

JOHN WESLEY AND FRANCIS ASBURY¹

JOHN WIGGER

Picture Francis Asbury and John Wesley sitting in a pub somewhere in England, perhaps like the one across the road from Asbury's childhood home. The room is bustling but not crowded and they have a quiet table in the corner. It is sometime in the late 1780s, after Wesley ordained Thomas Coke and sent him to America to ordain Asbury, and after the Americans formed themselves into the Methodist Episcopal Church. Wesley is in his eighties and Asbury is in his mid-forties. For some reason the two men have been left alone for a few hours with only each other for company. Each has a pint in front of him, enjoying it with the leisure of someone who has nothing better to do.

Of course, no such meeting ever occurred, either in England or America. Wesley never crossed the Atlantic after his mostly unsuccessful mission to Georgia in 1736-1737 and Asbury never returned home after he left for the colonies in 1771. But if he had, and if the two men had found themselves alone without any pressing business, what would they have talked about? What was there that would have bound them together, and what would have pulled them apart?

There was much that divided Wesley and Asbury, beginning with their upbringings and family backgrounds. Wesley's parents, Samuel and Susanna, were part of England's educated elite, though their means always remained modest by gentry standards. While his father and grandfather were Dissenting ministers, Samuel Wesley became a High Church Tory. Susanna Wesley, the daughter of a prominent Dissenting minister, joined the Church of England in her teens. Educated at Oxford, albeit as a servitor, Samuel received his living at Epworth in 1695 and remained there until his death in 1735. He was, by any broad measure, a solid and respectable gentleman.

The Wesleys admittedly had their share of family turmoil. Samuel and Susanna had between seventeen and nineteen children, of which John was the thirteenth or fourteenth and only the second of three sons to survive childhood. It was, to say the least, a large and boisterous family. Samuel and Susanna were a study in contrasts. "Temperamentally, it seems painfully clear, they were poles apart," writes Henry D. Rack. Where Susanna was "competent, businesslike and possessed of a cool, rational mentality," Sam-

¹ A slightly revised version of John Wigger's article was previously published as "John Wesley and Francis Asbury" in *Perfecting Perfection: Essays in Honor of Henry D. Rack*, ed., Robert Webster (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 173-188. Used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers, www.wipfandstock.com.

uel was “learned, zealous, pious, affectionate” but also “prone to self-dramatization.” The effect was “almost uniformly disastrous” for the Wesley girls, as Rack notes, but not for John. His upbringing provided him with a confident sense of his place in the world and a firm conviction that he had an important place in English society.²

Asbury’s upbringing was far humbler. As a child he had no expectations of a life beyond his village and a trade. His parents, Joseph and Elizabeth, were married on May 30, 1742, when he was about twenty-nine and she about twenty-seven. They had two children, Sarah, born on May 3, 1743, and Francis, born on August 20 or 21, 1745. He was never exactly sure of the date since his parents, who were not particularly religious during much of his childhood, may never have had him baptized.³

Francis, or Frank as the family called him, grew up in the West Midlands of England, near Birmingham, in Great Barr, near Wednesbury and West Bromwich. His father was an agricultural laborer and gardener employed, according to most accounts, by two local, wealthy families. Their cottage was attached to a brewery indicating that Joseph likely worked at the nearby brewery farm, with the cottage as part of his compensation. Soundly built, the cottage was lived in until the 1950s. It consists of two bedrooms upstairs, two rooms downstairs, and a cellar, a comfortable home for the family of a gardener but nothing to compare to the Epworth rectory. Reflecting on this period, Asbury recalled that his parents “were people in common life; were remarkable for honesty and industry, and had all things needful to enjoy.”⁴

But he also added, “had my father been as saving as laborious, he might have been wealthy.” Did Joseph gamble or drink their money away, as proximity to the brewery might suggest? Whatever his failing, it cast a cloud over the family. About 1796, two years before Joseph’s death, the American preacher Jeremiah Minter asked Asbury, “I have often heard you mention your Mother, but never heard you mention your Father, is he living or is he dead?” When Asbury didn’t reply another preacher answered for him: “It may be that he has no Father.” At least not that he cared to discuss. Samuel Wesley had his faults (chronic debt among them), but they did not leave John

² Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1989), 5-51; Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 25-32.

³ John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 15-16; *JLEA*, 1:720; David J. A. Hallam, *Eliza Asbury: Her Cottage and Her Son* (Studley, England: Berwin, 2003), 1-7, 12-15; Henry Herbert Prince, *The Romance of Early Methodism in and around West Bromwich and Wednesbury* (West Bromwich: Published by the author, 1925), 39-40; Parish Register and Bishops Transcript for St. Mary Parish, Handsworth, 1743-1745. City Archives and Local History Department, Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, England.

