



American Saint

Francis Asbury and the Methodists

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Introduction

Francis Asbury was worried about the future of Methodism in America as he rode south into Powhatan County, Virginia, in early May 1780. Since emigrating from England in 1771, he had seen the movement gain a foothold in the colonies, only to be thrown into disarray by the American Revolution. Asbury had spent most of the past two years lying low at a friend's in Delaware, fearing for his life because of his association with John Wesley, the founder of Methodism in England and no friend of the revolution. Meanwhile, southern Methodists had decided to ordain themselves, outside of any episcopal oversight, and begin offering the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, a clear break from the movement's Wesleyan roots in England. Asbury had one last chance to bring them back into the fold at a conference scheduled to meet in Manakintown, Virginia, that May. Most observers predicted he would fail. Southern Methodists had experienced a sustained revival over the past two years, and most of the young preachers hardly knew Asbury. "At that time there was very little room to hope that they would ever recede from their new plan, in which they were so well established," wrote Jesse Lee, who became a Methodist during this revival. Remarkably, Asbury succeeded, with the southern preachers agreeing to suspend administering the sacraments and acknowledge him as the leader of American Methodism.¹

This much is familiar to historians of early American Methodism, but what Asbury did next was just as important. Rather than return north, he set out on a grueling five-month tour of Virginia and North

Carolina, crisscrossing the region to meet as many people as possible. One of the people he was determined to win over was John Dickins. Dickins had been a leader of the separatist party, and his ties to the South were strong. In April 1779 he had married Elizabeth Yancey, whose family owned a large plantation in Halifax County, North Carolina, and staunchly supported the revolution. At Manakintown, Dickins was the “chief speaker” for the southern preachers in opposition to Asbury, according to one of the southern preachers who witnessed the debate. Following the reconciliation between the two sides, Dickins was chosen to write a letter to Wesley seeking his advice on how to handle the issue of ordination and the sacraments. No one believed more firmly in the southern position or enjoyed greater confidence among the southern preachers than Dickins.²

Their differences at Manakintown only a few weeks before notwithstanding, when Asbury reached North Carolina in mid-June, he made a point of finding Dickins. Asbury could have been vindictive toward Dickins, but instead he drew him in through the common bonds of their faith. The two preached together to five hundred people near Dickins’s home on June 18, 1780, and the next day they discussed the possibility of opening a school modeled after Wesley’s Kingswood school. They talked late into the night, and Dickins was never quite the same. “I hope John Dickins will ever after this be a friend to me and Methodism,” Asbury wrote in his journal. Dickins came away from their brief time together with the same hope, his opinion of Asbury having completely changed now that he had seen him up close. When Dickins’s son was born that July, he named him Asbury Dickins, completing a transition from adversary to namesake in the space of a few weeks. John Dickins remained one of Asbury’s staunchest supporters, later writing pamphlets defending Asbury’s reputation against critics. Asbury won over most of the southern preachers and thousands of ordinary people who turned out to see him in much the same way. His ability to inspire deep and lasting loyalty in others is not easy to define from a distance. He wasn’t a persuasive public speaker. Yet in close conversation and small groups he had the ability to draw others to him, to dispel their fears about his motives and inspire them with his sense of purpose. Here was someone worth following, someone whose integrity and piety were above reproach, someone whose vision seemed truly inspired by God.³

Francis Asbury lived one of the most remarkable lives in American history, a life that many have admired but few have envied. The son of an English gardener, he became one of America’s leading religious voices and the person most responsible for shaping American Methodism. Through sheer perseverance and dedication to a single goal, he changed American popular religion—and by extension American culture—as much as anyone ever has. America is one of the most religious nations on earth, and Asbury is an important reason

why. Yet his dedication to the ministry cost him dearly, requiring that he set aside more worldly desires and ambitions. During his 45-year career in America (he died in 1816), he never married or owned much more than he could carry on horseback. He led a wanderer's life of voluntary poverty and intense introspection. The church and the nation ultimately disappointed him, but his faith never did. Asbury embodies Methodism's greatest successes and its most wrenching failures.

