

David W Fletcher, *Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest* (Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007)
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CHAPTER THREE:
RELIGIOUS APATHY AND REVIVAL ON THE SOUTHWEST FRONTIER

Apocalyptic rhetoric served little usefulness for many of the settlers in the Old Southwest, since religious attachments were far from ubiquitous in early nineteenth-century America. Frontier life better suited self-sufficiency, and the early pioneers tended to more practical concerns than the refinements of religion that they either avoided or neglected. In his *History of Middle Tennessee*, A. W. Putnam portrayed the early pioneers as obsessed with the acquisition of land and the problem of Indians, but he did not include religious life or revivals at all.¹ Many pioneers had crossed the Appalachians to get away from the strictures of law and religion, and the harshness of eking out a living and the continual hostility of the Indians weighed against any serious involvement with religious organizations. Fittingly, the Synod of Kentucky's "Narrative of Religion" in 1815 indicated "much cause to deplore the state of morals throughout our bounds and the existence of that gross darkness that rests on the minds of many."²

¹A. W. Putnam, *History of Middle Tennessee or, Life and Times of Gen. James Robertson* (1859; repr., Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), 11-16, 48-49. Compare the minimal references to religion in the political deliberations of early Tennessee governors and legislatures in Robert H. White, ed., *Messages of the Governors of Tennessee, 1796-1821*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Commission, 1952).

²Robert E. Cogswell, *Written on Many Hearts: The History of the First Presbyterian Church, Shelbyville, Bedford County, Tennessee, 1815-1965* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, n.d.), 30-31.

Protestant clergy repeatedly cited religious apathy as the chief tragedy that afflicted frontier people. In their view, thievery, drunkenness, sexual immorality, and slander tainted frontier life. One Methodist preacher in Tennessee described his circuit as “a Sink of Iniquity, a Black Pit of Irreligion.”³ James McGready, a Presbyterian minister from Logan County in southern Kentucky, lamented, “There is an host of vain, trifling amusements, such as balls, parties, merry-meetings, vain songs, frothy, unprofitable discourse, Sunday visits and diversions. Such as these fill the whole soul, and leave no room for holy things, for Godly conversations, or for Jesus Christ.”⁴ Because of this perception of a failed state of morals and religion on the frontier, Christian ministers took every opportunity to preach against what they believed to be corruption.

A good example was the practice of preaching moral lessons at public events such as civil executions. At the request of Colonel M. McClanahan, the sheriff of Rutherford County (Tennessee), Reverend Robert Henderson, pastor of the town’s Presbyterian Church, preached an execution sermon to about five thousand witnesses who had gathered on a hot summer day in 1819 to watch the hanging of a young man. Henderson titled his message “Young Men Carefully Warned Against the Danger of Bad Company and Earnestly Dissuaded from Such Company.” In somber language he warned his

³Ibid.

⁴James McGready, *The Posthumous Works of the Reverend and Pious James M’Gready, Late Minister of the Gospel, In Henderson, Kentucky*, vol. 1, ed. Rev. James Smith (Louisville: W. W. Worsley, 1831-1833), 168. See also the fine study by Christopher Waldrep, “The Making of a Border State Society: James McGready, the Great Revival, and the Prosecution of Profanity in Kentucky,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 3 (June 1994): 767-784.

listeners about the perils of associating with various types of “bad company”—evil females, the angry and quarrelsome, drunkards, the immodest and licentious, and gamblers. Although not excessive in his appeal to end-time punishment as a deterrent to inappropriate conduct in the here-and-now, the pastor did speak of eternal punishment in contrast to temporal punishment and cautioned, “Eternal misery in hell with sinful companions is often the consequence of being led astray by their society here.” To conclude, Henderson couched this forewarning with an exhortation to parents and guardians to care for and discipline their youth.⁵

Early settlers did not have much time for formal religion, but the rough nature of frontier life—its violence and disruptions—often forced the rustic pioneers to make time for religion. Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist churches took the initiative to evangelize the frontier, and each became “a strong social factor in the development of [the] new land.”⁶ Energetic clergy of these three “democratic churches” traveled widely to meet the pioneers wherever they were. But clergy typically had to combine battle against spiritual evils with battles against Indians and other threats to the pioneers. For example, Gideon Blackburn, a Presbyterian circuit rider in southwest Virginia and the Watauga settlements of East Tennessee, traveled from “fort to fort with the soldiers who were protecting the settlers from Indian attacks” with “Bible and Hymnbook, as well as knapsack and rifle” in

⁵Robert Henderson, *A Series of Sermons on Practical and Familiar Subjects*, vol. 2 (Knoxville: Heiskell and Brown, 1823), 300-316.

