

# “A Strange Land and a Peculiar People”

The Challenge of Antebellum Appalachian Christianity  
to the Religious Mainstream

A thesis

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## Abstract

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Beginning in 1799, the Great Revival drastically reconfigured the religious identity of south-central Appalachia. From this event, a distinctive religious culture developed in the region during the antebellum period, one that was unique on the American religious landscape. Protestantism as it developed in Appalachia valued the primacy of the individual, embraced an anti-authoritarian conception of church structure, and emphasized an emotive religious experience. This culture rejected the social and crusading understanding of Protestantism nurtured elsewhere in the United States by the zeal of the Second Great Awakening. Appalachian Protestants' individualistic ideals were tempered, however, by their simultaneous desire for communal stability and cohesion, which resulted in a carefully tensioned balance between believers' independence and interdependence.

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# “A Strange Land and a Peculiar People”

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## Introduction

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In 1872, the popular *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* published Will Wallace Harney's recollection of his travels through the mountains of eastern Kentucky. Harney, himself a Kentuckian who had removed to the East, described the rugged Southern Appalachians as "a strange land and a peculiar people."<sup>1</sup> His words' stinging impact has been felt to the present day, both among Appalachian scholars and Appalachian people. Harney's description also harkens back to a long history of suspicion and derision of southern Appalachian people—and religion—in mainstream American society.

In the closing years of the eighteenth century, Kentucky in particular and Appalachia in general would become the center of a great revival of religion, characterized by large and exuberant camp meetings and an emphasis on the individual's emotive conversion experience. This Great Revival spread religious fervor throughout the old Southwest and into the South as well. The years that followed marked a time of religious ferment throughout the United States and witnessed the emergence of a distinctive regional religious culture in Appalachia, one marked by both diversity of theology and a general unity of social attitudes.

Appalachian Protestants valued the individual's access to God and resisted hierarchical assumptions about church organization and leadership. They rejected the Church as a social agent, understanding its purpose more simply as a support and community for Christ's followers. As Christianity became more ingrained in

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<sup>1</sup> Will W. Harney, "A Strange Land and a Peculiar People," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science*, October 1872.

Appalachian life, it became more organized as believers used the churches to structure their internal communities and maintain discipline and order.

Nevertheless, most of the faithful continued to resist an active role for the Church outside of the community of believers.

Religion elsewhere in the United States was also undergoing significant changes at this time. In the North, both conservatives and revivalist liberals came to understand Christianity as having an active role to play in shaping both local communities and the nation itself. This conception of religion was social and crusading, quite different from the philosophy nurtured in the mountains of Appalachia. Some Southerners embraced the exuberance of the Great Revival almost immediately. When faced with an entrenched religious and cultural sensibility that valued decorum in church pews and diligent attention to complex codes of honor at all times, however, these evangelicals were obligated to tailor—and tame—their exuberant message in order to win converts for Christ. As a result of this reality, religion developed a very different identity in the South than it did in Appalachia, despite the two regions' initial similarities.

Appalachia's unique place in antebellum Christianity has been woefully under-investigated and what work has been done is now generally quite old. In the early decades of the twentieth century, when Frederick Turner and his disciples dominated the historical discussion of the "frontier," Appalachians were cast as independence-minded, rough-hewn, and proud Americans who formed the emotional heart of a nation. Since then, however, they have been largely ignored by historians, who left the region the domain of social scientists who generally

preferred to focus on psychological or anthropological aspects of the more “bizarre” practices in the region’s Holiness churches –tongues speaking, being blessed or slain in the spirit, and serpent handling—as well as an emphasis on the hereafter rather than the present that they generally understood as fatalism, driven by social and economic deprivation.<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s, historical interest in Appalachia again grew with the advent of Appalachian Studies.

Still, only a handful of scholars have written at any length about Appalachian religion’s history. Chief among these individuals is Deborah Vansau McCauley, whose *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* has been the standard text since its publication in 1995. McCauley’s book outlines and fiercely defends a very specific conception of Appalachian religion, which is holiness in nature, predating and developing independently from the late nineteenth century Holiness Revival, and influenced by a convergence of pietism and Scotch-Irish revivalism with a decidedly Calvinist bent. In her dedication to legitimizing a religious tradition that is often misunderstood and seen as an aberration of mainline American Protestantism, McCauley sometimes becomes almost polemical, which detracts from her ability to convincingly argue her case.<sup>3</sup>

The Second Great Awakening, particularly as it unfolded in New England, is well documented, though all too often its characteristics are taken to be representative for American religion as a whole during a period of great foment

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<sup>2</sup> John D. Photiadis, ed., *Religion in Appalachia: Theological, Social, and Psychological Dimensions and Correlates* (Mogantown: Center for Extension and Continuing Education, Division of Social and Economic Development, Office of Research and Development, West Virginia University, 1978) is representative of this line of thinking.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah V. McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

and variety.<sup>4</sup> Antebellum Southern religious history has only recently been the recipient of much careful attention, and its scholars also tend to assume that Appalachia's religious identity was not distinct, absorbing it into the broader Southern context. John Boles' 1972 *The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* was the first relatively recent treatment of the topic, followed in 1977 by Donald Mathew's *Religion in the Old South*. Boles places Appalachia on the edge of the South culturally, to be sure, but still well within its bounds. In his hands, the Great Revival's effects in the two areas are virtually identical and he detects no appreciable regional variation. Mathew's South also encompasses Appalachia, though the region receives little attention.

In 1997, Christine Heyrman's *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* significantly updated the field and remains likely the most important discussion at present. She convincingly argues that Southern evangelicalism's ascendance in the nineteenth century was due to its leaders' ability to adapt to Southern cultural and social attitudes, rather than their success in persuading potential converts to significantly modify their behaviors. Despite its compelling thesis, Heyrman's book also falls short with regards to Appalachia. She too treats Appalachian Christians as part of a broader Southern tradition without any complications or differences.

This paper challenges the traditional assumptions about antebellum Appalachia and seeks a middle path between McCauley's zeal and Southern

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Clifford S. Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1960).

historians' apathy. By the first few decades of the century, Appalachia was indeed developing a distinctive religious culture and identity, a fact recognized by contemporaries if not by most historians. Appalachian religion offered something particular and generally unrecognized by the historiography of American religion. Chapter one outlines Appalachia's eighteenth century history and examines the Great Revival during the opening years of the nineteenth century, which was centered in Kentucky and quickly spread to the surrounding region. It argues that both Appalachian people and outside observers recognized the Revival as both new and unique.

Chapter two provides the wider context of religious development during the antebellum period, demonstrating the diversity of American religious identity. It traces the emergence of disinterested benevolence and the desire for a Christian nation and delineates between the revivalism that flourished throughout the rest of the United States and that which was embraced in Appalachia.

Finally, chapter three illustrates the maturation of Appalachia's religious culture and demonstrates the continuity of a number of themes and attitudes established during the Great Revival. As the nineteenth century progressed, Appalachian Protestants adjusted their conception of religion and their religious communities to fill a variety of roles in their lives.

Ultimately, this paper aims to address the larger context for both the exuberance of the Great Revival and the religious culture that followed in its wake. Beyond their sectarian differences, Appalachian Protestants developed an overarching religious philosophy that embraced the interdependence of the

believer and his or her religious community, bound together as they were to seek God's will individually as well as communally.

A note on nomenclature and scope: This paper will focus primarily on Kentucky and Tennessee, as well as the western regions of Virginia (including what would become West Virginia) and North Carolina. Today, this region is most appropriately classed as south-central Appalachia, though it bore no such name during the time this paper addresses. This region was, at various points during the sixty-odd years covered by the present study, known by a variety of names, though "the Southwest" was the most commonly used term. I have used both contemporary nomenclature as well as the anachronistic Appalachia interchangeably as seems appropriate.

I have chosen to maintain the original spelling and grammar in quotations of primary source documents. As errors are sometimes frequent I have not used [sic] to mark them, as it mars the clarity of the texts.

# 1

## Zion Travailed in Birth

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In the opening years of the nineteenth century, Appalachia would be overwhelmed by the fires of religious revival and the dreaded epithet—enthusiasm. This Great Revival transformed a region noted for its irreligiosity into one firmly in the grip of emotive, personal heart religion. By the close of the tumultuous years of Revival, a distinct religious mindset had developed, focusing on the individual, embracing what others would deride as “enthusiasm,” and crossing denominational boundaries. This regional culture stood in contrast to that ascendant elsewhere in the United States and illustrated southern Appalachia’s movement away from the American religious mainstream. This chapter opens by tracing the history of religious practice and belief in southern Appalachia in the latter half of the eighteenth century, setting the stage for the upheaval of the Great Revival. It then examines the Southwest’s Great Revival’s development and character and argues for the advent of a unique southwestern religious culture, which was recognized as such by those both in and outside of the region.

Called the backcountry by an eastward-facing population, the wild frontier of the Appalachian Mountains was a place outside of the American mainstream, both in cultural and religious terms. Geographically isolated, settlers lived a rough existence close to the land. Settlement of the backcountry began just before the middle of the eighteenth century and by the end of the American Revolution, the

population in what would become Kentucky and Tennessee was nearly fifty thousand, most from Virginia or the Carolinas.<sup>5</sup>

Those who traveled west and who claimed a religious identification were almost universally members of the three popular denominations: the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. The Baptists and especially Methodists were on the fringes of American Christianity in the eighteenth century. While Presbyterianism enjoyed more respect as a fairly established denomination, its practitioners who pushed west over the Appalachian Mountains were almost all either immigrants from northern Ireland or their descendants. They tended towards ethnic insularity, preferring their own ministers to those trained in America and culturally homogenous congregations. The proportion of settlers who were actively religious, however, was always quite small.<sup>6</sup>

The Scotch-Irish have become Appalachia's iconic settlers, and indeed they made up a significant part of its early population. Scotsmen by way of northern Ireland, they gave up their Ulster farms in favor of settlement in the American colonies in response to high rents, economic uncertainty, and the religious weight of Irish Anglicanism. Scotch-Irish emigration ebbed and flowed throughout the eighteenth century and by 1800, roughly 200,000 Scotch-Irish had migrated to America.<sup>7</sup> Almost all were Presbyterians and over three-quarters of them arrived in the Mid-Atlantic colonies of Delaware and Pennsylvania, from which many travelled south and west into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and

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<sup>5</sup>Ahlstrom, 429.

<sup>6</sup> John B. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Leyburn, James G. *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 169.

the Piedmont in the Carolinas.<sup>8</sup> Scotch-Irish settlement in the Shenandoah Valley began in the 1730s and swelled at the decade's end, with settlers pushing west of the Alleghany Mountains.

Settlement in the Piedmont followed slightly behind that in Virginia, with the earliest settlers not arriving until between 1740 and 1745.<sup>9</sup> Once inhabitation began, however, it continued in earnest. "Inhabitants flock in here daily, mostly from Pennsylvania and other parts of America who are overstocked with people and some directly from Europe" wrote the governor of North Carolina, Gabriel Johnston, in 1751, "They commonly seat themselves toward the West and have got near the mountains."<sup>10</sup> By the time of the American Revolution there were twenty-three Presbyterian churches in the Great Valley of Virginia.<sup>11</sup>

Due to their position already along the frontier, Scotch-Irish immigrants and their American descendants were among the largest groups to move west into Kentucky and Tennessee. With them traveled Presbyterianism. Presbyterian ministers, however, lagged behind. Most who did work in Appalachia had been sent by Donegal Presbytery in Virginia, America's western-most Presbytery. After scattered missionary efforts during the 1760s, the following decade saw a surge in migration with no corresponding increase in missionary attention. The first Presbyterian minister was not settled in the Southwest until David Rice was appointed to a small settlement near Danville, Kentucky in 1783. Rice was

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<sup>8</sup> Leyburn, 185.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 214.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 208.

obliged to hold meetings in a crude log cabin raised and funded by the local faithful, which was “used for the double purpose of a school and for teaching.”<sup>12</sup>

The Presbytery of Transylvania was formed in 1786, comprising all of Kentucky as well as the settlements along the Cumberland in Tennessee and those along the Miami in what is now Ohio.<sup>13</sup> Western Virginian Presbyterians fell under the auspices of the Presbytery of Redstone, which had been formed five years earlier and was based out of western Pennsylvania, still very much on the frontier at the time.<sup>14</sup>

In 1739, there had been only between two hundred and three hundred Baptists in the entire South, worshiping in only six or seven churches: three or four in South Carolina, two in Virginia, and one in North Carolina.<sup>15</sup> The Baptists arrived in strength to the backcountry in the middle years of the eighteenth century with increased ministerial attention in the years surrounding the American Revolution. The first regular Baptist preacher west of the Appalachians was Thomas Tinsley, who arrived in Kentucky in 1776. The first church west of Virginia’s Alleghenies was not constituted until 1781, at Severns Valley.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Robert McAfee in William W. Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier 1783-1840: The Presbyterians, A Collection of Source Documents* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), 30-31.