⁴ Wigger, *American Saint*, 16; *JLEA*, 1:720; W. C. Sheldon, “The Landmarks of Bishop Asbury’s Childhood and Youth,” *PWHS* 12 (1920) 97-103; Frederick W. Briggs, *Bishop Asbury: A Biographical Study for Christian Workers*, 3rd ed. (1874; repr., London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1880s), 9-10; J. M. Day, *Asbury Cottage, Newton Road, Great Barr, Restored, re-opened and dedicated on Friday, 27th November, 1959* (Printed and published by the Metropolitan Borough of Sandwell, n.d.), 6-7.

Wesley too embarrassed to even acknowledge him.⁵

Education also separated Wesley and Asbury. John Wesley went up to Oxford, to Christ Church, in June, 1720. Oxford was formative for Wesley and would remain a central axis of his life ever after. It conferred on him the respectability and dignity of England's educated elite. Wesley was ordained a deacon in the Church of England in September, 1725, and a priest in September, 1728. He was elected a fellow of Lincoln College in March, 1726, a fellowship he continued to hold until his marriage in 1751. The fellowship paid him a stipend of £18 to £80 per year, though it was usually about £30. "This was comfortable enough for a young bachelor," writes Rack, and provided the kind of security which Asbury could have never dreamt.⁶

Wesley's education and upbringing allowed him to become a prolific author and the dominant theological voice of Methodism in Britain and America. If we count the later holiness and Pentecostal movements as part of the Wesleyan family, then Wesley's theology, particularly his doctrine of Christian perfection, is key to understanding the development of Protestant evangelicalism from the mid-eighteenth century to the present. Francis Asbury produced no similar body of literature. Though he diligently kept a journal for forty-five years and wrote thousands of letters, Asbury never published a book or treatise of any note. He was a voracious reader, particularly of Wesley's works, but he simply did not have the intellectual tools to do more with pen and paper.

Asbury's parents had done the best they could, beginning with the best education they could imagine or afford. By age five his mother had taught him to read the Bible, and he remained "remarkably fond of reading" during his childhood. He later recalled that "my father having but one son, greatly desired to keep me at school he cared not how long." They sent Frank to the only school in the area at Sneal's Green, a free school about a quarter mile from their cottage. Unfortunately the school's master was "a great churl, and used to beat me cruelly," Asbury later remembered. His severity "filled me with such horrible dread, that with me anything was preferable to going to school."⁷

At about age thirteen Asbury entered an apprenticeship to a local metalworker. The six and a half years he spent as a metalworker left an indelible mark on him. West Midlands manufacturers had a keen eye for what would sell. Asbury later applied this same market sense to the American religious landscape. Having seen a consumer revolution in material goods he was better prepared to appreciate a consumer revolution in spiritual ideas, exactly

⁵ Wigger, *American Saint*, 16-18; *JLFA*, 1:720; Jeremiah Minter, *A Brief Account of the Religious Experience, Travels, Preaching, Persecutions From Evil Men, and God's Special Helps in the Faith and Life, &c. of Jerem. Minter, Minister of the Gospel of Christ* (Washington City: Printed for the Author, 1817), 26.

⁶ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 68-76; Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 33-58.

⁷ Wigger, *American Saint*, 19; *JLFA*, 1:720-21.

what he would encounter in America.⁸

Nevertheless, a metalworker's shop was not Oxford. Wesley's family may have been only moderately wealthy by gentry standards, but he could still command the attention of the well-heeled. There was much about his Oxford experience that Wesley later rejected, but he usually included the title "Fellow of Lincoln College" on the title pages of his books. He had great sympathy and even admiration for the working people of England, but it was the sympathy of an outsider. When he traveled, Wesley routinely lodged with wealthy supporters, who were nevertheless not Methodists, rather than stay in the homes of more humble members. Asbury never adopted a similar practice. His early life was more commonplace than Wesley's and he never expected to be treated like a gentleman.⁹

The event that would drive a wedge between Wesley and Asbury was the American Revolution. At the outset it was not obvious that Wesley would oppose the American cause. Writing in June, 1775, to the Earl of Dartmouth, secretary of state for the colonies, Wesley confessed that he could not help but think of Americans as "an oppressed people" who "ask for nothing more than their legal rights, and that in the most modest and inoffensive manner that the nature of the thing would allow."¹⁰

