

# CIRCUIT RIDERS AND CAMP MEETINGS

by Dr. Ben Witherington

## 1. Periodic Panaceas

Circuit riders and camp meetings - these were the staple items in the diet of the Methodist Church during the time of its most spectacular growth, the 19th century. Since we are now asking ourselves how we may once again grow, it may prove useful to examine the means used in previous eras. Thus, in this series we will focus on two means once used to promote church growth in the hopes that they may yet again lead us down the right path.

The first thing one notices about circuit riders and camp meetings is how intermittent their presence was. A family, even in the heyday of camp meetings would not likely have gone to more than two a year. Circuit riders, especially west of the Appalachians, were unlikely to see any given settlement more than once a month, and many had two month circuits. This suggests that the effect circuit riders and camp meetings had on members' spiritual formation was that of a catalyst or rejuvenator.

Outside the major cities, especially in the first half of the 19th century, people got their religion in strong and powerful, but periodic, doses. The circuit rider knew that every sermon had to be "preached for a verdict" and every camp meeting had to be treated as a golden opportunity to reach the people for Christ. This produced a religious fervor in the traveling preacher that often reached fever pitch. When one is convinced that but for *this* one sermon or *this* one camp meeting, souls are on the way to hell, it tends to make one take the task at hand very seriously.

There was not a lot of variety in camp meeting preaching, but there was earnestness. There was a concentration on conversion or revival preaching, not on nurture or how to live the day to day Christian life. Yet, at the end of the camp meeting week, the family went back to their farm and would be left "to work out their salvation with fear and trembling" on their own.

Doubtless, this was a lopsided approach but it certainly produced results. Today's preaching tends to focus mainly on nurture and growth. We seem to assume that we are preaching to the *converted* who already know the essentials of how to come to Christ, to experience the new birth, to be, as Wesley said, "an altogether and not just an almost" Christian.

Perhaps we preachers fear it might be taken as an insult to tell longtime Church members, who are decent and honest folks, that even they must be born of God. Whatever the reasons for the insufficient stress today on conversion and justification, it may be time for the pendulum to swing back to these basics of the faith. To our laudable stress on sanctification and Christian growth must once more be added a call to the crisis experience which brings about new creatures in Christ. Such a stress may again bring new life to Methodism.

## **2. The Long and Winding Road**

Long before Peter Cartwright was born, and before Francis Asbury mounted his first horse, there were already circuit riders in this country who called themselves Methodists. It appears that Methodism really got its permanent start here when various Irish Methodists, such as Robert Strawbridge, immigrated to the U.S. They settled up and down the east coast from New York to Frederick County, Maryland. I use the word 'settled' loosely, for persons like Strawbridge, once they built a home for their families, were soon out on the long and winding road.

The roots of Methodist circuit riding stretch back into the 1760s and before that if one counts the work of George Whitefield, before that. The first preachers were neither ordained clergy nor even authorized or appointed by Wesley.

Thus, when Asbury arrived in 1771 with Richard Wright he found a movement already in motion. Between the time of his arrival and the 1784 Christmas Conference, Asbury spent his time organizing and consolidating, correcting and regulating "the connexion" of Methodist lay preachers who were out there doing their own thing. With the exception of the Revolutionary War years, he rode 4000 or more miles a year on horseback surveying the work of the circuit riders. No one could match Asbury for traveling zeal. Methodist preachers came to accept his leadership probably because he made so many sacrifices to build up and organize the connection.

Some circuit riders did approach Asbury's traveling record. James Finley of Ohio rode to 32 places in one month covering numerous counties. He would minister to as many as 1000 people on a given trip.

To say the least, circuit riders were rugged individualists. Thus, Asbury's organizing efforts were made difficult by the fact that they did not like being told what to do or how to do it. When Asbury went to see Strawbridge to suggest he stop serving the Lord's Supper until ordination became a reality, Strawbridge was outraged. However, he apparently just smiled and went on his way doing just as he had done before. But in time, all came to respect Asbury as the master organizer

of American Methodism. By his hands, the church, with ordained clergy, became a reality in 1784 and moved toward the 19th century.

