

From the Arrival of the First Missionaries in 1769 to the First Conference in 1773

by Nathan Bangs

The sermon recounts the arrival of the first Methodist missionaries in America, their labors, and the expansion of preaching in the country towns and villages.

Scripture: Psalm 96:3, Proverbs 16:3, Isaiah 6:8, Matthew 28:19, Acts 1:8, Romans 10:14, 1 Corinthians 3:6, 2 Timothy 4:2

Topics: "Missionary Work", "Church History"

Description

Nathan Bangs preaches about the early missions in America from 1769 to 1773, highlighting the zeal and success of the first missionaries, such as Messrs. Boardman, Pillmore, and others, in spreading the gospel and forming societies in various states. The arrival of Francis Asbury and Richard Wright in 1771 marked a significant step in providing additional help for the growing work in America. Despite opposition from some clergy, the Methodist preachers, including Robert Williams and John King, persevered in their mission, leading to the establishment of new societies and the revival of religion in different regions. The itinerant labors of Mr. Asbury and the arrival of missionaries Rankin and Shadford in 1773 further fueled the spread of the gospel and the formation of Methodist societies across the country.

Transcript

From the arrival of the first missionaries in 1769 to the first conference in 1773.

We have already seen that Messrs. Boardman and Pillmore, after their arrival, entered upon their respective fields of labor with ardor and success. After spending some time in Philadelphia, hearing of the labors of Mr. Strawbridge in Maryland, Mr. Pillmore paid him a visit, and endeavored to strengthen his hands in the Lord. After preaching to the people in that part of Maryland, and rejoicing in the good which had been effected by the labors of Mr. Strawbridge, he visited some parts of Virginia and North Carolina, where he preached with success, and formed some societies. Here he also found the people exceedingly attentive to the word of God, and manifesting a cordial feeling for those who preached it. After laboring a short time in those parts of the country, where he was much encouraged at the appearance of things, he returned to Philadelphia. The following letter, which he addressed to Mr. Wesley, will show the state of things here. The letter is dated,

"Philadelphia, Oct. 31, 1769.

"Rev. Sir, -- By the blessing of God we are safely arrived here, after a tedious passage of nine weeks. We were not a little surprised to find Captain Webb in town, a society of about one hundred members, who desire to be in close connection with you. 'This is the Lord's doings, and it is marvellous in our eyes.'

I have preached several times, and the people flock to hear in multitudes. Sunday evening I went out upon the common. I had the stage appointed for the horse race for my pulpit, and I think between four and five thousand hearers, who heard with attention still as night. Blessed be God for field preaching. When I began to talk of preaching at 5 o'clock in the morning, the people thought it would not answer in America however, I resolved to try, and I had a very good congregation.

"There seems to be a great and effectual door opening in this country, and I hope many souls will be gathered in. The people in general like to hear the word, and seem to have ideas of salvation by grace."

The above letter shows the good effects of Captain Webb's labor's in Philadelphia, for it seems he had been instrumental in collecting not less than one hundred souls into the society previously to the arrival of Mr. Pillmore.

On coming to New York, Mr. Boardman found the society in a flourishing state under the labors of Mr. Embury. Mr. Boardman was a man of respectable talents as a preacher, of great simplicity and godly sincerity, and he entered upon his evangelical labors with a fair prospect of success, the people flocking to hear him with the utmost eagerness and attention. At this early stage of their labors in the ministry they commenced an interchange with each other, Mr. Pillmore coming to New York and Mr. Boardman going to Philadelphia. Having entered upon the charge of the society in New York, and making a fair trial among the people, on the 24th of April, 1770, he transmitted to Mr. Wesley the following account of the state of things in this city:

"Our house contains about seventeen hundred people. About a third part of those who attend get in; the rest are glad to hear without. There appears such a willingness in the Americans to hear the word as I never saw before. They have no preaching in some parts of the back settlements. I doubt not but an effectual door will be opened among them. O! may the Most High now give his Son the heathen for his inheritance. The number of the blacks that attend the preaching affects me much."

In addition to these two eminent men, who were sent over to this country by Mr. Wesley, Mr. Robert Williams, who had been a local preacher in England, and Mr. John King, from London, came over, not under the direction of Mr. Wesley, but on their own account; the former, however, having a permit from him to preach under the direction of the missionaries. Mr. Williams labored as a local preacher with acceptance among the people; and with considerable success, and so also did Mr. King, after being duly examined and licensed by Mr. Pillmore. Both of these brethren so demeaned themselves as ministers of the gospel, that they were afterward received into the traveling ministry, as may be seen by reference to the minutes of conference for the year 1773.

