

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE
LUTHERAN CHARISMATIC RENEWAL
AND THE FRONTIER CAMP-MEETING

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In 1890 the director of census could announce that "there can hardly be said to be a frontier line"¹ in the United States. The elements of frontier life which shaped religion on the frontier vanished as life became more and more organized and modern. But we find elements that marked the religion of the frontier still thriving in religion today. Ninety years after the officials of the United States considered the frontier life at an end, the elements of frontier religion still exist.

We find these frontier religious elements evident in the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal among pastors and parishoners from the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. In studying the Lutheran Charismatic men and their movement the question arises as to how come there are many striking parallels between frontier religion and the Charismatic movement? Does the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal we see today have its roots in frontier religion? Or has the Lutheran Charismatic movement merely developed like frontier religion? This paper will endeavor to determine what, if any, connection there is between the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal and frontier religion. The area of specific interest will be the Charismatic Renewal among men formerly from or presently in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod (LC-MS).

Elements of Frontier Religion

Thoughts of the frontier in America remind us of the sparse population and the hard, sometimes cruel life people lived. To serve such a spread-out population the circuit rider came into being. That rugged man, most often unmarried, who spent most of his non-preaching and teaching time in the saddle. The circuit pastor could preach an average of twenty to thirty sermons a week while covering a circuit which took four to five weeks to cover.² The Methodists were most successful with the circuit pastor method of religion. Baptists and

¹ Ray Allen Billington, "The Westward Movement," The Encyclopedia Americana, (New York: Americana Corporation, 1972), p. 676.

² William Warren Sweet, The Story of Religion in America, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1839), p. 316.

Presbyterians also employed circuit pastors with some degree of success. Yet the novel idea of religion carried on through circuit pastors is not the element most noticeable in Lutheran Charismatic Renewal.

Religious elements of the frontier still existing today in religion come from a development in frontier religion which began in 1880 and remained in popular practice until 1845. The movement is the camp-meeting which dominated many aspects of frontier religion and life. The camp-meeting was held annually for one week usually in autumn after the harvest and was attended by almost every person in a given region of the frontier. Men, women, and children came from remote spots in the wilderness to live in tents for a week with their "neighbors" for the sake of religion. In such a setting religion took on some marked characteristics. Let us examine these characteristics and see how they look in contemporary Lutheran Charismatic religion.

The camp-meeting depended greatly upon the evangelist or preacher. He was a man of strong character and usually carried himself in a way that demanded respect from others. Yet he was often from the common, less educated variety of people found on the frontier. The main concern of the frontier minister was to convert the individuals before him.³ Many other elements normally associated with the ministry like instruction in doctrine and in-depth Bible study were not dealt with by the frontier preacher at the camp-meeting. These ministrations took time and there just wasn't that much time in the one week camp-meeting. Nor could the minister be sure that spending time with the converted person teaching him in doctrine and in Word would benefit the person. For frontier people often led lives that helped them forget the teaching they had learned ^{from the minister}. Frontier Christians often led lives that were anything but sanctified.⁴ As best the frontier preacher could attempt to bring God into the lives of the people for one week a year. For this reason the frontier preacher delivered powerful sermons that

³Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. And They All Sang Hallelujah, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1973), p. 61.

⁴Ibid., p. 56.

marked him as a man to be taken seriously.

The sermons that were presented at the camp-meeting were full of moral instructions. Indeed an offshoot of camp-meetings was discipline trials. Here was an attempt to not only control doctrine which was very hard to do, but also to control the conduct of people. In this last endeavor the frontier trials tended to be successful. Public attention often led the offenders to succumb to justice or leave the area.⁵ The people of the frontier needed the standard of morals and the law preaching of the zealous preachers to fill in a void in their lives. The people needed this stability from religion in a frontier full of instability. The camp-meeting reached success because the church provided a disciplined community where "proper relationships between individuals were spelled out and rules rigidly enforced."⁶ Certainly the freedom of the frontier allowed the people to be independant to determine their own polotics and destinies in life. But many people needed the order of the church and the Lord of the sure Word to keep freedom under control.⁷ The preaching of stern law supplied the needed control. As one could imagine, the sermons filled with morals and laws pricked many frontier consciences and brought forth highly emotional confessions of sins and convictions to follow God with a God-pleasing life.

