

Session II Notes
Important Excerpts from *American Saint*:

Dichotomies:

Throughout the book Wigger has illuminated several key tensions that were present in American Methodism during the time that Francis Asbury was active. A few of the main tensions I've listed below:

1. Tension between Emotional Extremism / Cold Observance

“Devereux Jarratt, Anglican priest that he was, worried that the revival encouraged too much in the way of religious enthusiasm. He fretted over what he saw as the revival’s excesses, almost as much as he relished its accomplishments...Jarratt soon managed to stamp out much of this exuberance in his neighborhood, but at a price. As the intensity ‘abated, the work of conviction and conversion usually abated too.’ He had to admit that such phenomena were an integral and vital part of the revival. ‘Where the greatest work was—where the greatest number of souls have been convinced and converted to God, there have been the most outcries, tremblings, convulsions, and all sorts of external signs’ he wrote in September 1776” (pp. 81-82).

“Here was a revival, the likes of which Rankin had been praying for since his arrival in America, that exceeded his expectations, but also defied his control” (82).

2. Tension between the Educated and the Uneducated

“After seeing to their spiritual balance, Wesley expected his preachers to become progressively better educated. Beyond the minimum amount of reading that could be squeezed into the morning and evening hour of prayer, meditation, and study, Wesley urged preachers to spend ‘at least five hours’ a day reading ‘the most useful books.’ Along with the Bible, these included Wesley’s own works, beginning with his published sermons and notes on the New Testament, and devotional classics such as Wesley’s abridgement of Thomas a Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*. To those who complained ‘I have no taste for reading,’ Wesley replied, ‘contract a taste for it by use, or return to your trade’” (40).

[Abraham Whitworth and Samuel Keene]

“Since none of the early Methodist preachers could hope to acquire a college education or the social position that went with it, they had to find another way of validating their ministries. They did so not by ridiculing learning, but by declaring that education alone wasn’t enough. God’s word could only be understood by those who knew him firsthand. Keene’s faith only went half way, according to Whitworth, since he had the knowledge but not the experience of God’s saving grace” (p.71)

It was now clear that Rankin resented Asbury’s influence over the younger preachers in the South and questioned his judgment in appointing some of them to preach. By this time Abraham Whitworth had fallen into heavy drinking and been expelled from the ministry” (pp.74-75).

3. Tension between Methodist and Anglican [political and religious]

“For Asbury, all of this [The Revolutionary War] was little more than a regrettable distraction, drawing people’s minds away from the fate of their eternal souls. ‘If it is thought expedient to watch and fight in defence of our bodies and property, how much more expedient is it to watch and fight against sin and Satan, in defence of our souls, which are in danger of eternal damnation!’” (87).

“All temporal concerns, particularly with regard to politics, were ultimately a distraction from a higher calling. What difference did it make which government people lived under if, in the end, they landed in hell? Surely the greater good was to continue preaching under whichever political faction prevailed. With this in mind he [Asbury] determined to stay in America and weather the storm, if possible” (97).

“[John Wesley] had long advised his preachers to avoid meddling in politics. ‘It is your part to be peace-makers, to be loving and tender to all, but to addict yourselves to no party,’ he wrote to Thomas Rankin in March 1775” (87).

“‘Do any of you blaspheme God, or the King?’ Wesley asked his fellow Methodists. ‘None of you, I trust, who are in connexion with me. I would no more continue in fellowship with those, who continue in such a practice, than with whore-mongers, or Sabbath-breakers, or thieves, or drunkards, or common swearers’...Wesley was an Oxford-educated clergyman and gentleman who saw it as his duty to uphold church and king. For Wesley, republicanism undercut the essential social hierarchy that supported the moral order of the universe” (p. 89).

“By urging all the British preachers to return to Britain, Rankin was attempting ‘to sweep the continent of every preacher that Mr. Wesley sent to it and of every respectable travelling preacher of Europe,’ Asbury wrote to Joseph Benson in England. To sweeten the deal, Rankin ‘told us that if we returned to our native country, we would be esteemed as such obedient, loyal subjects that we would obtain ordination in the grand Episcopal Church of England and come back to America with high respectability after the war ended.’ On the contrary, Asbury knew that preachers who fled would be hard pressed to win back the trust of the people” (97).

“Here in a nutshell was the conflict between Methodist preachers and Anglican priests in the South. From ministers’ points of view, Methodists were unlearned charlatans seeking to break down the basic foundations of church and society. They took people away from their work and challenged the authority of the clergy, which was based largely on their superior education. From the Methodist perspective, Anglican priests were mostly lazy hirelings, too much addicted to the pleasures of this world and too little concerned with the salvation of souls” (58).

4. Tension between City and Country

“‘Tis one great disadvantage to me I am not polite enough for the people,’ Asbury wrote to his parents in October 1772 while still in New York. ‘They deem me fit for the country, but not for the cities; and it is my greater misfortune I cannot, or will not, learn, and they cannot teach me. But as my father and mother were never very polite people, it is not so strange. And as I was not born so, nor educated after this sort, I cannot help it’” (54).

“Had Pilmore’s vision won out, American Methodism would have drifted toward some form of congregational organization with tighter clerical control, a system that would have favored cities and towns over rural areas” (64).

5. Ecumenical Relations

“Sects and Parties are nothing to me, as I heartily love all the lovers of Jesus” (49).

“Later, after meeting with ‘two Catholick Ladies,’ he wrote, ‘I find when the word of God really touches the heart, it soon destroys all distinctions of Parties, and brings down the loftiness of man to the dust’” (49).

6. Why did Asbury come to America in the first place?

“Once accustomed to life at sea, Asbury sat down with his journal to evaluate the mission he had embarked on. His own motivations seemed pure. Was he going ‘to gain honour?’ ‘No, if I know my own heart. To get money? No: I am going to live to God, and to bring others to do so.’”

Discussion Questions:

1. Is there still a tension present in Methodism between the educated and the uneducated? Is there still a tension present in Methodism between rural churches and city churches? How does this tension play out at Asbury Memorial UMC?
2. Is it still the case that there is a tension between what many would consider more formal styles of worship and less formal styles of worship? Do you think that there is still a divide between the two styles and peoples’ preference for one over the other?
3. What should we take away from this study in terms of Ecumenism [relations between denominations]? Should we be doing more to bridge this gap?

Our pattern for study and discussion:

What?
So What?
Now What?