

A HISTORICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND POLITICAL LOOK INTO THE O'KELLY  
SEPARATION FROM THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, A DEFENSE OF  
ASBURY'S CHARACTER, AND THE ROOT CAUSE OF THAT SCHISM

Justin Singleton  
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Schism**

History can be wearisome business. Being one of the fields of science with which observation and repetition are virtually impossible, much is laid upon witnesses to the facts. Someone once asked me whether I believed that Abraham Lincoln was shot in a theater. Of course, the obvious reply was in the affirmative. He then asked me how I knew this since I was not there (implying that without scientific observation and repetition the certainty of the fact is absolutely suspect). Again, the obvious reply is that the eyewitnesses tell me so. Of course, the eyewitnesses to that fact are long and dead, but the stories that were written based upon the then current evidences, including those eyewitness testimonies, allow us, as later interpreters, to weigh the evidence and determine a conclusion. Again the question is asked can we trust those witnesses? This time the answer is not as clear-cut.

Any early witness can be said to have some level of bias, many will have more than simply “some.” The historian Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, for instance, seems to have favored the Senate in most areas, and therefore much of his “history” is pro-senatorial and filled with judgmental remarks. This is unremarkably so to the point that it is now common knowledge, yet Suetonius (as he is commonly referred to) is considered a chief source of information concerning the early years of Rome. Why is this? The answer is that even amongst the thorns of unreliability, we can find truth.

One area of particular interest, and the reason for writing, is in the history of the O’Kelly/Asbury separation, where truth can be found amongst some very biased sources. This

schism is that of Rev. James O'Kelly who pulled away from the Methodist Episcopal Church (of which Francis Asbury was the presiding bishop) to form the Republican Methodist Church, a body that would eventually become a part of the Christian Churches of the South. Of course, before the reader can fully appreciate this study he must first understand why it was undertaken. This reason lies in the two histories of the event.

As an undergraduate, I remember reading of the early life of the Methodist church in America; I remember the grandeur and the godliness of the saints. Of special interest to me was the personal of Francis Asbury, that great and godly man who led the early Methodists of America into a time of evangelistic prosper, though at the peril of many selfless itinerates. Reading of this history inspired me and made me, as a young "preacher boy," want to be like one of those special men who were willing to face snow and rain, malaria and pox to win the world for Jesus Christ. This is one of the "two" histories.

It wasn't until graduate school that my mind went back to that same time of history, though from a very different perspective. Having undertaken a search into the history of the now named Restoration Movement, I came upon a rather different history. Of course, this "other" story is quite different from the godly and selfless man of whom I had grown to love. What am I now to think? Of all truth that can be known, one thing is certain: time and romance can hide the warts of even the most ugly truths.

As a part of this study, I would like to explore the internal nature of the history of this schism with particular interest in the underlying theme that brought the schism to fruition. As a part of this journey, some of the original source documents from the schism will be analyzed in order to come to a better understanding of the proper history of the event. Pages will be used to analyze the lives of each man (both Asbury and O'Kelly) with the purpose of testing the

character of the two. Finally, time will be spent philosophizing as to possible infractions on each side. Ultimately, I think we will come to the realization that the underlying theme of the schism deals more in secular politics than in godly defiance.

### Analyzing the Past

There are three primary documents that must be analyzed in order to better understand the purpose of the O’Kelly schism, namely *The Author’s Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government* (henceforth dubbed *The Author’s Apology*), *Reply to an Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government* (henceforth dubbed *Reply to an Apology*), and *A Vindication of the Author’s Apology with Reflection on the Reply, and a Few Remarks on Bishop Asbury’s Annotations on His Book of Discipline* (henceforth dubbed *A Vindication of the Author’s Apology*). These three documents represent the original pamphlet “war” that took place between James O’Kelly, the person at issue, and one Nicholas Snethen (author of *Reply to an Apology*), who argued on behalf of Bishop Asbury, from 1798-1801.

These documents do represent the pamphlet “war,” but beyond that they represent the heartfelt intentions of both sides. To better understand the situation and the cause of the pamphlet “war,” a short history must be given here.

