Soldiers of the Lord: Francis Asbury and Freeborn Garrettson
Struggle with Wesley, War and Warfare
by Ken Loyer, 2003

During the Revolutionary War era, American and British troops did not do all the fighting. A conflict of another type also occurred throughout this period, for it featured not only the development of a new nation but also the growth of a new religious movement: American Methodism. And the leaders of this movement grappled with opposing forces every bit as hard as the troops in battle – only in a much different way and for a much different purpose. Francis Asbury and Freeborn Garrettson, like other Methodists, felt that Methodism’s connection to the Church of England was an eyesore to many supporters of American independence. Because of their leadership roles in the dawning of Methodism in America, these two key figures faced heightened hostility. Fittingly, they employed language of warfare to describe their tussles with the pro-American colonists who viewed their work distrustfully.

This tendency suggests that Asbury and Garrettson, though committed to nonviolence, did consider themselves soldiers engaged in a fierce conflict; only they represented not the state but God. As staunch pacifists, they depended on the God who had enlisted them into the army of faith and had promised to aid and guide them in their mission of spreading Scriptural holiness among the inhabitants of North America. Asbury and Garrettson combated harassment and persecution by clinging to belief in a present, active, and victorious God who would direct their efforts as a general commands troops in the field of battle and who would in fact fight with them against any forces that got in their way.

Although they refused to pick up a rifle or sword, these courageous Methodists nevertheless entered the fray over the legitimacy of the Methodist cause. They did not flee from confrontation but fought boldly to preserve and strengthen American Methodism at the same time the American troops fought the British for this nation’s independence. Asbury and Garrettson did engage in warfare – a war that would determine the future of Methodism in America. The persecution against Methodists, caused mostly by the movement’s association with John Wesley and the refusal of some Methodists to bear arms, drove each leader into a period of confinement that helped prepare him for the future contribution that he would make to the shape of American Methodism.

Causes of Methodist Persecution

Naturally, the American fight for independence entailed a radical rejection of virtually all British influence. Given Methodism’s relation to the Church of England, it suffered, along with the rest of the Anglican Church, “from its con-
continued association with the Crown. But colonist suspicion of the Methodist movement in particular derived from two primary factors: the movement’s link with John Wesley, the outspoken Tory, and the refusal of some Methodists to bear arms against the British for religious reasons. First, the title “Methodist” carried with it a connection, however subtle, to the most prominent Methodist figure in the world, John Wesley. During a time when a clear dislike of anything British had begun to flourish in America, Wesley made a name for himself by providing resolute backing for the British cause. Initially, he showed sympathy toward the colonists. But he later changed his mind, thanks largely to the writing of Dr. Samuel Johnson. In *Taxation No Tyranny*, Johnson articulated his belief that the English parliament had the power to tax American colonies. Wesley read Johnson’s work and came to agree wholeheartedly. Convinced of the illegitimacy of the colonists’ cause, he argued against them and showed unwavering support for the English monarch instead. He even took the liberty of paraphrasing Johnson’s argument in a pamphlet of his own, *A Calm Address to Our American Colonies*, which spread rapidly throughout England and America.

While Wesley’s *Calm Address* appealed to Tories on each side of the Atlantic, it did not produce a calming effect on other folks, English and American alike. Leading the harsh criticism in England, Augustus Toplady accused Wesley of plagiarism, and Caleb Evans chastised him for acting not as a minister but as a politician – even after he had labeled himself “no politician” in his 1770 tract *Free Thoughts on the Present State of Affairs*. Of course, proponents of American independence greeted Wesley’s *Calm Address* with even greater disdain. By taking such a strong political stand, Wesley subjected himself to criticism from every direction. Some people affirmed his sentiments, though many voiced their disgust. Wesley, refusing to rescind, reiterated his belief in the

---

2 Nathan Bangs, editor, cites these factors in *The Life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson: Compiled from His Printed and Manuscript Journals, and Other Authentic Documents*, 3rd edition (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1832), 71. As Frank Baker notes, such anti-British sentiments did more than foster opposition toward Wesley and other dogged Tories; these sentiments constituted a primary cause for the “decay of British Methodist traditions” in America (“The Americanizing of Methodism,” *Methodist History* vol 13 no 3 [April, 1975]: 15).
3 John Wesley, *A Calm Address to Our American Colonies* (London: R. Hawes, 1775). This source is located in the Special Collections Library at Duke University.
4 Augustus Toplady, *An Old Fox Tarr’d and Feather’d* (London: Printed for M. Lewis etc., 1775). This source is located in the Special Collections Library at Duke University.
5 Caleb Evans, *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, Occasioned by His “Calm Address to the American Colonies”* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly and J. Almon, 1775). This source is located in the Special Collections Library at Duke University.
6 Ibid., 1, 24.
impropriety of the colonists’ push for independence in an enigmatic sermon entitled “The Late Work of God in North America.”

