

The Cultural Background of Appalachian Peoples

For TBC January, 1999

Gary Farley

Center for Rural Church Leadership

garyfarley@pickens.net

A bird never flies so high that its droppings do not hit the ground.

He is so tight that he would skin a gnat for its tallow.

You can't expect pheasants from buzzards.

The mills of God grind slow but exceeding fine.

He'd tell a lie when the truth would serve him better.

Every tub must sit on its own bottom.

(You add some of your favorite and most useful Appalachian folk expressions.)

THE ERA OF SETTLEMENT

The primary heritage of peoples of Central and Southern Appalachia is that of the Celtic culture—Scotts, Scots-Irish, and Welch. The mountains were settled between 1770 and 1820 by persons whose ancestral roots were, mostly, in Scotland, particularly the southern part, and Northern Ireland. Most engaged in "kitchen garden" economy. They were carving out of the wilderness a place for themselves and their kin to dwell. This means that they were simply living off of the land with little thought of amassing a fortune. This is to be contrasted with their fellow citizens of New England and of the Tidewater. See Fischer, *Albion's Seed*.

They were Calvinist theologically. But as they pushed across the Western frontier, they outdistanced their clergy, most of whom were not inclined to live in a frontier setting. So, they were unchurched and available to the Baptist and Methodist preachers who were the fruit and the storm troopers of the 2nd Great Awakening, working along the frontier.

The Celtic was a pre-modern culture. The Celts dwelt in a world that was inhabited by spirits, ghosts, witches, and warlocks, and controllable by magic. The *prime cause* of events, good or bad, lay in the spirit world. The task of a minister was to lead the people to an acceptance of the Sovereignty of God. It was He, not so much the evil or good spirits, who was the source of events. The Baptist movement was amazingly effective in evangelizing these Celtic peoples. And while many became Baptists, the beliefs and practices of the Celtic culture remained strong. See the drama, *The Dark of the Moon*.

Professor Grady McWhiney, of TCU, in *Cracker Culture*, identifies nine primary elements of this Celtic culture which he sees as the roots of the culture of the Southern Piedmont and Mountains:

1. **Leisure.** More interested in being than in becoming. The goal of life was to have a full smokehouse and root cellar. One worked only to live, not to accumulate and become something different.
2. **Herdin**g. open range. hunting and fishing. Women tended the garden and gathered berries.
3. **Hospitality.** "Come and go home with us." Whiskey was common.
4. **Pleasures.** Horse racing, cock-fighting, drinking, oratory, story-telling, dancing, games, gambling, tobacco use, hunting and fishing. See R. Gilmore, *Baptizings, Hangings and Other Diversions*. (His setting is the Ozarks. But the culture was the same)
5. **Violence.** feuds. related to family and "face". duels. (When I was sworn into office in Tn. in 1971, took

an oath not to duel or to carry an invitation to one. Incidentally, my election, since I was a minister of the Gospel, was technically in violation of state law.) See the story of Oneida Institute in Kentucky.

6. **Morals.** Sexual looseness, swearing, no blue laws. Lack religious practice.

7. **Education.** poor in the modern sense and not highly valued. But the youth were schooled in woodcraft and in hearth work.

8. **Progress.** bad roads, poor housing. Not a great concern.

9. **Worth.** Based on physical power. family connection. Not all that Calvinistic or even Wesleyan about money. Valued the rural over the urban. Southern business was dominated by non-celtics.

When I read this listing and description, it rings true to some of my personal observations. When I hear the folk expressions with which I started this session, or read the humor of the region as collected by Loyal Jones and his partner, Billy Ed Wheeler, or sing the songs collected in the Southern Harmony and the more recent Heavenly Highways Hymn book, I find some confirmation of the elements of the culture as defined by professor McWhiney. But, this confirmation causes me to wonder how the Baptist movement proved to be so successful among the Celts in the hills of Appalachia. It seemed to me that many of these values were in direct opposition to the values of the Baptists.

Let's talk about this for a few minutes:

1. Does the list hold true, at least for some elements of Appalachian peoples today?
(Conference participants added Independence and Humility.)
2. What might you add—historically, presently?
 - *Independence
 - *Humility
3. If the list is true, can you explain how Baptists were able to run contrary to the values of culture, successfully.

THE ERA OF INDUSTRIALIZATION

The story of Appalachia continued. (You might want to look at it more. Check out the internet. You will find the class notes for the course offered by Ron Eller on the Appalachian Center web page.) By 1820 many parts of the region were getting settled up, and some folk began to move on West. Some settled in the Ozarks. Others elsewhere. Following the Civil War, to some extent as a consequence, the Industrial Revolution came. Appalachia was viewed by many as a great *storehouse* of resources to be exploited by industrialists for building cities, making machines, and producing consumer goods. Mines and mills were opened. A new wave of settlers came--Blacks, Eastern Europeans, and others. They settled in the company towns, and other urban places. The Industrial Age was driven by the world view of *Modernism*. This perspective tended to see the events of life as being the result of the laws of nature, laws that could be understood by the exercise of reason, or rationality. God was pushed into the background by many modern persons. Coupled with this was an increased emphasis on individualism. This development reinforced a new desire to "get ahead", to *become* something different than one's parents.