James O’Kelly left the Methodist Episcopal Church, the reason for which will be spoken of at length later, but there is always a context to every situation. The context of this schism is the Revolutionary War. While Rev. Asbury was being hidden from both sides, O’Kelly found himself on the side of the patriots, fighting, being captured, and avoiding treason.<sup>1</sup> After the war,

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<sup>1</sup> W.E. MacClenny, *The Life of Rev. James O’Kelly and the Early History of the Christian Church in the South*, (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1950), 42-44.

the world was still spinning with dizziness and policies had to be changed. Concerning the very life of Methodism, new governmental structures had to be put into place, primarily because the separation of the country also brought a separation from the Church of England.<sup>2</sup> With the established church no longer having a hold in the Americas, many of the Methodists and Anglicans alike had no one to lead them in partaking of the Eucharist, baptisms, etc.

It was this new Methodist governmental structure that evoked such negative remarks from O’Kelly and others. Thus we find ourselves trying to understand *The Author’s Apology*. On a whole, *The Author’s Apology* is “a faithful account”<sup>3</sup> of the events that led up to Mr. O’Kelly’s separation from the Episcopal Methodists. It begins with a brief history of the Methodist movement in North America and ends with a plea for union once again.<sup>4</sup>

As one reads through *The Author’s Apology*, one is moved to sympathize with the author, for O’Kelly truly seems to have a heart for the issue. He pleads with the audience with such vigor and strength, that it is hard not to simply “follow suit” with his arguments.

On a rather strange note, O’Kelly seems to hold Francis Asbury up against the will of John Wesley by quoting the circular letter of Wesley in its entirety, including the final exhortation of Wesley that the church in America is “now at full liberty, simply to follow the

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that John Wesley did not like the idea of establishing a new church; he wanted instead to reform the existing Church of England through his societies.

<sup>3</sup> James O’Kelly (Christicola), *The Author’s Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government*, (Richmond, VA: Printed by John Dixon, 1798), 118.

<sup>4</sup> I must give you a brief note concerning the grammar and syntax of the quotes from *The Author’s Apology*. At the very end of the pamphlet, O’Kelly states that there are many errors within the text that, due to time constraints, he had not time to correct. I have kept all quotes completely intact and did not attempt to redact any grammatical issues, neither did I place the Latin *sic* near any of these quotes. The reader is expected, here, to do two things: assume the quote is correctly portrayed and avoid any academic bias on the part of O’Kelly for not correcting his grammatical errors – correct grammar does not make one correct.

scriptures and the primitive church”<sup>5</sup> – a blow indeed against the Episcopacy established by Rev. Asbury! One is forced at this point, at the very beginning, to wonder what Wesley himself thought of the Episcopacy of the American church.

While reading O’Kelly’s *Apology*, three issues arise, namely the issue of the history of the events, the issue of the persuasiveness of the author, and finally the issue of the Episcopacy itself. Concerning the history of the events, who am I to call the man a liar. As a matter of fact, I do not believe that O’Kelly here is falsifying anything, though only Snethen’s response will settle this matter. Instead, O’Kelly gives a history of all events from his perspective, which unfortunately for Asbury places the bishop in a very bad light.

Throughout his history, O’Kelly makes Francis Asbury out to be less than the selfless saint that we have all come to love. According to O’Kelly, Asbury ordered his preachers to call him Bishop at an early stage.<sup>6</sup> He argues that Asbury “took care to secure his power” and “that all these things [concerning Asbury’s ‘mature thoughts’ of church government] are according to the counsel of his own will, created by him, and for him ... Seeing he remaineth a High Priest over the Methodist Episcopal Church.”<sup>7</sup> Probably the most obvious statement of O’Kelly’s dislike of Asbury is found in O’Kelly’s describing the bishop in mock terminology with reference to deity: “Then proceeded F. according to his foreknowledge, predestination, and sovereign power; chose out of conference a few men which formed the privy council.”<sup>8</sup> *The Author’s Apology* is written with such disdain toward Asbury that much of what O’Kelly states