Wesley’s position on war set the framework for his description of the American Revolution as a sin for Americans but a necessary response by England. Wesley, who espoused neither pacifist nor militarist views, held that God delegated the power of the sword to earthly authorities and that Christians had the moral duty of submitting “in loving service to those authorities.” According to Wesley, then, the Revolutionary War qualified as necessary from Britain’s perspective, since the Americans had challenged the authority of their mother country. Such a challenge, he contended, constituted severe immorality and necessitated an aggressive response.

Francis Asbury, painfully aware of the ill that resulted from Wesley’s forthright Tory stance, expressed sorrow “that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America.” Certainly, Asbury was not alone in his opinion about Wesley’s political dabbling, for the understood connection between American Methodists and Wesley only added to the challenges of Methodists in America.

Although some Americans showed indifference about the matter and regarded Methodists as no more of a threat to the colonists’ cause than any other religious group in the colonies, Methodism’s implicit association with Wesley elicited largely negative responses from many impassioned colonial patriots. These responses ranged in intensity from reticence to outrage and presented a formidable obstacle for Methodism in America by giving rise to the considerable harassment and persecution of its adherents.

The second strike against Methodism stemmed from the commitment of certain Methodists, including the visible leader Francis Asbury, to pacifism. By refusing to fight against the British, these Methodists made less of an observable contribution to the American cause than their fellow colonists who joined the Continental Army. This refusal to bear arms earned the criticism of many American patriots and intensified the authorities’ suspicion of the Methodist movement as a whole.

---


9 The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, editor-in-chief Elmer T. Clark, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), vol 1: 181 (March 19, 1776). Fascinatingly, Asbury speculates about how a visit to America might have changed Wesley’s thoughts about American independence: “Had [Wesley] been a subject of America, no doubt but he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American cause [as he was the British cause]” (181). One must also wonder what such a visit might have done to Wesley’s views about the legitimacy of an American Methodist Church, separate from the Church of England.
According to Freeborn Garrettson, actions of certain individuals affiliated with Methodism suggested that this suspicion did not lack truth. Perhaps no single person, save Wesley himself, did more damage to the image of Methodist preachers in America than Martin Rodda. An English missionary to America, Rodda showed his national pride in responding to a rebellion of sorts led by the Methodist layperson Chauncey Clowe. Clowe rounded up about three hundred supporters of Britain and tried to march to the Chesapeake Bay to join the British fleet in combat against the Americans. He and his men failed, however, and American authorities hanged Clowe for his role in the attempt.¹⁰ Not one to hesitate in mixing politics with religion – even when it entailed breaking the law – Rodda responded by propagating on his circuit “the king’s proclamation.”¹¹

He used his platform as a preacher to support the English crown, and this questionable tactic infuriated pro-American colonists. Before anyone could track him down, Rodda fled to Philadelphia, occupied then by British troops, and in 1777 returned to his homeland across the Atlantic. Freeborn Garrettson, who in 1776 served in Frederick MD with Rodda, described his conduct as “very injurious to the persecuted flock.”¹² Despite possibly having worthy intentions in serving God, Rodda had left his personal mark on American Methodism – and this mark did not aid the enterprise.¹³ In Garrettson’s words, “It was soon circulated through the country that the Methodists were enemies to the American cause: and were embodying themselves to meet the English army.”¹⁴ Even though the witness of Clowe and Rodda by no means reflected the general aims or convictions of Methodists in America, it enlarged the common stigma associated with the people of this religious movement leading up to and during the Revolutionary War.

Persecution affected few Methodists, if any, as much as it affected Asbury and Garrettson, who overcame harassment through their durable and robust faith in an intervening God. While these two stalwarts tended to describe their struggles in language of warfare, each responded to persecution in his own way, and each response yielded fruit for the movement in North America of the people called Methodists.

¹² American Methodist Pioneer, 68 (May 1778).
¹³ Bangs categorizes Rodda’s intentions as admirable but his method poor: “no doubt thinking he was doing God’s service,” he spread British propaganda on his circuit (The Life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson, 72 [May 1778]).
¹⁴ American Methodist Pioneer, 68 (May 1778).
Effects of Persecution on Asbury

From its beginning, Asbury considered the Revolutionary War a distraction from the weightier matter of Methodism’s development in America. Sent by Wesley in September of 1771 to help oversee the Methodist movement across the Atlantic, Asbury described his role as follows: “I am going to live to God, and to bring others so to do.” Asbury, a highly focused and committed individual, took this role quite seriously and did not welcome any obstructing force.

