

PETER CARTWRIGHT

In the front rank of the pioneer Methodist preachers of America was Peter Cartwright. He was famous not because of his education or learning, for he had but little of these. But his great spiritual power and native common sense and shrewdness made him known all over America and in many other lands as well. "It must be remembered," says he, "that many of us early traveling preachers, who entered the vast wilderness of the West at an early day, had little or no education, no books, and no time to read or study them if we could have had them".

Peter Cartwright was one of the principal agents used of God in the great revival near the beginning of the nineteenth century. Few, if any, other preachers ever conducted so many camp-meetings or conducted them with so great a success. We might almost say that Cartwright was without a peer as a camp-meeting preacher. In his "Autobiography " he has related many thrilling incidents, humorous or otherwise, concerning his experiences in camp-meetings and elsewhere.

Cartwright was born in Virginia in 1785. His parents were poor. They soon moved to the backwoods of Kentucky, where Cartwright grew up without an education. His mother was a Methodist, but his father was an unbeliever. Occasionally a Methodist itinerant preacher would visit their cabin. Finally a little church was organized near them. Many criminals and desperate characters had fled to this frontier settlement, and it was called "Rogues' Harbor". There was no newspaper or regular school within forty miles of the place. Almost everything eaten by the people was grown by them, and the clothes they wore were home-spun from cotton raised by themselves. They had but little communication with the outside world. Cartwright says: "I was naturally a wild, wicked boy, and delighted in horse-racing, card-playing and dancing. My father restrained me but little, though my mother often talked to me, wept over me, and prayed for me, often drew tears from my eyes ; and though I often wept under preaching and resolved to do better and seek religion, yet I broke my vows, went into young company, rode races, played cards and danced."

After a school was started in his neighborhood, Cartwright attended it for a short time, but the teacher was a poor one and Cartwright made but little progress in his studies. He says: "I, however, learned to read, write, and cipher a little, but very imperfectly." As time rolled on the population increased, civilization advanced, and a number of churches sprang up in the community. About this time the great Cumberland Revival began. Describing the beginning of the famous Cumberland Revival, Cartwright says: "Somewhere between 1800 and 1801, in the upper part of Kentucky, at a memorable place called 'Cane Ridge' there was appointed a sacramental meeting by some of the Presbyterian ministers; at which meeting, seemingly unexpected by ministers or people, the mighty power of God was displayed in a very extraordinary manner; many were moved to tears and cried aloud for mercy." This was the beginning of one of the greatest revivals of religion known to history. "The meeting was protracted for weeks", continues Cartwright. Ministers of almost all denominations flocked in from far and near. The meeting was kept up by night and day. Thousands heard of the mighty work, and came on foot, on horseback, in carriages and wagons. It is supposed that there were in attendance at times during the meeting from twelve to twenty-five thousand people. Hundreds fell prostrate under the mighty power of God, as men slain in battle."

"From this camp-meeting," he adds later, "for so it ought to be called, the news spread through all the churches, and through all the land, and it excited great wonder and surprise; but it kindled a religious flame that spread all over Kentucky, and through many other States. And I may here be permitted to say, that this was the first camp meeting ever held in the United States, and here our camp meetings took their rise." The revival spread to Cartwright's neighborhood, and a great camp-meeting was held there. The people crowded to this camp-meeting from far and near. "The power of God was wonderfully displayed;" says he, "scores of sinners fell under the preaching, like men slain in a mighty battle; Christians shouted aloud for joy."

Cartwright had previously been convicted of sin, and he went to this camp-meeting feeling that he was a lost, undone sinner, and he was even tempted to believe that he was forever reprobate, although he did not endorse the doctrines of unconditional election and reprobation. He says: "In 1801, when I was in my sixteenth year, my father, my eldest half-brother, and myself, attended a wedding about five miles from home, where there was a great deal of drinking and dancing, which was very common in marriages in those days. I drank little or nothing; my delight was in dancing. After a late hour in the night we mounted our horses and started for home. I was riding my race-horse. A few minutes after we had put up the horses, and were sitting by the fire, I began to reflect on the manner in which I had spent the day and evening. I felt guilty and condemned. I rose and walked the floor. My mother was in bed. It seemed to me, all of a sudden, my blood rushed to my head, my heart palpitated, in a few minutes I turned blind; an awful impression rested on my mind that death had come, and I was unprepared to die. I fell on my knees, and began to ask God to have mercy on me."