If there is one characteristic that has marked the frontier camp-meeting it is the high degree of emotionalism which existed. Because traditional orthodoxy of the organized church was put aside, emotionalism came in.⁸ The whole disign of the meeting centered on tension between the preacher and his flock. There was a predisposition towards group activity so that the "minister

⁵ Bruce, op. cit., p. 51.

⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

⁷ Sweet, op. cit., p. 5

⁸ Ibid., p. 496.

undertook no performance in which he was not joined by the congregation"⁹ through song, prayer, and open confessions of sin. The meetings often would last a long time causing the guilt feelings to push the gathering into a high state of emotionalism. When the sinner came forth to claim he was saved by God, that person vented pent-up tension.¹⁰ The actions which occurred when someone vented their feelings have been described as an "emotional orgy full of exhibitions of acrobatic Christianity including jerks, falling, dancing, and barking."¹¹ It must be noted that the preachers were not always in favor of such wild and unusual behavior. In fact in numerous instances the preacher would launch into fervent prayer against such displays once this unusual behavior erupted.¹² Yet emotionalism prevailed in almost every meeting. Emotionalism has become the most memorable element associated with the frontier camp-meeting.

The frontier people did not have great wealth. They were for the most part poor people living with a hand-to-mouth existence. They had no time or interests in theological differences. Their religion was one of personal religious experience, full of emotional fervor, rejection of abstract creeds and formal worship, and centered upon a religious message that placed major emphasis upon such simple virtues as personal honesty, equality, sympathy with one's fellows, and the corollary urge of mutual helpfulness.¹³ Because of the sparse population their religion developed in the simplest way concentrating on the basic needs for life and heavy with individualism.

When the frontier camp-meeting was tried in urban areas where organized city life lacked a lot of the simpleness of the frontier, the camp-meeting lost most of its religious importance. In the settled eastern areas where camp-meetings were held, they took on social importance rather than serving as a way to bring

⁹Bruce, op. cit., p. 85.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 6.

¹¹Ibid., p. 53.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Charles A. Johnson, The Frontier Camp Meeting, (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955), p. 17.

sinner to repentance. Undoubtedly this is why frontier religion with elements of worship we find in camp-meetings disappeared in the late 1800's as the frontier ceased to exist. But these religious elements reappeared in the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal as we see it today among former and present LC-MS members.

Comparable Elements of the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal

Now the Charismatic or Pentecostal movement first became noticeable in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod in the early 1960's. A legitimate question to raise is what is the connection between frontier religion which disappeared in the 1890's along with the frontier and the Charismatic religion of the 1960's in the LC-MS? The answer to that question is simple. The LC-MS had no association with a Charismatic movement until it began to lose its Biblical doctrine of fellowship. Once the LC-MS began unionistic practices with the ALC and other church bodies, the Charismatic Renewal appeared in the LC-MS.¹⁴ Certainly these unBiblical unionistic practices introduced Charismatic religion into the LC-MS. From this exposure the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal came into being and developed in like nature to frontier religion.

You see, the nature of frontier religion as displayed in camp-meetings came to be preserved in the Pentecostal religion which started in 1906 by Charles Perham. He was a Methodist preacher of Topeka, Kansas. Perham was not setting out to consciously promote the camp-meeting religion of the frontier under the new religion he started which is called Pentecostalism. Yet what he accomplished was to recapture frontier religion giving it a new name. In essence the Charismatic religion has developed from the same type of stimuli as frontier religion and accomplishes the same end as frontier religion. The Charismatic religion is distinct from frontier religion because it is more highly developed in doctrine and organization than the frontier camp-meeting. Yet the nature of the Charismatic religion which came into the LC-MS and the nature of frontier

¹⁴Scott J. Stone, Unionism: Cause and Effect of the Charismatic Renewal within the Lutheran Church, (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library, 1977).

religion are the same. We can see this as we take a look at the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal in the LC-MS.