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<sup>5</sup> James O’Kelly (Christicola), *The Author’s Apology*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 31.

smacks of jealousy, as noted in the following quote: “And it was so, about this time Francis [Asbury] cut off part of *my* district, and fixed a man to preside therein, who was after his own heart” (emphasis mine).<sup>9</sup> One would almost think that O’Kelly wanted to be a bishop himself if it wasn’t for his solemn assurance against that fact when he states, “How cruel, and how false is the prevailing report of my leaving the Episcopal Methodists because I could not obtain the place of a bishop.”<sup>10</sup> With such bias within the work at question, one must wonder as to the historical validity of such a document.

*The Author’s Apology* contains much bias, yes, but this does not negate the truth that still may be within the pages. A second aspect, though, that might lay credit to one side or the other is the persuasiveness of the document, or rather how the author persuades his audience. At the very first, O’Kelly writes as if quoting Scripture, a somewhat common habit amongst ministers during the time but one that lends toward religious acceptance of the truth of the document. This may or may not have been intended, or could have simply been an expression of the author’s will and style. What is interesting, though, isn’t the religiousness of the document but the American sentiment throughout the document, which is obviously intended. Throughout much of the writing, indeed at the very beginning of the document (and even before in the advertisement) O’Kelly appeals to the “freedom” and “liberty” of the audience. This being the heart of the matter (of which shall be expounded upon later), the author iterates throughout the document a danger lurking from the other side in the person of Asbury, that man “from the land of kings and bishops.”<sup>11</sup> Beyond the appeal to patriotism, early in Chapter 22, the author quickly strings

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<sup>9</sup> O’Kelly, James (Christicola), *The Author’s Apology*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 21.

together a series of exclamatory statements, thus appealing to emotions – a common theme throughout the work.

The history, patriotism, and emotional drive are a standard aspect of the document, but the heart of the writing focuses on disproving the concept of bishop. As he closes his pamphlet, O’Kelly spends time disallowing the office of bishop from Scripture (several chapters), from Episcopal writers (Chapter 26), and even from the example of the primitive church (Chapter 27ff). The most useful section (according to my own judgment) of the entire pamphlet is that section (ranging from Chapters 40-46) that deals not with what the bishop is not, but what O’Kelly urges should replace the episcopacy – namely a New Testament style government.

It is not until we read *Reply to an Apology* by Nicholas Snethen that we begin to make some sense concerning the multiple accusations against Rev. Asbury. The reply is made in two parts, the first dealing with the character claims against Asbury, and the second dealing with the issue of church government. It pains me to bypass, for the time, the character accusations and their responses, but this will be addressed in the second major section of this article. Let it suffice for the time to give a rather quick overview of the document for the sake of clarification and grounding the reader in the facts.

Snethen begins his response, or Reply, by moving through several of the individual claims made by O’Kelly against the person and the work of the Bishop Asbury. As we have already seen in *The Author’s Apology*, O’Kelly vehemently attacks the person of Francis Asbury.

Snethen did not merely respond to the claims, but he went a step beyond by citing several testimonies from well-known ministers within Methodism. Remember, this pamphlet was designed to annul the effects of the previous pamphlet published by James O’Kelly, whose primary audience was the Methodist Episcopal Church and her members. Therefore, a response



required a firm and authoritative approach. This is why Snethen spends time actually citing many of his sources, as seen in his response to O’Kelly’s statement that Asbury opposed the joint superintendence with Whatcoat. Here, on pages 9-10 of his response, Snethen quotes signed testimonies to the fact that Asbury was not against the joint superintendence with Whatcoat, but that O’Kelly himself was opposed to the idea. These sworn statements are signed by Coke, Whatcoat himself, and still another. This approach of citing his sources is in direct conflict to O’Kelly’s pamphlet, which is riddled with hearsay.

In the second, and final chapter, of his pamphlet, Snethen spends eleven full pages upholding the governmental structure of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It cannot be said that this system of government did win the day, but the actual validity of the government is not in question. Instead, we must turn to *A Vindication of the Author’s Apology* for even further clarification of the schism.

