

Peter Hon and the 'Kentucky Dunkards'

by David B. Eller

The preacher had worked the camp meeting for all he was worth, and had stirred the people mightily. His exhortation had opened the Kentucky frontier folk to an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that had 30 or 40 of them pushing forward to be baptized.

As was his wont, the preacher let his converts choose their own mode of baptism. Some were dipped once backward, some once forward, some three times forward, and others had the water poured on them.

Finally there remained just one woman waiting on the bank.

"How do you desire to be baptized, Sister?" asked the preacher.

"Sprinkled," she replied.

The preacher cupped water in his hands and started up the steep bank. The way was slick with mud from all the baptism traffic. His feet slipped, he threw out his hands to save himself, and the water was lost.

Nothing daunted by his mishap, the preacher rubbed his muddy hands on the woman's face and pronounced her baptized.

It is no wonder that Peter Hon was remembered as a colorful and down-to-earth preacher. And it is no wonder that a Brethren member in that throng on the Kentucky creek bank shouted out when he saw Hon apply the mud, "That is neither law nor gospel baptism!" And another brother reflected later, "I should think if there are any who desire to walk in the Lord's ways, blameless before him, they would accept of the form in the great commission."

Controversy developed over Brethren doctrine and practice wherever Peter Hon was active, and from that and his effective preaching he was one of the best-known Brethren leaders in the Ohio Valley in the 1830s and '40s. From his home in the rural East Union section of Nicholas County, Ky., preaching trips took him into numerous communities in central Kentucky, southern Indiana, and southern Ohio. Indeed, an 1830s traveler in Lexington inquiring about the "Dunkards" might well have been directed to Hon's congregation some 30 miles to the

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east, near Sharpsburg.

Peter Hon's parents, Jonas and Mary Keithly Hon, migrated to Kentucky about 1785, settling with other Dunkers of Carolina background along the Hinkston Creek, near where the present-day counties of Bourbon, Nicholas, Montgomery, and Bath come together. A church took form here at an early date, and a log meetinghouse was built on Somerset Creek (Nicholas County), shortly after 1819. Hon was born near here in 1791 and spent most of his life in this general vicinity. At 17 he married Elizabeth Clark, age 20, and they raised a family of 12 children.

Peter Hon may have been placed in the ministry as early as 1814, for in that year he accompanied Adam Hostetler, a Brethren minister from Shelby County, as far west as the Mississippi River on an itinerant preaching trip. In frontier Illinois they ordained George Wolfe, who would later become the well-known leader of the "Far Western Brethren" (See "George Wolfe: Giant in Illinois," May 1984). Neither Hostetler nor Hon remained in the traditional Brethren (German Baptist) fellowship long after Wolfe's ordination, but the story of what happened to them is far from clear. Apparently two councils were held in Kentucky over the matter between 1816

and 1826—one in Muhlenberg County and one at Hostetler's home in Shelby County.

Abraham Harley Cassel, 19th century Brethren antiquary and book collector, believed that the Kentucky Brethren had become "too zealous in religious excitements." Cassel undoubtedly was referring to the influence of the "Second Great Awakening," which began in Bourbon County, Ky., in 1801. Thousands of people are believed to have camped out at the Cane Ridge Presbyterian meetinghouse, where they experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit almost beyond description. A wave of religious enthusiasm followed that shaped the course of Protestantism in the Ohio Valley for decades. Although the first Brethren in the area were probably still German-speaking sectarians, it is difficult to see how they could have escaped the effects of the awakening. The East Union community is located only a few miles southeast of Cane Ridge.

Other issues in the Hostetler-Hon controversy may have included plain dress and slavery. In any event, Hostetler was instrumental in organizing the Kentucky Brethren into their own "Association" independent from the "old Brethren" in the East, and, presumably, independent from the Annual Meeting, as well. This group



Above: Peter and Elizabeth Hon.

was variously known as the "Kentucky Dunkards" or "Hostetler Brethren." While there are no Annual Meeting minutes that record this division, it was the largest that the Brethren had yet experienced. By 1825 it came to include 15 or more congregations with 2,000 members and 24 "teachers" (ministers). These churches were in southern Indiana and central Kentucky.

This independent Brethren Association had not functioned long, however, before other forces brought about its dissolution. This was accomplished primarily through Joseph Hostetler, the "boy preacher" of Orange County, Ind., and a nephew of Adam Hostetler; Abraham Kern of Lawrence County, Ind.; and Peter Hon—all native Kentuckians—with a little help from Alexander Campbell.

Campbell, surely one of the most famous preachers in the West, and his associates in the "Restoration" movement

Peter Hon 'labors constantly'

Sharpsburg, Ky., Aug. 12, 1842:

It affords me great pleasure to give you an account of a meeting held at the Union Meeting House, about four miles from this, usually known by the appellation of the Tunker Church. This church was established many years ago by the labors of one of the most pious, devoted, and talented among those pious and good brethren, the Tunkers.

When brother Peter Hon first commenced his labors there, his zeal, piety, and devotion soon induced many to turn to the Lord, who even then, according to the laws of these Brethren, were received into the church by being immersed three times, face foremost, in a kneeling posture.