⁶Walter Brownlow Posey, *The Presbyterian Church in the Old Southwest, 1778-1838* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1952), 7.

hand.⁷ Charles Cummings, another Presbyterian itinerant from the Wolf Hills in Virginia (the Abingdon area), would “put on his shot-pouch, shoulder his rifle, mount his dun stallion, and ride off to church” each Sunday and preach to his congregants, “every man of which held his rifle close to his side.”⁸

Conversions were slow as these early itinerants faced the difficult challenges of greed for land and little spirituality among the settlers. But the presence of ministers in threatening circumstances generally was appreciated. When issues of life and death faced the pioneers, preachers infused a vision of hope, a bit of apocalyptic encouragement. In the fall of 1780, Samuel Doak, a Presbyterian minister who later started over twenty churches and an academy near Jonesboro in East Tennessee, mustered with militiamen just before their battle with British regulars at King’s Mountain in North Carolina. The Reverend ended his prayer for the men with the rally cry, “The sword of the Lord and of Gideon,” to which the men replied, “The sword of the Lord and our Gideons.”⁹

After the battle, the soldiers returned to their homes and became preoccupied with duties of frontier life. Spiritual matters had little staying power and got crowded out. This shift away from spiritual consciousness affected the frontier and the nation generally. Some credit the decline in religion after the Revolution to “demoralization of the war”

⁷Virginia W. Alexander and Charles C. Alexander, *Historic Ebenezer (Reese’s Chapel) Presbyterian Church and Cemetery: Maury County, Columbia, Tennessee* (Columbia, Tennessee: Mrs. Paul McAnally, 1968), 62.

⁸Posey, *Presbyterian Church in the Old Southwest*, 19.

⁹Lyman C. Draper, *King’s Mountain and Its Heroes: History of the Battle of King’s Mountain, October 7th, 1780, and the Events Which Led To It* (1881; repr., Marietta, Georgia: Continental Book Company, 1954), 176.

and “spread of a rationalistic spirit.”¹⁰ Whatever the exact reasons, due to a sense of worldliness and neglect of religious duties, the General Assembly’s pastoral letter of 1789 warned with “deep concern” that “the Eternal God has a controversy with our nation, and is about to visit us in his sore displeasure.”¹¹ This echoing of the New England colonial jeremiads captured the seriousness of the situation to Presbyterian leaders.

Early Methodist preachers faced comparable difficulties. Benjamin Ogden, a Revolutionary War veteran from North Carolina, moved from Kentucky to Tennessee in 1787 to preach at the Cumberland settlements in Davidson, Robertson, and Sumner counties. He followed a typical Methodist approach for evangelizing the unchurched and organized converts first as “classes” and then as “religious societies” that eventually evolved into churches.¹² But Methodist communions remained small, and even by 1800 Kentucky and Tennessee had only six circuits with about twenty-five hundred members.¹³ Church leaders attributed this partly to lack of interest in religion, but others put blame on

¹⁰Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, vol. 1 (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1963), 126.

¹¹Posey, *Presbyterian Church in the Old Southwest*, 21.

¹²Herman A. Norton, *Religion in Tennessee, 1777-1945* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 15.

¹³Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America, Beginning in 1766, and Continued till 1809 . . .* (Baltimore: Magill and Cleine, 1810), 280-281.

James O’Kelly, an Irish immigrant and Methodist minister in North Carolina, and his schismatic “Republican” Methodists.¹⁴

America’s first Methodist bishop, Francis Asbury, also had a slow go of it on the frontier. He preached at Nelson’s Chapel near Jonesboro in May 1788. He passed near Elizabethton a few years later and received hospitality from Presbyterians there. He noted, “I must give the Presbyterians the preference for respect to ministers. We prayed, and came on to a kind people; but to our sorrow we find it low times for religion on Holston and Watauga Rivers.”¹⁵ Although travel through the wilderness presented dangers, Asbury confided in the fact that “we have formed a company . . . who are well armed and mounted. . . . If reports be true, there is danger in journeying through the wilderness; but I do not fear—we go armed. If God suffer Satan to drive the Indians on us; if it be his will, he will teach our hands to war, and our fingers to fight and conquer.”¹⁶ Asbury and his company survived the dangers, and the first Methodist conference met in Tennessee at Nelson’s Chapel in the spring of 1793. Not to be discouraged, Asbury

¹⁴See James B. North, *Union in Truth: An Interpretive History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1994), 13-19.

