



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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**The Mailbag Brings
A Picture of The Young Mr. Asbury
and
A Frank Letter from Bishop Andrew**

Two letters, coming to me over the past few weeks, provide considerable human interest concerning two famous American Methodist Bishops—Asbury and Andrew. The first letter is from Dr. John Vickers, probably the greatest living authority on Thomas Coke, and a Methodist historian well known on both sides of the Atlantic. His scholarship is impeccable, and he is not only involved with the Wesley Works Project but also numerous other historical ventures. He sends along some notes on Asbury based on an unpublished *History of Methodism in Hampshire* by John Sundius Stamp compiled while he was stationed in the Winchester Circuit, c. 1826–1827. The original is in two volumes now in the Methodist Archives, Manchester.

“The preachers appointed to the circuit in 1770 were John Cattermole and Francis Asbury. Cattermole was ‘much addicted to melancholy’ and ‘after going twice around the circuit retired from the itinerant work’ leaving Asbury to assume the superintendency. Stamp writes of Asbury: ‘His firmness to the rules of Methodism and presence of mind in apparent internal broils were put to the test by the Society at Portsmouth. He had many warm friends, but want of understanding on their part rendered them in a great degree of very little service to him. Yet previous to the ensuing Conference all unpleasant affairs were amicably settled.’

“The nature of the trouble Asbury faced at Portsmouth is described in words quoted from the Journal (no longer extant) of Jasper Winscom, a Winchester tradesman who was a leading member of the Society there and a local preacher. (Winscom’s account must be read in the light of the fact that he could himself be headstrong and difficult to work with). He writes:

'William Norman of Portsmouth . . . was a journeyman Baker at Newport [Isle of Wight]. [After sixteen years as a class leader and occasional exhorter] he imagined he had a call to preach, but this call was neglected that he might pay his devoirs at the altar of Cupid. He married and settled at Portsmouth, obtaining the Situation of clark [sic] in a Brewhouse and continued in Society. In the year 1764 the principle persons who were the support of the [Society] left the place and the management of the Society devolved upon him, when he again imagined he was called to preach. This he seldom availed himself of but with an iron hand managed the Societies for the space of six years, during which time the Methodist preachers deserted the place, and came not again until Mr. Wesley re-introduced them. He was visited with much affliction but this did not produce any change in him. He purchased a room and put it in order for preaching for 430 pounds [at the expense of the Society, of course]. . . . His oppressive conduct [eventually] was such as neither preacher nor people could bear. Asbury found much difficulty in replacing him & putting a new Steward in his place. This at last was done [by the young Mr. Asbury]. Norman left the Society [and died in December 1771].'

"Some of the strength of character and single-minded dedication to unpleasant duty which Asbury was to show in America are here already in evidence.

"Under the date of July 26th, 1771, Winscom's Journal records: 'Brother Asbury left Winchester after we had a lovefeast together, when we found the Lord to be present. I think we may say he is a good preacher & an honest Christian, fitted for the work of the Lord.' Winscom also describes how they journeyed together to the Conference at Bristol and how he returned with Asbury's successor in the circuit. Rather surprisingly he makes no reference to Asbury's offer to serve in America. The two men remained in touch, at least for a time, as a few surviving letters clearly show.

A Frank Letter from Bishop Andrew

The second letter I referred to came from Dr. Frederick A. Norwood, well-known Methodist historian, author of *The Story of American Methodism* and the invaluable *Sourcebook of American Methodism* in addition to numerous other books and articles. Though a retired Methodist preacher and professor, he continues to research and write in his chosen fields. He writes: "Among the manuscript letters sent to Bishop Thomas A. Morris preserved in the Morris papers at Ohio Wesleyan University is one of [great human interest] from his fellow bishop, James O. Andrew. It was written in 1838, several years before his sobering experience at the General Conference of 1844 when the Methodist Episcopal Church was [bisected]. At this conference [two cases concerning slavery were presented to the delegates. The most important one involved Bishop Andrew, one of the five episcopal leaders. Bishop Andrew had acquired two slaves, property of his first wife who bequeathed them to him on her death. Furthermore, his second wife also owned slaves, although they remained her property and under her control. Andrew, therefore, rightly claimed that he

had never bought or sold a slave. He stated that circumstances did not permit the emancipation of his family's slaves. Following lengthy debate, the General Conference approved a compromise resolution requiring Andrew to suspend the exercises of his episcopal duties as long as the slavery impediment remained. A minority report appeared protesting the action against Andrew. Within a few days a Plan of Separation was presented to the delegates bisecting the Methodist Episcopal Church into the church south and north.] (See *Proclaiming Grace and Freedom* [Abingdon Press, 1982], p. 66.)"

