

# FRANCIS ASBURY'S LETTERS *to* PREACHERS



MATT FRIEDEMANN



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# THE PASTOR'S SPIRITUALITY

**I**n October 1771, Francis Asbury traveled to America from Great Britain at the behest of John Wesley. During his 45 years here, he devoted his life to Great Commission ministry, traveling thousands of miles on horseback and by carriage to reach those living across the vast frontier. He superintended hundreds of circuit-riding preachers and church plants/preaching points. In so doing, he spread Methodism in America as part of the Second Great Awakening.

Across the years, Asbury sought to instruct and encourage his protégés through sermons, conversation, and personal correspondence. In this brief volume we will survey Asbury's advice to his young preachers on how they might impact their spheres of influence. The ten letters that we will examine in this series touch upon five basic arenas: the pastor's

relationship to God, preaching, pastoring, attitude, and discipleship. First we cover Asbury's advice on the pastor's relationship to God. These all-important dynamics not only cultivated spiritual fitness in the life of Asbury's pastors but also set a precedent for Methodists across the American frontier.

*The necessity of spiritual exclusivity.* "Live to God," Asbury wrote to Edward Dromgoole, in January of 1775, even before he was a bishop, "and give up every idol and not let one stand in the Temple of the Lord." This "living to God" meant yielding precedence to no other. To make a commitment of heart and soul to Him necessitated that the preacher say "no" to all else and be willing to tear down competing obsessions that diverted attention from the Great Commission and the Great commandments. "O!" Asbury once wrote in his journal, "I greatly long to be swallowed up in the will of God" (9/14/1774). He yearned for his preachers to be similarly impassioned.

*The importance of depth and wholeness.* "Drink deeper into God," Asbury penned to Nelson Reed in May of 1791, and "push on the blessed work more and more." To George Roberts in 1802, he pleaded, "I wish you

to be wholly for God.” This call to go “deeper” and to “be wholly” has always been the key distinctive of Methodism. But it never sufficed that this life of entire sanctification might be for the preacher only; “push on the blessed work” was the heart-cry of the burgeoning movement. Asbury’s journal entries were instructive on this point as well: “I had but few hearers; and some of these made their escape when I began to insist on the necessity of holiness – a subject which the Antinomians do not like to hear pressed too closely” (2/10/1785). Still, few hearers or not, “I only wish to be holy; and then let come whatever the Lord pleases” (9/11/1794).

*The call to hardship.* “You will be called for greater services and suffering in the ministry,” Asbury cautioned Joseph Frye toward the end of his life (August 1813). So... “Be faithful, keep thyself pure, make great sacrifices for God!” What a powerful emphasis from an older saint to a younger one: You will be called to great service, but with that privileged service will come pain. Are you ready? Are you willing?

“Purity of heart is to will one thing,” Soren Kierkegaard’s book title famously declared. That one thing for Asbury was a sure planting of the gospel across the various regions of America. In the contemporary age as in centuries past, faithfully acknowledging this “one thing” is a matter of self-denial and cross-bearing. It is never easy and can sometimes bring great trials. That is the price which must be paid for great movements of God. Asbury himself was able to hold the pain of discipleship in perspective: “...the more I suffer, the better it will be in the end, if it is for souls I labour and suffer” (*Journal*, 6/14/1780).

*Advantages of the pure passion of youth toward the Lord and His work.* In the same letter in which Asbury writes of suffering, he also commends the fledgling pastor for his youth.

*I am never afraid to trust young men. The same measure that has been meted [sic] to me, I meet [sic] back. Great confidence was put in me, a boy! Young men are strong in body, and mind, not skilled in craft, not the same temptation to ease*

*and indulgence as aged. I have never repented of the confidence I have put in you and thousands.*

Asbury was almost assuredly recalling the day when Wesley wondered aloud who from amongst his younger men in England would venture to America. Asbury raised his hand, and sending him was the best decision the father of Methodism ever made for the perpetuation of the movement. A young man traveled to America and changed it, by the grace of God. He became, in the words of Dennis Kinlaw, “The most important American that ever lived.”

