"BE YE PERFECT:"

THE HARTSELLE CAMP MEETING

AND THE PERSISTENCE OF REVIVALISM IN THE SOUTH

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On a humid Sunday afternoon in August, 1967, an attentive audience cooled itself with cardboard fans and listened to ninety-nine-year-old John L. Brasher deliver a powerful sermon of approximately one hour's duration. Like so many preached before at the Hartselle Camp Meeting, this homily called upon the listeners to receive the blessing of entire sanctification and to live lives of holiness. The call to sinners for repentance went out of course, but present in every sentence was the unmistakable emphasis on the believer's need to partake of a second work of grace, subsequent to regeneration, which would bestow upon them "perfect love" and freedom from the tyranny of sin. One who responded to the altar call was an ordained minister and missionary who was the youth counselor for the encampment. The vision of their counselor weeping and kneeling in the sawdust made a profound impression upon the teenagers in his charge. Later in the day, the impression on one of these young people was deepened when he witnessed his newly sanctified youth leader hurl his collection of fine briar pipes into the creek.

Though I had grown up in the Methodist Church, that experience of almost twenty-five years ago was the first time I ever confronted the distinctive tenant of Wesleyan theology known variously as entire sanctification, scriptural holiness, the

second blessing, or as Wesley himself called it, "perfect love."[1] It was also my first encounter with one of the old fashioned holiness camp meetings which are the chief proponents of this doctrine today.

The origin of the American camp meeting is considered by most historians to be in Kentucky around 1800. The Cane Ridge Camp Meeting and others like it signaled the advent of the great frontier revival known as the Second Great Awakening. Although developed first by the Presbyterians, the camp meeting form was used most successfully by Baptists and Methodists.[2] The large gains made by the Methodists during the first two decades of the nineteenth century are surely due in part to the ability of the circuit riders to adapt the camp meeting as a revivalistic tool.[3] In his discussion of religion in frontier society Dickson Bruce concurs:

> The Methodists were the most interested in and most successful at gaining converts. Much of the success of the Methodists was due to their theology and organization, but it was also due in large measure to their exploitation of the frontier's unique contribution to Christian practice, the

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[1]John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection as Believed and Taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley," The Works of John Wesley, Vol. IX (Grand Rapids [Mich.]: Baker Book House, 1978), 366-488.

[2]David Cohen, The Spirit of the Lord: Revivalism in America (New York: Four Winds Press, 1975), 15-16.

[3]Vinson Synan, The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States (Grand Rapids [Mich]: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 25.

camp meeting.[4]

Concerning these Methodist camp meetings, Professor Charles E. Jones observed:

> . . . Methodism had its most notable impact in America on the frontier. Methodism accommodated to its new environment, deserting the formal worship Wesley preferred for the emotionalism of the frontier revival. So successful were Methodist preachers in making converts that a rural aura came to pervade the . . . group's activities generally. As rural Methodists moved into the . . . cities and prospered, they sought summer refuge from the temptations and heat of the city by establishing camp meetings . . . where they might relax in a religious, morally guarded atmosphere.[5]

John Wesley, mentor and inspiration for the rapidly expanding Methodist movement, declared it the task of his preachers to "spread scriptural holiness over the land."[6] They did exactly that, and by 1820 nearly a thousand camp meetings had been founded. Wesley's holiness doctrine was explicitly promoted in these camp meetings and it became as fixed an item in Methodist preaching as the call to repentance and salvation. This was especially true in the South where adherence to holiness teaching was a majority position from 1825 until about a decade before the civil war, when virtually all southern theology came to little more than a defense of slavery.[7] As the church in the

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[4]Dickson D. Bruce, And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974, 51.

[5]Charles E. Jones, Perfectionist Persuasion: The Holiness Movement and American Methodism, 1867-1936 (Metuchin [N. J.]: Scarecrow Press, 1974), xii-xiv.

[6]John Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Reverend Mr. Wesley and Others," Wesley, Works, Vol. IX, 299.