Contrary to this book's title, some might argue that Asbury was neither an American nor a saint. He was born and raised in a small village outside of Birmingham, England, and didn't come to America until the age of 26. Yet he adapted to the landscape and culture of America with surprising speed. Of John Wesley's licensed missionaries to the colonies, Asbury was the only one who stayed through the American Revolution as a Methodist preacher. He developed a remarkably keen sense of what Americans were looking for and how to reach them with the Methodist message of salvation. He traveled at least 130,000 miles by horse 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 any other American of his day. He preached more than ten thousand sermons and probably ordained from two thousand to three thousand preachers. 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. Asbury wasn't born in America, but he came to understand ordinary Americans as well as anyone of his generation.⁴

Asbury's saintliness also requires some explaining. He never claimed that he was especially holy or pure, though he diligently tried to be. Like any good eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century evangelical, Asbury was never satisfied with his own piety or labors. Yet people saw in him an example of single-minded dedication to the gospel that they themselves had never managed to attain, but to which, on their better days, they aspired. In their eyes he was indeed a saint. Though he spent his life traveling, he insisted on riding inexpensive horses and using cheap saddles and riding gear. He ate sparingly and usually got up at 4 or 5 a.m. to pray for an hour in the stillness before dawn. No one believed that Asbury was perfect, and even his most ardent supporters admitted that he made mistakes in running the church. He jealously guarded his episcopal authority, the one issue on which his critics gained traction. Yet his piety and underlying motivations seemed genuine to almost everyone. This is crucial for understanding not only Asbury, but all of evangelical culture in this period. Though they

often fell short of their own expectations, evangelicals admired nothing so much as a heart yearning to be poured out in service to God.⁵

Asbury is seldom remembered as an important American religious leader because he didn't exert influence in ways that we expect. Key figures in American religious history are generally lumped into three camps: charismatic communicators, such as George Whitefield, Charles Finney, or Billy Graham; intellectuals, such as Jonathan Edwards or Reinhold Niebuhr; and domineering autocrats—the way in which Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormons, is often depicted.⁶ Asbury was certainly neither of the first two. He was known for preaching disjointed sermons that were almost impossible to follow, and he never published a book or sermon of any note. “It seems strange, that sometimes, after much premeditation and devotion, I cannot express my thoughts with readiness and perspicuity,” he wrote early in his career, in 1774. This remained true even as he matured and became famous. Relatively late in his career, when his reputation was well established, he still sometimes had difficulty preaching before large audiences. “This excessive delicacy of feeling, which shuts my mouth so often, may appear strange to those who do not know me,” he wrote in August 1806. “There are some houses in which I am not sure that I could speak to my father, were he alive, and I to meet him there.” He hated face-to-face conflict and rarely took a public role in debates at the church's major conferences. “I am not fond of hurting the feelings of people,” he wrote in January 1807.⁷

Scholars usually portray Asbury as falling into the third category, the rigid autocrat. In his massive study of early Methodism in Britain and America, Edward Drinkhouse, historian of the Methodist Protestant Church, concludes that Asbury followed John Wesley in instituting a rigid form of “ecclesiastical Paternalism,” designed to stamp out any hint of real democracy in the Methodist movement. Together they created what Drinkhouse called “the Episcopal anaconda,” that “bastard thing.” More recently, a number of scholars have puzzled over the supposed paradox of a movement that appealed to democratically minded masses while maintaining a rigidly hierarchical structure. One prominent historian writes that during this period American Methodism was “almost ostentatiously hierarchical,” with authority continuing “to flow down from the top, not rise up from the bottom.”⁸

But Asbury wasn't a distant autocrat. He remained closely connected to the people he led. His legacy is not in books and sermons, but in the thousands of preachers whose careers he shaped one conversation at a time, and in the tens of thousands of ordinary believers who saw him up close and took him (in however limited a way) as their guide. He was the people's saint, an ordinary person who chose to do extraordinary things.

