Take heed in your spirits.
  \item Take heed to your practice.
  \item Take heed in your doctrine.
  \item Take heed to the flock
    \begin{enumerate}
      \item Those that are under deep conviction.
      \item Those that are true believers.
    \end{enumerate}
\end{enumerate}
From these three examples one can begin to see how Asbury used this same organizational technique in various ways. At the core of all of them is Asbury's understanding of scripture, i.e., its meaning is propositional. The purpose of a sermon, it logically follows, must likewise be propositional. What occurs again and again in Asbury's journal entries is his propositional outline of the sermons. Asbury moved from the wording of the text to the wording of a topical outline.27 And more often than not this outline was an outline of terms and their definition.

Primary Element 2: Use of Allegory

In a manual for Methodist ministers assembled by Asbury and Coke, Asbury warned against the pitfalls of using allegory in preaching. This warning in no way prevented Asbury himself from going off on frequent allegorical excursions in his sermons. At one point in his journal he recorded his interpretation of Isaiah 33, Isaiah 62, and Song of Songs 1, giving all three a thorough allegorical interpretation.29 Similar examples are prevalent in his sermon notes. The following journal entry is typical of Asbury's use of allegory.

I preached Romans xiii, 12: "The night is far spent." What constitutes the natural night? Absence of light, ignorance, insecurity, uncertainty. The Gospel watchman crieth the hours. The Scripture night; from Adam to Moses. The patriarchal stars, and those who preceded them as dim lights, Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham. The moonlight of the law, the Sabbaths, the sacrifices. But this night was about to pass away, although darker just before the dawn of the Gospel day; and it is us in nature. The Jews had corrupted themselves in religion and in manners. The night of Judaism and Paganism had nearly passed away. When Paul wrote in the year sixty, the Gospel had obtained in Europe, lesser Asia, Greece, in the city of Rome; and had spread from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean. This night has returned occasionally. It came upon the Asiatic churches because of their unfaithfulness: where once were the gospel and martyrs, now Greek papas, and Greek superstitions. From the third to the thirteenth century, the church at Rome brought darkness upon Europe by prohibiting the Bible, and by the introduction of her own mummeries and idolatries. Philosophy, so called, with Voltaire for its high priest, brought night and destruction upon France; judicially to avenge on the bloody house of Bourbon the blood of Protestant martyrs. And would not some of our great men, if they dared, bring as night of infidelity on this land? Who sees them in regular attendance on the house of God? "Let us cast off works of darkness." Let us not sin in practice. Let us cast off evil tempers, desires and affections. "The armour of light" (see Ephesians vi, 11-17), perfect faith, perfect hope, perfect obedience, perfect love.30

27 Journal I, 59.
28 Rudolph, 84.
29 Rudolph, 85.
30 Journal II, 790.
In this example, one can see the genuine investment Asbury had in this sort of interpretation. He had no hesitation to take this one phrase and to inflate its application until it becomes an analogy for the whole of Christian history. On the one hand this technique is admirable for Asbury was able to draw out a common theme from creation though the history of the church and finally to apply it to the Methodists of America. This analogy is both memorable and poetic, and it is highly accessible to the common person. Yet this allegorical use of analogy implies that this interpretation was the intention of the author and the distinction between the authority of scripture and the interpretation by the preacher is blurred.

These two hermeneutical principles were central to Asbury's scriptural interpretation and sermon construction. So fundamental were they that it appears that they were the foundation upon which all of the other hermeneutical principles are constructed. I identified five other characteristics in Asbury's hermeneutic which should be seen as specific applications of these two principles.