[7]Synan, The Holiness Pentecostal Movement, 31.

South was abandoning the pursuit of holiness for the pursuit of political and regional interests, the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South reminded the church that "its true vocation" was "to spread scriptural holiness."[8] Within half a decade, the church had indeed almost entirely forgotten. The Civil War did nothing to encourage the spread of holiness teaching. In fact the devastation of the war and the humiliation of reconstruction caused a serious setback in the propagation of holiness doctrine throughout the South.[9] Vinson Synan reasons that:

> The years following the Civil War were characterized by a moral depression. . . . Returning soldiers with battlefield ethics entered . . . the sanctuaries of the churches. Many of the younger recruits to the ministry entered their vocations with less training than their elders and lacked the same respect for the traditions and doctrines of the church. No denomination felt the winds of change more than the Methodist Church. Such ancient usages of that church as the . . . class meetings for the 'perfection of the saints,' and camp meetings . . . had been abandoned during the war. With the return of peace, little effort was made to revive these honored forms.[10]

During the years following the civil war Methodism compromised with its surrounding culture. Methodist people were for the most part hard working and thrifty, and so they attained a certain upward mobility as more and more families left the farm

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[8]Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1846 (Richmond [Va.]: John Early, 1851), 118.

[9]John L. Brasher, "'Standing Between the Living and the Dead': John Lakin Brasher, Holiness Preacher," (Ph. D. Thesis: Duke University, 1986), 66.

[10]Synan, The Holiness Pentecostal Movement, 34.

for the cities. Their church which had been founding colleges and seminaries for the past fifty years, now understandably began to place a premium on an educated ministry. Often the education received by this generation of clergy was strongly influenced by German higher criticism. The Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy also heated up, with the greatest heat, of course, being in the southern latitudes. Ferment in Methodism was not limited to theological crisis. Traditional believers were scandalized by signs of affluence and worldliness in the churches. Vestments, robed choirs, pipe organs and carpeted sanctuaries were all interpreted as harbingers of apostasy and proof of the need for a renewal of holiness preaching and living. Many conservatives felt that the general decline of the church could be cured only by a return to its doctrinal roots and a renewal of the camp meeting revivalism that prevailed before the war.[11] Many of the camp meetings that survived were clearly changed in character. Rather than strictly evangelistic and spiritual in mission, many had broadened their scope. These changes were not reassuring to those conservatives who looked to the camp meeting as a reform movement, as a means of calling the Methodist church back to traditional Wesleyan doctrine. Innovations such as the Chautauqua were patterned after the camp meeting, but without the same religious purposes. Even more repugnant was the tendency to make camp meetings a place for

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[11]Ibid, 35.

recreation and spiritual nurture.[12] Harper's Weekly noted the new emphasis in an August 1873 issue:

> The fervent Methodists are all through the month of August holding their camp meetings. Near the great cities their once primitive assemblies have changed their form. The camp is sought for its sanitary as well as religious advantages. . . . Boating, bathing, fishing, have a place with religious worship in the round of occupation.[13]

It was in response to these developments and concerns that a post-war holiness camp meeting movement was fostered. Beginning first in the North, followed a few years later in the South, many old camps, and hundreds of new, specifically holiness camps became centers of holiness revival.[14] In 1867 a large number of Methodist ministers on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, formed the National Camp Meeting Association for the promotion of Holiness. The leadership of this association felt that the organization was in no way schismatic and the leaders were as ardent Methodists as they were advocates of holiness.[15]

Before the end of the century, the holiness movement had a significant following in the Southern Methodist Church. In 1878 bishops of the Southern Church actually criticized their preachers for "the infrequency of its [Christian perfection] proclamation from the pulpit and the irregularity of its

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[12]Melvin E. Dieter, The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century (Metuchin [N. J.]: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 110.

[13]Harper's Weekly, Vol. XVII (August 23, 1873), 742.

[14]Dieter, The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century, 111.

