



# DISCOVERY

Edited by  
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## More About Asbury and Wesley

In the Discovery article in the July 1995 issue of *Methodist History* Mark Shenise related the fascinating story of the rediscovery of two Asbury letters and one John Wesley letter while he and Jean Yrigoyen were making an inventory of the holdings of the General Commission on Archives and History. Shenise discussed the first Asbury letter, dated October 6, 1808 in the July article.<sup>1</sup> The letter dealt with the question of ordination in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Shenise continues his research with his comments on the second Asbury letter and the Wesley letter.

## Comments by Mark Shenise

The second Asbury letter, presented in this issue, also deals with (among other things) the question of ordination. The first letter was written to Martin Hitt, but the second letter, dated October 16, 1811,<sup>2</sup> to Nathaniel Harris while Asbury was residing at the home of Martin Hitt. A rather ironic situation since both letters dealt with a question near to the heart of both Hitt and Harris. It is possible that Asbury was again confronted with the question of ordination at the home of Hitt and thus he refers to it in his letter to Harris. Hitt was a local preacher and very much interested in the whole ordination question. Unlike his letter to Hitt in 1808, Asbury is more

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<sup>1</sup>Shenise, *Methodist History*, 262-266.

<sup>2</sup>Emory Stevens Bucke, ed., *The History of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), plate 39. Here the reader will find a facsimile of the original letter.

direct about the slim chance the local pastors will have in receiving the office of elder at the 1812 General Conference without going through the proper steps as prescribed by the 1808 General Conference. Unfortunately for those in a position similar to Hitt and Harris this turned out to be all too true.<sup>3</sup>

Asbury begins the letter by comparing Harris and himself to the “Fathers in our Israel.” This patriarchal imagery shows that Harris and Asbury were perceived not only as part of the elder leaders of American Methodism, but also much more sapient in spirituality and preaching than their younger associates.

Another “father” of Methodism mentioned in the letter by Asbury is Francis Poythress. This “afflicted friend” was admitted on trial in 1776 and was a member of the 1784 Christmas Conference when the Methodist Episcopal Church was born.<sup>4</sup> In 1788 Poythress was a presiding elder of the Lexington, Danville, and Cumberland circuits. He continued as a dynamic leader for Kentucky and Tennessee Methodism until 1797 when his health finally gave way.<sup>5</sup>

Asbury shifts gears and makes a stinging indictment about the clergy and laity within the Methodist Episcopal Church. As far as Asbury was concerned the doctrine of sanctification was being neglected. Sanctification was the core doctrine in Wesley’s teachings and early Methodism as a whole. Sanctification was a distinct second work of grace apart from regeneration and justification which was manifested through the new birth. Through sanctification the believer is saved from the root and power of sin and propelled into a life of Christian perfection. Part of the neglect that Asbury mentions was due to the fact that on the Western frontier preachers emphasized the work of salvation rather than sanctification. The reasons for this neglect were both cultural and religious. It was cultural in that the majority of settlers lived a hard agrarian lifestyle in a hostile environment. There was not a lot of time to reflect upon a “higher” spiritual life. The religious dimension was intimately tied into the cultural dimension since many of these frontier settlers were basically unchurched in comparison to their more “urbanized” compatriots in the East whose lifestyle and ability to attend regular church services would have allowed more time to reflect and seek the second work of grace.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>For an expanded discussion of the issues involved and subsequent ruling of the 1812 General Conference, see the July 1995 “Discovery” column in *Methodist History*.

<sup>4</sup>Bucke, *History of American Methodism*, 132, 215.

<sup>5</sup>Bucke, *History of American Methodism*, 388. Years of hard riding and preaching finally took its toll on Poythress. After a short rest he tried once more to recapture the vigor and pace he set before his early retirement. Unfortunately his health problems were no longer physical. Poythress’ mental health broke down as well. In 1802 the Western Conference voted to support him in his final retirement from the ministry through a conference claim.

<sup>6</sup>Despite the fact that Asbury’s statistics reflect a general church environment most of this letter reflects a distinct Western flavor. Though there may have been many individuals in eastern part of American Methodism that did not experience sanctification, the problem would have been much more acute in the west.

Asbury shifts his thoughts once more by launching into a statistical report of the western ministry by quoting numbers reflecting various aspects of church's work encompassing both clergy and laity. Asbury then injects a strange number for the current calendar year. He refers to 1811 as 184567. Unfortunately the original letter offers no clues to solve this chronological dilemma.

Robert Marshall and John Thompson were Presbyterians who were members of the Kentucky Synod up to 1803. They officially aligned themselves with the New Light movement. The leader of this movement was Barton Stone. Members of the New Light movement were intensely revivalistic in contrast to their more liturgically traditional Presbyterian brethren of the Kentucky Synod.

Williston Walker<sup>7</sup> points out that these "New Lights" soon dropped all "sectarian" type names seeking to be known simply as Christians. Stone believed that denominational rites and practices were unnecessary and that salvation had little to do with church affiliation. Stone later became one of the co-founders of the Christian Church better known as the Disciples of Christ.

