

**Out of the Mouths of Babes:
Exhortation by Children and the Great Revival in Kentucky¹**

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ABSTRACT

Boys and girls as young as five offered public exhortations in the revivals that rolled across Kentucky in the first years of the nineteenth century. Revival beliefs and practices combined with existing patterns of childhood to open up possibilities for authorized exhortation by children. Children seized those possibilities to play a large role in the revivals—and an even larger role in the stories told about the revivals. Boosters appealed to exhortation by children as the miracle that proved legitimacy. Scoffers used children’s exhortations to define revival as fraudulent and disorderly. Exhortation by children diminished rapidly in the wake of the 1801 meeting at Cane Ridge. Some revival leaders repudiated exhortation by children. Others began to consider naturalistic explanations. Most significantly, organizers aiming at more general reform changed camp meetings in ways that closed down the conditions that allowed widespread exhortation by children. By 1810 the practice had largely disappeared. By the 1840s the convergence in practice was matched by a convergence in belief. Both those who had supported revival and those who had opposed it agreed that the past speech and present silence of children helped establish the church in Kentucky.

Richard McNemar, wild Presbyterian turned Shaker, relished telling stories of the Great Revival that rolled through the Cumberland and Ohio watersheds in the first years of the nineteenth century. McNemar's written account reeled off the numbers for camp meeting after camp meeting, pausing only to give details of the most important wonders—like the story of a boy at the meeting at Indian Creek, Ohio in June of 1801. The boy, “from appearance about twelve years old,” was powerfully affected by the sermon of an adult preacher. He slipped away from the preaching stand, overwhelmed by conviction of sin, and eventually found the strength to climb up on a log some distance away. Then, tears streaming down his face, he began to exhort. “He cried aloud to the wicked,” McNemar wrote, “warning them of their danger, denouncing their certain doom, if they persisted in their sins; expressing his love to their souls, and desire that they would turn to the Lord, and be saved.” A crowd gathered around the boy. Two men held him up, and he spoke for about an hour. Finally, exhausted from his labors and running to the edge of language, the boy wiped his brow with a handkerchief. He raised the handkerchief high above his head and then dropped it, saying, “Thus, O sinner! Shall you drop into hell, unless you forsake your sins and turn to the Lord.” Members of the crowd fell “like those shot in battle,” McNemar wrote. Falling from conviction of their sin, they rose to conversion and to exhortations of their own. The wonder of conversion “spread in a manner which human language cannot describe.”²

So important was the young exhorter to the crowd at Indian Creek that adults held him on their shoulders; so important was he to McNemar's narrative that he got almost as many lines as the whole story of the famous meeting at Cane Ridge. Young exhorters played central roles in the revival and in the stories told about the revival.

The most important of all these stories was the *Short Narrative* of James McGready, the Presbyterian preacher hailed as “The Father of the Great Revival.” McGready's narrative reached people all across the United States in the first years of the nineteenth century. Excerpts appeared in several regional missionary magazines. The *Western Missionary Magazine*, out of Pennsylvania, launched itself in 1803 by printing the entire McGready account in serial. Methodist bishop Francis Asbury would read McGready's narrative to congregations when he felt too tired or ill to preach a sermon of his own. About one half of the stories McGready told with any detail concerned child exhorters. Almost all the speaking that he quoted at length came from children. He filled his narrative with stories of exhortations like this one from a twelve-year-old girl:

She then ran to her father, and clasping her arms around his neck, she wept over him, and told him that he had no religion -- she told him what she saw in Christ and what she felt of his love. O my father! says she, Christ is willing to have you -- O try to seek him, and you will find him -- O! if you but saw that in Christ which I see -- O! if you but saw his fulness and willingness, you would come to him. This seemed to pierce the old man like a dart, and made him weep like a child.³

The children in McGready's narrative piled up direct, sentimental bursts of speech. They spoke to their families, to other children, and to crowds of adults. And people listened. McGready concluded one story of the Sabbath exhortation of “a little girl, about eleven or twelve years old,” with the

confident assertion that “the conduct of young converts, and especially such as were but children, fastened more convictions at these times, than all the preaching.”⁴

Child exhorters have played much smaller roles in more recent histories of the Kentucky revivals. Nathan O. Hatch, for instance, stressed the role of adult leaders who “mastered the democratic art of persuasion and on that rock built significant religious movements.”⁵ People like Richard McNemar and James McGready find ready places within Hatch’s narrative. Their stories about child exhorters mixed sensational detail with religious sentiment to create powerful arguments for revival. But if McNemar and McGready shaped their stories about children to suit their purposes, they did not spin them up from nothing. Underneath the stories about children were actions by children—actions that helped define and legitimate the revival.

These actions of children cannot be reduced to effects of actions by adults. Historian John B. Boles rightly noted the “disproportionate number” of young people affected by the revival but then explained their numbers in ways that rendered them passive and marginal: “Quite understandably, the impressionable, easily frightened youngsters, who by virtue of their age had never experienced a period of revivalism and mass conversion, were an easy mark for the hypnotic proselytism of the camp meeting.” Boles’s naturalistic explanation had some power to account for why so many children fell, but it took no notice of the fact that they then rose to speak and that their speaking was in turn the subject of much speech. He made the children mere recipients of revival. Boles saw the prominence of child converts, but he missed the significance of child exhorters.⁶

The full significance of child exhorters begins to come into view when the children are seen as actors in the midst of contested networks of institutions, beliefs, and rituals. Patterns of childhood and ideas about children collided with the theology and practice of revival to open up space for children to offer tearful testimonies to Christ’s sufficiency to save. Boys and girls as young as five spoke in private homes and open fields. They addressed close family members and huge crowds of strangers. They spoke like adults. Adults took action in response, sometimes falling to the ground in conviction, sometimes lifting the children to their shoulders, sometimes locking them in back rooms, and, not least, sometimes casting the children as characters in the stories they told to argue for and against revival. Early on, the stories of revival boosters and opponents competed with one another to define the meaning of exhortation by children. Soon these old antagonists moved to a practical consensus that closed down spaces for exhortation by children even as it assigned new meaning to their speech.⁷

Young Kentucky

In 1797 James McGready knew it was time to move on. McGready, a Presbyterian minister serving in North Carolina, had been calling for revival in a hot series of sermons. The sermons stirred up opponents, and some of those opponents sent McGready a letter written in blood. McGready read the letter as a call to Kentucky. He joined floods of other people pouring down the

Ohio River and through the Cumberland Gap. Together these immigrants almost tripled the official population of Kentucky in the decade before the Great Revival, swelling it from 73,677 in 1790 to 220,955 in 1800. Young people made up a disproportionate number of the migrant population. In 1790, 49% of that portion of the U.S. population measured by the census was under 16. In Kentucky, however, children and youth under 16 made up 54.5% of the total. By 1800 that number had reached 55.2%. Kentucky was young, and getting younger every year.⁸

Many of these children and young people entered Kentucky as part of households that included people who were not part of their nuclear families. Looking back in his memoirs of 1859, New Light Presbyterian divine Thomas Cleland recalled a Kentucky boyhood in the 1790s that illustrated some key features of western family patterns. The Cleland household had very loose ties beyond the generations of parents and children. Cleland claimed to know nothing of his father's side of the family and mentioned a maternal grandmother only in passing. Though not a classic extended family, Cleland's family was both more and less than a tight-knit nuclear unit. Cleland barely mentioned his older sister, younger brother, and three little sisters until the death of their parents made them his wards, but he fondly recalled working at the age of twelve to clear the fields with his "Uncle Sammy," a maternal uncle who lived with the family. He also regularly worked alongside two enslaved women and two enslaved boys. While Cleland's relationships with the boys should not be sentimentally confused with sibling relationships, he did seem to spend more time with them than with some of his brothers and sisters. Neither extended nor nuclear, Cleland's household organized thirteen people in a variety of complex relationships. The make-up of the household made the boundary of the household more like a continuum than a stark line between insiders and outsiders.

