



DISCOVERY

edited by
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BISHOP ASBURY AND THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

by Edward J. Wynne, Jr.

Since 1980 marks the 200th anniversary of the Sunday School it is fitting that we remember that one of the very first episcopal letters addressed by Francis Asbury to the people called Methodists in America deals with this subject. The strong letter in support of Christian education is dated September 16, 1791, a scant eleven years after Robert Raikes started his school in Gloucester, England. The letter was first printed and circulated with the *Minutes Taken at the Several Conferences of the Methodist-Episcopal Church in America for the Year 1791*, a slim 16-page pamphlet printed by Parry Hall in Philadelphia that same year. The next year Bishop Asbury reinforced his letter on Sunday Schools with a "Postscript" dated Philadelphia, September 7, 1792 which, together with the original letter, was published in the minutes of the conferences for that year. The episcopal letter without postscript was reprinted in the first collected edition of the minutes of the American conferences in 1795.¹ Both letter and postscript were included in the standard edition of Asbury's letters edited by J. Manning Potts and published by Abingdon and Epworth Presses in 1958.² The following text of the letter and postscript is from the *Minutes Taken at the Several Conferences of the Methodist-Episcopal Church in America for the Year 1792* (Philadelphia: Printed by Parry Hall and sold by John Dickins, 1792, pp. 16-19).

¹*Minutes of the Methodist Conferences Annually Held in America from 1773 to 1794, Inclusive*. Philadelphia: Printed by Henry Tuckniss and sold by John Dickins, 1795, pp. 162-164.

²*The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958, Vol. III, pp. 102-103.

To the Brethren in the United Societies of the
METHODIST—EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN AMERICA.

Dearly beloved in the Lord,

I REJOICE to see so many thousands of the present generation happy subjects of knowledge and grace. A real concern for the rising offspring and the children yet unborn, has been very weighty on my mind for many years. We have been at no small expense to provide a house for refined education, to serve those whose wealth and desires [l]ead them to improve the minds of their children. This will not extend to all, neither will it meet the ideas and wishes of those who have personal and located interests. What I now recommend, as your duty and privilege, is to give the key of knowledge in a general way, to your children, and those of the poor in the vicinity of your small towns and villages. It is submitted to your serious consideration, providence, and charity, whether a plan of Christian education may not be brought into execution. In every large society, where the members are able and willing to build a school-house for your sons, and to appropriate land-- to employ a single, skilful [sic], pious young man of the society; fix his salary according to that of a travelling preacher; or if a married man, the same with that of a married preacher. The worship of God in the school-house, should be reading the word of the Lord, singing and prayer, every morning and evening. Playing strictly prohibited. A lesson in the instructions weekly committed to memory-- to enjoin manly exercises, as working in the garden or field, walking, reading, or speaking in public, or bathing. To admit the children whose parents are not in our Society, by paying and submission to the rules-- to take as many poor of our own, and others as you can. To build a separate school for your daughters, and put these under a gracious woman of abilities, to learn to read, write, sew, knit, mark, and make their own cloathing [sic]-- to have their religious exercises and instructions the same as your sons-- to expel the false, obstinately wicked, and incorrigible of either sex. The elder can spend a day in the school once in two weeks, to see how both parts of education are attended to. It might be well to elect and appoint three men, wise, good, and willing, as trustees, or stewards, to serve a year; in order to manage the temporalities, visit at set times, admit or expel, after consulting the elder: and three very discreet, godly women, for the daughters, who shall do the same.

The school may be erected, and finished, clear of debt or rent, for one hundred pounds. Some pious people will, probably, at their death, leave legacies; and annual subscriptions should be opened through the society, and for any others that will assist. A charity sermon once a year, and public collections may be necessary; perhaps sixty or seventy

pounds will be sufficient for the annual expense. The sisters must collect amongst their own sex, and also see how the mistress performs her duty.

These schools may be open on Sabbath days, two hours in the morning, and two hours in the evening, for those that have no other time. We have but small hopes of coming properly at the lambs of the flock, till you have schools of your own founding, and under your direction, that neither ourselves or the teachers, may be under any restraints from refractory men. If what I have advised, with any improvement, shall be found acceptable, it will give rest and joy to my mind. I have served you almost twenty one³ years. I can only say they are YOUR children I want taught, and can assure you it is in my heart to live and die with and for both the parents and children.

Your Brother, Friend and Servant,
for Christ's sake,

F. ASBURY.

Near Salem, New-Jersey,
Sept. 16, 1791.

POSTSCRIPT.

I am fully persuaded that the minds of many of our brethren and sisters have been impressed with the propriety of establishing Christian schools on this continent.