<sup>13</sup> Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Smith, *Old Redstone, or Historical Sketches of Western Presbyterianism, Its Early Ministers, Its Perilous Times and Its First Records* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854), 34.

Smith noted “the exposure of many persons, especially women and children, to perilous adventures with the ‘feræ naturæ,’ howling beasts of prey—the want of bread, and danger of starvation at particular seasons—the scarcity of salt and iron—the absence of all roads across the mountains, except brindle paths” at the time of the Presbytery’s founding.

<sup>15</sup> Robert A. Baker, *A Baptist Source Book with Particular Reference to Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 16.

<sup>16</sup> William W. Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783-1830, A Collection of Source Material* (New York: Cooper Square, 1964), 19.

Settlement in what is now eastern Tennessee followed a similar pattern and by 1781 there were five or six Baptist churches in the region.<sup>17</sup>

By the end of the century, Baptists' share of the population had grown substantially. In 1790, there were forty two Baptist churches in the "District of Kentuckee" (3,105 members), seventeen in the western counties of North Carolina (1146 members), four in Tennessee (333 members) and twenty in western Virginia (1000 members).<sup>18</sup> In terms of the entire population, the Baptists' share was modest: about one out of every twenty-five Kentuckians was a Baptist in 1790.<sup>19</sup> Both Separates and Regulars were represented and were grouped into three associations. Two, the Elkhorn and Salem, were Regular, while the South Kentucky was Separate.<sup>20</sup>

A fairly lax Calvinism was the generally accepted belief, though both individuals and congregations varied in their acceptance of more Arminian belief. Outright Arminianism was never tolerated. Baptist settlers were usually small farmers, but there were also some individuals of better means among them. Unlike Presbyterians, the Baptists were not ethnically homogenous.<sup>21</sup>

The Methodists were relatively late arrivers to the Southwest. Originally a reform movement within the Anglican Church, Methodism initially had little influence where Anglicanism itself was weak. The region between New York City in the north and the Carolinas in the south saw the greatest Methodist

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<sup>17</sup> Sweet, *Baptists*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> John Asplund. *The Annual Register of the Baptist Denomination, in North America; To The First of November, 1790* (Richmond: Dixon, Nicolson, and Davis, 1792), 24-38.

<sup>19</sup> Sweet, *Baptists*, 24.

<sup>20</sup> Ahlstrom, 432.

<sup>21</sup> Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky*, 5.

presence. Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia formed the heart of American Methodism in its earliest years.<sup>22</sup> Methodism crossed the Appalachians with the westward population surge that followed the conclusion of the American Revolution, moving from Virginia and North Carolina into the mountains and beyond to Tennessee and Kentucky.

Dedicated Arminians, Methodists were fiercely opposed to Baptists' and Presbyterians' predestinarian beliefs. John Wesley, Methodism's founder, preached a theology that centered on God's sovereignty and mankind's depravity. Wesley believed that humanity did not have free will per se and the Methodist Episcopal Church taught "that the condition of man... is such that he can not turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and works to faith;... whereupon we have no power to do good works... without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that good will."<sup>23</sup> Arminianism was not an optimistic view of human nature, but rather an insistence on its weakness and humanity's subsequent need for active repentance.<sup>24</sup> In this attitude, however, Methodists were of a mind with their Presbyterian and Baptist neighbors, despite their significant theological differences.

Baptists and Methodists held a number of opinions that were, while not identical, closely in line with each other's, eschewing tradition and hierarchy for

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<sup>22</sup> William W. Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier 1783-1840: The Methodists, A Collection of Source Materials* (New York: Cooper Square, 1964), 51.

<sup>23</sup> "Confession of Faith" in Robert Baird, *Religion in America; or, an Account of The Origin, Relation to the State, and Present Condition of the Evangelical Churches in the United States with Notices of the Unevangelical Denominations* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856), 491.

<sup>24</sup> Ahlstrom, 438.

an individualistic religion based on the heart. Presbyterians stood apart and most held tightly to the established norms of their church. These differences in attitude would prove to be decisive in dictating the denominations' various fates in the wake of the coming turmoil of the Great Revival.

Appalachian Presbyterians continued to require higher learning for their ministers. As time passed, more American-trained men took up the leadership of Southwestern congregations that had previously been led by men born outside of the United States. Princeton was the pinnacle of American Presbyterian training, and as late as 1824 one quarter of Kentucky's Presbyterian ministers had been trained there.<sup>25</sup> Those who could not travel east to study were still expected to achieve a university level of education and trained locally instead in small, sometimes crude, colleges—a process that could take many years.<sup>26</sup>

Baptists and Methodists were significantly less concerned with higher learning and among them there was even a sense that such schooling could be actively harmful. Too much education was understood to run directly contrary to God's intentions, turning its pursuers towards worldly rather than godly pursuits. Peter Cartwright, one of Appalachian Methodism's most tireless and influential circuit preachers, classed Presbyterians' emphasis on an educated clergy with other such fripperies as pews, instrumental music, and ministers supported financially by either the state or their congregants. Cartwright rejected the insult lobbed by Presbyterian critics that Methodist preachers were no better than

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<sup>25</sup> T. Scott Miyakawa, *Protestants and Pioneers: Individualism and Conformity on the American Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 85.

<sup>26</sup> Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 579.

“illiterate ignorant babblers.”<sup>27</sup> Literacy was an important skill for Methodist preachers, but more learning was superfluous. “I do not wish to undervalue education,” Cartwright wrote, “but really have seen so many of these educated preachers who forcibly reminded me of lettuce growing under the shade of a peach-tree, or like a gosling that had got the straddles by wading in the dew, that I turn away sick and faint.”<sup>28</sup>

The primary marker of a preacher, in Baptist and Methodist eyes alike, was a command from God, called a gift, supported by the church. Everything else was secondary. “A good motive to the work, and the call of the church, is all sufficient as to a man’s authority to preach the gospel,” explained John Taylor, one of the West’s great Baptist preachers. “By a good motive to the work,” he continued, “I understand, the man’s own soul must be converted, for except he is born again, he cannot have a spiritually good motive, and be what Paul designs, by the husbandman that laboureth must first be partaker of the fruit.”<sup>29</sup>

A Baptist brother who demonstrated a call to preach would be examined by the congregation of his church. After this examination he might be given license to “exhort,” a position less than that of a preacher, or he might be allowed to preach. This trial period was often limited geographically to either one congregation or a small area. If his preaching proved acceptable, the brother would then be licensed to preach throughout the association as needed.<sup>30</sup> A young

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W.P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Cranston and Curts, 1856), 80.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> John Taylor in McCauley, 117.

<sup>30</sup> Sweet, *Baptists*, 39.

Methodist man followed a similar trajectory, though his gift was vetted by more senior preachers rather than his congregation.<sup>31</sup>

Itinerating formed the heart of Methodism in Appalachia and indeed throughout the West. Preachers traveled defined circuits, sometimes individually and sometimes in pairs, which were most commonly comprised of a veteran preacher and a novice. If the community was receptive, after an initial visit a preacher would set a regular appointment to visit during each completion of his circuit, which would generally require between four and six weeks to travel. The most basic organizational unit in Methodism was the “class,” which was made up of between ten and twenty believers in a community. These individuals met regularly—usually weekly—in a member’s home for “mutual edification,” overseen by a class leader “whose duty it [was] to... inquire how their souls prosper, and to receive what they are willing to give for the support of the church and the poor.”<sup>32</sup> Above the class leader was a lay exhorter and perhaps a local preacher. All these would be supervised by the circuit preacher. A cluster of circuits would be grouped into a district, which was overseen by a presiding elder, who himself was required to visit each circuit at least once a quarter. Finally, a number of districts formed a Conference, guided by a bishop.<sup>33</sup> The Western Conference that covered the entirety of the early frontier was overseen for many

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<sup>31</sup> Miyakawa, 96.

<sup>32</sup> Baird, 493.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 493-495.

years by Bishop Francis Asbury, one of the most significant individuals in both early Methodism and American religion more generally.<sup>34</sup>

The first western circuits—the Yadkin and Holston, both in Tennessee—were formed in 1782 and the Redstone Circuit in southwestern Pennsylvania was established by 1784. Methodism in America broke from the Episcopal Church, Anglicanism’s American church after the Revolutionary War, with the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1785. At the annual meeting in 1786, the Church had 14,988 members, attended to by 83 preachers. Of these members, 1,210 lived on the Yadkin, Holston, and Redstone circuits. The Kentucky circuit was formed that year, further expanding Methodism’s western reach.<sup>35</sup> By the century’s end there were at least fourteen circuits in the West: six in Kentucky, two in Tennessee, two in the Ohio territory, two in southwestern Pennsylvania, one in western Virginia, and one in western North Carolina and the region was organized into the Western Conference.<sup>36</sup>

By the mid-1790s, religion was stagnating in Appalachia. In Kentucky, church membership held roughly steady despite a threefold increase in population. Similar trends were evident elsewhere. “The remaining church folk and their worried clergy desperately sought an answer to what they called a woeful ‘declension,’ a loss of ‘vital piety.’”<sup>37</sup> Material interests were a frequently-cited cause for the religious malaise in the Southwest. “Good religion and such good land are not so easily matched together,” noted Bishop Asbury. “I think it

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<sup>34</sup> John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven By Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 174.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky*, 18.

will be well if some or many do not eventually lose their souls.”<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Peter Cartwright bemoaned that his childhood home, Logan County, Kentucky, was nothing better than a “‘Rogues’ Harbor.’ [There,] many refugees, from almost all parts of the Union, fled to escape justice or punishment... it was a desperate state of society. Murderers, horse thieves, highway robbers, and counterfeiters [all] fled [there.]”<sup>39</sup> Also worrisome was a perception that “‘the Universalists, joining with the Deists, had given Christianity a deadly stab’” in the region; the sense of danger from liberal religion was severe.<sup>40</sup>

The faithful’s concerns about piety would lead to revival in Appalachia. As did virtually all Protestants of their day, Appalachian Christians held a firm belief in God’s Providence—that He was omnipotent and always in control of earthly affairs. From this understanding, they reasoned that God remained in control of humanity’s trials and that, because He was benevolent, He would provide a means of renewal. Reverend Smith, a Presbyterian, maintained that “‘the Lord hath his way in the wilderness and all things obey his might.’ I trust he will yet bring good out of this evil.”<sup>41</sup>

It was the believers’ obligation to locate and then correct the reason for lagging piety, at which junction God would provide the means for their deliverance. Most placed the blame at mankind’s feet: Christians had become lazy and had forgotten Christ’s admonition in John 2:15-16 to “Love not the world,

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<sup>38</sup> Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 2: 89 & 125.

<sup>39</sup> Cartwright, 24.

<sup>40</sup> James Smith in John Boles, *The Great Revival 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 18.

<sup>41</sup> Boles, *Great Revival*, 26.

neither the things that are in the world... For it all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” By removing His mercies, God was reminding the faithful of their utter dependence upon Him.

Having identified the cause of religion’s weakness, believers then set out to correct it. Fasting as a means of repentance and turning to God dates to the Old Testament, and it was to this ancient practice that Appalachian Christians turned. James McGready, one of Appalachia’s great Presbyterian revivalists, described the embrace of penitential fasting among the congregations in which he ministered in 1797.

[The sense of religious declension] struck a general alarm to all praying Christians. The people of God were painfully exercised about the perishing state of sinners, and sorely distressed under the gloomy appearance of the Spirit’s withdrawing, and the work of God ceasing. Particular times were set apart for prayer, and the last Saturday in each month was set apart as a day of fasting and prayer to God for the church of Christ.<sup>42</sup>

His congregants covenanted to pray individually as well, every Saturday evening and Sunday morning.<sup>43</sup>

The identification of Americans’ worldliness as the cause for religion’s weak condition and the use of fasting and organized corporate and individual prayer as an antidote were not at all unique to Appalachia. The results of such attention, however, were unlike any experienced elsewhere. The fierce desire for change among Southwestern Christians initially led to a number of small and

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<sup>42</sup> James McGready, “A Short Narrative of the Revival of Religion in Logan County, in the State of Kentucky, and the Adjacent Settlements in the State of Tennessee, from May 1797, until September 1800,” *The Western Missionary Magazine and Repository of Religious Intelligence* 1(1803), 27.

