

## THE HISTORIANS' TREATMENT OF THE CANE RIDGE REVIVAL

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Barton Warren Stone stood in the clearing at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, the third week of August, 1801, and observed the simultaneous sessions of the giant revival. A few months earlier he had felt an "ardent love and tenderness for all mankind, and such a longing desire for their salvation," that he had exclaimed, "So great is my love for sinners that, had I power, I would save them all."<sup>1</sup> As he watched the camp meeting in progress, he had reason to believe that at least in this part of Kentucky he was realizing his desire. People were everywhere. Some listened to preaching, sang hymns, or prayed in uneven groups scattered over the clearing; others went sightseeing from group to group; and still others enjoyed themselves with their friends amidst the horses, wagons, and carriages in the surrounding woods.

Stone, who had preached at Cane Ridge since 1798, and seventeen other Presbyterian ministers, together with an unknown number of Methodist and Baptist preachers, were in charge of this unusual meeting. That they had made preparation for the revival was verified by one observer who reported that a Presbyterian minister preached from a stage erected in the clearing one hundred yards from the meeting-house. At the same time a Methodist spoke from a stand one hundred yards east of the building, while an assembly of colored people met about one hundred and fifty yards away.<sup>2</sup> James B. Finley "counted seven ministers, all preaching at one time, some on stumps, others in wagons, and one, the Rev. William Burke (Methodist) was standing on a tree which had, in falling, lodged against another."<sup>3</sup> Stone wrote that the roads to Cane Ridge were "literally crowded with wagons, carriages, horsemen and footmen,"<sup>4</sup> and that the preachers were cordially united in their message of salvation: "We all engaged in singing the same songs of praise — all united in prayer — all preached the same things — free salvation urged upon all by faith and repentance."<sup>5</sup>

The preaching was unusual, but the response was amazing. Converts by the hundreds expressed their religious feelings with strenuous bodily agitations called exercises. Almost everyone who wrote of the revival mentioned the exercises, but Stone gave the most complete account of them. The falling exercise was the most common; hundreds

of people, good and bad alike, would utter "a piercing scream, fall like a log on the floor, earth or mud, and appear as dead."<sup>6</sup> The jerking exercise sometimes affected the whole body; even the wicked, cursing the jerks, stood in one place and jerked "backward and forward in quick succession, their head nearly touching the floor behind and before."<sup>7</sup> The dancing exercise, practiced only by the religious, usually started with the jerks. The subject moved back and forth over the same area singing and praying with the "smile of heaven" on his face. Stone believed that the barking exercise was nothing but the jerks nicknamed by some wag.<sup>8</sup> The laughing exercise affected only the religious with loud, hearty laughter. The running exercise happened to those who ran to get away from the jerks, often falling in their tracks. In the singing exercise, the most unaccountable for Stone, the subject sang happily and melodiously, "not from the mouth or nose, but entirely in the breast."<sup>9</sup> The campfire faded by day and flickered at night, but the Cane Ridge Revival continued without a break.

Some of the preachers who witnessed the revival opposed it by fasting and praying in their churches against it,<sup>10</sup> but most of them favored it enthusiastically. Peter Cartwright called it the greatest revival since the day of Pentecost.<sup>11</sup> Richard McNemar described the preaching: "The love of a Savior constrained them to testify, that one had died for all."<sup>12</sup> James B. Finley, converted as a result of the meeting, reported that "men of the most depraved hearts and vicious habits were made new creatures,"<sup>13</sup> and that their conversion was confirmed by a life of virtue. He felt the exercises were "necessary to arrest the attention of a wicked and skeptical people."<sup>14</sup> William Rogers was convinced that the revival was genuine because most of the converts that he knew had "by their pious and godly lives and their triumphant deaths, long since stamped the seal of heaven upon its divine origin."<sup>15</sup> Stone, who gave up his slaves as a result of the revival, felt that the exercises were sent because the state of religion was so low that "nothing common could have arrested the attention of the world."<sup>16</sup> He reacted favorably to the revival because he was convinced that it helped the religious situation, but he did not approve of everything that went on: "Much did I then see, and much have I since seen, that I considered to be fanaticism; but this should not condemn the work."<sup>17</sup> He rejoiced in the "spirit of love and union"<sup>18</sup> among the preachers who took part in the revival, and he caught a vision of what they could accomplish when they worked in harmony. The Cane Ridge Revival caused Stone to feel that Christian unity was possible.