Yet, he could not prevent his very identity as a British subject from later producing such an effect. By increasing the suspicion with which many colonists – especially those in positions of authority – viewed Asbury, the mark of Britain upon him limited his influence and made him more of a target for hounding than Methodist leaders of American descent, who encountered varying degrees of opposition themselves. Asbury’s fellow British Methodist missionaries felt the weight of persecution most of all and began to reconsider the value of their presence in the colonies. But Asbury maintained an unswerving devotion to the task at hand. Of the eight official Methodist missionaries sent from England to America during the years of 1769-1774, only Asbury remained in America beyond 1778 to advance the cause of American Methodism. This fact illustrates Asbury’s resiliency, expressed in his response to news that Rodda and James Dempster, two of his British comrades, had decided to return to their homeland: I can by no means agree to leave such a field for gathering souls to Christ, as we have in America. It would be an eternal dishonour to the Methodists, that we should all leave three thousand souls, who desire to commit themselves to our care; neither is it the part of a good shepherd to leave his flock in time of danger: therefore, I am determined, by the grace of God, not to leave them, let the consequences be what may. Our friends here appeared to be distressed above measure, at the thoughts of being forsaken by the preachers.

Asbury would follow through on his promise, despite the substantial turmoil that would ensue. After leaving the Baltimore circuit to the care of George Shadford, Asbury spent the majority of 1777 ranging at large through several counties on the western shore of Maryland.

---

16 L.C. Rudolph notes, “some patriots thought all Methodist preachers were British agents; some opponents of the Methodists were glad to label them as Tories so they could abuse them freely” (Francis Asbury [Nashville: Abingdon, 1966], 34).
17 Albea Godbold refutes the popular but false notion that all eight British Methodist missionaries that Wesley sent to America, save for Asbury, returned to England (e.g., Rudolph, 33) (“Francis Asbury and His Difficulties with John Wesley and Thomas Rankin,” Methodist History vol 3 no 3 [April, 1965]: 3). Technically, at least one other, James Dempster, stayed in America but became a Presbyterian preacher (see Asbury, Journal and Letters, vol 1: page 138 footnote 92).
year, he traveled east and became “the first of our preachers who carried the Gospel into this neighbourhood.” While he may have had no original intentions of staying for so long, he remained on the Delmarva Peninsula through May of 1780. This pivotal period, though fraught with challenges, prepared Asbury for his future contribution to the shape of American Methodism.

In early 1778, the growing discrimination directed toward him from zealous patriots compelled Asbury to counter with a move of his own. The authorities of Maryland had begun screening out unwelcome preachers, and they fined Asbury for his preaching. Moreover, Maryland had a compulsory oath that Asbury labeled “preposterously rigid.” This oath contained anti-British language to which Asbury, an Englishman at heart, simply could not consent in good conscience. So he left for Delaware, which attracted him because of its less stringent oath of allegiance and, most of all, its exemption for preachers from conforming to an oath altogether. Had he not wanted to protect the tender consciences of others, he would have taken the Delaware oath.

Asbury’s move to Delaware alleviated his conditions somewhat, but this move kept him in the Peninsula, the hotbed of Methodist persecution. Still, faith in a present and active God inspired him to forge ahead. Putting his “whole trust in God, on all occasions,” Asbury considered himself “strongly persuaded that [God] will defend his own cause, and his own people.” This confidence helped him a few months later, when the effects of hardship had begun to take their toll. But he kept an optimistic outlook, grounded in the hope for God’s continued work:

_I was under some heaviness of mind. But it was no wonder: three thousand miles from home – my friends have left me – I am considered by some as an enemy of the country – every day liable to be seized by violence, and abused. However, all this is but a trifle to suffer for Christ, and the salvation of souls. Lord, stand by me!_

Asbury’s “heaviness of mind” followed naturally from his circumstances. Even so, he relied on the omnipresent God to help him keep going. When the road seemed treacherous, as it often did, Asbury drew power to persevere from his enduring faith in God. Without such faith, he likely would have returned to England with the other British Methodist missionaries. But he stayed in America to do the work that he felt God had called him to do. He would ultimately succeed in helping to establish Methodism in America, but this work entailed complexities and dilemmas of immense proportion.

---

20 _Journal and Letters_, vol 1: 261 (December 1, 1777).
21 Ibid., vol 1: 346 (April 24, 1780).
23 May describes the Peninsula as the place where, “with the British occupation of Philadelphia, persecution of the Methodist preachers reached its height” (143).
25 Ibid., vol 1: 263-264 (March 13, 1778).
Asbury often recorded his experiences in military terminology, which indicated the intensity of his struggle to advance Methodism as well as his profound trust in God. After going into hiding for reasons of personal safety, Asbury cited the devil’s vicious intent “to destroy, or at least, to disturb my soul.” Asbury looked to God in prayer, his most effective response: “But I pray mightily to God against him. O that he may rebuke the tempter, and make a way for my escape!” The “tempter” or “enemy,” as Asbury commonly dubbed him, sought to distract the prominent Methodist from his leadership position in the movement. Such aggravation presented a daunting barrier that Asbury could not easily surmount: “On Wednesday my temptations were so violent, that it seemed as if all the infernal powers were combined to attack my soul. Like Elijah, when persecuted by Jezebel, I was ready to request for myself that I might die. However, about noon the storm abated, and my soul was calm.” He later found himself under assault again, his mind “variously agitated at certain times, by that restless, fallen spirit, who so often attempts to break my peace.” But, as Asbury recalled, God once more came to his rescue and restored him to a condition of inner peace and resolute devotion: “my soul has been kept by the same omnipotent, gracious arm which has been so frequently displayed in my behalf.” Sometimes the state of Asbury’s soul would fluctuate back and forth, from a vigorous spirituality to apathy and indolence, all because of the horrific toils of “the enemy.”