Keith Green, the late singer/songwriter, once wrote a song to his wife that declared, “Moments of truth, we truly dare not waste our youth, we truly dare not waste our youth.” Early years of young people are a gift to the ministry. They have, according to Asbury, a unique capacity to devote themselves to God. Asbury did; he hoped that the movement Wesley entrusted to him would continue to flourish even after his death with the blossoming efforts of such youthfulness.

Asbury’s dream was not disappointed. Methodism thrived and the gospel was firmly rooted because of the maturing youth movement he established.

## ADVICE ON HOW TO PREACH WELL

**A** major key to the Asbury-inspired circuit riders was preaching. He had advice for his young men that would make a marked difference in their communication style.

1. In the letter to an Edward Dromgoole in 1775, Asbury advised to “Always account yourself a learner, only when you go to preach take care of trifling . . .” “The best leaders are the best notetakers” it has been said. And it could also be said of preachers – to learn is to grow and to share what God is growing in you is the essence of powerful testimony. Learn, grow, testify. And about this “trifling” – it refers to unimportant or trivial matters. Asbury exhorted his preachers to learn, and then preach, in such a way as to “major on the majors.” Salvation and its effect on the totality of a life, and the many lives around it, mattered.

A life fully given and thus fully blessed, and the implications of that sanctified life in family, church and society, mattered.

2. To Ezekiel Cooper he counseled that sermons ought to be “short and pointed in tone, briefly explanatory...” Anyone who considers TED talks revolutionary for their information-packed brevity should know that in the years of our nation’s founding, the most life-changing leader alive recognized that keeping sermons short and to the point was essential to successful communication. This approach doesn’t mean, of course, that we must sacrifice cogency. For effective examples, check out Seedbed’s “Seven-Minute Seminary” offerings, which provide a wealth of information in a short period of time. Asbury would have approved.

3. In the same letter, Asbury noted that “Sermons ought to press the people to conviction, repentance, faith and holiness.” Not all sermons are intended for the same purpose; generally, however, the aforementioned aims are admirable ends to keep in mind. Preaching for conviction means setting up the human dilemma inherent in most pericopes of

Scripture. Repentance involves helping the listener to understand what change is needed to align with God's purposes. Faith is believing that God, by His grace, can get us to the point where He wants us. And holiness means applying the message to real-life situations your congregation will experience this week. "Be holy as God is holy" wasn't a pipe-dream; it was a grace-filled reality for those who truly desired it.

4. To Nelson Reed (1791) Asbury said, "stir up that wrestling agonizing spirit more and more, after justifying and sanctifying grace; without this the souls of the people will die, even the souls of believers." In other words, stimulate the desire for more grace, greater life change, further progress in the Spirit. Without that "agonizing" (from the Greek *agonizesthai*, "to contend in the struggle"), believers would get comfortable, settled in, content...and thereby die. Preaching, therefore, should encourage people to pursue "straining toward what is ahead." (Phil. 3:13 [NIV]) Asbury didn't seem to think that condemnation alone was necessary for people to agonize, strain and contend. Indeed, he said, "Show the promises and excite the souls of believers..."

5. This didn't mean that Asbury was all Norman Vincent Peale. In a letter dated 1801, Asbury wrote George Roberts to "Preach upon the travail of a soul, every sermon preach very plain and pure, and God will own your work..." It wasn't easy, but it could be simple. "Plain truth for plain people" was Wesley's motto. But these plain people needed to know that soul work was serious work... there would be painful and laborious effort ahead. To shy away from this was to risk God disowning your pulpit efforts. To embrace it would mean His blessing.

6. Asbury taught to preach on "perfect love, and practical godliness" (letter to Roberts, 1802). These emphases belonged together. Perfect love was no "pie in the sky" teaching of the Methodists. It was a way to relate to God and man, which meant it was a way to live. A life of love resulting from complete consecration and entire sanctification impacted the workplace, social issues of the day (like slavery), dress, habits, the family, etc. These practical outcomes needed instruction from Scripture. Asbury implored his circuit riders to provide it.

