

BISHOP ASBURY AND THE GERMANS

By Paul F. Blankenship

In recent years Methodists and others have been too much inclined to blame Bishop Francis Asbury for Methodism's failure to merge with the United Brethren and the Evangelical Association in the early days. The following is a fairly typical example of this inclination:

Much as we Methodists revere Francis Asbury as the chief architect of our church in colonial America, we cannot deny this failure, or inability, or refusal, to make Methodism more than a one-language church. He had ample opportunities to do so. . . . But Otterbein and the other EUB founders were all of German descent, and Asbury, a thoroughgoing Englishman all his life, refused to accept the German language for Methodist worship. The result was the organization of separate societies and eventually the founding of separate churches for the German and English-speaking people.¹

Usually such censure of Asbury is based on an article by John Dreisbach in the *Evangelical Messenger* on February 21, 1855 (p. 28), and a similar quotation from him in W. W. Orwig's *History of the Evangelical Association*. In the latter account, Dreisbach, who emerged as a strong leader in the Evangelical Association, tells of a meeting with Bishop Asbury and Henry Boehm during the summer of 1810:

After we had, for sometime, freely conversed on various Christian topics, the Bishop made me a very liberal and respectable offer, on certain conditions to unite with his church. I was to withdraw from the Evangelical Association, and go with them to Baltimore to attend their conference; there to join them, and to travel a year with Jacob Gruber (a second of the three German preachers among the Methodists), who was then presiding elder, for the purpose of better acquainting myself with the English language, wherein Brother Gruber might be very useful to me, that I might be able to preach, according to circumstances, both in German and English; and I was to receive my salary as if I had travelled on a circuit, etc. Moreover, the bishop remarked that, by being able to preach in both languages, I could make myself so much more useful, and that among them there would be less danger of my becoming self-conceited, and to fall away, than in my present position, etc. But however enticing the offer and truthful the statement of the bishop was, yet I could not determine in my mind to take such a treacherous step toward the Evangelical Association. I therefore told the bishop, that we considered ourselves called of God to labor principally among the German population, and that thus far our labors had not been in vain. To this he replied that the German language could not exist much longer in this

¹ Frederick E. Maser, "Our EUB Cousins," *Together*, May, 1964, p. 21. A similar conclusion is expressed in the following works: Roland E. Garvin, "The Inter-Relationships of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church," B.D. thesis (Bonebrake Theological Seminary, 1954), p. 24;

Charles C. Parlin, "Our Common Heritage," an address presented to the 1962 Evangelical United Brethren General Conference and printed in booklet form, p. 9; and Carl Wittke, *William Nast: Patriarch of German Methodism* (Detroit, 1959), p. 36.

country, etc. I rejoined, that if this should ever be the case, it would then be time enough to discontinue preaching in German, and gave as my opinion that this would not very soon occur, but that the German language would rather increase, at least as the immigration from the old world would continue. I then gave him my views, in which I expected my brethren to concur, and made him the following offer: "If you will give us German circuits, districts and conferences, we are willing to make your church ours, be one people with you, and have one and the same church government." "This cannot be—it would not be expedient," was the bishop's reply.²

Though there is no serious reason to question that the meeting and the conversation took place, one may challenge the accuracy of Dreisbach's statement on several counts. First, a record of this incident is not found in either Asbury's *Journal* or in Henry Boehm's *Reminiscences*. Asbury's entry in his *Journal* on August 2, 1810 (the day Orwig says the conversation took place), tells of riding down the Susquehanna valley with Henry Boehm (as in Dreisbach's account) and spending the night with a Mr. Folke ("Folks" according to Dreisbach), but Asbury says nothing about meeting or conversing with a German preacher.³ This does not mean that such a conversation did not take place, since Dreisbach was a man of integrity. It does mean, however, that Dreisbach's report of the details of the conversation cannot be verified by the writings of the other participants (Asbury and Boehm), and it means that they did not consider the conversation as particularly significant.

Second, the accuracy of Dreisbach's statement can be challenged on the ground that he does not seem to have kept a journal in 1810, though he did maintain such a record of events a few years later. His article in the *Evangelical Messenger* in 1855—45 years after the event—appears to be a recollection from memory, as does the slightly different version in Orwig's *History* (first published in 1857). Orwig does not give the source of the account he prints, but it seems to be from a contemporary interview with Dreisbach! If such was the case, then the exact details of the Asbury-Dreisbach conversation as recorded by Orwig are, in view of the natural faults of memory, open to further question.

