A SURVEY OF EVANGELISM IN AMERICA

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Mass evangelism is particularly an American phenomenon, if by mass evangelism we mean using means on a large scale. Interestingly, America produced no mass evangelists until Finney, and he began his career not as a mass evangelist but as a revivalist. I draw a distinction between these terms because of an essential difference in function between them.

A mass evangelist is basically a promoter. True enough, he promotes the most valuable commodity in the world—the gospel—but he cannot be distinguished (except for his product) from any other promoter of large scale enterprises. To that extent he uses appealing advertising, a convenient and comfortable place of assembly, a committee to make advance arrangements, a budget, and a follow up committee to handle the new converts. I don't mean to imply that spiritual forces are not at work in such enterprises which are over and beyond the merely human. I mean only that mechanical means occupy a large part of the effort of such evangelists, indeed distinguish them, even though I readily admit that great and immense good may come through such efforts.

The revivalist, on the other hand, does not rely upon mechanical means for his success but seems endued with a power which is irrepressible. This power is manifest mostly in preaching but not necessarily. Sometimes the revivalist's part in a prayer meeting, or even his physical presence in a group of people is sufficient to communicate spiritual power strong enough to cause the bystanders to cry to God for mercy. A revivalist seems to be successful in persuading people largely through invisible means, whereas the evangelist succeeds by both the visible and the invisible means. The efforts of a revivalist eventuate in revival, whereas the efforts of an evangelist result in individual conversions.

Having arbitrarily distinguished between the two kinds of agents in American mass evangelism, I would like to suggest that early American evangelism was of the revivalistic type, while later American evangelism (specifically after 1830) has followed the evangelistic type.

EDWARDS AND THE COLONIALISTS

The first giant in American evangelism was Jonathan Edwards

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(1703-1758) who arrived on the scene in a happy arrangement of circumstances as far as evangelism is concerned. Edwards began his work in New York and later moved to New England at a time when the Holy Spirit was choosing to make deep and lasting impressions on the English speaking world. So far as I can discover, the earliest evidence of the moving of God's spirit on American soil massively, was in the ministry of Theodore Jacob Frelinghuysen in the 1720's in the Raritan Valley of New Jersey. Frelinghuysen was a Dutch pietist who felt called to leave his native land to settle among the Dutch colonists of New Jersey in order to induce in them a deep sense of spirituality and godliness. The result of his preaching, which was severe and legalistic, was a spontaneous spirit of repentance and contrition which revitalized the Dutch community.

Excited by the news of such a revival, and influenced by it to a remarkable degree, was an Irish Anglican priest by the name of William Tennent (Sr.) who had migrated to America from his native land in 1716 in order to effect a break with the Anglican church which, he maintained, espoused doctrines contrary to the Word of God. He began preaching under Presbyterian auspices in both New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania with remarkable success. In 1726 he founded the famous "Log College" to train "gracious youths" for the gospel ministry and by this means kept the revival fires fed. The Log College later became the College of New Jersey and still later Princeton University. Please note that the years in which both Frelinghuysen and Tennent induced revival in America antecede the beginnings of the Evangelical revival in Great Britain.

It was in this burgeoning revivalism that Jonathan Edwards, now pastor of the Northampton, Massachusetts Congregational Church, began to preach a severe and harsh message. Fearing a rising Arminianism, which to Edwards was the first step toward man's self deification, he began to stress the wrath of God against independent human thought and behavior and the result was "an alteration in the whole town" in 1734-35 which appeared so quickly and extensively that Edwards believed the millennial kingdom of Christ was near at hand.

Edward's own account of this revival, *A Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God,* was a best seller in its day, going through twenty printings in three years and became, according to Robert T. Oliver, the basic text for revival study for a hundred years. Edwards admitted that the extent of the revival was greater than anything reached by his famous grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. It was even "beyond any former outpouring of the Spirit that was ever known in New England."[1] The revival in Northampton spread far and wide up and down the Colonies and became known as the Great Awakening, "the greatest

1. Jonathan Edwards, *Edwards on Revivals* (New York: Dunning and Spalding, 1832), 178-179.

revival," says Orville Hitchcock, "in American history."[2] This statement, I must add, includes the second phase of the New England revival in 1740-41, in which Edwards was assisted by the itinerating George Whitefield of England and by Gilbert and William Tennent Jr. of Pennsylvania. The span of five years (1735-1740) was the period in which the Evangelical Revival of England was born. Whitefield arrived in New England after his amazing success among the Kingswood Colliers in the early Spring of 1739 in which both he and John Wesley took to the open air for the first time in preaching the gospel. By this time, however, revival had been a steady occurrence in the Colonies for almost two decades.