[15]Ibid, 118.

experimental power in the church."[16] At the height of the movement some two hundred of two hundred and forty ministers of the North Georgia Conference claimed the holiness experience.[17] John Lawrence Brasher concluded that, "when . . . holiness did spread throughout the changing South in the final two decades of the century, the doctrine of a decisive and often emotional second blessing found warm acceptance among a people who continued to perceive conversion and most religious experience in terms of the dramatic intervention of God."[18]

The movement which spawned this new wave of camp meetings at the turn of the century differed from the camp meeting revival in the first half of the nineteenth century. The later camp meeting movement was specifically intended for the propagation of holiness doctrine and was oriented toward reform in the Methodist Church, whereas the earlier one was a spontaneous attempt at evangelizing the frontier. This Holiness movement was related to the "general pattern of American social and religious life in the years 1875 to 1925," according to William G. McLoughlin. McLoughlin summarized the effect of these years:

> . . . the mainline Protestant churches . . . underwent a revolution in thought and practice as a result of the combined impacts of urbanism, industrialism, technocracy from the outside and higher criticism, Darwinism and Liberal theology from the inside. In this crisis the

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[16]Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1878), 33.

[17]Synan, The Holiness Pentecostal Movement, 39.

[18]Brasher, "'Standing Between the Living and the Dead,'" 69.

> Holiness movement met social and psychological needs for many American churchgoers which the major denominations, anxious to accommodate to the modern ways of which they had become an established part, could not meet. In particular, the Holiness . . . tabernacles, and camp meetings provided a religious home for thousands of rural Americans who moved into the growing cities in these years.[19]

The Hartselle (Alabama) Camp Meeting Association founded in 1897 is typical of those which were founded near the turn of the century during the holiness revival. Several distinctions make the Hartselle Camp Meeting a most suitable subject for historical inquiry. It is the oldest camp meeting in Alabama and it has continued to meet year after year, without interruption, since its inaugural encampment in 1900.[20] The Hartselle Camp Meeting is also notable because of the extensive involvement of Reverend John Lakin Brasher throughout the life of the camp. Brasher, who was certainly the South's most prominent holiness spokesperson during the years from 1925 until his death in 1970, was the preacher for the first four camps and for at least ten others during the history of the Hartselle camp.[21] When Brasher preached at Hartselle in 1968 at the age of 100, he held the distinction of having proclaimed Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification longer than anyone in history.[22] Interestingly,

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[19]William G. McLoughlin, quoted in Jones, The Holiness Movement and American Methodism, xvii-xviii.

[20]Mrs. Guin Puckett, "History of the Hartselle Campground," unpublished history based on personal interview with Rev. John L. Brasher and Byrd White, August 2, 1965. Copy in possession of author., 2.

[21]Ibid, 1.

[22]"I Won't Be Back," Hartselle Inquirer August 8, 1968.

Brasher's presence at Hartselle's first encampment in 1900 was also his first experience as a camp meeting preacher. His own sanctification experience had taken place earlier that same year at the altar of a Salvation Army Hall in Birmingham.[23]

A fascinating attribute of the Hartselle Camp Meeting which further underscores its suitability for this study is the sense of unchanging mission found in those who are active in the camp at present. Many historians view this type of camp meeting as a relic of the past. The stereotype that is often presented is a camp meeting that had to change with the times in order to survive. William Warren Sweet in his highly regarded work, Revivalism in America, stated:

> The great number of old Methodist camp meeting grounds . . . still owned by the Conferences or camp meeting associations but now turned into middle-class summer resorts or meeting places for summer conferences, are mute witnesses to the social, religious, and cultural change which has taken place in American Methodism. The conditions which gave rise to the camp meeting have passed. . . . the need for the great summer gatherings in the woods, a harvest time for souls, gradually disappeared. Such has been the strange development of the camp meeting . . . a transformation which was inevitable in the light of the change in the cultural and religious climate.[24]

While many surviving camp meetings have changed their purposes and activities, Hartselle has steadfastly refused to

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[23]Jon Tal Murphree, Giant of a Century Trail: The Life and Labors of John Lakin Brasher--Great Southern Orator (Wilmore [Ky.]: Jon Tal Murphree, 1969), 72.

