Bound for the Promised Land: Camp Meetings and Their Impact on Antebellum Religion and Society

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A mention of the term "Old South" brings quickly to mind images of magnolias and live oaks, plantations and the people, black and white, that inhabited them. But this was also a region of ordinary people living in small towns and on farms, redefined by the Second Great Awakening, and a unique religious experience, the camp meeting. The Second Great Awakening resulted in a shift from the Calvinistic belief in predestination to evangelical Protestantism, with its focus on individual freedom of choice and the conversion experience through personal salvation. In the South, camp meetings filled spiritual needs, affected mainline denominations, initiated social change, and were shaped by the isolation, economy, and agrarian nature of society. Additionally, revivals produced by the Second Great Awakening, in their different Northern and Southern manifestations, were instrumental in increasing sectionalism in America in the years preceding the Civil War.

Throughout its history, America has experienced cycles of secularism and spiritual revival. The First Great Awakening, in the mid-eighteenth century laid the foundation for a Christian America, but by the end of that century, Americans were falling away from the faith. In New England, church membership plummeted as people died or moved away faster than they joined churches. Things were no better in the southern states, as the former Church of England, now the Protestant Episcopal Church, showed an increase of only five clergy in a twenty-two year period. Even at the nation's universities, most founded by churches and overseen by ministers, the faithful had dwindled to the point that in 1782 at Presbyterian Princeton only two students professed to be Christians.[42] Deism was on the rise, embraced by prominent men such as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. By

[42] William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939), 224.

the early nineteenth century, the last state-supported churches were disestablished in New England. The religious fervor of the First Great Awakening was dwindling in the established portions of the nation.

On the frontier, the future of America's Christian character looked even bleaker. As Americans moved west, they abandoned the traditional churches of the East, and did not build new ones, leaving the frontier destitute of religion.[43] Frontiersmen found it necessary to pour their energies into survival, with little time to spend in building or establishing churches. Christians in the East could see no hope for the stability and morality of the uncivilized frontier society, living without organized religion. Connecticut born Methodist Lorenzo Dow described the people of western New York as "the offscouring of the earth."[44] Peter Cartwright, an Illinois minister, described late eighteenth century Kentucky as the home of "murderers, horse thieves, highway robbers, and counterfeits."[45] These concerns led to the formation of missionary societies, with an urgent desire to save the nation as it grew. Documenting this urgency, a missionary agent wrote:

> Look at . . . the "valley of the Mississippi." In twenty years if it should continue to increase as it has done . . . it will contain a majority of the people of the United States. . . The destinies of the Union will be in their hands. If that portion of the country be not brought under the influence of religion *now,* it cannot, to human view, be done at all . . . *Now or never* is the watchword . . . in reference to that region.[46]

Churches in the east responded to the exigency, sending money and ministers to spread God's word and redeem the frontier.

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[43] Bernard Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River: The Story of the Great Revivalists and Their Impact Upon Religion in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), 5-6.

[44] Lorenzo Dow, *The Dealings of God, Man and the Devil: As Exemplified in the Life, Experience, and Travels of Lorenzo Dow, in a Period of More Than a Half Century: With Reflections on Various Subjects, Religious, Moral, Political and Prophetic,* 4th ed., (Norwich, 1833), 57.

[45] Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher,* ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati, 1856), 24.

[46] Knowles Taylor, Office of the American Home Missionary Society, August 20, 1830, in William Warren Sweet, *The Presbyterians: 1783-1840, a Collection of Source Materials* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), 668-9.

An increasing sense of secularism, both on the frontier and in the established portions of the nation, conflicted with the nation's unique "belief that Americans are a peculiar race, chosen by God to perfect the world."[47] This dichotomy created a spiritual awareness and openness to change in existing religious structure. Faith born or renewed by the First Great Awakening, no longer fit Americans at the turn of the nineteenth century; this generation was seeking a new identity and needed a more relevant religion, one which matched their feeling of nationalism and independence, and provided direction to move forward in the post-Revolutionary years. The nation was ready for revival, in part, to realize America's desire to separate from the past and create a national identity, reflecting their newfound independence, and further to revitalize the faithful for their God-ordained task of winning over the world. As Jesus once told his disciples, "the fields were ripe for harvest"; the time was right for the Second Great Awakening.[48]