His mother, hearing him praying, was soon at his side. They prayed long and earnestly. Finally he went to bed, after promising the Lord that he would seek until he found salvation. Next morning he rose "feeling wretched beyond expression." He sold his race-horse, burned his pack of cards, and tried to read the Bible and pray. "I was so distressed and miserable," says he, "that I was incapable of any regular business." He agonized and prayed for days in this wretched, miserable condition. Three months passed by and still he did not find the pardon of his sins. It was at this time that the great camp-meeting already described began in his neighborhood. "To this meeting I repaired," says he, "a guilty miserable sinner."

On the Saturday evening of said meeting, I went with weeping multitudes, and bowed before the stand, and earnestly prayed for mercy. In the midst of a solemn struggle of soul, an impression was made on my mind, as though a voice said to me, 'Thy sins are all forgiven thee'. Divine light flashed all around me, unspeakable joy sprung up in my soul. I rose to my feet, opened my eyes, and it really seemed as if I was in heaven; the trees, the leaves on them, and everything seemed, and I really thought were, praising God. My mother raised the shout, my Christian friends crowded around me, and joined me in praising God; and though I have been since then, in many instances, unfaithful, yet I have never, for one moment, doubted that the Lord did, then and there, forgive my sins, and give me religion."

Cartwright joined the Methodist Church the same year that he was converted to Christ. He went to several camp-meetings among the Methodists and Presbyterians, and took quite an active part in the meetings. "I was enjoying great comfort and peace" says he. Next year after his conversion, to Christ, Cartwright was given an exhorter's license. He had already exhorted some when he felt led of the Spirit to do so, but he was not expecting any license from the Church. In the fall of the same year his presiding elder gave him permission to form a circuit, in the new region of Kentucky to which he was then moving. "I told him," says Cartwright, "just to give me a simple letter of membership; that, although I did feel at times that it was my duty to preach, I had little education, and it was my intention to go to school next year." After moving to the new region of Kentucky, Cartwright attended school, but was so persecuted

on account of his religion that he soon gave up school and began to organize a circuit and engage in the work of the ministry. He had good success, organized a number of class meetings, and had many conversions.

Cartwright describes his call to the ministry and his entire consecration and endowment with power from on high as follows: "Brother Garret, the new elder, called on me at my father's and urged me to go on this Circuit with Brother Lotspeich. My father was unwilling, but my mother urged me to go, and finally prevailed. This was in October, 1803, when I was a little over eighteen years of age. I had a hard struggle to give my consent, and although I thought it my duty to preach, yet I thought I could do this, and not throw myself into the ranks as a circuit preacher, when I was liable to be sent from Greenbrier to Natchez; no members hardly to support a preacher, the Discipline only allowing a single man eighty dollars, and in nine cases out of ten he could not get half that amount. These were times that tried men's souls and bodies too. " At last I literally gave up the world, and started, bidding farewell to father and mother, brothers and sisters, and met brother Lotspeich at an appointment in Logan County. He told me I must preach that night. This I had never done; mine was an exhorter's dispensation. I tried to beg off, but he urged me to make the effort. I went out and prayed fervently for aid from heaven. All at once it seemed to me as if I could never preach at all, but I struggled in prayer. At length I asked God, if He had called me to preach, to give me aid that night, and give me one soul, that is, convert one soul under my preaching, as evidence that I was called to this work. I went into the house, took my stand, gave out a hymn, sang, and prayed. I then rose, gave them for a text Isaiah xxvi. 4: 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever ; for in the Lord Jehovah there is everlasting strength.' The Lord gave light, liberty, and power; the congregation was melted into tears. There was present a professed infidel. The word reached his heart by the eternal Spirit. He was powerfully convicted, and, as I believe, soundly converted to God that night, and joined the Church, and afterward became a useful member of the same."