<sup>43</sup> Catherine C. Cleveland, *The Great Revival in the West: 1797-1805* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1959), 40.

localized revivals in the three or so years leading up to 1800. One such revival took place among the Baptists of Mason County, Kentucky, where a “manifest increase in spiritual interest” led to the baptism of 277 new members.<sup>44</sup> Another series of revivals struck McGready’s three congregations. These proceeded in fits and starts, with periods of fervor followed by times of apathy. Despite this unsteady nature, each revival appeared stronger than the last and “it might be said with propriety, that Zion travailed in birth to bring forth her spiritual children.”<sup>45</sup>

It was during the revivals overseen by McGready that the distinctive behavior attributes that would become associated with the Great Revival were first displayed in significant numbers. Convicted sinners, old and young, white and black, would be “so struck with deep, heart-piercing convictions, that their bodily strength was quite overcome, so that they fell to the ground, and could not refrain from bitter groans and outcries for mercy.”<sup>46</sup> At one meeting, “a woman, who had been many months under deep convictions... was brought to Christ, and could not refrain from breaking out into an amazing rapture of joy and adoration, for a few minutes.”<sup>47</sup> The meetings usually lasted many days, beginning on the Thursday or Friday of one week and continuing at least until Sunday and perhaps as long as the following Tuesday. Each day stretched far into the night as preachers and “experienced” Christians joined together in exhorting the unconverted, who felt the “arrows of the Almighty sticking fast in their hearts.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Boles, *Great Revival*, 51.

<sup>45</sup> McGready, “A Short Narrative of the Revival of Religion,” 46.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

In July 1800, the Southwest experienced the first of what would become its iconic camp meetings, though the term would not be used until 1802.<sup>49</sup> At McGready's church at Gaspar River, families gathered from as many as one hundred miles distant to attend the multi-day revival. "There were 13 waggons brought to the meeting house, in order to transport people and their provisions," recalled McGready.<sup>50</sup> Since the earliest days of his revivalist work, McGready had been working in concert with fellow Presbyterians William Hodge, John Rankin, and John McGee, as well as McGee's brother William, a Methodist. At Gaspar River, this cooperative spirit came into its own as believers from various denominations came together to participate in the meeting.

The services were marked by a sense of eagerness and anticipation; "no person seemed to wish to go home—hunger and sleep seemed to affect no body—eternal things were the vast concern."<sup>51</sup> Sunday evening's closing sermon, about Peter's doubt causing him to sink into the water that Jesus had asked him to walk on, was preached by William McGee and marked the culmination of three days' tension and excitement. "Towards the close of the sermon, the cries of the distressed arose almost as loud as his voice," reported McGready. "Here awakening and converting work was to be found in every part of the multitude; and even some things strangely and wonderfully new."<sup>52</sup>

The Gaspar River meeting began a wave of meetings at neighboring congregations and so the revival spread. Initially the revival was largely limited to

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<sup>49</sup> Boles, *Great Revival*, 55.

<sup>50</sup> McGready, "A Short Narrative of the Revival of Religion," 49.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

those who already believed. Nevertheless, the emotional fervor, friendly meetings among denominationalists, and the commitment of whole families soon encouraged many doubters to believe that there could be no explanation but an omnipotent and benevolent God.

As attendees returned to their homes far from the revival sites, they brought their renewed religious passion with them, spreading the revival by example and by word of mouth. “In some [places] it appears like a fire that has been long confined—bursting all its barriers, and spreading with a rapidity that is indescribable—attended only with a still small voice—This, my brother, is a harvest indeed,” effused one Lexington Baptist.<sup>53</sup> The revival spread outward from Mason County, into Kentucky’s Woodford, Fayette, and Jefferson counties. Presbyterians were generally more hesitant than Baptists and Methodists, who had been long accustomed to more exuberant worship, but “a little conversation with the affected persons, induced [them] to believe, that in the judgement of charity, it was the work of the Lord.”<sup>54</sup>

In August 1801, the most famous camp meeting of the Great Revival took place at Cane Ridge, in Logan County, Kentucky. Barton Warren Stone, a Presbyterian minister who had been converted under McGready in the early 1790s, organized the meeting at his church. The meeting had been widely advertised for about a month before it was to begin and anticipation was high in the days leading up to it. Shortly before he arrived to the event, one attendee

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<sup>53</sup> “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend at the City of Washington, dated Lexington March 8, 1801,” in *Gospel News, or A Brief Account of the Revival of Religion in Kentucky, and Several Other Parts of the United States* (Baltimore: N.P., 1801), 3.

<sup>54</sup> John E. Findley in Boles, *The Great Revival*, 62.

wrote that “on this occasion I doubt not but that there will be 10,000 people, and perhaps 500 waggons,”<sup>55</sup> No exact count exists, but this anonymous correspondent was likely not far off in his estimate. Attendees and observers recorded that between ten and twenty five thousand people attended the meeting over the course of its duration. Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist ministers and preachers were all in attendance, though only the Presbyterians and Methodists were in full communion with each other.

First-hand accounts of the revival reveal the tremendous size and fervent character of the occasion:

At 11 o'clock [on Saturday morning] the quantity of ground occupied by horses, waggons, &c. was about the same size as the square between Market, Chesnut, Second, and Third-streets, of Philadelphia... There was at this place a stage erected in the woods, about 100 yards from the meeting-house, where were a number of Presbyterian and Methodist ministers; one of the former preaching to as many as could get near enough to hear... in the house also, was another of the same denomination, preaching to a crowded audience.. at the same time another large concourse of people collected about 100 yards in an east direction from the meeting-house, hearing a Methodist speaker... and about 150 yards in a south course from the house was an assembly of black people, hearing the exhortations of the blacks... I believe there was at one time as many as three hundred who exhorted on this occasion.<sup>56</sup>

The meeting lasted six days, ultimately ended by lack of food rather than lack of dedication.<sup>57</sup>

Far from an isolated event, the revival at Cane Ridge was but the most prominent example of the religious culture taking shape in south-central Appalachia. While there was some, though not much, precedence for the physical manifestations of religious emotion that became the Revival's hallmark, it was at

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<sup>55</sup> “Extract of a Letter from a Presbyterian, to his friend in Baltimore, dated Bourbon-county, August 7, 1801,” in *Gospel News*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Paul K. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 85.

the camp meetings that such “exercises” first garnered much attention. Slurred as enthusiasm by the Revival’s opponents, the six exercises (falling, rolling, “jerking,” barking, dancing, and laughing and singing) were seized upon by the faithful as divinely sent and as incontrovertible proof of God’s power and blessing.<sup>58</sup>

Those affected usually began to cry, sometimes profusely and vocally, before being struck physically. Once struck, a single individual might begin a tidal wave of similar behavior and hundreds were said to fall together at the same time.<sup>59</sup> Those affected would be removed to “some convenient place, where prayer [was] made for them; some Psalm or Hymn suitable to the occasion, sung.”<sup>60</sup> If a person in the midst of an exercise spoke, their words were given great weight and were understood as particularly powerful.

Much of the time, one affected by an exercise was quite literally unaware of those around him or her. Upon recovering, a person often bore a testimony of conversion and would joyously exhort others to continue to seek Christ. “O! I know, I know he is willing, he is willing—He is come! he is come!” exclaimed one such young girl, “O! there is a fullness in him for all the world, if they could but see it, if they would but come.”<sup>61</sup>

Demonstration of one of these physical exercises was tied tightly to the understanding that conversion was an intensely personal experience and those who experienced them were, as a rule, accepted as having had an authentic

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<sup>58</sup> Conkin, 93-95.

<sup>59</sup> Cleveland, 89.

<sup>60</sup> “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman to his Sister in Philadelphia, dated Lexington, (Ken.) August 10, 1801,” in *Gospel News*, 5.

<sup>61</sup> McGready, “A Short Narrative of the Revival of Religion,” 50-51.

experience. Being stricken with a physical exercise was not the only way to obtain “a hope in the Lord.”<sup>62</sup> Other times, the seeker would draw away from others and into him or herself. John Taylor, who was among the most active Baptist preachers in the Southwest and the author of one of the few published first-hand treatments of the region’s religious life from a believer’s perspective, recorded many conversion experiences in *A History of Ten Baptist Churches, of Which the Author Has Been Alternately a Member: In Which Will Be Seen Something of a Journal of the Author’s Life For More Than Fifty Years. Also a Comment on Some Parts of Scripture, in Which the Author Takes the Liberty to Differ from Other Expositors*. One characteristic experience was that of fourteen-year-old Hannah Graves who, with her friend Polly Woolfolk, had been earnestly seeking conversion during a small revival at Clear Creek, Kentucky. While attending a meeting together, “Polly, seeing something unusual in Hannah’s countenance, exclaimed, ‘What ails you?’ Receiving no answer, she then replied, ‘Hannah, you are converted! O Hannah, you are converted!’ Joyful Hannah, after a little, replied something had taken place she could not well account for. But hoped it might be that great blessing.”<sup>63</sup> The fateful moment rarely occurred but privately and internally, no matter how large the crowd assembled or how much attention a person’s exercises attracted. And once achieved, a believer’s hope was judged by the strength of their relation of experience.

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<sup>62</sup> John Taylor, *Baptists on the American Frontier: A History of Ten Baptist Churches of Which the Author Has Been Alternately a Member*, Chester R. Young, ed. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 203.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 234-235.

Preachers from all three of the popular denominations set aside doctrinal distinctions to jointly exhort both the lost and the saved, preaching a theology of individual accountability and primacy. Sinners were urged to seek an intensely personal conversion event in the midst of the revival's communal chaos and the mark of an individual's salvation was his ability to recount such an experience. As all labored together to convert sinners deemed damned for hell, the Calvinist and Arminian debate fell by the wayside and personal volition was universally emphasized. Those Presbyterians who embraced the revival downplayed their denomination's strict Calvinist doctrines. "Almost to a man," wrote Cartwright, they "gave up these points of high Calvinism, and preached a free salvation to all mankind."<sup>64</sup> Cartwright exaggerated the extent of Presbyterians' deviation—few denied the principle of election explicitly—but he was correct in observing that abstract elements of theology were set aside when they interfered with the revivalists' evangelistic zeal. David Rice, Kentucky's first Presbyterian minister, noted the doctrinal mixture evident in the revival meetings, though not entirely approvingly: "Sometimes there is in our discourses, a strange heterogeneous mixture of antimonianism, arminianism, and I may add, calvinism; calvinism, perhaps in the beginning, antimonianism in the middle, and arminianism at the end of a sermon."<sup>65</sup>

In the upheaval of the Great Revival, religion in Appalachia was dramatically reshaped. Between 1800 and 1802, the three Baptist associations in Kentucky grew to six and saw their numbers swell from 4,766 members to

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<sup>64</sup> Cartwright, 46.

<sup>65</sup> David Rice, *A Sermon on the Present Revival of Religion*, (Lexington: Joseph Charles, 1803), 32.

13,569. By 1805, the Methodist Church's Western Conference expanded from 3,030 to 10,158 members.<sup>66</sup> Francis Asbury, who had spoken so worriedly about the region in 1797, was by 1806 commenting that Kentucky was no longer a "dangerous frontier," but was instead the "centre of the western front of [Methodism's Christian] empire."<sup>67</sup>

The Presbyterians had likewise added several thousand to their membership by 1803 as a result of the revivals.<sup>68</sup> Their successes were not to be long-lived, however, as they were soon wracked by denominational divisions that were a direct result of the Great Revival. Many Presbyterian ministers had never been entirely comfortable with the exuberance of the revival, and their resistance sparked an intra-denominational conflict that was ultimately unresolvable. The revivalists subverted accepted ecclesiastical authority in asserting the primacy of the individual in interpreting Scripture and communing with Christ. The troubles that beset Appalachian Presbyterians illustrate the ascendance of a new religious ethos and its incompatibility with established methods of doing and understanding religion.

The issue first came to a head in the New Light Schism of 1803, when a number of Presbyterian revivalist ministers were charged with heterodoxy. Five ministers, Richard McNemar, John Thompson, Robert Marshall, John Dunlevy, and Barton W. Stone, "rose up and unitedly renounced the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church, organized a Church of their own, and dubbed it with the

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<sup>66</sup> Cleveland, 131.

<sup>67</sup> Boles, *Antebellum Kentucky*, 29.

<sup>68</sup> Cleveland 131.

name of *Christian*. Here was the origin of what was called the *New Lights*.<sup>69</sup> By April of 1804, the seceders abandoned the Presbyterian model of organization and governance entirely, instead “taking the New Testament for their Church discipline. They established no standard of doctrine; every one was to take the New Testament, read it, and abide his own construction of it.”<sup>70</sup> The group embraced the physical exercises of the revival, which played a prominent part in their worship, as did visions, and took as their final goal the formation of “a universal kingdom in which all denominations should unite.”<sup>71</sup>

This universal freedom of individual interpretation did not encourage sustained unity, however, and the five leaders broke apart before long. NcNemar and Dunlevy joined the Shakers, while Marshall and Thompson ultimately rejoined the Presbyterian Church. It was left to Barton Stone, who had brought the revival to fruition at Cane Ridge, to maintain the New Lights’ views until merging in 1832 with the Christian church of Alexander Campbell, himself also a former Presbyterian, who had left that body in the 1810 in western Pennsylvania to join the Baptists.<sup>72</sup>

A second schism shook the Presbyterian Church in the Southwest in 1810. In 1802, a new presbytery had been formed in the south of Kentucky, called the Cumberland Presbytery, which contained the central area of revival activity. The presbytery licensed “pious laymen of promising abilities, and who seemed to have a talent for public speaking” in response to the dearth of ordained ministers to

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<sup>69</sup> Cartwright, 31.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 31-32.