This Awakening had its roots in Kentucky, beginning around the year 1800 and spreading northward to involve the entire nation over the course of the next thirty years. The revival was not limited to one denomination, class, or region, although it manifested itself differently to specific groups. From the frontier of western New York to Kentucky and farther south, each revival was an intense emotional experience, highly individualized; in the established areas of the East, revival was more refined. The loud, emotional style of the camp meeting movement of the South seemed well suited to the uneducated frontiersmen of that area, but when camp meetings occurred in New England, northerners viewed them as "barbarous emotional outbreaks."[49] In response to this, and to prevent the further encroachment of Baptists and Methodists into the Congregationalist elect, Lyman Beecher and Asahel Nettleton organized a revival in the New England Congregational church, utilizing a "controlled style" of preaching which appealed to the northern middle class. In his autobiography, Beecher describes his style of revivalism:

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[47] William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 105.
[48] John 4:35 (New International Version).
[49] McLoughlin, *Revivals*, 107.

> I did not push revivals by protracted meetings, but preached twice on the Sabbath, and exhorted in the evenings . . . My revivals were slower in coming, and more gradual in their movement, but for that reason I held on strong . . . it was a year or two, perhaps more, until the revival came, and then it continued . . . for three or four years.[50]

Leading revivals in western New York, Charles G. Finney believed a different approach was necessary to produce revival. In his lecture, *What a Revival of Religion Is,* Finney says,

> Ministers ought to know what measures are best calculated to aid in accomplishing . . . the salvation of souls. Some measures are plainly necessary. By measures I mean what things should be done . . . to get the attention of the people and bring them to listen to the truth. . . the object is to get up an excitement, and bring the people out.[51]

Concerned that Finney's emotional revivals were the work of man not God, and that they might spread east to Connecticut and Boston, Beecher and Nettleton were instrumental in organizing a convention on the topic of conducting revivals. At the convention, Beecher admonished Finney:

> Finney, I know your plan, and you know I do; you mean to come into Connecticut and carry a streak of fire to Boston. But if you attempt it, as the Lord liveth, I'll meet you at the State line and call out the artillery-men, and fight every inch of the way to Boston, and then I'll fight you there.[52]

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[50]Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography, Correspondence, etc., of Lyman Beecher, D.D.*, ed. Charles Beecher (New York, 1864), 1:216.

[51]Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures On Revivals of Religion* (New York, 1868), 172.

[52] Beecher, *Autobiography,* 2:101.

Finney claimed to have no such intentions, stating in his autobiography:

> The fact is, (Dr. Beecher) was grossly deceived at every step. I had no design or desire to go to Connecticut or Boston . . . he was deceived and . . . utterly ignorant . . . of the character, and motives, and doings, of those who those who had labored in those glorious revivals.[53]

Indeed, revivals happened not only in the western New York towns where Finney preached but in towns where he had not; merely the news of revival seemed to be enough to spur more revivals. With a style considered radical by conservative Presbyterians, Finney, and others like him, continued to preach a gospel of repentance and forgiveness which produced reformers that would sow the seeds of societal change, evidenced by renewed observance of the Sabbath, and a sharp reduction in drinking and public fighting.[54] Laypeople developed volunteer organizations as a natural outgrowth of revival, addressing a range of issues including slavery, education, temperance, missions, Sabbath observance, prostitution, dueling, and gambling. Arguably one of the biggest changes brought about by the Second Great Awakening occurred in the church itself, with strict Calvinism and its belief in salvation limited to God's chosen ones, being replaced with an emphasis on free will and personal salvation for all.

While the revivals of the Second Great Awakening were an important force in bringing change to society and institutions across the northern states, religion played an even greater role in the less settled, rural, agricultural region of the South. America's Second Great Awakening actually grew out of religious revivals that began to occur just before the turn of the nineteenth century in Kentucky, when a dynamic Presbyterian minister named James McGready relocated from North

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[53] Charles Grandison Finney, *Memoirs of Charles G. Finney Written by Himself* (New York, 1876), 220.

[54] Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (1995), quoted in *Major Problems in the Early Republic, 1787-1848*, ed. Sean Wilentz and Jonathan Earle (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 161.