Missionaries also came to Appalachia from the Mainline, national denominations, during this period of the Ind. Revolution. The book by C. Marshall, *Christy*, tells about one such effort. Deborah MaCauley contends in *Appalachian Mountain Religion* that they were at least as much

carriers of the gospel of Modernity as they were of the story of Jesus. The missionaries built schools and colleges. They developed rural versions of city settlement houses. They had some success with drawing some youth from the old Celtic, pre-modern culture to the modern culture. But particularly in rural communities, and across the tracks in the towns, the old Celtic values continued to be strong. There, indigenous churches led by indigenous pastors continued to seek to evangelize and change pre-modern persons within the pre-modern culture. (As a kind of footnote, I need to add that more than a million persons left Appalachia during and shortly after World War II to work in the industries in the North and in the West. Often they carried with them a preacher and established a church in Dayton, Chicago, or Los Angeles much like the one back home.)

Within the Baptist movement, this resulted in some, mostly town, churches where the modern American culture and its values prevailed. But many, if not most, of the rural churches, particularly those not connected with the Southern or the American Conventions, continued to carry elements of the pre-modern, Celtic, culture. And even among Southern Baptist churches in Appalachia, the presence of a framed copy of the standard Church Covenant may well be a *marker* of a congregation where significant elements of the pre-modern culture can still be found in the life and practice of the church.

Church Covenant

Taken from New Hampshire Confession of Faith.
Appendix to the 1833 Statement

“Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour, and on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, we do now in the presence of God, angels, and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as one body in Christ.

“We engage therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love; to strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality, to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.

“We also engage to maintain family and secret devotion; to religiously educate our children; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment; to avoid all tattling, backbiting, and use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage, and be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Saviour.

“We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember each other in prayer, to aid each other in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feelings and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation, and mindful of the rules of our Saviour to secure it without delay.

“We moreover engage that when we remove from this place, we will as soon as possible unite with some other church, where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God’s Word.”

(Note: this confession, which is the basis for the current Baptist Faith and Message, calls for the local church to be a covenanted body in its section on the church. This covenant was attached as a model for churches to use in formulating a covenant. Many just adopted it.)

In fact, I have been wondering if the Covenant might not have served as a means for evangelical Christianity triumphing over some of the sub and non Christian elements of Celtic culture. For example, worship becomes a major *pleasure* in life. Church discipline provides a means for dealing with conflict, reducing the need for resorting to *violence*. (Although there were

times and places where a church business meeting became a setting for a modern duel as one family sought to get another "churched".) The accountability to and for others in the church called for in the covenant addressed the moral *deviance* of the Celtic culture from New Testament norms. Interestingly, the issue of the use and sale of alcohol was denounced in the standard covenant by 1853. *Hospitality* was channeled in part through the fellowship of the church. Sunday School started as an effort to *educated* and grew to become a great boon to the whole process of education.

It appears to me that the Covenant and the form of church life that produced it seemed to support peace among persons, in families and in the larger community. Did persons living in a violent and often lawless place find in the church a haven of order and stability? Was the church an important means toward the establishment of social order? Was this the reason for the success of the Baptist movement. Or is C. L. Heyrman, in *Southern Cross* correct? She argues that Baptists dropped church discipline in an effort to be more acceptable to the larger society, giving discipline back to the family. Gregory Wills, *Democratic Religion*, also looks at the changes in the Baptist movement and the practice of church discipline as the denomination moved into the main stream. He too notes the strain between the rural and the urban churches. (The University of Tennessee will soon be publishing a book on Appalachian religion. It is a collection of essays by Loyal Jones and others. One essay by Bill Leonard and myself seeks to address this point. And there may be others.)

Let's take a few moments and consider these issues.

1. What role did the church covenant and particularly church discipline play in the cultural development of Appalachia?
2. Were Baptists and other national denominations guilty of confusing the Gospel and Modernity?
3. How should the church deal with cultural values that are contrary to New Testament values?

THE ERA OF POST-MODERNITY

In contemporary Appalachia one can find persons who tend to continue to live according to many of the cultural values of *pre-modern* Celts. Some as Christians, some as non-Christians. Many as a kind of nominal mix, I fear, who compartmentalize their lives. One also finds *modern* persons, again in and out of the church. And the coming development and rise of *Post-modern* culture and people will further complicate mission work in Appalachia. (See Leonard Sweet, *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Cafe*. He is a leading Christian analyst of the impact of post-modernism, but also a part-time resident of rural West Virginia. And his kind may become legion.) Certainly a mission strategy for Appalachian Tennessee will need to address all three of these groupings and their variants.