<sup>71</sup> Cleveland, 139.

<sup>72</sup> From whom he would also later separate.

tend to the ever-growing flock. Such action was deemed disorderly and heterodox by the Synod of Kentucky, itself founded the same year, as it ran contrary to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Church's strict emphasis on a properly educated clergy.<sup>73</sup> Finally in 1810, three revivalist ministers of the Cumberland Presbytery, Finis Ewing, Samuel King, and Samuel McAdow, withdrew from the Presbyterian Church and formed an independent church, which they named the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The new body abandoned the notion of a partial atonement or of special election, but maintained the perseverance of the saints and most other Calvinist positions, a position that fit well into the philosophy nurtured by the Great Revival.

These schisms drew significant numbers from the Presbyterian Church in Appalachia. The General Assembly Reports from 1803 and 1804, for instance, reveal that "in the former year there were 31 presbyteries, 322 ministers, and 48 probationers, as compared with 27 presbyteries, 130 ministers, and 33 probationers" in the latter year.<sup>74</sup> The Presbyterian Church's difficulties in the Southwest following the Great Revival, coupled with the successes enjoyed by the Baptists and Methodists as well as the Presbyterian splinter groups illustrate the region's growing religious culture. It was one that placed the individual at the center; religion was personal, not societal. The role of a minister or preacher was not to foster a Christian society, but to guide individual souls to Christ and to Christian perfection. The church was understood as a voluntary association of likeminded individuals, an interpretation with a long dissenter history as a

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<sup>73</sup> Baird, 504.

<sup>74</sup> Cleveland, 146.

response to “an institutionalized church whose members often seemed anything but converted and voluntary.”<sup>75</sup> The Cumberland Presbyterians and Christians flourished while the Presbyterians suffered because of this fundamental disagreement over Christianity’s social role.

Among non-Appalachian Christians, there was a growing sense that the region was developing in a different direction from the rest of the country by the closing years of the eighteenth century, a sense that would only grow stronger as the nineteenth century progressed. Such sentiments were most clearly seen in the birth and development of the home missions movement. The home missions movement was born just as the eighteenth century drew to a close. Although the motivations and methods of the home missionary societies will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, it is useful here to note that these societies reflected a fear of the particular cast of Appalachian Christianity. The first was the Missionary Society of Connecticut, organized in 1798. The Massachusetts Missionary Society would follow the next year. In both bodies’ constitutions were explicit references to the necessity of “support[ing] and promot[ing] Christian knowledge in the new settlements, within the United States.”<sup>76</sup>

The earliest home missionaries, who predated the Great Revival, had been concerned with the same sense of irreligiosity and malaise that so disturbed their Appalachian contemporaries. But even as the Great Revival gained strength and reinvigorated Appalachian Protestantism, the missionaries remained worried. The

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<sup>75</sup> Boles, *Great Revival*, 129.

<sup>76</sup> Missionary Society of Connecticut, *The Constitution of the Missionary Society of Connecticut: With an Address from the Board of Trustees, to the People of the State, and A Narrative on the Subject of Missions to Which is Subjoined a Statement of the Funds of the Society* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1800), 4.

Great Revival was the subject of much discussion, concern, and, occasionally, support, among Christians throughout the United States. Their responses, both during the Great Revival and in its immediate wake as well as in the years following it, demonstrate a growing recognition throughout the country that what had transpired in Appalachia was unique. Additionally, this distinctiveness was understood by some observers as a threat to the nation's Christian destiny identified by the Second Great Awakening.

Not all Americans, including many quite devout ones, were pleased with what they saw unfolding. Their responses were based on three shared critiques. Firstly, they attacked the emotional excitement stirred by the revivals, naming it nothing more than enthusiasm. "Its "delirious fever" was "abhorrent [to] the genius of true Christianity" and as threatening as "the chilling hesitation of skepticism [and the] forbidding sternness of bigotry," warned one Rhode Island minister.<sup>77</sup> The sense that religious emotionalism was not the proper expression of Christian piety dated to at least the Great Awakening of nearly a century past, but to this critics added the fear that individuals "converted" in such a setting would mistake their flights of fancy for genuine conversion experiences, and thus would never seek a true conversion and live unaware of their eternal doom.

Secondly, critics focused on issues of church governance and structures of worship. Revivalists habitually defied long-standing tradition and authority; their anti-authoritarianism resulted in the revivalists being difficult to control or direct. Opponents saw this defiance as encouraging anarchy and ultimately tyranny by

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<sup>77</sup> "For the Providence Gazette," *The Providence Gazette*, January 5, 1811, 1.

those who would abuse their hold over their followers.<sup>78</sup> The third critique centered on theology itself. Methodist revivalism was straight-forwardly Arminian in nature, while the revivalist Baptists and especially Presbyterians minimized their Calvinist theologies. As a result, conservative Calvinists interpreted revivalism as being entirely too Arminian, whereas liberals noted that the revivalists, “while minimizing the effects of original sin, compensatorily maximized those of an individually chosen yet universal depravity, and so they labeled [the revivalists’ message] hyper-Calvinism of another sort.”<sup>79</sup>

Such critiques supported renewed vigor in missionizing Appalachia. The Great Revival had indeed made the Southwest more Christian, which was the missionaries’ stated goal. That home missionary attention to Appalachia only increased as the Great Revival waned illustrates that mainstream American Christians did not recognize the Christian culture that followed the Revival as familiar or authentic.

In 1812, the Connecticut and Massachusetts societies jointly sent John F. Schermerhorn and Samuel J. Mills, Presbyterians both, to Appalachia in order to assess the character of the inhabitants and gauge their religious attitudes, as “a correct view of the state of religious affairs, in that region, is of the utmost importance; for the knowledge which this part of the country at present possesses, on this subject, is very limited and partial.”<sup>80</sup> The men also hoped to attend to the

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<sup>78</sup> James D. Bratt, ed., *Antirevivalism in Antebellum America: a Collection of Religious Voices* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2006), xx.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> John F. Schermerhorn and Samuel J. Mills, *A Correct View of That Part of the United States Which Lies West of the Alleghany Mountains, With Regard to Religion and Morals* (Hartford: Peter B. Gleason and Co., 1814), 3.

lack of formal religious structures in the region by encouraging the establishment of Bible societies and other institutions.

In their travels, Schermerhorn and Mills visited western Pennsylvania, New Virginia (West Virginia), Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, with briefer forays into Mississippi, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and Louisiana. In 1814, the pair published the first survey of religion in the Southwest, *A Correct View of that Part of the United States Which Lies West of the Alleghany Mountains, With Regard to Religion and Morals*. In it Schermerhorn, who was the book's primary author, detailed the "religious and moral condition of the West, the number of Bibles in the various communities, the number of clergymen in each country, profitable fields for missionary labor, the number of towns able and willing to support ministers, and the origin of and characteristics of the people."<sup>81</sup>

Schermerhorn's report was replete with descriptions of the "raving enthusiasts" who populated Appalachia.<sup>82</sup> He lamented the diversity of belief, characterizing the people they encountered as having "no fixed opinions or principles" and vulnerable to being "blown about 'by every wind of doctrine.'"<sup>83</sup> He noted the continued emphasis on internal, individual understanding of religion and identified it as the fundamental difference between Appalachian religion and Christianity elsewhere in the United States:

It is this mistaken notion of this Spirit that has caused so much ignorance, error, and enthusiasm in the West: for the *Spirit within*, as they term it, is made the guide of their actions, and rule of their faith... These observations on the Spirit are applicable to several denominations... It was from this delusion that all the

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<sup>81</sup> Colin B. Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier, With Particular Reference to the American Home Missionary Society* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 139.

<sup>82</sup> Schermerhorn and Mills, 15.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

fanaticism and enthusiasm sprung which overspread the western country a few years since, and produced a flood of errors.<sup>84</sup>

Presbyterian ministers, by which Schermerhorn meant those who were not part of the Cumberland or New Light splits, held the highest place in Schermerhorn's conception, though they were also the least numerous of the preachers he and Mills encountered.

Schermerhorn's complaints and observations would be echoed by subsequent home missionaries throughout the decades leading to the Civil War. As late as 1851, *The Home Missionary*, the newsletter of the American Home Missionary Society, published a piece titled "The South West. Prejudices—Distracted Meetings," in which an anonymous author vented his frustrations with the "mass of the people" who "are made to believe that the Presbyterians think themselves above them."<sup>85</sup> He then went on to relate Presbyterianism and modern agricultural innovations as uplifting improvements offered and rejected, discussing how Appalachian people "go to hear the 'larned' preacher, and to see the new-fashioned plow, and the deep furrows which it makes; and then they return home, and partly from sloth, and partly from envy, cling the tighter to the old rickety plow, and to the see-saw, hum and spit preacher."<sup>86</sup> These preachers utilize a "passionate appeal (which is evidently intended to reach the weaker part of the congregation first,) about departed friends, and a vindication of shouting"

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<sup>84</sup> Schermerhorn and Mills, 39-40.

<sup>85</sup> "The South West. Prejudices—Distracted Meetings." *The Home Missionary*, June 1, 1851.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

to effectively exhaust listeners into a false conversion; embracing the camp meeting rather than forceful, rational teaching Sunday after Sunday.<sup>87</sup>

“It is painful to write of these things,” the author sighed, “much more to be compelled to witness and endure them.”<sup>88</sup> Rejection of Eastern religious sensibilities was as boggling as the rejection of the technological advances upon which civilization rested. Interesting also is the reference to people’s attention to a preacher, albeit one who is unsuitable according to the author’s determination. Once again, the frequent refrain that Westerners were irreligious was coupled with complaints about the kinds of religion which they held. Missionaries were either comfortable being utterly disingenuous or were absolutely incapable of recognizing other interpretations of Christianity as Christianity at all.

The region of the American West among and beyond the Southern Appalachians therefore came into its own as a recognizably discrete part of America’s religious landscape in the earliest years of the nineteenth century. Despite the continuance of denominational differences between the various churches, a distinctive regional religious identity was emerging. Across doctrinal lines, Appalachian people were invested in a Christianity that centered on the heart and gave primacy to the experience of the individual who experienced an emotional, exuberant experience of God. Christians from outside of Appalachia recognized this culture as distinct—and many found it distinctly worrying. At the center of Appalachian Christianity stood the solitary Christian, offering a

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<sup>87</sup> The South-West. Prejudices—Distracted Meetings.”

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

challenging conception of religion's role and purpose. The following chapter will demonstrate just how far outside of the American mainstream was this mentality.

## A Complete Christian Commonwealth?

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The Second Great Awakening was a time of upheaval throughout the United States and it altered religious Americans' lives in a variety of ways. The Great Revival that began in southern Appalachia sent shockwaves throughout Protestant America. It sparked a period of fervor and revival throughout the South and made the more staid North uneasy. Southerners followed the Appalachian example in embracing emotive, revivalistic religion, but adapted the Southwestern model to better suit their own situation.

Evangelical fervor also exploded in the Northeast, most famously under the untiring labor of Charles Finney, but from the start it was a different, more measured, entity. The North was also responsible for the emergence of Christian benevolence and the formation of voluntary societies dedicated to moral uplift. Northerners began to embrace a general consensus that religion ought to be social, political, and missionary, and that American society, and then the world, could be reformed as a "complete Christian commonwealth."<sup>89</sup> This chapter outlines the evolution of Christianity's multiple social roles in early nineteenth century America and illustrates the fractured, regionalized nature of religion at the time.

Evangelical religion began to flourish in the South shortly after it began to grow rapidly in southern Appalachia. Indeed, Southern revivalism found its roots in Appalachia's Great Revival. The Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptist all had

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<sup>89</sup> Horace Bushnell, *Barbarism the First Danger: A Discourse for Home Missions* (New York: William Osborn, 1847), 32.

a long history in the South and the Great Revival spread from Appalachia to the members of these churches east of the Appalachian Mountains almost immediately. Often it was visitors from the Southwest who brought the revival with them.<sup>90</sup> Large camp meetings marked by the appearance of the physical exercises dotted the South. Such events were generally received favorably, as the faithful rejoiced that “the sacred flame... is extending far and wide.”<sup>91</sup>

Evangelical preachers challenged the hierarchies that structured Southerners’ lives. In a culture where emotional reticence was the norm, revivalists expected religious seekers to undertake “daunting emotional risks” in struggling towards rebirth.<sup>92</sup> Southern revivalist religion soon moved away from its original identity, however, in an effective effort to take advantage of the vacuum left by the withering Episcopal Church and to better evangelize the unconverted.<sup>93</sup> In order to court the white men who dominated Southern life, both private and public, Southern evangelicals minimized those teachings that stood in their way.