### 3. Colorful Characters

Methodist circuit riders in the 19th century were by no means alone on the backwoods trails. There were Presbyterians and Baptists who rode the circuits. But only Methodism had the connectional system that made possible getting the maximum benefit out of circuit preaching and, later, camp meetings.

It has been said, "The Methodists preached a message to the common man and used the common man to preach it." The feeling on the frontier was that Methodist preachers were "one of us." They could identify with the hardships of life endured in the wilderness. For whatever reason, Methodists did not follow the route of the Presbyterian early in the 19th century, that is, insist on a highly educated and more stationary clergy. The result was that Methodism reached more people and identified with those people perhaps better than any other Protestant group at that time. Indeed, Methodists were famous and infamous for the lengths they would go to reach a settler.

Richard Nolley was one famous for finding the isolated settlers west of the Appalachians. He once came upon a family just unpacking their wagon. Recognizing the black hat and long black riding coat, the settler exclaimed, "What, another Methodist preacher! We left Virginia and Georgia to escape the Methodists!" Nolley replied, "You had better make peace with the Methodists - there will be some in both heaven and hell!"

Without question circuit riders were often colorful characters. Take Lorenzo Dow of Connecticut who liked to stand in the pulpit and proclaim the latest news from hell, or James Axley, a ventriloquist, who often liked to have a dialogue from the pulpit with an imaginary person seated in the back pew. Once he tried this at General Conference with good results. By throwing his voice, he had an imaginary speaker complain that too many Methodist preachers were dressed up like dandys. Axley himself turned around and surveyed the various preachers dressed in fine clothes. He then answered the imaginary complainer, "If you please, sir, we will just drop the subject." But the point was made.

What we discover about circuit riders is that they were the only "show" in town and if showmanship could draw a crowd, then they were happy to be "fools for Christ." To lonely people in isolated areas, they were one part newspaper, one part entertainment, one part tall-tale teller, and of course, one part preacher. In short, they were a breath of fresh air, a moral uplifter, and a bit of all things to all people.

Circuit riders knew they had a captive audience. Thus, Benjamin Abbott would say from the pulpit, "Lord, begin the work now, begin it in this place, begin just there" and he would point his long finger at a particular member with telling effects.

#### 4. "A Hit Dog Hollers"

There were various ways the circuit riders produced the effects they did on an audience. Sometimes it was the message, sometimes the medium. Thus, we hear of James Finley banging on the door of a wilderness home in foul winter weather. The mistress of the house was not predisposed to admitting the soaking stranger, but she finally consented to allow him to warm his hands by the fire. Once safely in front of the fire, Finley began singing one powerful hymn after another in a deep, rich voice. By the time he had finished his third hymn, the lady told her servants to bed down the horse and feed the preacher well. This was 'singing for your supper' - 19th century style.

Consider the case of the revolutionary soldier who went to hear a particularly loud, gravelly-voice Methodist preacher. After a few minutes of thunder from the pulpit, he cried out from the last bench, "Quarter, quarter, I never heard such canonading as this; I yield, I yield!" With these words he came running to the altar. The means might be grating, the message blunt (repent or go to hell), but it was effective. People were forced to make a decision about the direction of their life, and their priorities.

Then there was William McKendree, elected in 1808 as the first native American Methodist Bishop. McKendree had served in the Continental Army, was converted in 1787, and was sent to Kentucky in 1799 to supervise the Methodist work there. McKendree knew the seamier side of frontier life and had a real nose for graft and corruption. When he saw a shyster in his congregation whom he knew was taking advantage of vulnerable settlers, he would preach about *his* sin of extortion, theft, or fraud. One suspect in question came unglued and shouted out, "Even if I did sell them corn for a dollar a bushel, I gave them a year to pay for it!" This came to be called "a hit dog hollers." The direct method had convicted another soul.