Brother Hon has continued his labors constantly from the first up to this time, and being one among a thousand of our race who seeks the truth for the love of it, he has always been willing to give up error for the sake of truth, and in love instruct his brethren who might differ with him.

Since the commencement of this reformation he has nobly abandoned and laid aside two of his immersions, and through love and truth persuaded all the churches under his care to do the same.

A more pious and godly people I have never known. . . . It was truly a time of rejoicing . . . making in all 251 that brother Hon has baptized (in different churches) within the last 9 or 10 weeks.

—MOSES RYAN

From the Millennium Harbinger, November 1842, a periodical published by Alexander Campbell.



Peter Hon's lichen-spotted gravestone in the East Union burying ground has him born October 1791 and dying March 21, 1876.

fervently wanted to restore the practices of the New Testament church. This included a call for unity of all Christians based on the Scriptures alone—discarding denominational (“party”) names and holding to a simple order of worship, weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper, immersion baptism for the remission of sins, and local congregational policy with no over-arching church structures. These ideas, publicized through public debates, periodicals, pamphlets, and revival preaching, spread the movement like wildfire in the Midwest during the 1820s and 1830s.

While a few Brethren in Pennsylvania and elsewhere may have been warmed by these proposals, the Hostetler Brethren were engulfed by the flame. Through personal correspondence with Joseph Hostetler, Campbell was able to convince him to abandon the Brethren ordinances of trine immersion and the traditional love feast. By 1828 the schismatic Brethren Association dissolved and joined with other Baptist groups in calling themselves “Christians.” Eventually they became known as “Disciples of Christ” (popularly, “Campbellites”).

Hon was among those in the Association who led in the change to single-immersion baptism. Presumably, he made this switch sometime in the early 1820s. Oddly enough, from 1821 to the early 1830s, the Brethren Annual Meeting actually permitted membership through single immersion! In any event, during the 1830s and 1840s, Hon’s influence as an itinerant evangelist was the greatest. It

is estimated that during his long ministry he led 3,000 souls through the baptismal waters.

By all accounts he was an unusually gifted homespun preacher. While clearly identified with the Restoration by 1830, Hon retained feetwashing and perhaps some other Brethren ordinances. His congregation increased dramatically to about 400 members (including slaves) but continued to be known as “Dunkards,” a situation that one of Campbell’s critics considered scandalous. Hon’s itinerant ministry also took place primarily among former Brethren churches.

During a trip through Kentucky in 1840, Campbell met Hon, later calling him “an excellent brother” and saluting him as a “brother and fellow laborer in the Lord.” A letter that Hon wrote to Campbell in 1843 mentions the plain manner in which he was raised, his quite limited education, his “homely” zeal to warn sinners to flee from the wrath to come,” and his planting of seven or eight congregations. Included on his irregular circuit were the Corinth, Upper Slate, and Antioch churches in eastern Montgomery County, the “old Log Union” church in Fleming County, and other preaching points in Nicholas and Bath counties as well.

In southern Ohio, Hon’s followers were dubbed “Honites.” A few families from the East Union settlement had moved to Highland County in the 1810s, which gave Hon an opportunity to visit Brethren in this area. According to tradition, he was at first welcomed by John Countryman of the Brush Creek congregation, but they later fell out over Hon’s preaching that the Lord’s supper should not be celebrated in the manner of the Jewish Passover. After Hon’s adoption of single-mode immersion, his faction pulled away and organized the Union Church (1832), which grew rapidly. A second congregation was formed near Danville, which Hon also regularly visited. Union and Danville for many years were the largest Restoration churches in the county. Both observed

feetwashing into the 1850s.

By contrast, relatively little is known about Hon’s activities from the early 1850s to his death in 1876. It was a time in the Restoration movement when better educated clergy assumed leadership positions and implemented structures that made the Disciples appear more and more like yet another American denomination. The days of the fiery backwoods preacher typical of Hon’s early years were numbered. Hon, then in his 60s, ceased annual visits to churches in southern Ohio.

From about 1850 to 1852, Hon may have moved to near Napoleon, Gallatin County, where he founded the Sugar Creek Christian Church. His son Daniel was pastor here for many years. By the late 1850s, however, Hon was back in Montgomery County, where he resumed preaching among small rural churches that could not afford a pastor.

His wife died in 1865 and was buried in the old East Union cemetery, where he would also be laid to rest 11 years later. Recognizing the need for companionship during his senior years, Hon contracted a marriage with Mary Ann Wright, of Bath County, in 1866. She was to receive no part of his estate, but \$50 a year until his death, and one riding colt. He, on the other hand, claimed no part of her property.

Hon’s will was drawn up in 1869. He apparently owned considerable property (the estate was valued at about \$21,000) and during the difficult years after the Civil War he was comfortably settled. The will also provided: “to my old and faithful Negro woman Margaret who has never left me since she was freed . . . the sum of Five Hundred dollars.”

While Brethren have largely forgotten Peter Hon’s challenge to the mode of baptism and love feast, his legacy lives on in the rural churches he organized and pastored, several of which are still active today. He died a “father in Israel,” a well-loved pioneer preacher of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church). □

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