If Stone, McNemar, Cartwright, and Finley thought the exercises

were unusual, so have the historians who read their eye-witness accounts. In fact, they seemed more interested in the exercises than other features of the revival. James Truslow Adams,<sup>19</sup> Thomas A. Bailey,<sup>20</sup> Thomas D. Clark,<sup>21</sup> Catherine C. Cleveland,<sup>22</sup> Charles A. Johnson,<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette,<sup>24</sup> Peter G. Mode,<sup>25</sup> Arthur K. Moore,<sup>26</sup> Clifton E. Olmstead,<sup>27</sup> Fredric L. Paxson,<sup>28</sup> Robert E. Riegel,<sup>29</sup> William Warren Sweet,<sup>30</sup> and Bernard A. Weisberger<sup>31</sup> referred to the exercises of the Kentucky revival, and some of them, to those of the Cane Ridge Revival specifically. Cleveland made a typical observation that "men, women, and children, professing Christians and pronounced scoffers, the strong and the weak, the educated and the ignorant, were alike affected" <sup>32</sup> by the bodily agitations.

Most historians offered explanations for the exercises. They mentioned social companionship and emotional outlet most often. The frontier people were a "heterogeneous group" <sup>33</sup> with a "starved social and emotional life," <sup>34</sup> who let out feelings which were "cramped up by a hog and hominy existence." <sup>35</sup> Turner and Paxson saw a similarity between religious revival and political partisanship;<sup>36</sup> Mode singled out their background of fear.<sup>37</sup> Cleveland believed this type of phenomena could be found "in all ages and among all peoples, varying slightly, . . . in form, yet practically the same," <sup>38</sup> and she reported that some immigrants "recognized the exercises as something already familiar." <sup>39</sup> Latourette emphasized its similarity to "awakenings in older parts of the country and in the frontier regions in New England." <sup>40</sup> Weisberger felt that some of the reporters tried to "underscore the element of caricature in the meetings," but concluded that the "spirit often overcame the believers in one way or another." <sup>41</sup> He explained that "when the traditionally slow cycle of guilt, despair, hope and assurance was compressed into a few days or hours, its emotional states were agonizingly intensified." <sup>42</sup> Olmstead agreed that there was "bound to be a build up of tension which would have to be released." <sup>43</sup>

The historians also discussed the content of revival preaching. Preaching, they said, aimed at the emotions. Cleveland wrote, "The question of salvation became to many the all-important topic of conversation." <sup>44</sup> Weisberger reported that the revivalists sought "to convulse the conscience," to sharpen "man's guilt to a point, by repetition," and then to drive it "into the sinner's heart." <sup>45</sup> Mode asserted that preachers were "hortatory and rarely expository," and that "one subject, and only one," dominated the exhortation — "the terrors of hell." <sup>46</sup> As a result of the Kentucky Revival, some frontier preachers devoted sections of their sermons to constraining the converts. They checked any tendency to disorder by preaching on such

texts as "Bodily exercise profiteth little," and "Let all things be done decently and in order." Prayer proved the most effective remedy for those liable to jerking.<sup>47</sup>

Most historians agreed that educational standards were low for the frontier preacher and his audience. They were an "untaught community,"<sup>48</sup> many of whom "did not believe in a learned ministry,"<sup>49</sup> and "operated at the expense of intellectual religion,"<sup>50</sup> omitting "rational process from the steps of salvation."<sup>51</sup> Sweet affirmed, "In pioneer communities, where the emphasis was placed upon bodily exercise at the expense of mental equipment and where there were no people of educational attainment, revivalism of the extreme emotional type naturally flourished."<sup>52</sup>

Sweet reported that hucksters sold raw whiskey from wagons about the camp grounds.<sup>53</sup> Riegel implied "that at times sex was not sublimated, but took direct and earthly means for expression."<sup>54</sup> But to the charge of sexual misconduct at the meeting, Weisberger replied that there was "no way to prove that the emotional exhilaration of camp-meeting religion was the undoing of frontier virgins. The crowds were composed both of worshipers and numbers of families who came merely to enjoy the show."<sup>55</sup> Sweet stated that many who attended the meeting were "dissolute and irreligious characters, and they outnumbered by far those who came with religious interest."<sup>56</sup>