From the encouraging representations of the condition and disposition of the people in America, which were transmitted to Mr. Wesley, he was induced to adopt measures to furnish them with additional help in their important work. Accordingly, the next year, 1771, Mr. Francis Asbury and Mr. Richard Wright, having volunteered their services, were dismissed under the blessing of God for the help of their brethren in America. As Mr. Asbury bore such a conspicuous part in the extensive revival of pure religion, it seems proper that we should give some account of his birth and education, his call to the ministry, and the motives which led him to embark in this holy enterprise.

According to a notice in his journal, vol. ii, p.133, it appears that he was born in England, in the parish of Harrodsworth, near the foot of Hampstead Bridge, about four miles from Birmingham, in Staffordshire, on the 20th or 21st of August, 1745. His parents were people in common life, but were remarkable for honesty and industry, so that they procured a competency for themselves and family. They had but two children; a son and daughter, and the latter dying in infancy, left Francis the only son of his mother, and the only child of his parents. It seems that they lived in a very dark time and place as respects spiritual and divine things.

He was early sent to school, and though he took delight in learning to read, particularly his Bible, yet he met with such cruel treatment from his master as to contract such a dread of him, that he preferred almost any thing to his school. He accordingly, when about thirteen years of age, left the school and went to a trade, in which he continued as an apprentice about six years and a half, during which time he was treated with great kindness and attention. The following is his own account of his conversion, of his call to, and entrance upon, the Christian ministry:

"Soon after I entered on that business, God sent a pious man, not a Methodist, into our neighborhood, and my mother invited him to our house; by his conversation and prayers I was awakened before I was fourteen years of age. It was now easy and pleasing to leave my company, and I began to pray morning and evening, being drawn by the cords of love, as with the bands of a man. I soon left our blind priest, and went to West-Bromwick church: here I heard Ryland, Stillingfleet, Talbot, Bagnall, Mansfield, Hawes, and Venn, great names, and esteemed gospel ministers.

I became very serious, reading a great deal -- Whitefield and Cennick's Sermons, and every good book I could meet with. It was not long before I began to inquire of my mother who, where, what were the Methodists; she gave me a favorable account, and directed me to a person that could take me to Wednesbury to hear them. I soon found this was not the church -- but it was better. 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 yet 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. I had no deep convictions, nor had I committed any deep known sins. At one sermon, some time after, my companion was powerfully wrought on: I was exceedingly grieved that I could not weep like him; yet I knew myself to be in a state of unbelief.

On a certain time, when we were praying in my father's barn, I believe the Lord pardoned my sins, and justified my soul; but my companions reasoned me out of this belief, saying, 'Mr. Mather said a believer was as happy as if he was in heaven.' I thought I was not as happy as I would be there, and gave up my confidence, and that for months; yet I was happy; free from guilt and fear, and had power over sin, and felt great inward joy. After this we met for reading and prayer, and had large and good meetings, and were much persecuted, until the persons at whose houses we held them were afraid, and they were discontinued.

I then held meetings frequently at my father's house, exhorting the people there, as also at Sutton-Cofields, and several souls professed to find peace through my labors. I met class a while at Bromwick Heath, and met in band at Wednesbury. I had preached some months before I publicly

appeared in the Methodist meeting houses; when my labors became more public and extensive, some were amazed, not knowing how I had exercised elsewhere. Behold me now a local preacher; the humble and willing servant of any and of every preacher that called on me by night or by day, being ready, with hasty steps, to go far and wide to do good, visiting Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire, and indeed almost every place within my reach for the sake of precious souls; preaching, generally, three, four, and five times a week, and at the same time pursuing my calling.

I think when I was between twenty-one and twenty-two years of age I gave myself up to God and his work, after acting as a local preacher near the space of five years: it is now the 19th of July, 1792. I have been laboring for God and souls about thirty years, or upward.

"Some time after I had obtained a clear witness of my acceptance with God, the Lord showed me, in the heat of youth and youthful blood, the evil of my heart: for a short time I enjoyed, as I thought, the pure and perfect love of God; but this happy frame did not long continue, although at seasons I was greatly blessed. While I was a traveling preacher in England, I was much tempted, finding myself exceedingly ignorant of almost every thing a minister of the gospel ought to know. How I came to America, and the events which have happened since my Journal will show."