Cartwright must have received the baptism of the Spirit in power while preaching that night. He felt his utter inability to preach without power from God, and wrestled in prayer, like Jacob of old, until he obtained the blessing. He was then nineteen years of age. He continued to preach with great unction and power. His meetings were attended by marvelous manifestations of spiritual power, and multitudes of souls were won to Christ in them. Often people were stricken down in his meetings under an overwhelming conviction of sin. He had no sympathy with fleshly excitements in his meetings, and always checked them with an iron hand; and yet on the other hand he was careful not to grieve the Spirit of God by checking or quenching any genuine work or manifestation of the Holy Spirit. He frequently describes his meetings in words such as these: "Suddenly an awful power fell on the congregation, and they instantly fell right and left, and cried aloud for mercy."

He describes one camp-meeting thus: "The encampment was lighted up, the trumpet blown, I rose in the stand, and required every soul to leave the tents and come into the congregation. There was a general rush to the stand. I requested the brethren, if ever they prayed in all their lives, to pray now. My voice was strong and clear and my preaching was more of an exhortation and encouragement than anything else. My text was, 'The gates of hell shall not prevail.' In about thirty minutes the power of God fell on the congregation in such a manner as is seldom seen ; the people fell in every direction, right and left, front and rear. It was supposed that not less than three hundred fell like dead men in mighty battle; and there was no need of calling mourners, for they were strewed all over the camp-ground ; loud wailings went up to heaven from sinners for mercy, and a general shout from Christians, so that the noise was heard afar off."

In another place Cartwright says: "At our Breckenridge Circuit camp-meeting the following incident occurred. There were a brother S. and family, who were the owners of a good many slaves. It was a fine

family, and sister S. was a very intelligent lady, and an exemplary Christian. She had long sought the blessing of perfect love, but she said the idea of holding her fellow-beings in bondage stood out in her way. Many in this meeting sought and obtained the blessing of sanctification; Sister S. said her whole soul was in an agony for that blessing, and it seemed to her at times that she could almost lay hold, and claim the promise, but she said her slaves would seem to step right in between her and her Saviour, and prevent its reception; but while on her knees, and struggling as in an agony for a clean heart, she then and there covenanted with the Lord, if He would give her the blessing, she would give up her slaves and set them free. She said this covenant had hardly been made one moment when God filled her soul with such an overwhelming sense of Divine love, that she did not really know whether she was in or out of the body. She rose from her knees, and proclaimed to listening hundreds that she had obtained the blessing, and also the terms on which she obtained it. She went through the vast crowd with holy shouts of joy, and exhorting all to taste and see that the Lord was gracious; and such a power attended her words that hundreds fell to the ground, and scores of souls were happily born into the kingdom of God that afternoon and during the night. Shortly after this they set their slaves free, and the end of that family was peace."

While passing over the Cumberland Mountains one time, Cartwright was compelled to stop over night at a house where there was to be a dance. Many of the people had never heard a sermon. Cartwright sat in one corner of the room watching the dance. He made up his mind to stay over next day (Sunday) and preach to the people. "I had hardly settled this point in my mind" says he, "when a beautiful ruddy young lady walked very gracefully up to me, dropped a handsome courtesy, and pleasantly, with winning smiles, invited me out to take a dance with her. I can hardly describe my thoughts or feeling on that occasion. However, in a moment I resolved on a desperate experiment. I rose as gracefully as I could; I will not say with some emotion, but with many emotions. The young lady moved to my right side; I grasped her right hand with my right hand, while she leaned her left arm on mine. In this position we walked on the floor. The whole company seemed pleased at this act of politeness in the young lady, shown to a stranger. The colored man, who was the fiddler, began to put his fiddle in the best order. I then spoke to the fiddler to hold a moment, and added that for several years I had not undertaken any matter of importance without first asking the blessing of God upon it, and I desired now to ask the blessing of God upon this beautiful young lady and the whole company, that had shown such an act of politeness to a total stranger. Here I grasped the young lady's hand tightly, and said, 'Let us all kneel down and pray,' and then instantly dropped on my knees, and commenced praying with all the power of soul and body that I could command. The young lady tried to get loose from me, but I held her tight. Presently she fell on her knees. Some of the company kneeled, some stood, some fled, some sat still, all looked curious. The fiddler ran off into the kitchen, saying, ' Lord a marcy, what de matter? what is dat mean ? ' While I prayed, some wept, and wept out aloud, and some cried for mercy. I rose from my knees and commenced an exhortation, after which I sang a hymn. The young lady who invited me on the floor lay prostrate, crying for mercy. I exhorted again, I sang and prayed nearly all night. About fifteen of that company professed religion, and our meeting lasted next day and next night, and as many more were powerfully converted. I organized a society, took thirty-two into the church, and sent them a preacher. My landlord was appointed leader, which post he held for many years. This was the commencement of a great and glorious revival of religion in that region of the country, and several of the young men converted at the Methodist preacher's dance became useful ministers of Jesus Christ."