Application 1: Scripture Interprets Scripture

The above illustration from Romans also illustrates how Asbury used scripture to interpret scripture. This practice certainly seems to be an inheritance from Wesley. Asbury had a penchant for harmonizing the scriptures. At one point in his journal he wrote, "I spoke on 2 Cor. vi, 1, 2. My subject was 1 Pet. v, 7." At an other point Asbury conflates Luke's account of Peter's denial of Jesus with John's. Asbury wrote, "'And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter.' The gospels will harmonize here by John [sic], who was witness to the whole." Asbury was saturated in scripture and had frequent fugues of biblical cross-references often displaying this inclination for harmonizing the scriptures. It appears that one of the traits which Wesley bequeathed to the early Methodist preachers was an understanding of the Bible as one homogeneous unit.

Asbury's use of scripture and allegory were acceptable and possibly even expected by the people to whom Asbury preached. In fact, one person who frequently heard Asbury preach made this assessment of his preaching:

Asbury was the only preacher who preached to his text. He never preached from it, as do many who select a passage as a mere theme of a disclosure, the discussion of which would be as applicable to an axiom of Coleridge as to the text, but he would

---

31A good example of this practice in Wesley's sermons is the second of Wesley's thirteen sermons on the Sermon on the Mount. Here Wesley defined the term "merciful" with a full blown exegesis of I Corinthians 13 as the means of interpretation. See J. Wesley, The Works of John Wesley. The Bicentennial edition of the works of John Wesley, Volume 1. Editor-in-chief, Frank Baker. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984) 499-507.
32Journal II, 305.
The Sermons of Francis Asbury

start a proposition, and in its elaboration, would come directly to the text. With him proposition, argument, illustration, incident, everything was either immediately drawn from or directly connected with the subject of discourse. That is high praise. To go straight to the heart of a text, is that not the highest art of preaching?³⁴

The early Methodists prided themselves in being biblicists. Wesley himself exhorted Methodist preachers to be people “of one book.”³⁵ What is described in the above passage as “preaching to the text,” might be best interpreted as a corrective against those whose preaching seemed to move outside of the biblical sphere. Instead of using the text as a springboard to launch a thematic discourse, Asbury would find a central theme throughout a passage and then support it with other pertinent scripture passages. This approach to preaching was reinforced by Asbury’s sermon outlines which, as mentioned above, were constructed directly from the wording of the text itself.

Application 2: Eisegesis

Asbury’s preaching to the text, as described by this partisan observer, is what may be called Asbury’s eisegesis. Consistently, the theme which Asbury found within a text for exposition had a direct correlation to the situation which he addressed. In one farewell sermon Asbury preached on I Samuel 12:23–4. His main points were: 1) a pastor should pray for his people; 2) a pastor should teach his people to live righteously; and 3) a pastor should encourage his people to give thanks to God.³⁶ Asbury may have been thought to be preaching to the heart of the text, for his practice of using phrases from the text for his main points may have made him sound more “biblical” than other preachers, but he was preaching as much his context as he was the text. This practice became very clear as he read his itinerant experiences into his interpretation of the epistles.

At Marble head I spoke on Gal. iv, 20: “I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you.” 1. Evangelical men, or apostolic witnesses, may feel a desire to be present with societies at particular times when it is in their power. They will where this cannot be done, write. 2. That there may be very alarming and doubtful cases and characters in the congregation and Church; such as open sinners, hypocrites, half-awakened souls, backsliders, slothful believers. 3. Changing the voice—using a different method, as to matter and manner of preaching or writing, pointing at the cases and characters which are doubtful.³⁷

Asbury’s pastoral heart can be seen in the way in which he consistently attempted to connect propositional biblical truth with the specific situation which he is addressing. He also read his own itinerant experiences into the Bible. This practice which I have labeled eisegesis seems to be the

³⁴Tipple, 225.
³⁵Tipple, 224.
³⁶Journal II, 121.
³⁷Journal II, 474.
inevitable result of understanding the truth of the scriptures in propositional terms and assuming a direct application of these truths to his context. This approach leads to the next element of Asbury's hermeneutic, eisegesis taken to its logical conclusion.