7. Seeking practical outcomes also meant going to “practical” places to preach and minister. Wrote Asbury, “... by all means attend the market places. Oh for Christ’s sake seek his lost sheep, the outcast of men” (Roberts, 1802). Lost people were likely to be found in taverns, at public hangings, courthouses, tobacco houses, fields, public squares. This was where Asbury preached; his instruction to others was, basically, “Follow me...” In a journal entry, he penned that “To begin at the right end of the work, is to go first to the poor; these will, the rich may possibly, hear the truth: there are among us who have blundered here.” (June 19, 1789) Don’t blunder, warned Asbury, by spending too much time on the wealthy. Methodists belonged first with the poor, the vulgar, the outcasts of men.

Now for this surprise: Asbury wasn’t much of a preacher. But he knew great preaching when he heard it, and he recognized that the movement of God through Methodism would rise as others were exposed to its powerful message through robust preaching. The seven points above encapsulate his advice towards that end.

## PASTORAL ADVICE TO YOUNGER PREACHERS

**I**n a missive to Jonathan Lyons in 1813 Asbury set down pastoral advice that, without much updating, still provide valuable directives. The letter, in part:

*You will watch and pray, believe and love, preach and meet the classes and societies, instruct the children and visit from house to house...Let us preach every day, from morning to evening, every day in the week, let us have souls for our hire, God for our portion, heaven for our home. We live upon God and feel answers to the prayers of God's people and we are invulnerable, Immortal till our master's work is done.*

*Watch and pray.* The young pastor ought to be all eyes and ears and both towards the community in

which he or she is placed and, of course, towards God. Another Methodist of much later vintage, E. Stanley Jones, once said that one of the greatest things that ever happened to his larger ministry was the two-hour a day prayer habit he established while a student at Asbury College. Much of the vitality of early Methodism in this country was due to a robust conversational relationship with the Lord who wanted nothing more than to see His people holy and that holiness perpetuated.

*Believe and love.* It was Bishop Asbury's hope that Lyons would hold fast to a doctrine that was orthodox and Wesleyan, animated by the affection spoken of in The Great Commandments (Love God and love your neighbor). Together, doctrine and love are a potent force for evangelism and pastoral care that have transformative power.

*Preach and meet the classes and societies.* Even in Wesley and Asbury's day, most preachers had a fonder appreciation for pulpit performance than the hard work of discipling the converted and those who "desired to flee from the wrath that is to come." But Asbury placed in tandem pulpit speech and the

groups necessarily formed in the wake of convicting messages. Wesley had famously declared that he dared not preach where he could not follow up the holy oratory with accountability groups. Preaching and intentional discipleship were inextricably joined in the early Methodist construct as essential ingredients of spiritual health.

*Instruct the children and visit from house to house.* Asbury cherished the opportunity to go house-to-house, modeling prayer and children's instruction in homes where he stayed across the burgeoning nation. He felt that if such training wasn't taking place in the family circle, it wasn't likely to happen effectively in the church or community. He frequently bemoaned the lack of family discipleship and encouraged his young leaders to call on parishioners in order to model and encourage spiritual life in the home.

*Preach every day, from morning to evening, every day in the week.* Across the American frontier, more preaching meant more impact, more converts, more bands and classes, and more righteousness shed abroad in the community. To preach every day, of course, implied ministry beyond a single preaching

point or church. It meant exporting the message to places of which Asbury was especially fond (basically, wherever he could locate a crowd): taverns, hangings, town halls, homes, jailhouses, and in the streets. Preaching “every day in the week” meant finding places to preach, even for the busy circuit-rider. It was simply not the Methodist way to wait for the action to come to the preacher.

*Let us have souls for our hire, God for our portion, heaven for our home.* The lyrics to a Ken Medema song say, “Life looks different when you’re flying upside down.” Life looked different to young Methodist preachers. Souls, God, and heaven were priorities that ordered their imaginations, their affections, their schedules, their money, and their life agendas.