According to Dr. Norwood, the letter from Andrew to Morris, written with a remarkable degree of frankness and humor, has never before been published; it is not mentioned in *The Life and Letters of James Osgood Andrew* by George O. Smith (Nashville, 1883) or in *The Life of Rev. Thomas A. Morris* by John F. Marley (Cincinnati, 1875).

Norwood writes, "Dated March 14, 1838, Covington, Georgia, it was sent at a time when the debates over abolitionism were heating up. Two months earlier (January 18, 1838) Nathan Bangs [influential preacher, historian, and editor] who loved the church and hated to see it riven by controversy, wrote to Bishop Morris, who was presiding at Southern Annual Conferences, urging him to use his influence to discourage angry reactions by Southerners to the diatribes of abolitionists (not necessarily because abolitionists were wrong but because the reactions in kind only promoted further strife).

"As frequently happens in human affairs, the moderates found themselves caught between two vociferous and articulate extremes. In New England, Wilbur Fisk submitted a series of letters against abolitionists, and these were countered by such influential ministers as Orange Scott who in 1843 was an active leader in organizing the Wesleyan Methodist Church, Jotham Horton and others.

"The winsome contribution of Bishop Andrew to this ecclesiastical stew follows, complete except for a long paragraph which deals with a number of problematic ministerial appointments on which Andrew seeks Morris' counsel."

Covington [GA] March 14, 1838

Dear Brother

I wrote to you some little time since and directed my letter to Richmond, which I suppose you received in due course. I forgot in that letter to beg you to send me some help from Baltimore for Alabama—we are very bare in that region at the best as you very well know—.

[Here follows the lengthy paragraph referred to above relating to need for advice and counsel in the matter of appointments.]

* * *

Have you any further views of the convention of the Bishops in the spring? I should judge from what I see weekly in the Advocate that the church in the North and east

[sic] is in a fair way to be revolutionized — poor human nature, how weak, how erring, how inconsistent. God be merciful to us in church and state. I do not at all envy you your next summers work. However, we have one consolation — God is King in Zion and He sitteth above the waterfloods to still the noise and tumult of the people. I trust He will bring good out of all this evil and that all these raging tempests shall only purify the atmosphere of the church and make her strong and healthy to do the work of the Lord in evangelizing the world. A Methodist anti-slavery convention, to sit in judgment on the Genl Conference — a Methodist antislavery society — abolition prayer meetings and I suppose antislavery class meetings — and love feasts — and I suppose we shall shortly have *antislavery butter — aboliton cheese and antislavery brooms and onions*.

And when they shall have turned all slave holders out of the church below, I suppose there must be a committee appointed to go to the gate of paradise and demand as a prerequisite to their honoring heaven with their presence — that Abraham and Philemon and divers other worthies of the olden time be dismissed from the seats of glory — the object to *me* is sufficiently obvious. Messrs. Scott, Storrs, Sunderland, Merrett and other kindred spirits design to form a new and distinct organization of which they shall be the acknowledged leaders — Henry 8th opposed the Pope not because he was opposed to Popery but because he wished to be pope in England — give my love to Bishop Waugh and tell him I would have answered his letter but that as I was about to write to you I thought this would be sufficient for both — unless I had something of more interest to communicate. Remember me also very kindly to the preachers of the Baltimore Conference. Let me hear from you shortly and believe me yours very affectionately

James O. Andrew

The letter from Andrew “discovered” by Dr. Norwood, reveals the keen mind of the bishop who as early as 1838 was predicting the formation of a separate denomination — the Wesleyan Methodist Church — five years before its organization. Its whimsical humor is overshadowed by a cloud of sadness at the increasing controversy in the church and possibly by the realization that he, himself, would be caught up in the very eye of the hurricane to come.

At any rate, a sincere thank you to both Dr. Vickers and Dr. Norwood for their contributions to this month’s **Discovery**.