Asbury communicated his vision for Methodism in four enduring ways that came to define much of evangelical culture in America. The first was through his legendary piety and perseverance, rooted in a classically evangelical conversion experience. Piety isn't a word we use much anymore. It simply refers to devotion to God and serving others, to a desire to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," and "thy neighbour as thyself." Where most Methodists, even most preachers, settled for a serviceable faith, Asbury strove for a life of extraordinary devotion. During his forty-five years in America he essentially lived as a houseguest in thousands of other people's homes across the land. This manner of life "exposed him, continually, to public or 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. He lived one of the most transparent lives imaginable, with no private life beyond the confines of his mind. It is all the more revealing, then, that the closer people got to him, the more they tended to respect the integrity of his faith.⁹

Asbury's spiritual purity produced a "confidence in the uprightness of his intentions and wisdom of his plans, which gave him such a control over both preachers and people as enabled him to discharge the high trusts confided to him, with so much facility and to such general satisfaction," one contemporary observed. Perseverance counted for much among evangelicals, and on this score Asbury had few equals. He relentlessly pushed himself to the breaking point of his health, seldom asking more of other Methodists than he was willing to do. From 1793 on, he suffered from progressively worsening congestive heart failure, probably brought on by bouts of streptococcal pharyngitis (strep throat) and rheumatic fever that damaged his heart valves. As a result, he suffered from edema in his feet made worse by endless hours on horseback with his feet dangling until they were too swollen to fit in the stirrups. Toward the end of his life, he sometimes had to be carried from his horse to his preaching appointments because he couldn't stand the pain of walking, which must have been an inspiring, if bizarre, sight. It left one observer who saw him preach in this condition in "breathless awe and silent astonishment." Asbury's piety brought him respect, even renown, based on sacrifice rather than accumulation of buildings, money or other trappings of power. "It was almost impossible to approach, and converse with him, without feeling the strong influence of his spirit and presence . . . There was something, in the remarkable fact, almost inexplicable, and indescribable," Ezekiel Cooper wrote shortly after Asbury's death. Even James O'Kelly, who, in 1792, led the most bitter schism from the Methodist church in Asbury's lifetime, acknowledged his "cogent zeal, and unwearied diligence, in spite of every disappointment."¹⁰

The second way that Asbury communicated his vision was through his ability to connect with ordinary people. Connection was an important word for early Methodists, and Asbury embodied its meaning better than anyone. As he crisscrossed the nation from year to year, he conversed with countless thousands, demonstrating a gift for building relationships face to face or in small groups. It is remarkable how many of those he met became permanent friends, even after a single conversation. They 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. Henry Boehm, who traveled some 25,000 miles with Asbury from 1808 to 1813, recalled that “in private circles he would unbend, and relate amusing incidents and laugh most heartily. He said ‘if he was as grave as Bishop M’Kendree he should live but a short time.’ He would often indulge in a vein of innocent pleasantry.” Asbury once remarked to John Wesley Bond, who traveled with him during the last two years of his life, that his spirits always rose when he got “into a retired situation, in a quiet, plain and pious family.” In these settings Asbury felt most at home. “His conversational powers were great. He was full of interesting anecdotes, and could entertain people for hours,” Boehm remembered. “As a road-companion, no man could be more agreeable; he was cheerful almost to gaiety; his conversation was sprightly, and sufficiently seasoned with wit and anecdote,” wrote Nicholas Snethen, who was Asbury’s traveling companion for several years beginning in 1800. George Roberts remembered that at times Asbury would simply “break out” in song.¹¹

He could also be funny, which enhanced his appeal. Methodists didn’t generally consider joking and laughter compatible with religion, so the number of stories relating Asbury’s humor, often at his own expense, is surprising. Once, when Asbury was near sixty and had been a bishop for nearly two decades, he and the “venerable, portly” preacher Benjamin Bidlack came to the home of a “respectable Methodist” in the Genesee District of upstate New York. Seeing Asbury riding in front, the man mistook him for an assistant and ordered him to dismount and open the gate for the bishop. Bidlack played along, and as he passed by, Asbury bowed low, offering to see to the bishop’s horse and bags. When their host realized his mistake, he was “mortified” until he saw how much Asbury enjoyed the joke.¹²

