

PIONEER PREACHERS
Religion in the Upper Cumberland
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Chapter 3

As pioneers settled the Upper Cumberland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, their health conditions, education, social habits, and character greatly affected their religious beliefs. “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks.”

No chilling winds, nor
 pois’nous breath,
Can reach that healthful
 shore;
Sickness and sorrow, pain
 and death
Are felt and feared no
 more.

“Chilling winds and pois’nous breath” meant pneumonia in the winter time and malaria in the summer. In the Upper Cumberland, they did not have malaria, so “pois’nous breath” could also mean typhoid and tuberculosis. In addition, settlers suffered from cramp-colic, apoplexy, milk sickness, Indian arrows, the second summer for children, few doctors and bad remedies. The “widder-maker wind” turned tree-felling into a death trap and could pitch unheard and unseen limbs upon fragile heads below. Sickness and sorrow, pain and death were real and always present for the pioneer.

In addition to danger in field and forest, things were not healthy in homes and churches. Consider these words from Isaac Conger’s diary in the year 1813:

Come to Noahs fork’ and unexpectedly my horse swam got water in my saddlebags among my books & went on wet to meeting & I believe had as great liberty as ever I had after meeting turned out a whore....A cold time we had of it they wont pray here & so dirty they cannot have Religion staid & eat some but with reluctance the Milk I could not eat for I believe the 2 pet pigs they had in the house had eat in the tin and it had not been washed the dirtiest cup I ever say to eat out of in my life I must be very hungry if ever I eat there again & they must mend or lose preaching.... our meeting broke about midnight then I lay down & slept a little & wakened & slept, but little after for this settlement all have hungary nightwalkers about their houses & they so thirst for human blood they distract me.... I was weary eat & set until 10 o’clock & went to bed & when I walked I was infested with hungary nightwalkers that thirst for human blood & could not sleep well after, got up soon & got to writing.

Preachers were very vulnerable to ill health, especially those circuit riders who were out in all sorts of weather. Statistics given by Halford E. Luccock are noteworthy:

Of the first 737 members of the Conference (Methodist) to die—that is, all who died up to 1847-203 were between 25 and 35 years of age and 121 between 35 and 45. Nearly half died before they were 30 years old. Of 672 of those first preachers whose records we have in full, two-thirds died before they had been able to render 12 years.

It would be hard to draw a composite of a person called a “Tennessee or Upper Cumberland” pioneer, but a few generalizations about the strengths and weaknesses that modified his faith and his church, while they in turn were radically modifying him, are possible. In the first place, the very early pioneers were literate. They had been reared on the eastern seaboard and had attended or been influenced by the schools of that area. In addition, they were fiercely democratic and anti-authoritarian.

In many cases, the Upper Cumberland pioneer was a “second son”; the first son got the seaboard land or business, the younger was helped on his way toward opportunity in the western country. For some the opportunity came in terms of land grants for military or community service. It is certain that land was the predominant reason they moved across the mountain. Bishop Asbury wrote, “When I reflect that not one in a hundred came here to get religion but rather to get plenty of good land, I think it will be well if many do not eventually lose their souls.”

It is very important to remember that however advantageous and cultured his background may have been, they very early pioneer, once settled in the howling wilderness, quickly became an independent, tough, fearless, self-reliant, hard-working, do-it-yourself giant, who, because of the age in which he lived—the age of the American Revolution and French Revolution tended to be secular and liberal. The Tennessee Constitution was somewhat more liberal than the North Carolina Constitution which required officeholders to believe in God and other doctrinal matters.

In addition, the Upper Cumberland pioneer was hard-drinking; even some preachers drank. Tom Blake, an early Baptist preacher in Cumberland County, both made and sold whiskey. One pious settler could cry out that he was one of only three “tee-totalers” in one Tennessee county. Robert White noted, “At the time Tennessee became a state, practically everybody drank liquor....Temperance was a theme unheard of and unthought of outside the Methodist Church.

The Upper Cumberland pioneer was very superstitious. An excellent account was given by Reverend Monroe Seals in his book on White County.

Most people then believed in witches. In one neighborhood in the lower end of the County, the children had been afflicted strangely and much stock had died. “Witches are at work,” they said. In this neighborhood was a witch doctor named Bear. He was sent for and came. He drew a picture which he called “according to the scriptures” when he molded a silver bullet for his gun, loaded the gun, saying, “I could kill her, but I’m only going to cripple her.” At a little past four o’clock in the afternoon he shot. Thirteen or fourteen miles away, in the North of the County, at the time he shot, a woman named Nancy Gunter was carrying in some wood for the night. She fell, saying “Oh, Lord I’ve stumped my toe.” It was noticed that she limped ever after this.