All of this changed for Wesley once the disruptive social and economic impact of the revolution became clear, particularly its hostility to the king. Wesley was not so much concerned with what the revolution would do to America as with what it might do to England. "If a blow is struck, I give *America* for lost, and perhaps *England* too," he wrote to his brother Charles in June, 1775.¹¹ Wesley wrote to the Earl of Dartmouth to counter reports "that trade was as plentiful & flourishing as ever, & the people as well employed & as well satisfied." From Wesley's observations, just the opposite was true. "In every part of England where I have been (& I have been East, West, North & South within these two years) trade in general is exceedingly decayed, & thousands of people are quite unemployed." Food was so scarce that many were reduced to "walking shadows." Wesley found that people mostly blamed the king. "They heartily despise his Majesty, & hate him with a perfect Hatred. They wish to embrue their hands in his blood; they are full of ye Spirit of Murder and Rebellion." This was a dangerous situation and Wesley saw it as his duty to speak out.¹²

At about the same time that he wrote to Dartmouth, Wesley came across Samuel Johnson's pamphlet *Taxation No Tyranny*. Borrowing liberally from Johnson (his critics would say plagiarizing), Wesley reduced Johnson's argument in length and complexity, making it more suitable for a broad audience.

⁸ Wigger, *American Saint*, 20-24.

⁹ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 45-49, 105; Wigger, *American Saint*, 91.

¹⁰ John Wesley to William Legge, June 14, 1775, *JWLT*, 6:142, 156; Wigger, *American Saint*, 87-88.

¹¹ John Wesley to Charles Wesley, June 2, 1775, *LJWT*, 6:152.

¹² John Wesley to William Legge, Aug. 23, 1775, Staffordshire Record Office, Stafford, England; Wigger, *American Saint*, 88.

Published as *A Calm Address to Our American Colonies*, the pamphlet sold for two pence, but did little to calm anyone's feelings. Wesley reminded his readers that England enjoyed more civil and religious liberty than any nation on earth. Why would anyone rebel against such a benevolent government? The answer, Wesley wrote, was that "designing men" in England had duped the Americans into believing that they were oppressed. "Determined enemies to monarchy," these men were willing to risk all to bring down the king and replace him with a republican form of government. "Would a republican government give you more liberty, either religious or civil?" Wesley asked. Far from it: "No governments under heaven are so despotic as the republican; no subjects are governed in so arbitrary a manner as those of a commonwealth . . . Republics show no mercy." The only sensible course was to "fear God and honour the King!" Following up a theme from his earlier pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (1772), Wesley reminded readers that the only real slave in America was "that Negro, fainting under the load, bleeding under the lash!"¹³

Wesley's pamphlet sold a hundred thousand copies in a few months, creating a storm of protest in the process. Though few copies reached America, his views became generally known, and he continued to publish on the topic for several years. In subsequent pamphlets, particularly *A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England* (1777), Wesley shifted much of the blame for the war from anti-monarchists in England to the Americans themselves, and he continued to call for loyalty to the king. "Do any of you *blaspheme God, or the King?*" Wesley asked his fellow Methodists. "None of you, I trust, who are in connexion with *me*. I would no more continue in fellowship with those, who continue in such a practice, than with whore-mongers, or sabbath-breakers, or thieves, or drunkards, or common swearers."¹⁴

Other British Methodists, including John Fletcher, joined John Wesley in criticizing the Americans. Charles Wesley wrote hundreds of pages of poetry condemning American patriots, those "fiends from hell," and the conduct of British leaders who had bungled the war effort. Like John, Charles drew a connection between the American Revolution and the English Civil War. The American patriots, according to Charles, were guilty of conducting the war

By burnings, ravages, and rapes,
And villainy in a thousand shapes

¹³ *JWJW*, 11:80-90; Frank Baker, "The Shaping of Wesley's *Calm Address*," *Methodist History* 14.1 (1975): 3-12; Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 262-264; Wigger, *American Saint*, 88.

¹⁴ John Wesley, *A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England*, 2nd ed. (London, 1777); *JWJW*, 12:9-40; *JWLT*, 6:182; Donald H. Kirkham, "John Wesley's *Calm Address*: The Response of the Critics," *Methodist History* 14.1 (1975) 13-23; David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750-1900* (London: Routledge, 1996), 77-90; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 376-377; Wigger, *American Saint*, 89.

