The future of Methodism hung in the balance. A bold figure, both prophet and patriot, stood to oppose the powerful bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Raising his Bible in one hand, he cried out to all who could hear: “Brethren, hearken unto me, put away all other books, and forms, and let this be the criterion, and that will satisfy me!”

Such is the image of James O’Kelly presented in his own writing and by later biographers. This is the portrait of O’Kelly the patriot, lover of freedom and virtue, in opposition to all who would wrest power away from the American Methodist preacher. At a time when the fertile soil of independence was yielding a harvest of frontier exploration and settlement, many have heralded O’Kelly as the embodiment of that independent spirit.

Other less flattering images also begin to appear: O’Kelly the loose cannon, O’Kelly the twister of logic. These conflicting images and all the stories surrounding the man O’Kelly, begin to reveal the tremendous complexity of much larger forces shaping the new republic, even as the fledgling American Methodists were being forced to find their identity in such a setting. Surely John Wesley could not have foreseen how life in America would transform the Methodists who came there, placing them in the precarious position of choosing between loyalty to England or alignment with the patriots whose cause was American independence.

Charles Ferguson has observed that Methodism and the United States were “locked arm in arm” and they both “faced an uncertain future” during the turbulent early days of the country. This paper does not seek to produce a comprehensive historical analysis of those years prior to the O’Kelly schism, but instead it will consider how the major issues and challenges facing Francis Asbury throughout the 1780s and early 1790s, particularly the

1James O’Kelly, Author’s Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government (Richmond: Printed by John Dixon, 1798; repr., Wilmore, KY: Asbury Theological Seminary, 1981), 34.


opposition of James O’Kelly, shaped the power and structure of the episcopacy. Significant events, conferences, and conflicts will be examined with regard both to Asbury’s growing authority within the Methodist structure, and to O’Kelly’s voice in those events. The language of James O’Kelly’s writings and reactions will be considered, as well as the rhetorical aims of select biographers and apologists. Finally, Asbury’s thoughts as he expressed them near the end of his life will be examined as a retrospective on the development of the episcopal structure.

I

Patriot or Loyalist? Such a choice would soon face Francis Asbury, who arrived in Philadelphia on October 27, 1771 at the age of 26 as an emissary of John Wesley. Asbury recorded in his journal on October 10, 1772, “I received a letter from Mr. Wesley, in which he required a strict attention to discipline; and appointed me to act as assistant.” Just as Wesley had arrived in Georgia decades before with an array of hopes and fears, Asbury’s own substantial concerns were held together by Wesley’s charge to uphold discipline and structure in the growing Methodist movement.

The record of Asbury’s itinerant travels and his work throughout the circuits of the Methodist movement is nothing short of phenomenal. But even while riding through the mud, the rain, or the summer heat, Asbury’s mind frequently turned both to the immediate concerns and the future possibilities for the Methodist movement. His tremendous range of travel shaped his understanding of the frontier, the American people, and the connection. As illustrated below, years before he took the title of “bishop” Asbury had certainly begun to embody the New Testament spirit of the shepherd/overseer ἐπισκόπος.

Wesley’s itinerant plan for lay preachers had been a crucial element of the Methodist movement in England, proving to be indispensable for the connection as Methodist societies and preachers spread across the land. Francis Asbury was devoted to maintaining this integrity and flexibility within an American itinerant plan. However, as early as November 21, 1771, Asbury recorded his concerns about the preachers and their hesitancy in living out the full implications of the itinerant system:

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5Asbury, I: 46.
At present I am dissatisfied. I judge we are to be shut up in the cities this winter. My brethren seem unwilling to leave the cities, but I think I shall show them the way. I am in trouble, and more trouble is at hand, for I am determined to make a stand against all partiality. 8

Asbury would come to learn, however, that deference to authority is hard-earned. His insistence on discipline and itinerancy caused some to send "prejudiced reports" to Wesley in complaint. 9 Asbury also faced the enormous challenges bound up in the nationalistic forces of the Revolution. In fact, as Charles Ferguson aptly states, all of Wesley's preachers had to come to a decision for themselves whether "perhaps...being a Methodist was more important than being British?" 10 Furthermore, Asbury was also dealing with Thomas Rankin during this time, who had returned to England and who, as Asbury saw it, was influencing Wesley against America. 11 In 1777, Asbury wrote to Joseph Benson, describing Rankin's pro-Loyalist efforts:

It appeared to me that his object was to sweep the continent of every preacher that Mr. Wesley sent to it and of every respectable traveling preacher of Europe who had graduated among us, whether English or Irish. He told us that if we returned to our native country, we would be esteemed as such obedient, loyal subjects that we would obtain ordination in the grand Episcopal Church of England and come back to America with high respectability after the war has ended. 12

In fact, all the preachers Wesley had sent to America did return to England except Asbury. Jesse Lee observed that "Methodists met with some particular persecutions this year [1776],...[O]ur head preachers were all from Europe, and some of them were imprudent in speaking too freely against the proceedings of the Americans." 13 In a country that was forging its democratic identity, here were clear signs that, whatever Methodism would be in America, it would be uniquely American.

