HOW TO BECOME A BISHOP WHILE BEING TRULY RELIGIOUS

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All of the references below are to Francis Asbury, *Journal and Letters* (J. Manning Potts, Elmer T. Clark and Jacob S. Payton, eds.; 3 vols.; Nashville, 1958).

In December, 1783, a letter from John Wesley caught up with Francis Asbury in an obscure North Carolina settlement through which he was passing on his annual visitation of the Methodist societies in that primitive country. The letter appointed Asbury Wesley’s “General Assistant” in the superintendency of the American churches. It also directed the Assistant not to accept into his fellowship any preacher from England who did not come with Wesley’s recommendation and to receive none, however recommended, who would not be fully subject to Asbury and to the American Conference.1 Thus ended almost twelve years of uncertain and strained relations between the two men. They had not seen each other since 1771, when Wesley had sent young Asbury, then only 26 years old, to help spread Methodism in America. The estrangement stemmed in part from prejudiced reports sent home soon after Asbury arrived, complaining of the latter’s insistence that he and his fellow ministers should not settle in cities but itinerate, and misinterpreting Asbury’s overly-zealous administration of Methodist discipline.2

Each year thereafter witnessed one or another kind of crisis, both in Asbury’s personal ministry and in the Methodist fellowship. Each crisis was symptomatic of differing perceptions of means and ends,
both among the ministers and between the ministers and laymen gathered into local societies. The issue of discipline never disappeared, nor did that of evangelism or itineracy. They were overshadowed for a time by the political crisis of the American Revolution, in which Wesley’s intemperate attack upon the rebelling colonists made the Patriot party suspect every Methodist minister, and particularly those who were recently from Britain, to be a Loyalist agent.

As the war drew to a close, the questions of ordinances and of organization became crucial. Both during and after the Revolution, Methodist preachers chafed under the desire of their converts to receive the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper, ordinances which preachers were strictly forbidden to administer who had not been ordained deacons or priests in the Church of England. Asbury, of course, and nearly all of his preachers in America were not ordained. Methodists usually took communion when they were able in Anglican churches and secured baptism for their infants there. When the war ended, however, the organizational crisis confronting the Anglicans, who had themselves long suffered from the refusal of the Church of England to appoint an American bishop and who soon would form a separate national denomination, affected Methodists as well. All these circumstances pushed the Methodist societies toward the establishment of a separate sect or denomination, confronting Asbury with another crisis.

Through his conduct in relation to each one of these complex challenges, Asbury proved himself the true leader of the Methodists in America. At last, in 1783, John Wesley recognized this fact and granted the younger man his fullest approbation. During the year following, the Founder sent Thomas Coke to America with instructions to organize a separate denomination, to ordain the ministers who were qualified, and to make Francis Asbury co-superintendent with Coke of the Methodist societies in the United States. The proposal required Asbury to reverse his long insistence upon the high-church Anglican position concerning ordination and the sacraments. He spent a month or so praying, thinking, and consulting with his brothers about the plan. He at last accepted it heartily as a formalization in ritual of what had, in fact, been the case for many years, only insisting that an election by his fellow ministers ratify Wesley’s appointment. He and Coke, eager to draw away to the Methodist communion as large a group as possible of the company of American Anglicans willing to make the Methodist discipline their own, went a step further and accepted the title of “Bishop.” This step was a scandal to some, and it offended the aged Wesley. But Asbury had long since learned to rely upon his own judgment of what
seemed God’s will and of what was good for American Methodists, even if his beloved mentor in England had not yet seen what needed to be done. By that time, moreover, Asbury knew that he had won not only Wesley’s approbation but the confidence of his brethren. He had done so by simply being himself, a truly religious man.

What I have to offer in this study of how Asbury became a bishop is no set of secrets for ecclesiastical success. The point I make is much simpler, but, on that account, perhaps all the more valuable. Asbury’s experience suggests that when a pastor is honestly dealing with his own religious problems and overcoming them by faith in Christ, and when he tries with equal honesty and openness to help others with their problems, the strength that flows between him and his people may become a stronger bond than ritual or organization or oratory can forge. A bishop, like a pastor, needs charisma. But charisma, understood in Christian terms, is neither put on, nor received as a miraculous gift. It grows out of an apostleship in which one is true to himself, open with his brothers and sisters, and honest to God. That, at least, is the moral I point, in advance of telling the tale, from Francis Asbury’s emergence as the founding bishop of American Methodism.