Household activities further blurred the continuum around the household. Functions that would later become more distinctly public (like education, commerce, and group worship) often happened in domestic spaces. These functions regularly brought people from beyond the household into the household. Cleland, for instance, recalled an average of six to twelve travelers gathered around his fireplace each night. After his parents died, he began to hold what he called "family worship" in the evenings. He always invited the travelers to join. Household worship could very quickly become at least semi-public. Just as the outsiders came in, the household went out. Cleland and his youngest sister were typical of many children who boarded with teachers or other adults in order to go to school. Cleland also left the house to participate more directly in the emerging market economy, hiring out to perform simple tasks like carrying corn to market. Like many western children, Cleland grew up moving between households open to the public and quasi-public spaces that often felt like households. He grew up performing roles often performed by adults, and he grew up talking to people at a range of distances from the core of his household. All of these habits provided crucial tinder for the practice of exhortation by children when the spark of revival came. Child exhorters did not overturn but rather seized upon and intensified these established patterns of interaction.⁹

While western children often got out and about, they rarely made their way to membership in churches before the Great Revival. Neither did adults. The Methodists actually lost members in Kentucky between 1794 and 1800, even as the population was booming.¹⁰ The Presbyterians did little better. Writing in 1847, Kentucky Presbyterian Robert Davidson attributed the lack of formal religion to many causes. Few churches had been established. Clergy “were few and past their prime.” People spent all their time thinking about how to make money, fight, and hunt. Jacobinism ran through the population like a contagious disease. For these reasons, Davidson wrote, the churches failed to connect with large numbers of people of every age. They failed especially with young people. Davidson worried that “the youth grew up unimbued with religious principles and unaccustomed to religious restraints.”¹¹

Davidson argued that the church failed to engage young people in part because church leaders did not encourage children to participate in the sacramental meetings that formed the core of Presbyterian piety in the Cumberland. “The approach of young persons to the communion table was a rarity never expected,” Davidson wrote. The ordinance was reserved for “elderly persons,” for their years made them less susceptible to temptation and let them display the long, steady piety demanded by Presbyterian tables. In Davidson’s account, the church’s failure to involve young people in this central activity threatened its very survival.¹²

Davidson’s vision of a faithless frontier let him tell a story of denominational progress and establishment, especially in the Christian formation of young people. Davidson was right that children rarely received the elements at sacramental meetings. But the lives of children were more full and varied than his account suggests. While visiting the Dunlap family of Pisgah, Kentucky in 1797, Thomas Cleland found that the children of the family did come to the communion table as full participants.¹³ The event was exceptional—Cleland expressed surprise at the children’s sharing in the sacrament—but the anecdote begins to suggest the variety of children’s religious lives.

Still more variety emerges when Cleland’s memories range beyond Presbyterian settings. In 1792 or 1793 he and his little sister received monthly catechesis from a Methodist circuit rider while away at school. After catechesis the circuit rider would proceed “to prayer and exhortation, with great vehemence and effervescence, until nearly the whole female part of the school became in a perfect uproar, crying for mercy, exhorting careless brothers and some others of the male sex to give up their hearts to God.” Such exercises caused immediate controversy, and Cleland’s nominally Episcopalian father pulled his children out of all religious activities at the school. But the girls continued to meet through the summer, gathering at playtime in the woods. “You might hear them at the top of their voices nearly a mile,” Cleland recalled. “One or two led in prayer, until all joined in the outcry.” While some adults joined Cleland’s father in opposing the work, others encouraged the young exhorters. When boys in the school began to howl like wolves and chase the girls, the Methodist minister who ran the school gave the girls exclusive use of the schoolhouse for their meetings.

Even if not many children participated in forms of piety organized for them by Presbyterian

churches, turn-of-the-century Kentucky was hardly the religious vacuum for the young that Davidson described. Economic, political, and ecclesial life had moved past the frontier stage of development. Children lived in a rich, growing, and contested web of institutions. By 1793—four years before McGready arrived and five before he first saw inklings of revival—at least one group of girls in Kentucky had raised their voices in exhortation. They moved easily between home and school, not because these institutions did not exist, but because of the ways in which they were organized. When the girls echoed the Methodist exhorter, they did not offer wild, “natural” expressions of faith. They took up a well-established rhetorical form. Some adults supported them. Others mocked them. But all involved had models they could use to understand what was happening. Exhortation by children in the Great Revival did not break out as a new thing in an empty frontier, but as a relatively familiar phenomenon in a time of expansion, transformation, and competition.¹⁴

What Children Made of Revival

Revival involved beliefs and practices that mixed with patterns of western childhood to offer powerful authorization to exhortations by children. The children did not create wholly new forms of speech and behavior. Instead they took up well-established places and practices and made them their own. Because they recombined elements already invested with authority, their exhortations shared in that authority. Distinctive beliefs and practices of the Great Revival came together to offer children resources with which they crafted not only exhortations, but *authoritative* exhortations.¹⁵

A bundle of background beliefs helped establish the authority of exhortations by children. If not all these beliefs were held by everyone involved, and if they did not come together as a system, they nonetheless provided significant interpretive resources that made people more receptive to exhortation by children.

The emotional quality of children’s appeals derived legitimacy from some influential accounts of the process of conversion. More than fifty years before the Kentucky revivals, Jonathan Edwards offered a cautious defense of the emotional exhortations circulating through New England. He grounded his defense in a voluntarist view of human action in which the passions could shape the will. The “higher affections” connected even to “the noblest part of the soul,” and so speech that moved the affections could move the will to make a saving choice.¹⁶ Few of the people participating in the Great Revival could affirm Edwards’ anthropology in detail, but they were heirs to a revival tradition that depended on his work. Because emotions could lead to saving action, exhorters’ appeals to emotion carried great legitimacy. That cloak of legitimacy extended to weeping children who moved their listeners to tears and then, if all went right, to lasting conversion.