¹⁵Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, vol. 1, edited by Elmer T. Clark, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 753.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 754. Compare the impressions of Lorenzo Dow, a Methodist itinerant from Connecticut, when he set out for Nashville in the summer of 1803: “It turned in my mind how when I was in Ireland somebody would frequently be robbed or murdered one day and I would travel the same way the day before or the day after, and yet was preserved and brought back in peace; and the same God is as able to preserve me here and deliver me now as then—immediately I felt the power of faith to put my confidence in God; at the same time I observed the Indians.” *Life and Travels of Lorenzo Dow, Written by Himself, in Which Are Contained Some Singular Providences of God* (Hartford, Connecticut: Lincoln & Gleason, 1804), 295.

observed, “We have only four or five families of Methodists here. We had sweet peace in our conference.”¹⁷

Two years later Asbury had a good conference on Nolachucky River with twenty-three ministers, and he preached to about two hundred in the Watauga region the following year.¹⁸ Slow growth among the settlers hardly dispirited the hopeful Asbury. In East Tennessee again in the spring of 1797, he recorded:

I am of opinion it is as hard, or harder, for the people of the west to gain religion as any other. When I consider where they came from, where they are, and how they are, and how they are called to go farther, their being unsettled, with so many objects to take their attention, with the health and good air they enjoy; and 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 some or many do not eventually lose their souls.¹⁹

In the fall of 1800, Asbury made his first trip to Nashville with his tiny entourage and William McKendree, a presiding elder from Virginia. On his initial visit to “West Tennessee,” Asbury preached to over one thousand people. The next day he attended the conclusion of a four-day “sacramental solemnity” at Drake’s Creek meetinghouse about two miles from Saundersville in Sumner County. Presbyterian ministers Thomas Craighead, William Hodge, John Rankin, and William McGee conducted the festivities where Asbury “witnessed scenes of deep interest.”²⁰ Response to the gospel exceeded

¹⁷Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, vol. 1, 753.

¹⁸Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, vol. 2, 48, 83.

¹⁹Ibid., 125.

²⁰Ibid., 256-257. Compare his *Journal and Letters*, vol. 3, 201.

anything he had seen in East Tennessee. Religious fervor gripped the frontier; the Great Revival of 1800 had begun.²¹

Various causes for the outbreak of revival in the early nineteenth-century have been argued. Some have stressed the ongoing struggle between Calvinism—its biblical convictions, its apocalyptic prospect of America as “the potential scene of the millennium”—and the pervasive rationalism immortalized by the nation’s founders. After the turn of the century, the nation “seemed to be losing its revolutionary fervor and commitment.” The country struggled “to develop its own institutions and sense of direction.” Most unnerving was “the philosophical conflict between the world view of the Calvinists and the new Enlightenment rationalists. The former stressed man’s depravity and untrustworthiness; the latter (called deists) stressed his innate goodness, free will, and reasonableness.”²² This view certainly fit with the origin of enthusiasm on the frontier through Calvinistic ministers like David Rice, known to many as “the father of the Presbyterian Church in Kentucky,” and two revivalists who emigrated from Orange

²¹The revivals apparently received little notice outside religious circles. “Four Kentucky newspapers publishing five hundred issues between 1788 and 1804 did not mention the revivals.” Posey, *Presbyterian Church in the Old Southwest*, 25. The *Tennessee Gazette* in Nashville likewise omitted mention of the revivals from 1800 to 1804, although not all issues of the first year are extant. See Guy Harry Stewart, *History and Bibliography of Middle Tennessee Newspapers, 1799-1876* (PhD diss.; Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1957), 137-138.

²²William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 98-99.

County, North Carolina in the 1790s—James McGready and Barton Stone.²³ But common people possessed little knowledge of rationalism and its prevailing world view except as they picked up these ideas from speeches, legal edicts, or popular sayings and proverbs.

Impetus for the revivals more likely came “from below” or from the people themselves. After all, *they* responded to the fiery messages of the spirit-driven evangelists, and *they* attended the camp meetings en masse. Richard McNemar, a Presbyterian minister who came to Kentucky from Pennsylvania in 1795 and participated in the Kentucky revivals, specifically credited the role of children. He noted:

The work is still increasing in Cumberland. . . . It is in Nashville, Barren, Muddy, Gasper, Redbanks, Knoxville, &c. Children and all seem to be engaged; but children are the most active in the work. When they speak, it appears that the Lord sends his Spirit, to accompany it with power to the hearts of sinners. They all seem to be wrought in an extraordinary way; lie as though they were dead for some time, without pulse or breath; some longer, some shorter time. Some rise with joy and triumph; others crying for mercy. As soon as they get comfort, they cry to sinners, exhorting day and night to turn to the Lord.²⁴

McNemar more importantly viewed the revivals as apocalyptic. He believed they were sent by God not to reform the churches but to usher in the kingdom of God. McNemar thought the revivals indicated “a near prospect of the true kingdom of God, into which many were determined to press.” In reference to the religious fervor that occurred near

²³On their roles in the revivals in response to the dismal state of religion on the frontier, especially Rice and McGready, see Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 145-159.