In the first volume of his Journal he records the following facts the exercises of his mind, and his final determination to visit this country:

"On the 7th of August, 1771, the conference began at Bristol, in England. Before this, I had felt for half a year strong intimations in my mind that I should visit America; which I laid before the Lord, being unwilling to do my own will, or to run before I was sent. During this time my trials were very great, which the Lord, I believe, permitted to prove and try me, in order to prepare me for future usefulness. At the conference it was proposed that some preachers should go over to the American continent. I spoke my mind, and made a offer of myself. It was accepted by Mr. Wesley and others, who judged that I had a call. From Bristol I went home to acquaint my parents with my great undertaking, which I opened in as gentle a manner as possible. Though it was grievous to flesh and blood, they consented let me go. My mother is one of tenderest parents in the world: but I believe she was blessed in the present instance with divine assistance to part with me. I visited most of my friends in Staffordshire, Warwickshire, and Gloucestershire, and felt much life and power among them. Several of our meetings were indeed held in the Spirit and life of God. Many of my friends were struck with wonder when they heard of my going; but none opened their mouths against it, hoping it was of God. Some wished that their situation would allow them to go with me.

"I returned to Bristol in the latter end of August, where Richard Wright was waiting for me, to sail in a few days for Philadelphia. When I came to Bristol I had not one penny of money: but the Lord soon opened the hearts of friends, who supplied me with clothes and ten pounds: thus I found by experience that the Lord will provide for those who trust in him.

"On Wednesday, September 2, we set sail from a port near Bristol; and having a good wind soon passed the channel. For three days I was very ill with the sea-sickness: and no sickness I ever knew was equal to it. The captain behaved well to us. On the Lord's day, September 8, brother W. preached a sermon on deck, and all the crew gave attention.

"Thursday 12th. I will set down a few things that lie on my mind. Whither am I going? To the new world. What to do? To gain honor? No, if I know my own heart. To get money? No, I am going to live to God, and to bring others so to do. In America there has been a work of God: some moving first among the Friends,

but in time it declined: likewise by the Presbyterians, but among them also it declined. The people God owns in England are the Methodists. The doctrines they preach, and the discipline they enforce, are, I believe, the purest of any people now in the world. The Lord has greatly blessed these doctrines and this discipline in the three kingdoms: they must therefore be pleasing to him. If God does not acknowledge me in America, I will soon, return to England. I know my views are upright now -- may they never be otherwise!"

They landed in Philadelphia, October 7, 1771, and were most cordially received by the people. They immediately repaired to the church, and heard a sermon from Mr. Pillmore, whom they found at his station and in his work.

"The people," says Mr. Asbury, "looked on us with pleasure, hardly knowing how to show their love sufficiently, bidding us welcome with fervent affection; and receiving us as angels of God. O that we may walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called. When I came near the American shore my very heart melted within me: to think from whence I came, where I was going, and what I was going about. But I felt my mind open to the people, and my tongue loosed to speak. I feel that God is here, and find plenty of all I need."

As the printed minutes extend no farther back than 1773, we have no other account of the numbers in society at this time than what is found in Mr. Asbury's Journal, vol. iii, p. 109, where he says there were "about three hundred in New York, two hundred and fifty in Philadelphia, and a few in New Jersey;" but there must have been some also in Maryland, as the fruit of the labors of Mr. Strawbridge, probably the whole number was not less than six hundred.

After spending a few days in Philadelphia, delivering his testimony for God, Mr. Asbury left there for the city of New York, where he arrived on the 12th, of November, and on the 13th preached to the people from 1 Cor. ii, 2, "I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." "I approved much," says he, "of the spirit of the people; they were loving and serious; there appeared also in some a love of discipline. Though I was unwilling to go to York so soon, I believe it is all well; and I still hope I am in the order of God. My friend B." (meaning doubtless Mr. Boardman, the preacher) "is a kind, loving, worthy man, truly amiable and entertaining, and of a child-like temper." Respecting himself he says, "I purpose to be given up to God more and more, day by day."

It seems that previously to the arrival of Mr. Asbury the preachers had confined their labors chiefly to the cities. This plan of operations did not suit the enlarged desires of Mr. Asbury. He alludes to this circumstance in the following words: "At present I am dissatisfied, and judge that we are to be shut up in the cities this winter. My brethren seem unwilling to leave the cities, but I think I shall show them the way." -- "I am come over with an upright intention, and through the grace of God I will make it appear, and am determined that no man shall bias me with soft words and fair speeches." -- "Whomsoever I please or displease, I will be faithful to God, to the people, and to my own soul." This determination I believe he steadily and perseveringly kept to the end of his life. And in pursuance of the design he had thus formed, he made an excursion to West Farms and to Westchester, preaching with great freedom and power the "gospel of the kingdom." He spent the winter alternately in the city and country, extending his labors to New Rochelle, to Rye, and sometimes visiting Staten Island; and he had the unspeakable pleasure of being hailed by the people in general as a messenger of God, though sometimes persecuted and opposed by the rabble.