Finally, the mere presence of some circuit riders made a lasting impression. In 1799, Jesse Lee of North Carolina fame and three other preachers went to the general store after Annual Conference and all stood on the same feed scale. The total - 976 pounds - nearly 250 pounds per man. I am reminded of the words of a former luminary in our Conference who once said, "Whenever I want to see a big man, I just look in the mirror."

Many circuit riders were big men - most produced big effects. But it was not without a high cost. In the first 100 years, the average age of mortality for circuit riders was in the 40s. During Asbury's tenure as Bishop, the salary was \$64 per year across the board from Bishop to the newest preacher. Here were preachers who gave all in the service of their King. Their earthly rewards may have been few, but their heavenly reward made it all worthwhile.

## **5. The First Camp Meetings**

In 1796 a cry had gone up in both Europe and America - 'Let us pray for revival!' After the Revolutionary War the churches were noted for their coldness, both physical and spiritual. Thus there was a great need for revitalization and when it came in 1797, it came with a bang. In part, revival through camp meeting was made possible thanks to two treaties with the Indians which made travel and open air meetings relatively safe as far west as the Mississippi.

The man usually credited with beginning the revival was a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian named James McGready. He was rough and ready; not a polished preacher. McGready stressed the new birth, knowing its signs and recognizing its coming. No theologian, rather he was a moralist with religious fervour. McGready was run out of the Carolinas for "running people distracted and divesting them from their necessary vocations." Opposition became so strong that McGready got a letter signed in blood saying, leave the Carolinas or else!

Leave he did at age 38 in 1796 for three small churches in Logan County, Kentucky. His revival there began in 1797 and soon spread to all his churches by June, 1800. Many people were either swooning or shouting wildly under the impact of his preaching.

It was in July, 1800 at Gaspar Church that the first true camp meeting took place. The meeting was announced in advance and 13 wagon loads of people arrived coming from as much as 100 miles away. This meeting in turn led to the most famous of the meetings in August, 1801 in Bourbon County, Kentucky at Cane Ridge. It was planned by a McGready convert named Barton Stone in conjunction with various Baptists and Methodists. About 147 wagon loads of people filled the camp meeting.

Thus, the great Kentucky Revival began, a movement which, when Asbury got involved, was "regularized". It was exported back to the east with amazing effectiveness. Next we will look at the structure of these camp meetings.

## **6. Circle the Wagons**

Without question, the heyday of camp meetings was in the period

1800-1860. During the course of this period the meetings came to have certain characteristic features. For instance, in the early years, the camp meeting would last some 7 - 8 days and be an ecumenical venture. Asbury shortened this to a 4 day venture when he exported it back to the east because he knew city folk were not such a captive audience.

There were three basic patterns to the camp meetings - square, horseshoe, or the one Asbury preferred, circular. In the circular pattern there would be an outer ring of wagons, inside of which would be a circle of tents with fires in front of each tent. Inside this circle there would be the meeting area which included a partition down the middle to separate the men from the women. Here also was a platform with a pulpit for the preacher.

In the early meetings, preaching continued in shifts throughout the night. One Methodist invention was the mourner's bench, so called because those who needed to repent and deal with guilt also needed a place to go other than the altar. When ready for total commitment to Christ, then they could approach the altar.

It was Asbury in 1809 who thought of getting a ground floor prepared in advance, bringing in some wooden benches, and even erecting a wooden roof over the area. Thus, outdoor tabernacles were born. This led to camp meeting grounds springing up all over the eastern half of the U.S. Some of these meeting areas, such as Asbury Park in New Jersey, still bear the names of those who helped get them started.

The last night of the camp meeting would feature a great deal of singing, often many baptisms, and marching around the circle of the camp with pine cone branches held high, reminiscent of Joshua's troops circling Jericho, Spirits were indeed high by this point. . .

