

Peter Cartwright and the Influence of the Circuit Preacher on the West

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Frederick Jackson Turner described the civilization of the West as successive frontiers of trappers and traders, ranchers, miners, and farmers. Those occupations civilized the West economically and politically; the circuit riders who accompanied them, however, civilized civilization. Traveling many miles and preaching to men of every condition, the circuit riders connected scattered frontier settlements and developed the West religiously and socially. The Methodists were particularly successful as circuit riders and frontier preachers. Therefore understanding the contribution of the Methodist circuit riders is essential to understanding the settlement of the West. The life of Peter Cartwright as recorded in his *Autobiography* is typical of the thousands circuit preachers for whom no comparable record exists. Understanding the particular contribution of Peter Cartwright is therefore helpful in understanding the larger contribution of circuit preachers and of Methodism in general to the settlement of the frontier.

To understand Cartwright's role in the settlement of the West, one must examine his theology. American Methodism owed much to European theological traditions coming out of the Reformation; after all, in the eighteenth century Methodism was transplanted in America from England. The American experience, however, and especially the experience of the frontier, modified American Methodism. A practical, hardy, and democratic Methodism suited to and reflective of the character of the pioneers flourished on the frontier.

Just as the frontier experience was central to American Methodism, so Cartwright's personal conversion was central to his theology. In his youth, Cartwright played cards and gambled with his father's encouragement and in spite of his mother's

pleas and prayers.¹ Upon hearing the preaching of a circuit-rider, Cartwright felt deeply convicted about his sin and renounced it. For several months during which he could barely eat or sleep and was unable to work, he prayed earnestly for salvation until he was “soundly converted” and joined the Methodist church.²

The main elements of Cartwright’s conversion match the key emphases of his theology. In his preaching and exhortation to others, Cartwright demanded the same keen sense of sin and impending judgment that he had experienced. He preached against every kind of sin, but especially the sins of drinking, gambling, and owning slaves. In his *Autobiography*, Cartwright attacks the arguments of Universalism that all men will be saved despite sin as a theology that destroyed society and damned men to hell. Second, Cartwright’s theology saw salvation coming only after sustained pleading. Cartwright did not expect his hearers to be saved the moment they felt conviction, but frequently describes people who were “soundly converted” months after first being convicted and meetings where people prayed for hours before feeling forgiveness. Cartwright’s theology also focused on perseverance. After his own conversion, he never returned to sin, but he made note of several apostate preachers and of people who came under conviction but never persevered.³ He also opposed both high- and moderate-Calvinist doctrines of security with his own Arminianism. Finally, the Methodist church was crucial to Cartwright’s theology. He considered membership among the Methodists as crucial to a believer’s holiness and perseverance; therefore, though he believed in a man’s freedom to choose his own church, he tried to persuade people from joining the Baptists and Presbyterians.⁴

¹ Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 31-32.

² Cartwright, 36-38.

³ Cartwright, 32-33, 39, 84-86.

⁴ Cartwright, 43-44, 46, 48-49, 55-60, 76-77, 81-82, 90-91, 154-55, 184-85, 225-28, 234-35. Cartwright did emphasize some doctrines other than those identifiable in his own conversion experience. Though a pioneer and innovator himself, he was rather conservative. He opposed innovators in doctrine such as the New Lights and the Universalists and condemned cultic groups such as Mormons, Shakers, and the Millerites and other apocalyptic sects. Likewise, he mourned the replacement of the preacher riding a circuit in the wilderness by established preachers preaching in churches with pews, and he especially hated

Out of the emphases of his doctrine, especially his commitment to Methodism, came Cartwright's work as a circuit-riding preacher. Soon after his conversion, Cartwright was licensed as a Methodist exhorter; his first attempts at encouraging men as they repented led to attempts at preaching that they must repent.⁵ Cartwright described himself and preachers whom he admired as preaching fervently a blunt gospel sin and repentance with a homespun, backwoods plainness that was nevertheless eloquent and skillful. That preaching often provoked strong reactions in the hearers, including falling to the ground, uncontrollable shaking (called the "Methodist jerks"), weeping, and crying out for mercy. Cartwright did not, however, consider all those who reacted strongly to preaching as "soundly converted," and he looked for a perseverance that included holiness and participation in the Methodist church.⁶

Cartwright's work extended beyond persuading men to convert. In every location that he went, Cartwright attempted to establish "class meetings," gatherings of the Methodist church that met each Sunday even without a preacher. At the quarterly meetings of the many classes on his circuit, he administered the sacraments and accepted new members into the church. Those class and quarterly meetings were an essential maintain the local influence of Methodism when the circuit rider was absent.

