

Leonard Ravenhill:

When this presbytery was held, outside the memory of most of us, the church in Cumberland was troubled and in crisis. "The love of many [had waxed] cold." Defections had occurred. Some of the masters in her Israel had withdrawn, carrying off weight and influence and leaving behind them a host of perplexed people. The future of this assembly was shrouded in darkness. Some members were threatening to dissolve the church -- unless there were revolutionary changes made both in doctrine and in polity.

The apex of this dissipation in spiritual power was shown markedly in the absence of candidates for the ministry.

The members of the semiannual convocation were veterans -- mostly weatherbeaten veterans. They had wrestled on "gainst wind and storm and tide." Neither blinding snowstorms nor torrid heat had kept them from long horse riding in order to deliver "the whole counsel of God." With their fighting hearts but failing bodies, it was hard for them to understand why this younger generation of men could "eat their morsel alone."

The presbytery was held in candlelight in a member's large log cabin, and it was exceptionally full. On that now-historic cabin was to fall the Glory held in "earthen vessels." This special meeting had been called to test young men and seek those (if such there were) who would volunteer for the ministry. On such an occasion many a man, now well-accepted in his denomination as a burning and shining light, could tell of his awkwardness and unpromising exhibition. This time was to be no exception.

At the call of the presiding officer to "all who had felt impressions to preach to come forward and converse with the presbytery on the subject," three men stepped before the packed house. Of the first two we shall not speak. The third man had stood partly concealed in a dark corner of the room while the other candidates spoke. He now stepped forward.

His appearance excited a universal gasp of surprise even in that unsophisticated audience, accustomed as they were to rudeness of dress and uncouth manners.

Get this picture if you can. Imagine this tall mountain boy, dressed in copperas cloth -- that is, a cloth homespun, home-woven, home-cut, and home-sewed, dyed in that billious hue which is formed by copperas, alum, and walnut bark, and made into a clumsy coat, vest, and breeches. To this, add brogans of home-tanned, red leather, tied with a leather thong and covering immense feet (both feet and brogans were made for climbing hills). Now you have the portrait of this mountain boy. He could live off his rifle and whip any lowland boy in the state.

This is the angular lad who stepped from the dark of the corner into the blinking light of the candles and pine-log fire. He was weeping bitterly, and, having no such thing as a handkerchief, he adopted the original arrangement provided for such emergency. For a full minute he stood silent, every curious eye fastened upon him, every agitated mind wondering what on earth he would announce as his business. He cleared his throat, then commenced: "I've come to Presby--." But a new wave of tears stopped his utterance.

The moderator kindly prompted, "You came here why, my son? Take your time, tell us all about it; none here will hurt you."

As the storm in his soul prevailed, the stranger started again, and yet again, and then a fourth time, only to be choked with his own tears. Some good brother suggested that the young man be interviewed privately. The mountain lad demurred at this, replying that he'd "get my voice d'reckly, please God." And so he did, and rose up, straightening his gaunt, awkward frame. Then such words flowed from his lips that surpassed anything that had ever rung through that assembly. We shall not attempt to report the address. Enough to say that the oldest minister there said that his words scorched and burnt wherever they fell. The alarm in that rugged boy's soul swept through the whole place. This was his story.

A few months before, he had fallen in with a traveling preacher who had gotten lost on the thin mountain tracks. The minister, interested in the odd appearance of the boy and gripped by his total ignorance of things spiritual, had given him one whole hour of his precious time to telling of the sin of the world and the lost estate of the boy. The talk concluded with the godly man kneeling at the root of a tree and earnestly pouring out his heart's desire for the unenlightened soul. Days later the boy heard an inward voice saying, "Repent, repent; why will ye die?" A weight like a mountain weighed down upon his soul. Sleep forsook his eyelids. His axe rusted by the

pile. His rifle hung dust-covered on the wall.

The simple-hearted neighbors, ignorant as the boy himself, pronounced him deranged. The younger fry twitted him that he was in love. Some whispered behind their hands that it might be liquor. Despite visiting some preaching houses, he received no help but continued seeking. In many churches they now remember the apparition of the ill-clad youth sitting well up on the front seat, listening with ears and mouth with the attention that a man ready for the gallows would give at the sight of the distant horseman who, perhaps, brings him an expected reprieve.

In a camp meeting the place was shattered when the lad first saw the light. His happy cry, "I've got it! I've got it!" electrified his own breast and made others weep for joy. With the speed of Jehu, he went home to tell the neighbors what the Lord had done for his soul. Forsaking all other duties, he went from cabin to cabin in the exultant joy of the spiritual new birth. Daily his ardor increased. In amazement the mountaineers listened to their John Baptist as he called them to forsake sin and call on the name of the Lord.

By the time this moved and moving man had finished his spell-binding oration to the presbytery, the pine fire had burned low; the dipped and shapeless candles had shimmered themselves down. His language in parts was as uncouth as that of a bush native. His gestures were stiff. He alternated between crying and laughing as he wandered from his broken agony to his final triumph, shouting until his voice boomed back from the hillside as he enchained the heart of every listener. The gray-haired moderator sobbed aloud. From time to time the excitable joined in with the preacher's loud amen. The presbyters met, talked, decided that none could withhold a preacher's license from him. George Willets was duly received as a candidate for the ministry.

Ten years later this rough lad was still a fireball, still tireless in seeking the lost, still praying without ceasing, a clerical lion, fearless, strong -- and yet tender with the compassion of his Lord. When he talked of heaven, men felt they were in the vestibule of the city of God. When he spoke of hell -- and it was with tenderness as well as terror -- men trembled.

He descanted on the terrors of the damned until every shuddering face turned downward as if to see the solid globe rent asunder and the smoke of the bottomless pit billowing up. Strong men moaned like infants; ladies in silk shrieked as if a knife were plunged into them.

He reflected on "the city that hath foundations whose builder and maker is God." He pointed with a sharp finger at the sky as if the parting clouds offered a chink through which men could creep to the feet of a pardoning God. So stirring and heart-born was the word that almost all gazed into heaven to look for mercy. He then called mourners to the altar. On one occasion more than five hundred went forward, smitten with the sword of the Spirit.

George Willets' dress and manner are not to be copied by the preacher of this hour. But unless we are baptized with the same compassion, icicles will soon be hanging from our pulpits.

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