Perhaps Asbury viewed these political struggles and suspicion simply as part of the landscape of this new frontier, just like the rugged hills and cold streams he traveled through day after day for so many years. Soon, however, events arose that would test and shape this pastoral leadership. These events would threaten to split the growing movement from within, and as these events are considered, James O'Kelly emerged as a strong voice of opposition to Asbury and, later, to Thomas Coke.

1Asbury, I:10.
3Ferguson, 23.
4Asbury, III: 21 n. 16.
5Asbury, III: 21-22.
6Jesse Lee, A Short History of the Methodists, in the United States of America; Beginning in 1766, and Continued Till 1809 (Baltimore: Magill and Cline, 1810; reprint, Rutland, VT., Academy Books, 1974), 60.
Decisions would have to be made soon. The problem for Methodists to find priests from the Church of England who were willing to serve the Lord’s Supper had now become nearly an impossibility.\textsuperscript{14} With the Revolution, the question of the structure of authority was quickly becoming an issue. The preachers who met at Fluvanna County, Virginia on May 18, 1779, strongly felt that the need to administer the sacraments justified their forming a presbytery by ordaining each other.\textsuperscript{15} Asbury’s opposition to the developments at Fluvanna was both natural and substantial—not only was the issue of the sacraments a concern, but the entire movement was facing the very real threat of division.\textsuperscript{16} Asbury was able to meet with these preachers at Manakintown, Virginia beginning on May 8, 1780,\textsuperscript{17} and here a conflicting report of events is found. James O’Kelly wrote that he and John Dickins met together and decided they should petition Asbury to appeal to Wesley for guidance.\textsuperscript{18} However, Nicholas Snethen contended O’Kelly’s claim, writing, “Nay! It was Mr. Asbury that made the proposal, and it was agreed to by the conference.”\textsuperscript{19} In either case, Asbury took charge and so began to lead Methodism through a severe test. But his leadership was still tied to John Wesley, as is evidenced by Asbury’s journal entries during this time.\textsuperscript{20}

“When we...could not come to a conclusion with them, we withdrew, and left them to deliberate on the conditions I offered. ... I then prepared to leave the house...under the heaviest cloud I ever felt in America.”\textsuperscript{21} When Asbury left the proceedings, he had no reason to think his proposal would be accepted. He left as one who had failed to hold together the great forces threatening to tear apart the connection. But things would not end this way: “I returned to take leave of conference...but found they were brought to an agreement while I had been praying...preachers and people wept, prayed, and talked, so that the spirit of dissension was powerfully weakened, and I hoped it would never take place again.”\textsuperscript{22} The original proposal was altered to include both the petition to see Wesley’s advice, as well as the request for Asbury to lead the connection. In 1782, Francis Asbury was unanimously confirmed as the one to preside over the entire American Methodist conference.\textsuperscript{23}
Asbury’s authority would not go unchallenged. After the American connection separated from Wesley in the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church, strong opposition to Asbury’s authority would yet find its way to center stage in the challenges of James O’Kelly.

III

“I urged that two heads would produce two bodies.”

O’Kelly’s strong words at the Rough Creek Conference in 1787 referred to the proposal of the (joint) superintendency of Richard Whatcoat. The debate concerning Whatcoat’s superintendence was a crucial issue for O’Kelly and for Asbury. According to Charles Kilgore, O’Kelly believed the American preachers had to win this fight against Wesley’s control over them, in order to preserve the possibility of any future independence. In fact, Nicholas Snethen observed that although O’Kelly frequently opposed the specific proposals and actions of Asbury and Coke, O’Kelly’s main opposition was to the entire episcopal structure.