Cartwright's work also extended beyond local preaching to meetings of regional and national significance. Because Cartwright and other circuit preachers traveled to all the settlements in their circuits, no matter how isolated, their preaching and their religion were a part of the shared experiences connecting all the frontier settlements. The yearly camp meetings also helped connect the scattered settlers. Those meetings attracted many people—saints, seeking sinners, and the "rowdies" alike—for both their religious and social benefits, thus giving them shared experiences and beliefs. Beyond

increasing laxity within Methodism that made more allowance for fancy clothing, slave-ownership, and other sins. See Cartwright, 34-35, 61-62, 64-66.

⁵ Cartwright, 51-52, 54-55. Cartwright was later licensed as a preacher; Cartwright, 83-84.

⁶ Cartwright, 44-45, 68, 88-89, 143, 148-52, 243-46, 255-64.

the local class and quarterly meetings and the regional camp meetings, Cartwright also participated in the national affairs of the Methodist church.

In his participation in the Methodist church organization, Cartwright—and other circuit preachers like him—made his most significant contribution to the settlement of the West. The settlement of the West was guided primarily by economic forces and only secondarily by political or ideological forces, but the conversion of the West was carefully administered by the Methodist church. At the meetings of the Methodist hierarchy, the leaders planned the expansion of the church, and Cartwright received assignments to or volunteered for different circuits, usually moving west as the pioneers opened new territory.⁷ Several times Cartwright was appointed presiding elder responsible for several circuit preachers in his district. Cartwright himself showed respect for the Methodist bishops, especially Francis Asbury and William M'Kendree, and he kept his own records of the numbers of class members and of circuit preachers.⁸ Cartwright opposed divisions among Methodists that would damage their organized efforts.⁹ For example, he opposed to the split between the abolitionist Methodist Church North and the slave-owning Methodist Church South, primarily for doctrinal and moral reasons but also because the split harmed the mission of the Methodists to evangelize.¹⁰

The work of Cartwright and other circuit preachers required a special kind of man. Cartwright traveled thousands of miles each year, facing dangers from the wilderness such as getting lost, storms, cold and heat, floods and drought, Indians and criminals.¹¹ His travels kept him away from home so often that he barely mentions his family in his *Autobiography*.¹² Circuit preachers were always poorly paid, and often had difficulty even covering their travel expenses.¹³ While traveling and especially at camp

⁷ Cartwright, 67, 75, 84, 87, 92, 248.

⁸ See, for example, Cartwright, 86-87, 135, 163, 195, 212, 240, 247.

⁹ Cartwright, 39.

¹⁰ Cartwright, 93-94, 269-87.

¹¹ Cartwright, 25-27, 173-74, 216-17, 220-23.

¹² The few times Cartwright does mention his family, he gives only a few facts about them; e.g., Cartwright, 83, 166-67.

¹³ Cartwright, 74, 77-78, 80.

meetings, Cartwright faced danger from “rowdies” who mocked the meetings, sold liquor and gambled, and attempted to injure the preachers, the people, and their possessions. He sometimes was able to prompt timid magistrates to enforce the law or to rally the people at the meeting to defend themselves. At other times, he defeated the rowdies himself, with arguments and a ready wit if possible but otherwise with ready fists.¹⁴ With his rugged, unstoppable character and his commitment to his theology and gospel message, Cartwright typified thousands of other circuit preachers who civilized the civilization of the West.

¹⁴ Cartwright, 70-72, 155-61, 181-83, 190-93, 207-09, 248-52.