Appalachian revivalists, and early Southern evangelicals, emphasized the notion that the local church was more than disparate individuals gathered for worship at specific times. Instead, the congregation was a spiritual family, offering encouragement, rebuke, and guidance to each other as needed. This was demonstrated in the sometimes-intrusive oversight that churches commanded of member’s affairs. Few issues were truly private, and families’ personal lives were

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<sup>90</sup> Boles, *Great Revival*, 74.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>92</sup> Christine L. Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 39.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

accessible to public scrutiny. Church discipline also expected that members would shun many of the “vices” common to Southern men’s life, such as drinking, gambling, and dueling.<sup>94</sup>

The familial attitude of early nineteenth century popular religion also extended to members’ behavior towards one another and even the language that believers used with each other, such as Baptists’ references to each other as Brother, Sister, and sometimes Father or the still more familiar Daddy. Evangelicals, men and women both, came into close physical contact with each other: greeting each other with a “holy kiss,” extending the “right hand of fellowship,” hugging, and casual touch were all commonplace. For men steeped in a strict masculinity, evangelical religion could easily feel too feminine for comfort.<sup>95</sup>

In the evangelical view, pious women were afforded a great deal of respect, as well as autonomy that was not often available to them otherwise. Southern Methodists and Baptists permitted women to exhort, pray, and prophesy in public before mixed audiences, expanding their sphere beyond the typical confines of Southern womanhood. Women made up the majority of many congregations and often enjoyed close relationships with preachers and itinerants<sup>96</sup>. This defiance of Southern cultural expectations, which placed the family at the center of life and the father firmly at the family’s head, limited evangelicals’ ability to make lasting inroads into Southern life.

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<sup>94</sup> Heyrman, 230.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 226.

<sup>96</sup> Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 103.

Also problematic were evangelicals' views on slavery. The enthusiastic religion brought to the South from the Great Revival opposed the practice. Evangelicals argued that it was unjust; that it damaged masters by encouraging sexual indulgence, pride, and a sense that the strong were entitled to exploit the weak; that it promoted hypocrisy; and that it created a dangerous underclass that threatened society's safety and stability.<sup>97</sup> Devereaux Jarrett, an Episcopalian minister who was deeply and steadily sympathetic to the Methodist cause, equated slaveholders with "horsethieves & Hog-stealers."<sup>98</sup>

Such positions limited revival religion's success in the South. Between roughly 1810 and 1820, however, Southern evangelicals altered their positions on many of the problematic issues, thereby making the faith more palatable to white men. In matters of discipline, the evangelical churches had much reduced their oversight. By the 1830s, Methodist class meetings, which were the primary location of church discipline, had generally fallen into disuse. Baptists also were disciplining far fewer of their members; particularly reduced were citations for offenses that white men committed within the home, such as the physical or verbal abuse of wives, children, and slaves.<sup>99</sup>

The problem of slavery was minimized as evangelicals absorbed the Southern mentality towards the topic. Even the Methodists, slavery's dedicated opponents, moderated their language. They suggested that if it were not possible for an owner to emancipate his slaves immediately, he should emancipate them as he was able and in the interim "forbear & suppress cruelty" while allowing them

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<sup>97</sup> Heyrman, 73.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 159 & 321.

“full liberty to attend preaching of the gospel.”<sup>100</sup> In fact, by the 1840s, most slave owners were Methodists, with Baptists not far behind.<sup>101</sup>

Women’s religious roles were gradually and subtly curtailed in a variety of ways. Preachers’ journals, which had once been filled with glowing reports of the spiritual skills of pious women, began increasingly to describe a narrower interpretation of women’s religious rights and agency. In response to a woman congregant “blaz[ing] out at me in the congregation, [saying that] I must explain my preaching,” one North Carolina Baptist retorted, “I did not quarrel with women.”<sup>102</sup> Women were further counseled not to engage in the ecstatic displays that had come to characterize so much of Southern and Appalachian religion, and were subject to public censure if they failed to comply.<sup>103</sup>

In lieu of women’s public religious role, Southern evangelicals began to emphasize the importance of genteel, Christian womanhood within the home and, by the century’s third decade, had established academies for young ladies that instructed them in speaking, reading, writing, and understanding moral issues—the skills that they would require as respectable mothers and wives.<sup>104</sup>

With the minimization of evangelical religion’s femininity came a corresponding emphasis on its masculinity. Martial imagery and metaphors came to dominate antebellum Southern evangelical language. Although such language has a long history in Christianity, dating to the Bible itself, Southerners embraced it to an unparalleled degree. They used both biblical phrases as well as those of

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<sup>100</sup> Mathews, 74.

<sup>101</sup> McCauley, 117.

<sup>102</sup> Heyrman, 198.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 199.

<sup>104</sup> Mathews, 119-120.

their own devising, such as describing the newly converted as being “like men slain in battle” and long-standing church members as “old regulars in the army of Jesus.”<sup>105</sup> Preachers also began to include in their published memoirs and other writings descriptions of the physical altercations they willingly engaged in with scoffers or men of ill intent, casting themselves as defenders of both personal honor and of their families’ and congregations’ safety.

Bringing popular religion to meet Southern culture was not solely a conscious, calculated move, though such motivations were at play. Instead, as the popular churches established themselves in the early years of the nineteenth century, they were as changed by the culture in which they found themselves as it was by them. The movement towards Southern social norms was an organic one and the more complete it became, the better the evangelical churches fared. In 1790, an estimated 88,297 white Southerners (14.4% of the white population) belonged to the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. By 1813, this number had increased to at least 238,255 (17%), the vast majority of whom were Methodist or Baptist. Between 1834 and 1836, 722,074 (25.6%) Southerners belonged to one of the popular churches. When counting those who regularly attended, but did not join the churches, the numbers jump significantly: to 38% in 1790, 43.4% in 1813, and 65.8% by 1835.<sup>106</sup> In the end, Southerners adopted evangelical theology while evangelicals adopted southern societal norms and understanding.

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<sup>105</sup> Heyrman, 234.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 263-265.

Heyrman estimates that Baptists adherents probably outnumbered members three to one and a similar ratio likely held true for the Presbyterians. As the Methodists had a lower standard for admission, the ratio was probably closer to two to one.

Traditional historiography of Southern religion tends to group Appalachian Christianity with that which was practiced elsewhere in that part of the United States below the Mason-Dixon Line.<sup>107</sup> This characterization is too strong a claim. While the South and Appalachia shared a number of religious characteristics, each region developed in distinct directions. The South's path has been outlined here, while that taken in Appalachia will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Though the Great Revival did not reach much further north than Virginia in either its original or attenuated forms, the northern parts of the United States were at the same time experiencing a resurgence of religion as well: the Second Great Awakening, which re-conceptualized Christianity as an active societal force. Its exact beginning is impossible to pinpoint, but the Awakening began among seminary students at Yale, who identified themselves with Congregationalism's New Divinity wing and preached three "plain gospel truths:" God's absolute sovereignty, humanity's total depravity, and Christ's atonement.<sup>108</sup>

After the death in 1785 of Jonathan Edwards, the primary instigator of the first Great Awakening, New England Congregationalism had become divided into three broad camps: the Old Calvinists, or Moderates, predominated at Yale and represented by a somewhat more liberal contingent at Harvard, who kept most closely to traditional Puritan doctrine and teachings and who frowned on

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<sup>107</sup> See Heyrman, Boles, and Mathew, for example. Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1981) challenges this categorization in a chapter dedicated to Appalachian religion as a distinctive regional tradition. Later editions of the text omit the chapter, however.

<sup>108</sup> Ahlstrom, 417.

excessive revivalism; more liberal, tentatively Arminian men who were the forerunners of the looming Unitarian crisis, educated primarily at Harvard and centered around eastern Massachusetts; and the “New Divinity” men, mostly Yale graduates in the Connecticut River Valley, who embraced revival while also being highly concerned with doctrine and metaphysics.<sup>109</sup>

Revival was an essential element of the Second Great Awakening, but its cast was usually distinctly somber, as befitted New England Congregationalism. There were no “outcries, distortions of the body, or any symptoms of intemperate zeal... You might often see a congregation sit with deep solemnity depicted in their countenances, without observing a tear or sob during the service,” reported one contemporary.<sup>110</sup> New England revivals also never reached the size or scope of those that were seen in Appalachia. Instead, they were small, local events overseen by ministers at their own churches.

Grand revival religion on the scale of that experienced in Appalachia did exist in the North, however, and Charles Grandison Finney was the Second Great Awakening’s great revivalist. Although Finney was born in Connecticut, he had been raised in western New York, where he was converted in 1821 and ordained by a presbytery operating under the Plan of Union in 1824. A fervent believer in the need for a second birth, Finney’s dedication to revival gave the area its nickname the “burnt-over-district” in the 1830s when it was seized by evangelical zeal. The burnt-over-district was not, however, an extension of revivalism in Appalachia; the two places’ experiences differed in a number of key ways.

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<sup>109</sup> Ahlstrom, 403-404.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 417.

Finney was explicitly pragmatic. “A revival of religion is not a miracle... or dependent upon a miracle in any sense,” he maintained. “It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.”<sup>111</sup> To think that religion could not “be judged by the ordinary rules of cause and effect” was not only “dangerous,” but utterly “absurd.”<sup>112</sup> The means by which Christians could bring about a revival were the examination of and contriteness for their sins, both of omission and commission, and earnest prayer for a revival. If these things occurred, revival would come. If they did not, revival would fail to appear. Finney envisioned God and mankind working together; men were not merely a conduit for God, but voluntary moral agents.

Finney’s distinctive philosophy continued to influence his approach to revival once one was underway. Where the Appalachian revivalists appealed to a sinner’s heart, Finney appealed, sometimes aggressively, to his or her reason. In his *Memoirs*, Finney recounted one such case concerning a young woman in Utica, New York:

She sat down upon the sofa in the parlor. I drew up my chair in front of her, and began to press her with the claims of God. She referred to my preaching that sinners deserved to be sent to an eternal hell; and said that she could not receive it, that she could not believe that God was such a being. I replied, “Nor do you yet understand what sin is, in its true nature and ill desert; if you did, you would not complain of God for sending the sinner to an eternal hell.” I then spread out that subject before her in conversation, as plainly as I could. Much as she hated to believe it, still the conviction of its truth was irresistible.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Charles G. Finney, “What a Revival of Religion Is,” in *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960), 12-13.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>113</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney, written by himself* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1876), 182.

Finney honed what he called his “new measures,” which he used to deliberately bring about revivals; while none of these measures was actually new, his use of all of them together combined with his powerful devotion to instigating revival was. These measures included protracted meetings designed to break down the unconverted as well as individual attention such as that experienced by the young woman above in addition to the main preaching services. Finney had no qualms about addressing unconverted sinners by name in his public addresses and used the Methodists’ mourners’ bench as an “anxious seat” to great effect. Methodists and Appalachia revivalists used the bench as a place for those convicted of their sin but not yet saved to come and receive personal—private—prayer and exhortation. Finney’s anxious seat was a place for the unconverted to sit close to the preacher and receive his particular—public—attention.<sup>114</sup> Finney’s example, and great success, inspired many others to adopt similar methods and theology and by the 1830s, his revivalism had become a distinctive, recognizable style. Indeed, Finney’s “new revivalism” was the only sort to survive outside of Appalachia by 1840.<sup>115</sup>

Finney and other more radical evangelicals joined with their more conservative counterparts in an explicit melding of moral (that is, Christian) and worldly interests, which was at the heart of the Second Great Awakening’s philosophy. As early as 1819, many accepted as an “all-important truth that the religion of Jesus Christ, in its vital power and practical influence, is the best friend

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<sup>114</sup> William G. McLaughlin, Introduction to *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, by Charles G. Finney (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960), xxxvi.

<sup>115</sup> McCauley, 116.

of civil society, as well as essential to the eternal well-being of man.”<sup>116</sup> The Congregationalist president of Bowdoin College, Jesse Appleton, exhorted his readers:

Do you believe, that any State, community, or nation can be powerful, tranquil, and permanently happy, if their morals are extensively depraved? Would not the most alarming of depravation of morals result from a general disbelief in the Christian religion? Would the happiness of families, would property or life be secure in a nation of deists? If Christianity is the most powerful guardian of morals, are you not, as civilians, bound to give it your support and patronage?<sup>117</sup>

A truly Christian nation was comprised of “free, literate, industrious, honest, law-abiding, religious” citizens.<sup>118</sup> To that end, such attitudes ought to be supported in those who have them and developed in those who do not. Christianity, as conceptualized by the leaders of the Second Great Awakening, was active, social, and reforming.