Without going into too much detail, for sake of space and time, it should be noted that here the author, O’Kelly, attempts to vindicate his *Apology* chapter by chapter. In this vindication, he sometimes admits mistakes but also stands firm to his opinions. It seems that he does have some grounds, here, for although he admits that both Coke and Asbury were chosen by Wesley to be superintendents, but he ends with this, implying that the office of superintendent is different in substance to that of bishop. Indeed, this is a major argument of his in his *Apology*. Does this argument stand? The other side argues that the name implies the same as Bishop, and indeed Snethen cites Dr. Coke’s sermon during Asbury’s ordination, “Our bishops, or superintendants (as we rather call them) have been elected or received by the whole body of our

ministers through the continent, assembled in general conference.”<sup>12</sup> It seems here that the issue is a stalemate, and therefore something more must be at the cause of this schism than mere names and terminology.

In response to the witnesses called forth by Snethen concerning the appointment of Whatcoat, O’Kelly appears once again to take the issue. Snethen and his witnesses say that Asbury did not stand against the appointment, but they do not say that he stood with the appointment. O’Kelly argues that “Francis was opposed to a joint Superintendent, yet said but little, for he was under authority.”<sup>13</sup> It seems, once again, that the argument has been brought to a stalemate for no one can argue from silence. Though this does lay credence to Snethen, the idea has already entered one’s mind and therefore, by natural humanity, we may find a hint of prejudice against the man, Asbury, whether evidences or not.

Before we move on from the *Vindication*, one last point should be made. The author several times refers to mathematical equations to prove his point. There is a major problem with this argument. First, to say that three times five and five times three both equal fifteen (see page seven of the *Vindication*), and three times four and four times three have the same sum (page 10), is not the same as saying that whether a proposal was made by the superintendent/bishop or the constitutionally ordered conference is the same when the point is trying to be made that the superintendent/bishop is proposing plans for his own good! Here O’Kelly makes a grave error and is showing signs not only of poor judgment, but also bad logic.

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<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Snethen, *Reply to an Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government*. (American Theological Library Association (ATLA) Historical Monographs Collection: Series 1, EBSCOhost [accessed July 9, 2010] 1800), 9.

<sup>13</sup> James O’Kelly, *A Vindication of the Author’s Apology with Reflection on the Reply, and a Few Remarks on Bishop Asbury’s Annotations on His Book of Discipline*, (Raleigh, N.C.: Printed by Joseph Gales, 1801), 9.

It is a hard business to try to establish some truth from original documents, especially when these documents, on both sides, are riddled with emotive jabs and sometimes-senseless strikes. Overall, at least at this point, it seems that O’Kelly may have something justifiably against the bishop, though his works are logically null and emotionally strong.

### Character Development

Sometimes what seems strongest in an argument is what pricks the heart; any story can be called on to establish a fact if only the author uses enough exclamation points – to verify this simply ask a preacher! Yet, while this is true, it should not be; our job is to cut through the “fat” of emotionalism in order to come to the kernel of truth.

As the reader saw in *The Author’s Apology*, O’Kelly made some rather bold statements concerning Francis Asbury, bringing the bishop’s character into question through very strong emotional appeal and, as stated above, quite a few exclamation points. The brief analysis of the pamphlet “war” helped to shape the historical reliability of the events, but the character assault left many questions unanswered. It is our duty, now, to analyze the character not only of Asbury but also of O’Kelly himself, the man who proceeded to assault the other. The findings, based upon the pamphlets and early and late biographers, will help the reader to establish some faith in one of the two men, but little faith in the other.