But even if Dreisbach's account is taken at face value, it does not justify the oft-drawn conclusion that Asbury did not approve of the use of the German language in worship and that he thereby compelled the Albright people and the United Brethren to form their own denominations when they would have preferred inclusion in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

It seems probable that *language* was not the deciding factor in the failure of the Methodists and United Brethren to become one

² W. W. Orwig, *History of the Evangelical Association* (Cleveland, 1858), p. 57.

³ Francis Asbury, *The Journal and*

Letters of Francis Asbury, ed. Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton (Nashville, 1958), II, 645.

church. Negotiations concerning intercommunion between the United Brethren and the Methodists were initiated by Christian Newcomer in cooperation with Bishops Asbury and McKendree and officially carried on between 1809 and 1814. These negotiations, which can best be traced in Newcomer's *Journal* (ed. Samuel S. Hough, 1941, Dayton, Ohio), finally faltered, but they did so because of organizational difference and not primarily because of a difference of language.⁴ The absence of a prominent language problem in these conversations probably reflects the fact that the United Brethren were becoming bilingual by this time.

Language may have been the main factor in the failure of the Methodists and the Albright people to get together. Having said that, we must quickly add that the point of contention between Asbury and Dreisbach was not whether or not *German* should be used in preaching and worship, but whether or not *only* German should be employed. Asbury was calling for *bilingual evangelism* while Dreisbach seems to have been advocating an *exclusive mission to Germans in German*. Considering the fact that the Germans of Pennsylvania and Maryland were living in an English-speaking nation and would of necessity have to be bilingual, Asbury's position was logically correct and practically sound.

Asbury was also correct in his view of the impermanency of the German language in the United States and of the inadvisability of forming German circuits, districts, and conferences in the Methodist Episcopal Church. For twenty years after the reported conversation between Dreisbach and Asbury, the use of the German language in this country did decrease, and in 1810 neither Asbury nor Dreisbach could have had any way of knowing that there would be a tremendous German immigration into the United States between 1830 and 1890 which would then make a separate German-speaking mission advisable or necessary. When that time came, the Methodists formed a German mission with separate churches, districts, and conferences (as Dreisbach had advocated) under the leadership of William Nast, who sought union with the Evangelical Association in 1867 and 1871. Meanwhile as R. W. Albright has indicated, the expansion of the Evangelical Association between 1800 and 1830 was markedly limited by its German exclusiveness and the decline of German immigration.⁵

A related reason why Asbury may have felt that it was "inexpedient" to form German circuits, districts, and conferences in 1810

⁴ For an exhaustive treatment of this point see Paul F. Blankenship, "History of Negotiations for Union Between Methodists and Non-Methodists in the United States" (Doctoral Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1965: University

Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan, publication 65-12,051), pp. 177-195.

⁵ Raymond W. Albright, *A History of the Evangelical Church* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1942), p. 144.

in order to include the Albrights is that they were a very small group at that time and were having difficulty in enlisting itinerant ministers. In 1810 the Albright people totaled 528 members⁶ while the Methodists numbered 174,560,⁷ and the United Brethren had an estimated 10,000. The fact that the Albright people were few in number may have caused Asbury to conclude that they did not have the key to evangelism among the Germans, or that in any event the group was not large enough to merit the kind of cooperative endeavor suggested by Dreisbach. Besides, the Albrights' shortage of itinerant ministers⁸ coupled with Asbury's difficulty in recruiting German-speaking preachers (Dreisbach's refusal is an example) would have made the formation of German circuits, districts, and conferences among the Albrights difficult. Thus, all things considered, the unwillingness of the Albright people to use English along with German in their services was as much responsible as Asbury's lack of appreciation of the German language for their failure to be included among the Methodists in the early days.

Noting that Asbury made several efforts to promote work among the Germans, R. W. Albright has suggested that he may have altered his attitude toward the Germans in his later ministry and that Jacob Albright may have influenced this change. He concludes that Jacob "Albright influenced the work and future of the Methodist Church quite as much as the Methodist Church had influenced him."⁹ This assertion goes beyond all historical evidence and treats Asbury unfairly. There is no indication whatever that Asbury ever met Jacob Albright or even knew of him during his lifetime, and there is no way of determining whether or how much he was influenced by this German leader. The only claim that Asbury and Jacob Albright ever met is the following bit of tradition which R. W. Albright heard from Louisa A. Zipperer of Chicago who in turn heard it from William Jones, a Methodist Episcopal minister, who was almost 80 years of age at the time, and who claimed to have heard it from Bishop Asbury.