[24]William Warren Sweet, Revivalism in America: Its Origin, Growth and Decline (Gloucester [Mass]: Peter Smith, 1965), 165-166.

become a summer resort and remains essentially unchanged from its earliest days. Association president Harry Puckett recalled:

> As far back as I can remember, the routine has stayed the same. Breakfast at 7:00, prayer service at 9:30. Then at 10:30 there is a morning service, with lunch at noon. At 2:30 there is an afternoon preaching service, dinner at 5:00 and the evening service at 7:30. In between those times there is an opportunity for Christian fellowship.[25]

Virtually every aspect of camp life retains both the flavor and the method of the holiness revival with its overwhelming emphasis on old time religion, crisis and decision. At the outset of my research I too considered the Hartselle Tabernacle to be a tableau of living history. I expected to find that the regular participants viewed the camp meeting as a kind of nostalgic religious reunion. Knowing that many of these folk are only one or two generations removed from rural life, I assumed that these yearly meetings were a way of reaching back to a simpler time and stimulating the memory of meeting the Lord in the warmth and fragrance of a Southern summer night.

The findings of this inquiry are that the distinctive theology and purposes of the holiness camp meetings are not fossil remains but are alive and well in the descendants of this heritage. The unexpected discovery of this research is that the people of the Hartselle Camp Meeting Association view their mission today as identical to its original mission. This mission, succinctly stated, is the propagation of Wesleyan

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[25]Oral History with Harry Puckett, interview conducted by the author, May 13, 1990.

teaching on conversion and sanctification through the means of lively, confrontational preaching; and the rejection of modern trends in Methodist doctrine and practice and the call to the church to return to its roots. Tuza Ryan, the association secretary, emphasized that:

> Wesleyan doctrine was certainly preached and also entire sanctification, which we all must have. The Bible says, 'you must be born again' and then comes the second blessing when we are filled with the spirit. We receive this through complete surrender. This is what John Wesley taught and I think we had wandered away from it, just as we have today in the Methodist Church . . . and I think that's what the camp meeting has always stood for and I think there are other camp meetings that stand for the same thing--they stand for a strict doctrine, rather than some of these liberal things.[26]

In an interview for the Hartselle Enquirer, Harry Puckett affirmed:

> Making sure these traditions are continued is the main responsibility of its present board. We feel it is imperative that we see to this, particularly in the 1990s. People are searching for something, and I think they are going to turn to the sincerity of the religion that is conveyed in the camp. They know we have something, and they want to find out what it is.[27]

These remarks and other data concerning this camp meeting (the foremost one in Alabama) reveal a vital movement that defies the stereotype.

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[26]Oral History with Tuza Ryan, interview conducted by the author, May 12, 1990.

[27]Ann Saur, "Tabernacle's Christian Face is Mirrored in Town," Hartselle Enquirer, March 15, 1990.

The idea to build a camp meeting in Hartselle originated with a group of local people who were meeting with an itinerate Methodist preacher named Ben Huckabee. According to Tuza Ryan:

> On a Sunday afternoon in late November of 1897 a group of people who were interested in the Holiness movement, coming in at that time, in order to know more about the teaching of sanctification, met at my great aunt and uncle's house. There was four or five men who were meeting with brother Huckabee who was a preacher.[28]

Apparently Huckabee had been in Hartselle before. He had held a promising holiness tent revival in that area, but the local presiding elder of the Southern Methodist Church, who was opposed to the holiness doctrine, undermined his efforts. This elder ". . . visited from house to house and bade his people 'stay out of this fanaticism.'" The tent revival waned and Huckabee left town temporarily. He returned later at a more propitious time and successfully organized the Hartselle Camp Meeting Association.[29] Brasher recalled that Huckabee came from around Hartselle, but had backslidden in his faith and moved to Georgia. While there he was exposed to the revivalistic preaching of A. J. Quattlebaum, repented, and received the blessing of sanctification. Evidently after the false start already mentioned Huckabee got in touch with Banks Bradley, with whom he

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[28]Oral history with Tuza Ryan.