Edwards also offered the crucial example of Phebe Bartlett. Phebe played a prominent role in Edwards’ *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, a text in wide circulation among both boosters and scoffers. Phebe’s was one of two cases analyzed in detail at the narrative’s end. Phebe

was four years old in 1735, the year her mother first noticed unusual activity. Phebe cried and writhed, fearing she would go to hell. Then her confidence came to her, and she declared, “Mother, the kingdom of heaven is come to me!” “From this,” Edwards wrote, “there has appeared a very remarkable abiding change in the child.” She kept the Sabbath, longed to go to church, showed great fear of God, loved Scripture with new zeal, cried at the realization of God’s love for her, showed great concern for other children’s souls, displayed a sense of charity, and, Edwards proudly noted, loved her minister.¹⁷

These marks of piety played a crucial role for Edwards. He argued in *The Distinguishing Marks* that the unusual or extraordinary nature of a work told nothing of whether or not the work came from God. Edwards remained carefully elusive on questions of the agency of evil spirits. He did not rule out supernatural explanation, but he left room for entirely natural explanation. Edwards was less concerned to account for every work than he was to insist that the mere presence of wonders proved nothing. The only “positive signs” that a work was of God came from just such signs of piety as Phebe demonstrated. Such subtleties could get lost, for a time, under the glow of a great story. Phebe’s story created expectations for child converts and gave authority to their speech when it came.¹⁸

Edwards was not the only source of beliefs that allowed authority to be ascribed to the speech of children. Revival leaders in Kentucky tended to argue that the gospel was simple enough for a child to understand—and proclaim. In their renunciation of the authority of the Synod of Kentucky, Barton Stone, Richard McNemar, and other revival leaders mocked “elaborate treatises” on true religion. “A child of a few years old understands the meaning of believing,” they wrote, “as well as a doctor of divinity.” Because saving faith was so simple, a child could exhort as well as any adult.¹⁹

Revival preachers also offered an account of the working of the Holy Spirit that helped explain wonders in the lives of children. They argued that the Holy Spirit led sinners to conversion, even performing works of wonder in them before they professed their faith or received baptism. Exhortation was one of those works. When James McGready spoke of how “God alone” must have put the words into the mouths of young exhorters, their unbaptized state caused him no hesitation.²⁰ The depth of this belief emerged most clearly several years later, in a controversy around the merger between the Christian movement following Barton Stone and the Disciples movement of Alexander Campbell. Campbell believed that God gave the Spirit only with baptism, but this view grated hard on faiths forged in revival. Members remembered the Spirit’s work in others (and perhaps themselves) before baptism.²¹

Beliefs in the gift of the Spirit were intensified by a broad and varied millennialism. “The Millennium was supposed to have commenced,” Robert Davidson wrote in his account of the revivals, “and the ordinary means of grace were superseded, as rather embarrassing the new and free outpouring of the Spirit.”²² Revivalists’ talk of an “outpouring of the Spirit” called to mind the promise of the prophet Joel: “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit

upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions” (2:28, KJV). If the Millennium had come, people believing this promise would be expecting children to exhort.

Ideas associated with revival played a crucial role in lending authority to religious speech by children. But the authority of children’s exhortations also depended on more embodied forms of legitimation. The camp meetings that formed the heart of this revival opened up spaces for child exhorters by multiplying the number of sites for sacred speech. At Cane Ridge, for instance, planners set up one pulpit in the meetinghouse and another in a tent about 150 yards to the southeast. Erecting two pulpits was no innovation. The planners simply provided for the crowd in the way their Scots forebears had provided for the great crowd at the sacrament at Cambuslang in 1742.²³

These two pulpits quickly multiplied, though, in ways they never did in Scotland. Factors peculiar to early nineteenth-century Kentucky helped account for the proliferation. The lives of white and African American residents were so intertwined that both attended the camp meeting. At least one African American preacher, probably the famed Old Captain of Lexington’s First African Baptist Church, delivered sermons. While people clearly mingled with uncommon freedom at Cane Ridge, the reigning ideologies required a separate center for African American worship, which became a third pulpit.²⁴

Denominational competition produced still more pulpits at Cane Ridge. The Reverend John Evans Finley, a cautious supporter of revival, said he joined seventeen other Presbyterian ministers in preaching and exhorting. At least four Methodists preached from the pulpits, and an untold number of Baptists worked the grounds. When the Presbyterians gathered to celebrate the sacrament on Sunday, though, only Presbyterian preachers were allowed to take the stand. William Burke, a hot-preaching Methodist who had participated in other Presbyterian sacraments, refused to be excluded. He climbed up on a fallen tree and created a fourth pulpit.²⁵

The “falling exercise” so characteristic of the Great Revival further multiplied the pulpits. Finley recounted that when people fell, the ministers would go to pray for them. A crowd of friends or family usually gathered round, and the minister might step “up on a stump or log, and [begin] exhortation or sermon, when, as many as can collect around him.” Even the rather staid Presbyterian minister John Lyle wrote in his diary of routinely moving from place to place, praying over the fallen and exhorting people in the crowd. Lyle might have circulated among the crowd with the intention of restoring an ordered center, but his movements had a centrifugal effect. When a minister like Lyle preached or exhorted from a spot away from the formal pulpit, he marked that spot as a site for authorized speech. When ministers started speaking from the stumps and then from the ground, they sanctified every inch of the camp as a potential pulpit.²⁶

The proliferation of pulpits opened up the sanctioned space necessary for exhortation by children at public meetings. Children came to camp meetings, often as part of household groups, and moved fairly freely from family campsites to more and less official gatherings around the grounds. The normally permeable boundaries between institutions like church and family became even

more permeable at camp meetings, and children moved easily across them. That freedom of movement extended to the newly- or potentially-authorized sites for sacred speech. Children might not have been able to get behind official pulpits. But children could and did climb up on benches, tree stumps, and the shoulders of adults. And a child could always speak from the spot she made sacred by falling on it in conviction of sin and then watering it with her tears. Because these sites had been sanctioned by the speech of ordained ministers and other adults, children could speak from them with a measure of authority.

Revival practices also opened up *rhetorical* space for child exhorters. The genre of exhortation provided a well-established form of authoritative speech that children could perform. The boundaries of exhortation as a genre may have been fuzzy, but its center was clear. For more than fifty years, exhortation had been religious speech designed to move the emotions of people in order to produce some change in their lives. Sermons sought intellectual conviction. Testimonies recounted God's saving work. Prayers implored God's mercy. Exhortations might have brushed against all these other genres, but at their core they tried to melt hearts and change lives. Eyewitnesses to the Great Revival used the term consistently, confidently, and without explanation. The crowds who gathered knew what an exhortation was, and they respected its authority.²⁷

Exhortation had authority as a rhetorical form in part because ordained ministers made use of it. McGready exhorted from the pulpit, following his carefully written old-style sermons with extended unscripted exhortations. Presbyterians often heard an exhortation at the table right after the "action sermon" and right before they received communion. The exhortation carried lower expectations for formality, and these expectations allowed it to grow legs and walk around at camp meetings. While Lyle preached pulpit sermons from "well-digested skeletons," he allowed himself to exhort extemporaneously as he walked the grounds. Ministers authorized the exhortation as a genre fit for multiple settings.²⁸

Laypersons had been making the exhortation their own for several decades before the Great Revival. Lay exhorters encouraged by James Davenport roiled New England in the 1740s. Boston preacher Charles Chauncy complained that "Men of all Occupations" and even "*young Persons, sometimes Lads, or rather Boys: Nay. Women and Girls; yea, Negroes, have taken upon them the Business of Preachers.*"²⁹ The Methodist class system provided a controlled atmosphere, but it also encouraged leaders from lower social strata to exhort. By the time of Cane Ridge, lay exhortation was a venerable practice that could rival the preaching of regular ministers. Lyle wrote with some consternation how the people at a Lexington meeting streamed away from his sermon to hear "a class leader one Murphy exhort."³⁰

Exhortation by lay people expanded exponentially at camp meetings as some kind of exhortation became, in Davidson's words, a "generally expected" part of the falling exercise. One eyewitness noted how people fell in various ways but "all, when they obtain relief, break forth into shouts or praise and thanks to God. Many, after their shouts of praise, turn, and address their fellow-sinners in the most pathetic and tender manner, to come to Jesus, to forsake their sins, &c."³¹ This

general pattern could result in hundreds of people exhorting at once.³² Once exhortation became an expected part of the practice of falling, children who fell could become authorized as exhorters.

