



FRANCIS ASBURY

An Englishman
Who Americanized Methodism
1745-1816

By John G. McElhenney

Francis Asbury, an Englishman, volunteered for missionary service in America. But after John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, accepted his offer, Asbury crossed the Atlantic as a man under orders. Because Wesley, like a monarch, expected his preachers to obey, not to ask for the right to vote.

Docking at Philadelphia in 1771, the 26-year-old Asbury busied himself immediately with his twin passions: saving souls and shaping lives. He preached Christ's forgiving love, invited people to save their souls by responding to Christ, and showed them how to shape their lives as Christ's followers.

Asbury had made his own commitment to Christ in England at age 14, following which he increasingly identified himself

with the Methodists. Working all day as an apprentice to a craftsman, he led Methodist meetings at night. Finally, just before his twenty-second birthday, he was accepted by Wesley as a self-educated, full-time lay preacher. Four years later, he offered to seek converts in America.

Missionary work also afforded Asbury an opportunity to test his administrative abilities, serving as one among a succession of leaders picked by Wesley to supervise the other preachers. But by the time the Revolutionary War ended, he was the only Wesley-commissioned leader left in America.

Therefore his fellow lay preachers acceded to his suggestion that the problem of an ordained ministry be referred



FRANCIS ASBURY

An Englishman
Who Americanized Methodism
1745-1816

By John G. McElhenney

Francis Asbury, an Englishman, volunteered for missionary service in America. But after John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, accepted his offer, Asbury crossed the Atlantic as a man under orders. Because Wesley, like a monarch, expected his preachers to obey, not to ask for the right to vote.

Docking at Philadelphia in 1771, the 26-year-old Asbury busied himself immediately with his twin passions: saving souls and shaping lives. He preached Christ's forgiving love, invited people to save their souls by responding to Christ, and showed them how to shape their lives as Christ's followers.

Asbury had made his own commitment to Christ in England at age 14, following which he increasingly identified himself

with the Methodists. Working all day as an apprentice to a craftsman, he led Methodist meetings at night. Finally, just before his twenty-second birthday, he was accepted by Wesley as a self-educated, full-time lay preacher. Four years later, he offered to seek converts in America.

Missionary work also afforded Asbury an opportunity to test his administrative abilities, serving as one among a succession of leaders picked by Wesley to supervise the other preachers. But by the time the Revolutionary War ended, he was the only Wesley-commissioned leader left in America.

Therefore his fellow lay preachers acceded to his suggestion that the problem of an ordained ministry be referred

to Wesley. No Methodist in the newly formed United States could administer baptism and communion. To remedy this situation quickly, some preachers considered ordaining each other. Asbury counseled patience and seeking Wesley's guidance.

Wesley's answer reached America in early November 1784, carried by Thomas Coke, who, short and portly in stature, embodied the weight of Wesley's authority and the solidity of scriptural precedent. Biblical people had not voted on their prophets. God designated them and then guided their choice of successors, as God directed Elijah to throw his mantle over Elisha's shoulders.

Wesley understood himself as Methodism's Elijah. Now, in 1784, he needed an Elisha to lead the Methodists in the United States. Praying, he became convinced that God had two Elishas in mind: Thomas Coke and Asbury. He instructed Coke to carry his decision to Asbury, who commented that "it may be of God." But he would only know God's will to the point of certainty by inviting the preachers to vote on Wesley's nominations.

Wesley never allowed his preachers to vote. He emphasized that his Methodism was not a

democracy. But Asbury was fathering a new Methodism in a new democracy. So he gathered the preachers in Baltimore at Christmas 1784. Accepting Wesley's choices as nominations, they voted unanimously to elect Coke and Asbury as superintendents of the new Methodist Episcopal Church in America.

From that moment on, Asbury's Methodism drew closer and closer to the American people. His Methodists, both preachers and laity, did not always have a vote, but their voices were heard. When his strong anti-slavery stance, which echoed Wesley's position, angered them, he laid it aside in favor of saving souls. When he discovered that people enjoyed Bible-thumping, shout-raising, toe-tapping camp meeting worship, he made it a staple of the Methodist religious diet.

Asbury died in 1816, the father of a highly successful American Methodism. When his brethren voted for him in 1784, Asbury had 15,000 members and 83 preachers to shepherd. Thirty years later, he herded 212,000 members, 700 ordained pastors, and 2,000 lay preachers.

to Wesley. No Methodist in the newly formed United States could administer baptism and communion. To remedy this situation quickly, some preachers considered ordaining each other. Asbury counseled patience and seeking Wesley's guidance.

Wesley's answer reached America in early November 1784, carried by Thomas Coke, who, short and portly in stature, embodied the weight of Wesley's authority and the solidity of scriptural precedent. Biblical people had not voted on their prophets. God designated them and then guided their choice of successors, as God directed Elijah to throw his mantle over Elisha's shoulders.

Wesley understood himself as Methodism's Elijah. Now, in 1784, he needed an Elisha to lead the Methodists in the United States. Praying, he became convinced that God had two Elishas in mind: Thomas Coke and Asbury. He instructed Coke to carry his decision to Asbury, who commented that "it may be of God." But he would only know God's will to the point of certainty by inviting the preachers to vote on Wesley's nominations.

Wesley never allowed his preachers to vote. He emphasized that his Methodism was not a

democracy. But Asbury was fathering a new Methodism in a new democracy. So he gathered the preachers in Baltimore at Christmas 1784. Accepting Wesley's choices as nominations, they voted unanimously to elect Coke and Asbury as superintendents of the new Methodist Episcopal Church in America.

From that moment on, Asbury's Methodism drew closer and closer to the American people. His Methodists, both preachers and laity, did not always have a vote, but their voices were heard. When his strong anti-slavery stance, which echoed Wesley's position, angered them, he laid it aside in favor of saving souls. When he discovered that people enjoyed Bible-thumping, shout-raising, toe-tapping camp meeting worship, he made it a staple of the Methodist religious diet.

Asbury died in 1816, the father of a highly successful American Methodism. When his brethren voted for him in 1784, Asbury had 15,000 members and 83 preachers to shepherd. Thirty years later, he herded 212,000 members, 700 ordained pastors, and 2,000 lay preachers.