In every case his conduct and inspiration as a Methodist preacher—what we might call his policy—was a consistent expression of his own inward quest fully to receive and completely to share with those around him the love of the one whom he believed was the Lord, Jesus Christ. Becoming a bishop was incidental to that quest. He could scarcely have realized, save in retrospect, that his peculiar combination of talents and opportunities for service would lead to such an outcome. That event was in fact one of the lesser fruits of his commitment of his life in its larger and truly religious purposes.

I shall try to make plain the bases of these conclusions by reference to four areas of Asbury’s leadership, namely, doctrine, discipline, pastoral care, and the resolution of conflicts.

First, any careful reading of his journal makes clear that the continuous effort to improve his own understanding of his faith was the foundation of his effectiveness in preaching the doctrines of Christianity to others. Asbury read continuously from a wide range of Christian literature, and dipped occasionally into pagan or secular writings as well. No trip by land or sea found him without some difficult volume to master, and no time of release or confinement from heavy duties passed without his recording in his diary the substance of his reaction...
to the many things he read. 3 Most interesting to me is not simply the
variety of the books, but the tenor of his response to them. He was
obviously reading both devotionally and critically, searching frequently
the writings of Calvinist or of non-Christian authors for insights about
the truths of the gospel which he could apply to his own spiritual needs.
At the same time, he evaluated them all by reference to a rigorous
standard of what he believed to be Biblical truth. 4 The consequence
was that with Asbury, as with Wesley, devotional and doctrinal pursuits
were united; experience and creed formed a consistent whole. "It is
plain to me," he wrote on one occasion, that "the devil will let us read
always, if we will not pray; but prayer is the sword of the preacher, the
life of the Christian, the terror of hell, and the devil's plague." 5

Little wonder, therefore, that those doctrines of the Christian
faith which Asbury emphasized in his preaching were those which were
central to personal religious experience: the incarnation, atonement
and resurrection of the Lord, Jesus Christ; the promise to believers of
the assurance of salvation, on the ground of their repentance and faith;
the saints' inheritance of God's gift of perfect love; the centrality of
witness in the Christian life; and the hope of eternal life which he
believed was the basis not only of the faith of the church but of the
trust and love of each child of God. 6

Now, to be sure, Asbury, like all eighteenth-century ministers,
preached a full range of Christian doctrines; the sketches of his many
sermons make this point clear. Unlike the caricature historians have
drawn of the circuit-riding who repeated his two or three familiar dis-
courses at each location across a wide area and then moved on to
another circuit, Asbury might preach on as many as twelve or fifteen
different texts in a single fortnight, even after he had enjoyed great
"liberty," as he put it, in preaching on one and might have been, on
that account, prompted to repeat that sermon at the next stop. 7Clearly,
his preaching was intended for his own edification as well as that of his
hearers; as all good preaching should, it grew out of his own devotional
life.

7. See, for example, the sixteen texts he used between May 28 and June
The doctrines having to do with the salvation of persons, then, became and remained central in Methodist preaching for generations to come. This fact has given rise to the remarkable judgment, enforced by incantation rather more than by evidence, that American Protestantism generally, especially in its Methodist and Baptist forms, had no theological substance, being concerned principally with the salvation of sinners. This judgment stems in fact from the theological bias of European religious thought, which evaluates the strength of a theology according to its originality in dealing with either Calvinistic or rationalistic presuppositions. The New Testament, however, like Asbury's sermons, makes the primary meaning of the gospel to be "the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth."