Albright and Bishops Asbury and Lee were on their way to attend a Methodist Conference. When they stopped at an inn to spend the night these men discussed the matter of working in the German language. Asbury and Lee were adamant in their opposition to such work. In the morning Albright saddled his horse and turned homeward, saying, "If there is no room in the Methodist Church to work in the German language and win the Pennsylvania Germans, I am going back to do that work."¹⁰

There are several reasons for doubting the authenticity of this story. It was recorded in neither Asbury's *Journal* nor Jesse Lee's

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁷ Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, 1839), II, 291.

⁸ Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Short History of the Methodists, and it does not fit the known facts, namely, Asbury's attempts to recruit preachers who could preach in both German and English and his general concern for work among the Germans. Moreover, while Jesse Lee was a traveling companion of Bishop Asbury, contrary to the title given him in the story, he was never a bishop. William Jones was only fifteen years old when Asbury died in 1816 and he did not join the Methodist Episcopal Church until he was eighteen.¹¹ Still further, this is not the kind of story that Bishop Asbury would be likely to tell about himself to anyone, much less to a young boy. Again, this story has all the earmarks of a wayward version of the Asbury-Dreisbach conversation in 1810, and it is the only account which flatly says that Asbury opposed work in the German language.

The only change in Asbury's attitude toward work among the Germans was his ever increasing concern for it. Ironically enough, one of the reasons for his growing concern was his mounting conviction that the German-speaking religious bodies were not sufficiently effective among their own people. We have seen that as early as 1774 Asbury was concerned about the lack of organization among the followers of Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm, and he began urging Otterbein to follow the example of the Methodists in correcting the situation. On August 2, 1803, three years after the United Brethren had formed their first official organization, Asbury made the following entry in his *Journal*:

I feel, and have felt thirty-two years, for Pennsylvania—the most wealthy, and the most careless about God, and the things of God: but I hope God will shake the State and the Churches. There are now upwards of twenty German preachers somehow connected with Mr. Philip Otterbein and Martin Boehm; but they want authority, and the Church wants discipline.¹²

Meanwhile, Henry Boehm, a son of Martin Boehm, had become a Methodist preacher in 1800, and in 1803, he and Jacob Gruber (the only other German-speaking Methodist preacher at that time) were appointed to the Dauphin Circuit of the Philadelphia Conference for the specific purpose of working among the Germans.¹³

During the summer of 1807 Asbury tells of sending out "eleven missionaries, for the exterior, and interior, any place, and every place, unsupplied by the circuits, streets, lanes, shades, market houses. In Pennsylvania chiefly the Germans are the object. We conclude many thousands will hear our Gospel by these men that will not in our circuits."¹⁴ At the same time he wrote the following words to Jacob Gruber: "I hope you will redeem what time you

¹¹ "Memoir" of William Patterson Jones, *Journal of the Rock River Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1886, p. 39.

¹² Asbury, *op. cit.*, II, 400.

¹³ Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences—Historical and Biographical* (1865), pp. 102-103.

¹⁴ Asbury, *op. cit.*, III, 370.

can for the Germans in your charge. In your appointment that was in sight, you keep it in constant view; they are children of the same Father bought with the same blood of Christ. Oh could you with Paul wish if it was lawful to die like Jesus for your brethren and kinsmen according to the flesh." ¹⁵

By the spring of 1808, when he became Asbury's traveling companion, Henry Boehm, following Asbury's orders, had managed to have the *Discipline*, a pamphlet on "The Characteristics of a True Methodist or Christian," and a sermon entitled "Awake Thou That Sleepest" translated into German. Later, the Methodist hymnbook was also translated into German. Henry Boehm continued to travel with Asbury until 1813 "especially on account of the Germans." ¹⁶ When Boehm was relieved as Asbury's traveling companion, it was partly because Asbury "thought I was needed among the Germans." ¹⁷

In 1807 and 1808 when Asbury was increasing Methodism's outreach to the Germans, he was becoming more critical of the United Brethren and other German-speaking denominations. On June 18, 1808, Asbury commented in his *Journal* on Methodism in Hagerstown, Maryland, "Our German brethren of Otterbein's have shouldered us out, but have failed to establish themselves." ¹⁸ On April 5, 1812, Asbury delivered a sermon eulogizing Martin Boehm, who had died on March 23. After appreciative words about Boehm, the bishop went on to give his most pointed evaluation of the United Brethren and other German-speaking denominations:

I pause here to indulge in reflections upon the past. Why was the German reformation in the middle States, that sprang up with Boehm, Otterbein, and their helpers, not more perfect? Was money, was labor made a consideration with these primitive men? No; they wanted not the one and heeded not the other. They all had had church membership, as Presbyterians, Lutherans, Moravians, Dunkers, Mennonists. The spiritual men of these societies generally united with the reformers, but they brought along with them the formalities, superstitions, and peculiar opinions of religious education. There was no master-spirit to rise up and organize and lead them. Some of the ministers located, and only added to their charge partial traveling labors; and all were independent. It remains to be proved whether a reformation, in any country, or under any circumstances, can be perpetuated without a well-directed itinerancy. But these faithful men of God were not the less zealous in declaring the truth because they failed to erect a church government. This was wished for by many; and among the first, perhaps, to discover the necessity of discipline and order, was Benedict Swope, of Pipe Creek, Frederick County; he became Otterbein's prompter as early as 1772, and called upon him to translate the general rules of the Methodists, and explain to their German brethren, wandering as sheep without a shepherd, their nature, design, and efficacy. Otterbein, one of the wisest and best of men, could only approve; when urged to put himself forward as a leader, his great modesty and diffidence of himself forbade his acceptance of so high a trust. His journeys, nevertheless, were long, his visits frequent, his labors constant; so that, after he came to Baltimore, he might be called a travelling preacher

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 372-373.

¹⁶ Boehm, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-185.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

¹⁸ Asbury, *op. cit.*, II, 572.

until age and infirmities compelled him to be still. Surely I should not forget his helpers. . . . Christian Newcomer, near Hager's town in Maryland, has labored and travelled many years. His heart's desire always has been to effect a union between his German brethren and the Methodists. Are there many that fear God who have passed by his house and have not heard of or witnessed the piety and hospitality of these Newcomers? Worthy people!¹⁹

In addition to Asbury's opinion as to why the German reformation in the middle states "was not more perfect," we have in the above quotation a good summary of why the Methodists and United Brethren did not unite—the United Brethren lacked effective organization and they did not have a well-directed itinerancy. There is no mention of the language problem!

Christian Newcomer's *Journal* substantiates these conclusions. Newcomer expresses a vital and continuing concern for intercommunion or union between the United Brethren and the Methodists, and at the same time he speaks in the highest terms of Asbury and nowhere blames him for the failure of the two groups to unite. Indeed, Newcomer makes it clear that he considered withdrawing from the United Brethren in 1809 because his fellow-preachers seemed to be opposed to the form of church organization that would be necessary if they were to have closer relations with the Methodists.²⁰ Fortunately for the United Brethren, an agreement was reached and conversations with the Methodists were begun.

After the death of Martin Boehm, Asbury's desire for a ministry to the Germans increased. As indicated above, one reason for his growing concern for the German people was a conviction that the German denominations had failed to fulfill their mission. Asbury was harshly critical of the German churches for their failure. His frustrating concern was compounded by the lack of concern on the part of his preachers, as we see in the following letter to Jacob Gruber, dated "Chambersburg, Pa., July 7, 1814" (quoted in full from the original at Lovely Lane Museum, Baltimore, Maryland):

Great grace be with us. Brethren my heart's desire, and prayer to God is that Israel might be saved. I am willing to go, and to die, at Jerusalem! I could wish my self accursed, from the example of Christ; perhaps he might mean crucified.

I suppose we English Americans, hold 4000 traveling, and local preachers, and living exhorters, to supply 3 million souls annually. I say 200,000 Germans, and their descendants, on the East side of the Ohio, including Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. Not one Gospel minister among them; perhaps 100 settlements and congregations vacant.

What are the Lutherans? What are the Reformers? The other sects? What are the Albrights, but deceitfull apes, and opposers of Methodists? What are the United Brethren?—But you may ride a circuit, or, let it alone. You may meet in class or let it alone.

¹⁹ Quoted at length in Francis Hollingsworth, "Notices of the Life and Labours of Martin Boehm and William Otterbein; and Other Ministers of the Gospel Among the German United Brethren," *The*

Methodist Magazine, July, 1823, pp. 253-254.

²⁰ Samuel S. Hough, ed., *Christian Newcomer, His Life, Journal, and Achievements* (Dayton, Ohio, 1941), pp. 118-119.