By comparison, John Wesley seemed a moderate.¹⁵

British preachers in America could easily perceive the direction of the Wesleys' opinions and increasingly spoke out against the American cause. Except for Asbury. After receiving an "affectionate letter" from John Wesley in early 1776, Asbury declared that he was "truly sorry that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America." Had Wesley "been a subject of America, no doubt he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American cause" as he now was of the British. The gulf between Wesley and Asbury in this regard ran deep. Wesley was an Oxford-educated clergyman and gentleman who saw it as his duty to uphold church and king. For Wesley, republicanism undercut the essential social hierarchy that supported the moral order of the universe. Asbury had come to the more American view that the old order was inherently flawed, a human invention, and not a very good one at that. None of this is surprising given that Wesley was a priest of the established church and Asbury was not. Asbury had grown up within sight of political power (Dartmouth's estate was within two miles of the Asburys' cottage), but without any expectation that it would ever concern him directly. Of Wesley's licensed missionaries to America, only Asbury divided Wesley's theology from his political and social views. Asbury's position on the war was much closer to that of the majority of the American preachers, who eventually supported the American cause.¹⁶

So it would seem that Wesley and Asbury had little in common. But there are other ways of looking at the two that make them appear much more alike, and that shed light on what Methodism was really all about.

First, Wesley and Asbury shared a core sense of piety and spiritual devotion. At Oxford, Wesley began to fashion a life of spiritual discipline that he would hold to, in its broad outline, for the remainder of his life. He determined to rise at 5:00 a.m. for prayer, though it was a practice "only gradually achieved," as Professor Rack writes. While still in his twenties he developed a "passion for an organized life of piety" that, for Wesley at least, laid the foundation for the so-called "Holy Club." There is much about Wesley's conversion, whether at Aldersgate or at some other point, and his quest for assurance that remains difficult to pin down. In a remarkable letter to his brother Charles on June 27, 1766, John wrote: "[I] do not feel the wrath of God abiding on [me]; nor can I believe it does. And yet (this is the mystery) [I do not love God. I never did.] Therefore [I never] *believed* in the Christian sense of the word."¹⁷ This was more than an isolated moment of doubt, but it does not mean that Wesley's piety was feigned or insincere. Wesley was a mediator of religious experience for his followers, even when he had not had the kind of direct, emotional experience he preached. For all the vicissitudes

¹⁵ Charles Wesley, *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, eds. S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, 3 vols. (Nashville: Kingswood, 1988), 1:72, 96, 104, 109; Wigger, *American Saint*, 89.

¹⁶ *JLFA*, 1:181; Wigger, *American Saint*, 89-90.

¹⁷ John Wesley to Charles Wesley, June 27, 1766, *JWLT*, 5:16.

of his faith, Wesley's life was defined by his practice, his method, of piety.¹⁸

Asbury's life was also defined by his piety, though with fewer doubts, so far as we know. He ate sparingly and usually rose at 4 or 5 a.m. to pray for an hour in the stillness before dawn. He never married or owned a home and could carry nearly all of his possessions on horseback. During his forty-five years in America he essentially lived as a houseguest in thousands of other people's homes across the nation. This manner of life "exposed him, continually, to public and private observation and inspection, and subjected him to a constant and critical review, and that from day to day, and from year to year," wrote Ezekiel Cooper, who knew Asbury for more than thirty years. Asbury lived one of the most transparent lives imaginable. People saw him at unguarded moments, when he was tired and sick, when he went to bed at night and got up in the morning. If his piety had been less than sincere it would have been obvious. It is therefore all the more revealing that the closer people got to him, the more they respected the integrity of his faith.¹⁹

Wesley and Asbury agreed on the danger that wealth posed to true spiritual devotion. Wesley was always suspicious of the consumer revolution taking shape in the eighteenth century, and his economic teaching was hardly a model for acquisitive capitalism. He never ceased to warn Methodists against the evil of stockpiling wealth. They were to work diligently within the bounds of the law, regarding their labor as a divine calling. The object of their financial ambitions ought to be charity, not luxury. They should provide for their families "plain, cheap, wholesome food, which most promotes health both of body and mind" and whatever else was "needful for life and godliness," and then "fix [their] purpose to 'gain no more.'" Laying up treasures on earth "our Lord as flatly forbids as murder and adultery."²⁰

Wesley mostly practiced what he preached, but a growing number of his followers did not. Methodist discipline gave them the tools they needed to gain a measure of financial success, but they proved reluctant to give it away. As early as 1765, Wesley was complaining that "many Methodists" had grown "*rich, and thereby lovers of the present world.*" In a 1784 sermon, he lamented that "of all temptations none so struck at the whole work of God as 'the deceitfulness of riches.'" Too many were "indulging 'the pride of life,'" and "seeking the honour that cometh of men." "They *gain all*

¹⁸ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 83, 544-549.

¹⁹ Ezekiel Cooper, *The Substance of a Funeral Discourse, Delivered at the Request of the Annual Conference, on Tuesday, the 23d of April, 1816, in St. George's Church, Philadelphia: on the Death of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Superintendent, or Senior Bishop, of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: Jonathan Pounder, 1819), 21; Wigger, *American Saint*, 3, 5.