Vital faith, education, and time were all needed to overcome such superstition.

In the minds of some, these secular, liberal, crude, cruel, ignorant, hard-drinking superstitious characters were very irreligious. But, as historian Bernard Weisberger has observed, “The west was not lost in 1800, but it was on the verge of being save. Only it was going to be saved in the same way that it did everything else: on it’s own individualistic terms.”

Certainly the churches were trying to do every thing they could in this wild and cruel time. Frontier conditions made church work hard. In that day there were Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and a little later Church of Christ ministers and members, and they rarely faltered at the hard task. In addition, state and local governments were trying to do all they could to make the people of the frontier upright and honorable. Most counties had laws concerning the Sabbath and public worship, statutes prohibiting profane swearing, lewdness and the like, as well as strict, harsh laws concerning such things as stealing. One of the punishments for stealing was the branding a “T” on the thick part of the thumb. One of the last such brandings was in Overton County in 1832 just prior to the repeal of the law.

In spite of churches and preachers, law and civic endeavors, something else was direly needed. Brigands, blasphemers, thieves, murderers, and drunkards were everywhere. Lorenzo Dow, that eccentric Methodist whom Presbyterians claimed at times, called Tennessee that “Sink of Iniquity, a Black Pit of Irreligion.” A deeper faith was desperately needed by the people on the frontier, a faith that could speak to bottled-up emotions and fears, be authoritative without being authoritarian, and be without inhibiting theology, formal creeds or confessions. This new pathway had to be quickly and simply accessible to all, a religion without intermediaries between the individual and his God. In addition, saving faith on the frontier would have to offer a “personal experience” of redeemed life and hope, be the foundation for morality, and offer social opportunities for people long separated from each other.

At this point, James McGready, a Presbyterian minister in the Red River country of southern Kentucky, came into prominence. A revival began that caused waves to go out to the Upper Cumberland, the South, and, indeed, to all the nation. There were revivals just prior to this in other parts of the country, but this is the one that redeemed the time as far as the Southeast was concerned.

At the Red River church in June of 1800, in a sacramental service, the Revival began in a most fervent way. Four Presbyterian elders were present: McGready, Hogue, Rankin, and William McGee. Also present was John McGee, a Methodist preacher and brother to William McGee. Hogue preached the sermon on this particular day. Some say that following the sermon all the Presbyterian elders except William McGee left the meeting house and stood outside. Others claim that they remained inside, leaving in shocked wonderment only after John McGee had preached. Whatever the case, John McGee, who certainly remained inside, apparently felt the congregation needed another sermon, and since he was not the least bit inhibited, he began to preach, ultimately bouncing from bench to bench crying that everyone should submit to the "Lord Omnipotent." Others say simply that as he moved from the pulpit to shake hands with two happy old sisters, he suddenly broke into song:

Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly
Dove,
With all they quickening powers,
Kindle a flame of sacred love,
In these cold hearts of ours.

As he passed through the crowd singing, people began to fall, some as if dead. Whatever the cause and exact means, most were swept to the floor, some crying in distress for salvation, others shouting in ecstasy at having found it. The Great Revival had begun!

On moving back to Gasper River a little later, such great crowds were expected that McGready and others announced that there would be "camping on the ground." This probably was not the first "camp meeting," but McGready made it famous. These early spontaneous "camp meetings" were awesome events. They were not the product of vast advertising and planning – they just happened! The appointment would be given out, and persons would come from miles and camp for four or five days, all in an effort to hear the need and experience the hope and ecstasy of salvation.

The largest of the spontaneous "camp meetings" was set in motion by Barton Warren Stone, a Presbyterian elder, later a great leader in the Disciples - - Church of Christ - - movement. This revival, at Cane Ridge in Kentucky, began August 6, 1801, and lasted about a week. Some said 25,000 people attended! Most historians doubt this, but granting even a few thousand, it would still be fantastic for frontier days. Sometimes a number of preachers spoke - - all at the same time! The arrangement was quite convenient: the "pulpits" were scattered over all the area, and if some in the crowd did not like what one preacher or lay speaker said, they could move on to hear the "experience" of the next. The meeting began as a Presbyterian sacramental service, but ultimately most, if not all, of the frontier denominations were well represented by both parishioners and preachers. Black people were present and contributed to both singing and preaching.