The consequence of thus extending his labors into the country towns and villages, was the giving a new and more vigorous impulse to religious zeal, and of calling the attention of multitudes to the gospel message, who otherwise might never have heard it. This example of Mr. Asbury had its effect upon the other preachers, and in the latter part of the year some of them visited the provinces of Delaware and Maryland, and preached on the western and eastern shore of Maryland. Two private members of the society raised up by Mr. Strawbridge, were the first Methodists who visited Kent county, on the eastern shore of Maryland. They came to one John Randal's, conversed and prayed with the family, and left behind them some salutary impressions. This created a desire for Methodist preaching; and shortly after, Mr. Strawbridge himself paid them a visit, and preached to them the gospel of Christ. He was followed by Robert Williams; and in December following, 1772, Mr. Asbury went into Kent county. "Before preaching," he says, "one Mr. R., a Church minister, came to me and desired to know who I was, and whether I was licensed. I told him who I was. He spoke great swelling words, and said he had authority over the people, and was charged with the care of their souls. He also said that I could not, and should not preach: and if I did, he should proceed against me according to law. I let him know that I came to preach, and preach I would; and farther asked him if he had authority to bind the consciences of the people, or if he was a justice of the peace; and told him I thought he had nothing to do with me. He charged me with making a schism. I told him that I did not draw the people from the Church, and asked him if his church was then open. He then said that I hindered the people from their work. I asked him if fairs and horse races did not hinder them; and farther told him that I came to help him. He said he had not hired me for an assistant, and did not want my help. I told him if there were no swearers or other sinners, he was sufficient. But, said he, What do you come for? I replied, To turn sinners to God. He said, Cannot I do that as well as you? I told him that I had authority from God. He then laughed at me, and said, You are a fine fellow indeed! I told him I did not do this to invalidate his authority: and also gave him to understand that I did not wish to dispute with him; but he said he had business with me, and came into the house in a great rage. I began to preach, and urged the people to repent and turn from all their transgressions, so iniquity should not prove their ruin. After preaching the parson went out, and told the people they did wrong in coming to hear me, and said I spoke against learning, whereas I only spoke to this purpose -- when a man turned from all sin he would adorn every character in life, both in church and state."

This quotation is given as a specimen of the sort of opposition the first Methodist preachers had to encounter in that part of the country. The clergy in general had but a name to live, while they were dead to spiritual and divine things, and were therefore unprepared to receive the true messengers of peace and mercy. Through the persevering labors of Mr. Asbury and others associated with him, a gracious work was commenced on this peninsula, which has terminated in great good to the souls of thousands.

In the month of April of this year Mr. Pillmore, following the example of Mr. Asbury, traveled south, through Maryland and Virginia, as far as Norfolk, preaching in all places where he could find an opening; and in the beginning of 1773 he penetrated into the lower counties of Virginia, and thence through North Carolina to Charleston, in South Carolina, nor did he stop till he reached Savannah, in Georgia, visiting the Orphan House, which had been erected by Mr. Whitefield as early as 1740. We have no particular account of these visits, but it is presumed that they were rendered a blessing to many. He returned northwardly some time the next spring. Mr. Boardman made a tour north as far as Boston, where he preached and formed a small society, and then returned to his station in New York.

In the early part of this year Mr. Robert Williams visited Norfolk, in Virginia. Without giving any public notice, he stood on the steps of the court house and began to sing, which soon collected a number of

people around him, to whom he preached, not, however, without considerable interruption from some disorderly persons. They seemed to think, indeed, that the preacher was mad, for as they had not been accustomed to hear a minister pronounce the words hell and devil in his sermons, from the frequent use Mr. Williams made of these terms they concluded he was a wicked, swearing preacher, though in some parts of his discourse they thought he preached the gospel. From this first impression of the man, no one was inclined to invite him to his house. But on hearing him a second time at the same place, they so far altered their opinion respecting his sanity that he was invited to their houses; and not long after, a society was formed in Norfolk, which has continued to this day, gradually increasing in number and usefulness.