[29]John Lakin Brasher, "Brief Story of the Beginning of Hartselle Camp Meeting," quoted in Brasher, "'Standing Between the Living and the Dead,'" 109-110.

talked and prayed about a permanent camp meeting.[30] Mrs. Guin Puckett, a former camp historian, reported:

> They finally decided to call together a few men who were interested in the doctrine of sanctification or divine work of the Holy Spirit in its fullness. They had met to talk about building a tabernacle in which to hold the meetings. They first had to have a place to build one. There was snow on the ground that afternoon . . . but these men walked down the railroad track . . . to this place, and decided it would be an ideal place, with the spring at the foot of the hill by the creek. The men told Mr. Bradley to get a price on the land. He did and bought it and gave it to the Association. This land would belong to the Association as long as the doctrine of Scriptural Holiness is preached and when that ceases, the property would revert back to his heirs. Thanks be to God, we have never had to give it up.[31]

By 1899 the Tabernacle had been built. The Tabernacle was a large, open air shed resting on enormous cedar posts which were cut in Cedar Plains, southwest of Hartselle, and dragged to the site by mules. Sturdy wooden benches served as pews and a simple wooden chancel rail, referred to as the altar or mourner's bench, ran almost the width of the tabernacle just in front of the pulpit.[32] With the exception of added electric lighting and ceiling fans, the Tabernacle today is exactly as it was in 1899.

In early August Ben Huckabee issued an invitation to his friend John Brasher, only 32 years old at the time, to preach at the opening session of the new camp meeting. The first Sunday of the new camp exceeded all expectations. One who was present in

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[30]Mrs. Guin Puckett, "History of Hartselle Campground," (unpublished manuscript in possession of the author), 1.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Oral history with Tuza Ryan.

the congregation remembered: " The great outpouring on the first Sunday morning when Brother Brasher brought that marvelous sermon from Isaiah 35. Truly, we had a duplicate of Pentecost and bless His name I received the Blessing!"[33] By the last Sunday of camp, Brasher's experience confirmed what he had in faith begun earlier that year at the Salvation Army Hall. In his own words:

> The last Sunday morning was a time never to be forgotten and a climax of all before it. I was a bit sick. Brother Huckabee came to my tent. . . . I said, 'I am not feeling very well. I will make a little talk and you can take your collection.' He said, 'Brasher, the people are and will be here from all over the county. We want a sermon this morning." Well, I prayed and made what preparation I could, and took for a text Ephesians 5:25-27. I was not conscious of anything but simple speech. The Lord took full possession of every power of mind, body, and spirit. It was a Pentecost of power. The people on the rear seat were as much affected as at the front, and when I opened the altar it was filled and much over in one instantaneous rush. Prejudices of many were swept away, and all acknowledged it was the mighty power of God. One old hard church member said, 'I could have sat on a dozen eggs and not broken one of them.'[34]

So began the Hartselle Camp Meeting. Through the ensuing ninety years there have been some changes, though not many. Running water was added in the fifties. This was a welcome luxury to all, but a great relief to the young boys whose task it was to haul up scores of buckets from the spring every day of the encampment.[35] One of the most far-reaching changes occurred not in the camp itself, but amongst its constituency. In spite of

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[33]Byrd White quoted by Puckett, "History of Hartselle Campground," 2.

[34]John Lakin Brasher, unpublished autobiography quoted by Brasher, "'Standing Between the Living and the Dead,'" 140.