## **7. The One and the Many**

To understand the camp meeting you must first understand that people, especially west of the Appalachians, lived 6 to 10 miles from their nearest neighbors. These people experienced lonely and harsh times while trying to build their homes and eke out a living in the wilderness. We need to be aware that camp meetings must have served a great social as well as religious need. For these settlers, the need for fellowship and friends was indeed great.

Thus, the camp meeting became one part vacation, one part business trip, one part family reunion, and one part religious experience. In some ways, the camp meetings before Asbury's influence were rather like carnivals. There were salesmen of all sorts seeking to sell everything from shoes to farm tools to the latest elixirs. There were various ne'er-do-wells looking to seduce the 'innocent'. In short, the camp meeting

became a sort of temporary city with all the usual benefits and banes of city life. At their peak, when some 25,000 would arrive for a camp meeting, they were indeed small cities.

The camp meetings brought together people of all ages, races, and denominations. Out of these meetings grew friendships, weddings, business deals, and even religious conversions. This was the place to swap your best recipes, drag out your tallest tales, and let the children find new playmates.

People came to these meetings already in a holiday mood, ready for a change from the daily grind of dawn to dusk farming. It is safe to say that many came with pent-up feelings, and while at the camp meeting were able to let go and let God. As Harvey Cox says, "carnival behavior" prevailed and all sorts of human energies were let loose by the spirit.

The spiritual phenomena that resulted was often bizarre but never boring. Here a lonely person could come and become a part of something larger than himself. Here the one could mix with the many and not only make friends but also let down the barriers of protection used to survive in the wilderness. It has been suggested that the genius of the camp meeting was that the individual could lose himself in the masses and yet be found by God. By letting the barriers down, a person could come to terms with himself and join with others in a religious experience. This led to unusual forms of group behavior and in our next article we will analyze this phenomenon further.

## **8. "Holy Barking" and "The Jerks"**

Some of the first camp meetings were known for allowing things to get more than a little out of hand when the oceans of human emotion were let loose. Though men and women were regularly separated by a barrier, when the swooning and shouting got going the women were known to tear open their clothing and fall to the ground, or run around hugging and kissing friends and strangers alike.

The men and children were often seen to engage in one of the odder forms of motor response to preaching known as "holy barking". This involved dropping on to all fours and running about snapping and growling, even foaming at the mouth. Groups would surround a tree baying as if the devil himself were sitting in the branches. A more common reaction was what is now called "being slain in the Spirit." This would often happen to a group in the congregation at some dramatic point in the preaching. At that point they would fall into a "spiritual coma" which could last from a few minutes to several hours. There were reports that often people would preach sermons for an hour or more at an in-

credible volume while in this comatose state.

Perhaps, however, the most peculiar of the spiritual phenomena was called the "jerks". This arose in the Tennessee camp meetings and involved first the wild gyration of the head, followed by the arms and whole body until one became a veritable whirling dervish. Peter Cartwright, that most famous of Methodist Circuit Riders, said he saw as many as 500 people behaving in this way, no doubt in a sort of epileptic seizure. He once reported with real satisfaction that when some proper city women came to gawk at a camp meeting, suddenly they were taken with the "jerks" and could not control themselves. Cartwright judged that the Spirit had gotten hold of these souls and taught them a lesson - do not underestimate the power of God.

Surprisingly, Asbury and others relished the holy noise and other phenomena of the camp meetings. So long as there was no moral aberrations, they believed it to be of the Spirit. As Asbury saw it, these were evidences that God was working dramatically in a human life with the result being a morally and religiously changed person. The end thus justified the means, or perhaps the means manifested the dramatic transformation taking place. In our next article we will examine the Methodist restrictions on camp meetings.

## **9. Methodist Strictures**

Asbury and McKendree took part in their first camp meeting in the fall of 1800 in Drake's Creek, Tennessee. Both were very impressed with the potential of reaching so many people at once. In January of 1801 Asbury was already writing to his preachers urging them to have camp meetings as often as possible. By 1810 his enthusiasm still had not waned. He called for 10,000 Methodist camp meetings, writing his preachers, "Camp meetings, camp meetings, glory, glory!"