As the development of the authority of the bishop in the episcopal structure is considered, it is important to bear in mind the movement of Asbury away from Wesley in connectional decisions. One significant element in this process, observed by Jesse Lee in his consideration of the debate concerning Whatcoat, is perhaps so obvious that it might be overlooked—John Wesley simply wasn’t in America! Lee mentioned that the preachers debated what Wesley might do if they approved Whatcoat, specifically wondering if Wesley might be planning to call Asbury back to England. Lee also recorded, “It was further argued, that Mr. Wesley, while in England, could not tell what man was qualified to govern us, as well as we could who were present and were to be governed.”

During this time, Francis Asbury was still embodying and linking together the connection, really serving as the “linchpin of the connection” by sheer physical presence, much as Wesley had been doing in England. Also during this time, Jesse Lee noted that Asbury reprinted the general minutes of 1784 in a slightly different (but very significant) form, in which he changed the language to include the term “bishop.” Lee observed that:

This was the first time that our Superintendents [sic] ever gave themselves the title of Bishops in the minutes. They changed the title themselves without the consent of the conference; and at the next conference they asked the preachers if the word Bishop might

24 O’Kelly, 11.
26 Snethen, 48.
27 Lee, 126-127.
28 Kirby, 17.
O’Kelly commented in his Apology that Asbury “directed the preachers that whenever they wrote to him, to title him Bishop. They did so: and this was the beginning of our spurious Episcopacy.”

Gerald Moede observes that the years from 1784 to 1790 were times of “growing pains, pains which became constantly more severe” for the con­nectional structure. During this period of loose organizational structure, the several annual conferences (in 1789, eleven annual conferences were held) had been meeting in different parts of the country, but they had no central law-making body. Instead, proposals had to be presented and approved at each annual conference separately. In 1789, Asbury attempted to respond to the problematic administrative structure by creating the short-lived Council.

What was at stake during these years of the Council and the move to the general conference? For Asbury, it was the representation of the conference, which he believed to hold the real power for American Methodism. However, O’Kelly strongly opposed the means by which Asbury was doing what, admittedly, he thought was best for the church: O’Kelly’s opposition to Asbury’s motion that no preaching house should be built without “first obtaining liberty of the conference” caused Asbury to respond (according to O’Kelly) by saying “I can stay in Baltimore as long as you: and if I do not carry this, I will never sit in another council.”

The annotations in the 1798 *Doctrines and Discipline* clearly place the balance of power in the hands of the General Conference, and their descriptions of this structure strongly state the value Coke and Asbury placed on the conference as the central structure of American Methodism. Asbury saw the connection, stretching across this continent, as “that grand spring, the union of the body at large.” Having the support of the connection expressed by vote meant that the authority implied in his title would be backed by the imparted authority of the people, a value not lost on Americans then or now.

29Lee, 127-128.
30O’Kelly, 11.
32Kirby, 51.
33Moede, 62.
34Kirby, 58.
35O’Kelly, 16.
36O’Kelly, 17.
Moede observes that the councils were actually an attempt by Asbury to decentralize power, by designing a representative structure that would alleviate the travel burden a General Conference would place on preachers, while at the same time giving them at least a measure of representation by means of the presiding elders who attended. Furthermore, the first Council’s legislation was then passed back to the several conferences by the presiding elders, for the consideration of each. But even with the changes made for the second Council, such as allowing a two-thirds majority rather than requiring unanimous approval, Moede notes that Asbury was still perceived as trying to concentrate power in the hands of a few people, including himself and those he chose to sit on the council.

In any case, one element of the connectional structure certainly was in the hands of the bishops: the appointment of preachers to circuits. This issue was at the heart of O’Kelly’s opposition to Asbury, and it is to this issue — and its consequences for American Methodism — that the debate not turns.

IV

I now moved again, after this manner; Let a preacher who thinks himself injured in his appointment, have an appeal to the district conference. This motion was seconded, and warmly debated. William McKendre [sic], with several more, did, with holy zeal strive with me for liberty.40

On November 1, 1792, the first General Conference met in Baltimore, Maryland. By this time, James O’Kelly had appealed to Thomas Coke in writing that the Council was a failure, and Coke persuaded Asbury to convene a General Conference in order to solve the problems O’Kelly had argued against in the Council plan.41

The General Conference officially established its own authority over the office of bishop, specifically regarding the election and trial of bishops in cases of immorality.42 However, division would quickly take center stage. James O’Kelly’s proposal to the conference (quoted above) brings together several explosive issues as his opposition with Asbury reached critical mass: the authority to make appointments, the representation of the preachers, the balance of power in the connection, as well as his own personal conflict with Asbury!