Most historians evaluated the Kentucky Revival as a whole, which included the Cane Ridge Revival. They asserted that the revivals "improved morality, increased church membership, and encouraged urgently needed humanitarian reform,"<sup>57</sup> that they "were religiously constructive,"<sup>58</sup> served as a "social meeting place," emphasized "religious idealism,"<sup>59</sup> were more effective than the Great Awakening, and "set a pattern of religious life which persisted through much of the nineteenth century."<sup>60</sup> Referring to the malignment of revivalism, Sweet said, "It has been the victim of much chief debunking and has suffered at the hands of writers who have been interested only in its excesses."<sup>61</sup> Two historians evaluated the Cane Ridge Revival specifically; Weisberger doubted that the revival alone raised the moral tone of the frontier, for "as churches multiplied, so did schoolhouses, courts of law, newspapers and other tranquilizing agencies."<sup>62</sup> He saw the revival as a medicine for ailing churches which "could kill as well as cure, . . . liable to rack the patient with spasms, purges and sweats" in the "form of schisms."<sup>63</sup> West summarized the effects of the revival; it was "intoxication wine to the ignorant masses; a stumbling block to the orderly Presbyterians; foolishness to the upper strata of Kentuckians; hysteria to contemporary and present day rationalists"; but to Stone it held the "promise that a new Christian order

might unite the churches on the Bible for the glory of the coming kingdom." <sup>64</sup>

The historians used "loaded language" to describe the revivals with superlatives and emotive terms that colored their facts. They called the Cane Ridge Revival the "most hysterical" <sup>65</sup> revival held in early America, an orgy that reminded one of "ancient rites like the Dionysiac," <sup>66</sup> a "frenzy," <sup>67</sup> a "monster meeting," <sup>68</sup> a place where "one prayer felled three thousand," <sup>69</sup> one of the "roaring revivals" or "religious fairs," a place reminiscent of the "circus," <sup>70</sup> where people drank in the "hell-fire gospel," <sup>71</sup> and exhibited "pathological symptoms in unison." <sup>72</sup> Stone was labeled a "schismatic," <sup>73</sup> and "the spirit of the Lord began to make itself manifest upon the frontier" when a wave of "riotous religious revivals poured over the West with an increasing fury." <sup>74</sup>

Some of the criticisms leveled at the revival are undeniably true, but others are not quite so drastic when one sees them in their times and through the eyes of a man like Barton W. Stone. Revival preachers have been called unlearned men, but, although educational training on the frontier left much to be desired, not every preacher at the Cane Ridge Revival was without at least the fundamentals. Richard McNemar, John Dunlavy, and John Thompson were schoolfellows at the Log Cabin Seminary at Cane Ridge, <sup>75</sup> and studied "the languages and higher branches of an English education" <sup>76</sup> under Robert W. Finley, founder of the Cane Ridge Church and seminary. Finley studied for the ministry at Princeton College under Dr. Witherspoon and had taught languages there. <sup>77</sup> Stone, who succeeded Finley in the Cane Ridge pulpit, had studied the academic course under Dr. David Caldwell at Guilford Academy, Guilford, North Carolina, <sup>78</sup> and theology under William Hodge of Orange County, North Carolina. <sup>79</sup> He became professor of languages at a Methodist academy near Washington, Georgia, <sup>80</sup> and later added a knowledge of French and Hebrew. <sup>81</sup> Compared to most inhabitants of the area in which he lived and worked, Stone was exceptionally well educated.

Hell was not the only sermon subject in those days. In fact, the sermon that brought the turning point in Stone's life was a sermon on love. He was not converted by James McGready, as one historian claimed, <sup>82</sup> although McGready doubtless had an influence on him. He heard McGready preach on "Tekel, thou art weighed in the balances and found wanting," in February, 1791, at Sandy River, Virginia. Stone reported that at the conclusion of his sermon "he labored to arouse me from my torpor by the terrors of God and the horrors of hell. I told him his labors were lost upon me — that I was entirely callous. He left me in this gloomy state without one encouraging

word."<sup>83</sup> Several weeks later he heard William Hodge preach on the text "God is love." Retiring immediately to the woods alone with his Bible, he read and prayed. The truth of the sermon, God is love, prevailed over his fears. He said, "I yielded and sank at his feet a willing subject."<sup>84</sup> The gospel of love melted his heart when a message of hell-fire could not. It is unlikely that Stone would make a subject that failed to win him the sole message of his preaching.

