

Francis Asbury Study Notes
Session III

The Sacraments

Whereas the debate in the United Methodist Church in our time has largely centered on the frequency of communion (weekly, bi-monthly, monthly, quarterly, special occasions, etc.), the early Methodist movement was concerned not with frequency but whether or not they could even celebrate the sacraments.

There was a desire to celebrate the sacraments frequently (see Wesley's sermon *The Duty of Constant Communion*), but there was also the desire to maintain unity and cohesion with the Anglican/Episcopal churches.

“What was true in New York was even more so in the South, where obtaining the sacraments through the Anglican Church was difficult at best. Even where Anglican clergymen could still be found by 1779, they were rarely on friendly terms with local Methodists, as Asbury and others had discovered in their dealings with Samuel Keene and Robert Reade in Maryland. This was a serious liability for southern Methodists. A church bereft of the sacraments was at a serious disadvantage among people for whom the ordinances represented a major portion of what organized religion they knew” (115-116).

Slavery

“I have lately [1779] been impressed with a deep concern, for bringing about the freedom of slaves, in America, and feel resolved to do what little I can to promote it. If God, by his providence hath detained me in this country, to be instrumental in so merciful and great an undertaking, I hope he will give me wisdom and courage sufficient, and enable me to give him all the glory. I am strongly persuaded, that if the Methodists will not yield in this point, and emancipate their slaves, God will depart from them” (123).

“By the time the yearly conference met in Baltimore on June 1, 1785, a majority of the preachers, including Coke and Asbury, were ready to back down” (154).

“[Asbury's] commitment to the anti-slavery cause was genuine, but not as deep as his commitment to preaching the gospel as he understood it. The most important goal was the save souls for eternity, be they those of blacks or whites. All earthly cares were of secondary importance” (155).

Celibacy

Asbury pushed himself so hard that he basically had eliminated all sexual desire from his mind. However, many other Methodist ministers had more of a struggle with it—particularly Jeremiah Minter who had himself surgically castrated in 1791 after allegations that he had an inappropriate relationship with Sarah Jones who was married (c.f. 135).

Methodist Society -> Methodist Church

“Wesley had been weighing the problem of ordination for Methodist preachers for several years. On the one hand, he was committed to remaining in the Church of England, at least in principle. Though he maintained to the end of his life that he and the British Methodists hadn’t separated from the Anglican church, he recognized that many Methodists didn’t have access to the sacraments from an Anglican priest. If this was true in England, it was doubly so in America, as Asbury and others had told him. The end of the war and Wesley’s own advancing years (he turned eighty in 1783) led him finally in 1784 to take a decisive step. In that year, he legally incorporated Methodism and began ordaining preachers with his own hands. He hoped by these measures to maintain some kind of direct control over American Methodism and keep the American movement broadly within the Anglican tradition” (139).

“More recently, in August 1780, Wesley had written to the Bishop of London, under whose jurisdiction America fell, asking him to ordain a preacher to serve in Newfoundland. To the objection that the preacher couldn’t read classical languages, Wesley replied, “but your Lordship did see good to ordain and send into America other persons who knew something of Greek and Latin, but who knew no more of saving souls than of catching whales” (140).

John Andrews and William West tried to offer Coke a plan of union between the Methodists and the Anglicans, but they ignored Asbury, and Coke wouldn’t accept the offer.

[Coke tried a second time to bring about a re-union with the Episcopal church, but failed as he underestimated the Episcopal desire to have something like that happen. c.f. 196-97].

Schisms

There were several figures (O’Kelly in particular) who brought about a schism within the Methodist church, though none amounted to much of a threat. Their basis for splitting was usually owing to the claim that Asbury had too much power and that the denomination wasn’t democratic enough for their tastes. Itinerancy was also an issue, but ultimately the masses sided with Asbury and the greater connection.

Discussion Questions:

1. The question of sacramental authority and who had it was a big issue in the early Methodist Church (in America and in Great Britain). John Wesley's views on the sacraments are still largely at odds with typical practice in the United Methodist Church. What are we to make of this in our day and age?
2. The issue of slavery was one that Asbury strongly condemned, but he never really worked to resolve it on a systemic or national level. What is the proper balance between politics and religion? Could one say that the issue of homosexuality has taken the same place of that old debate in our time?
3. Asbury consistently wrote in his journal of his disdain for not being able to be in prayer and study enough owing to the issues and problems that arose in the course of administration of the new denomination. Do administrative issues still plague the Methodist church today or are they crucial to the expedient functioning of the church?
4. Is the system of itinerancy still practical and appropriate in our day and age? One critique of the opponents of the itinerancy system was that rural churches and those with less money would get shafted. Are rural churches, i.e. "family chapels" still worth keeping open since there is no frontier anymore and everyone drives cars?
5. Are there questions you had in the course of your reading?