October 10, 1772, Mr. Asbury says he received a letter from Mr. Wesley, in which he required a strict attention to the general rules, and also appointing him general assistant. To understand this designation it is necessary to observe, that Mr. Wesley, being, under God, the founder of the societies, was considered the head of the whole body, both in Europe and America, and the one having charge of a circuit under him was styled his assistant, and those under this assistant were styled helpers. In appointing, therefore, Mr. Asbury as general assistant, he constituted him the head of all the preachers and societies in America, with power to station the preachers, &c., under the general direction of Mr. Wesley himself.

As yet no regular conference of preachers had been convened, but they regulated their matters at the quarterly meetings. At one of these meetings, which was held Tuesday, December 23, on the western shore of Maryland, Mr. Asbury, after preaching on the duties of the ministry, says they "proceeded to their temporal business, and considered the following propositions:

What are our collections? We found them sufficient to defray our expenses.

How are the preachers stationed? It is regretted that, in answering this question, Mr. Asbury gives the initials only of the names of the preachers who received their stations. He says, "Brother S. (by which we suppose he means, Strawbridge,) "and brother O." (who?) "in Frederick county," "brother K." (King?) "brother W." (Williams?) "and J. R" (who?) "on the other side of the Bay; and myself in Baltimore.

Shall we be strict in our society meetings, and not admit strangers? Agreed.

Shall we drop preaching in the day-time through the week? Not agreed to.

Will the people be contented without our administering the sacraments. John King was neuter; brother Strawbridge pleaded much for the ordinances, and so did the people, who seemed to be much biased by him. I told them I would not agree to it at that time, and insisted on our abiding by our rules.

Shall we make collections weekly to pay the preachers' board and expenses? This was not agreed to. We then inquired into the moral character of the preachers and exhorters."

Though Mr. Asbury took his station in Baltimore, where he was most cordially received by the people, he by no means confined his labors to that city, but extended them into the towns and villages in the vicinity, everywhere proclaiming in the ears of the people the joyful news of salvation by grace, through faith in the Lord Jesus. In consequence of thus enlarging the boundaries of their labors -- for the other preachers followed the apostolic example set them by Mr. Asbury -- the work of God spread among the people, so that considerable additions were made to the societies. This, though the numbers were not yet taken, appears evident from Mr. Asbury's Journal, where he speaks of meeting and regulating the classes in a number of places.

It was remarked above, that most of the clergy in the southern provinces were destitute of experimental godliness; and therefore, instead of helping forward the work of God as promoted by the Methodist preachers, they either manifested indifference, "caring for none of these things," or otherwise set themselves in opposition to it. To this, however, there were some honorable exceptions. Among these was the Rev. Mr. Jarratt, of Virginia, under whose preaching there had been a considerable revival of religion, particularly at a place called White Oak. In imitation of Mr. Wesley and his preachers, Mr. Jarratt formed those who were awakened to a sense of their danger into a society, that they might assist each other in working out their salvation. The good effects of these meetings were so apparent, in producing "the fruits of good living," that they were encouraged, and the revival went on gradually, chiefly under the labors of Mr. Jarratt, from 1771 to 1773, spreading from fifty to sixty miles "in the region round about."

In the beginning of the year 1773, Mr. Robert Williams visited Petersburg, in Virginia, and preached with success, first in the town, and then through various parts of the country. He was a plain, pointed preacher, indefatigable in his labors, and many were awakened and converted to God through his public and private exhortations; and it is said that the name of Robert Williams was long remembered by many who were his spiritual children in those parts. He and other Methodist preachers who visited Virginia were kindly received by Mr. Jarratt, and they greatly assisted each other in promoting the work of the Lord.

In the meantime Mr. Asbury continued his itinerating labors very extensively through the country, devoting all his time and attention to the work of the ministry. Nor did he labor in vain. Many sinners were brought to the knowledge of the truth, and new societies were established in various places.

Mr. Wesley was considered the father of the societies both in Europe and America. To him, therefore, they looked for direction in all important matters, and especially for a regular supply of preachers -- for as yet none had been raised in this country who had entered the itinerant ranks. That he might understand the true state of things for himself, and thereby be competent to act with the more discretion and efficiency, it seems that he had manifested a desire to visit America; for Mr. Asbury says, under date of May 6, 1773, "This day a letter from Mr. Wesley came to hand, dated March 2, in which he informs me that the time for his visiting America is not yet, being detained by the building of a new chapel." Soon after this, however, Mr. Asbury was cheered by the arrival of two missionaries, Messrs. Thomas Rankin and George Shadford. They landed in Philadelphia on the third day of June, 1773, and immediately entered upon their work. As Mr. Rankin had traveled several years longer than Mr. Asbury, Mr. Wesley appointed him the general assistant of the societies in America.

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