The impetus for the reformers’ concerns was to be found in their Calvinist inheritance. The preaching of the Reverend Samuel Hopkins, a fierce New England Calvinist, developed the philosophy known as disinterested benevolence. Hopkins defined all sin as inherently selfish and therefore all virtue as benevolent. As a Calvinist, he believed in the fixity of one’s election or damnation, but also denied that any man could be certain of his destiny while still on Earth. Furthermore, both groups manifested God’s glory and therefore members of each should act benevolently without expecting any divine reward for their actions.<sup>119</sup> The perfect expression of benevolence was working to make others moral; as the Bible explained, “iron sharpens irons.”

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<sup>116</sup> 1819 Presbyterian General Assembly in Handy, *A Christian America*, 32.

<sup>117</sup> Handy, *A Christian America*, 36.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>119</sup> Griffin, 6.

To carry out their benevolent obligation, reformers founded a variety of voluntary societies focused on a wide range of perceived social dangers and depravities. The organization of voluntary societies to mitigate society's ills dated to the Second Great Awakening's earliest days as a student movement at Yale. Such societies were generally governed independently, though many of them were at least nominally affiliated with one or more denominations.<sup>120</sup> Most were interdenominational, governed by members of more than one church, though spats over how equally authority was shared were not uncommon. Generally these remained spats, however, as larger concerns about the creation of a broader Christian culture overrode doctrinal disputes.<sup>121</sup> This ideal culture centered on the notion that true religion was actively engaged not only in the lives of its adherents but also in their societies and their governments. In order to be a good Christian, holding the proper religious beliefs was insufficient. More was needed: the embrace of a particular way of living, in which the church was active and prominent, was the required mark of true religion.<sup>122</sup>

Moral reform issues, such as temperance and strict observation of the Sabbath as a day of rest were among the earliest causes embraced. Ever stricter definitions of obscenity and profanity followed. Morally dubious entertainments such as lotteries, dancing, and theater-going were also increasingly suspect.<sup>123</sup> The rights and quality of life of prisoners and the mentally and physically handicapped also became the subjects of concern. A contentious subject in a

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<sup>120</sup> Handy, *A Christian America*, 42-43.

<sup>121</sup> Goodykoontz, 151.

<sup>122</sup> Handy, *A Christian America*, 38.

<sup>123</sup> Ahlstrom, 425-426.

country increasingly conflicted over its practice, slavery too was the source of much worry and the focus of much attention.

Home missionary societies were among the most significant of the voluntary societies to emerge from New England's Second Great Awakening and were largely the domain of the Reformed churches, mildly revivalistic at most. The first societies, founded at the century's beginning, were local, but by the 1820s many missionary-minded Christians began to see the value of national organizations. In 1826, the American Home Missionary Society was founded, organized by the United Domestic Missionary Society in New York and encompassing the former membership of a number of smaller regional societies. Members came from the Congregational, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and Associated Reformed churches.

In its first year, the Society received more than \$18,000 and supported 169 missionaries; by its fifth year, its income reached \$50,000 and its missionaries 509 in number. By 1836, over \$100,000 supported 755 missionaries.<sup>124</sup> As discussed previously, many of these missionaries served throughout the frontier West. By 1836, there were 191 missionaries working in the West: 12 in Tennessee, 9 in Kentucky, 80 in Ohio, 24 in Indiana, 32 in Illinois, 12 in Missouri, and 17 in Michigan.<sup>125</sup> Other reform societies also increasingly moved towards a national model and by the 1830s, there were eight such bodies,

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<sup>124</sup> Goodykoontz, 178-180.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, 180.

attending to issues as varied as the distribution of tracts and the creation of Sunday schools.<sup>126</sup>

American Protestants were not only interested in ecumenical endeavors, but also in strengthening their ties to their co-religionists throughout the country. To this end, the early nineteenth century was a period of increased denominational organization on a national scale. This was as true for the popular traditions as for the more conservative and liturgical ones. Even the Baptists, long resistant to oversight beyond the associational level, began to see the benefits of national organization.

The missionary impulse drove the Baptists' desire to organize and the first national Baptist missionary organization was the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions, often called the Triennial Convention due to its meeting schedule, in Philadelphia in 1814. The convention organizers, thirty-three men from eleven states as far apart as Georgia and Massachusetts, met "for the purpose of carrying into effect the benevolent Intentions of our Constituents, by organizing a plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the whole denomination in one sacred effort."<sup>127</sup> Member associations were obligated to raise at least one hundred dollars annually to support the Convention's work.

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<sup>126</sup> Griffin, 43.

<sup>127</sup> The General Missionary Convention. "Constitution," in Baker, 62.

The Convention's members anticipated that, while it had been organized to streamline missionary work, it would also be a vehicle for better integrating the various Baptist associations more generally:

But, while we call your attention to the spread of evangelic truth, we would impress on your minds that many other and more important advantages may arise to the interests of Christ among us from our acting as societies and on the more extended scale of a Convention, in delightful union... Is it not a fact that our churches are ignorant of each other to a lamentable degree?... We have "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," why should our ignorance of each other continue?... The efforts of the present Convention have been directed chiefly to the establishment of a foreign Mission; but, it is expected that when the general concert of their brethren, and sufficient contributions to a common fund shall furnish them with proper instruction and adequate means, the promotion of the interests of the churches at home, will enter into the deliberations of future meetings.<sup>128</sup>

In 1817, home missionary and educational work would be added to the Triennial Conference's responsibilities. James Welch and John Peck were the first home missionaries for the Convention, having applied for appointment to a Western mission. Soon after receiving their commission, the two traveled to the Missouri Territory, where they began their Western tour, which took them through Appalachia.

The majority of American Baptists welcomed the Triennial Conference. Using the pseudonym "Backus," Francis Wayland, an influential New England Baptist, in 1817 wrote a representative letter to *The American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer*, the most important American Baptist publication of the day, in which he stated that "we do not want to abridge the liberties of any individual church... We want them to assist us, and want to assist them, in all the

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<sup>128</sup> The General Missionary Convention. "Address, 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1814," in Baker, 65.

plans that they or we may devise for promoting the salvation of our fellow men.”<sup>129</sup>

In 1826, the Triennial Convention would disband its home missionary and educational arms, stating that its three aims would be better served if overseen by separate agencies. In 1824, the General Tract Society, later to be known as the American Baptist Publication Society, had been formed, and it absorbed the Triennial Convention’s educational work. Baptist home missionary work remained uncoordinated until the founding of American Baptist Home Missionary Society in 1832, with John Peck a principal participant.

Even the independence-minded Baptists, then, were brought into the moralizing, improving fold. Across the United States, Christians increasingly conceived of their faith as a political force and nurtured a sense that Christianity had an explicit, uplifting, societal role to play. Men as varied as Charles Finney, Samuel Hopkins, and Francis Wayland agitated not only for a religious but also a social transformation of America. They involved themselves in secular causes in the belief that all of life fell under the Christian purview. As Finney explained, politics was “an indispensable part of religion. No man can possibly be benevolent or religious without concerning himself with the affairs of human government.”<sup>130</sup>

As they concerned themselves with the political fate of the country, evangelicals and conservatives both came to recognize the significance of the

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<sup>129</sup> Francis Wayland. “Part of Letter V,” in Baker, 68.

<sup>130</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology; Embracing Lectures on Moral Government, Together with Atonement, Moral and Physical Depravity, Regeneration, Philosophical Theories, and Evidences of Regeneration* (Oberlin: James M. Fitch, 1846), 431.

West, including Appalachia. As the American Home Missionary Society noted in 1830, “In twenty years, if it should continue to increase as it has done in population, [the West] will contain a majority of the people of the United States, & also have a majority in the halls of Congress. The destinies of the Union will be in their hands. If that portion of country be not brought under the influence of religion *now*, it cannot, to human view, be done at all.”<sup>131</sup> Lyman Beecher, New England Calvinist, evangelical, and social reformer, feared the superstition stalking the great expanse beyond the Appalachians, leading its inhabitants into sin and despotism.

Despite such fears, however, religion continued alive and well in Appalachia. What it would prove resistant to, however, was the Eastern preoccupation with reforming society via organized cooperative bodies outside of the churches themselves. How the churches of Appalachia developed their understanding of the character and purpose of religion in the broader religious context provided here is the subject of the following chapter.

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<sup>131</sup> American Home Missionary Society, Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 668.

### 3

## Let Them Shout From the Top of the Mountains

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While much of the rest of America was developing a social, political, and moralizing interpretation of Christian religiosity, Appalachia continued along its own path. The fervor of the Great Revival settled down somewhat after about 1810, but the Southwest had been fundamentally altered by the emotional upheaval that had swept through its physical and religious landscape. As the nineteenth century progressed, the emotionalism, emphasis on heart religion, and the primacy of the individual believer continued at the heart of Appalachian religious practice.

These impulses were tempered, however, by an abiding desire for stability, cohesion, and unity, which was expressed in the sometimes-rigid maintenance of orthodoxy. These two elements of Appalachian religiosity were in a carefully tensioned balance and came to encompass a distinct religious philosophy that was both larger than denominational or sectarian differences as well as unlike the Christian culture developing elsewhere in the United States. After the Great Revival, Baptists and Methodists saw their numbers swell as the Presbyterians' stagnated. This trend would continue throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, an indication of the region's general religious proclivities.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Walter B. Posey, *Frontier Mission: A History of Religion West of the Southern Appalachians to 1861* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), Appendix.

The Methodists and especially the Baptists along with the Cumberland Presbyterians and, to a lesser extent, Campbell's "Christians" formed the basis for the nascent Appalachian religious identity. Therefore, their beliefs and behaviors are the primary subjects of this discussion. The Cumberland Presbyterians and Christians were almost exclusively Appalachian churches for much of this period; the Methodists and especially Baptists in Appalachia moved increasingly away from their co-religionists as the century progressed. This chapter demonstrates the often unacknowledged moderation of the Appalachian churches while still placing them outside of the American mainstream.

One of the defining characteristics of Appalachian religion continued to be the presence of revivals. Unlike those of the burnt-over-district, Appalachia's revivals continued to be affairs of the heart. The Cumberland Presbyterians heavily supported revivals; one which occurred in 1833 under that church's auspices was called "hardly less remarkable than that of 1800" at Bowling Green, Kentucky.<sup>133</sup> The meetings lasted seventeen days as people traveled from all over the region to attend. The exercises that had played such a central role thirty years earlier again made an appearance. "Men of strong frames fell to the ground and lay motionless for hours. One man was carried out and his friends sent for a physician. Mr. Lowry, however, told them that he had seen many such cases and never knew any dangerous consequences to result. After a long delay the man

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<sup>133</sup> Alexander Gross, *A History of the Methodist Church, South, the United Presbyterian Church, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and the Presbyterian Church, South, in the United States* (New York: Christian Literature, 1894), 291.

rose with rapturous exclamations of joy and trust.”<sup>134</sup> In Appalachia, revivals of the heart were a central part of the religious experience many decades into the nineteenth century. Unlike their Southern contemporaries, Appalachian Christians continued to emphasize the physical expression of both divine experience and friendly love between believers.

Great vigor in worship and preaching continued to attend both revivals and regular church services. Being “blessed” by being overcome with emotion was an indication of God’s presence or approval.

The Lord was with us in class, one woman got so happy that she hung upon her husband in raptures of Joy. then she ran through the house. But the house could not hold her [and] she rushed out at the door to invite others to come to Jesus. All the time her countenance bore the most solemn appearance. Others were shouting and some in tears, God was with us of a truth

recorded Benjamin Lakin, a Methodist circuit rider in Kentucky, in his journal in 1803.<sup>135</sup>

Lakin’s journal spanned over twenty five years and was filled with references to the importance of spirit-filled preaching, which he described as “liberty in preaching.”<sup>136</sup> He emphasized “speaking plain” during his preaching, which he understood as an opportunity to encourage, rather than edify, his listeners. When the Presbyterian colporteur Hamilton W. Pierson traveled through Kentucky in the 1850s, he observed this mixture of exhortation and exuberance with amazement, noting that worshipers combined a “general blending of songs,

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<sup>134</sup> Benjamin W. McDonold, *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Nashville: Cumberland Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1888), 301.