At one point, moreover, I think that Asbury, as compared with Wesley and his colleagues in England, made a genuine advance in the art of teaching the gospel. He learned to preach short sermons, without a manuscript or extensive notes; and he judged each attempt not only by the clarity with which he had been able to enforce a particular teaching but by what he described as the degree of "liberty" he felt when doing so. One inclined to jump to the conclusion that he meant by "liberty" a merely emotional freedom in rhetoric would do well to consider the intensity of Asbury's resistance to emotionalism and to all forms of what he and Wesley called enthusiasm. What Asbury meant by the word was, rather, the degree to which the clear conviction of the ultimate significance of what he was preaching flowed between speaker and hearers, breaking up resistance to it. When he wrote, as he often did, that "there was a great melting" while he preached, he meant simply that he sensed minds and hearts were opened to accept the truth.8

Viewed without preconceptions grounded in either rhetoric or theology, I suppose one would say that the effectiveness of his preaching lay in the fact that it echoed his praying. At the center of both was Asbury's desire to know and to share the love of Jesus. He uttered judgments tenderly and made rebuke an act of love. The heart of every sermon was the promise that a God of infinite mercy stood ready to pardon and to cleanse all sin. Asbury had little patience with what he called the "furious" spirit in which Thomas Rankin sought to enforce the law of the Lord. His own personal salvation, his diary makes plain, was to him

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each day the wondrous gift of God's loving grace, of which he felt utterly unworthy; what he proclaimed to lost and sinning men was the same loving and forgiving grace. Than such, it seems to me, there is no higher, no more subtle, no more profound Christian doctrine.9

Turning now to discipline, Asbury regarded the willingness of Methodist preachers to enforce rigorously the rules of Methodism as a test of the soundness of their faith. This attitude may appear on first reading as a manifestation merely of organizational loyalty. It proves on closer inspection, however, to have reflected his passion for communal discipline. That passion, in turn, stemmed from Asbury's deep honesty about his own need for that continual correction from Scripture and Holy Spirit and church fellowship which he believed necessary to make him a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

Such discipline, either personal or communal, was no work for weaklings; Asbury's strength in public tests stemmed from his rigor in self-examination. "It is for holiness my spirit mourns," he wrote some months after his arrival in America;" I want to walk constantly before God without reproof . . . . God hath sent me to this country. All I seek is to be more spiritual, and given up entirely to God—to be all devoted to Him whom I love."10 Out of this fountain sprang his firmness with others.11 On an early visit to Philadelphia in April, 1772, he recorded that he "preached to the people with some sharpness," and then in the evening "kept at the door, met the society, and read Mr. Wesley's epistle to them." Keeping at the door meant, of course, forbidding participation in the society of those who did not seem truly converted or who were unwilling to accept Methodist discipline. Later in the week, Asbury wrote that he had "heard that many were offended at my shutting them out of society meeting, as they had been greatly indulged before. But this does not trouble me. While I stay, the rules must be attended to; . . . . I cannot suffer myself to be guided by half-hearted Methodists." An elderly member of the Society of Friends thereupon told him that "the opinion of the people was much changed, within a few days, about Methodism, and that the Quakers and other dissenters had laxed their discipline; that none but the Roman Catholics kept it

10. I, 8,
11. For an example see I, 145–146.
up with strictness.” But, Asbury confided to his journal, “these things do not move me.”

That Asbury could also accept the discipline of others was continuously clear during these early days. When Rankin, who also bore the title of Wesley’s Assistant in America, prevented his going back to the Baltimore circuit, where Asbury’s work was beginning to bear fruit and where many friends were pleading for him to come, the future bishop found it grievous, but was sure that “all things shall work together for good to them that love God.” When Rankin spoke kindly to him the next day, he expressed the hope that “all things will give place to love.” He remained in Philadelphia, sharing the pulpit with Rankin, chafing but obeying. On the Lord’s day, December 18, 1774, he wrote, “My soul was happy while preaching in the morning. Mr. Stringer gave us an old piece at church; and Mr. Rankin was very furious in the evening.” Nevertheless, the following Wednesday, deep in the reading of Neal’s History of the Puritans, he wrote, “The Lord keeps me from all impure desire, and makes me to abound with divine peace. In prayer meeting this evening, all present were greatly blessed.”

Again and again, it is clear that the ground of Asbury’s administration of discipline in the Methodist community as well as his submission to it was his own private commitment to the will of God, and his quest for perfect love.

Since that commitment and that quest transcended allegiance to any man, they may also have reflected or contributed to his sense of alienation. At a quarterly meeting with his fellow ministers in Maryland in 1775, Asbury was depressed by the realization that, as he put it, “my hand appears still to be against every man.” The strength of his discipline, which had helped to produce these feelings, stemmed not from physical vigor, for he had been sorely ill, but from a determination, as he put it, “that my few remaining days may be spent to His glory.”