Should my life be spared, to return, which is very doubtful, one more attempt for a German missionary, as a kind of presbytery preaching, at least half their time, in German. Lay out the country, in proper divisions, meeting quarterly, but taking our complete form of Discipline and Hymn Book in German translation, and putting them into every hand and house. And where there is a good German settlement, and a prospect, let one missionary stay, and work till a regular society is formed, and given up to the circuit preachers; yet let the missionaries, visit them quarterly, to remove difficulties, to explain things the English preachers cannot, for want of language. Where is the money to support 4 missionaries?—Make collections, once a quarter, and let them dividend, with Baltimore, and Philadelphia, Conferences. Where are the men? Jacob Gruber, Henry Boehm, John Swartswelder, and William Folks. Now, think on this, for God's sake; for Christ's sake; and for the sake of the many thousands of souls, shut up in blindness. Mind you preach English half your time; and receive all the helps they can give, of entertainment. But see if in 45 years, we have preached in Pennsylvania, we have 6000 members in the old circuits, and need, Philadelphia left out as a city. Think it over, consult your God, and your brethren; as the most active man, I think, you ought to preside, as ruling Elder, and there ought to be a strict discipline, like a well regulated flying army.

I am your feeble Father; and let it be known that, one of the grand acts of his life, was a capital mission to the American Germans; but lived not to finish it; or, that the conferences, did not see eye to eye, with the Bishop, in this great undertaking; or, that the missionaries, the men of his choice, though well qualified, and of full descent, from father and mother, and educated, in the German language, and of sound constitution; yet, would not nobly volunteer; but I hope better things, though I thus write. I hope the Lord will direct us, and make the path of duty plain.

My soul has been without a doubt, or a cloud in all my affliction, though the greatest, I have ever experienced, and the most difficult to recover from. Of the entire letter only the following words are in Asbury's handwriting. My copy was incorrect made employ an amanuensis not having written more than three letters 13 weeks. I am if possible more than ever yours.

F. Asbury

P.S. You let John Swartswelder see this letter.²¹

While it may be difficult for some to believe that Asbury sometimes failed to persuade his preachers and his conferences to do what he wanted, this is precisely what the above letter implies. Asbury's amanuensis was weak on grammar, but, in spite of incoherent phrases, the bishop's disappointment comes through. Neither his German preachers nor his conferences were enthusiastic about his "capital mission to the American Germans."

Shortly before his death, Asbury asked Francis Hollingsworth, the transcriber of his *Journal*, to draw up an account of the German preachers and their work. Unfortunately, the bishop was unable to make available to Hollingsworth all the necessary papers, and the so-called "Hollingsworth Paper" was not published until 1823 when it appeared in the June and July issues of *The Methodist Magazine*. The document contained an introduction by Hollingsworth and interviews between Asbury, Otterbein, Henry Boehm, and Martin Boehm. The interviews had been initiated by Asbury in 1811 for historical purposes. Also included in the paper were parts of Asbury's sermon occasioned by the death of Martin Boehm. A. W.

²¹ Asbury, *op. cit.*, III, 504-505.

Drury has questioned the accuracy of some parts of the "Hollingsworth Paper," but he affirms its historical value.²² For our purpose, this document is important because it shows Asbury's interest in the work being carried on among the Germans outside the Methodist Episcopal Church.

In what was probably the last letter written or dictated before his death, Asbury gave advice on German missions to Bishop William McKendree:

2. If we take up German missions, it must be spiritedly. I wish we had four men who would offer freely, and serve faithfully, married or single; our hymn book translated; a thousand copies of Discipline, correct from the General Conference. If they will not sell, give them away to the people. Send a missionary to Schuylkill District, Susquehanna, Carlisle, and Monongahela, presiding elders holding cash to pay the missionaries quarterly, the missionaries making collections and being accountable for these also to the conferences.

I wish the change of Boehm and Roberts, because of Henry's usefulness in German.²³

In view of the evidence, then, it seems reasonable to conclude that Francis Asbury cannot be blamed for the failure of the Methodists to do more work among the Germans. Neither can Asbury be held responsible for the failure of the Methodists to unite with the United Brethren and the Albright people (Evangelical Association). Above all, Asbury cannot be justly accused of lacking either appreciation of the German language or concern for the spiritual welfare of the American Germans.

²² A. W. Drury, *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton,

Ohio, 1924), pp. 209-211 and 254-259.

²³ Asbury, *op. cit.*, III, 555.