<sup>135</sup> Benjamin Lakin. “The Journal of Benjamin Lakin, 1794-1820,” Sweet, *Methodists*, 226.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

prayers, and vociferous shouts” with careful attention to the sermon being given.<sup>137</sup>

Pierson’s *In the Brush* also illustrated another long-lasting characteristic of Western religion, a resistance to establishing clergy as a separate class of Christians. The Methodists were less extreme in this position than were the Baptists or Cumberland Presbyterians, requiring confirmation from the conference’s presiding elder and expecting some degree of literacy. The other churches, however, called preachers from within their own congregations without any significant attention paid to their ability to read or write. Pierson described attending one such preacher’s service, and his account merits being quoted in its entirety as it encapsulates the typical Appalachian preacher’s character and comportment:

He had attended school but a very few months, and that was vastly poorer than most of my readers have ever conceived of as possible.... His reading was tolerable, his writing passable, his spelling horrible... [He had] a voice that rang loud, smooth, and clear like a trumpet. I listened to his sermon with unbounded amazement, and, I may add, delight. It was a mystery to me how one so unlettered and so unlearned in all religious reading except the Bible—and, in the nature of the case, but poorly versed in that—could have acquired thoughts so sensible and good. It was a great mystery to me how he could clothe them in such appropriate language. Both his thoughts and his words flowed as freely as the stream near by, and they had great power to arrest the attention and move the hearts of his hearers. It was the power of undoubted sincerity and burning zeal; it was the power of one with superior natural endowments stirred to their profoundest depths, and, beyond all question, taught of God... If it be heresy, I am so heretical as to believe that God has other methods of training some men—yea, many men—to be useful ministers of the Gospel than by filling their heads with Latin, Hebrew, and Greek. So he had trained this man for the remarkable work he had for him to do.<sup>138</sup>

As was the case in the act of preaching, the calling of preachers rested heavily upon the call of the Spirit rather than formal training. “I many times feel so

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<sup>137</sup> Hamilton W. Pierson, *In the Brush; Or, Old-Time Social, Political, and Religious Life in the Southwest* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), 176.

<sup>138</sup> Pierson, 178-179.

ignorant that I ought not to preach yet I think God hath called me to the work and I must go on,” reads one entry in Lakin’s journal.<sup>139</sup>

The Cumberland Presbyterians continued to deny the necessity of formal training for preachers, one of the sentiments that had originally led to the church’s separation from the Presbyterian Church, although they declined to carry the case as far as did the Baptists. While education was a good attribute in a preacher, it was not a necessary one. “A theological school may cover a student all over with theories about Christ, and hide a personal Savior from his eyes so as to send him out at last a mere proclaimer of theories,” explained one historian of the church, “Or it may be an institution conducted by men who are themselves filled with all the fullness of God... and they may lead their pupils on and up in the blessed experience of the divine life... The latter is the only type of a theological school which will ever fit into the Cumberland Presbyterian system[.]”<sup>140</sup>

Running throughout Appalachian Christianity was the principle of individual autonomy and the primacy of the personal experience of saving grace. Rather than demonstrating mastery over doctrine or theology, applicants to the Appalachian churches were instead tested on the basis of their internal experience of and relationship with God. “Too much attention is paid to the feelings and impressions of the individuals without examining them by the word of God,” reported Schermerhorn, “Dreams, visions, the unusual suggestions of some text of Scripture, which are very alarming, and others that cause great inward joy and

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<sup>139</sup> Lakin, Sweet, *Methodists*, 235.

<sup>140</sup> McDonnold, 75-76.

rejoicing, also form a great part of the experience.”<sup>141</sup> The Cumberland Presbyterians were particularly responsive to individuals’ relations of dreams and visions, and John Taylor put great stock in the portents of his own dreams.<sup>142</sup> What appeared to Schermerhorn as flightiness was understood by believers as each individual’s obligation to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Yet, despite the continuation of an exuberant, emotive religious sensibility, Appalachia was far from a free-wheeling celebration of unbridled individualism. Appalachian Christians eschewed formalism and hierarchy and embraced a belief in the Spirit’s guide of each sinner to God, but also expected that He would ultimately move all along a fairly standard path. The Cumberland Presbyterians, for example, required ministers to regularly assemble each congregation and examine its members in the catechism as a way of warding off “looseness and instability of doctrines.”<sup>143</sup>

As the fervor of the Great Revival quieted, Appalachian Protestants began to conceive of individualism as first supporting the primacy of the local group, rather than the individual believer. As voluntary organizations, rather than state-sanctioned and established, Appalachian churches emphasized members’ simultaneous independence and interdependence. The importance of an individual’s sanctification and conviction remained paramount, but members were held accountable to each other for their behavior, both public and private. Believers were also deeply concerned with maintaining what they perceived as orthodoxy within their congregations and used the churches as a means of

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<sup>141</sup> Schermerhorn, 40.

<sup>142</sup> Taylor, 214.

<sup>143</sup> McDonnold, 116.

preserving behavioral and cultural norms. In rural Appalachia, where secular sources of authority and governance were relatively rare, the local church fulfilled that stabilizing role.

Methodists concerned themselves with both the religious and secular conduct of their co-religionists. Their belief in the possibility of lost salvation instructed them that the risk of sin was ever-present. *The Doctrines and Disciplines of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, which contained the teachings of the Methodist Episcopal Church on a wide variety of subjects, outlined the basic categories of sin which the believer was to avoid:

The taking of the name of God in vain:  
The profaning of the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work therein, or by buying or selling:  
Drunkenness: or drinking spirituous liquors, unless in cases of necessity:  
The buying and selling of men, women, and children, with an intention to enslave them:  
Fighting, quarrelling, brawling, brother *going to law* with brother; returning evil for evil; or railing for railing; the *using many words* in buying or selling:  
The *buying or selling goods that have not paid the duty*:  
The giving or taking things on usury, i.e. unlawful interest:  
Uncharitable or unprofitable conversation: particularly speaking evil of magistrates or ministers:  
Doing to others as we would not they should do unto us:  
Doing what we know is not for the glory of God: As  
The *putting on of gold and costly apparel*:  
The *taking such diversions* as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus:  
The *singing those songs, or reading those books*, which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God:  
Softness and needless self-indulgence:  
Laying up treasure upon earth:  
Borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them.<sup>144</sup>

The *Discipline* governed the church's system for dealing with sinful or unlawful behavior, laying out specific methods for dealing with members and preachers as well.

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<sup>144</sup> *The Doctrines and Disciplines of the Methodist Episcopal Church* in Sweet, *Methodists*, 643.

Believers accused of sin were frequently brought up to trial. Sometimes mere suspicion was cause enough. Only laymen or women would be tried before the society to which he or she belonged; attendance at the trial was obligatory and failure to appear was taken as admission of guilt. The consequences of an upheld accusation varied according to its severity, ranging from a ministerial reprimand to expulsion from the church for a transgression deemed “sufficient to exclude a person from the kingdom of grace and glory.”<sup>145</sup> Provided that he or she had appeared for the trial, a member had the right to appeal any decision at the quarterly conference. Local and traveling preachers, deacons, and elders were not subject to the authority of the local meeting, but instead appeared before other preachers or the bishop. They too had a right to appeal decisions made against them, bringing their case to the annual conference.

The basic authority in a Baptist church was the church members themselves. Each congregation was responsible for “constituting” itself, with permission from the members’ former church(es), and drawing up a covenant and rules of decorum. These documents were fairly standard and many churches’ reveal a customary set of accepted language over the decades and across geographic distance. The “Abstract of Baptist principles” of the Senter Baptist Church in Ashe County, North Carolina, constituted in 1835, is representative:

- 1<sup>st</sup> We believe in One true and living God Father Son and Holy Ghost and that these three are one.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and new Testament are the words of God and the only rule of faith and practice.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> We believe in the doctrine of election by Grace.
- 4<sup>th</sup> We believe in the doctrine of original sin and in mans impotency to recover himself from the fallen state he is in by nature by his own free will or ability.

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<sup>145</sup> *Doctrines and Disciplines*, 644.

- 5<sup>th</sup> We believe that sinners are called converted regenerated and sanctified by the Holy Spirit and that all who are thus regenerated in him again by the Spirit of God shall never fade finally away.
- 6<sup>th</sup> We believe that sinners are justified in the Sight of God only by the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.
- 7<sup>th</sup> We believe that Baptism and the Lords Supper are ordinances of Jesus Christ and that believers are the Subjects of these ordinances. And we believe that the true mode of Baptism is by immersion.
- 8<sup>th</sup> We believe in the Resurrection of the Dead and a general Judgment and that the joys of the righteous and the torments of the wicked will be eternal
- 9<sup>th</sup> We believe that no minister has a right to administer the ordinances except such as are regularly called and come under the hands of the presbytery.<sup>146</sup>

Many congregations publicly reaffirmed their covenants each month and all counted them as an important basis for their daily lives, both corporately and individually.

In matters of discipline, Appalachian Baptists turned to Matthew 18:15-17, in line with their understanding of the New Testament as the “only rule of faith and practice.”<sup>147</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

<sup>16</sup>But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

<sup>17</sup>And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican.

The desired pattern of reconciliation moved from private to increasingly public channels, with the church as final arbiter. An example of this process can be found in the records of Three Forks Baptist Church of Watauga County, North Carolina: When Brother Blair approached the church with a grievance against Brother Ebrod after failing to settle it privately, “the said parties [were instructed

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<sup>146</sup> Senter Baptist Church of Ashe County Ledger (includes membership list, minutes from 1835-1869), W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, NC, USA.

<sup>147</sup> Stony Fork Baptist Church Ledger, Senter Baptist Church of Ashe County Ledger, Church of Christ Ledger Book, Scott County, Virginia.

to] take Brethren of their own Choosing indeavor for Reconciliation and make Report Next Church Meeting.”<sup>148</sup> At the next month’s meeting, “the above grieved parts came forward and made report and no Reconciliation being attained,” the church resolved to hear the matter in full.<sup>149</sup> Ebrod apparently accepted the church’s verdict in the matter, but Blair refused. As a result, he was temporarily suspended from the church until the next month’s meeting, at which point “being Laid under Suspence he... would not Submit and hear the Church, [which therefore saw it proper] to publickly Excommunicate him for abusing the Church in a abrupt manner also Charged him with injustice and Neglecting to hear the Church.”<sup>150</sup>

Church records illustrate the various types of complaints brought and justice dealt in the Western Baptist churches. There were three general categories of behavior subject to discipline by the church: that related to the business of the church, usually either disrupting or failing to attend services or meetings or charges of heretical belief; violations of the church’s rules or ethical standards; and private conflicts between members. Both religious and more secular issues were subject to church censure.

Against men, charges of improper or lewd language and public drunkenness were most common and often the two charges were brought in conjunction. Men were also subject to exclusion if they repeatedly failed to attend monthly services, although women were under no such compunction. Women

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<sup>148</sup> Three Forks Baptist Church Records, Miscellaneous Church Records, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, NC, USA.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

were most generally censured for crimes of sexual immorality, some when they were first found to be “in a family way,” but occasionally not until the birth of a child.<sup>151</sup> Behaviors that might be worldly or sexually suggestive were also a cause for church concern, as it was in the case of Matilda Parsons of Senter Baptist Church, who was excluded for dancing.<sup>152</sup> In many congregations, joining a non-Baptist church was automatic grounds for exclusion for both men and women.<sup>153</sup>

In many cases, the accused member was given the opportunity to explain himself (records seem to indicate that women’s transgressions were more likely to result in immediate excommunication). If he was not present at the meeting at which the charge was brought, another member would be assigned to inform the individual of the accusation against him and to request his attendance at the following month’s meeting. Addressing a complaint could sometimes stretch out over many months, as the church wrote to solicit the attendance of witnesses who were members of neighboring churches. Sometimes the congregation repeatedly decided to “put the matter over to next month’s meeting” perhaps due to division within the body over the appropriate judgment, as churches required either agreement among a majority of the brethren (women being excluded from voting) or sometimes unanimity in matters of justice.

The standard punishment for those found guilty of the complaints brought against them was excommunication, generally referred to as exclusion. In some cases, the excluded individual disappeared from the church records. In many others, however, he or she returned, perhaps a number of months later, seeking

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<sup>151</sup> Senter Baptist Church of Ashe County Ledger.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Stony Fork Baptist Church Ledger.

readmission to the church's communion. The congregation would test the individual's repentance; sometimes, having "received satisfaction from him," it then "restor'd him to fellowship again."<sup>154</sup> On other occasions, the petitioner might be repeatedly "referred to next Meeting... to make further satisfaction" before being restored to the church's fold.<sup>155</sup> It was not uncommon for newly restored members, desirous of remaining within the larger Baptist fold but unwilling to continue to worship with their previous congregation, to ask for a letter of dismissal at the same meeting.

A letter of dismissal was issued to an individual upon leaving a church's fellowship. It certified that the bearer was of orthodox faith and of good standing and full fellowship in his or her previous congregation. Such certification provided immediate entry into a new church. Those lacking letters of dismissal, or who had not previously belonged to a Baptist church, were "received by experience" after attending services diligently for some time and proving to the congregation their sincere belief, including their agreement to be baptized by immersion if they had not been previously.<sup>156</sup>

The importance of letters of dismissal highlights the importance of not only the local church but also the local association played in Western Baptist life. Despite its high degree of autonomy, a Baptist church was not an island unto itself, but rather a member of a larger group to which it was accountable. The basic relationship remained voluntary, however. As with an individual's church

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<sup>154</sup> Stony Fork Baptist Church Ledger.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Bud Altmayer, *The Sinners and the Righteous*, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, NC, USA, Chapter 1 Page 8.

membership, a congregation's associational membership was voluntary. Letters of dismissal were similarly granted to churches withdrawing from an association to aid in the transition to a new one. Associations collected together a number of churches within a particular area that subscribed to a common set of beliefs and practices; sometimes their areas of jurisdiction would overlap.