We have already had some powerful instances of a gracious work in those schools, where the order of God has been introduced. I shall therefore continue my good wishes and prayers that many may heartily join in this good work; and shall retain the above address in our minutes, hoping the Lord will make it instrumental to move the hearts of our brethren to make the trial.

I shall not forget the pleasing sensations I felt in visiting a school which was under the particular direction of a godly woman, where all were solemn and quiet, and regular prayer both morning and evening.

If preachers, parents, and trustees, with schoolmasters, and mistresses, would be diligent in this matter, the point would be carried.

I remain as ever, your faithful remembrancer, to take heed both to yourselves and your tender offspring,

FRANCIS ASBURY.

Philadelphia,
Sept. 7, 1792.

COMMENTARY

Several items deserve comment here.

First, it is obvious Asbury wanted no innovation in education in

³Added in 1792 printing.

terms of mixing of the sexes! The present writer's home city of Boston to this day carries on this tradition of separate schools for boys and girls among the four top-rated high schools academically (three for boys and one for girls, by the way). At the time of Asbury's letter the practice was well-nigh universal, with boys getting a more academically oriented and girls a more domestically oriented education. Note, however, that Asbury's letter seems directed to those larger societies in small towns and villages rather than to those in large cities.

Second, Asbury had in mind no one-hour-a-week Sunday Church School, but a church-sponsored "Christian school" much along the lines of those presently run by the Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic churches, and not a few conservative groups. Robert Raikes had begun his "Sunday school" only ten years before Asbury's letter was written, and, while the American Protestant Sunday School movement as such later paved the way for universal public education, local churches had no such wide-spread organized Sunday schools in 1791. A careful reading of the history of the growth of the public school system in America will indicate that the idea of universal education at public expense evolved during the early 19th century against an almost two-century tradition of church-sponsored elementary, secondary, and higher institutions of learning-- mostly for the children of the well to do. (It took Connecticut until 1813 and Massachusetts until 1833 to "disestablish"!) It is to Asbury's credit that he insisted upon giving "the key of knowledge in a general way" and taking "as many poor of our own, and others as you can," over against the prevailing practice of providing "a house for refined education to serve those whose wealth and desires lead them to improve the minds of their children."

Third, setting the salary of the teacher equal to that of a travelling elder (if single) or a married preacher (if married) indicates the long tradition in our society of paying less for human services than for the manufacture and distribution of goods.

Fourth, it seems that Asbury reflects in his pedagogy his own experiences in education (scripture reading both morning and evening, no play, memorization, good health habits, strict punishment, and expulsion of "the false obstinately wicked and incorrigible of either sex").

Fifth, in Asbury's insistence that the elder "spend a day in the school once in two weeks to see how both parts of education are attended to," we find a good precedent being set for today's ministers and their own Sunday church schools. A clear identification of the minister with the Christian education enterprise in the local church continues to be a strong key to success.

Sixth, what more need we say about inflation and rising prices beyond indicating that "one hundred pounds"-- the total cost of labor, materials, and furnishings when Asbury wrote-- and "sixty or seventy pounds. . . for the annual expense"-- might help toward one week's wage for one worker today! But, let us mark well our first Bishop's methods of raising the necessary funds-- legacies, annual subscriptions, "a charity sermon once a year," public collections-- for time has not much improved or expanded the list.

Seventh, it is almost passing strange to find Asbury "coming properly at the lambs of the flock"-- almost seventy-five years before Horace Bushnell's theories burst upon the ecclesiastical scene-- in a day when the custom was to let youth sow their wild oats and then soundly convert them. Of course, by the time Bushnell wrote *Christian Nurture* (1847) he had a well-established tradition of revivals, camp meetings, and anti-intellectualism to contend with, and his notion to raise children so they would never know themselves not to be Christian was a radical departure indeed, and foreshadowed our modern approach to Christian education. For Asbury in 1791 (and years before that, as his letter would have us believe) to have "a real concern for the rising offspring and the children yet unborn," and to see the need to expose children to religiously-oriented schooling under the direction of local church leaders, indicates perhaps another hitherto unappreciated facet of this amazing man's abilities. That the people called Methodist did not follow his advice is not to be blamed so much on Asbury-- beyond the obvious reminder that "episcopal letters" and even "episcopal addresses" are sometimes the poorest way to disseminate and implement good ideas without some careful structure being provided for doing so-- as upon the reluctance of our ancestors in the faith. And while "Decision Point: Church School" channels our present energies toward improving what some have described as the most wasted hour on Sunday morning, perhaps Asbury's letter might cause some of us to think once again about a more well-rounded church-sponsored education for our children.

Finally, a question-- did Francis Asbury foresee the battle of the 1980 General Conference over designated giving with his sentence: "This will not extend to all, neither will it meet the needs and wishes of those who have personal and located interests"?