Many recognized Asbury’s ability to connect with people on a personal level, though few found it easy to explain. The dissident Methodist preacher Jeremiah Minter concluded that Asbury must have been a “sorcerer,” “in

league with the devil,” to have “enchanted [and] deceived” so many who “thought him a good man.” Asbury’s only equal in this regard, Minter believed, was the famous evangelist Lorenzo Dow. “With their *sorcery* and enchantments,” Asbury and Dow had “bewitched multitudes, who take them to be, as it were, the great power of God,” Minter wrote in 1814, two years before Asbury’s death. Few would have agreed with Minter’s analysis, but many recognized what it was about Asbury that so annoyed Minter. Even James O’Kelly confessed a “disagreeable jealousy” over Asbury’s ability to influence those closest to him. Nicholas Snethen came much closer to understanding Asbury in this regard when he wrote that “he was charitable, almost to excess, of the experience of others.” People found Asbury approachable and willing to listen to their concerns more than they found him full of inspiring ideas.¹³

The third conduit of Asbury’s vision was the way that he understood and used popular culture. John Wesley and Asbury were alike in their willingness to negotiate between competing religious and cultural worlds. In his biography of Wesley, Henry Rack argues persuasively that Wesley acted as a “cultural middleman” between Methodists on the one hand and clergymen and educated gentlemen in England on the other.¹⁴ If so, then Asbury acted as a mediator between Wesley and common Americans. Wesley and Asbury came from significantly different backgrounds, but they shared a realization that the dominant religious institutions of their day were failing to reach most people. The great question they both addressed was how to make the gospel relevant in their time and place. The audience was never far from their minds. This led Asbury to do things in America that he wouldn’t have done in England, some of which Wesley disapproved. Asbury, for example, accepted the emotionalism of southern worship in the 1770s, promoted 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.

All religious movements interact with the prevailing culture of their adherents. Popular religious movements like early American Methodism exist in a tension between religious values and the values of the dominant culture, alternately challenging and embracing the larger culture around them. To either completely accept or reject the larger culture is to cease to be either religious on the one hand, or popular on the other. Leaders like Asbury understand this tension and work within it. At times, they call their movements to reject the dominant culture and society. But this rejection can never be complete. Indeed, in ways that these leaders and their followers may never completely acknowledge or even understand, the success of their movements hinge on maintaining contact with the culture around them.

Asbury didn't accept American culture indiscriminately or without reservation. He was deeply suspicious of much of it, and never simply identified the mission of Methodism with that of America. Yet cultural accommodation exacted a price, the clearest example of which was the presence of slavery in the church, a reality that he tacitly accepted, but which haunted him for the last thirty years of his life. Cultural adaptation is also never static, since both the church and the broader culture are constantly changing. Asbury was remarkably well-informed (the product of his travels and love of conversation) and flexible in keeping up with these changes, but everyone has their limits. Though the American Revolution led to a good deal of persecution of American Methodists, Asbury fretted that its end would produce too much prosperity and thereby dampen Methodist zeal. Later he worried that the availability of cheap land in the West would have the same effect, drawing people's attention from spiritual concerns to the cares of this world. As long as they were poor, most Methodists agreed with Asbury that wealth was a snare. But as Methodists became generally more prosperous, they became less concerned about the dangers of wealth, much to Asbury's dismay. By the end of his career he was largely out of step with the church that he was so instrumental in creating. This, in the end, seemed to him a great tragedy.