[35]Oral history with Harry Puckett.

interest between 1875 and 1890, it was obvious that the holiness faction would not prevail in the Methodist Church. By 1900 the Church was polarized over the issue, and holiness advocates were losing ground. Most of the upper echelon of church leadership was ready to declare open warfare against the preachers who espoused perfectionist teachings. Entire sanctification was considered by many to be divisive and disparaging of the new birth as an incomplete experience. A war of extermination began to remove or silence holiness advocates. Methodist holiness folk had to consider whether to join the separatists or "come-outers" as they were called, who were withdrawing from organized Methodism. Thousands took this option and joined one of the new denominations which were being formed explicitly as holiness churches. Many others were such loyal Methodists that they determined to remain within their church, even though it was highly unlikely that Methodism could be re-created in a holiness image.[36]

These events were felt at Hartselle as well. Some of the leading families of the association did come out of the Methodist Church while others remained, but traditional Wesleyan soteriology continued to be common ground. Since that time the Hartselle Camp Meeting has included in its constituency almost as many members of the Church of the Nazarene and the Church of God as Methodists.[37] Although there are numerous aspects of the

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[36]Synan, Holiness Pentecostal Movement, 51.

[37]Oral History with Tuza Ryan.

Hartselle Camp Meeting which would be interesting to study, not all would be equally illuminating concerning the ultimate purposes of the camp. The propagation of holiness doctrine through the camp meeting is best illustrated by examining the main vehicle of theological content in the camp meeting--the preaching.[38] Camp meeting preaching differs from the conventional sermonizing often found in local church pulpits in both content and style. Acknowledging this contrast Harry Puckett said:

> The men [camp meeting preachers] are all evangelists . . . that makes them more colorful and they are probably better orators. The same church preacher coming out to the camp meeting would probably be a better orator. Here there are no inhibitions among both preachers and listeners. Even if you've never been to a camp meeting before, you can feel a difference when you come into the camp.[39]

The content distinctive of camp meeting preaching is of course sanctification. This is not to say that preachers did not address a great diversity of biblical texts and themes, but this one constant underlying theme predominated. A parishioner in John L. Brasher's church in Boaz, Alabama remarked to him on one occasion that "she never did know what his text was going to be,

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[38]Though there have been many excellent holiness preachers associated with the Hartselle Camp Meeting Association, there is no doubt that John L. Brasher is the most outstanding. It is because of his prominence and because so many of his sermons have been preserved that his work will be the primary source considered.

[39]Oral History with Harry Puckett.

but she always knew what he was going to preach about."[40] This statement demonstrated that the holiness preacher would not only overwhelmingly select scriptures that bear on holiness themes, but that he would predictably intone this theme in whatever text he was treating. Brasher admitted a tendency among camp meeting oriented preachers to be too specialized, and he encouraged them to preach other doctrines also.[41] A characteristic sermonic device Brasher used to emphasize the distinction between the first and second works of grace was the contrasting couplet. A sermon he preached at Hartselle demonstrates this style:

> Sins were cleansed away when we were converted.
> Sin is cleansed away when we are sanctified.
> In the first place we got rid of guilt.
> In the next we got rid of depravity.
> In the first we receive pardon for what we've done.
> In the next we receive cleansing from the nature we've inherited.
> In the first we get guilt cancelled and life imparted.
> In the next we get carnality cleansed away and a more abundant life.
> In the one we are born of the Spirit.
> In the next we are baptized with the Spirit.
> The one is sanctification begun.
> The other is sanctification completed.[42]

The theological thrust of all these years of sermonizing came through to listeners loud and clear. When asked what he remembered about the communication of the holiness message, Harry Puckett personalized it in these words:

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[40]Quoted in Brasher, "'Standing Between the Living and the Dead,'" 257.

[41]Ibid, 220.

[42]John Lakin Brasher, "In the Beginning, God," Transcript of sermon, Hartselle Camp Meeting, Hartselle, Alabama, August, 1950, copy in possession of the author.