Since Asbury’s character has been called into question, it is only fitting that his character is analyzed now. The reader should recall that O’Kelly states that Asbury “took care to secure his power” and “that [Asbury’s ‘mature thoughts’ of church government] are according to the

counsel of his own will, created by him, and for him.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout his *Apology*, O’Kelly repeats the claim that Asbury manipulated the body in order to hold power. This idea is seconded by a later witness, as an author writes, “On this side of the Atlantic Mr. Francis Asbury saw the possibility of organizing a new church with himself as its head and founder. This was the goal for which he strove. ... [yet] James O’Kelly, the champion of religious freedom, stood ready to expose anything that he thought was against the liberty of conscience.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, this does seem to have some support even from Methodist historians, for one states, “Methodist leaders Dr. Thomas Coke and Bishop Francis Asbury competed fiercely for their place within the hierarchy and history of the new church. The rivalry was so intense that John Wesley, who directed the Methodist Society from England, wrote a letter to Asbury warning both men about their pursuit of greatness.”

That term, liberty, is used quite often throughout the work of O’Kelly, who was a devout American in all ways. In one regard, O’Kelly tried to diminish the character of Asbury through a continual use of patriotic jargon, which, after the Revolutionary War, would make O’Kelly out to be the patriot and Asbury out to be the “Old-Lander.” One such statement of O’Kelly’s to substantiate this theory is his mocking statement concerning Asbury’s bishopric, “Ah, Francis [Asbury] was born and nurtured in the land of kings and bishops, and that which is bred in the bone, is hard to be got out of the flesh.”<sup>16</sup> Statements such as these, and others calling Asbury a tyrant, push the “Old World” mentality upon Asbury.

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<sup>14</sup> James O’Kelly (Christicola), *The Author’s Apology*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> W.E. MacClenny, *The Life of Rev. James O’Kelly and the Early History of the Christian Church in the South*, (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1950), 49-51.

<sup>16</sup> James O’Kelly (Christicola), *The Author’s Apology*, 21.

The fact that in many ways Asbury was still “Old World” does not weigh upon the case, for the attempt, whether intentionally or subconsciously, was to discredit the bishop based upon his unpatriotic nature. This use of debate seems almost immoral, except that O’Kelly truly believed this to be the case, for he was in all ways a Republican and saw Asbury as a religious “monarch” with bishop’s title. The patriotism of Asbury, though, should never have been questioned, namely for two reasons. First, when all of the English Methodist missionaries left the New World for the Old, Asbury did in fact stay, believing that the American people should not be abandoned. Secondly, according to Bishop Simpson’s *Cyclopædia of Methodism*, “During [Asbury’s days of hiding], a private letter which he had written to one of his English associates who was leaving the country, and in which he defended the cause of America, fell into the hands of the military authorities, and they became satisfied that so far from his being an enemy, he was a true and earnest friend.”<sup>17</sup> This ended the days of Asbury’s hiding, for he was accepted by all as a “true and earnest friend” of America.

It was not just his patriotism that was called into question, though, but his very moral nature. Concerning the “expelling of John [Wesley],” O’Kelly writes, “... what appears so exceptionable in the conduct of Francis [Asbury], is the clandestine manner in which he expelled the name, and authority of Wesley; and then to act with a far more lordly and tyranaical power over us!”<sup>18</sup> O’Kelly saw Asbury as the head of an “Ecclesiastical Monarchy,”<sup>19</sup> and a “tyrant.” In

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew Simpson, ed., *Cyclopædia of Methodism: Embracing Sketches of Its Rise, Progress, and Present Condition, with Biographical Notices and Numerous Illustrations*, (Philadelphia: Everts and Stewart, 1878), 60.

<sup>18</sup> James O’Kelly (Christicola), *The Author’s Apology*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

these accusations lie more than simply a thirst for power, but a desire beyond the Christian experience for which both men preached – that is a death to selfishness.

Of course, this is not how other men saw Asbury. One historian says in an interview, “Asbury didn't think of himself as particularly holy. But other people did. Living the same life as Methodism's circuit riders, he spent most days in other people's homes during his 45 years in America. ... He prayed frequently, getting up at 4 or 5 A.M. many mornings for private prayer, and then joining with his host families for evening prayer.”<sup>20</sup> Another writer states that the people saw Asbury as “... someone worth following, someone whose integrity and piety were above reproach, someone whose vision seemed truly inspired by God.”<sup>21</sup>