Asbury periodically explained his afflictions in more explicit fashion, such as when he depicted Satan shooting at him with “fiery darts,” “tearing” at his soul “like a lion,” and making “one sudden stroke” at him. Each time, he turned to God for protection and deliverance. These expressions of assistance did not always appear as quickly as he had wished; sometimes the battle of temptation raged for longer than Asbury thought bearable. But he wrote of a God who “makes way for us in all trials.” When the “internal assaults from the banded powers of darkness” nearly overwhelmed him, and when “death and destruction” seemed imminent, Asbury drew strength from God’s grace and reminded himself

---

26 This portion of Asbury’s life is discussed in detail on pages 10 and following.
28 Ibid.
29 E.g., Ibid., vol 1: 274 (June 27, 1778).
30 Ibid., vol 1: 269-270 (May 4, 1778); see also vol 1: 275 (July 7, 1778).
31 Ibid., vol 1: 274 (June 13, 1778).
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., vol 1: 274 (June 27, 1778).
34 Ibid., vol 1: 297 (March 5, 1779).
36 Ibid., vol 1: 338 (February 28, 1780).
that it was, is, and always will be, “ever nigh.”38 This active power and presence of God made all the difference.

According to Asbury, the hideous foe of God and God’s people plagued not only individuals but also institutions. Threats against the unity of the Episcopal Church, such as the effort of Virginia clergy to secede, constituted for Asbury manifestations of the devil’s hope to “have us (i.e., American Methodists), that he may sift us like wheat.”39 But Asbury did not relent in the face of such ostensible oppugnancy, for he believed that Methodism would come to thrive in America.

The above excerpts show Asbury’s inclination to regard God and Satan as competing for human allegiance. Asbury aligned himself with the cause of God and labored indefatigably toward that end, of which he perceived Methodism as the chief representation. Caught in the crossfire, this warrior of the Lord underwent frequent assaults from the “enemy.” While suffering the worst temptations of his life,40 Asbury took comfort in the Lord, his “defender and friend.”41 Those trials increased Asbury’s trust in God and commitment to the task before him in “this distant and strange land.”42

Through all his adversity – whether spiritual or physical in nature – Asbury marched on in the service of his sustaining God. And he believed that God marched, and fought, with him. He had already found the spiritual refuge that he needed, but soon he would locate a special safe haven with Judge Thomas White, a Tory Methodist living in Delaware.

Acutely aware of the danger of public life under such distressing circumstances, Asbury decided to lower his profile considerably in the form of self-imposed confinement and chose the residence of Thomas White, a prominent Judge and fellow Methodist, as the place for this exile. An Anglican in upbringing, White had joined the Methodist movement through the influence of his nephew, Dr. Edward White. Judge White’s home, situated in a thick forest, offered relative isolation from large plantations, main roads, and waterways – as well as the peaceful seclusion that Asbury found so essential. Nevertheless, Thomas White lived close enough to the other Methodists in the area, including Edward White, so that Asbury could easily stay up to date on the condition of his beloved Methodists and tend to the flock – albeit less directly than before.

38 Ibid., vol 1: 275 (July 7, 1778).
39 Ibid., vol 1: 304 (June 30, 1779). Interestingly, Asbury would later push for a church split at the Christmas Conference in 1784, when the Methodist Episcopal Church declared itself separate from the Church of England. But since the situation had altered considerably by then, this apparent inconsistency in his thinking seems justifiable.
40 On May 4, 1778, Asbury wrote: “My temptations have been such as I never experienced before in the course of my life. But God will help me, and I shall yet praise him!” (Ibid., vol 1: 270).
41 Ibid., vol 1: 293 (January 16, 1779).
42 On April 7, 1778, Asbury appealed to God’s providence: “And he knows with what intention and for what purposes I came into this distant and strange land” (Ibid., vol 1: 265).
Another benefit of living with White derived from his political views. He aligned himself with a conservative, traditional faction in Delaware politics that opposed the movement for independence. Whereas a supporter of the Continental Army might have turned Asbury in (if even accepting him in the first place), White posed no such threat. Asbury cared little for politics, but he had found in Thomas White a reliable confidant who offered what Asbury needed most, shelter.