²⁴Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival; or, a Short History of the Late Extraordinary Outpouring of the Spirit of God in the Western States of America, Agreeably to Scripture Promises and Prophecies concerning the Latter Day . . .* (repr.; New York: Edward O. Jenkins, 1846), 20.

Lexington, Kentucky, at Cane Ridge in 1801, he noted, “The late revival was not sent to re-form the churches. It did not come with a piece of new cloth to patch the old garment, to mend up the old hope with some new experience; but to prepare the way for that kingdom of God, in which all things are new.”²⁵

If some revival leaders seemed certain about the meaning of the evangelistic enthusiasm, others seemed puzzled about the extravagant and unusual work of the Holy Spirit that they witnessed. To them it was anything but contrived and quite inexplicable. Jesse Lee, the Methodist clergyman from Virginia who penned the first history of American Methodism, was able to ascertain generally the time of the beginning of the revivals. But he conceded, “I never could learn whether they began in the upper parts of South Carolina, in Tennessee, or in Kentucky. However, I believe they took place through necessity, and without design; and that there was no plan laid for them in the beginning.”²⁶ Samuel K. Jennings, a medical doctor and Methodist Episcopal Church minister from Baltimore, agreed that “the blessed effects of Camp-Meetings were discovered as if by accident.” In defense of the revivals he suggested, “But the discovery being made, those who were deeply interested in repairing *the walls and temple of the spiritual city of our God*, repeated the meetings with the happiest consequences.”²⁷

²⁵Ibid., 5.

²⁶Lee, *Short History of the Methodists*, 279.

²⁷Samuel K. Jennings, *A Defence of the Camp Meetings (North America) in Six Objections, Stated and Answered . . .* (Liverpool: H. Forshaw, 1806), 35.

Jennings, like McNemar, imbued the revivals with apocalyptic meaning. In the preface to his *Defence of the Camp Meetings*, he reminded his readers of the cosmic struggle between good and evil: “Light and darkness must for ever stand opposed to each other. If either prevail, in proportion to its prevalence, the other must disappear. The kingdom of righteousness and true holiness must for ever be opposed to the kingdom of Satan, or the wicked inclinations of men. Every man is subject to one or other of these powers.”²⁸ By using classic Christian rhetoric that expressed a dichotomy, Jennings left no doubt about which side of the struggle—an apocalyptic conflict—he championed in his defense of the revivals.

Other promoters of the revivals were more subtle in their analysis of the phenomena. They believed the void in religious experience on the frontier finally reached its limit for unknown reasons. Revivals filled that void, and the evangelists who had grown weary of the people’s indifference to things spiritual gladly obliged the change. Barton Stone, a Presbyterian revivalist who moved to the Southwest frontier from North Carolina in the late 1790s, reflected on this development in his *Christian Messenger*:

Towards the close of the eighteenth century, there was an unusual death in the professors of religion throughout the western country both among the preachers and the people. In the commencement of the present century, the more pious became seriously alarmed at the prevalence of vice and the declension of vital piety. They agreed to meet often in prayer to God to revive religion, which appeared ready to die.²⁹

²⁸Ibid., 9.

²⁹Barton W. Stone, “History of the Christian Church in the West,” *Christian Messenger*, vol. 1 (24 February 1827), quoted in Hoke Smith Dickinson, ed., *The Cane Ridge Reader* (Paris, Kentucky: Cane Ridge Preservation Project, 1972), 1.