The nature of post-modern culture is still in process of taking shape. But it seems that the spiritual dimension of life is coming back into vogue. Often this new spirituality focuses on the place of the spirit within a person, rather than external to him or to her. If this continues, then the role of ministers seeking to evangelize post-modern persons will be to offer the biblical interpretation of spirituality, say, as contrasted with Native American or Eastern religions. We will need to help some realize that the Christianity that they have rejected is a form that addressed the concerns of modern persons. It will gather up strains of pietism. It will be a bold new theological enterprise. The common element in each era is the need to call people to acknowledge that God is indeed sovereign, living accordingly.

OTHER CULTURAL ELEMENTS

While the Celtic heritage must be seen as the primary sources of world view and values among Appalachian peoples there are other important elements that need to be at least noted.

Economy. Tobacco culture. Marijuana culture. Moonshine culture. Coal mine culture. Modified by the open face mining process. The welfare system culture and the growth of dependence. Roller coaster of having and not having resources and income.

Dependency. Many folk who are unable to work and are thus dependent upon others--children, aged, the hurt and the sick.

Environment. Vertical and linear relationships.

Family. Nuclear and kin

MTV. The impact of the national and world culture through the media, particularly on the youth.

Reading, Writing and Route 23. The migratory nature of the life of many Appalachian persons. Alternating between Tazewell and Detroit.

Old Regular, Holiness and Pentecostalism. Intense seriousness about the Bible. Joyous worship which continues the traditions of the Second Great Awakening.

Again, let's pause, consider, and talk.

1. What other factors need to be taken into consideration?
2. Some feel that the post-modern culture will be a kind of synthesis of elements of the pre-modern and the modern. May Appalachia be a place that will provide leadership in the formation of this synthesis?

Mission Strategy

Finally, let's define culture and particularly hone in on the pre-modern version of it. My reason for this is that Southern Baptists know how to do Industrial Age church. We are getting lots of instruction from Sweet, Barna and others concerning doing church for the post-modern folk. But in Appalachia there are still many pre-modern folk who need evangelization. And they tend to be overlooked by most mission strategists who are concerned about missions in North America as they focus on the Mega cities, Boomers, and Gen Xers.

Culture is the collection of values, norms, behavior patterns, and artifacts, or material things, that an identified group of people hold in common. There is some fine material available from missiologists related to overseas missions that seems to be adaptable to pre-modern folk in Appalachia as well as overseas. They tell us that pre-modern folk tend to be:

- *Event/Time
- *Dychotomistic/Holistic Thinking
- *Quick/Delayed response to Crisis
- *Relational/Task Goals (being/becoming)

- *Ascribed/Achieved Self-worth (face-making))
 - *Conceal/Disclose Vulnerability (face-saving)
- (See S. Lingerfelter and M. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally*)

It is my belief that there will continue to be a need for churches that address pre-modern folk in Appalachia. There will continue to be Modern people with Modern churches. This is what most of our town churches became. But, there is a growing need for churches that address post-modern folk. No one type of church will likely reach everyone.

One of the great needs in Appalachia is for Baptists to focus again on how to do church with pre-modern folk. Let me suggest 13 marks of such a church as I close.

- *Loving acceptance of sinners.
- *Strong affirmation of Biblical norms of conduct
- *The sharing of good counsel from the Bible
- *Healing for physical, psychic, and spiritual maladies
- *Active intercessory prayer for the needs of participants and their kin and friends
- *Deep faith that trusting Jesus makes a difference now and hereafter
- *Blessings that come without merit or manipulation of God
- *Expressive worship grounded in solid Biblical preaching
- *Networks of caring
- *Creative involvement in the life and ministry of the congregation by discovering, training and expressing ones giftedness
- *Growth of the body both by inclusion and by extension
- *Personal spiritual growth and development
- *Build upon the doctrine of the Sovereignty of a Loving God.

One of my several major personal concerns is to continue an effort some of us had worked on related to developing processes for raising up and training pastors for churches from within the harvest. In my new setting, which is in the ARC's Appalachia, I am drawing upon the resources of Seminary Extension to do this very thing today. I have eight pastors and want-to-bees studying by correspondence, working on their diploma. We meet once a month for a tutorial session to prepare them for their tests. I hope to have men prepared to lead churches for the rural, common, mostly per-modern folk of my area. (Similar need for post-modern church leadership.)

But I must also be supportive of the work of the town churches to reach modern folk. And I hope that new forms of church that focus on the spiritual needs of post-modern folk, networking churches, will emerge in my place.

Let me close with a modern Celtic saying, one by Wendell Berry, a modern prophet from rural Kentucky. He has put a different twist on the popular bumper slogan—Think Globally, Act Locally. Without demeaning this statement, Berry contends that we must—Think Locally and Act Locally. This is way I am seeking to do in my little corner of Appalachia. I hope that you will consider doing similarly in yours.