On April 2, 1778, however, an event occurred that disrupted the lives of the Whites and the life of their clandestine guest. American authorities carried out Congress’s resolution, passed on March 26, for White’s arrest. Asbury recorded a rather succinct entry in his journal: “This night we had a scene of trouble in the family. My friend Mr. T.W. (i.e., Thomas White) was taken away, and his wife and family left in great distress of mind. The next day I sought the interposition of God by fasting and prayer.” Asbury stayed at the White’s until the evening of April 7, when he mustered up the courage to leave, though without a particular destination in mind. After spending the night in a swamp, he ventured on until his friend John Fogwell, who lived about fifteen miles north of the White’s home, welcomed him in. Feeling much like “some of the old prophets, who were concealed in times of public distress,” Asbury waited upon God to direct him further: “Surely God will stand by and deliver me! I have none other on whom I can depend.” On April 29, certain of “special providence of God,” Asbury returned to the White’s residence. There he would remain until April of 1780, and there Judge White would also return on May 9 at the end of his five-week imprisonment.

Although it added to his burden, Asbury’s adventure from White’s to Fogwell’s and back seemed to benefit him in certain ways as well. His journal entries during this period suggest an increased sense of dependence on God, his “portion” and the source of rest for his soul. He confessed the uncertainty that sometimes beleaguered him, and he found himself “at a loss to know what to do.” After contemplating turning himself in so as to end this wild flight, he settled upon waiting for God’s direction. And such waiting in a state of utter helplessness inevitably enhanced his trust in God. While idleness would hardly ever characterize a person of Asbury’s tireless work ethic, he had no better

---

43 May, 148-49.
44 Ibid., 153.
46 May, 154.
47 Journal and Letters, vol 1: 266 (April 7, 1778).
48 Ibid., vol 1: 269 (April 29, 1778).
49 Rudolph, 36.
51 Ibid., vol 1: 267 (April 11, 1778).
52 Ibid.
alternative under these circumstances than to wait; so he did precisely that. In the
process, he passed the time for “my own spiritual advantage, which for some
years past, had been in a degree neglected, on account of my great attention to the
souls of others.” By attending to matters of personal discipline while waiting
patiently for God to guide him, Asbury developed qualities of trust and depend-
dence that would prove crucial in the ordeals that lay ahead.

As with the first few months, the rest of Asbury’s confinement at the
White’s sometimes elicited the frustration of this caged itinerant, yet it ultimately
contributed to his growth as both a follower of Christ and a leader of those whom
God had entrusted to his care. Asbury enhanced his knowledge base by reading
diligently and had his spiritual vitality strengthened through long and fruitful – yet
often difficult – sessions of prayer. He noted carefully that reading, by itself,
profited little: “It is plain to me the devil will let us read always, if we will not
pray; but prayer is the sword of the preacher, the life of the Christian, the terror of
hell, and the devil’s plague.” Asbury utilized this “sword” determinedly in his
effort to supervise American Methodism and increase its prevalence in this land.
All the while, he kept in regular contact with Methodist preachers and remained
informed about news relevant to Methodism in particular and society as a whole.
In addition to exercising leadership from the friendly confines of the Whites’
home or barn through teaching the children, officiating services, and attending
meetings with pastors and society members, Asbury gradually increased his
involvement in the surrounding area. Clearance from American authorities, now
convinced that he did not pose a threat to the movement of independence,
quickened Asbury’s return to the public scene. After finally re-instituting his
work throughout the entire connection in late March of 1780, he saw the
opportunity before him and, requesting God’s assistance, prepared to move

53 Ibid.
55 Asbury sets forth his demanding daily schedule, reminiscent of Wesley’s, in his journal entry
on November 17, 1779: “I purposed to rise at four o’clock, as often as I can, and spend two hours
in prayer and meditation; two hours in reading, and one in recreating and conversation; and in the
evening, to take my room at eight, pray and meditate an hour, and go to bed at nine o’clock”
(Journal and Letters, vol 1: 323). Yet, he notes the next day temptations that such a disciplined
life still entails: “Spent the day in reading and prayers, but was sorely tempted.”
56 Ibid., vol 1: 314 (September 20, 1779). Here, as elsewhere in his journal, Asbury’s language
closely parallels that of Paul in the famous passage about the whole armor of God in Ephesians
6:10-18.
57 Asbury’s habit of noting his frequency in prayer—or lack thereof—reflects his view of prayer
as the proverbial sword to ward off all opposition. He noted, for example, that temptation “flies”
when he prays (Journal and Letters, vol 1: 343 [April 1, 1780]). Indeed, prayer seemed for
Asbury to represent the culmination of Paul’s description of spiritual armor in Ephesians 6.
58 Ibid., vol 1: 270 (May 14, 1778).
59 E.g., Asbury preached on May 17, 1778 (Ibid., vol 1: 272).
60 E.g., Asbury attended a quarterly meeting on May 19, 1778 (Ibid., vol 1: 272).
forward: “I have been very much exercised in mind; the time for leaving this place draws nigh. Never was confinement in one State, Delaware, so trying to me. Lord, help me, I am weak!” While speaking candidly about the trials of his previous two years, Asbury also showed his usual humility as expressed through a clear dependence on God. But four months later, having had additional time to reflect on his exile, he admitted its benefit to his life and ministry: I was never more devoted to God – it makes me think I am in my duty. I was tempted and tried in Delaware to prepare me for, and drive me to, this work; and believe if I had not started I should have suffered great loss in my soul. I admire the hand of God in disposing of me, and wonder and own his providence.