The Presbyterian Church divided on the frontier, and the revivalists received the blame for it. Stone was called a schismatic<sup>85</sup> and his co-workers a "band of revivalistic brothers"<sup>86</sup> who had to shake loose from the narrowness of Calvinism if revivals were to succeed. But before the Cane Ridge Revival began, Stone had already raised the doctrinal issue that brought division; the revival merely intensified it. When he went before the Presbytery of Transylvania in 1798 to be ordained to the ministry, he was asked, "Do you receive and adopt the Confession of Faith, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Bible?" He answered, "I do, as far as I see it consistent with the word of God."<sup>87</sup> No objection being made, he was ordained. He became more convinced that Calvinism was erroneous, that the reason for unbelief was "not because God did not exert his physical, almighty power in them to make them believe, but because they neglected and received not his testimony given in the Word concerning his Son."<sup>88</sup> After the revival, Stone, Dunlavy, Thompson, McNemar, and Marshall withdrew from the synod's jurisdiction, but not immediately from their communion. Their spirit was reflected in one of the items in "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery": "We will, that preachers and people cultivate a spirit of mutual forbearance; pray more and dispute less; and while they behold the sign of the times, look up, and confidently expect that redemption draweth nigh."<sup>89</sup> Their writings do not reflect the antagonistic spirit of the schismatic. From Stone's point of view the keepers of creeds were breaking the harmony among Christians that he had seen manifested at the revival. He wrote that the "spirit of partyism soon expelled the spirit of love and union — peace fled before discord and strife, and religion was stifled and banished in the unhallowed struggle for pre-eminence."<sup>90</sup> Stone recognized the extremes of the revival; he admitted frankly: "That there were many eccentricities and much fanaticism in this excitement, was acknowledged by its warmest advocates; indeed, it would have been a wonder if such things had not appeared in the circumstances of that time."<sup>91</sup> He had held this attitude from the first time he witnessed the exercises; "Much did I then see, and much have I since seen, that I considered to be fanaticism; but this should not condemn the work."<sup>92</sup>

Before one can evaluate the Cane Ridge Revival fairly, he must be aware of the historical sources of revivals in Judaism and Christianity recorded in the Old and New Testaments and the ebb and flow of revival in the history of the church. Otherwise, he is liable to absolutize one expression of revival as the image of what revival is, rather than observing it within the total picture historically. He needs to keep in mind that historians have often confused their evaluation of revivals because they have not made the Biblical distinction — that revival is for the saved and evangelism is for the sinner. He needs also to remember that the Kentucky Revival was only one expression of a revival wave moving across all America; and that any mass movement has good and bad qualities. Because there are multiple uncontrolled variables present in any mass movement, it is impossible to conclude necessarily that revivalism is responsible for the attending evils. The major revivals in the Old Testament demonstrate that revival can come without ensuing evil consequences. Perhaps most of all he needs to remember Barton W. Stone's admonition, "I am always hurt to hear people speak lightly of this work. I always think they speak of what they know nothing about. Should everything bearing the impress of imperfection be blasphemously rejected, who amongst us at this time could stand?"<sup>93</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> James R. Rogers, *The Cane Ridge Meeting-house*, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Co., 1910), pp. 150, 151.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine C. Cleveland, *The Great Revival in the West, 1797-1805* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1916), p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> *Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley*, ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1872), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Estimates ran from 10,000 to 30,000 people. Bernard A. Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1958), p. 31, puts the number much lower from the number of wagons there. However, this was a Saturday morning count, early in the meeting and does not number carriages, horsemen and people coming on foot throughout the week. In 1800 the population of Kentucky was approximately 220,000.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers, *op. cit.*, pp. 157, 158. Stone's autobiography is included in this work.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 160, 161.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 162.

<sup>10</sup> Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival* (New York: Edward O. Jenkins, 1846), p. 28.