Concerning financial integrity, a historian states, “He lived in voluntary poverty, dressing cheaply, even buying the cheapest saddles despite the huge amount of time he spent on horseback. He gave away almost all the money that ever came his way. He relentlessly pushed himself in the service of the gospel ...”<sup>22</sup> In fact, Snethen, in his reply to O’Kelly concerning £10, states, “Mr. Asbury, if he had money, would be as generous and as liberal as any man in America; but he never had ten pounds to give, since he has been a Methodist preacher.”<sup>23</sup>

I say all this to show that Asbury was a man of integrity. His life was relentlessly spent upon the preaching of the gospel. When he had money, he gave it away. He even fought against the idea of preaching to obtain a monetary position in society by “the practice of paying all of the

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<sup>20</sup> John Wigger, “Indelible Marker: Methodist Francis Asbury left his fingerprints all over American Christianity,” (*Christianity Today*, 53 [12]. December, 2009), 65.

<sup>21</sup> John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists*. (<http://rave.ohiolink.edu/ebooks/ebc/9780195387803>, 2009), 2.

<sup>22</sup> John Wigger, “Indelible Marker,” 65.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Snethen, *Reply to an Apology*, 34.

preachers the same salary (\$64 a year), whether probationers or bishops.”<sup>24</sup> The very remarks of O’Kelly that when Rice arose and stated that there are two ministers who were offended by the bishop, “Then members arose, out of due order, as men alarmed! As though treason had been heard,”<sup>25</sup> is hard evidence that the man, Asbury, was extremely well loved amongst his people.

Of course, this is not to say that Francis Asbury was a “perfect” man. “No one believed that Asbury was perfect and even his greatest supporters admitted that he made mistakes in running the church.”<sup>26</sup> But even here, there is a fine line between “mistakes” and moral tyranny.

There does come a point, though, that even the most adamant supporter of Asbury must admit that every leader, including Asbury, does in fact strive to protect his position, even if only to protect the organization of which he leads. In deed, “[t]hough not an autocrat, he did guard his episcopal authority, which opened him up to criticism.”<sup>27</sup> Concerning the building of new meetinghouses without approval, Wigger, a Methodist historian, writes, “Asbury and his supporters insisted that this measure was designed to prevent societies from taking on too much debt, but it was probably also intended in part to foil a movement O’Kelly supported aimed at incorporating church property in a way that removed it from the bishops’ control.”<sup>28</sup> Obviously, all leaders must use their political leverage in order to keep the organization alive; this is, at least, what Wigger proposes as the reason here.

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<sup>24</sup> John Wigger, *American Saint*, 176.

<sup>25</sup> James O’Kelly (Christicola), *The Author’s Apology*, 36.

<sup>26</sup> John Wigger, “Indelible Marker,” 65.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>28</sup> John Wigger, *American Saint*, 184.

On the other hand, O’Kelly has a much different character. For one, if Wigger is correct, O’Kelly was attempting to overthrow the Bishop’s control, which is in direct violation of Scripture (Heb. 13:17). We cannot take that claim too far, though, for although he might have been trying to overthrow the bishop’s control, indeed, according to his *Apology* he did not believe that the bishop actually had that control; O’Kelly was still a stalwart steward of salvation. Though O’Kelly’s mileage no doubt did not match that of the roving bishop, mileage has never been a test of one’s godliness. “For years he served with conspicuous ability and devotion.”<sup>29</sup> One historian says of O’Kelly: “Rev. James O’Kelly was a tenacious itinerant preacher in the Methodist Society ... [who] ... rode the circuits in the southern Piedmont and in the Tidewater region of Virginia, and he created the New Hope Circuit in North Carolina early in his itinerancy. O’Kelly quickly ascended the ranks of Francis Asbury’s Methodist preachers and became district elder, presiding over circuits in Virginia and North Carolina.”<sup>30</sup> This is not the work of a rouge or jealous itinerate. O’Kelly was not a horrible man! He did have one major weakness; he wanted to see things done right.