Children could and did fall into periods of grief and anxiety for their sins. Revival beliefs insisted that all had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and children were no exception. Recounting a meeting at Red River in June of 1800, McGready described “little boys and girls of nine, ten, and twelve years of age, and some younger, lying prostrate on the ground, weeping, praying, and crying out for mercy, like condemned criminals at the place of execution; and that in the presence of a multitude.” Later children would be authorized by presumptions of their innocence, but child exhorters in the Great Revival were authorized at least in part by displaying heartfelt conviction of their sin.

After what could be hours or even days of writhing and weeping, child exhorters, like their adult counterparts, typically experienced something they described as an assurance of God’s willingness to forgive and Christ’s sufficiency to save. They then rose, often still weeping, to warn other sinners of danger and call them to Christ. They spoke of the terror of sin and the sweet love of Christ. They spoke in short, ecstatic, repetitive phrases, often punctuated with interjections, like the speech of this girl remembered by McGready: “O! if you but saw that in Christ which I see,” she said. “O! if you but saw his fullness and willingness, you would come to him.”³³ When children took up the practice of exhortation, adults recognized it for what it was. They responded in a variety of ways—some fell in conviction, others scoffed, and still others just stood by. However adults responded, they recognized what the children were doing. They were exhorting.

Recognition of the form gave child exhorters authority to exhort within their families and across family lines, often, but not always, in ways that upset expected hierarchies. McGready told of a twelve-year-old girl who warned her father to repent. At that same meeting, an even younger girl warned her unconverted sister, a married woman, in stark language before turning to her little brother. But children did not limit their exhortations to family members. Children “in the Spirit” had even more freedom to range beyond household boundaries than usual. Sometimes children addressed other children specifically, as did the nine- or ten-year-old girls McNemar remembered at Flemingbush. But children also regularly addressed large crowds of adults not of their households. Those addresses could be sharp, as this eyewitness to Cane Ridge remembered:

One little girl, about nine years of age, was put on a man’s shoulder, and delivered, I think, a body of divinity; at length, when exhausted, she sank back upon her upholder, upon which a man who stood near, affectingly said, “Poor thing, set her down.” She replied, “Don’t call me poor; I have Christ for my Brother, God for my Father, and am an heir to a kingdom.”³⁴

Children spoke to family members and strangers, adults and children alike. Even when they addressed other children or members of their household, they often did so in the open space of the camp meeting. The children spoke, as Colonel Robert Patterson remembered, “publicly.”³⁵

In falling, weeping, appealing to emotions, repeating short phrases, and speaking publicly, children did not invent some new practice. They simply took up a highly esteemed practice that came to be expected of them and exercised it in spaces newly opened to them. Children could learn a practical mastery of exhortation in a host of ways. The exhortations of others, children and adults, lay folk and clergy, offered powerful exemplars. Read from the pulpit, narratives like that of McGready provided a kind of authorized libretto complete with words to speak and actions to perform. But children did not just repeat existing forms of exhortation. The variety of details—a dropped handkerchief, arms wrapped around a father’s neck, a spontaneous rebuke of one who dared to call the exhorter poor—reveal children’s improvisations upon a form that was both regular and regulated.³⁶

Child exhorters adapted recognized forms to talk like little adults. That adult-like behavior played an essential part in their authority. Exhortation by children amazed people not because they believed children had such purity they would not feign inspiration, but because they believed children had such incapacity they *could not* feign inspiration.³⁷ The authority of the child exhorters rested not in their intensification of some virtue particular to childhood, but in their evident transcendence of the limits of childhood.³⁸ Child exhorters seemed a wonder because the children sounded like adults. McGready made this clear when he described the “scene of wonder” of “dear young creatures, little boys and girls” expounding upon the plan of salvation and speaking in the language of scripture. “I felt mortified and mean before them,” he concluded. “They spoke upon the subjects beyond what I could have done. An evident demonstration that, out of the mouths of babes and sucklings the Lord can perfect praise.”³⁹ McGready explicitly compared the young exhorters to himself. The comparison made sense because he and the children were engaged in the same kind of thing. They both exhorted, and in similar styles. The wonder was not that the children did something entirely different, but that they did a familiar adult thing so well.

What Revival Made of Children

One measure of the importance of child exhorters comes in the wide agreement in descriptions of them. Every sustained and many shorter eyewitness accounts mentioned child exhorters as important actors in the Kentucky revivals. Accounts from people with many different attitudes towards revival showed remarkable coherence in describing the basic phenomenon of children falling in conviction of sin and rising to exhort friends, family, and even great crowds with passionate pleas to come to Christ. This agreement in basic description only brings into sharper relief the deep differences in interpretation. Different authors assigned the children different levels of centrality, used different literary styles in describing them, and accounted for their speech in different ways.

While the age of exhorters was at issue, the ages of the authors cannot account for their views of exhortation by children. People of all generations both supported and opposed child exhorters. While the younger ministers who came to Kentucky in the 1790s were more likely than ministers

of “Father” David Rice’s generation to encourage exhortation by children, the younger generation also included critical observers like John Lyle and James Blythe. Even as some younger clergy criticized child exhorters, some older clergy defended them. James McGready, for instance, was older than many of his opponents. Differences within generations extended beyond the clergy. Some of the most active boosters of child exhorters were adult laypersons, and some of their most violent opponents were other children.

There is a correlation, however, between the depiction of child exhorters and the author’s general attitude towards revival. People committed to revival tended to pay special attention to child exhorters. James McGready packed his *Short Narrative* full of detailed accounts of children speaking with power. His narrative slowed down with each of these stories, lingering to quote the young exhorters at length and lavishing attention on them that stood in sharp contrast to his spare references to clergy. Consider McGready’s quotation of the exhortation by a “little girl” at the Gasper River sacrament on the fourth Sabbath of July 1801:

“O! I know, I know he is willing, he is willing -- He is come! he is come! O! what a glorious Christ, what a sweet Christ, what a lovely Christ, what a precious Christ he is! O! what a beauty I can see in him! What a glory I see in him! O! What a fulness, what an infinite fulness I see in Christ! O! there is a fulness in him for all the world, if they could but see it, if they would but come.” She then, turning to Christless sinners, addressed them in language which God alone must have put in her mouth, which was sufficient to move the hardest hearts.⁴⁰

McGready did not just tell his readers that a little girl spoke. He presented what appeared to be a literal transcription of her words and added his own testimony to their heavenly origin and earthly efficacy. He told similarly elaborate accounts of child exhortation at five other camp meetings.