Carolina to pastor several widely scattered church districts in southwestern Kentucky. Recently opened to settlement, the residents of this area were anxious to create a stable community for their families, including establishing churches, but the farms were too far apart to justify erecting permanent church facilities.[55] As McGready travelled the circuit of his church districts, he recognized the need for new settlers in this area to gather for fellowship and worship, and to experience communion. He determined to utilize the traditional four-day communion service familiar to the Scotch-Irish settlers, allowing members of his congregation to travel by wagon to a central location for communion. This was an important step towards creating an atmosphere for revival, and thus bringing change to southern frontier communities. As Paul Conkin states in his study of revival, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost,* "the travel, the home hospitality, the break from normal routines, the all-day, and often, almost all-night services . . . created a special atmosphere."[56]

In June 1800, McGready conducted communion at Red River, Kentucky, attended by hundreds of people who travelled from surrounding communities. The atmosphere of the gathering led the Red River communion to erupt into a massive revival that continued until Tuesday. The success of this gathering caused McGready to organize another communion one month later at Gasper River, complete with camp sites, wagons, provisions, and an outdoor preaching stand; informal worship and exhortation was planned to continue for four days.[57] Word of the Red River communion had spread, and hundreds of people showed up at Gasper River. From Saturday through the following Tuesday they worshiped, received communion, and listened to the various ministers day and night. Loud shouts of repentance echoed across the grounds as convicted sinners experienced salvation through McGready and other Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist ministers of the southern frontier.

One of the largest and most memorable camp meetings occurred in August 1801 at Cane Ridge, in Bourbon County, Kentucky. Building on the excitement generated in previous meetings, and promoted in

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[55] Paul K. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 56.

[56] Ibid., 57.

[57] John Opie, Jr., "James McGready: Theologian of Frontier Revivalism," *Church History*, 34 (December 1965): 446.

newspapers and by minsters throughout the region, an extremely large group of Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists were in attendance. "It is generally supposed that there were not fewer than 8, 10, or 12 thousand people," William Woodward remembered, "some persons had come 200 miles."[58] Levi Purviance documented the testimony of William Rogers concerning the unity of denominations at Cane Ridge: "they preached and prayed and praised together – they mutually labored together for the salvation of sinners. Their objects and aims were the same – there was no schism."[59] In this atmosphere, dramatic, emotional revival broke out. "The careless fall down, cry out, tremble, and not unfrequently are affected with convulsive twitchings," described a participant. "Among these the pious are very busy singing, praying, conversing . . . and fainting with joy."[60] Elder Barton Warren Stone, pastor of the church at Cane Ridge, described the salvation experience in his autobiography:

> Many, very many fell down, as men slain in battle and continued for hours together in an apparently breathless and motionless state – sometimes for a few moments reviving, and exhibiting symptoms of life by a deep groan or piercing shriek, or by a prayer for mercy . . . after lying thus for hours, they obtained deliverance . . . they would rise shouting . . . and then would address the surrounding multitude.[61]

While some church leaders condemned this experience as the work of the devil, Stone believed otherwise: "Much did I

[58] William W. Woodward, *Increase of Piety, or, The Revival of Religion in the United States of America: Containing Several Interesting Letters Not Published Before* (Philadelphia, 1802), 59.

[59] Levi Purviance, *The Biography of Elder David Purviance: With His Memoirs, Containing His Views on Baptism, the Divinity of Christ and the Atonement, Written by Himself* (Dayton, TN, 1848), 297-298.

[60] William W. Woodward, *Surprising Accounts of the Revival of Religion in the United States of America, in Different Parts of the World, and Among Different Denominations of Christians* (Philadelphia, 1802), 53.

[61] Barton Warren Stone and John Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone, Written by Himself: With Additions and Reflections by Elder John Rogers* (1847), in *The Cane Ridge Reader,* ed. Hoke S. Dickinson (Paris, KY: Cane Ridge Preservation Project, 1972), 34-35.

then see, and much have I since seen that I considered to be fanaticism . . . this should not condemn (it) . . . But that cannot be a Satanic work which brings men to humble confession and forsaking of sin."[62] According to Woodward, the revival continued uninterrupted for six days. "They met on Friday and continued until Wednesday evening, night and day without intermission," he wrote, "and with such earnestness that heavy shower of rain were not sufficient to disperse them."[63] By the end of the Cane Ridge communion, an estimated 3000 souls had been saved and word of the revival spread rapidly as "tidings of Cane Ridge meeting was carried to almost every corner of the country, and the holy fire spread in all directions."[64]