I think this is where he and Asbury met. Asbury truly believed in his form of government; O’Kelly truly believed in a republican form of government. Asbury was willing to use his authority to make things right; O’Kelly was also willing to use his authority to make things right. After O’Kelly left the Methodist Episcopal Church, he was in conference with his Republican Methodists, who now simply called themselves “Christians.” In this conference, there was a hot debate concerning baptism. O’Kelly’s “Christians,” who had no ruling head but

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<sup>29</sup> John Atkinson, *Centennial History of American Methodism*, (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1884), 434.

<sup>30</sup> J. Timothy Allen, “‘Some Expectation of Being Promoted’: Ambition, Abolition, and the Reverend James O’Kelly.” (*North Carolina Historical Review*, 84 [1]. Jan., 2007), 63.



acted in a form of representative democracy, could not come to terms on the matter. “In the heat of discussion, Mr. O’Kelly is said to have asked William Guriey [his counterpart]: ‘Who rules this body, you or I?’”<sup>31</sup> The point of fact is that O’Kelly truly believed what he was fighting for and was willing to become what he despised in Asbury.

This is not the only account we find of O’Kelly’s turning as a “weather-cock” (as he calls the Methodist Episcopal general conference).<sup>32</sup> In his article on abolition, J. Timothy Allen points out that though O’Kelly was once an abolitionist, he quickly changed sides on the issue when it was politically beneficial. He writes: “During [the Revolutionary War] some itinerants and preachers, along with those who supported the Patriot cause, attacked the British economic and political enslavement of the colonists with a barrage of republican “antislavery” rhetoric that depicted colonists as slaves. This onslaught took a turn, however, between the mid-1780s and the 1790s. With the Revolution over and the British threat of enslaving the colonists gone, these same preachers, itinerants, and revolutionaries, fearful that the new republic would fail without slave labor, adopted a pro-slavery stance.”<sup>33</sup>

Thus we find that the masses were all weather-cocks. Concerning O’Kelly specifically, Allen writes: “As Republicans and Federalists fought for control of the fledgling republic, O’Kelly joined the political debate. ... In the South, politicians and many ministers considered antislavery ‘a Federalist mask for political and economic exploitation’ of the South. In the last years of his ministry, O’Kelly watched evangelicalism combine with capitalism to become the

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<sup>31</sup> W.E. MacClenny, *The Life of Rev. James O’Kelly and the Early History of the Christian Church in the South*, (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1950), 158.

<sup>32</sup> James O’Kelly (Christicola), *The Author’s Apology*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> J. Timothy Allen, “Some Expectation of Being Promoted,” 59.

driving force of the new nation.”<sup>34</sup> He then goes on to remark that “O’Kelly’s abolitionist fervor, like that of his peers, diminished by the early 1800s.” Why did this change? It was a grab for power within his political system of thinking. As a matter of fact, the same author goes on to write of O’Kelly later, “Ambition and success at the national and local levels motivated James O’Kelly just as it did many other early Americans.”<sup>35</sup>

### Politics as Usual

It seems that politics, once again, rules the day, for political power seemed to be a turning point for O’Kelly. It is not just political power that he was after; O’Kelly truly believed in his republican form of government. He not only believed in it, but he fought for it. Much can be said about a man who is willing to lose his own life for a cause.

As a recent infantry combat veteran, I can vouch for the fact that at times veterans can get a bit angry when dealing with those who “just don’t understand.” As the life of O’Kelly is laid bare, we must wonder if this is not a part of his mindset.

A cursory reading of O’Kelly’s *Apology* is enough to see that patriotism and freedom is a major concern of his. With such phrases as “May America ever be an asylum for those who fly from tyranny,”<sup>36</sup> one cannot deny the fact.

It seems that at one point O’Kelly even pulled Coke into the attempt to overthrow the “new government” of Asbury, though only for a time, for O’Kelly mentions a very patriotic letter from Coke that reads, “But remember, when we meet together, and overthrow the new

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 59-60.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>36</sup> James O’Kelly (Christicola), *The Author’s Apology*, 92.

institution, as I believe we shall; “if Mr. —, is not satisfied with the government as it stood before, we will contend for a republican government. ‘Give me thy hand. Fear not. I am a friend to America.’”<sup>37</sup> This idea that Coke is a “friend to America” lends credence to the idea that O’Kelly believed that Asbury was not.