Even as the frontier religion of the camp-meeting offered the frontier people an order and stability which they needed in life, so also the Charismatic religion fills in a void in many peoples' lives. Where Charismatic religion has been successful it has given its followers confidence and made religion personal for them. Frontier life with its sparse population and infrequent circuit pastor's visits had made religion hard to participate in and hard for people to identify as their own except for the brief time in camp-meetings. In like manner, city life and the social gospel preaching took the personal element out of religion. This personal element is very evident in the Charismatic religion. As cities developed ever larger in the late 1800's and continuing through the 1900's, the churches shifted their preaching emphasis. Many churches stopped preaching evangelically with emphasis upon the salvation of the individual.¹⁵ In place of the preaching of objective justification and encouragement for people to rejoice in their unmerited salvation and to make it their own, as Paul urges in the third chapter of Philippians, there came social gospel, A religion that put emphasis on social sins which must be the concern of the church.¹⁶ When religion stressed social gospel reducing its preaching about the forgiveness of sins which we have from God through Jesus, religion then left people unsure of their salvation. Into this void came the Charismatic religion with its highly emotional and personal appeal. When the LC-MS began its unionistic tendencies it too began to preach social gospel leaving some of its people open to the appeal of Charismatic religion.

Like the camp-meetings the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal depends heavily

¹⁵ Sweet, op. cit., p. 510

¹⁶ Ibid.

on a strong central man, who is most often the pastor. Psychologist John P. Kildahl has established the fact that those who have entered the Charismatic movement display a need to be "emotionally close to some kindly leader who was also strong and masterful."¹⁷ This is the leader who steers the person to feeling fulfilled with his religion. This leader helps the person feel a personal satisfaction with religion by helping the person obtain the alleged gift of the Holy Spirit called tongue-speaking. In almost all cases in Charismatic religions it takes a key man to lead others to feel confident and satisfied with their religion.

In the famous case (in the LC-MS) of Pastor Don C. Pfotenhauer, who became one of the first Lutheran Charismatics of the LC-MS, his strong leader was a WELS seminary graduate and former LC-MS pastor, Rev. A. G. Dornfeld.¹⁸ After Dornfeld had prayed with Pfotenhauer and his wife they spoke in tongues. At this time Pfotenhauer says he felt a sense of joy and desire to praise God.¹⁹ Dornfeld had been the dominant man who had led the Pfotenhauers to an emotional and highly personal religious experience. Pfotenhauer in turn became the dominant, strong man who brought others this emotional experience. As in frontier religion the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal has a central figure to lead others who depend heavily upon his strength and guidance. This tends to draw attention away from God and His Word and put the focus upon the minister and his actions just like the performance of the preacher in a camp-meeting.

What makes the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal seem to be identical to the frontier camp-meeting religion is its high degree of emotionalism. Both camp-meetings and the Charismatic meetings were structured so as to set no

¹⁷ John P. Kildahl, the Psychology of Speaking in Tongues, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 38

¹⁸ Erling Jorstad, Bold in the Spirit, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974), p. 64

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 65

definite end to the meetings. It is not uncommon in Charismatic religion for a meeting to begin at 8 a.m. and last all day. Such "open-ended meetings cause tension which wears down natural resistance to excessive behavior. The open-ended feeling generates tension which calls for conclusion in the form of a barrage of tongue-speaking."²⁰ This speaking in tongues is considered by some to be an ability to speak a foreign language. But thorough study of glossolalists (those who speak in tongues) has proven that tongue-speaking does not meet the sixteen criteria for a language.²¹ More than likely tongue-speaking is equal to the jerks, dances and barking of the camp-meetings. In both cases this exhibition of unusual behavior has two purposes. The obvious behavior is a release of tension which has built up in the meeting. Also it is an action brought on mainly by the person's earnest and sincere desire to show others that he is part of the group. Since in both the frontier meetings and in the Charismatic gathering there was an established pattern of behavior to follow, naturally then, the person performs such behavior like speaking in tongues. This emotional release through unusual behavior makes the religion very personal for the individual. All of this emotionalism is part of the commitment which a person makes to the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal.²² It reminds us so much of the emotionalism in the camp-meetings which marked a person's renewed commitment to God and a God-pleasing life.

Naturally committing oneself in such a way has to give a person a feeling of stability. In both frontier religion and in the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal the people looked for something missing in their life. Something that would add a quality of stableness to their life. In the case of Pastor Pfothenauer he

²⁰Kildahl, op. cit., p. 72.