Out of his tremendous trials, Asbury emerged with a deeper faith in God and a surer sense of God’s wondrous and mysterious work in calling, gifting, and using human servants than he had before. Asbury’s future success as a minister of the gospel came in part from the lessons learned during this formative, though admittedly strenuous, period of his life.

Effects of Persecution on Garrettson

Freeborn Garrettson also bore the brunt of intense persecution because of his association with Methodism, endured this persecution through mature faith in the saving work of God, and utilized certain warfare terminology to illustrate the situation. For example, he described the plight of Methodists as the work of Satan that only God could offset: “The enemy of souls had stirred up a great persecution against the Methodists….I am sure if the Lord had not been on our side, we should have been torn to pieces by our enemies.” Moreover, Garrettson understood himself as a prominent figure in the clash between God and Satan. After wanting for some time to – in his word – “attack” Dover, Delaware, he finally arrived there in September of 1778 to advance the cause of Methodism. Though a pacifist in regard to physical conflicts, Garrettson nevertheless considered himself a soldier of the Lord deeply entangled in the messy and enduring battle for ultimate loyalty to God. Like Asbury, he tolerated a period of confinement that, despite the resulting afflictions, enhanced his role in the opportunities for leadership and ministry that would follow.

Garrettson’s career as a Methodist preacher began nearly concurrently with the American Revolution. Examined and given license to preach at the

61 *Journal and Letters*, vol 1: 342 (March 29, 1780).
63 *American Methodist Pioneer*, 68 (May 1778).
64 *American Methodist Pioneer*, 74 (September 1778). Upon his arrival, “hundreds” surrounded him, some voicing their approval and others their disdain. Those in the latter category accused him of being “one of Clowe’s men” because of his identity as a Methodist. Ominously, the Methodist stigma still lingered almost two years after Clowe led the failed uprising.
Baltimore session of the Methodist Conference in May of 1776, the twenty-four-year-old set out eagerly on the path of itinerant ministry. This path would prove bumpy and even impassable at times, since Garrettson refused to fight against the British, objected of the oath of allegiance as a matter of conscience, and denounced of the practice of slavery. But even as a common target of threats and abuse, Garrettson did not waver or back down.

His grit and fortitude helped him to play a key part in the advancement of Methodism throughout the mid-Atlantic region and beyond. Because of Asbury’s confinement, Asbury relied on preachers like Garrettson to manage the Methodist movement in his stead. Robert Drew Simpson elucidates Garrettson’s administration and supervision of Methodist work during 1779, “a fact usually overlooked by Methodist historians.” Asbury could not travel safely then, so Garrettson, though hardly out of harm’s way himself, traveled for Asbury. Garrettson represented his partner in places like Philadelphia, where he spent two months overseeing and encouraging the societies.

Then, back in Maryland in early 1780, Garrettson encountered more concentrated opposition than before. Here he would face a time of confinement of his own. But, unlike Asbury, Garrettson did not choose this confinement for himself; a magistrate chose it for him.

Garrettson’s identity as an outspoken Methodist preacher enraged many of the locals, who did not hesitate to express their disgust. Despite facing the usual insults and threats, Garrettson saw promise in this region. His successful preaching at the home of Major Vickers led him to regard the fields as “white for harvest.” But soon this opportunity for mission would turn rotten – or at least ostensibly so. Certain members of the county court tried to use their legal clout to their advantage in silencing and apprehending this purported supporter of the English crown. But Garrettson viewed the ordeal as the work of Satan: “The devil is angry – The wicked rage, and invent lies and mischief.” Two important pieces of news reached his ears later that day. First, a plot to take his life had “providentially” come to his attention. Second, after charging him with “toryism,” the court had thrown out its threat. Garrettson could thank his ally Thomas Hill Airey (whose name Garrettson spelled name as “Avery”) for aiding

65 Garrettson also enjoyed a fruitful period of service in Nova Scotia from 1784-87 (American Methodist Pioneer, Biographical Essay, 7-9).
66 Ibid., Biographical Essay, 4.
67 Ibid., 91 (August-December 1779).
68 American Methodist Pioneer, 95 (February 10, 1780).
69 Ibid.
70 Freeborn Garrettson, Manuscript Journal, as cited in American Methodist Pioneer, page 95 footnote 101 (February 14, 1780).
71 Ibid., as cited in American Methodist Pioneer, page 95 footnote 96 (February 10, 1780).
him in this regard: “I should have been in gaol before now I suppose if my friend Avery had not been Justice of the Peace.”