²⁰ John Wesley, "The More Excellent Way," *Sermons III 71-114*, ed. Albert C. Outler, *BEW*, 3:270, 276; John Walsh, "John Wesley and the Community of Goods," in *Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany, and America c.1750-c.1950: Essays in Honour of W. R. Ward*, ed. Keith Robbins (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 25-50; Wigger, *American Saint*, 36. The quotations from Wesley are from the sermon "The More Excellent Way." Also see Wesley's sermon "The Danger of Increasing Riches," *Sermons IV 115-151*, ed. Albert C. Outler, *BEW*, 4:178-86. The works by William Law that most impressed Wesley in this regard were *A Practical Treatise Upon Christian Perfection* and *A Serious Call to a Holy Life*.

they can, honestly and conscientiously. They *save all they can*, by cutting off all needless expense, by adding frugality to diligence. And so far all is right. This is the duty of everyone that fears God. But they do not *give all they can*; without which they must needs grow more and more earthly-minded.” In short, because of their unwillingness to detach themselves from the world around them, many lost their spiritual edge.²¹

Not Asbury. Perhaps more so than any of Wesley’s followers Asbury lived out the patterns of Wesleyan piety and discipline. Though he spent his life on the road he insisted on riding inexpensive horses and using cheap saddles and riding gear. He relentlessly pushed himself to the breaking point of his health, seldom asking more of other Methodists than he was willing to do. Asbury rode more than 130,000 miles during his career in America, on mostly bad backcountry roads and through all kinds of weather. In 1810, at age sixty-five and in precarious health, he sold a two-wheeled sulky he had used for a couple of years and returned to riding horseback. Without the carriage he could “better turn aside to visit the poor; I can get along more difficult and intricate roads; I shall save money to give away to the needy; and, lastly, I can be more tender to my poor, faithful beast.”²²

Even more so than Wesley, Asbury gave away nearly all the money that came his way. While riding through Virginia in March, 1800, a “friend” asked to borrow £50. “He might as well have asked for Peru,” Asbury joked. “I showed him all the money I had in the world—about twelve dollars, and gave him five . . . I will live and die a poor man.” “He would divide his last dollar with a Methodist preacher,” recalled Henry Boehm, who traveled some 25,000 miles with Asbury from 1808 to 1813. “He was restless till it was gone, so anxious was he to do good with it.” Once, in Ohio, Asbury and Boehm came across a widow whose only cow was about to be sold to pay her debts. Determining that “It must not be,” Asbury gave what he had and solicited enough from bystanders to pay the woman’s bills. “His charity knew no bounds but the limits of its resources, nor did I ever know him let an object of charity pass without contributing something for their relief,” wrote John Wesley Bond, who traveled with Asbury during the last years of his life and who, like Boehm, kept track of Asbury’s money. “To begin at the right end of the work is to go first to the *poor*; these *will*, the rich *may possibly*,

²¹ John Wesley, “The Wisdom of God’s Counsel,” *Sermons II 34-70*, ed. Albert C. Outler, *BEW*, 2:560–61; *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, From the First, Held in London, By the Rev. John Wesley, A. M. In the year 1744, vols. 1-2* (London: Conference Office, 1812, 1813), 1:50. Also see John Wesley’s “The Use of Money,” *Sermons II 34-70*, *BEW*, 2:268-80.

²² *JLFA*, 2:610, 612, 614, 652, 656, 3:406-8; Wigger, *American Saint*, 3, 5, 368. “Since I am on horseback my fetters are gone,” Asbury wrote on Nov. 19, 1810, after selling the sulky (Asbury, *JLFA*, 2:653). Asbury’s austerity sometimes led to misunderstandings. In rural Maryland in March, 1810, he apparently offended locals by refusing a ride in a coach. “Will my character never be understood? But gossips will talk. If we want plenty of good eating and new suits of clothes, let us come to Baltimore; but we want souls” (*JLFA*, 2:632).

hear the truth," Asbury observed in 1789.²³

Like Wesley, Asbury believed that wealth was a snare. Toward the end of his career the growing prosperity of American Methodists increasingly alarmed Asbury. After the end of Thomas Jefferson's unpopular trade embargo with Europe in 1809, he could not help but "fear much that these expected *good times* will injure us:—the prosperity of fools will destroy; therefore affliction may be best, and God may send it, for this is a favored land: Lord save us from ruin as a people!" He feared that creeping affluence would lead to complacency and pride. "Our *ease in Zion* makes me feel awful," he wrote in July, 1810. "Ah, poor dead Methodists! I have seen preachers' children wearing gold—brought up in pride. Ah, mercy, mercy!" One can hardly doubt that Wesley would have agreed.²⁴