> When you are saved, that is the first step. The second step might come at the same time, but then again it might not. It might come later on, when you receive what we call the second blessing. I feel like the second blessing is this: I, individually, feel like I am completely cleansed of everything that shouldn't be in my heart, that I am completely in the will of God. It doesn't last though, unless you cultivate it. It's a growing experience. Just as we are told when we are children that we can't be perfect, but we can strive for perfection. That's really what it is. You always feel like you can reach it, if you take just one more step.[43]

Even though content is the most important facet of the camp meeting sermon, its most recognizable attributes have more to do with the characteristic style of delivery. Anyone who has ever visited a Southern camp meeting service will recognize immediately that there are certain elements of style and oratorical techniques which are employed in such a way as to make the camp meeting sermon unique from other types of delivery. "The Great Southern Orator," as Brasher was called by his peers, admitted that he had adapted his own style was adapted from revivalists of the middle nineteenth century. In a sense, therefore, much of the unique delivery style of the camp meeting preacher is a "hold-over" from a previous period of history, just as the language of public prayer in these circles is a learned duplication of the King James English of the early seventeenth century. According to his biographer, Brasher's ideal for preaching was:

> . . . logical, doctrinal and practical--employing anecdote, graphic imagery, and humor. Careful use of voice and gesture, freely expressed emotion, and the quality of 'presence' issuing from the preacher's own inner religious

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[43]Oral History with Harry Puckett.

> experience contributed to the ideal delivery. The language of preaching was eloquent, characterized by floridity, striking imagery, dramatic delivery, and rhythm. Sacred eloquence was a divine gift, the necessary outpouring of the graces of the Spirit within. In this respect, sacred eloquence was essentially 'native,' not learned; yet formal education could enhance a preacher's spiritual eloquence. Eloquence, however, was to remain democratic in its clarity and appeal to all people.[44]

Camp meeting preaching is emotional. The natural environment of the camp meeting tabernacle encourages the loss of inhibition. Many a worshipper who sits quietly during a service at church will shout "Amen" at the camp meeting. As Tuza Ryan said: "You receive something there in that atmosphere that you don't get elsewhere. Even though I might be in the church every Sunday and prayer meeting and all that, there's something about the grounds; it's a very hallowed place, and there's something about it that really thrills my soul and fills my soul."[45] The preachers not only encourage emotion in their listeners, but frequently cry, sing, shout or perform other emotionally demonstrative actions in the pulpit. Demonstrations of extreme emotion, however, are merely stereotypes--myths of the camp meeting that need to be exploded. In all of my observation of camp meeting services I have never witnessed the more outrageous emotional behavior often associated in the popular mind with this kind of religion. Extreme manifestations of revivalistic zeal are more typical of the camp meetings of the Second Great

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[44]Brasher, "'Standing Between the Living and the Dead,'" 196.

[45]Oral History with Tuza Ryan.

Awakening in the early part of the last century. Brasher himself advocated dignity in holiness worship: "Our little . . . doggeral songs, calculated only to stir up momentary excitement, have wounded and weakened us."[46]

Camp meeting preaching is decision oriented. The theology behind the holiness movement understands spiritual birth and growth in terms of crisis and surrender. Therefore "decision" is emphasized as the means of entering a new phase of spiritual life. Nowhere is decision stressed more than in the sermon. A distinguishing mark of camp meeting preaching is the power to call forth religious experience and to elicit decision for God. The altar call given at the end of each sermon offers an opportunity for the seeker to struggle through personal impediments and finally to make a "decision," a process that is visible for all present to witness. Before his acceptance of holiness teaching Brasher preached with little emphasis upon religious experience; afterward he never failed to use all his powers to urge his listeners to "decide" to respond to God.[47]

Camp meeting preaching is extemporaneous. Almost all holiness preachers speak without aid of a manuscript. Preaching without a manuscript allowed a freedom of physical movement and eye contact that is beneficial to the overall result. Furthermore, congregations are duly impressed. Methodist lore is

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[46]Murphree, Giant of a Century Trail, 73.