But if Stone could not pinpoint precisely the human agencies of the revivals, he did not waver in his convictions about their divine source: “Their prayers reached the ears of the Lord; *he answered by fire*, for he poured out his spirit in a way almost miraculous. This powerful work was first experienced in Tennessee, and in the lower parts of [Kentucky], among the Presbyterians, in the summer or fall of 1800.”³⁰

Stone had been influenced deeply by two revivalists—William Hodge and James McGready—at Guilford Academy in North Carolina, and he felt acutely the need for greater spirituality on the frontier. After his ordination in 1796, he traveled to Tennessee and saw firsthand the apathy among the “religious societies.” His depiction of the revivals epitomized his own internal struggle with Satan and the “danger” inherent in an unregenerate world. Concerning the curious “bodily agitations or exercises” that affected the masses, he said, “I have seen many a pious person fall in the same way from a sense of the danger of their unconverted children, brothers, or sisters—from a sense of the danger of their neighbors, and of the sinful world. I have heard them agonizing in tears and strong crying for mercy to be shown to sinners, and speaking like angels to all around.”³¹

The gospel that Stone and other revivalists preached put emphasis on personal salvation rather than any global or cosmic redemption. For Stone, salvation of the world could not happen without salvation of the individual. For this reason he lamented the competition and distress among the Christian denominations. “Who shall be the greatest

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Barton W. Stone, *The Biography of B. W. Stone, Written by Himself* (1847; repr., Cincinnati: Restoration Reprint Library, n.d.), 39-40.

seemed to be the spirit of the contest—the salvation of a ruined world was no longer the burden, and the spirit of prayer in mourning took its flight from the breasts of many preachers and people,” he opined.³² But Stone did not fail to place the lack of concern for the unsaved and the need for genuine spirituality among the masses in its universal perspective. One of his revival hymns expressed this poignantly:

O, how I long to see the hour
When sin and death shall lose their power!
When all the world, both great and small,
Shall own thee Sov'reign Lord of all!

Thou bleeding Lamb—thou mighty God!
O, spread thy conquests far abroad!
Thy kingdom come, exalt thy fame,
Let all the world bow to thy name!

Shout, Christians, shout the Lord has come!
Prepare, prepare to make him room!
On earth he reigns, we feel him near!
The signs of glory now appear!³³

This expectation of Stone followed postmillennial theology that envisioned the kingdom of God to be set up on earth. As Elder John Rogers, Stone's contemporary and biographer, observed, “It was in 1804 that the glorious era dawned, which is to witness the regeneration of the world.” This was the year Stone and other Kentucky ministers dissolved affiliation with Presbyterianism and issued their “Last Will and Testament of

³²Ibid., 46.

³³Ibid., 316-317.

the Springfield Presbytery.”³⁴ But this intense anticipation of the world’s regeneration and a “glorious era” of salvation on the frontier did not come without serious prodding.

At Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia some years earlier (Fig. 3.1), Joseph Alleine’s *Alarm to Unconverted Sinners*³⁵ sparked a spiritual fire and resulted in the sudden conversion of students Cary Allen, James Blythe, William Hill, and Clement Read who were castigated as fanatics by fellow students. In this awakening of the late 1780s, Reverend Blair Smith, the president of the college, mediated the dispute and kept the revival fires burning by inviting the young men to join him in his parlor for prayer and study. President Smith’s efforts touched many including James McGready, a newly licensed Presbyterian minister who was traveling from Pennsylvania to North Carolina in the fall of 1788. McGready was deeply affected by what he heard and saw at the college and took these impressions with him to his pastorate in North Carolina and later to the Kentucky frontier.³⁶

Unlike his convert and co-revivalist William Hodge who emphasized God’s grace in his preaching, McGready adopted a hellfire approach in his evangelistic efforts. In apocalyptic fashion he argued like a “son of thunder” that biblical images of hell such as

³⁴Ibid., 408.

³⁵Alleine (1634-1668), an English Nonconformist divine and contemporary of John Wesley’s grandfather, left his puritan mark on England and America with the publication and subsequent circulation of his *Alarm to Unconverted Sinners* . . . (repr., London: C. Dilly, T. N. Longman, and T. Wiche, 1797).

³⁶Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, vol. 1, 128-130.