Other early accounts by leaders of the revival followed a similar pattern. Richard McNemar, who passed on the story of the handkerchief-dropping boy exhorter, remembered the sacrament near Flemingbush on the last Sabbath of 1801 in this way:

But what was the most solemn and striking, was the case of two little girls, who, in the time of meeting, cried out in great distress. They both continued for some time praying and crying for mercy, till one of them received a comfortable hope, and then turning to the other, cried out: “Oh! you little sinner, come to Christ! take hold of his promise! trust in him! he is able to save to the uttermost! Oh! I have found peace in my soul! Oh! the precious Saviour! come just as you are! he will take away the stony heart and give you a heart of flesh! you can’t make yourself any better--just give up your heart to Christ now!--You are not a greater sinner than me! You need not wait another moment!” Thus she continued exhorting, until her little companion received a ray from heaven that produced a sudden and sensible change; then rising with her in her arms, she cried out in a most affecting manner: “Oh, here is another star of light!” These children were perhaps nine or ten years old.⁴¹

Like McGready, McNemar made the story of child exhorters a little dramatic unit and quoted the girls directly and extensively. Elsewhere in his account, McNemar cited a letter from a “P.H.” in

Cane Ridge to a “J.M.C.” dated January 1801 that served to summarize the revival for him: “Children and all seem to be engaged, but the children are most active in the work. When they speak, it appears that the Lord sends his Spirit, to accompany it with power to the hearts of sinners.”⁴²

More wary participants in the revival also mentioned children prominently but then portrayed the children’s actions in very different ways. The Reverend John Evans Finley of Mason County supported the revival less wholeheartedly than McGready, McNemar and Patterson, but he gave an even longer and more detailed account of child exhortation with the story of young Davis McCorkle. McCorkle, “a lad of eight or nine years of age,” went to a sacrament “some distance from his father’s house.” He got religion, and when he returned to his home the newly pious boy immediately set about his chores. A friend joined him, and McCorkle told the friend that he was resolved to live a Christian life and that if the friend did not alter his course of life “we must break off our acquaintance; for I am determined to serve the Lord.” The boy was greatly disturbed, and returned home in silence. After some time of worrying his parents, he asked them to send for McCorkle. The two boys met privately and emerged “talking in rapturous language, of redeeming love. Their zeal and crying greatly affected all present.” The parents called for the neighbors to give thanks for this wonder but sequestered the boys in a back room “to prevent any disorder in devotion by the crying of the boys.” The guests demanded to see the boys, who then “simply related to them, with tears of joy, what God had done for their souls.”

Writing some time before 1803, Finley shared the dramatic style of McGready and McNemar. He told his story at even greater length, pausing to mention factual details that would reassure moderates that the work was decent, orderly, and of God. McCorkle did his chores, converted not adults but another child, and exhorted within the private space of homes and in response to parental direction. In all this detail, Finley gave no quotation of what the boy said. Finley presented adults as carefully ordering the boy’s exhortation by keeping him in a back room, and Finley himself regulated the presentation of McCorkle’s exhortation by speaking of it without direct quotation. Finley’s child exhorter was contained within existing structures of home and church, morality and piety.

The sober, steady Presbyterian minister John Lyle viewed the revival even more warily than did Finley. Lyle welcomed the renewal of religion he saw, and while he thought “Stone’s people were wild & disorderly,” he conceded that “as religion seems to be dull in my bounds I would probably rather wish them to be lively & wild & disorderly than cold & unanimated.” The “exercises” accompanying this revival fascinated Lyle, but they also worried him. He preached and exhorted at camp meetings, but often his topic was the need for the kind of restraint his own preaching demonstrated. McNemar’s “unintelligible” exuberance disgusted him. Lyle’s ambivalence led him to keep a diary of precise observations of the revival. He paid special attention to the names of those who engaged in revival exercises, in part because he wanted to keep track of how they persevered in the faith and so test the revival as a whole.⁴³

Lyle regularly recorded in his diary how children fell and exhorted, but he gave children no

special prominence in his account. Children were just a few among the many in Lyle's vision of the revival. After several pages about the sacrament at Lexington in June of 1801, Lyle concluded: "I have now gone through with most cases I saw and remember (perhaps little Lila Steel Mrs. Peters niece is not mentioned who seemed as rationally convinced as almost any of them)." ⁴⁴ The child was a parenthetical afterthought, defined by family relations, and Lyle's description of her stopped short of robust affirmation. When Lyle did mention children, he almost never quoted them directly and only rarely made any kind of reference to their words. Lyle did sometimes give the ages of children, suggesting that he placed some importance on their status as children. More usually, though, he stressed a young exhorter's family relations or used words like "girl" or "lad" that he also used for people he clearly regarded as full-grown adults. ⁴⁵ Age served more to identify the revived for future study than to testify to wonders. Lyle's account suggested that children exhorted regularly, but he presented them as small parts of much larger scenes, took mostly taxonomic interest in their ages, and told their stories with little dramatic detail and almost no quotation. ⁴⁶

From McGready to Lyle, authors wrote about the speeches of children in ways that corresponded closely with their general stance toward revival. Strong supporters of revival stressed wonder, made the children central, and presented long streams of direct quotation. A moderate stressed piety and order, describing the child's speech without presenting it. A still more wary observer simply catalogued the event of child exhorters as one sort of happening among many. Presentations of exhortation by children tracked so closely with attitudes toward revival as a whole because child exhorters and revival were bound together in constellations of mutual legitimation.

McGready saw the power of child exhorters to legitimate the revival, and he used this power with unparalleled effectiveness. The power of McGready's narratives of child exhortation to legitimate revival depended in part on a widely shared set of beliefs. While some disputants considered the work of evil spirits as a hypothetical explanation, the real controversy was between scoffers who sought a naturalistic explanation and boosters who offered a supernatural one. Proponents of revival believed its effects to be involuntary for the persons affected because the phenomena were special works of the Spirit of God. Scoffers and moderates countered each point of this platform precisely, arguing that the effects were voluntary and natural. Opponents did not attempt exorcism but took bread soaked with vinegar to rub in the eyes and noses of the fallen to see just how committed they were to the charade of trance. ⁴⁷ Both sides agreed on a basic framework: the effects were either supernatural, involuntary, and legitimate, or they were natural, voluntary and fraudulent.

The most heated argument, therefore, occurred around the question of imposture. An exchange between George Baxter of Washington Academy, Virginia and an anonymous critic provides a telling example. The anonymous critic read a letter praising the revival written by Baxter to Archibald Alexander that had appeared in a range of missionary magazines. The critic responded in the December 1803 edition of *The Western Missionary Magazine*, arguing that these wondrous exercises "are not so involuntary as they appear." Their cause is natural, not supernatural, and they

can be explained by “sympathy.” In reply, Baxter argued that sympathy could not explain why the first person fell. How did this chain reaction of sympathy begin? He then moved briskly through other inexplicables, pausing briefly to refute any idea of evil spirits before returning to his main theme. We know the exercises were involuntary, Baxter said, because there was no good incentive to fake them, because “sober and elderly professors” were converted, and because of the remarkable cessation of breathing and pulsation in some who fell. Two more of Baxter’s arguments had particular resonance with the writings of James McGready: We know the exercises were involuntary because so many enemies of the revival fell, Baxter wrote, and “Because ignorant boys and girls who were the subjects of it, often personated the converted sinner or triumphant believer more naturally and pathetically than perhaps the best stage-actor in the world could have done.”⁴⁸ Child exhorters and converted deists offered proof that revival was real. Rationalist scoffers might try to explain away revival wonders as acts of fakery or sympathy, but enemies of revival lacked the motive and children lacked the means.