But things were to be done decently and in order, and so Asbury drew up some rules. First of all, Asbury felt the meetings lost their maximum impact by dragging on too long. Thus, he standardized a four day period from Friday through Monday. He would line up preachers in a certain order so that the better preachers would not come on until at least Saturday afternoon. This gave everyone plenty of time to arrive. The Bishop set up shifts for the preaching but insisted on a 10 p.m. curfew.

After the curfew Asbury had guards with armbands patrol the grounds to insure upright and moral behavior. To that end not only were torches to be kept burning all night, but also each tent was required to have a lit candle within. Needless to say, there was also to be a bucket of water outside each tent. Surprisingly, there was only one serious fire

at any camp meeting, and it was not a Methodist one.

Another Methodist innovation was introduced by Valentine Cook who decided to set up a wooden altar at the front of the meeting place. All who were willing to take the first step into the Kingdom were invited to come down to that pine altar to be met by Methodist lay workers.

Asbury had the camp meeting rules posted well in advance. Some complained that the trees became "lettered pillars. . . inscribed with the 12 tables of the camp code." Despite all the rules, some problems still arose. But circuit riders knew well how to deal with rabble rousers and ruffians. Finley would often come down from the pulpit, seize the offender, and shake him till his teeth rattled. James Haven, the so-called Napoleon of Indiana Methodism, once grabbed a ruffian by the hair and threw him to the ground. These were crude methods for a crude age.

Methodists often learned to improvise. If the crowd was not familiar with a hymn, no matter. The leader would sing it out a line at a time to a tune they did know.

Thus it was that through the concurrence of the Methodist connectional system and camp meetings, a combination of freedom and discipline, thousands came into the Methodist Church (10,000 in the Kentucky Revival of 1801-1808 alone). What lessons may we learn from all this? In our last article we will draw some conclusions.

## **10. Beyond the Frontier**

Why is it that camp meetings and circuit riders served Methodism so well in the nineteenth century? Certainly one reason was that Methodist theology was well-suited for such a time and such meetings. Indeed, it was a Gospel tailor-made for frontier life.

Methodists preached that by God's grace you and your circumstances could be dramatically improved. Conversion was a need and a possibility for *everyone*. A person joined to God could do all things in Him who strengthened him. Conversion was called for over and over by the preacher, a conversion that could have visible results by changing behavior and character. This was a philosophy that stressed the importance of human decision and human potential enabled by grace. It was optimistic, and geared toward the power of positive thinking. As one author noted, Methodists preached a religious version of rags to riches.

Secondly, the connectional system of circuit riders was flexible enough to expand with the frontier, and smart enough to direct people from the camp meetings into the local Methodist chapels. Only the Methodists had such a network that could go and grow where the people were. If Methodism wishes to expand and grow today, it must again be flexible enough to plant new churches where the population is, or face be-

ing left behind. I suggest simple and flexible buildings that can meet many social needs for congregations of between 200-300 members, rather than large and costly building projects.

Thirdly, camp meetings met the social needs of the people. Perhaps churches should be used more for social events aimed at the community as a whole. Churches can also be used for counseling centers, day care centers, hunger centers - to meet the needs of the community 7 days a week. There is a desperate need in our fragmented society.

Finally, the early Methodists witnessed Spirit-filled worship services which today would help the Church enormously. Granted, we don't need the excesses often seen at camp meetings, but it would seem that Methodism has long since gone to the other extreme. Sometimes our attitude seems to be, 'Far be it from us to let the power of God break forth in the congregation.' Are we afraid of what God might do if we let go and let God?

It was said of the early Methodists that they prayed better with their eyes closed than with their eyes open. In worship services especially we should help our members articulate their faith in spontaneous prayer and without written prompting. *Order* we have, but *fervor* we need more of. Perhaps we should hear the call once again of the old spiritual, "Over Jordan, over Jordan, my heart longs to go into camp ground again."

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