*We live upon God.* Asbury affirmed the living God as the foundation of the Methodist preacher’s life and ministry, ordering every facet of his reality and trajectory. Upon this Rock all decisions were made and the steadfastness of the preacher rested secure. If the vibrant Methodist pastor was as solid as he was enthusiastic, the movement was destined for growth – both qualitatively and quantitatively.

*Feel answers to the prayers of God's people.* This was another descriptor of early Methodism. It was an intercessory movement; prayers were frequent, fervent and fruitful. The pastor was to lead the way for an effectual outpouring of personal and corporate requests to an ever-answering Lord.

*We are invulnerable, immortal till our master's work is done.* Asbury and all who knew a genuine Methodist recognized that this was no mere triumphalism. This passion to fulfill the Great Commission was the life of God in Asbury, passed on by contagion to the bold preachers who frequently went where no person had ever gone with the pulsating, evangelical Word of the Lord. Some of the best of them would die young, some old. But none ceased their labor until they had completed the task to which God had called them, regardless of the many difficulties that they were called upon to overcome.

Today's seminars for preachers at various conventions contain topics like, "How to start a prayer movement" or "Love-infused orthodoxy" or "Vital small groups" or "The catechesis of children" or "Preaching to change lives" or "The

spiritually-ordered clergy” or “God as our pastoral refuge” or “Staring down burn-out.” The contemporary Methodist should be encouraged to know that these were the kinds of things being talked about 200 years ago from the pen of America’s most formidable circuit-riding Bishop. Many things change, of course. But we can read deeply from our spiritual forebears knowing that, of course, many things don’t.

## PASSION MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN MINISTRY

**I**n a letter written in the last year of his life to a Jacob Gruber, the formidable Bishop touched on themes that had been constant across his years of advising young circuit riders attempting to develop a righteous people in a nascent nation. The letter, in part:

*Now if ever wrestle, preach, pray, cry aloud, stamp with ye foot, smite with both hands, wake saints, sinners, seekers, preachers also. (Littleton, Pennsylvania/July 19, 1815)*

*Wrestle.* Paul famously wrote to the church at Ephesus that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” (Ephesians 6:12 [KJV])

Asbury seemed to bear this concept in mind at numerous points during his ministry. In 1792 he wrote, for instance, that “...it is hard to civilize, meth-  
odize, and spiritualize: sin, Satan, flesh, and hell are  
against us” (March 18, 1792 – all dates in this chapter  
are noted from his journal).

So it was and so it ever will be in the hard work  
of discipleship. In the final analysis, it is a wrestling  
match against spiritual forces and those whom those  
forces have impacted in the pastor’s field of battle.  
So...wrestle well!

*Preach.* For the preacher in Asbury’s day, the sermon  
was a formidable tool for gaining spiritual ground  
in the community. Early in his tenure in America,  
young Asbury wrote, “My feeble frame is much  
fatigued with preaching twice a day; but it must drag  
on as long as it can; for it is my meat and drink, yea,  
it is the life of my soul, to be labouring for the salva-  
tion of mankind. I desire nothing but God, and to  
spend the remainder of my strength in suffering and  
labouring for him” (June 13, 1776).

Not that the task of preaching the Word was  
easy. “It is hard,” said Asbury, “to get and preserve  
the spirit of preaching: it seems as if God, at times

and places, withholds his Spirit from his servants; or else the power of Satan is so strong as to depress the life and liberty of the speaker” (March 7, 1786). Not an exceptional orator himself, Asbury nonetheless recognized that any preacher would need God to bless his efforts and the devil would have to be beaten back. If both happened, blessing would ensue.

*Pray.* Asbury meant personal prayer—a regular practice of daily worship, confession, thanksgiving and intercession. “So prone is man to grow languid in devout exercises,” he remarked, “that without fresh and powerful exertions he will soon sink into dead formality” (January 2, 1775). Not long after Asbury’s arrival in America, he set about to develop an exceptional prayer life. “My present practice is, to set apart about three hours out of every twenty-four for private prayer; but Satan labours much to interrupt me; nevertheless, my soul enjoys a sweet and peaceful nearness to God, for the most part, in these duties” (December 8, 1776). As E. Stanley Jones, a missionary in the trail of Asbury, would say, “Prayer tones up the total life. I find by actual experience I am better or worse as I pray more or less....To fail

here is to fail all down the line; to succeed her is to succeed everywhere” (How to Pray).