When Methodism was growing rapidly in Baltimore, he spoke plainly one Monday evening, he tells us, “on the nature of our society,” and “the necessity of discipline,” a subject which was “not pleasing to

some.” Nevertheless, he wrote, “I desire to know no man after the flesh. My soul is in peace.”

The singular strength of Methodist organization across the ensuing decades, in frontier settlements as well as in the great cities, seems to have stemmed from the personal strength which Asbury and his ministerial and lay associates displayed by insisting that the covenant with Christ required radical inward as well as outward discipline. A reasonable conjecture is that such men were spared from remorse at those who were not willing to submit to the rules, by their keen awareness of how dangerous it had been to their own spiritual lives to regard temptation lightly or to dally with their vocation to holiness. Not organizational loyalty, but the hope of heaven and their earthly experience of the interdependence of holiness and love formed the spiritual basis of their passion for discipline and revealed their attachment to the idea of Christian community.

Consider, now, the evidences of that attachment in Asbury’s work as pastor. If Asbury’s doctrinal insights and concern for obedience to Methodist rules grew out of his personal religious experience, his spiritual identification with the people whom he served was a principal factor in his emergence as bishop. That identification, in turn, stemmed from his efforts to follow closely in the footsteps of Jesus, whom he thought to be the great Shepherd. Touring Virginia in the fall of 1780, Asbury found himself speaking “with great liberty” one day when several preachers were present. “They shook whilst I showed the call to the ministry,” he wrote,

> how they ought to evidence it, by having the same end in view our Lord had; ‘to preach the Gospel to the poor; to bind up the broken-hearted, and to set at liberty them that are bound;’ to imitate the prophetic and priestly office of Christ,—thus to set up Christ among the people, or to conclude they had not the call.16

Such a pastoral ideal helped Asbury to lay aside very early his initial prejudice against ministering in cities. In the late fall of 1773, stationed in Baltimore, he found himself preaching every day, first in the town and then at Fells Point where the docks were located, to

15. I, 90.
16. I, 16.
great crowds of people. "Many are under some awakenings here," he wrote, "and they are very kind and affectionate to me." 17 He helped the congregations in both places erect buildings, visited and preached from house to house, and led the way in ministry to the poor, the imprisoned, and the drunken. Lying down to sleep one Friday night he found himself burdened by his concern for the inhabitants of Baltimore. "I am pressed under them as a cart full of sheaves," he wrote, "and would rather be employed in the most servile offices than preach to them, if it were not from a sense of duty to God...." 18 Though his love for Baltimore always remained strong and he returned there happily whenever assigned, 19 what he had actually learned in his first two years in America, in brief pastorates in New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, was that a country boy like himself could build through an urban ministry the base from which to mount an invasion of the countryside nearby, preaching weekdays in small settlements or private homes and establishing a network of Methodist classes all around a major city. This was the plan Asbury followed thereafter. In the summer of 1775, when stationed at Norfolk, Virginia, he shuttled back and forth by ferry between Norfolk and Portsmouth on Sundays. On weekdays he sometimes went "to the farthestmost part of Portsmouth parish, through such a swamp as I never saw before, and partook of a blessing with the people," some of whom were "of a simple heart." 20 He visited regularly several small societies, numbering sometimes scarcely a dozen members and meeting at some planter's home in the woods. We can understand why his Sunday congregations in Norfolk soon came to consist "of many people from the country as well as the towns." 21

When stationed later that year at Philadelphia, Asbury combined a close pastoral ministry to the city congregation with frequent trips into New Jersey. He encouraged the preachers in the sizeable towns to erect houses of worship, conducted class meetings and love feasts, the latter being services in which those present shared their private spiritual experiences, and meanwhile cultivated day by day his own inner