The revivals of the Second Great Awakening, born of the Great Revival in Kentucky, were an answer to the concerted prayers of the faithful in the North and East, as well as pastors on the western and southern frontier. Cumberland Presbyterian minister, Benjamin McDonnold shared this 1803 testimony about the origins:

> In many southern and western presbyteries revivals more extensive and of a more extraordinary nature have taken place . . . in the course of the last year . . . several thousands within the bounds of the Presbyterian church have been brought to embrace the gospel of Christ.[65]

Initially united in a common goal of prayer for revival, the ways in which it was manifested caused division in the various denominations, starting with the Presbyterians, who were also the first to abandon the camp meeting style of gathering. The Presbyterian Church in America was already divided between the upper class intellectuals of the Northeast, and the straight talking, down-to-earth men living in the less

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[62] Ibid., 35.

[63] Woodward, *Increase of Piety,* 60.

[64] Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 93; James Finley, *Sketches of Western Methodism: Biographical, Historical, and Miscellaneous. Illustrative of Pioneer Life,* ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati, 1854), 79.

[65] Benjamin McDonnold, *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church,* 2nd ed. (Nashville, 1888), 21-22.

settled areas of the South and West. The two groups differed on everything from preaching style to decorum, and regardless of the results, camp meetings offended conservative Presbyterians. Even though this form of gathering originated with the Presbyterians, many were unaccustomed to demonstrative outbursts, and were appalled by the shouting and fainting that occurred. "The Presbyterians generally condemned shouting, and this feature of McGready's meetings," noted McDonnold, "was one of the grounds of their bitter complaints." [66] He further described the charges brought against the Kentucky Presbyterians by their General Assembly: "(1) That they were illiterate; (2) That they held erroneous doctrine."[67] At the heart of the "erroneous doctrine" was disagreement over strict Calvinist beliefs. "Calvinism is among the heaviest clogs on Christianity in the world," argued Barton Stone, "discouraging . . . sinners from seeking the kingdom of God."[68] A few years after the Cane Ridge communion, Stone and several other pastors from his area were suspended from the Presbyterian Church for their anti-Calvinistic doctrine.[69] Eventually the gap between the two factions widened to the point that the Kentucky Presbyterians seceded and formed a separate body, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.[70]

Like the Presbyterians, Baptists eventually withdrew from jointly-sponsored camp meetings, leaving the institution to Methodists whose style and doctrine were more suited to these emotional gatherings. Although the Methodist Church was relatively new in 1800, its membership was increasing rapidly. Reverend C. C. Goss defined the Methodists' success:

> A Methodist addresses himself directly to the heart, while many others appeal to the intellect . . . they address themselves to the emotional department of the natures . . . As a general rule, a Methodist preacher comes directly from the people . . . the sermons, too, of these men have been mostly extemporaneous . . . delivered in plain, simple language--the language of the

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[66] McDonnold, *Cumberland Presbyterian,* 18.
[67] Ibid, 67.
[68] Stone, *Biography,* 153.
[69] Ibid., 169.
[70] Weisberger, *Gathered,* 39.

people . . . Book language has not been so much used as the common language, hence the people have known where to say Amen.[71]

The Methodists also developed a system of circuit riders; pastors who travelled through sparsely settled areas holding small, local gatherings, that was ideal for organizing into larger gatherings at camp meetings. These meetings owed much of their success to their setting in the rural South, where people were newly settled and widely scattered, having recently left behind extended family and established religious institutions.