- <sup>11</sup> Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1857), p. 33.
- <sup>12</sup> McNemar, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
- <sup>13</sup> Finley, *op. cit.*, p. 365.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.
- <sup>15</sup> Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- <sup>19</sup> James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Garden City: Blue Ribbon Books, 1941), p. 127.
- <sup>20</sup> Thomas A. Bailey, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1956), p. 328.
- <sup>21</sup> Thomas D. Clark, *The Rampaging Frontier* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs Merrill Co., 1939), p. 143.
- <sup>22</sup> Cleveland, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
- <sup>23</sup> Charles A. Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955), p. 62f.
- <sup>24</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. IV, *The Great Century A.D. 1800-1914* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1941), p. 193.
- <sup>25</sup> Peter G. Mode, *The Frontier Spirit in American Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1923), p. 54.
- <sup>26</sup> Arthur K. Moore, *The Frontier Mind* (The University of Kentucky Press, 1957), p. 230.
- <sup>27</sup> Clifton E. Olmstead, *Religion in America Past and Present* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961), p. 67.
- <sup>28</sup> Fredric L. Paxson, *History of the American Frontier 1763-1893* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924), p. 117.
- <sup>29</sup> Robert E. Riegel, *America Moves West* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1947), p. 112.
- <sup>30</sup> William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the Frontier: the Presbyterians*, Vol. II (New York: Harper & Bro. Pub., 1936), pp. 88, 89.
- <sup>31</sup> Weisberger, *op. cit.*, pp. 34, 35.
- <sup>32</sup> Cleveland, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
- <sup>33</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
- <sup>34</sup> Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 127; Paxson, *op. cit.*, p. 117; Riegel, *op. cit.*, p. 111; Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 329.
- <sup>35</sup> Weisberger, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- <sup>36</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1947), p. 165; Paxson, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
- <sup>37</sup> Mode, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
- <sup>38</sup> Cleveland, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- <sup>40</sup> Latourette, *op. cit.*, p. 194.
- <sup>41</sup> Weisberger, *op. cit.*, p. 35; Charles Crossfield Ware, *Barton Warren Stone: Pathfinder of Christian Union* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1932), p. 118, says, "John Lyle seems to have kept his diary for that specific purpose."
- <sup>42</sup> Weisberger, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
- <sup>43</sup> Olmstead, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
- <sup>44</sup> Cleveland, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
- <sup>45</sup> Weisberger, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
- <sup>46</sup> Mode, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
- <sup>47</sup> Cleveland, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
- <sup>48</sup> Paxson, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
- <sup>49</sup> Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
- <sup>50</sup> Paxson, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
- <sup>51</sup> Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
- <sup>52</sup> Sweet, *Revivalism in America* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1944), p. 165
- <sup>53</sup> Sweet, *Presbyterians*, p. 89.
- <sup>54</sup> Riegel, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
- <sup>55</sup> Weisberger, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
- <sup>56</sup> Sweet, *Revivalism*, p. 124.
- <sup>57</sup> Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 329.



- <sup>58</sup> Olmstead, *op. cit.*, p. 67.  
<sup>59</sup> Riegel, *op. cit.*, p. 114.  
<sup>60</sup> Latourette, *op. cit.*, pp. 34, 35.  
<sup>61</sup> Sweet, *Revivalism*, p. xiv.  
<sup>62</sup> Weisberger, *op. cit.*, p. 36.  
<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.  
<sup>64</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 45.  
<sup>65</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 62, 63.  
<sup>66</sup> Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 230.  
<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.  
<sup>68</sup> Weisberger, *op. cit.*, p. 31.  
<sup>69</sup> Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 127.  
<sup>70</sup> Weisberger, *op. cit.*, p. 22.  
<sup>71</sup> Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 328.  
<sup>72</sup> Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 127.  
<sup>73</sup> Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 230.  
<sup>74</sup> Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 142.  
<sup>75</sup> Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 66.  
<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.  
<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.  
<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.  
<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.  
<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.  
<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.  
<sup>82</sup> Weisberger, *op. cit.*, p. 30.  
<sup>83</sup> Rogers, *op. cit.*, pp. 122, 123.  
<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.  
<sup>85</sup> Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 230.  
<sup>86</sup> Weisberger, *op. cit.*, p. 41; see pp. 38-42.  
<sup>87</sup> Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 148.  
<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.  
<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.  
<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.  
<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.  
<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.  
<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.