Seemingly in contrast to Asbury, O’Kelly was at all times a republican, though Asbury found himself with a lack of secular politics. At a time when “some of the English preachers in America had manifested such an imprudent zeal for the cause of the king as to draw upon the Methodist movement the odium attached to Toryism.”<sup>38</sup> Asbury did not. As a matter of fact, as was previously stated, Asbury alone stayed behind to help the poor lost sheep of America. It is interesting that although Asbury did not preach the king’s business, neither did he take the oath of allegiance to the State of Maryland. Asbury did suffer political persecution, and so was forced into the home of Judge Thomas White for asylum. It was here that he sent a letter to a friend defending the Americans’ actions. Of course, this cannot be considered a public display of secular politics, only a personal approval of the events. This, as we have already seen, stands in stark contrast to James O’Kelly.

Unfortunately, O’Kelly’s political views carried him and his religion. O’Kelly was known to have openly preached republicanism. “A veteran of the Revolutionary War, O’Kelly emphasized republican rhetoric over Christian faith in his sermons.”<sup>39</sup> At the end of the day,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 30. It should be noted that Snethen, in his reply to *The Author’s Apology* explains this letter and argues that Coke was impressed to take O’Kelly’s side early on before hearing the whole truth of the matter. Coke himself turned against O’Kelly and his attempt to dismantle the Episcopacy afterward. This very action on the part of Coke influences this author greatly.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew H. Moore, *Sketches of the Pioneers of Methodism in North Carolina and Virginia*, (Nashville, TN: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1884), 23.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew H. Moore, *Sketches of the Pioneers of Methodism*, 63.

O’Kelly seems to have let his own ideas take hold of him. Though O’Kelly “feared that Francis Asbury ... would install a Federalist-styled denominational polity ... that would threaten the fragile Union,”<sup>40</sup> it was not the Union that needed protected, but the Church.

In many ways, O’Kelly’s republicanism became a stumbling-block for the church. Because he and others were so adamantly “American,” more than 8,000 people were moved from one church body to another and subsequently isolated from their friends, relatives, but more importantly, brethren in Christ. His attempt to correct a church led him into establishing another, which was, itself, eventually split. No, “Americanism” did not help in this situation; it only hurt. The political game truly was the core of the O’Kelly schism.

### **CONCLUSION: CAUSE OF THE SCHISM**

As we stand on the brink of a new error in the church, i.e., the church invisible, one must wonder what he himself is bringing into the local body to ruin it. I do not say that light heartedly, but with all honesty. Someone once told me that if ever I find the perfect church to stay away from it, for I would ruin it. I think this is the best advise on the subject, for it shows that no perfect system is ever in place.

The Episcopacy after Asbury did not succeed. Many of the old itinerates wished for the old days of glory, but instead were led into constant political battle. Indeed, the Episcopacy had many problems, some of which were caused by Bishop Asbury, but as previously stated, no form of government is ever perfect.

I, myself, am an old republican; as O’Kelly, I believe in representative democracy. But there is something still beyond that form of government that must triumph above and beyond all

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<sup>40</sup> J. Timothy Allen, “Some Expectation of Being Promoted,” 59.

things – the Kingdom of God. This is what was lost from O’Kelly’s vision. The Kingdom of God does not allow one to be a “weather-cock” on biblical issues; one must stand his ground, for as someone once said, “Where the Bible speaks, we speak.”

From an analysis of the original documents, we find a lot of “fat” that needed to be cut through. Asbury was not a bad man, nor was he a Tory tyrant. O’Kelly was not an evil, schismatic maniac; he was only an American. The true reason of the O’Kelly split had nothing to do with a power hungry Asbury, Coke, or O’Kelly. The true reason for the O’Kelly schism had to do with a revolutionary who simply fought too hard and against the wrong enemy, a man whose republican virtues were allowed to outweigh his theology and hope for a theocratic Millennium.

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