

Dr. Julian C. McPheeters and the Camp Meeting

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One of the significant results of the Great Revival which began in the latter part of the eighteenth century and which continued into the nineteenth century was the camp meeting. Strangely enough this new child of revivalism soon became the chief promoter of spiritual revival in American Christianity. This was due in part to the nature of the times and to the conditions of the people who pioneered in the settlement of the interior of the United States.

These were the days of the frontiersmen--days when the population was scattered and on the move, days when sinful practices were rampant, means of communication were slow, social life and contacts were limited, preachers were in short supply, and the general life of the people very simple when judged by modern standards. William Warren Sweet, in his volume *Religion in the Development of American Culture*, says:

It is quite clear that the camp meeting arose in answer to a need; it was one of the new ways which emerged to deal with the appalling spiritual poverty of the pioneer...Although at first there was much disorder, it was not long before it became a well regulated institution.¹

Aggressive and wise Christians are always looking for new and better ways of getting the Gospel message to the people. Many of these were quick to realize that the camp meeting held great potential as an effective method of evangelism. Among those who saw the possibilities of this institution were the Disciples of Christ, especially in the border states. Discerning Methodists likewise came early to see the value of this new medium for the propagation of spiritual life. Dr. J. C. McPheeters writes in *The Herald*: "The Methodists early appropriated the camp meeting and used it more extensively

¹William Warren Sweet, *Religion in the Development of American Culture*, 1765-1840 (New York: Scribner's, 1952), p. 150.

than any other denomination, scarcely a district being without its annual camp."² Among the individuals who were quick to utilize the camp meeting as an effective evangelistic medium was Bishop Francis Asbury. Dr. McPheeters says at this point, "Asbury's journal indicates that it was not uncommon for thousands to be in attendance at a single camp, the number saved and sanctified running well over a thousand souls."³

Bishop Asbury further expressed the attitude of Methodists toward the camp meeting in those days in these words: "We must attend to camp meetings; they make our harvest time..." By the year 1816, there were at least six hundred annual camp meetings sponsored by this denomination in America. Within the Methodist system of church advance, there was a real place for effective action in the camp meeting. The preachers in charge of large circuits, in which individual annual church revivals and regular communion services were impossible, could reach the people with effectiveness within the context of the wholesome social and spiritual fellowship of the protracted gathering which was the camp meeting.

Following the Civil War, when devoutness in the spiritual life of America was at a low ebb, some spiritual men and women of rare insight conceived the idea of holding "National Camp Meetings" for the promotion of holiness of heart and life within the church. At Vineland, New Jersey, in 1867, the first National Holiness Camp was conducted. From that modest beginning, the camp meeting movement has spread throughout the nation and around the world. Historically, it has produced some of the greatest preachers and the most effective soul-winners in the life of the church.

Today there are scores of vital Holiness Camp Meetings held annually in nearly all of these United States. A number of these have existed continuously for nearly a century. Many of them have their original charters, and occupy the premises which they acquired during the preceding century. In general, they maintain a continuity of emphasis with that which was theirs at their establishment.

²J. C. McPheeters, "The Camp Meeting," *The Herald*, Vol. 71, No. 11 (Louisville: The Pentecostal Publishing Co., 1960), p. 1.

³*Ibid.*

The relevance of the camp meeting to today's spiritual life in America has been called into question by some who feel that it was an institution which grew out of a dated necessity. It was, so the contention goes, a dramatic and effective method of reaching the immoral, rough, mobile frontiersmen with the Gospel. It is said that the camp meeting afforded the men and women of the American Frontier with a much-needed social contact and a much-needed cultural outlet, and that it expressed the genius of the doctrine of democracy in action during the nineteenth century. However, some will argue, the camp meeting has long since outlived its usefulness, particularly in this atomic, space age.

There are others of equal or greater spiritual insight who feel that the camp meeting is still relevant to American life, and that it still ministers to basic human heart-needs, and that it continues to be an effective method of evangelism in its best and truest sense. Dr. Howard F. Shipps, professor of Church History at Asbury Theological Seminary, writes in *The Herald*:

In the development of the camp meeting during the course of more than a century and a half, many changes have occurred, but in some measure much of its original purpose has been preserved. It has been flexible enough to meet the needs of the people under many changing environments. Today it remains as an outstanding spiritual force in the life of the American Church.⁴

In the same issue of *The Herald*, Dr. Julian C. McPheeters writes:

A rebirth of the camp meeting movement came with the birth of the modern holiness movement, following the period of the war between the states. The holiness camps have had a spiritual vitality which has perpetuated them unto the present day. These camps at the present time are a vital source of supply for ministers at home and missionaries abroad... The camp meetings of the present day form

⁴Howard F. Shipps, "The Camp Meeting--Its Development and Influence upon the People of the United States," *The Herald* Vol. 69, No. 11 (Louisville: The Pentecostal Publishing Co., 1959), p. 3.

an important front line offensive against the forces of evil and unrighteousness.⁵

It is clear from these statements that there are men of stature and discernment who recognize that the camp meeting has not outlived its day, but that those camp meetings which have weathered the storms for seventy-five or one hundred years are still wielding an interest as significant as that which they had in the early years of their history. It goes without saying that these institutions, like all others, are dependent, for their quality and for the type of influence which they bear, upon their leaders. It is recognized on all hands that they have been fruitful sources for candidates for the ministry of the Gospel, at home and abroad. As Dr. McPheeters writes, "It would be a major catastrophe to the cause of missions if all the missionaries who received their call should suddenly be removed from their fields of labor."⁶

During the past twenty-five years, this writer has had the privilege of being among the workers in many of the great camp meetings in the nation. During those years, it has been my privilege to sit under the ministry of, and to work with, a number of the leaders of the Holiness Movement of this generation. It has been my personal experience--and the records will bear me out on a wide front at this point--that Dr. Julian C. McPheeters has had a very significant place among the giants of the camp meeting preachers of our day. To him, the camp meeting has not been an adopted child among the agencies for effective spread of the Christian Gospel: he has frankly identified himself with this cause, and has made large and significant contributions to its effective ongoing.

From our point of view, there are certain basic necessities for an effective camp meeting. These are: intercessory prayer; plain, personal, passionate preaching of the Word; praise, centering in joyous verbal witnessing and singing; and pedagogy, which instructs the people in the Scriptures and in the techniques of abiding. Dr. McPheeters sums up his vision for the camp meeting ministry in these words:

⁵J. C. McPheeters, "Camp Meeting Revivals," *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶J. C. McPheeters, "At the Summer Camps," *The Herald*, Vol. 71, No. 15 (Louisville: The Pentecostal Publishing Co., 1960), p. 16.

Camps do not thrive on lectures and discussions of the topics of the day. They thrive only on heaven-sent preaching under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, preaching which honors the Bible as the word of the living God.⁷

In each of the areas vital to the success of the ministry of the camp meeting, Dr. McPheeters excels. It is his genius, not only to advise others what to do, but to lead out personally, and to exemplify that which he counsels. He is a man of earnest and importunate prayer; he is a studious preacher of the Word, who immerses himself in the Scriptures, and comes from a prayerful living in its pages to his people, with treasures old and new. He is a master at conducting the service of praise and witnessing. He has himself mastered the disciplines of abiding, and can instruct his hearers from his background of personal experience. May I add that he is a princely man with whom to work in the camp meeting, exhibiting in the day-by-day contacts there the graces of the Spirit whose ministry he loves to expound to others.

Dr. Julian C. McPheeters is an intensely practical man. He is of the deep conviction that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is essentially the same for all ages. He is also keenly aware that we must be alert to discover new ways of approach to the people of each generation--ways which harness together the tried of the old with the best of the new. He has done this in a remarkable way at the Redwoods Camp Meeting, not far from Santa Cruz, California, of which he is founder and president. In my judgment, this camp meeting, which is one of the youngest camps, is one of the most redemptively effective holiness camp meetings in America. All who have been there, either as attenders or as workers, will give a similar testimony. This institution is to this writer an outstanding evidence of the camp meeting genius of Dr. McPheeters, and as well, an outstanding witness to the relevance and effectiveness of the camp meeting in this modern generation.

It is therefore a privilege to say, in connection with this briefest of surveys of the camp meeting, a word of profound tribute to the one whom this issue of *The Asbury Seminarian* is honoring. It goes without saying that Dr. Julian C. McPheeters deserves the highest honor as he retires from a long and suc-

⁷ *Ibid.*

successful presidency of Asbury Theological Seminary. He likewise merits the highest tribute for his long and effective service to the institution of the American camp meeting. His identification with this institution has been frankly avowed and profoundly loyal. His service in her behalf continues to be vitally effective. To you, Dr. McPheeters, the spiritual life of America, as nourished by the camp meeting, is profoundly indebted!