17.  I, 98.
devotion to Christ. In Philadelphia, as in Baltimore, he continued to preach often in private dwellings even after church buildings were erected, a habit no doubt enforced by his rural experience, where he saw the value of preaching in the intimate surroundings of a home. In 1788, Asbury wrote Ezekiel Cooper, pastor in Baltimore, a brief instruction on the urban pastorate which reveals how mistaken is the myth that the bishop always remained at heart a frontier circuit rider. He told Cooper to call in every home of his society once each two weeks, "for no other purpose than to speak to each in the family about their souls." He counseled him to preach somewhere every other night and to remember that "sermons ought to be short and pointed in town" and that they should "press the people to conviction, repentance, faith and holiness." He continued, "I am sure that the whole method of preaching will be changed as we come near the golden age. So shall we speak not so much by system but by life and application in the heart, little illustration and great fervency in the spark of life."23

Asbury's pastoral concern was especially apparent in his insistence upon constantly preaching to poor people and to Negroes and prisoners wherever he found them. On his first appointment for a three-month period in Philadelphia, in the spring of 1772, he wasted no time in going to preach to the "poor mortals in the Bettering-house."24 Whenever stationed in New York City he went frequently to the cluster of cottages beside Beekman's Swamp, where lived the poor tannery workers.25 He preached to Negroes everywhere, and in joint meetings with white people most of the time.26 But he met black people separately also, particularly in Baltimore. There, he wrote, some of their "unhappy masters forbade their coming for religious instruction. "How will the sons of oppression answer for their conduct," he asked, when the great "Proprietor of all shall call them to an account?"27 His journal shows a remarkable consistency of concern to convert and enroll black people in Methodist societies; and he opposed slavery always,
both before, during, and after the Revolution. On Maryland’s Eastern Shore in 1784, he found a black man who was a Methodist under sentence of death for thefts committed before his conversion. Though “much given up” to his fate, the man was reprieved under the gallows, while “a merchant who cursed the Negro for praying” dropped dead on the spot. “I pity the poor slaves,” Asbury added; “Oh that God would look down in mercy, and take their cause in hand.”

It is clear also, however, that the young preacher was equally interested in the conversion of wealthy and socially eminent persons whom he could bring to Christian faith and discipline. The summer of 1776 found him ill. He determined to go to Berkeley Springs, a resort in Morgan County, Virginia, two days journey from Baltimore, to recover his health. Whether the healing powers of the springs had a fair test in his case is questionable. The first Sunday of his six-week stay he preached out of doors so loudly that he hurt himself, in his “desire that the people who were in their houses might hear.” The following Tuesday he “preached again by the side of the hill, near the bath;” and the word, he tells us, “had a melting influence on some of the congregation.” By Wednesday he sensed “a manifest check to the overflowing tide of immorality” among the crowds of wealthy vacationers. By the end of the week he had established a daily schedule for his holiday: “to read about a hundred pages a day; usually to pray in public five times a day; to preach in the open areas every other day; and to lecture in prayer meeting every evening. And if it were in my power,” he added, “I would do a thousand times as much for such a gracious and blessed Master. But in the midst of all my little employments, I feel myself as nothing, and Christ to me is all in all.”

Nor did this balancing of concern for the poor and the wealthy diminish after Asbury had been elected Bishop. In 1786 his long journey on horseback through the wilds of backwoods Carolina, passing over flooded creeks, occasionally missing appointments from wrong turns taken amidst driving rain, and usually ill himself, revealed the passion of a man driven by concern for poor men settled in the wilderness. He returned by way of Alexandria, Virginia, where he

28. I, 469.
29. I, 195; see generally, 191–197.
preached Sunday morning in the courthouse and in the evening at the Presbyterian Church and laid plans for a Methodist meeting house. After a brief visit to Baltimore he headed into Western Maryland and Virginia, one foot swollen and feverish, staying in uncomfortable lodgings, sometimes rising to preach when “almost ready to drop for want of sleep.”31 Arriving at Friends’ Cove in Western Maryland, he wrote, “I have been greatly tempted to impatience and discontent. The roads are bad; my horse’s hind feet without shoes; and but little to eat. To this I may add that the lodgings are unclean and uncomfortable.” Nevertheless, he preached the next day, Sunday, and “had sweet communion with God in the woods,” he tells us. “My soul hath rest in Lord.” He stopped a few days later at the Springs in Bath, Virginia, for his annual “vacation,” which he spent in reading and preaching to the wealthy planters gathered there while trying to find “the healing efficacy of the waters” for himself. Of the visit he wrote, “more than ordinary in prayer, and spoke in public every other night.”32

