

The Camp Meeting

“The large meetings held at Red River and Cane Ridge, Kentucky are cited as the first camp meetings. But even Presbyterian and Methodist historians such as Charles Johnson recognize the fact that the camp meeting had its beginning 50 years earlier in the foothills of the Appalachians in central west North Carolina. George Whitefield was the mouthpiece of the Great Awakening. It was illegal to be a Baptist itinerant, and while some tried to preach as Whitefield, in the open air, they were imprisoned or fined. Whitefield preached, ‘Ye must be Born Again’ and shook the established Church of England and Episcopal Church. When his converts began to embrace believer’s baptism in large number he declared, ‘All my chickens have turned to ducks.’ One of Whitefield’s converts was a Connecticut Congregationalist named Shubal Stearns. Stearns was a fiery preacher who saw infant baptism as false and was immersed by the Baptist Wait Palmer in Tolland, Connecticut. Stearns had a vision to preach the gospel to the growing population of the South. So he and 16 of his followers made the trip southwest into the wilderness in early 1755. (Earlier) In 1770, Shubal Stearns wrote to Isaac Backus: ‘The Lord carries on His work gloriously, in sundry places in this province, and in Virginia, and in South Carolina. Not long since, I attended a meeting on Hoy River, about thirty miles from hence. About seven hundred souls attended the meeting, which held six days. We received twenty-four persons by a satisfactory declaration of grace, and eighteen of them were baptized. The power of God was wonderful.’ (Origin of The American Camp Meeting by James Beller).

A secular historian gives this account of the Cane Ridge Camp Meeting, starting in Kentucky in 1801: “At its height, about twenty thousand were said to have been in attendance. Religious services of praying, singing, exhorting, and preaching were kept up day and night. Physical expressions of the excitement were numerous and sometimes took bizarre forms. The groans and screams of those under conviction mingled with the shouts of those who had found release and joy. The fear of hell and damnation and the hopelessness of the lost would be succeeded by the bliss of assured salvation.”

This “camp meeting” phenomenon continued through the nineteenth century spreading throughout America. Out of this came the Chautauqua Meetings that continues today under a more secular educational approach. I would also place the great Keswick Convention of England, which started in 1875, as a continuum of the great camp meeting approach to ministry. Denominational barriers broke down and a move of God that majored in the victorious Christian life was taught. It was at one of these conventions that Amy Carmichael of Ireland was inspired by Hudson Taylor founder of The China Inland Mission and answered God’s call to go to India.

For almost four decades of ministry, my summers are often filled with frequent travels to be a speaker at a camp meeting somewhere. The tradition still continues with an emphasis on conversion and dedication of the converted for the victorious Christian life and Christian service. This is Friday morning and although tired, I found it difficult last night to settle down and go to sleep because I kept thinking about the seventeen souls that either gave their hearts to Christ or received assurance of their salvation last night. In the course of this week we will have had a good number saved. My heart is thrilled with young people approaching me after nearly every service telling me of God’s call on their life to ministry or missions. One of the great blessings of my heart is to see the youth from our church in attendance at this camp give their all to Christ. It has been a great week and hopefully in coming days parents will bear witness that among their children there was a genuine work of God that will continue on into their maturing years. With these thoughts of the origin and continuation of the camp meeting allow me to ramify on the significance, purpose and plan of the camp meeting:

1. Isolation

Often times the camps are in a remote place. Last week at Timberline, we had to climb a hill just to make a cell phone call. Churches from all over East Texas brought their kids to an out of the way place. Our youth traveled nine hours to Florida's panhandle for Teen Extreme. The kids are away from all forms of entertainment such as televisions, radios, ipods, computers, and video games. They are also away from peers that have not been helping them on to God and His will. If some of the wrong crowd also came to the camp meeting, the effect of isolation will help bring them to the understanding of their spiritual need and, God willing, respond to Christ.

In camp meeting, we try to capture the spirit and sanctifying effect of isolating ourselves to Jesus, "*And he said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure ...*" (Mark 6:31).

2. Concentration

The effect of the noisy world around us can sometimes be deafening to the voice of God. Therefore, once we have isolation, the next step is concentration of a large, healthy intake of the Word of God. The Bible says, "*Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?*" (Jeremiah 23:29). The Word will purge any sin that may be harbored in our hearts and like a hammer will break our hearts and bring us to repentance. "*The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit*" (Psalm 34:18). "*So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it*" (Isaiah 55:11).

3. Recreation

Although we often don't explain the purpose of recreation, we who have ministered in camps appreciate the fun the kids have, but more importantly, have an appreciation that goes beyond the benefit of the physical. Recreation is away to exercise the body in such a way that when the kids come together, they have better concentration on the subject at hand. In Jim Fixx's book, The Complete Book of Running, he commented that the simple exercise of running preoccupies the physical in such a way that the mind is freed up to spiritual experience.

4. Conversion

In the environment of the camp experience, the atmosphere is propitious for a genuine move of God. Our prayer for those who are strangers to the grace of God in salvation will repent and believe. "*Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord*" (Acts 3:19). Jesus said to Peter, who had been so prone to wander, even after his initial conversion, "*But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren*" (Luke 22:32). On the Day of Pentecost, this is exactly what happened - he received great strengthening from a conversion that was evidenced by the infilling and empowering of the Holy Spirit. These are the two types of conversion we pray for in camp meeting. I like the way Webster's 1828 dictionary defines conversion: "In a theological or moral sense, a change of heart, or dispositions, in which the enmity of the heart to God and his law and the obstinacy of the will are subdued, and are succeeded by supreme love to God and his moral government, and a reformation of life." May God continue to bless the camp meeting and may this goal of conversion evermore become reality.

- Pastor Pope -

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