

American Saint Session IV Notes

Personal Life

- In a letter to his parents, Asbury instructs them to “sell any useless property you have, and live upon the proceeds. I shall never want or possess anything you have” (221).
- “We think it our duty to inform you [Thomas Coke] that in case of the death of Bishop Asbury, we do not believe the General Conference would ever invest any man with the same power,” the conference stated. “He had been with us from the beginning...and in every instance he has conducted himself as such in adversity and prosperity—in fullness and want: he knew us when we were scarcely a people, and he has travel’d on with us through all our difficulties and dangers without ever flinching, till we have become more than One Hundred Thousand in number” (342).

Church and State

- “But the new system also held out the possibility that Anglicans, Baptists, Quakers, and others could vote themselves tax support in places where they held the majority. In Massachusetts, some urged the Methodists to do exactly this. At least for now the preachers “absolutely refused this plan,” for which Asbury “commended them.” Taking the government’s money meant becoming entangled in the corrupt and unawakened world of politics, something that Asbury had always avoided. Having seen the collapse of state-sponsored religion in the South, Asbury and the preachers he imported from there brought a broader perspective to New England’s debates over separation of church and state. They realized that state-sponsored religion was a step backwards, even if not all New Englanders could see it that way yet” (224).

Travelling

- “‘Were I to charge the people on the western waters for my services, I should take their roads, rocks, and mountains into the account, and rate my labours at a very high price,’ he wrote while in western Virginia during this swing” (232).
- William Ormond, a Methodist preacher moving from a rural circuit to a city appointment was so sad about having to part with his horse that he believed he and the horse would be reunited at the General Resurrection! (334).

Issues of the Clergy

- “Closely related to the problem of preachers marrying and locating was a tendency for those who remained to cut a more refined figure in polite society. ‘I fear I do not see as much simplicity in our young brethren now as in years past. The love of shining dress and talents appears to be too prevalent,’ Asbury wrote to the preacher Daniel Fidler in June 1793. Young preachers increasingly seemed less willing to make the same sort of sacrifices that their older colleagues had. They appeared less countercultural, more concerned with making a good impression, especially in the cities...‘I am not without fears, that a door will be

- opened to honour, ease, or interest; and then farewell to religion in the American Methodist Connexion” (238-239).
- “If the majority of the preachers were young and relatively new to circuit preaching, they still resembled their predecessors in several important ways. Like the preachers of Asbury’s generation, they came from families of modest means. Had they not turned to preaching, they would have taken up farming or laboring with their hands. Most had only a few years of common school behind them, having never darkened the door of a college. Like their predecessors, they aspired to preach with what the itinerant Henry Smith, who took up his first circuit in western Virginia in 1794, described as an irresistible ‘holy ‘knock-‘em-down’ power” (284).
 - Some of the more high profile preachers became Episcopalian [Thomas Lyell] and made a LOT more money! (335).
 - “Marriage is honourable in all—but to me it is a ceremony as awful as death” (340). For more on Coke’s marriage to Penelope Goulding Smith see pages 340-341.
 - Parsonages: see example on page 349-350 about the incident in Charleston when an affluent church didn’t want to have to furnish a new parsonage they had just built because they were stingy.

Camp Meetings

- “That said, camp meetings did represent an important progression in the Methodist program to evangelize the nation, though it had little to do with a shift in theology or doctrine. Camp meetings took the familiar Wesleyan message of repentance, conversion, and sanctification and presented it in a new, more culturally accommodating setting. Nonmembers hadn’t generally traveled long distances to reach quarterly meetings (how could they have expected to impose on the hospitality of strangers when they weren’t even members?), but camp meetings created a more public space, inviting nearly anyone who could bring provisions and a tent to attend. Almost immediately this new openness required organizers to create security details to keep out rowdies and peddlers. Asbury advised Daniel Hitt, presiding elder of the Alexandria, Virginia, district in August 1804, to appoint sixteen to twenty watchmen at an upcoming camp meeting, carrying ‘long, white, peeled rods, that they may be known by all the camp.’ This was a small price to pay for the opportunity to reach a much broader audience. No longer would multi-day meetings be limited by the floor space of local families.
- Asbury’s enthusiasm for camp meetings at this juncture is in some respects surprising, considering that he had only attended one by that name prior to 1803. The theatrical nature of camp meetings, with their nighttime preaching under the somber glow of torches, accompanied by the shrieks and groans of seekers, was a far cry from Asbury’s own public manner. While others preached, shouted, and fell, Asbury usually worked quietly behind the scenes, planning ahead, resolving disputes and talking closely with a handful of friends” (319-320).
- Foreign travellers couldn’t resist treating the intense emotionalism of camp meetings as a tourist attraction. Their analyses reflect wider patterns of criticism of the revival” (322).

Discussion Questions

1. Is separation between church and state a good thing? What has been the experience in England and Europe where in many cases there is no separation between church and state (or where tax money is used to assist in the maintenance of historic church buildings)?
2. Issues of what kind of pastor serves a church continue to be a question even for us today. What can we learn from Asbury's method of stationing preachers, and is it still relevant today? In what ways?
3. A main impediment to the spread of Methodism (and Christianity at large for that matter) was the westward expansion of the country and the perils of travel. In the history of the Methodist movement, Asbury didn't have enough preachers who could go far enough to sustain the growth of the movement. But, as society has shifted from walking and from travel by horse to automobiles and public transportation systems, might our current problem be that we have too many outlying chapels and that we need larger, more centralized churches that can accomplish more?
4. Camp meetings as described in *American Saint* were intensely emotional and definitively extreme in the jerking, shouting, and falling out that was taking place. Was this emotionalism as some have called it genuine? The Corinthian church struggled with how to understand and include a more charismatic element in the Church. Do we need that sort of display in Methodism today? Why or why not? Is there some other form of extra-church activity that we should look to employ to reach others for Christ?
5. Will Willimon, a retired bishop in the UMC and former dean of Duke Chapel, says that it is "sinful for Christians to be boring." Have we become boring? Is he correct?
6. What insights were you able to gain from your reading and thinking on the book this past week?