Asbury’s pastoral care for children affords another perspective upon his effort to follow the example of Jesus. As early as September, 1772, he held a meeting in New York City “for the better ordering of the spiritual and temporal affairs of the society.” Of the sixteen questions he raised dealing with general matters of discipline and organization, one of the several which got an affirmative answer was “Can the preacher meet the children?”33 In the midst of the revolutionary war while still free to travel over his Delaware circuit, he preached persistently on “the education of children, and family duties.”34 In November, 1780, free again after a long period of danger to travel through Virginia and Delaware and help the ministers in charge of the multiplying circuits, he came back to his favorite residence, Dover, and proposed meeting the children. “I appointed a place for them to sit, and desired the parents to send a note with each, letting me know the temper, and those vices to which the child might be most subject.” Then, without any indication of a change in subject, he added to his diary for that day, “I love to spend a few minutes every hour in prayer. I see

32. I, 516–518.
33. I, 42; cf. p. 47.
34. I, 293.
great need of living near to God—the people are so affectionate. Lord, humble me!” He was reading Wesley’s Journal at the time, preaching frequently on Christian perfection, and conferring constantly with his fellow ministers concerning the danger of a separation of the Methodists in Virginia.35

Indeed, this same commitment to pastoral care, on the model he thought Jesus provided, eventually made Asbury, the high-church Anglican and lover of all things British, an American patriot. The event was crucial to his nomination and election as bishop.

The first intimations of the approach of the revolt of the colonies from England drew from Asbury a sharp reaction against the involvement of preachers in politics. In the fall of 1774 he refused even to think about the consequences of the British attack on Boston. “Alas,” he wrote, “what a small matter may interrupt our communion with God; even draw away our affections from him.”36 But the matter would not stay small. In Baltimore in March, 1775, his preaching on the glory of God fell on deaf ears, he thought, because “they were training the militia” and “the town seemed all in confusion.”37 A few Sundays later he heard “alarming military accounts from Boston, New York, and Philadelphia,” but comforted himself with the hope that the Lord would overrule “and make all these things subservient to the spiritual welfare of his Church.” Nevertheless, back in town Tuesday night after a visit to the country, he “found the people all inflamed with a martial spirit.”38 Throughout the following years Asbury was always unhappy when confined, as he wrote one evening, “to the company of men who were destitute of religion, and full of sin and politics.”39

Nevertheless, the crucial decision to stay in America rather than to join the other British preachers in plans to return to England was for him a pastoral duty before which he did not hesitate. In early August, 1775, he received at Norfolk a letter from Thomas Rankin announcing that the latter and two other preachers had concluded it would be best

35. I, 386–388.
37. I, 152.
38. I, 155; for comparable events in Norfolk, Virginia, later the same year, see pp. 164, 171, 176.
39. I, 156.
to return to England. "But I can by no means agree to leave a field for gathering souls to Christ as we have in America," Asbury confided to his journal.

It would be an eternal dishonour to the Methodists, that we should all leave three thousand souls, who desire to commit themselves to our care; neither is it the part of a good shepherd to leave his flock in time of danger: therefore, I am determined by the grace of God, not to leave them, let the consequence be what it may.40

The consequences were, indeed, formidable. In March, 1776, he came to Philadelphia, having ridden two thousand miles since his last visit there, for a parting conversation with Thomas Rankin. Asbury's own decision had been complicated by publication in America of John Wesley's denunciation of the rebels. Although "an affectionate letter from Mr. Wesley" awaited him there, Asbury wrote he was "truly sorry that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America. My desire is to live in love and peace with all men; to do them no harm, but all the good I can." He thought it unreasonable for their critics "to censor the Methodists in America, on account of Mr. Wesley's political sentiments," since the Founder had simply revealed by his tract a "conscientious attachment to the government under which he lived." Had Wesley "been a subject of America," Asbury wrote, "he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American cause." In these words, Asbury perhaps unconsciously betrayed his own growing sense of being "a subject of America," though his subjection seemed to him primarily to his Lord and to the pastoral responsibility which he had assumed.41