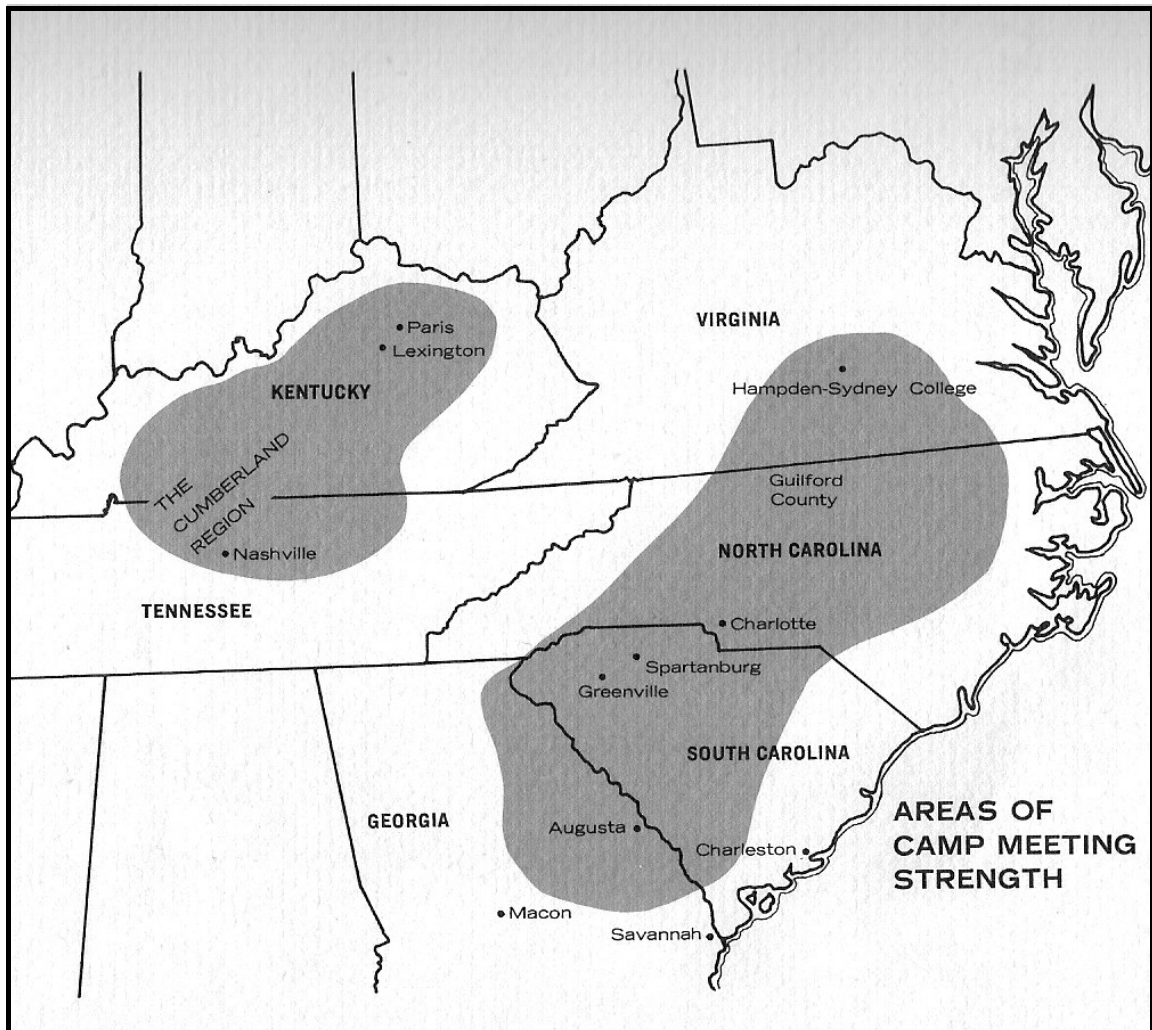


Fig. 3.1. Areas of camp meeting strength. John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), inside front cover.

“lake of fire” and “bottomless pit” should not be taken literally. For McGready, divine punishment in hell would be much worse! He preached:

It is equally impossible in the present state, to form just conceptions of the torments of hell, which are prepared by a holy God for impenitent sinners. We shall suppose that all the pains and torments that ever were endured, by all the human bodies which ever existed upon the earth, were inflicted on one person; add to this ten thousand times the horror endured by Spira, yet all this would not

bear the same comparison to the torments of the damned in hell, that the scratch of a pin will do to a sword run through a man's vitals.³⁷

Due to the severity of eternal punishment, McGready believed God saved sinners "by power, for he plucks them as brands from the burning, in the day of their conversion to God; he snatches them out of the jaws of the roaring Lion of hell." McGready repeatedly affirmed to his parishioners that God had saved millions "from the jaws of the roaring Lion of hell."³⁸

Because of apocalyptic invectives like this to churchgoers at Stony Creek, North Carolina, especially against the common and favorite entertainments of horse racing and gambling, McGready became unpopular. After rabble rousers broke benches in his meetinghouse, burned the pulpit, and threatened him with a letter written in blood, he felt the inspiration to leave suddenly for the West. In 1796, McGready received and accepted a call to the Gasper, Muddy, and Red River churches in Logan County in southwest Kentucky and went to preach his hellfire brand of gospel on the frontier.³⁹

In Kentucky during the summers of 1798 and 1799, McGready sensed the evil mood of the moment and exhorted his congregations to fervent prayer on Saturdays and Sundays to prepare for Pentecost, repentance, and redemption. In doing this, McGready acted on the General Assembly's request that a day be devoted to fasting, humiliation,

³⁷McGready, *Posthumous Works*, vol. 1, 63.