Annual associational conventions were attended by messengers from the member churches. Each delegation carried with them a letter prepared by their church's clerk that outlined that congregation's doings and situation over the previous year. These messengers were just that—their task was to bear their church's news and they were not in a position to make promises or decisions on the local church's behalf. The proceedings of these conventions were assembled into printed minutes, paid for by voluntary contributions, which would then be distributed to the various member churches.

Associational membership played an important role in the selection and ordination of preachers. If a congregation was left without a preacher they could, and did, request the services of a member from a neighboring church. The members of a single congregation could evaluate a male member's "gift as a preacher and license him to exercise a publick gift when and where the Lord may call him."<sup>157</sup> Upon choosing to ordain a man, however, the church was obligated to call a presbytery of Elders from other associational churches. Despite the primacy of the individual experience of a divine call to preach, the Appalachian Baptist churches did not allow men to claim inspiration and authority without check. These men of a presbytery would examine the candidate for orthodoxy; if

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<sup>157</sup> Senter Baptist Church of Ashe County Ledger.

they were “satisfied with his gift and graces,” they would appoint him “as a faithful gospel preacher... solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer and laying on of hands to officiate in the whole ministerial function wheresoever God in providence may call him.”<sup>158</sup>

Requests for the formation of a presbytery to examine a candidate’s qualifications are frequent throughout Western Baptist church records in the early nineteenth century and most prospective preachers seem to have been accepted. A case encountered by the Stony Fork Baptist Church, a member of the Lewis Fork Association in western North Carolina, illustrates that the ordaining presbytery was not simply a formality, however, and demonstrates the control that church leaders were able to exert upon other churches within their associations.

In October 1851, Stony Fork Church decided “to call A presbytery of Elders for the purpose of ordaining bro Nathanel Church... Appointed Messengers as follows to Bever Creek for Elder Joel Brown F. P Carlton to Kings Creek for Elder Burton Bradley Davie Green.”<sup>159</sup> By December, no presbytery had yet attended to the Stony Fork Church, which reissued its request to the churches at Beaver and Kings Creeks, as well as requesting the attendance of one of the Elders from Lewis Fork Church. By March of the next year, the presbytery had presumably still not assembled, so Elders from Old Field Church, Three Forks Church, and Ebenezer Church were also summoned.

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<sup>158</sup> Stony Fork Baptist Church Ledger.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

The following monthly meetings' records are punctuated by terse notes that "no Presbytery attended."<sup>160</sup> The situation continued for over a year, with the Stony Fork Church requesting the attendance of a presbytery every few months, slowly expanding their request to an ever-growing number of churches. Finally, in February 1853, after the messengers selected to bear the most recent set of requests reported that they had indeed delivered the summons and that "the Elders were given up but failed to attend." Frustrated, "Brother N Church made Application for letters of dismissal for himself" and for some other members, "All for the purpose of becoming a Constitution at Yellow Hill" and making a clean break of the low-grade dispute that had carried on for fifteen months.<sup>161</sup> For reasons that are not clear, the other churches found Church an unsatisfactory candidate and their disapproval thwarted the Stony Fork congregation's desires for his ordination. Such an incident belies the Baptists' fundamental understanding of the local church as the final authority in its own and its members' lives. Individual and local independence instead coexisted with the realities of the benefits provided by associational structure—camaraderie, financial and material support, and the maintenance of discipline.

The Cumberland Presbyterians loosened their initial emphasis on the limited rights and authorities of higher organizational bodies. Although the schism that had created the church involved a battle over whether a synod had the right to dismiss ministers who proved satisfactory to their governing presbytery, as it matured the Cumberland Presbyterian Church became increasingly

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<sup>160</sup> Stony Fork Baptist Church Ledger.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

organizationally complex and hierarchical. In 1810, the Church had only three ministers in one presbytery. By 1860, ninety seven presbyteries contained over 100,000 members.<sup>162</sup> Various boards were created to oversee the Church's running and various missions. The presbyteries were democratic in nature and organized much like Baptist associations, with each congregation sending a representative, who was of equal status to all other representatives.

Despite the social role played by Appalachian churches, Appalachian *religion* was still not conceived of as being fundamentally social but instead remained the domain of the individual. The church as a body of believers moderated itself; the reasoning behind such behavior was fundamentally different than that which drove the civilizing efforts of the northeastern Calvinists, for example. The pietism encouraged by the Appalachian churches challenged the false idols of "the world, money, and prosperity... fine clothes and beautiful ornaments [and] the BOTTLE."<sup>163</sup> Preparing oneself for a hardly-deserved heaven was the aim; although such sobriety had the effect of stabilizing and improving the community, it was hardly the purpose.

Many Appalachian Christians, especially Baptists, challenged the benevolent aims of mainstream Protestantism on theological grounds. Benevolent societies, such as Sunday Schools, Bible Associations, and especially missionary bodies, were the most common targets. Anti-missionism was by no means universal, but it was quite strong in some quarters and represented a powerful division between Appalachian Baptists and their co-religionists throughout the

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<sup>162</sup> Gross, 301.

<sup>163</sup> Henry Holcombe, "The Vitality of Faith" in *Primitive Theology, in a Series of Lectures* (Philadelphia, 1822), 115.

United States. “To read, or hear the Reports of Peck and Welch, it would seem as if the whole country was almost blank as to religion,” sputtered John Taylor, in an 1819 pamphlet entitled “Thoughts on Missions.” “From their statements, one would think, there was not surely a preacher in the country that deserved the name, and hardly a church that was in good order... But it is probable these men think, that but few deserve the name of preachers, but missionaries.”<sup>164</sup>

By the middle of the century, there were just over 68,000 anti-mission Baptists in the United States. The greatest concentration was to be found in western Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina, where the number approached 28,000.<sup>165</sup> Among the loudest protestors was the Kehukee Baptist Association of western North Carolina. In 1827, it issued a Declaration of Principles that addressed a number of “innovations on the ancient usages of the church of Christ,” including missionary societies.<sup>166</sup> In that Declaration, the Association unanimously agreed to:

discard all Missionary Societies, Bible Societies and Theological Seminaries, and the practices heretofore resorted to for their support, in begging money from the public; and if any persons should be among us, as agents of any societies, we hereafter discountenance them in those practices; and if under a character of a minister of the gospel, we will not invite them into our pulpits; believing these societies and institutions to be the inventions of men, and not warranted from the word of God.<sup>167</sup>

Many other associations did not reach unanimous decisions and hardly any were untouched by the controversy over the issue. A strict Calvinist position along with resistance to theological or other training for preachers tended to correlate with

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<sup>164</sup> Taylor in McCauley, 21.

<sup>165</sup> Sweet, *Baptists*, 66.

<sup>166</sup> Cushing B. Hassell and Sylvester Hassell, *History of the Church of God, from the Creation to A.D. 1885, Including Especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association* (1886), 736.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, 736-737.

rejection of missionary and other societies that assumed a Christian basis for the improvement of society.<sup>168</sup>

There were a number of reasons that Appalachian Baptists resisted or resented organized missionary work. The most frequently-cited reason was the unscriptural nature of the missionary societies. Alexander Campbell, the one-time Presbyterian and future leader of the Disciples of Christ, who was at the height of the anti-missionary fervor a Baptist, was bitterly opposed to organized missionary work and represented the more liberal wing of anti-missionism. His publication, *The Christian Baptist*, contained frequent attacks against the practice's lack of scriptural legitimacy, as the church was the only religious body ordained by Jesus Christ. Daniel Parker, a Tennessee Baptist and hyper-Calvinist, pointed out that

God did not send Jonah to Nineveh through a missionary society, nor was he “sent to a seminary of learning to prepare him to preach to these Gentiles; but was under the tuition of a special order of God, and was in no case under the direction of any body of men whatever, neither did he look back to a society formed to raise money for his support.”<sup>169</sup>

Parker stood at the opposite end of the spectrum from Campbell, and his two-seed-in-the-spirit predestinarianism represented an unusually strict understanding of Calvinism, in which some people were born with the seed of God and therefore elect while others were born with the seed of Satan and therefore damned. Each group would properly return to its father, either in heaven or in hell, and to attempt to interfere with this process was against God's will. Opposition to

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<sup>168</sup> Sweet, *Baptists*, 67.

<sup>169</sup> McCauley, 74.

It is important to note that most anti-missionary Baptists did not oppose missionary work per se, but rather the means by which they saw it being carried out, both among themselves and among the Native Americans who also continued to inhabit the Southwest.

missionary work was not the sole domain of a small niche of Appalachian Baptist churches, but instead represented a broad cross-section.

The most moderate and frequent Baptist anti-missionary position was that occupied by John Taylor. Taylor compared the situation among American Baptists to the time when “the Pope of Rome and the Mother of Harlots were at their zenith... [and considered the missionaries] as verging close on an aristocracy, with an object to sap the foundation of Baptist republican government.”<sup>170</sup> This worry related to another complaint about missionary societies: that they paid men for their labors. In a church culture highly suspect about the motives of paid and educated ministers, such a notion was beyond the pale in many minds. As Baptists throughout the United States increasingly embraced the concept of a national denomination and the attendant ancillary organizations that such a body entailed, Appalachian Baptists defied the norm.

Protestantism as it developed in Appalachia in the first half of the nineteenth century was a challenge to that embraced elsewhere. A study in contradictions, the variety of Appalachian churches—many holding quite disparate theological beliefs—shared a unity of spirit regarding the day to day life of the believer. This unique religious culture valued both individuality and conformity and was fiercely committed to its own understanding of the Christian life. Appalachian religiosity lacked the active social dimension so present in the lives of Northerners, both evangelical and not and did not demand the same compromises of its practitioners as did Southern evangelicalism. While Appalachia was never again the hotbed of revivalistic frenzy that it had been at

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<sup>170</sup> Taylor in Sweet, *Baptists*, 72.

the opening of the nineteenth century, Appalachian Christians continued to hold to many of the Great Revival's most fundamental characteristics as the region's religious identity matured and settled.

## Conclusions

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In 1883, the Presbyterian colporteur Hamilton W. Pierson noted that “comparatively little has been written which is the result of extended personal contact with, and intimate personal knowledge of, the people. They have been largely the subjects of exaggeration and caricature.”<sup>171</sup> His observation holds nearly as true today as it did then. Among American religious historians, there is a tendency to interpret Appalachia’s religious history as little more than an emotional blip among frontiersmen separated from all civilizing influences, or to not interpret it at all.

The antebellum period was a time of great change in American religious culture and Appalachia was part of that larger process. What Appalachia was not, however, was simply the western reaches of the South or an aberration in a country moving to embrace its destiny as a Christian nation. Examination of Appalachian Christians’ experiences in the first half of the nineteenth century reveals a rich and distinctive religious culture that crossed denominational lines. In the Southwest, the faithful experienced God first-hand as He came to each believer in turn. Church members both encouraged and rebuked each other, preferring the familiarity and autonomy of their churches to political engagement and the oversight and assistance of benevolent societies.

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<sup>171</sup> Pierson, 10.

This thesis provides a new interpretation of the development and purposes of antebellum Appalachian Christianity. It fails to find the sustained individualistic religion described by Deborah McCauley, but it does reinforce her argument that Appalachian Christianity was unique from its earliest days. Historians of Southern religion are on the right track in recognizing the importance of the Great Revival to that regional tradition, but have stopped short of carrying through to its conclusion their investigation of Appalachia's religious heritage.

Much remains to be done. A comprehensive examination of the religious experiences of Appalachia's black and non-evangelical populations, neither insignificant in size, remains to be undertaken. As the nineteenth century rushed on, new settlers and missionaries both brought a greater diversity of religious traditions to Appalachia. The Disciples of Christ and the Cumberland Presbyterians were also far from the last denominations born in the mountains of Appalachia. Today, despite these changes to its denominational composition, Appalachian religious practice continues to bear many similarities to its early nineteenth century antecedent, with an emphasis on both individual autonomy as well as the guidance and oversight of the local church community. A careful study of the region's absorption of many new, disparate, traditions will likely yield further evidence for the enormous vitality and flexibility of Appalachia's Christians.

Appalachia's reputation as a backwards place frozen in time is long-standing. As this investigation has demonstrated, nothing could be further from

the truth. From the turn of the nineteenth century, the Southwest was the location of a distinctive regional religious identity which has proven both flexible and durable; it is not the appendage or aberration of any other philosophy but a tradition in its own right.

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