The Cane Ridge meeting gave rise to phenomena called "exercises" which were, in short, physical – emotional contortions prompted by Spirit - - emotion - - suggestion. Elder Barton Warren Stone provided perhaps the most comprehensive description of these "exercises." He enumerated six kinds of bodily agitation's that went on at Cane Ridge and many subsequent "camp meetings." His list included the "jerks," the falling exercise, the dancing exercise, the barking exercise, the laughing exercise, and the singing exercise. On some occasions small trees were cut off three to four feet above the ground for jerk victims to hold on to. Others reported that the women's hair would often snap or crack like a whip as their heads jerked back and forth. The "running exercise" often resulted in the victims falling or becoming so agitated they could proceed no further. Stone said,

The singing is more unaccountable than anything I ever saw. The subject, in a very happy state of mind, would sing most melodiously, not from the mouth or nose, but from the breast entirely - - the sound issuing thence. Such music silenced everything and attracted the attention of all. It was most heavenly.

The “jerks” were not understood. Some were “ferit” and some were “agin.” Walter Brownlow Posey said, “No doubt the attitude of the preacher had to do with the presence of these exercises.... If salvation was expected to descend in a remarkable manner, he saw to it that the crowd got what it wanted.” Such exercises were evident in the Upper Cumberland even as late as the 1850’s.

The spontaneous “camp meetings” had other problems, both inside and out. There were people who simply did not want to see their wives, daughters, or sons down in those straw pens on their knees praying and moaning. Some took them out by force when necessary. The area outside the camp was most troublesome. Unscrupulous souls would bring whiskey to the camp where they would sell it - - or give it away - - to the detriment of many. In some areas, saddles were cut as well as manes and tails of horses. As one might expect, there was love-making. Some critics asserted that for a mile or more around the camp meeting the woods seemed alive with people, and that the “camp meeting begot more souls than were saved.”

One can read plenty in the above vein if he wishes, but one certain result of the Revival was the salvation of the Upper Cumberland areas of Kentucky and Tennessee. Thousands of members joined churches - - ten thousand Baptists in Kentucky in three years, six thousand Methodists in two years, and several thousand new Presbyterians. Perhaps most important of all, a moral and spiritual difference was effected in the life of the people. Many of these new converts gave serious attention to New Testament standards.

About 1803 the spontaneous camp meeting, with all of its attendant problems, came to an end. There arose instead the ordered camp meeting, basically a Methodist institution. Methodists put order, structure and methodology into what had been at times questionable endeavor. As the rest of the churches pulled away from camp meetings, the Methodists made the annual camp meeting one of their chief ways of gaining members. Ordered camp meetings continued among Methodists even to the beginning of the Civil War. Such a camp meeting in Wilson County, Tennessee, started on Friday and ended on Tuesday with every moment being accounted for. In some of these camp meetings the rowdies were kept in line by guards. In others, a benediction was given only after the final service of the meeting, for if there were no benedictions, the people were theoretically worshipping at all times, and the state law against disturbing public worship could be evoked at any hour.

One bad result of the spontaneous camp meeting was denominational friction. The movement was at first ecumenical, but then as the participating denominations began to receive members by the thousands, competition, jealousy, dissension, and antagonism arose. The almost complete tolerance at the beginning degenerated to the point that Methodists could sing:

I’ll tell you who the Lord loves
best - -
It’s the shouting Methodists.

And the Baptists would answer back:

Baptist, Baptist, Baptist - -
Baptist till I die,
I’ll go along with the Baptist
And find myself on High!

In the Upper Cumberland, in White County, Isaac Woodard was considered a champion among Methodist preachers when it came to fighting other denominations. He usually had three divisions in his sermons. The first one was for Presbyterians; he ripped them open. Division two was for the Baptists; they too suffered the same fate, especially Old Isaac Denton, his Baptist counterpart. Division three was for Methodists, and here he really waxed eloquent in a deadly verbal shootout. Of course the Baptist answered back in their revivals. One said in his sermon, “Brother, now there’s three things that God Almighty never

made and never intended should be made: a mule, a mulatto and a Methodist..." Such was the warfare between denominations.

Most, if not all, of the denominations on the frontier were modified or influenced by the Great Revival. One such result was the founding of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Frontier Presbyterian preachers had seen what Methodists could do with the doctrine of "who so ever will," and some began to lean away from a strict Calvinism to a more inclusive point of view. These same preachers practiced an enthusiastic kind of evangelism. Some of the frontier Presbyterians also thought Greek and Hebrew were not necessary for ordination. In addition, many could not accept the whole Calvinistic point of view, and in 1810, in what is now Montgomery State Park, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was organized.