A short time afterward, though, not even the influence of a high-ranking sympathizer could prevent Garrettson’s imprisonment. The journal entries prior to this imprisonment indicate the growing severity in Garrettson’s tussle with hostile forces and reveal his frame of mind going into what would prove to be a defining moment in his pastoral career. In the nights leading up to February 25, 1780, the day of his arrest and placement in prison, Garrettson had several unusual dreams that illustrated his perceived struggle against Satan and that, mysteriously, foreshadowed the events that would follow. He described the first as a revelation in which God described his future trials and stressed that he would not face those trials alone: *I had a most remarkable vision of the night. And in that vision it was revealed to me what I was to suffer; and that the Lord would stand by me, so that my enemies should not injure me. Hundreds flocked out to hear the word, on one side sinners were enquiring, what they should do to be saved; and those on the other side, how they should manage in order to banish me from the place.*

Then, on February 21, Garrettson entertained a terribly peculiar dream that further corroborated his pulsating belief in supernatural warfare. After he had retired for the evening, “the devil” appeared on the bed and proceeded to grab Garrettson’s pillow from him in an attempt to snatch it for himself. Garrettson responded by taking hold of part of the pillow, “and both pulled at it.” But when Garrettson “cried out, get behind me Satan,” “immediately he vanished.” In his reflections about this spat over a pillow, Garrettson concluded: “Poor devil, you are afraid of your own kingdom.” For the fiery Methodist, this experience represented his ongoing battle against the forces of darkness. Five days later, that battle would only intensify.

According to Garrettson, he had begun to assist Avery in repairing his house on the evening of February 25 when an angry mob approached and promptly captured him: “a parcel of men embodied themselves and way-laid me, with an intention to take me to gaol.” Calling him their prisoner, these determined patriots took him to a magistrate, “who was as much my enemy as any of them.” The judge condemned him “for preaching the gospel” and “immediately wrote a mittimus and ordered me to jail.”

---

72 Ibid., as cited in *American Methodist Pioneer*, page 95 footnote 102 (February 10, 1780).
74 Ibid., 96 (February 21, 1780).
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 96 (February 25, 1780).
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
In Garrettson’s account, oozing with providential signs, a “very uncommon flash of lightning” sent his captors fleeing on their way to the prison.\(^1\) Joined by Avery, Garrettson found himself once again headed for Avery’s house. He stayed there through the night, and another mystical dream assured him of God’s protection: *I was in the visions of the night, many sharp and terrible weapons formed against me; but none could penetrate, or hurt me; for as soon as they came near me they were turned into feathers, and brushed by me as soft as down.*\(^2\)

The time had finally come for Garrettson to discover the validity of these harbingers, for the next morning approximately twenty of his pursuers apprehended him, marched him to Cambridge, and threw him in the Dorchester County jail. The events surrounding his arrest indicate a direct correlation between his last vision and reality (again, at least as he would later portray it): *The ringleader rushed forward, with a pistol presented, and laid hold of me; putting the pistol to my breast. Blessed be God! my confidence was so strong in him, that this was with me, as well as their other weapons, like feathers; as was represented to me in the vision of the night.*\(^3\) Garrettson trusted in God’s protection, which his vision reportedly ensured in advance.

The jail, of course, offered an extremely undesirable living environment. Garrettson slept on a dirty floor and used his saddlebags for his pillow. A cold wind blew through the two large open windows, and the company around him seemed every bit as cold: *I think I never saw anything more like hell in all my life, if the damned had been loose, they could not have been wickider, cursed and swore (altho it was the sabbath).*\(^4\)

But Garrettson still managed to recognize the hand of God and give thanks. Finding “great consolation in my dear Lord, I could say, ‘Thy will be done’.”\(^5\) He used his confinement to his advantage, by spending much time “in prayer, reading, writing, and meditation.”\(^6\) His soul, despite the hardship, remained “exceedingly happy,” and his language, though probably not without a dash or two of hyperbole, indicated the benefits resulting from such an obvious inconvenience: “The bible was never sweeter to me. I never had a greater love to God’s dear children. I never saw myself more unworthy. I never saw a greater beauty in the cross of my dear Lord…. ”\(^7\) He even compared himself to the martyrs, who did not at all surprise him with their patient contentment and quiet assurance in God. Embellishments aside, this experience clearly marked a high point in Garrettson’s spiritual life. And his concluding remark suggests likewise: “After I left my confinement, I was more than ever determined to be for God, and

---

\(^1\) *American Methodist Pioneer*, 98 (February 25, 1780).
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid., 98 (February 27, 1780).
\(^4\) Ibid., 98 (February 27, 1780).
\(^5\) Ibid., 98 (February 27, 1780).
\(^6\) Ibid., 98 (February 27, 1780).
Garrettson showed this determination through his diligent work in advancing Methodism.