*Cry aloud.* Perhaps a reference to an earnest plea for God to intervene, not unlike David frequently did in the Psalms. Asbury understood what he wanted the Almighty to do – the “happy consequences of a revival of religion” which consisted of “pure doctrine, strict discipline, great harmony, love, and life” (May 29, 1800). And for Asbury and his preachers to establish these it would be, it was felt, because of their loud pleas to the God who wanted America alive for Him.

*Wake saints.* The Good News wasn’t just an offer to those outside the household of faith, but for those inside as well. Of those supposedly in the faith Asbury once wrote that “The people are kind, and appear loving; but there is a great falling away; the devil has not been idle, and opposers have preached to them water (ed: a reference to the Baptists), more than holiness; and have thus brought confusion among the Methodists” (September 21, 1780). On another occasion: “In my own soul I feel happy, but on account of the Church of God, and poor sinners, awful. It appears as necessary to preach conviction

and conversion among our own, as among other congregations. O! when will the Lord appear as in ancient times?” (August 21, 1796) The Lord would appear—but He required, it would seem, “awakeners” of the circuit-riding variety.

*Wake sinners.* Asbury was an undaunted confronter of the sinner and the unchurched. He was legendary for his boldness and reveled in the change that could be brought with God’s help: “The Lord hath done great things for these people...Men who neither feared God, nor regarded man—swearers, liars, cock-fighters, card-players, horse-racers, drunkards, &c., are now so changed as to become new men; and they are filled with the praises of God” (November 6, 1772). For the modern preacher to know heaven-sent revival will mean that we take the “outcastes of men” as seriously as Asbury did.

*Wake seekers.* The prevenient grace of God was on the march across the new nation and Asbury wanted to follow close behind. He noticed, however, that not everyone in the early Methodist efforts possessed his same fervor. “I find that the preachers have their friends in the cities, and care not to leave them. There

is a strange party-spirit. For my part I desire to be faithful to God and man” (January 1, 1772). When preachers were willing to follow the Spirit’s preparatory work, surprising results at surprising times were possible. “At Strasburg, in the afternoon, we had a solemn meeting; a young woman, who was married a few minutes before worship began, was powerfully struck under the word, and wept greatly. O may she mourn until her second marriage takes place in her soul!” (July 3, 1792)

This vision for waking souls Asbury shared in a letter with a Thornton Fleming: “Oh, my brother, when all our quarterly meetings become camp meetings, and 1000 souls should be converted, our American millennium will begin. And when the people in our towns and country assemble by thousands, and are converted by hundreds, night after night, what times! Lord, increase our faith. Nothing is too hard for him who made and redeemed a world” (Charleston, South Carolina/November 7, 1806).

“*Wake preachers, also . . .*”: Typically, it was hoped that preachers not be considered barriers to Kingdom expansion. But in a letter to John Wesley, Asbury

seemed to indicate that their spiritual lethargy might indeed be the obstacle to the laity catching fire. “I see clearly that the Calvinists on one hand, and the Universilians on the other, very much retard the work of God...for they both appear to keep people from seeking heart religion” (West Jersey/September 20, 1783). Could it be that one of the labors of the contemporary pastor is the awakening of clergy of the same community?

*Now, if ever.* A passion for igniting “heart religion” meant that the reputation of the Methodists would not be unlike that of Paul and Silas in Acts: “These men...have caused trouble all over the world...” (Acts 17:6). Asbury wanted his preachers to shun relative peace if it meant a lack of progress. “At present a spirit of harmony subsisteth amongst our leaders; but I want to see them also deeply engaged to take the kingdom of heaven by violence” (November 3, 1774).