Jesse Lee’s account describes the scene following O’Kelly’s proposal: “This motion brought on a long debate, and the arguments for and against the proposal were weighty, and handled in a masterly manner. There never had been a subject before us that so fully called forth all the strength of the

38 Moede, 63.
39 Moede, 64-65.
40 O’Kelly, 35.
41 Moede, 67.
42 Moede, 68.
Policies as well as passions were both strongly expressed throughout the proceedings.

John Dickins separated the issue into two proposals, and the first (whether the bishops shall appoint) passed unanimously. But the second question, “Shall a preacher be allowed to appeal?” caused debate — was this to be considered a new rule, or an amendment to an old rule? It was decided that the issue was an amendment, the significance of which was that amendments could pass by simple majority vote, while new rules required a two-thirds majority.

Asbury felt that the bishop was uniquely positioned for the task of appointing preachers to circuits. In the retrospective “annotations” to the 1798 Doctrines and Discipline, Asbury and Coke clearly stated the rationale behind the disciplinary language; only the traveling bishop had the perspective to consider the entirety of the connection, and to make the most appropriate appointments. If an individual preacher opposed the appointment, and the preacher’s annual conference were allowed to overturn the appointment, Asbury argued that the conference would naturally keep its own best interests in mind, rather than the good of the entire connection.

Nicholas Snethen also employed this argument against O’Kelly in his treatise, A Reply to an Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government, focusing on the appointments O’Kelly had received: “[O’Kelly’s] stations for ten years...were almost constantly...presiding over a large district of the very best circuits in the connection. ...would he have appealed to the conference for a station upon the banks of the Ohio; upon the frontiers of Kentucky and Tennessee; or upon the burning sands of Georgia?”

However, O’Kelly’s rhetoric not only simply attacked specific appointments, but rather the danger of allowing all the power of appointment to rest with the bishop. He wrote, “It was urged by several, that the bishop always appointed well, as far as they knew. I prayed them not to arrogate infallibility [sic] to the bishop. For in my judgement, he made many very injudicious appointments.” He implied that the real debate had gone beyond the question of whether preachers could appeal their appointments; rather, the heart of the issue was whether such episcopal power and control would become inherent functions of the office.

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43Lee, 178-179.
44Lee, 179.
45Moede, 67.
46M.E. Church, 1798 Doctrines and Discipline, 41.
47M.E. Church, 1798 Doctrines and Discipline, 41.
48Snethen, 30.
49O’Kelly, 36.
50O’Kelly, 36.
After much debate, the appeal was voted down and the result was, as O’Kelly stated, “that an injured brother and minister in the Church of Christ, should have no redress!” After O’Kelly refused to come back to the meeting, Jesse Lee recorded that O’Kelly and many who were influenced by him set off by foot, with their saddle bags and coats on their shoulders, toward town where their horses were located about twelve miles away. Lee wrote, “I stood and looked after them as they went off, and observed to one of the preachers, that I was sorry to see the old man go off in that way, for I was persuaded that he would not be quiet long; but he would try to be the head of some party.” And just as Jesse Lee indicated, later that year James O’Kelly established the Republican Methodist Church, the subject of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

As we have seen, what has come to be known at the “O’Kelly schism” really had its roots in a developing debate over the power and nature of church government throughout the critical years of the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Russell Richey has pointed out that during these years, American Methodists were not merely struggling with how to organize their movement, but more generally, they were forming a language with which they began to understand and speak about themselves.

The language used by O’Kelly to frame the virtues of a scriptural, republican government is part of a larger world of language involving both the fight for American independence from England, as well as the struggle for American Methodist identity apart from Wesley. The events that shaped American identity, and the language with which Americans framed their ideas, were also shaping the language used by Methodists on all sides of the debates centering around the episcopacy.

Richey’s analysis of the “four languages” of American Methodism sheds light specifically on O’Kelly’s opposition to Asbury and the power of the episcopacy. Richey aptly observes that the episcopal framework of language, which was taken most immediately from the Church of England, was not a perfect fit for the Methodists in this new nation. Rather, the language was “only partially connected with the richly textured community, fraternity, and order of Methodism.” Both O’Kelly’s writings and Asbury’s journal

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4O’Kelly, 39.
5Lee, 180.
8Richey, 14.
records will be considered in this light, with emphasis given to the different perspectives from which they formed their arguments.