³⁸Ibid., 24, 40.

³⁹Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, vol. 1, 131.

and prayer to bring the people of the West back from “Egyptian darkness.”⁴⁰ But McGready, a tall man with dark eyes and a stubborn manner, went beyond the directive and inveighed against the lack of vibrancy in the frontier churches. His message did not go unnoticed, as parishioners broke free from the bonds of liturgical restraint and experienced with full emotions the awfulness of the prospect of eternal damnation. The revivalist vividly remembered:

Presently several persons under deep conviction broke forth into a loud outcry—many fell to the ground, lay powerless, groaning, praying and crying for mercy. As I passed through the multitude, a woman, lying in awful distress called me to her. Said she, “I lived in your congregation in Carolina; I was a professor, and often went to the communion; but I was deceived; I have no religion; I am going to hell.”

In another place an old, gray-headed man lay in an agony of distress, addressing his weeping wife and children in such language as this: “We are all going to hell together; we have lived prayerless, ungodly lives; the work of our souls is yet to begin; we must get religion, or we will all be damned.”⁴¹

According to McGready, many such incidents of apocalyptic distress occurred. “Time would fail me to mention every instance of this kind,” he figured.

In the summer of 1800, enthusiasm spread and broke out in several of the Cumberland settlements in Tennessee. McGready had realized the importance of the dawn of a new century and the spread of revival fervor as part of apocalyptic expectations. “The year 1800,” he wrote, “exceeds all that my eyes ever beheld upon earth. All that I have related is only, as it were, an introduction. . . . All that work is only like a few drops before a mighty rain, when compared with the wonders of Almighty

⁴⁰Posey, *Presbyterian Church in the Old Southwest*, 21.

⁴¹McGready, *Posthumous Works*, vol. 1, xi.-xii.

Grace, that took place in the year 1800.”⁴² To facilitate this spread of evangelistic fervor, several members from the Shiloh Church in Sumner County had attended the revivals in Kentucky and were converted.

When they returned home, they became like “fire in dry stubble” among their neighbors.⁴³ On his travels to the area, Stone recalled receiving en route “an account of a wonderful meeting at Shiloh in Tennessee—that many had been struck down as dead, and continued for hours apparently breathless, and afterwards rose, praising God for his saving mercy—that the saints were all alive—and sinners all around weeping and crying for mercy—and that multitudes were converted and rejoicing in God.”⁴⁴ This seemed all the more remarkable, since many of the Tennesseans had attended the sacramental meeting at Gasper River out of “great curiosity to see the work, yet prepossessed with strong prejudices against it.”⁴⁵

By early fall, revivals or “Sacraments” occurred regularly in the Cumberland settlements of Sumner County. Gatherings of the church for protracted sacramental meetings with accompanying celebrations were not anything new but followed established Presbyterian traditions. By calling these gatherings, Presbyterian ministers

⁴²Ibid., xii.

⁴³B. W. McDonnold, *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Board of Publication of Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1899), 13-14.

⁴⁴Stone, “History of the Christian Church in the West,” quoted in Dickinson, *Cane Ridge Reader*, 1.

⁴⁵McGready, *Posthumous Works*, vol. 1, xiv. Compare McDonnold, *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church*, 13.

modeled a seventeenth-century practice in Scotland where Presbyterians traveled long distances to observe the Lord's Supper. These gatherings blended entertainment and social events with solemn religious rituals in open-air festivities that often exhibited "a carnival atmosphere."⁴⁶

Not everyone in the Cumberland region agreed with the purpose and proceedings of these camp meetings. For example, on the Red River northwest of Gallatin, Reverends Craighead and Rankin of Nashville assisted in a sacramental camp meeting at Robert Shaw's that was hosted by McGready and William McGee, the minister of Shiloh Church. According to John McGee, the older brother of William and a Methodist preacher himself, one dissenter at this gathering "got mad, cursed the people, and said he would go home, but before he got out of sight of the camp-ground, a tree fell on him, and he was carried home dead."⁴⁷

In September at Blythe's Big Spring on Desha's Creek, another meeting brought together Presbyterian and Methodist clergy "in a blaze of fraternity."⁴⁸ Since Presbyterian ministers typically hosted these meetings as sacramental gatherings to observe the Lord's Supper, the Baptists normally did not participate due to their strict practice of "closed"

⁴⁶James H. Moorhead, "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery from the Perspective of Presbyterian History," *Discipliana* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2004), 35.

