

Session I Notes
Important Excerpts from *American Saint*

Introduction

1. “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” (13).
2. “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 travelled at least 130,000 miles by horse and crossed the Alleghany Mountains some sixty times. For many years he visited nearly every state once a year, and travelled more extensively across the American landscape than probably any other American of his day. He preached more than ten thousand sermons and probably ordained 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” (3).
3. “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” (11).
4. “[Asbury] 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’” (12).

Asbury and Money

5. “Asbury fretted that [the American Revolution] 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” (8).

6. “[He] gave away nearly all the money that came his way. Both Boehm and Bond kept track of Asbury’s funds while travelling 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” (12).
7. “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 travelled, 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. 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” (12).

Chapter One: The Apprentice

8. “Francis never felt comfortable around people of wealth and political power, and it is tempting to see this as a product of his family’s experience with the local landed gentry of his youth” (19).
9. “Asbury would later apply this same market sense to the American religious landscape. Having seen a consumer revolution in material goods, he was better prepared to appreciate a consumer revolution in spiritual ideas, exactly what he would encounter in America” (21).
10. “As a metalworker’s apprentice and the son of a common laborer, Asbury understood the lives of working people. Once in America, he established a close bond with the American Methodists, the vast majority of whom came from the lower and middling ranks of society” (23).

11. “There was much that Asbury could take from his upbringing, but there was much that he could leave behind” (24).
12. “The roots of Asbury’s religious beliefs go back to the death of his sister. Sarah’s death in May 1749 at the age of six was a severe blow to Eliza Asbury. Sarah was her mother’s ‘favourite,’ Asbury later recalled, ‘and my dear mother being very affectionate, sunk into deep distress at the loss of a darling child, from which she was not relieved for many years’” (24).
13. “Eliza’s spiritual hunger was more intense than Joseph’s, and she was more central to Frank’s spiritual development. This was a common pattern with evangelical groups of the time. Women often joined first and in larger numbers, later bringing their fathers and brothers, husbands and sons into the faith” (26).
14. “ ‘I soon found this was not the Church—but it was better,’ Asbury remembered. ‘The people were so devout—men and women kneeling down—saying *Amen*. Now, behold! they were singing hymns—sweet sound! Why, strange to tell! the preacher had no prayer-book, and yet he prayed wonderfully! What was more extraordinary, the man took his text, and had no sermon-book: thought I, this is wonderful indeed! It is certainly a strange way, but the best way. He talked about confidence, assurance, &c.—of which all my flights and hopes fell short’” (29).

Discussion Questions

- I. Given the quotes highlighted from the book about Asbury and his relationship with money, what might the modern Methodist church (in general) and Asbury Memorial UMC (in particular) learn from his life and views on money?

- II. What do you think Asbury might say to us (positive and/or negative) if he were to ride into town and speak with our study group tonight?

- III. Asbury's experience as a metalworker's apprentice had a profound effect on the way in which he carried himself and acted when he was a Methodist minister and bishop. What might the Church be able to learn from other professions?

- IV. Asbury's personal life growing up, particularly the death of his young sister, influenced his spiritual life as an adult. Are there experiences you remember from your own childhood that have impacted your faith? How and in what way?

- V. Are there things we should do to change our habits, practices, and/or outlook as a result of what we've learned tonight?

Pattern for us to follow:

What?
So What?
Now What?