The fourth way that Asbury communicated his message was through his organization of the Methodist church. He was a brilliant administrator and a keen judge of human motivations. He had a "superior talent to read men," as Peter Cartwright put it. As Asbury crisscrossed the nation year in and year out, he attended to countless administrative details. Yet he never lost sight of the people involved. "I have always taken a pleasure as far as it was in my power, to bring men of merit & standing forward," he wrote to the preacher Daniel Hitt in 1801. The system Asbury crafted made it possible to keep tabs on thousands of preachers and lay workers. Under his leadership, American Methodists anticipated the development of modern managerial styles. No merchant of the early nineteenth century could match Asbury's nationwide network of class leaders, circuit stewards, book stewards, exhorters, local preachers, circuit riders, and presiding elders, or the movement's system of class meetings, circuit preaching, quarterly meetings, annual conferences, and quadrennial general conferences, all churning out detailed statistical reports to be consolidated and published on a regular basis.¹⁵

At the center of Asbury's system was the itinerant connection. He learned the itinerant system in England under John Wesley, bringing it to America, where it worked even better than it had in England. Methodist itinerant preachers, or circuit riders, didn't serve a single congregation or parish, but rather ministered to a number of congregations spread out along a circuit they

continually traveled. Under Asbury, the typical American itinerant rode a predominantly rural circuit 200 to 500 miles in circumference, typically with twenty-five to thirty preaching appointments per round. He completed the circuit every two to six weeks, with the standard being a four weeks' circuit of 400 miles. This meant that circuit riders had to travel and preach nearly every day, with only a few days for rest each month. Often they were assigned a partner, but even so, they usually started at opposite ends of the circuit instead of traveling together. The itinerant system worked well for reaching post-revolutionary America's rapidly expanding population. In 1795, 95 percent of Americans lived in places with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants; by 1830 this proportion was 91 percent. While Methodism retained a stronghold in the seaports of the middle states, Asbury hammered its organization into one that had a distinctly rural orientation adept at expanding into newly populated areas. "We must draw resources from center to circumference," he wrote in 1797.¹⁶

Despite its success, keeping the itinerant system intact proved the greatest challenge of Asbury's career. From the beginning he faced opposition from those unhappy with its demands and constraints. Some, like Joseph Pilmore, wanted to focus Methodist resources more on the cities of the Atlantic seaboard, where they believed it was important for Methodism to build a base of influence and social respectability. Others, like James O'Kelly, wanted to make Methodism more congregational, allowing preachers who had built up a local following to remain on the same circuit indefinitely. Asbury believed that all such proposals would ultimately limit the movement's ability to reach the most people with the gospel. He maintained that sending preachers where they would have the most telling impact, rather than leaving them where they were most comfortable, was crucial to the success of the Methodist system. For the most part, he succeeded in defending the itinerant system until the last decade of his life. By then a new generation of Methodists, who were accustomed to a higher social status than their parents had enjoyed, began chipping away at his cherished itinerant connection. For all of its usefulness, the itinerant system was rooted in a particular place and time, something that Asbury couldn't really see.

There was another less obvious, but equally important, component of Asbury's system that went to the heart of what it meant to be a Methodist, to practice a method: the necessity of a culture of discipline. As individuals and communities, believers had to take it upon themselves to regulate their spiritual lives, to maintain their own spiritual focus. Neither Asbury nor his preachers could be everywhere at once. This is why, from his first days in America, he insisted on upholding the requirement that all members attend class meetings and that love feasts be limited to active members, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and support. He delegated authority to others, recognizing that a

voluntary system wouldn't work if it relied on coercion from above. It needed to become a central component of people's world view. Though there were plenty of disagreements along the way, Methodists succeeded where other religious groups failed largely because they were more disciplined. Yet this culture of discipline changed over time, much to Asbury's chagrin, as the church itself became more respectable and less countercultural.¹⁷

Still, the system worked remarkably well during Asbury's lifetime. The Methodist church grew at an unprecedented rate, rising from a few hundred members in 1771, the year he came to America, to more than two hundred thousand in 1816, the year of his death. Methodism was the largest and most dynamic popular religious movement in America between the Revolution and the Civil War. In 1775, fewer than one out of every eight hundred Americans was a Methodist; by 1812, Methodists numbered one out of every thirty-six Americans. These figures are even more impressive given the movement's wider influence. Many more Americans attended Methodist meetings than actually joined the church, particularly in the movement's early, most volatile years. Methodism's theology, worship style, and system of discipline worked their ways deep into the fabric of American life, influencing nearly all other mass religious movements that would follow, as well as many facets of American life not directly connected to the church.