Urban revivals were effective in northern cities, but with ninety-four percent of the population living on farms in 1800, the camp meeting had a wider appeal that was even more important for church growth, as well as providing social opportunities. Camp meetings were the only large-scale gatherings on the southern frontier. With no established churches, they provided an opportunity for people to pray and sing together, as well as perform baptisms and weddings. The effort that was put forth to attend these meetings, packing up family and provisions, leaving their farms, travelling great distances, and camping outdoors, proved how vital they were in filling a need for fellowship and spiritual teaching. The struggle of daily life, living in small cabins lacking privacy, the constant threat of illness and death, and the effort expended to meet basic needs required frontier men and women to constantly guard their emotions.[72] The camp meeting setting, away from home and responsibilities, often lowered inhibitions, resulting in the emotional and dramatic style of southern revivals. Although many in the North looked upon camp meetings as the work of the devil trying to discredit true religion, those involved felt differently.[73] A Kentucky camp meeting attendee wrote: "As to the work in general there can be no question but it is of God. The subjects of it, for the most part are deeply wounded

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[71] C. C. Goss, *Statistical History of the First Century of American Methodism: With a Summary of the Origin and Present Operation of Other Denominations* (New York, 1866), 166-167.

[72] Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 45.

[73] McLoughlin, *Revivals,* 107.

for their sins, and can give a clear and rational account of their conversion."[74] In the process, the primary religious theology of American Protestants was transformed to the evangelical emphasis on free will of the individual, which gave people a sense of power and control over their lives and destinies.[75]

The movement brought together individualistic inhabitants of the southern frontier, creating a true sense of community. While worshipping together in a large group provided a unique bond for those involved, other factors contributed to the cohesive environment. The unstructured meetings were not limited to one denomination or socio-economic demographic. The evangelical belief that God is not a respecter of persons initially attracted middle and lower classes, women, and blacks, all of which worshipped together at early camp meetings. Ministers of various denominations came together shifting the focus from individual doctrines to salvation. "All of our gifts and ministerial efforts were united and tended to the same end," explained Presbyterian minister John Rankin, "the conviction, conversion and salvation of souls."[76] Camping on the grounds was an important factor in the overall experience. This allowed the participants to be fully involved in religious activities for days on end, without the distractions of everyday work and living. Camping also eliminated social and economic distinctions, creating a temporary unified society.[77]

In a societal structure in which men filled the active role in public meetings, the inclusive nature of camp meetings allowed new roles for children and women. Upon experiencing conversion, even young children were allowed to address the group, reversing the traditional child/adult relationship.[78] A letter sent from Kentucky to Philadelphia recalled a child at the Cane Ridge revival: "I noted a remarkable influence of a little girl, by the name of Barbara, about 7 years old, who was set up on a man's shoulders to speak to the multitude, which she did until she appeared almost exhausted."[79] Not merely mimicking what they heard around them, children displayed a knowledge of scripture

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[74] Woodward, *Surprising Accounts,* 149.
[75] Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 214.
[76] Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion,* 228.
[77] Ibid., 226.
[78] Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion,* 230.
[79] Woodward, *Surprising Accounts,* 58.

and spiritual things far beyond their years. In addition to exhorting, or speaking words of encouragement, women and children contributed their talents as singers or by praying aloud.[80] Evangelical leaders encouraged the conversion experience in young people, recognizing their potential to shape the South's religious future.[81]

One of the most powerful social changes to come from these revivals was the increase in freedom for women. The experience helped change women's place in Southern religious and social structure. Most women in the antebellum south went directly from living under the authority of their father to the authority of their husband. The conversion process was often the first independent decision a woman made, and the attraction of spiritual equality provided women with recognition based on their own individual merit.[82] Like many other aspects of revivals, women's roles in the church and home varied regionally. Among Finney's converts in New York, as men "abdicated their roles as head of household," women "rose out of old subordinate roles . . . and extended their authority."[83] This role seemed logical in the industrializing North where men might work away from home, and women filled their place of leadership. In the rural South, however, where families lived on farms, men remained the leaders of church and home, making new opportunities for women even more important. Southern women made public confessions of faith, encouraged and challenged believers at religious gatherings, and assumed responsibility for nurturing the spiritual life of their families. In 1842, Kentucky Presbyterian Mary Craddock reflected on her multiple spiritual responsibilities:

> I often fear that I come too far short of doing my whole duty in different stations in which I have to act, as a wife, as a neighbor, as a mistress, and as a Christian,

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[80] Dickson Bruce, Jr., *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974), 86.

[81] Heyrman, *Southern Cross,* 81.

[82] Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 181.

[83] Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 108.