The power of these stories to legitimate revival helps explain why McGready and McNemar wrote as they did. McGready mostly panned his camera across events, but he zoomed in eleven times for close-ups on special stories. Five of those stories concerned skeptics who converted, and five concerned children who exhorted. The eleventh close-up combined both tropes in a single story. At Muddy River, “a little boy of about twelve years old” aimed his exhortation at a notorious deist. “The Deist began to dispute with him, but the Lord opened the child’s mouth to speak so affectingly and convincingly to his confidence, as to silence every argument.”⁴⁹ The words of the boy were powerful, but what really mattered was that a boy spoke them. For McGready and his most sympathetic readers, child exhorters were “an evident demonstration” that God was the source of the revival.⁵⁰

The power of child exhorters to legitimate revival suggests an enriched picture of the full significance of their actions. Their exhortations had significance not only immediately, in the open fields or churches or homes in which they were given, but also symbolically, in the larger debates about the revival as a whole. They presented a topic worth struggling over, a potentially powerful public event that invited competing interpretations. That sharp competition makes the later consensus even more remarkable.

Children Seen, Not Heard

As early 1801 adults with a variety of relationships to revival began to close up spaces for exhortation by children. Over the next few years, exhortations by children and revival fervor both began to recede dramatically. The institutions collapsed together, but in different ways for different people.

The more established denominations reformed camp meetings to curb what they saw as the worst abuses. Concerned by reports of intoxication and adultery at the Paris meeting, Presbyterian

clergy met in Walnut Hill in September of 1801 to consider reform. They began to schedule more than one sacrament each day to hold down the number of people—and pulpits. They also adopted David Rice’s plan to differentiate space by function and gender. They marked off separate spaces for sleeping and preaching. They separated the sleeping spaces for men and women and then set up a rotation to keep watch through the night to maintain the boundaries. Rice and other reformers did not aim specifically to curtail exhortation by children. But in limiting the numbers of people involved, consolidating the authorized space for preaching, and controlling the movement of people at the meeting, they made changes that eliminated the conditions that allowed exhortation by children to flourish.⁵¹

By 1804 most Presbyterians and Baptists had abandoned camp meetings to the Methodists. The Methodists kept the meetings in a routinized and orderly form. A single pulpit helped limit access to spaces that might authorize speech. Official, licensed leaders of various kinds gradually accounted for more and more of the exhortation. The youthfulness of adolescent itinerants might have reminded some of child exhorters, but the space for spontaneous exhortation by children rapidly disappeared from Methodist camp meetings.⁵²

Parts of the revival press offered a more explicit rebuke of child exhorters. The year after it launched itself with McGready’s wondrous stories of child exhorters, *The Western Missionary Magazine* ran a series of articles aimed at keeping “young professors” in line.⁵³ The most scathing of these articles, attributed to “Eubulus,” opened with a declaration that “Young converts have much less of true religion, than what they are generally thought to have.” The essay went on to insist that the true test of a work was not its appearance as an inexplicable wonder, but its production of a long-enduring piety that (by definition) only adults could claim. And the essay suggested that at least some of the spiritual exercises associated with revival had their origin in “natural affection”—all this just one year after Baxter’s vigorous defense of divine causes had appeared in the same journal.⁵⁴

Richard McNemar retained a more supernatural account of revival events but came to the same conclusion against child exhorters. McNemar joined the Shakers in 1805 and wrote *The Kentucky Revival* two years later. While he assigned children starring roles in his chapters on the revival, they disappeared once he started describing “the progress of testimony” that came with Shakerism. McNemar the Shaker showed greater wariness about bodily exercises that “furnished, at best, but a fleeting joy.” Only transformation of “all the Believer’s deportment” offered real proof of the Spirit’s activity. True Believers displayed frugality and hard work “whereby they lay up...a good foundation.” McNemar did not adopt naturalistic explanations for what he had seen. He held out hope for a very present Holy Spirit active in this world. But the proof of that activity shifted from wondrous events to economic virtues.⁵⁵

As these examples suggest, a practical consensus against exhortation by children had begun to take shape even before 1810. Leaders of both more established churches and the increasingly established revival movement took actions that made exhortation by children less common. Some

of these actions aimed primarily at other ends and limited speech by children as a side effect. Other actions and arguments aimed directly at limiting the practice of exhortation by children. Over time, rationalists and supernaturalists found their way to common ground on this topic. Different beliefs led to different styles of argument, but the practical effects were the same.

The Testimony of Silence

The convergence of adult beliefs about child exhorters intensified over time, eventually including both former leaders of the revival and the institutional heirs of those who opposed it. The naturalistic account of the Kentucky revival suggested by Eubulus reached its peak with mid-century sophisticate Robert Davidson's 1847 *History of the Presbyterian Church in Kentucky*. Davidson quickly dismissed the full range of supernatural explanations for revival. An "evil spirit" could not have produced the effects, he argued, for the Kentucky cases had little in common with demoniacs from Scripture, and the exercises led to many genuine conversions in the early days, "a result hardly compatible with the impious designs of Satanic agency." Neither could one attribute the contortions to the "special agency of the *Spirit of God*." Here Davidson again argued from comparison to Scripture, citing the well-worn texts of opponents of enthusiasm: "Bodily exercise profiteth little ... all things should be done decently and in order ... God is not the author of confusion, but of peace." Davidson also turned McGready on his head, arguing that the presence of exercises among deists and blasphemers showed that the exercises could not result from the special agency of the Spirit. Satan would not do such good work, and the Spirit would not work through such base matter.⁵⁶

While Davidson rejected supernatural explanations, he also rejected accounts that reduced the exercises to intentional "*deception and imposture*." Here Davidson followed McGready, arguing that skeptics would not have willingly participated in revival and adding as evidence the many "persons of exemplary and respectable character" who would not "conspire in so vast a fraud." Davidson rejected both supernatural and voluntarist accounts of revival wonders. He needed a theory that accounted for the phenomena as natural but involuntary.⁵⁷

He found it in the emerging mental science of his day. After taking the reader on a brief tour of animal magnetism, clairvoyance, and somnambulism, Davidson summarized his position:

That we must seek an explanation of the phenomena exhibited in Kentucky at the commencement of the present century in the Influence of the Imagination upon the Nervous System, originally stimulated by earnest hortatory preaching, venting itself in vehement ebullitions of Animal Excitement, and easily propagated by the natural operation of the laws of Sympathy; in all which there was nothing peculiar or unprecedented, except the greatness of the masses affected, and the novelty or oddity of some of the motions introduced.⁵⁸

Hot preaching produced animal excitement that spread through sympathy from one person's imagination to that of another and then from imaginations to bodies through the nervous system. The

process was both natural and involuntary. And so Davidson unmade the opposition that had structured debates earlier in the century: between voluntary, natural and fraudulent, on the one hand, and involuntary, supernatural and miraculous on the other. Davidson's mental science gave a natural explanation of children's ability to speak like adults that did not presume intention to deceive. He could acknowledge that the children's exercises were involuntary without granting any kind of supernatural agency behind them.