Asbury identifies the Marshall and Thompson's example by referring to the 1792 O'Kelly split in the Middle Tennessee region. James O'Kelly, a Methodist minister, disputed the authority of the episcopacy (which in many ways was a direct and personal attack on Asbury's strong episcopal leadership) and with his followers formed the Republican Methodist Church. Later, O'Kelly changed the name of his new denomination to the Christian Church.<sup>8</sup> As time passed O'Kelly's denomination merged with two other smaller groups and formed the American Christian Convention. Unlike O'Kelly, Marshall and Thompson did return to their "old shell" after this letter was written.

The final element in this letter is somewhat puzzling. Here Asbury remarks that he tried to remove "Br Halliday" from his appointment but could not do so for whatever unknown reason(s). Halliday is actually Charles Holliday<sup>9</sup> who was just ordained by Asbury a few days before this letter was written. Holliday was appointed to the Lexington Circuit in 1811. Apparently Asbury had enough confidence in him to make the comment that he would "be a double blessing to the circuit this year." The only possible solution to this puzzle is that Asbury wanted to appoint him elsewhere for greater service. The text of the letter is as follows:

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<sup>7</sup>Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 3d ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 512.

<sup>8</sup>Not to be confused with Stone's "Christian Church."

<sup>9</sup>Bucke, *History of American Methodism*, plate 39. See the commentary following the typescript copy of Asbury's letter.

Octr 16, 1811

Dearly beloved in the Lord

Great peace be upon us, that we may be Fathers in our Israel; not in age only; but in piety and preaching. You did not write anything about our afflicted Friend Poythress. God is with us as a people we spread wide but the work is not deep! in preachers nor people as it respects sanctification; we neither experience it, preach it, nor live it. Amidst the Labrinth of business we had to liquidate we had great peace and union at our conference in so large a body 102 preachers in the western charges. We have 669 ministers last year. I [presume] licenced travelling and local preachers and exhorters; near 4000 number of members present year 184567, but 10,000 added present year, such is the mortality, and constant imigration. Marshall and Thompson have published their recantation. It is Kelley and company to a [little] but I suppose the recanters will go back to the old shell. I make but small doubt, but a narrow door will be opened into the eldership at the next General Conference, for the local ministry. I see that a delegated power will [sift] the connection, some will be disappointed of a seat that a delegated power will order with contempt at whose feet some are unworthy to sit at the feet of our local Brethren; in neither gifts grace nor preaching Oh my BR make haste. I tried to remove Br Halliday but I could not may he and you be a double blessing to the circuit this year. Farewell

As ever yours

F Asbury

### John Wesley's Letter

The next letter to be examined is from John Wesley. His journal<sup>10</sup> reveals that on November 28, 1774 he was visiting a family in Shoreham before he continued his journey to Rygate. It was during this visit at Shoreham that he wrote a letter to a Miss Sarah James of Bristol<sup>11</sup> on November 29th. Sally was the daughter of Captain John James who was an intimate friend of Charles Wesley.<sup>12</sup> What makes this letter so unusual is that it is the only extant letter John ever wrote to a member of this family who meant so much to his brother Charles.<sup>13</sup>

In the first section John encourages Sally to continue in her struggle as she now confronts and redefines her relationship with Christ through faith. The road is one of affliction. Yet if she remains faithful she will be delivered. Following this statement of assurance Wesley then remarks that Sally should learn humility from her parents' current weakened and distressful condition(s) so that she will be able to digest the greatest lesson to

<sup>10</sup>John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 4, 3d ed., *Journals from September 13, 1773 to October 24, 1790* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1984), 37.

<sup>11</sup>The reverse side of the letter is addressed as: "To Miss Sally James, In St. James Barton, Bristol."

<sup>12</sup>John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.*, vol. 6 (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 124-125.

<sup>13</sup>Frank Baker, Durham, N.C. to Mark Shenise, Madison, N.J., September 19, 1994.

be learned at the present time which is God's sovereignty. Once this is accomplished Wesley will no longer feel the need to press on about her salvation.

To reinforce his point, Wesley then quotes a poem that would have special meaning to Sally, since the author is none other than Charles Wesley.<sup>14</sup> John further cajoles Sally that even in her present sinful condition she can be instantly converted into the Christian faith by giving an oath of trust combined with a vow of praise to the risen Christ. The text is as follows:

Shoreham, November 29, 1774

My Dear Sally,

I do not love you because you are without faults; but because you are desirous of being delivered from them. And I trust, you will now find a great Deliverance, in a little time. For you are now taken into God's school; into the school of affliction. The continued weakness and distress of Mrs. James (nay, and I fear, Mr. James is not much better) is designed to humble and meeken your soul, to keep you dead to all below, and to teach you that grand lesson to say in all things, "Not as I will, but as Thou wilt." Only carry this point, and then I am not solicitous whether you have joy or not.

"See, the Lord, thy Keeper stand  
Omnipotently near!  
Lo! He holds thee by the hand,  
And banishes thy Fear."

Thou poor sinner, stay not to be any better, but take him just as you are! Trust him, praise Him Now! The Lord take you with his sweet force! And then you will not forget, my dear Sally.

Yours affectionately

JWesley

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<sup>14</sup>G. Osborn, ed., *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, vol. 8 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1870), 236. John is quoting Charles poetic commentary on Psalm 121 which from an Ancient Israelite viewpoint is identified as a Song of Trust.