In the contributions that he would go on to make, including his calling of preachers to attend the Christmas Conference in 1784 and his missionary term in Nova Scotia, he built upon his enriching and affirming experience in the Dorchester County jail. Remembering this spiritual zenith, Garrettson pressed on in faithful service to his God. Without the determination that he gained through his imprisonment, he may have quivered in the face of impending danger instead of thriving in it.

When he traveled south to Virginia and North Carolina, for example, in an effort to prevent the potential schism over the sacraments that many southern clergy proposed, he came within miles of fighting between British and American troops. He even preached and lectured in the day and at night within the sound of rumbling cannon in the siege of Yorktown. Though he faced peril on numerous sides – from military fighting to civilian acrimony – Garrettson found a way to persist. By increasing his faith and confirming his vocation, formative moments such as those during his confinement in Dorchester County prepared him for the trials that he would go on to face. Through grace, Garrettson rose above these trials and declared loudly and effectively the gospel of Christ and the teachings of Methodism.

Conclusion

The pacifism championed by Asbury and Garrettson sprang from their confidence in God. Though often shaken through peril, this confidence never collapsed. In their journal entries, they ascribed to God an impressive litany of roles: consummate deliver, vigorous protector, ubiquitous guide, and ultimate general, commanding the troops toward the fulfillment of His glorious purposes. Above all, these ardent Christians knew this God as a present and active God who cared deeply about the events of this world and who worked constantly to bring about good in the midst of apparent evil. Not even the most ominous circumstances, as when Asbury fled out of necessity into hiding and Garrettson was jailed for preaching the gospel, could eviscerate their hope in God. Assured that God had already won the victory and that, in Christ, they shared in that victory, they contested the numerous foes that reared their ugly heads. Asbury and Garrettson chose not to pick up a rifle and join the throngs on the battlefield because Almighty God had called them to fight another war, of much greater importance than the American-British conflict, a war to establish Methodism on North American soil.

88 Ibid., 100 (February 27, 1780).
89 Ibid., Biographical Essay, 6.
Their poignant use of military language in describing the Christian life reflected both that of certain biblical authors and that of their contemporaries. Paul set the precedent in Ephesians 6, and the author of 1 Timothy utilized a similar tactic as well. These words about participating in spiritual warfare and fighting “the good fight of faith” must have resounded in the ears of Asbury and Garrettson throughout their laborious effort to preserve and strengthen American Methodism, for this “good fight” meant for them precisely that tussle in which they so steadfastly engaged. Joseph Pilmore, a fellow American Methodist, also employed such parlance. Pilmore, for example, contended that whenever “God is reviving his work, the enemy does all in his power to hinder it by buffeting the people with fiery temptations. ‘Tis well that God is above Men, Devils, and sin, and we shall overcome all through him.”

Among their colleagues, Asbury and Garrettson did not stand out in their spiritualization of language, although though they certainly chose an appropriate setting in which to perform this common practice. Against the background of a secular war simultaneously ravaging the land, mention of the cosmic conflict between good and evil took on added meaning. Considering the degree of inconvenience and strife that they tolerated because of their identity as Methodists, Asbury and Garrettson merit special attention. These loyal Methodists knew the ramifications of this war, this long and arduous struggle against opposition ranging from extremist patriots who saw Methodism as another English vice to eliminate to what they considered Satan himself.

Despite espousing pacifism, Asbury and Garrettson fought alongside of God against whatever forces that resisted the development and preservation of American Methodism. As bold and faithful soldiers of the Lord, they performed their administrative and pastoral duties to the American Methodists, starved for leadership, with dogged persistence and remarkable efficiency. Overcoming great odds, they fulfilled their callings, fought “the good fight of faith,” and served the Lord, their source of strength, constant companion, and triumphant commander-in-chief who led the troops – no matter how troubled or wearied by their circumstances – on toward victory.

---

90 1 Timothy 6:12ff.
91 Aply, Asbury referred to this passage in December of 1778: “With the greatest propriety St. Paul exhorted Timothy, to ‘war a good warfare.’ A ‘warfare’ indeed! How powerful and subtle our enemies! Lord, help me to stand in the evil day,…conquering every foe, by thy Almighty aid” (Journal of the Rev. Francis Asbury, vol 1: 295-296 [December 17, 1778]).
Bibliography

_____.*“The Shaping of Wesley’s Calm Address,”* Methodist History vol 14 no 1 (October, 1975): 3-12.
Raymond, Allan. “I Fear God and Honour the King: John Wesley and the American Revolution,” *Church History* vol 45 (Spring, 1976): 316-328.