Exhortation by children became neither wonder nor abomination, but one in a long list of phenomena that shared a common explanation and a common evaluation. In a chapter entitled "Extravagances and Disorders of the Revival," Davidson portrayed the children as sincere but still placed their exhortations in a long list of disorders. Whatever good the children did, Davidson wrote, came from their contribution to the expansion of morality and religion. His summary of the revival reflected his ambivalence: "That it was attended by beneficial consequences, especially during the earlier stages of progress, is undeniable. Whether that good was of sufficient weight to counterbalance the varied evils introduced, is a question not so easily settled." Child exhorters got swept up into this evaluation. They became some among many, not wrong but not quite right.⁵⁹

Davidson presented himself as a sober, scientific chronicler. He gave a full chapter to his naturalistic explanation of the revival exercises, and the length and detail of the explanation suggest that the development of mental science contributed to his position. But seeing Davidson as nothing more than a dispassionate servant of rising rationalism overlooks the sharply polemic tone of his history and the fact that his conclusion fit so neatly with his interests as a representative of an established church. The expansion of the explanatory powers of mental science contributed to Davidson's position but was not the only factor at work.

One might expect an emphasis on piety and morality from Davidson. He simply extended the moderate tradition he shared with Lyle and Finley. More surprising is that by mid-century Barton Stone would be agreeing with his old opponents. Stone helped organize the revival at Cane Ridge and became a founder of the Christian movement. He led the revival at every turn. He was less McGready's heir than his younger partner, and a special target of loathing from moderates like Lyle and Davidson. But by the time Stone's autobiography was published in 1847—the same year Davidson's *History* was published—his account of child exhortation sounded more like that of Lyle than that of McGready. He told of hearing "men, women and children declaring the wonderful works of God" in the most "solemn" manner. In Stone's hands, McGready's individual, loquacious, ebullient child exhorters became solemn voices in a larger crowd. Stone did tell a few stories of individual children in this mid-century memoir. He briefly narrated how "two little girls" fell at a night meeting in Concord. "Their addresses made deep impressions on the congregation." And two other girls, sisters, fell and then rose to exhort "in language almost superhuman." Stone took pains to add, though, that "from that time they became pious members of the church, and were in constant attendance."⁶⁰ By the 1840s even a staunch revivalist sought to downplay the wonder of child exhorters and to stress the long endurance of their piety.

The change in Stone's stories about children went hand in hand with changes in the way he justified the revival. In his *Autobiography*, Stone said of the revival days that "many things transpired there which were so much like miracles that, if they were not, they had the same effect as miracles on infidels and unbeliever." Stone retained some ambiguity, but his standard of proof had shifted from the wondrous to the moral. The shift was even more transparent in his insistence that while "many eccentricities and much fanaticism" happened during the revival, "the good effects were seen and acknowledged in every neighborhood."⁶¹

Stone's changing beliefs mirrored changes in his practices. Stone's churches retained some of the camp meeting impulse, but his autobiography told no more stories of child exhorters after the camp meeting chapters. Stone's account of the religious lives of his own children was simple and brief: "All my daughters when young professed faith in Jesus and were baptized." In the years after Cane Ridge, he taught at a high school in Lexington and served as principal of the Rittenhouse Academy in Georgetown, where he helped train children not given to exhorting their elders.

By mid-century Davidson and Stone, heirs to two sides of the revival controversy, had come to see the strange events of 1799-1805 in much the same way. Rising trust in naturalistic explanation made proof by wonders implausible. And the revival movement's steady establishment of institutions gave Stone the role of denominational patriarch—and a different sort of stake in established orders. Like Davidson, Stone came to see the revival as a kind of founding act, a "fountain of light" from which the gospel still flowed.

That consensus fit closely with a host of new practices and institutions structuring the lives of Kentucky's children. Boundaries between social spheres became less permeable, especially for children. Children came to spend more time within households, and households came to be more centered on the nuclear family and more sharply distinguished from the outside world. When children did leave their homes, they tended to go to institutions that isolated them with one another and some exemplary adults.⁶² New and renewed institutions like Stone's Rittenhouse Academy and Davidson's beloved Pisgah Presbyterian grammar school sprang up across the state. Institutions that mixed generations together—like congregations—began to develop expectations for increasingly differentiated roles for children and adults. Even before 1810, both the *Western Missionary Magazine* and the Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky called for more catechesis and instruction appropriate to children *as children*. By 1832 the American Sunday School Union claimed 200 affiliates in Kentucky.⁶³ As the nineteenth century unfolded, children in Kentucky lived lives increasingly distinct from those of adults around them. They moved in separate spaces and engaged in separate practices. Ending a practice in which children mingled freely with adults and spoke in the manner of adults fit closely with this larger trend. The emerging model of childhood had little place for child exhorters like McGready described. They all but disappeared.

Their memory, though, and the memory of revival, had a stubborn staying power. It found a place in a new pattern of mutual legitimation. As an event safely in the past, the revival authorized the present churches. In their present goodness, the churches proved the truth of the revival. The

Great Revival became a founding story for the churches that descended from it, a Pentecost birthday moment. This new pattern of legitimation had no need, and no room, for present-day child exhorters. Once so necessary for an insurgent revival, the speech of children became increasingly unpersuasive in narrative and uncomfortable in practice. If the initial bid of upstarts like Stone relied on the presence of exhortation by children, the consolidation of that power depended on the successful confinement of children's public religious speech to the past. The revival movements did bring some real democratization of the power to speak, but they became lasting institutions only through a series of exclusions. The establishment of the churches in Kentucky depended on the public speech, and then the public silence, of children.

Notes

1 This essay began in a seminar taught by E. Brooks Holifield, and whatever virtues it might have surely trace back to those origins. The essay has been strengthened by comments from the audience after presentation at a meeting of the American Society of Church History, conversations with my colleague James P. Byrd, and the extraordinarily helpful suggestions of the anonymous reviewers for *Practical Matters*. The mistakes and shortcomings are my own responsibility.

2 Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival: Or, a Short History of the Late Extraordinary Outpouring of the Spirit of God in the Western States of America* (New York: Edward O. Jenkins, 1846), 26.

3 McGready, "A Short Narrative," 101,

4 James McGready, "A Short Narrative of the Revival of Religion in Logan County," *Western Missionary Magazine* I (February 1803), 27-28; (March 1803), 45-54; (April 1803), 99-103; (June 1803), 172-173. For the significance of McGready's *Short Narrative*, see Paul K. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 56.

Throughout this essay I have tried to use the word "child" in a way that tracks with the ways people writing about revival used the term. People up to twelve years of age were clearly and widely identified as "children," "boys," and "girls," as these stories from McNemar and McGready begin to suggest. People from about thirteen to about sixteen years of age were sometimes still called "children," but, especially as they got older, they were more likely to be described using forms of "young" or "youth." I found no references to people over sixteen as "children."

5 Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 12.