> all of which are very important stations and I am convinced I should take great care in letting my light so shine that others seeing my Godly walks and good words . . . glorify God.[84]

Southern women moved forward through the nineteenth century to establish numerous organizations, religious and secular, providing social activity that extended beyond their previous sphere within the home.[85]

While women found empowerment at camp meetings, aspects of the gatherings intimidated many men. The emotional conversions experienced at camp meetings conflicted with the Southern view of manliness. Open displays of emotion, public confession, expressing feelings, and physically touching, beyond shaking hands and back slapping, were uncomfortable for Southern men of any class. Conviction that accompanied the salvation experience was particularly intimidating to men, as they feared losing self-control.[86] "I left and went into the woods and there I strove to rally and man up my courage," remembered James Finley, overcome at a Kentucky camp meeting. "My pride was wounded for I had supposed that my mental and physical strength and vigor could most successfully resist these influences."[87] Even the seemingly "unmanly" appearance of some evangelical ministers was offensive. "At first, I was not at all pleased with his appearance," Thomas Ware said of his initial impression of Minister Dr. Coke. "His stature, complexion, and voice, resembled those of a woman rather than those of a man."[88]

Slaveholding men had further religious conflict during the Second Great Awakening, as Christianity spread to blacks through the inclusive nature of the evangelical movement. Thousands of African Americans became Baptists and Methodists. Slaves were viewed as morally responsible individuals, spiritual brothers of white men. "In his moral, religious, and intellectual nature (the black man possesses)

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[84] Scott Stephan, *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 1.

[85] Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 110.

[86] Heyrman, *Southern Cross,* 212.

[87] Finley, *Autobiography,* 167.

[88] Thomas Ware, *Sketches of the Life and Travel of Thomas Ware, Who Has Been An Itinerant Methodist Preacher for More Than Fifty Years* (New York, 1839), 108.

the same humanity in which we glory as the image of God," argued James Henley Thornwell in a sermon on the duties of masters. "We are not ashamed to call him our brother."[89] These "brothers," however, worshipped in a separate section at camp meetings, often with black exhorters, or at separate services with white ministers held in churches after the Sunday morning service for whites. In 1835, Reverend George McAfee commented on preaching to slaves:

> The blacks are numerous . . . and their masters are entirely willing that they should hear preaching. It has generally been supposed that they would not go to hear a white preacher, but I feel confident that this opinion is without foundations. In the sermon one Sabbath morning I told the white congregation that I would preach to the blacks at three o'clock . . . I requested them to inform their servants. At the appointed hour the house was filled, and I have never preached to a more attentive and interesting congregation. Having long felt a deep interest for this portion of our community I assure you that I rejoice to find that they are more than willing to hear the gospel.[90]

Loud and emotional gatherings, not just during conversion experiences, were typical among African-American worshipers. As slaves in daily bondage, they prayed for release from their sins, experienced a sense of freedom, and celebrated uninhibitedly. While whites were often "broken down" by the gospel message, blacks were "lifted up." Blacks often danced, clapped, and shouted with complete abandon during preaching and worship times, strengthening their self-esteem and providing an essential source of hope.[91]

The issue of slavery presented a dilemma to Southern evangelicals, struggling to reconcile individual free will in a democratic society with human bondage. The Presbyterian general assembly addressed the

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[89] James Henley Thornwell, *The Rights And Duties of Masters: A Sermon Preached at the Dedication of a Church Erected in Charleston, S. C., for the Benefit and Instruction of the Coloured Population* (Charleston, 1850), 11.

[90] Sweet, *The Presbyterians,* 280-1.

[91] Mathews, *Religion in the Old South,* 214-220.

question in 1797: "'Is slavery a moral evil?' it was determined in the affirmative. The question was likewise considered, 'Are all persons who hold slaves guilty of a moral evil?' & it was voted in the negative."[92] This was an important distinction, condemning the institution of slavery, but exonerating slave owners, relieving them of condemnation for a situation perceived to be an economic necessity, and one not quickly or easily eliminated. By providing justification for the existence of slavery, the focus shifted to the moral responsibility slave owners held for their entire household, black and white. "Of all other duties that masters owe to their servants," the Reverend Samuel Dunwoody told his South Carolina congregation in 1837, "there is none so important, as that of teaching them the genuine precepts of religion."[93] In 1822, Baptist minister Richard Furman gave this reminder, "For though they are slaves, they are also men; and are with ourselves accountable creatures; having immortal souls, and being destined to future eternal award."[94] Embracing the humanity of slaves led to church resolutions to prevent cruelty, separation of slave families, and the buying and selling of slaves. While anti-slavery organizations and abolitionist sentiment developed in the 1830s, the idea in the South was more theory than agenda, and it left evangelicals wrestling with their region's "peculiar institution."[95]