His vision, like the passion that accompanied it, was immense and ever-expanding. In a letter to Thomas Coke he wrote, “I thought once, should I live to see preaching established in all the states, and one

hundred in society in each of them, I should be satisfied. Now, I want millions where millions are” (Near Little York, Pennsylvania/July 28, 1803).

Passion, Francis Asbury-style, was the holy unction designed to set ablaze the evangelistic and disciple-making task in the pastor’s community, by any biblical means necessary. The cost was high but the salvation of souls was the reward, and the rapidly burgeoning movement of Methodism was the promise.

## FEEL, PREACH, AND LIVE SANCTIFICATION

**F**rancis Asbury came to America with the Wesleyan revival fresh on his mind—people gathered in societies, classes and bands who spurred one another on towards the holy dream of spreading scriptural holiness across the land. For Asbury, that “land” was now the American colonies, and God’s call was heavy upon him.

In a handful of letters written to few pastors Asbury demonstrated intensity about two overarching priorities—promoting continuous learning among his preachers and establishing a rich environment of discipleship for the people called Methodists. Although “discipleship” wasn’t the common nomenclature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it is certainly how we would describe a similar emphasis in contemporary evangelicalism.

In a missive to Edward Dromgoole, Asbury declared that the preacher should “Always account yourself a learner...” To George Roberts (1801), he exhorted, “You should be very full of intelligence.” “Learner” is unquestionably a discipleship term in any age. Asbury’s use of it could have had multiple implications, not the least for Dromgoole to set his attention on reading and adjusting spiritually to the words of Scripture and the classics. Indeed, Asbury urged his protege, “may your soul make the words of God your study day and night.” Soul and study are not typically paired; one usually thinks in terms of the mind and the study of Scripture. But the former was what Asbury meant by “intelligence.” He recognized that the soul must necessarily be engaged. As we shall see momentarily, to the degree that became the preacher’s experience, the opportunity increased for the souls of his listeners to be enlightened and enlarged.

Asbury was no contextual illiterate. To know Scripture is one thing; to know the people one desires to impact with the Gospel is another. In 1812, he wrote to James Quinn that he would be wise to “Know men and all things well.” Asbury himself preached with apparent insight into the minds and hearts of

colonial Americans and the challenges they faced. He understood the hardships of the frontier and recognized the political and cultural realities of his times. That knowledge wasn't merely a natural outcome of being the most well-traveled man of his day. He studied people and their contexts, enjoyed listening to them and developing a meaningful acquaintance, and discerned the milieu that impacted their Christian pilgrimage. When he told young preachers to "prepare," the implication went beyond prayer and study. Preparation encompassed personal knowledge of Scripture and the means of grace and an informed understanding of the persons to whom and environs in which he and his preachers ministered. This incarnational versatility was the stuff of legend for Asbury and his army of disciple-makers.

The aforementioned letter to Quinn contains a very pregnant sentence that pulsates with conviction. For Wesleyans, it could be a corporate life motto: "See sanctification, feel it, preach it, live it."

*See sanctification.* Do you have a vision for what the holy life could look like in your congregation if God had His way? A vision for how your community could be impacted if your church and its members

were fully consecrated and thereby fully sanctified for His purposes?

*Feel sanctification.* Do you feel his holiness in you? Do you have a passion for holiness and what love—radically expressed and liberally dispensed – could mean for the individuals, communities, and churches you serve as a pastor? Are you a holiness-driven pastor?

*Preach sanctification.* Is a full consecration of lives to Jesus the main thrust of your pulpit ministry? Is God’s gift of sanctifying and making beautiful those consecrated lives a promise you declare boldly, regularly?

*Live sanctification.* Are you living a life of sanctified discipleship? Can people see the graceful demonstration of love in your demeanor, your relationships, your family, your business dealings? Are people compelled to follow the Jesus in you because of your holy integrity?

“See sanctification, feel it, preach it, live it.” Francis Asbury’s life was so ordered. He was insistent that his preachers model this experience for the new, robust movement of God in this burgeoning nation. That

vision became reality, and it has impacted us some two centuries later. May our emulation of Asbury's passion for holy discipleship similarly transform coming generations.



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