⁴⁷Walter T. Durham, *The Great Leap Westward: A History of Sumner County, Tennessee from Its Beginnings to 1805* (Gallatin, Tennessee: Sumner County Public Library Board, 1969), 166.

⁴⁸John Abernathy Smith, *Cross and Flame: Two Centuries of United Methodism in Middle Tennessee* (Nashville: Commission on Archives and History of the Tennessee Conference, 1984), 49.

communion. A few Baptists occasionally attended the camp meetings and received censure as a result.⁴⁹ But Presbyterian and Methodist communicants responded marvelously, as the meeting lasted four days and nights and, according to John McGee, “many thousands of people attended.” McGee colorfully recounted, “The people fell before the word like corn before a storm of wind, and many rose from the dust with divine glory shining in their countenances.”⁵⁰

One Methodist who benefitted from the revival at Desha’s Creek was John Grenade who had come to Tennessee from North Carolina in 1798. Because he had rejected an earlier call to preach, Grenade was stricken by fits of depression. He attended the Presbyterian sacrament and there “obtained deliverance from bondage. . . . Heaven was pictured upon the face of the happy man, and his language, as though learned in a new world, was apparently superhuman. He spoke of angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, and dwelt with rapture upon the fulness and freeness of the gospel of Christ for the salvation of a lost world.”⁵¹ The camp meeting with its appeal to apocalyptic imagery touched and changed Grenade, and he became an effective but perhaps erratic preacher.

⁴⁹Walter Brownlow Posey, *The Baptist Church in the Lower Mississippi Valley, 1776-1845* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1957), 55-56; O. W. Taylor, *Early Tennessee Baptists, 1769-1832* (Nashville: Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, 1957), 155.

⁵⁰Quoted in John B. M’Ferrin, *History of Methodism in Tennessee*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Publishing House of the M. E. Church, South, 1888), 296.

⁵¹John Carr, *Early Times in Middle Tennessee* (1857; repr., Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1958), 56-57.

In October, another extended meeting at McGee's Beech Church on Drake's Creek drew substantial crowds and notable Presbyterian and Methodist divines. Francis Asbury, who had visited Nashville for the first time the day before, saw the excitement throughout the night and noted:

Yesterday, and especially during the night, were witnessed scenes of deep interest. . . . The *stand* was in the open air, embosomed in a wood of lofty beech trees. The ministers of God, Methodists and Presbyterians, united their labours and mingled with the childlike simplicity of primitive times. Fires blazing here and there dispelled the darkness and the shouts of the redeemed captives, and the cries of precious souls struggling into life, broke the silence of midnight. The weather was delightful; as if heaven smiled, whilst mercy flowed in abundant streams of salvation to perishing sinners.⁵²

Asbury evidently noticed but did not elaborate on the physical phenomena associated with the frontier revivals—the screams for mercy, the cries of penitence, the moans of sorrow, and the shouts of thanksgiving. Amazing and unusual things—with apocalyptic implications—happened to people during the excitement of the camp meetings. They were slain in the Holy Spirit; they had uncontrollable bodily movements; they got the “jerks.”⁵³

With the coming of the revivals and their peculiar phenomena to the early nineteenth-century frontier, the significance of apocalyptic ideas heightened. Apocalyptic imagery had played a subsidiary role in early efforts of frontier preachers to convert the general populace. Ministers like McGready and Stone certainly made use of traditional Christian teachings about the end of time and a person's eternal destiny to motivate and convict, but they gave priority to teachings about personal salvation and right living. This

⁵²Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, vol. 2, 257.

⁵³For a vivid description, see in Appendix B the memoirs of Thomas Calhoun, who served as a minister in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church from 1810 to 1855.

was true because religion itself was not an engaging objective for most settlers. The revivals changed that in two ways.

First, the revivals promoted interdenominational cooperation and broke down some of the theological barriers that separated the major Protestant churches. Concerns of regional or global import replaced local, sectarian considerations. Second, the revivals advanced a religion of emotional rather than rational experience. For many, the logic of the creed and doctrinal correctness gave way to the feelings of the moment and personal testimony. This altered the way apocalyptic ideas were used and understood. For some, the excitement of the revivals and their phenomena indicated the arrival of the kingdom of God and the establishment of utopian society. Others, who felt obligated to creedal teachings, cautioned against extreme revival practices and thinking. This led invariably to fragmentation within major faith groups like the Presbyterians and the formation of new faith groups. The economy of American religious pluralism was alive and well on the frontier, and apocalyptic ideas played an influential role in this religious formation.