Evangelical insistence that all people were "the children of God by faith" led to a movement for religious instruction for slaves.[96] Georgia-born Presbyterian Charles Colcock Jones argued that changes in the behavior of slaves as a result of religious instruction would affect "the feelings and conduct" of masters who would ask:

> In what kind of houses do I permit them to live; what clothes do I give them to wear; what food to eat; what privileges to enjoy? In what temper and manner, and in what proportion to their crimes do I allow them

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[92] Sweet, *The Presbyterians,* 169-170.
[93] Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
[94] Snay, *Gospel of Disunion,* 88.
[95] Sweet, *The Presbyterians,* 112-3.
[96] Galatians, 3:26 (King James Version); Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 254.

to be punished? What care do I take of their family relations? What am I doing for their souls' salvation? In fine, what does God require me to do to, and for them and their children, in view of their happiness here and hereafter?[97]

Placing the importance on the eternal future of slaves, and minimizing their current earthly existence, increased the strength of the slavery system, and defended the southern way of life.[98]

By the mid-1830s, with slavery justified, Southerners embraced evangelicalism, moving it from the margin to the mainstream, shifting it from formalized religion to an emotional, personal experience centered on the family. All white men were considered equal in the evangelical church, putting planters and common folk in leadership positions together, although numerous church records would indicate that planters held most elected church offices.[99] While common folk and elites did not attain equality in southern congregations, wealthy members provided an influx of money to build and maintain church buildings and programs, and to help meet the needs of the poor and widowed in their congregations. Yeomen, in turn, were likely to reward benevolence with votes, when their wealthy brethren had political aspirations.[100] In this manner, new churches in the South sustained a semblance of community created by camp meetings, and further developed their regional identity.

The Second Great Awakening, despite its regional differences, would ultimately provide some unity of doctrine in America, and although political and social unity would not occur until after the Civil War, the absence of a state church increased the importance of revivals in shaping society and politics.[101] A less-structured religious atmosphere suited an expanding American frontier, and "evangelicalism

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[97] Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals,* 255.
[98] Ibid, 256.
[99] McCurry, *Masters*, 202.
[100] Ibid., 206.
[101] George M. Thomas, *Revivalism and Cultural Change: Christianity, Nation Building, and the Market in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 64.

became," according to historian David Mathews, "one of the distinguishing marks of what it meant to be a southerner."[102] The independent nature of the conversion experience crossed race, gender, social and economic lines, but in the wake of doctrinal unity, sectional interpretation increased national disunity. One of the original inspirations for revival, the search for a national identity, resulted in multiple identities, foundationally differing on the issue of slavery. Northern revivals produced social reforms that led to a strong abolitionist movement, but Southern revivals generated personal reform, justifying slavery by shifting the focus away from human bondage. Instead, whites fulfilled their Christian duty by becoming responsible for the moral and spiritual well being of their slaves.

The sanctification of slavery would continue to shape and define the South, and its politics in the years preceding the Civil War, while the independence developed by women, children, and common folk through the revival experience would provide the faith, strength, and perseverance necessary to maintain their way of life. In the years following the Second Great Awakening, the moral debate over slavery would divide the major denominations, splintering them into separate sectional churches.[103] As major denominations began to split along regional lines, the nation would soon follow. Peter Cartwright decried the division over slavery among his Methodists, and he feared for the nation. "I could not survive under the painful fact that the Methodist Church must be divided," he said, and worried such action "would be the entering wedge to the dissolution of our glorious Union; and perhaps the downfall of this great republic."[104] The civilizing effect of religion on the frontier and the community created by camp meetings were instrumental in forming the character of the South, which would increasingly conflict with the religious activism that resulted from revivals in the North. The Second Great Awakening fundamentally changed religious, political, and social structure in America, as the Spirit of God moved the lives of common men in uncommon ways.

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[102] Mathews, *Religion in the Old South,* 246.
[103] Snay, *Gospel of Disunion,* 113.
[104] Cartwright, *Autobiography,* 423-4.