Asbury spent a great deal of time the following year in Baltimore, endeavoring as much as possible in his pastorate to ignore the events of the Revolution.42 In March, 1777, a letter from one of his fellow ministers reminded Asbury that according to the rule adopted by the Methodist conference in England, "the time was drawing near for us to return." Asbury noted, however, that since Saint Paul's rule was "that our spiritual children should be in our hearts, to live and die with them,

40. I, 161–162.
41. I, 181.
42. I, 228–229.
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. . . doubtless we should be willing to suffer affliction with them.” Then he prayed, “May the Lord give me wisdom sufficient to direct me in this and every intricate case.” In the following days Asbury found himself anxious “in respect to the times,” and wrote: “My brethren are inclined to leave the continent, and I do not know that something may be propounded to me which would touch my conscience; but my determination is to trust in God, and be satisfied if the souls of my fellow men are saved.”43 Troubled lest his preaching in America seem to support acts of revolution and informed in September, 1777, that Thomas Rankin and one other minister had, in fact, at long last left the continent, Asbury wrote, “so we are left alone. But I leave myself in the hand of God; relying on His good providence to direct and protect us . . . .”44

Retreating from the excitement of Baltimore to Delaware, he concentrated in his pastoral work on dealing “plainly and honestly, though affectionately and tenderly” with his people, affirming that, “if we seek to please men, unless it is for their good to edification, we are not the servant of Christ.”45 He buried himself during this time also in Mr. Wesley’s works, commenting that there was “a certain spirituality” in them which he could “find in no other human compositions . . . . A man who has any taste for true piety, can scarcely read a few pages in the writings of that great divine, without imbibing a greater relish for the pure and simple religion of Jesus Christ, which is therein so Scripturally and rationally explained and defended.” On a Friday, the 13th of February, 1778, he wrote that he was “under some heaviness of mind. But it was no wonder: three thousand miles from home—my friends have left me—I am considered by some as an enemy of the country—every day liable to be seized by violence, and abused. However, all this is a trifle to suffer for Christ, and the salvation of souls. Lord, stand by me!”46 A little later, back in Maryland, he wrote “surely God will stand by and deliver me! I have none other on whom I can depend. And He knows with what intention and for what purposes I came into this distant and strange land, and what little I have suffered for His cause.” That very night a report was spread which

43. I, 234.
44. I, 249.
45. I, 263.
prompted him to leave the city the next day. "Accordingly, I set out after dinner," he wrote, "and lay in a swamp till about sunset; but was then kindly taken in by a friend. My soul has been greatly humbled and blessed under these difficulties, and I thought myself like some of the old prophets who were concealed in times of public distress." In the following days of that summer, he endured patiently what he called his "dumb and silent Sabbaths." He remembered that he once had thought "it would be death for me to keep silence from declaring the word of God; but now I am in a measure contented, and hope to see a day of liberty once again." Meanwhile, he spent his time in prayer, meditation, and reading. His Delaware host, Judge Thomas White, was jailed for a time for entertaining Asbury. When Asbury was able later to return to the White home, he found himself on a Sunday with a mind "strangely twisted and tortured, not knowing what to do. It seems I know not how to fight, nor how to fly." What emerged in this period of danger and enforced silence, however, was an awareness that the Anglican population of Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware among whom he was sheltered could never again accept British rule and were, on that account, permanently estranged from the Church of England. For many generations the English church and state had refused to provide them with a Bishop and had shown a remarkable lack of concern to supply them with able and upright clergymen. Asbury realized that his refusal to return to England gave him an opportunity to lead more and more of these Anglicans toward Methodism, if only he could hold back the enthusiasm of those young ministers who wanted to establish a separate Methodist sect at once, so as to be able to administer the sacraments to their people. As the worst dangers of the Revolution passed, therefore, Asbury found himself crucially responsible for the pastoral guidance not only of hundreds of lay people but of a great group of young preachers, most of them born in America, whose enthusiasm needed a restraining hand. He assumed the task of restraining them without realizing that very soon he would become the bishop of a separate American denomination. His purpose at the time was simply to win as many souls as he could, particularly among the Anglicans, and to bring them into the discipline of the Methodist societies.