In one of Cartwright's camp-meetings a little preacher, fresh from the theological seminary, began to teach the inquirers at the altar, just to resolve to be a Christian and that would make them Christians. Cartwright objected to this, and sent him out into the audience to exhort. The power of God fell on a big man, weighing about 230 pounds, and he began to cry for mercy. The little preacher exhorted him to

"be composed," but he prayed on until his soul was filled with joy. Then, in his ecstasy, he picked up the little preacher, and ran about with him in his arms, dancing for joy. The little preacher was pale with fright, and was never seen again on the camp-ground.

At one appointment where the people had never heard Cartwright preach, the weather was so bad that on the first day only one person, a one-eyed man who was an elder in the Presbyterian Church, came to hear him. He preached his best for forty-five minutes. The elder spread the news that it was the greatest sermon he ever heard. Next time Cartwright found the house crowded to overflowing and the whole hillside covered with horses and vehicles.

Many persons in Cartwright's meetings were seized with the strange exercise known as the "jerks." All over the country this phenomenon accompanied the great Cumberland Revival. Some regarded it as a purely nervous affection caused by suggestion, while others regarded it as a peculiar manifestation or operation of the Holy Spirit. Individuals seemed seized by a strange power which caused them to jerk in a most mysterious manner, and the more they resisted the more they jerked. Cartwright says: "To see those proud young gentlemen and ladies, dressed in their silks, jewelry and prunella, from top to toe, take the jerks, would often excite my risibilities. The first jerk or so, you would see their fine bonnets, caps, and combs fly; and so sudden would be the jerking of the head, that their long loose hair would crack almost as loud as a waggoner's whip." Cartwright regarded the "jerks" as a genuine manifestation of God's Spirit, although he believed that excitement often led people to counterfeit them. He says: "I always looked upon the jerks as a judgment sent from God, first, to bring sinners to repentance; and, secondly, to show professors that God could work with or without means." He tells of a drinking man who resisted the "jerks" until they came to him so severely that when he swore he would drink them off, and tried to raise a bottle of whiskey to his lips, a jerk more severe than before broke his neck. This happened at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, and brought great conviction of sin on the people.

Cartwright was a large, square-shouldered man, with some native ruggedness mingled with considerable humor. His strength was sometimes used to quiet the rowdies who tried to disturb his meetings. His creed was "to love everybody and fear nobody" and he sometimes thrashed the worst rowdies and then proceeded with the meeting. He saw nothing inconsistent in a Christian thrashing disturbers of religious services, so long as it was done in a spirit of love and not in a spirit of revenge.

Cartwright's sense of humor is shown in the following amusing incident. Like many other pioneer Methodist preachers, he had but little education. A learned minister of another denomination once addressed him publicly in Greek, in order to bring him into contempt for his ignorance. Cartwright listened as though he understood it all, and then replied in German, of which language he had learned considerable from a neighbor's children while he was a boy. The minister, not understanding Hebrew and supposing that Cartwright had answered him in Hebrew, said that Cartwright was the first educated Methodist preacher he had seen. It was not so much worldly learning as wisdom from above which enabled Cartwright to win so many souls for Christ.

The grand old veteran, after enduring many hardships and winning multitudes to the Saviour, fell asleep in Christ at a good old age.