VI

O'Kelly's writings bear very strongly the language of the republic, the freedom and liberty for which all people were created, and which come to full manifestation in the democratic equality of the scriptural, primitive church.56 O'Kelly argued that there is no separate order of bishop in scripture and that the word ἐπισκόπος should be translated "presbyter" or "elder."57 His perspective on liberty is expressed clearly when he contended that for Methodists to accept the power of the bishop is, in effect, to forfeit their liberties and settle for less than full representation:

All those who are acquainted with the New Testament, must also know that this is not gospel order. Strange indeed, that thousands of good people should calmly part with their gospel liberties, and like Esau sell their birth right. For, there is but one way that people can give power to others which they have not to give, that is, be deprecating themselves.59

O'Kelly's biographers also bear this standard as well. For instance, W. E. MacClenny's *The Life of Rev. James O'Kelly* described O'Kelly as "champion of religious freedom, [who] stood ready to oppose anything that he thought was against the liberty of conscience."59 In fact, MacClenny goes so far as to compare the opposition O'Kelly received from the conference to the cries of "crucify him!" Jesus encountered so soon after his entrance into Jerusalem!60

O'Kelly wrote of the growth of the episcopacy in the years prior to the 1792 conference, "Ah, Francis was born and nurtured in the land of kings and bishops, and that which is bred in the bone, is hard to be got out of the flesh."61 For O'Kelly, this "and of kings and bishops" could do nothing else than reproduce in Asbury the episcopacy he had left in England. O'Kelly also used implicitly derogatory references to the Roman Catholic Church, poisoning the well by charging "popery" in order to build a more passionate appeal for his cause. For instance, in describing the debates at the 1792 General Conference, O'Kelly referred to Hope Hull's appeal at American liberty, in which Hull "spake after this manner: O Heavens! Are we not Americans! Did not our fathers bleed to free their sons

56Richey, 89. Richey describes this language as "republican language, the rhetoric of the British Commonwealthman tradition, the world view of radical Whiggery, the ideology of the American Revolution."
57O'Kelly, 81.
58O'Kelly, 80.
60MacClenny, 100.
61O'Kelly, 21.
from British yoke? And shall we be slaves to ecclesiastical oppression?" 62
Stephen Davis later cried out, after "Henry" arose to refute Hull, "'We are
far gone into Popery!" 63

The fact that O'Kelly did retain the name "Methodist," adding the
descriptive "Republican," to describe the church he founded certainly bears
mentioning inasmuch as it demonstrated even further that O'Kelly's opposi-
tion was not against what he considered true Wesleyan Methodism, but
against the Methodist Episcopal structure dominated by Asbury. O'Kelly's
_Apology_ creates the impression that the Republicans were an idyllic, harmo-
nious and completely scriptural church, in which everyone participated
equally in the government. As O'Kelly wrote, "Then as free citizens in the
land of Columbia, and servants of the great King, we proceeded according
to divine order..." to lay hands upon the presbyters chosen by the church
according to scriptural guidelines. 64

It is also important to remember that O'Kelly's language also represents
a retrospective examination of the development of the Methodist episcopal
structure over the past two decades. In the _Apology_, as well as in
_Vindication_, he expressed the strong conviction that from the beginning of
the movement, he had opposed the assumptions and deceptions that had led
to the establishment of a tyrannical, despotic form of episcopal govern-
ment. 65 However, as an influential presiding elder in the Petersburg area,
O'Kelly was critiquing a system he himself was still involved in, and he was
still shaping his understanding of how all parts would fit together into the
whole of this new church. 66

_VII_

The skillful passionate rhetoric of James O'Kelly demanded that
Asbury's written statements be carefully constructed. O'Kelly's language
drove Asbury and Coke, as well as Nicholas Snethen and others, to produce
extensive responses based upon both conference legislation and scriptural
understanding.

George Moede draws from the work of Thomas Neely that Wesley, as
well as Asbury and Coke, intended the affairs of the church to be overseen
by a "New Testament-like episcopacy," not a higher order, but as "'pres-
byter-bishops who, as overseers, superintend the affairs of the church. . . . So
Methodist government is government not by bishops, but a government with
bishops.'" 67 Asbury and Coke's comments in the 1798 _Doctrines and

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62 O'Kelly, 38.
63 O'Kelly, 38.
64 O'Kelly, 50.
65 O'Kelly, _Vindication_, 28, 46, et al.
66 Price, 84.
67 Moede, 62.
Discipline make this point clear,\(^6\) the annotations for which were written, as Frederick Norwood’s introduction explains, primarily in response to O’Kelly.\(^6\) Asbury took this task extremely seriously, as he expressed in a letter to George Roberts, February 11, 1797:

> Brother James O’Kelly answered a woman who asked the difference between me and him. He gave her the powerful return. “Suppose,” said he, “I were to show you the Bible and a form of discipline made by the General Conference, would you not know the difference?”
>
> For this cause we have abounded in scripture...I judge it of such consequence that I shall offer the reading not only before the Philadelphia Conference but before every yearly conference in the Union.\(^7\)

The annotations of Asbury and Coke clearly outlined the role the bishop will play in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Their work paints the picture of the bishop in contrast to the power of John Wesley in England, as well as in response to O’Kelly and other forces.\(^7\) As they described it, American (Methodist Episcopal) bishops are “perfectly subject to the general conference.”\(^7\) Also, “there are no bishops of any other episcopal church upon earth, who are subject to so strict a trial as the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal church in America” (regarding trial for immorality).\(^7\) Furthermore, they point out that while the bishops have authority to ordain, “they not only have no power to ordain a person for the episcopal office till he be first elected by the general conference, but they possess no authority to ordain and elder or a traveling deacon, till he be first elected by a yearly conference.”\(^7\) This language clearly seeks to establish the bishop not as one who is the authority above other authority, but who is one doubly accountable to the rest of the structure—a position to which the power-hungry should not aspire!

Asbury’s language also reflects the fact that perhaps few people have traveled this continent in its length and breadth as Francis Asbury did. Richey notes the significance of Asbury’s view of the country as “continent,” a reference with which Asbury’s journal is filled.\(^7\) Both in his quite matter-of-fact description of the terrain, the rivers, and the mountains, as well as in his understanding of what this land represents, it is significant that this American continent was seen above all as a mission field both for Wesley and for the Methodist movement under Asbury’s leadership.\(^7\) In fact, Methodists did not come to America to escape religious tyranny, but to

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\(^6\)M.E. Church, 1798 Doctrines and Discipline, 7-8.

\(^6\)Norwood, introduction to 1798 Doctrines and Discipline, [2-3].

\(^7\)Asbury, III:159.

\(^7\)Richey, 87.

\(^7\)M.E. Church, 1798 Doctrines and Discipline, 42.

\(^7\)M.E. Church, 1798 Doctrines and Discipline, 43.

\(^7\)M.E. Church, 1798 Doctrines and Discipline, 44.

\(^7\)Richey, 36-37.

\(^7\)Richey, 36.
"reform the Continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness over these lands." 77 
In fact, this land was particularly viewed not in terms of country, but more significantly as "Zion," representing God's redemption not just of America as a political entity, but of the church in all lands. 78

VIII

On January 15, 1816, at the end of a life lived in the fullness of the word "connection" as much perhaps as any American Methodist ever has, Francis Asbury wrote a letter to Joseph Benson looking back on this connectional structure as it related to himself and to the life and growth of the church. In this letter, Asbury gave significant attention to the nature of the episcopal office, writing:

Bishops in Greece or Rome, what have they been in frightful forms? ... Bishops in our age, among the Presbyterians and Independent Churches, the Baptists, and the commonality of the people are ready to suppose that a bishop is a tyrant, the same as a pope, dreadful, dangerous creatures.... With us a bishop is a plain man, altogether like his brethren, wearing no marks of distinction... and many times, if he is able, called upon to labor and suffer more than any of his brethren.... 79

As Francis Asbury reflected on his life, no doubt his mind turned to the voice of James O'Kelly and the issues O'Kelly so vehemently raised. Asbury had tried to serve his beloved people, shepherd them, and care for them as the επισκόπος must do. And in doing so, he had at times felt it necessary to push, as a shepherd must also do sometimes, for what he believed was in the church's best interest.

Asbury had faced tremendous opposition throughout these decades of immense growth and change in both the church and the nation. He had witnessed the tragic schism of losing over 4,000 members of the Methodist Episcopal Church who left the church to follow O'Kelly. 80 But James O'Kelly in his own way was also strongly committed to his own understanding of the church and his concern for the members. O'Kelly's passions for equality and the ideological virtues of the republic would have a lasting impact on American Methodism and many of his issues would have continued impact in the reform movement of the 1820s. 81 Through it all, these struggles had caused the church to explore, refine, and establish the episcopacy that would serve generations to come.

77 M.E. Church, 1798 Doctrines and Discipline, iii.
78 Richey, 42-43.
79 Asbury, III: 544-545.
80 Price, 83.
81 Richey, 91.