**Application 3: Transposition of History**

Asbury’s two hermeneutic principles of propositional structure and allegorical interpretation allowed him at times to go beyond eisegesis to what could be called a “transposition of history.” Sermons where Asbury made a one-to-one correspondence between his reading of the text and his reading of a contemporary situation provide illustrative examples. In his sermon on Isaiah 62:6 Asbury interpreted watchmen on the walls as the Lord calling, authorizing and qualifying all faithful ministers and “delineated their character as watchmen.”38 Further in two sermons given on the same day, Asbury first preached Ecclesiastes 5:1 as directions on how one should behave in church and especially during sermons, and then preached from Ezekiel 36:25-7 describing the idols of his day which must be removed.39 On another occasion, Asbury interpreted Azariah’s prophecy in II Chronicles 15:2 as being delivered directly to his audience.40 Two other examples show both the breadth of the application of this principle and the amount to which it was appropriated. When preaching on Acts 13:26, “To you the word of salvation is sent,” Asbury developed a *heilsgeschichte* approach to revelation, first defining the word of salvation as the gospel, and then showing how this word was sent “to Jews first, afterward to the Gentiles” and continues to be sent through the Spirit and preaching.41 This example demonstrates Asbury’s principle most clearly as it shows that there is a consistent and repeated revelation of God’s truth from one age through the next. Therefore the truth revealed in the scriptures should logically correspond to the events of the day in a very literal way. Asbury had no hesitation to ascribe to a biblical passage a timeless quality and would then apply it to a current historical situation without apparent concern for the historical context of the passage.

**Application 4: Preaching Methodism**

At other times his use of propositional structure and allegory allowed him to preach that which he, like Wesley, believed to be the core of the scriptures, sanctification. Asbury once vowed to include sanctification in all of his sermons.42 His preaching on sanctification is really synonymous with his preaching Methodism, which comes as no surprise since Asbury

38 *Journal I*, p. 78.
40 *Journal I*, p. 766.
41 *Journal II*, p. 792.
42 Tipple, p. 232.
believed that Methodism as a means of holiness was the way that America could be saved. This belief frequently manifested itself in Asbury’s sermons. In a sermon on II Corinthians 13:5, Asbury reduced the experience of religion to sound doctrine, repentance for sins, having “heart-religion,” and holiness. This understanding of Christianity squared very nicely with that understood by Wesley in his definition of Methodism. Likewise in a sermon on Hebrews 3:7–8, Asbury expounded the nature of Methodist preaching and its reception and rejection.

Possibly the clearest example of Asbury’s preaching of Methodist holiness can be found in a brief journal entry recorded on June 18, 1802.

On Friday we came to Nathan Herrick’s at North Preston; I read some letters, and then preached upon Titus ii, 11, 12: we had an open time. I made two simple propositions:

I. The operations of grace upon sinners; and

II. The operations of grace upon believers, by which they live in self-denial of all evil, and bear the cross, enjoy the life of God, and exercise themselves in Christian temperance, justice and holiness.

These two “simple propositions”: salvation by grace through faith and a response to grace through a life of holiness typified the Methodist movement. Asbury, like an apple not falling far from a tree, echoed Wesley’s own definition, “A Methodist—one that lives according to the method laid down in the Bible.” In other words, for Asbury, to preach the Bible with integrity was to preach Methodism.

Application 5: Preaching Himself

The last characteristic of Asbury’s preaching was his use of personal experience in preaching. This characteristic differs from his reading of either Methodist holiness or a contemporary situation into a text in that these are examples of his preaching his own personal life. Asbury used his own life as both a source of understanding Christian living and an example for other people. At one point Asbury explicitly referred to his experience as a source of interpretation. “Rode to Robert Layton’s, and preached to about thirty people from ‘Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God.’ Spoke as my experience led me...” In another sermon Asbury preached on Ephesians 3:7–8. He outlined the four qualities of a Christian minister. Although he did not expand on these qualities, their congruence with Asbury’s own ministry is obvious: 1) how