[47]Brasher, "'Standing Between the Living and the Dead,'" 139.

filled with stories of camp meeting congregations who had no patience for preachers who read their sermons. Written sermonizing was condemned by Methodist divine William Arthur. It was "a gain of elegance, at the cost of ease; of finish, at the cost of freedom; of precision, at that of power; and of literary pleasure, at that of religious impressiveness."[48] Brasher told a story that revealed his opinion on this subject:

> A preacher was preaching from a manuscript. There was a boy up in the gallery watching him. Finally the preacher slipped the last page over and the boy knew it was the last one. The preacher said, "Friends, I could just go on and on about this." And the boy said, "you couldn't either, you slipped the last piece of paper over." Hurrah for the boy.[49]

This attitude most likely does not spring from anti-intellectualism as many people suppose, but rather from the concern that nothing hinder the freedom and spontaneity of a message that is believed to be directly inspired by the Spirit.

Unquestionably there is great social significance to the American camp meeting. One of the most important needs met by the camp meeting was transition. The camp meeting has helped rural people make the adjustment to urban life in much the same way that the Catholic Church assisted European immigrants adjust to life in the New World. It represents the familiar and is comforting to one who finds himself in a strange and discomfiting new environment. Even after the transition was complete the camp

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[48]William Arthur, The Tongue of Fire or the True Power of Christianity (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1856), 324.

[49]Quoted in Brasher, "'Standing Between the Living and the Dead,'" 139.

meeting doubtless offered a place for those who were formerly rural once again to immerse themselves in the old familiar world of crops laid by and friends gathered under the arbor to hear the old gospel story.

For all of its social importance, it must be stressed that the camp meeting was and is, first and foremost, a religious activity. There has been an unfortunate tendency of many writers to interpret the camp meeting in almost exclusively psychological or sociological terms. The obvious fact that the camp meeting should be interpreted primarily in religious terms has been too often overlooked.[50] To quote Dickson D. Bruce:

> So much has been made of the camp meeting's frontier origins as well as of its more sensational qualities that one often loses sight of its religious appeal. For many observers, then and now, the secular social role of the camp meeting has far overshadowed whatever religious significance the practice might have had.[51]

In Wayne Flynt's analysis, "rather than viewing the camp meetings as essentially a social event with a thin religious veneer, one should view them as the anvil upon which plain folk religion was formed."[52] Certainly there are sociological and psychological aspects to the camp meeting, but they are secondary to the religious. This is a fundamentally religious event with religious meanings. One important meaning of the camp meeting

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[50]Wayne Flynt, "One in the Spirit, Many in the Flesh: Southern Evangelicals," in David E. Harrell, Jr., ed. Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism (Macon [Ga.]: Mercer University Press, 1981), 27.

[51]Bruce, And They All Sang Hallelujah, 5.

[52]Flynt, "One in the Spirit, Many in the Flesh," 27.

phenomenon in general and Hartselle camp meeting in particular is conversion. The main reason for the camp meeting's existence is to persuade, convince and convert people to faith in Christ and personal piety.

Another important meaning has to do with the interpretation of life itself. In the days of the frontier, religion offered a way to make sense of the often overwhelming hardships of life. Today, camp meeting religion offers a stable, Bible-based interpretation of a rapidly changing world. For the believer, there is a sense of everything being in God's hands--that some things never change, even in the seeming chaos of the modern world.

Finally, camp meeting preaching reinforces Christian morality. In the frontier period it helped to set community moral standards. The preaching of ethical living identified for many the limits of acceptable behavior. Today it offers a call to morality that sounds almost counter-cultural, but of course it has never troubled the holiness folk that they are out of step with the world.

The Hartselle Camp Meeting Association is a classic example of one of the tabernacles established during the heyday of the Holiness movement in the Methodist Church. In spirit it is also a descendant of the original camp meetings of the Southern frontier. It was founded for evangelization and conversion, and for the propagation of perfectionist doctrine as taught by John Wesley. It not only has survived for ninety

years, but still faithfully upholds its original mission. Hartselle camp meeting stands as a challenge to those who say its vitality and purposes are a thing of the past. Far from being a historical/religious relic, its ministry is very much alive and its leadership is forward looking. Among the many aspects of the camp meeting, its doctrinal distinctives can best be found and understood in the oral proclamation of holiness faith known as the camp meeting sermon.

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