47. I, 265–266.
49. I, 269.
The controversy which broke out between Asbury and the preachers in Virginia displayed another source of his emerging powers of leadership: he dealt with conflict and contention in the Methodist societies and among the Methodist clergymen in the same spiritual way he confronted temptations to pride and self-will in his personal life.

One by-product of his emerging strategy for Methodism, Asbury wrote in Delaware in the Spring of 1779, was that some of the most wealthy families were very courteous and friendly to him. "Sundry persons of respectability attend my feeble exercises in public, and express satisfaction," he wrote. "But shall this satisfy, or lift me up? God forbid! If this should be the case, God will punish me for my folly."50 A few days later, at a conference of preachers laboring north of the Potomac, the group "had great reason to fear that our brothers in the south were in danger of separating from us." Asbury helped compose "a soft, healing epistle" to them.51 Nevertheless, six weeks later, he received the minutes of the Virginia conference describing what he called "a lame separation from the Episcopal Church."52 Asbury continued his own preaching to rich and poor in Delaware, writing frequent letters to the "dissenting brethren in Virginia, hoping to reclaim them."53 Meanwhile, his love and faithfulness to his close colleagues, especially to Freeborn Garrettson, grew steadily. He prayed each day, morning and evening, for "all the preachers and circuits in America," he wrote.54 He knew during this period the wry humour of a man who was constitutionally pessimistic. He called himself once "a true prophet of evil tidings, as it suits my cast of mind."55

Nevertheless, in the crucial negotiations Asbury's leadership was deeply spiritual. He worked throughout the spring and summer of 1780 on plans for a reconciliation with the Virginia brethren. His occasional reunions with Methodist preachers from afar found him "more moved than ever before, with leaving and meeting my friends." These, he added, were "humbling times," which made the Christians love one another.56 In April, 1780, the Maryland preachers met in Baltimore.

51. I, 300.
52. I, 304.
55. I, 376.
56. I, 346.
They first concluded to renounce the Virginia secessionists. Asbury proposed instead conditions of union, namely, that the Virginians should not ordain any more; that they should come no farther North than Hanover circuit; that they should not presume to administer the sacraments where there was "a decent Episcopal minister;" and that they should join in plans for a union conference. The other ministers would not agree to these concessions, however, though they acknowledged that "it was like death to think of parting" with their Virginia colleagues. Asbury, almost at the point of despair, hit upon the idea of proposing that the Virginians suspend the sacraments for one year and see if the group could find a way to preserve the bond of Methodist unity during that period.57

When his colleagues agreed to this plan, Asbury and Garrettson journeyed to the Virginia conference, their minds heavy with doubts it would be accepted but hoping God's grace would prove "almighty." When permitted to speak, Asbury read Wesley's thoughts against separation from the Church of England; showed his private letters of instruction from Wesley; read the epistles and other expressions of sentiment from the Delaware and Baltimore conferences; and preached a tender sermon. "They wept like children," Asbury wrote, "but kept their opinions." He and Garrettson returned them to their lodgings, "under the heaviest cloud I ever felt in America." The next day they returned to say goodbye and found that while Asbury had been praying alone that morning the Virginians "had been brought to an agreement" to accept the proposal and to suspend their secession for one year.58 There followed a joyous tour by Asbury through Virginia, during which he visited Devereaux Jarratt, who, being an Anglican clergyman himself, had had no part of the separation movement. Asbury preached everywhere the doctrine of perfect love, amidst "divine calm and friendly sweetness."59 The event was crucial, Asbury realized. Forestalling the secession made it possible for John Wesley soon after to send Thomas Coke to bring about the orderly establishment of a separate denomination for American Methodists under circumstances which gave at least some chance of drawing a large number of former Anglicans into the fold.

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57. I, 347.
The healing of the Virginia division constitutes from the point of view of this paper simply another example of how one Christian bishop achieved and exercised leadership—by being truly religious. In this as in so much else in his ministry, Asbury revealed the base of his power to lie in caring for others, in being open about himself, and in showing a readiness to accept all such correction as did not violate either the word of God or the Methodist discipline. He was utterly dedicated to the highest aim of the Methodist ministers, namely, to share the love of the Lord, Jesus Christ, with the people God had given them to serve.