The Baptist Church was also modified by the Great Revival. It became polarized into missionary and non-missionary camps. In the beginning the opposing forces - - the missionary group on one hand and the strict Calvinists on the other - - coexisted in a "live-and-let-live" world; but when the Great Revival brought thousands into the church, the groups became antagonistic. The missionary group became very active in reaching out to the unchurched. At the same time others became hyper-Calvinists and declared that unless God had predestined a soul for salvation he was lost and, in short, there was not a reason on earth to preach to a sinner.

In the Upper Cumberland, the most hyper-Calvinists preacher was Daniel Parker, who started what is known as the "two-seed" Baptist doctrine. This maintains that part of the human race is born with a "seed of God" in them and will be saved; the other part is born with the "seed of Satan" and will be lost. Parker preached in the Upper Cumberland for several years. The Caney Fork Baptist Association was quite disrupted by Parker and his preaching.

The Great Revival had tremendous influence upon the Disciples of Christ and the Church of Christ. On the frontier, especially after the Great Revival, people were sometimes troubled by two things - - the uncertainty of Calvinism's particular election and whether the "conversion experience" was real. In that day the only way the believer could know whether God had elected him was through his "experiences" of conversion." These "experiences" were sometimes open to question. Truly it could God's gift of a warm heart; on the other hand, it may have been simply one's imagination, or too many beans. One can best understand the early Disciples - - Church of Christ - - Restoration point of view if he keeps in mind that they were trying to overcome this "uncertainty." Thus the Restoration preachers rejected Calvinism. They were, or became, Arminian in approach, believing in whosoever will may become a believer. Likewise, they rejected "experience" as a determination of certainty. Hierarchies and creeds were also abandoned. There was no authority but the Bible: "where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent we are silent." This was Thomas Campbell's favorite "rule."

The Restoration preachers very simply and practically stated that one becomes a Christian at and by immersion. Baptism by immersion meant "unto the remission of sins" - - where one found forgiveness and where one entered into the church, the body of Christ, the family of God. It was by that act of obedience that one could know himself to be a Christian. In this unemotional and practical approach to religion, professing faith became a simple expression or statement of belief in Jesus Christ, not a traumatic kind of "conversion experience." This very simple approach to religion made vast inroads into the Baptist Church in particular, and also into the masses who were not part of any church.

The Disciples also believed that "whosoever will" may preach and baptize. In ancient terms, they believed in the "universal priesthood of all believers." The clergy-laity distinction was played down. The movement also hoped to restore Christianity to its pristine purity in doctrine and in practice. Its members saw communion with Christ in the Lord's Supper as a weekly observance on the Lord's Day. In addition they held to the autonomy of each local church which was seen as a family. The local church was related to other congregations only by common beliefs, brotherly love and mutual endeavors; that is, no board, organization, agency, or hierarchy stood between or above the local congregation. Some churches in this movement believed only in a cappella music; others had musical instruments.

There were many great religious leaders on the frontier - - before and after the Great Revival. Presbyterian James McGready was a product of one of the church-founded log colleges in Pennsylvania. His first pulpit was in North Carolina, where he was forced to resign (they set fire to his pulpit). On moving to Kentucky he became the igniting force of the Great Revival. Central to his thought was the belief that the purpose of preaching was the conversion of sinners. This became one of the keystones in American theology.

Issac Denton, Sr. is noteworthy as an early Baptist preacher in the Upper Cumberland. This was the man who baptized "Raccoon" John Smith, the great Church of Christ leader who in his old days could speak so kindly of Elder Denton, calling him "an humble and godly man, - - a good, godly man who did not tire his congregation." Elder Denton was a very personable and influential man in the Stockton Valley Association. It is quite possible that he could have helped in the founding of Caney Fork Baptist Church, the oldest in Putnam County.

"Uncle Bud" Robinson was a native of White County and a champion of the Holiness movement. he was born about 1860, went to Texas, was converted in a Methodist meeting, and became a Nazarene preacher. He preached all over the nation, and in his time held several meetings in the Upper Cumberland, the last being at Monterey. Bud Robinson was of limited formal education. His speaking power came from homespun wit, sincere Bible study, and, most of all, from a concern for the spiritual welfare of his fellow man.

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