For all of his focus on a single goal, Asbury remained a complex figure. At the core of his personality was a fear of rejection that at times made him seem aloof or severe in settings he found intimidating. He tended to hold others at arms length until he could be sure of their intentions. John Wesley Bond remembered that Asbury himself believed "that by nature he was suspicious." Henry Boehm recalled that at a distance Asbury often seemed "rough, unfeeling, harsh, and stoical." While rarely mean spirited, he feared being taken for a fool. "I grant he had a rather rough exterior, that he was sometimes stern; but under that roughness and sternness of manner beat a heart as feeling as ever dwelt in human bosom," Boehm asserted. Nicholas Snethen, who often opposed Asbury's policies after 1812 and later left the Methodist Episcopal Church, wasn't as forgiving. Snethen believed that Asbury's "suspicious disposition" stemmed "from his well known irritability, his faculty of obtaining the most secret information, and the quickness and penetration of his genius." Yet even Snethen didn't believe that Asbury's "ambition" flowed from "a criminal nature." Like nearly everyone who knew Asbury well, Snethen acknowledged his ability to assess human motivations, or as he said, to judge "human nature." "In what related to ecclesiastical men, and things, he was all eye, and ear; and what he saw and heard he never forgot. The tenacity of his memory was surprising. His knowledge of human nature was penetrating

and extensive,” Snethen wrote in 1816. Asbury was a keen observer of the human heart, and it often left him melancholy.¹⁸

Asbury’s inability to speak clearly in front of authority figures led him to work through proxies. He was the quintessential backroom negotiator, perhaps his least admirable trait. “In a judicial or legislative capacity he seemed not to excel, and hence he did not often appear to the best advantage in the chair of conferences,” recalled Snethen, who observed Asbury at many conferences from 1794 to 1814. “He knew also the art of governing, and seldom trusted to the naked force of authority. Indeed, the majesty of command, was almost wholly concealed, or superceded by that wonderful faculty, which belongs to this class of human geniuses, and which enables them to inspire their own disposition for action, into the breasts of others,” Snethen concluded.¹⁹

Wesleyan perfectionism—Wesley’s belief that it was the duty of all believers to seek perfection in this life—also colored Asbury’s personality. It heightened his resolve but also his insecurities. His failings instilled in him a genuine humility. By the end of his life any number of churches had been named for him, but “he did not approve of this, and called it folly,” according to Boehm. He didn’t expect great rewards in this life because he didn’t believe he deserved them.²⁰

Yet Wesleyan perfectionism wasn’t a theology of despair. With diligence, holiness was attainable in this life, if only for brief periods. Ultimately, believers could be confident of God’s grace if they held steady. Guiding the church toward this goal became an all-consuming passion for Asbury. “His patience in bearing disappointments was equal if not superior to that of any man I ever knew,” remembered Bond. According to Bond, Asbury rarely allowed himself to “repine” or “brood” over past difficulties; instead he turned them over in his mind, thinking “How shall I mend it:—How can things be made better.” In fact, Asbury did brood and fret, but it didn’t define him. He could sink deep within himself when concentrating on a problem, but this wasn’t the same thing. “At times he appeared unsociable, for his mind was engrossed with his work,” recalled Boehm. Or, as Bond put it, Asbury “thrust himself into every part of his charge; lest something might be wrong,—lest some part of the cause of God might suffer.” Asbury had a thorough and even subtle mind, but he wasn’t a quick study or good on his feet. He could work his way through thorny problems, but it took time. The long hours he spent on horseback gave him the space for reflection, prayer, and meditation that he needed. Those who didn’t know him sometimes mistook his preoccupation for severity.²¹