Asbury and Wesley were alike in a second crucial way, their ability to negotiate between competing religious and cultural worlds. In his magisterial biography of John Wesley, Rack argues persuasively that Wesley acted as a "cultural middleman" between Methodists on the one hand and clergymen and educated gentlemen on the other. Asbury used this same mediating impulse to shape Wesley's system for America. What Wesley and Asbury both understood was that the church was failing to reach large numbers of people with the gospel. In England the greatest areas of need were the newly industrializing towns and cities. In 1700, only about nineteen percent of the English population lived in a town of more than 2,500 people. By 1801, it was nearly thirty-one percent. These were the people that the Church of England was largely failing to minister to in Wesley's day. In America urbanization was never much of a factor during Asbury's lifetime but rapid geographic expansion was. England's expansion was more intensive and America's more diffuse, but the effect was the same. Both were societies in rapid transition where the old ways of connecting with people would not suffice.²⁵

Wesley blended the theology of the Church of England and the eighteenth century's emphasis on reason with the more "supernaturalist mentality and religious tastes" of common people, making him indeed a "reasonable enthusiast." To provide preaching to places that did not have it, he licensed lay preachers and appointed them to circuits. To provide pastoral care he created class meetings. In the process this gentleman priest gave voice to a much wider range of people than had ever been the case before in England.²⁶ Asbury maintained this system, this method, in America throughout his career. Yet Asbury's own cultural sensitivity led him to do things in America that he would not have done in England, some of which Wesley disapproved. Asbury accepted the emotionalism of southern worship in the 1770s, pro-

²³ *JLEA*, 1:440, 445, 601, 607, 2:223-31; Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Sixty-Four Years in the Ministry* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1866), 445, 454-455; John Wesley Bond, "Anecdotes of Bishop Asbury, No. 4," *Methodist Archives and History Center*, Drew University, Madison, N. J.; Wigger, *American Saint*, 12, 175, 288.

²⁴ *JLEA*, 2:600, 602, 603, 643, 666; Wigger, *American Saint*, 367.

²⁵ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 2, 352; Wigger, *American Saint*, 7.

²⁶ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 352.

moted camp meetings in the early 1800s, and reluctantly acquiesced to southern Methodists holding slaves. This mediating impulse, transmitted from Wesley through Asbury, became a trademark of American Methodism. An episode involving Thomas Rankin, one of the preachers Wesley trusted most, illustrates Asbury's close understanding of American culture.²⁷

Wesley sent Rankin to America to enforce the discipline of the class meetings and love feasts, which Wesley's first appointed preachers to America, Joseph Pilmore and Richard Boardman, had neglected. "There has been good, much good done in America, and would have been abundantly more had Brother Boardman and Pilmoor continued genuine Methodists both in doctrine and discipline. It is your part to supply what was wanting in them," Wesley wrote to Rankin shortly after his arrival. Asbury initially welcomed Rankin's mission, hoping that he would have the weight to deal with lax members, particularly in New York and Philadelphia. But Rankin had little of Asbury's understanding of, or sympathy for, how American culture differed from English ways.²⁸

Beginning in 1775, Methodism was growing by leaps and bounds in southern Virginia and North Carolina. Asbury first visited there in late 1775 and early 1776, writing that January, "Virginia pleases me in preference to all other places where I have been." It did not please Thomas Rankin. Rankin toured southern Virginia for the first time in the summer of 1776, where he saw the revival in full swing. When he preached at Boisseau's (often written Bushill's) chapel in Dinwiddie County and White's chapel in Amelia County he could hardly be heard over the shouting, crying, and extemporaneous prayers of his listeners.²⁹

When Rankin returned to Boisseau's Chapel a few weeks later he was determined to quiet things down. That morning, according to the American preacher Jesse Lee, Rankin "gave us a good discourse . . . and tried to keep the people from making any noise while he was speaking." But as soon as Rankin left to "get his dinner," "the people felt at liberty, and began to sing, pray, and talk to friends, till the heavenly flame kindled in their souls, and sinners were conquered, and twelve to fifteen souls were converted to God." Rankin returned to preach again in the afternoon, though most of the people seem to have wished he hadn't. When he could not stop them from crying aloud and shouting out prayers while he spoke, he finally gave up and turned the meeting over to George Shadford, who had come to America with Rankin and was one of Wesley's most dynamic preachers. Shadford strode to the front and "cried out in his usual manner, 'Who wants a Saviour? The first that believes shall be justified.'" That did it; the place erupted. Shadford embraced the assembly's emotional energy such that "in a few minutes the house was ringing with the cries of broken-hearted sinners, and the shouts of

²⁷ Wigger, *American Saint*, 7.