²¹Ibid., p. 41.

²²Luther P. Gerlach and Virginia H. Hine, "Five Factors Crucial to the Growth and Spread of a Modern Religious Movement, "Journal for Scientific Study of Religion VII (Spring, 1968), p. 32.

felt the Charismatic religion with its emphasis on spiritual gifts would make him a stronger servant of God.²³ In frontier religion as in Charismatic religion the members have a definite belief that they are better off than before. Their emotional feelings tell them this. Another unusual result of the religion they practice tends to further make them feel secure and certain. That unusual element is the fact that once a person joins the Charismatic group he has identified something to vent hostility and anger towards. The group identified as the opposition are all other religions who don't accept the Charismatic teachings. "There is a psychological security in this kind of polarization because one feels that he knows for sure where he stands, and it is easy to find an object for anger."²⁴ What makes this strange is that where no opposition group exists, great effort is expended on describing the opposition.²⁵ Just as speaking in tongues is an essential part of the Lutheran Charismatic Movement so also the negative emotions of hate and anger play a part too. One psychologist describes this need for emotion ^{expression} as a process of hypnosis through which the subject gets rid of tension and feels more relaxed.²⁶ Both the love for fellow Charismatics and hate for opposition are vital reasons why the person feels more secure and confident than he did before. It should be mentioned that this negative emotion was found in frontier religion too. However, it was noticeable mainly among those people who disliked established churches which objected to the unionistic practices of camp-meetings.

The fact that the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal in many cases practices fellowship with all other Charismatics of different religions makes them look a lot like

²³ Torstad, op. cit., p. 64.

²⁴ Kildahl, op. cit., p. 69.

²⁵ Gerlach and Hine, op. cit., p. 36.

²⁶ Kildahl, op. cit., p. 38.

the tolerant frontier religion. The Charismatics, like the frontier church, have, as their main objective the conversion of the individual. The Charismatics often express disappointment with others who are only curious with speaking in tongues and not actually seeking the experience.²⁷ The uniting element for the Lutheran Charismatic people is experience and not necessarily doctrine. This explains why they unite with others who are not confessing the same doctrine. One could rightly conclude that the religion they practice is thought of as a higher form of worship than the worship found in the older churches. It is as if they practice a religion where they have overcome the old doctrine problems with a religion of love and emotional fulfillment. Whether the men of the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal view their religion in this way cannot be proven. Yet it is clear they practice fellowship with charismatics of all faiths. Like frontier men they see the important element in religion to be the conversion or emotional experience.

Analysis:

At the beginning of this paper we set out to see if frontier religion in the form of the camp-meeting had any connection with the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal as had occurred among men in the LC-MS. We have noted that many elements of the frontier religion are evident in the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal. But it would be wrong to say that the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal developed directly from frontier religion. History has recorded no such direct connection between the two. Yet it is evident that both frontier religion and the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal have developed out of a need on the part of people to make religions something very personal and special in their lives. Perhaps if people had learned to appreciate and understand the greatness of objective justification from God, they would have experienced the tremendous love Christians have for a Lord who has saved them from sins inspite of their

²⁷ Kildahl, op. cit., p. 69

totally sinful nature. There is no need to make a religion more personal if one realizes that you can't get anymore personal than Jesus did when he died in place of every man on earth. But the fact remains, people looked for something more in religion and turned to the emotional experience found in camp-meetings and Charismatic Renewal.

Therefore the connection between the two types of religion which we have looked at is that the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal developed like frontier religion found in camp-meetings. Someone may argue that the two types of religions are as different as night and day. Indeed I did not find a man who was active in frontier religion who later became an active member in the Charismatic religion. Such a link just doesn't exist. But on the basis of the content of this paper it appears that both religions have much in common. In fact it could be said that the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal took over where the frontier left off. The camp-meeting concept has come back to life in the Charismatic religion under the form of Jesus rallies. Fully more than a dozen are to be held in 1980 by Lutheran and non-Lutheran Charismatic religious groups. The emotional religion that so dramatically marked frontier camp-meetings is with us today in strikingly similar practices in the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal.

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