Coupled with Asbury’s fear of rejection was a genuine compassion for others, especially the downtrodden. He believed that true religion embraced the suffering of the poor and did all that was possible to alleviate it. Resources

should be channeled to those most in need, not squandered on luxuries, he believed. This is why he allowed himself few comforts. His clothes were cheap and plain, though he took some care to appear presentable. He once told Boehm “that the equipment of a Methodist minister consisted of a horse, saddle and bridle, one suit of clothes, a watch, a pocket Bible, and a hymn book. Anything else would be an encumbrance.” Indeed, Asbury rarely owned much more than this. At the same time, he gave away nearly all the money that came his way. Both Boehm and Bond kept track of Asbury’s funds while traveling with him as assistants. “He would divide his last dollar with a Methodist preacher,” Boehm recalled. “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 for debt. 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,” Bond wrote. He recalled that Asbury often gave money to strangers he met on the road whose circumstances seemed dire, especially widows. He had his share of failings, but the love of money wasn’t one of them. This won him a great deal of respect from almost everyone who knew him.²²

Asbury used poverty to keep himself honest. The preacher George Roberts believed that Asbury often “carried his deadness to the world too far . . . by a kind of negligence all most peculiar to himself.” When he traveled, according to Roberts, “he did not in common make any calculation of the probability of his expenses or whether he had sufficient to supply his wants.” To prove the point, Roberts recounts that in 1805 Asbury set out from New York for Boston with only three dollars in his pocket, refusing to take more. This incident proved to be one of Roberts’ strongest memories of Asbury.²³ It also illustrates Asbury’s deliberate use of his poverty to influence others. Notice that in the story of the widow’s cow, people gave in Asbury’s presence when they presumably would not have otherwise. Particularly later in his career, when Methodists were becoming more affluent, he knew that his reputation for charity and asceticism could be used as a shield against all kinds of criticism. If money is power, then Asbury was powerless. But of course money is not the only source of power in a religious movement.

If viewed in isolation, Asbury’s adult life appears one-dimensional. Much of what makes human life so interesting—family, sexual romance, creating an intellectual legacy—were largely absent from Asbury’s life after his arrival in America as a missionary (in the case of sexual romance, completely absent). Perhaps this is why so little has been written about him. Even John Wesley and

George Whitefield married (both unhappily, which makes for a better story). But Asbury's life wasn't flat, revolving as it did around the relationships he formed with other Methodists. Asbury lived his life in public, and the community of Methodist believers spread across the country became his vast extended family. He must be understood in this context or not at all. Like a rock thrown into a pond, his life sent ripples through the Methodist movement to its most distant reaches. Hence, this book has two parallel threads. The first is the story of Asbury's life in its more immediate setting. The second is more or less a collective biography of those Asbury knew best, mostly the itinerant preachers under his charge. Their lives form the human connections through which Asbury's ideas were shaped and through which he transmitted his vision outward. For this reason I have relied not only on his journal and letters, but also on the journals, letters, and memoirs of dozens of others who knew him or had contact with the early Methodist movement.

Asbury was a transitional figure in the development of American religion, promoting the separation of religious leadership from wealth and formal education. The system of religious economy that Asbury and the Methodists were largely responsible for creating—churches unaided and not coerced by government intervention, operating outside the control of social elites—was far different from what had existed in colonial America. Most religious leaders in colonial America were relatively wealthy college educated elites. Lay people occasionally gained public notoriety (Anne Hutchinson, for example), but they rarely held positions of official leadership for very long. Even George Whitefield, the famous evangelist of the Great Awakening, was a graduate of Oxford University. Such clearly wasn't the case with Asbury, who grew up in a small cottage and had only a few years of common school to his credit. But most of the leaders of large religious movements who followed Asbury looked more like him than the religious leaders of colonial America.

The religious pattern that Asbury was so instrumental in establishing is still with us today. While Methodists themselves are declining in numbers in the United States, other groups that derive from the Wesleyan heritage, including much of Pentecostalism, are thriving, as is evangelical culture in general, which Methodism did much to create. One of the most significant changes in recent decades has been the growth of non-Christian religions in the United States, yet even many of these have been to some degree "methodized." Asbury wasn't an intellectual, charismatic performer or autocrat, but his understanding of what it meant to be pious, connected, culturally aware, and effectively organized redefined religious leadership in America.