²⁸ *EMP*, 6: 23, 57; Wigger, *American Saint*, 62.

²⁹ *JLEA*, 1:166, 167, 168, 178; Wigger, *American Saint*, 80, 82.

happy believers.” Rankin could only look on in dismay.³⁰

As Rankin’s opposition to southern Methodist worship grew, Asbury was determined to defend the revival. He and Rankin had both come to Virginia with high hopes. While Rankin left disturbed that American Methodists were moving beyond English patterns, Asbury, who had always been on better terms with the mostly young southern preachers, embraced the new style. At a subsequent conference of the preachers, Rankin launched into a tirade against “the spirit of the Americans,” criticizing southern Methodists for putting up with “noise” and “wild enthusiasm” in their meetings. He urged that “a stop must absolutely be put to the prevailing wildfire, or it would prove ruinous.” Though he “had done all he could to suppress it,” Rankin was “ashamed to say that some of his brethren, the preachers, were infected with it.” As Rankin railed on, Asbury “became alarmed, and deemed it absolutely necessary that a stop should be put to the debate, and this he thought could be most easily and safely done by a stroke of humour,” according to Thomas Ware, who witnessed the event. Jumping up, Asbury pointed across the room and said, “I thought,—I thought,—I thought,” to which Rankin asked, “pray . . . what did you thought?” “I thought I saw a mouse!” Asbury replied. This joke, which must have been perfectly timed because otherwise it isn’t that funny, “electrified” the preachers, and in the ensuing laughter Rankin realized that he had lost. From the American perspective his concerns amounted to little more than a mouse in the corner of the room. The result was “alike gratifying to the preachers generally, and mortifying to the person concerned,” according to Ware.³¹

This episode reveals the degree to which Asbury had quickly come to understand Americans. While he was no enthusiast—he seems never to have been among the shouters, jumpers, and fainters at these noisy meetings—he did not share Rankin’s fears about southern worship. If this was the way that southerners took to the gospel, then Asbury was willing to make room for it, as all the preachers could now see. “Mr. Asbury always sided with those who deemed it dangerous to” oppose “those gusts of feeling that always did accompany deep and lasting revivals of religion,” Ware wrote. “The friends of order, he used to say, may well allow a guilty mortal to tremble at God’s word, for to such the Lord will look; and the saints to cry out and shout when

³⁰ Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists, in the United States of America; Beginning in 1766, and Continued till 1809. To Which is Prefixed a Brief Account of Their Rise in England, in the year 1729, &c.* (Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810), 51-52; Wigger, *American Saint*, 82-83. Rankin said little about this meeting in his diary, except that “It fell far short of what we enjoyed the first Sunday I preached there.” (Thomas Rankin, untitled manuscript journal, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, IL.[July 14, 1776], 104).

³¹ Thomas Ware, *Sketches of the Life and Travels of Rev. Thomas Ware, Who Has Been an Itinerant Methodist Preacher for More Than Fifty Years* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 252-253; Thomas Ware, “The Christmas Conference of 1784,” *Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review* 14.1 (January, 1832): 96-104; Wigger, *American Saint*, 83. This exchange between Rankin and Asbury probably took place at the May, 1777 conference at Deer Creek, in Harford County, Md. See *JLFA*, 1:238-39; Rankin, mss. journal (May 18, 1777), 136-137.

the Holy One is in the midst of them.”³²

This exchange also helps explain Asbury’s quirky (from an eighteenth-century perspective) ability to control small group discussions, something that many contemporaries alluded to, but few attempted to explain. Laughing in public wasn’t something early Methodists encouraged, and Asbury often chided himself for excessive “mirth.” Salvation was serious business, and the eternal fate of souls was never to be taken lightly. And yet it was Asbury’s ability to use humor to redirect potentially explosive discussions that in part made him so effective in these situations. The danger of looking foolish would have been great, but Asbury knew his audience. Whether Wesley would have had more sympathy for Rankin or Asbury in this instance is difficult to say. But the point is that in the same way that Wesley understood England, Asbury understood America.³³

Finally, Wesley and Asbury were alike in their organizational ability. Both were central to the creation of religious organizations that have endured to the present. Wesley created a system of class meetings, societies, circuits, and conferences that Asbury adjusted for the American setting. Though there are important theological issues tied to Wesley’s ordination of Thomas Coke and Asbury as superintendents of American Methodism (the Americans later adopted the title of bishop, much to Wesley’s dismay) it was also a brilliant administrative decision. Wesley and Asbury understood that religion meant little apart from community. Dramatic public meetings were well and good, but they amounted to little without sustained nurturing.³⁴