---

43 Baker, 118.
44 Journal I, 775–6.
45 Cf Baker, 14f.
46 Journal II, 347.
47 Baker, 15.
48 Journal I, 323.
a minister is made, 2) to whom he is to preach, 3) what he is to preach—the unsearchable riches of Christ, and 4) the humility of a minister. 49

This feature of Asbury's preaching became most evident in his ordination sermons. Asbury's traveling companion, Henry Boehm claimed to have heard him preach over 1,500 times of which 50 were ordination sermons. Of these 50 sermons Boehm commented that they "were among the most impressive I have ever heard." 50 What made these sermons stand out in the legacy of Asbury's preaching was his passion for preaching and his obedience to God's call for this task evident in his relentless travels. Descriptions of self-sacrifice and perseverance in Asbury's ordination sermons are clearly autobiographical. Evidence of this can be seen in the following outline of an ordination sermon.

At Wilbraham I spoke on 2 Tim. iv, 5–8: "But watch thou in all things," &c.

Introduction—the special relation of a spiritual father and son. The time and circumstances peculiar to Paul and Timothy: "Watch in all things": as a Christian, as a Christian minister or bishop; endure afflictions of mind and body, as a Christian and a minister—endure heat, cold, hunger, thirst, labour, persecution, temptations. "Do the work of an evangelist"—spread the gospel where it is not, support it where it is. Paul knew he was going by martyrdom; "he had fought the good fight of faith"; and by faith had "kept" justifying "faith," which some had made shipwreck of; the "crown" of justifying and sanctifying, and practical righteousness, was waiting to encircle his triumphant brows—a "crown" thrice radiant with the three degrees of glory. 51

Asbury had two common characteristics in his sermons. He chose a propositional approach to preaching which manifested itself in various types of propositional sermons. His use of moving from the wording of the text to the outline of his sermon is common in his sermons. In defining these phrases Asbury made frequent use of allegory. The use of allegory became the hermeneutical bridge which he used to link the scriptures with his situation. This allegorical bridge is evident in his harmonization of the scriptures, his eisegetical principles, his transposition of history, and his preaching of Methodist holiness. In an interesting twist, Asbury seemed to use himself as bridge between the scriptures and holy living in the eighteenth century. This is a prominent feature in his ordination sermons.

Francis Asbury often preached in a frontier filled with struggle and loneliness. People were slowly creating footholds in the new world and calling them home. Results and success came slowly and often the efforts made in sustaining oneself and one's family in the midst of a new land were difficult to justify. These were also very lonely, isolated times as people often lived far from the mainstream of society. It is to this situation Asbury preached. As much a tonic for boredom as a cure for souls, his preaching reached people throughout the frontier. By Asbury's own admission he

49Journal I, 776.
50Rudolph, 91.
51Journal II, 475.
was not a great preacher, but he was renowned for his traveling exploits and undoubtedly was the most famous preacher in America of his time. In any event, the name of Francis Asbury could draw a crowd in even the most isolated regions.\footnote{Atkinson, 292.}

In 1771 there were six Methodist preachers and 600 members. By the end of Asbury's life in 1816 there were 700 ministers and 200,000 members. This growth can be largely attributed to the zeal and dedication that Asbury had for both evangelism and the Methodist movement. Although Asbury was not a great orator, he was a man of great character. What he communicated in his preaching was not by the words of the sermon alone, but the desire he had to preach to those people who had gathered, no matter how few. This desire becomes obvious as one reads accounts of his being too ill to walk to the pulpit and being there carried by his companions, and afterward being placed on his horse to go to the next destination.\footnote{M. R. Abbey, \textit{The Epic of United Methodist Preaching} (Lanham, MD, University Press of America) 22.} Asbury preached a simple message: human life is to be lived in submission to the divine will of God. This submissive life leads to life eternal. Asbury himself devoutly lived this life of submission to the divine will of God as he perceived it, and lived this life openly for all to see.

For Asbury the itinerant preacher and traveling bishop, the medium was the message of the sermon. And this message was as lucid as the finest oration.