6 John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 57.

7 A series of excellent studies has described some of the ways adults understood and related to children. The essays in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001) and *Children and Childhood in American Religions*, ed. Don S. Browning and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009) do this kind of work very well. Some recent studies have tried to focus more on documents that children produced themselves. See, for instance, E. Brooks Holifield, "Let the Children Come: The Religion of the Protestant Child in Early America," *Church History* 76.4 (December 2007), 750-777). In this essay I am trying to do some of each kind of study and to begin to relate them to one another. I am trying to describe what children made of revival, what adults interested in revival made of children, and the relationship between the two.

8 Ibid., 43-44.

9 Edward P. Humphrey and Thomas H. Cleland, *Memoirs of the Rev. Thomas Cleland, D.D., Compiled from his Private Papers* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wiltach, Keys, & Co., 1859), 32, 50-51.

10 Boles, 21. Methodist Church membership declined from 67,643 in 1794 to 61,351 in 1800.

11 Robert Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky* (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 99-103.

12 Davidson, 104. On the centrality and significance of these sacramental meetings, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

13 Ibid., 36-37.

14 On economic and political development in Kentucky, see Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999), Part II. On the migration of religious practices and institutions to Kentucky, see, for instance, Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*.

15 "Authority," Pierre Bourdieu wrote, "comes to language from outside." Resisting Saussure's notion of the autonomous power of language, Bourdieu insisted on the role of institutions in making speech authoritative. The speech of an authorized speaker "concentrates within it the accumulated symbolic capital of the group which has delegated him and of which he is the *authorized representative*." See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Social Conditions for the Effectiveness of Ritual Discourse," in *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, transl. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 109-111.

16 See Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 36.

17 Jonathan Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. IV, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 199ff. See also Catherine A. Brekus, "Children of Wrath, Children of Grace: Jonathan Edwards and the Puritan Culture of Child Rearing," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand

Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 300-28.

18 Jonathan Edwards, “The Distinguishing Marks,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. IV, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 214-288.

19 Robert Marshall, John Dunlavy, Richard M’Nemar, Barton W. Stone, John Thompson, “An Apology for Renouncing the Jurisdiction of the Synod of Kentucky: To Which is Added, A Compendious View of the Gospel and a Few Remarks on the Confession of Faith” (Lexington, Ky. Reprinted Carlisle, Pa: George Kline, 1805).

20 McGready, “A Short Narrative,” 50-51.

21 Paul K. Conkin, *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 20-22.

22 Davidson, 159.

23 Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 84. Cf. Schmidt, 42.

24 Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 18. See also the letter from a Presbyterian minister in Kentucky to another in Philadelphia, dated August, 1801 in *The Methodist Magazine* 25(1802), 264.

25 John Evans Finley, letter dated September 20, 1801, in Cleveland, 79. Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 96.

26 Finley, 79. John Lyle, *Narratio Factorum*, unpublished manuscript held by the Kentucky Historical Society Special Collections, Frankfort, Kentucky, 26.

27 The authority of the children depended on the crowds’ *recognition* of their performances as authoritative. This recognition depended mostly on what Bourdieu called “incorporated signs” like tone, posture, and rhythm – features like the ones I have described in this section of the essay. What Bourdieu called “external signs” – the paraphernalia of ordained clergy, for instance – mattered far less. See Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, transl. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 94.

28 James McGready, *The Posthumous Works of the Reverend James M’Gready*, ed. James Smith, (Nashville: J. Smith’s Steam Press, 1837), vol. I, iv. Lyle, 26. Davidson, 104, 119.

29 Charles Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*. (Hicksville, NY: The Regina Press, 1975; Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1743), 226.

30 Lyle, 15.

31 Davidson, 157. Letter from a “Gentleman in Kentucky to his friend in Philadelphia, dated June 3, 1801,” in *The Methodist Magazine* 25(1802), 264.

32 Letter from a Presbyterian minister in Kentucky, 264.

33 McGready, “A Short Narrative,” 101,

34 Letter from a Presbyterian minister in Kentucky, 264.

35 Patterson, 118-120.

36 I borrow language of “regulated improvisation” from Bourdieu, *Outline*, 79.

37 The views of adults described here fit the broader account described in Margaret Bendroth, “Children of Adam, Children of God: Christian Nurture in Early Nineteenth-Century America,” *Theology Today* 56.4 (January, 2000), 495-505.

38 The child exhorters add an interesting wrinkle to Bernard Wishy’s classic story of the development of the “child redeemer.” Wishy described the emergence of a notion of children as “redeemable” around 1830. Around 1870, Wishy argued, children came to be seen as possessing “superior energy, purity or magic” as children that contributed to the redemption of adults. The child exhorters from the Kentucky revivals complicate this story. They offer an early instance of children being seen as playing an active role in the redemption of adults. And, significantly, they do their work not as “child redeemers,” but by leaving the limits of childhood behind. See Bernard W. Wishy, *The Child and the Republic: The Dawn of Modern American Child Nurture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 85.

39 McGready, 50.

40 McGready, “A Short Narrative,” 50-51.

41 McNemar, 21.

42 Ibid., 20.

43 Lyle, 66, 21-22, 94.

44 Ibid., 19.

45 Ibid., 120.

46 For examples of Lyle’s discussions of children, see 20, 34, 41-42, 62, 70, 91, and 134.

47 Ibid., 10.

48 Anonymous, “Remarks on Baxter’s Letter,” *The Western Missionary Magazine* (December 1803), 458-60. George Baxter, “Baxter’s Defense,” *The Western Missionary Magazine* (December 1803), 460-466. Baxter’s original letter can be found in the *New York Missionary Magazine and Repository of Religious Intelligence* (1802), 86-92.

49 McGready, “A Short Narrative,” 100.

50 Ibid., 50.

51 Baxter, letter to Alexander, 88; Davidson, 160.

52 Roger Robins, “Vernacular American Landscape: Methodists, Camp Meetings, and Social Respectability,” *Religion and American Culture*, 4/2 (Summer, 1994), 165-191.

53 Trophimus, “Address to Young Professors,” *The Western Missionary Magazine II* (January 1804), 23-

27. Eubulus, "Imperfection of Young Converts," *The Western Missionary Magazine* II (June 1804), 72-75. Anonymous, "Of the Importance of Family Prayer" *The Western Missionary Magazine* II (July 1804), 105-107. Zepho, "The Days of Youth: On the Importance of Early Piety," *The Western Missionary Magazine* II (August 1804), 146-154.

54 Eubulus, 75.

55 McNemar, 89-92.

56 Davidson, 170-171.

57 Ibid., 171.

58 Ibid., 184. Davidson's language supports Ann Taves's argument that a new vocabulary of mental science began to emerge after 1829 to explain religious experience. See Taves, *Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

59 Davidson, 159.

60 Barton W. Stone, "A Short History of the Life of Barton W. Stone," in James R. Rogers, *The Cane Ridge Meeting House* (Cincinnati: the Standard Publishing Company, 1910), 154, 156, 159-60.

61 Stone, 182-83, 191-3, 158, 162.

62 Barbara Finklestein, "Casting Networks of Good Influence: The Reconstruction of Childhood in the United States, 1790-1870," in *American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook*, Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner, eds. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 111-152.

63 Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 31.