American Methodists trusted Asbury because he knew the church better than anyone else. He traveled relentlessly for forty-five years and crossed the Allegheny Mountains some sixty times. For many years he visited nearly every state once a year, and traveled more extensively across the American landscape than probably anyone else of his time. He was more widely recognized face to face than any person of his generation, including such national figures as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Landlords and tavern keepers knew him on sight in every region, and parents named more than a thousand children after him. People called out his name as he passed by on the road.³⁵

Asbury did not just travel; he listened and talked. People loved to have him in their homes. Asbury often chided himself for talking too much and too freely, especially late at night. He considered this love of close, often lighthearted conversation a drain on his piety. In reality it was one of his greatest strengths, allowing him to build deep and lasting relationships and to feel closely the pulse of the church and the nation. Asbury was not born in America, but he came to understand ordinary Americans as well as anyone

³² Ware, “Christmas Conference,” 103.

³³ Wigger, *American Saint*, 84.

³⁴ On Wesley’s ordination of Coke and Asbury see Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 506-534; Wigger, *American Saint*, 140-147, 161-165.

³⁵ Wigger, *American Saint*, 5.

of his generation. Nathan Bangs, who knew Asbury and wrote one of the first comprehensive histories of American Methodism, believed that the key to Asbury's leadership was his ability to connect with people "in whatever company he appeared, whether religious or irreligious, whether high or low, learned or unlearned."³⁶

In the same manner Wesley traveled at least 200,000 miles over the course of his career. Wesley had few close friends and notoriously confusing relationships with women, but he nevertheless understood the needs of his followers. Though he was an Oxford educated priest of the Church of England, he had a remarkable feel for the sensibilities of ordinary people. As a leader he was more authoritarian than Asbury, but then English society was more hierarchical than American. What worked in one setting would not necessarily work in the other, something that Wesley and Asbury both broadly understood even if they did not always agree on specifics.³⁷

One of Asbury's strengths was his willingness to tolerate strong personalities in leadership positions, even when they cut across his views. He was "unwilling to cut off any member, whether in, or out of conference, until every prudential and Christian means, to reclaim, recover, and save them, had been used," wrote Ezekiel Cooper, who knew Asbury for more than thirty years. Once Asbury was gone the church reaped the benefits of this pattern. Perhaps even more so than was the case with Wesley in England, Asbury left behind a movement culture that could thrive without him. Much as Wesley had no single successor in England, Asbury had none in America, but the church did not decline as a result.³⁸

The movement that John Wesley founded is often called Wesleyanism; there is no Asburyianism. Yet without Asbury there probably would have been little Wesleyanism in America after the Revolution. The preachers in the South, where most Methodists lived and where the movement was growing the fastest, would have broken completely with John Wesley and gone their own way. Asbury barely persuaded them to suspend their decision to ordain one another and instead appeal to Wesley for a solution to the so-called sacramental crisis of 1779-1780. The eventual result was Wesley's ordinations of 1784. If not for Asbury it is anybody's guess where the southern preachers would have ended up, but it would not have been Methodism as we know it.³⁹

Francis Asbury did more than maintain the Wesleyan line in America. He adapted Wesley's practice to fit a new social and cultural setting. And yet he did so using decidedly Wesleyan principles. The combined influence of these two remarkable leaders is responsible for much of the Wesleyan, holiness, and Pentecostal movements that have so significantly shaped religion

³⁶ Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 3rd ed., 4 vols. (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1839-1840), 2:411; Wigger, *American Saint*, 6, 406-407.

³⁷ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 535; Wigger, *American Saint*, 350.

³⁸ Wigger, *American Saint*, 417.

³⁹ Wigger, *American Saint*, 112-122.

in America, Britain, and around the world to the present day.

So why is Wesley so much better known than Asbury? In part because of the skill of Professor Rack and others who have analyzed Wesley's thought and actions with such perception. Rack's ability to place Wesley in the broader context of eighteenth-century English life is stunning. Wesley was an innovative theologian and prolific author who understood how the world was changing, exactly the kind of leader we might expect to find at the heart of a movement like Methodism. Asbury is a more surprising leader, and therefore easier to overlook. His legacy was not in books published or memorable sermons, but in the convictions about what it meant to be pious, connected, and organized that he instilled in his people one conversation at a time. The sensitivity that Henry Rack applies to his study of John Wesley not only tells us much about Wesley and his times, it is also a model for how we might more broadly understand Methodism and religious movements like it.