The Great Awakening reached its peak with the famous Enfield sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God." A sense of apocalypticism prevailed over New England as a result of the sweeping revival, and Edwards' cogent description of God's terrible wrath against unrepentant sinners drove the people to cling to the pillars for support. Eye-witnesses pronounced it the most awesome movement of God ever seen in that area.

The effects of the Great Awakening diminished in the succeeding years and Edwards ended his preaching years bemoaning the lack of results.

The focus of revival power in the following generation shifted to the frontier, when men like Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury transplanted to the westward pioneers the fervor of the English awakening. This phase of revival was Methodist rather than Puritan and the emotional excesses went beyond those which followed the Great Awakening. In contrast to these frontier revivals, however, a revival among intellectuals occurred under the leadership of Timothy Dwight (himself a desendent of Jonathan Edwards) in 1797 at Yale University.

In summary of Colonial evangelism one might say it was predominantly Calvinistic in theology, harsh in message, and produced exciting results. Frontier revivalism was more Arminian in theology, as fervent in proclamation, as condemnatory in character, but produced more bizarre responses than the colonial type. Results were achieved by God's Spirit through dedicated men with no more means than prayer, the Bible, and a songbook. Massive preparation and detailed organization were not thought of, indeed were considered unnecessary and even carnal. With the coming of Charles G. Finney, however, these attitudes changed and so did the course of American evangelism thereafter.

Charles G. Finney and His New Measures

Charles G. Finney's spectacular work in western New York State in the early 1820's was primarily as a revivalist. Wholesale outpourings

2. Orville A. Hitchcock, "Jonathan Edwards," *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, Vol. I (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1943), 235.

followed his severe preaching and communities were reformed almost over night. With no more means than a praying friend, a zealous heart, and an open Bible, Finney's revivalism swept small towns like Antwerp, Evans Mills, Rome and others in the "burned over district" of New York. Sometimes his mere presence was enough to set the work of repentance going in the hearts of men.

By 1830, the larger cities of the frontier region were asking for his services. The Rochester, New York, campaign of 1830-31 was Finney's greatest in terms of extent and influence; it was also his greatest in terms of a direct contribution to a new form of evangelism—that produced by what he called "the new measures."

These new measures were:

1. Services held at unseasonable hours and often continued for days in order to break down the congregation.
2. Prayers which were highly emotional and hortative in content.
3. Women were allowed to pray in mixed assemblies.
4. The speaker used harsh, colloquial, and direct language.
5. The speaker named specific individuals in praying and preaching.
6. Prayer circles were introduced, as were inquiring meetings and personal counseling of converts.
7. The anxious bench was used.

These means were a daring innovation in evangelistic circles at this time, causing men like Asahel Nettleton and Lyman Beecher of New England to attack Finney for interfering with God's work in the human heart. Finney's response was that means were used in the natural realm (the farmer sowing seed in order to gain a harvest) why should they not be used in the spiritual realm? He went on to insist that revivals were so controlled by spiritual laws that any church could have one any time it met the conditions.

From Finney's day on, every major American evangelist has used means in order to produce results. The technique of the large urban crusades was perfected by Dwight L. Moody between 1870-1880; but Moody's work differed only in degree, not in kind, from that of Finney. Finney paved the way to what McLoughlin calls "manipulation" in evangelism, while Moody added the flamboyance of expert salesmanship on a massive scale.

Finney's "new measures" came by him naturally. Himself a lawyer, he sought "every available means of persuasion." Whatever it took to move men Finney justified by the ends sought. A master psychologist, he knew what moved the human heart. He sought by every ethical, moral and spiritual means possible to catalyze, paralyze, and finally revitalize the person with whom he was dealing. Of course he believed that salva-

tion was ultimately of God, as was revival, but he believed also that God allowed Himself to be approached by means, by conditions, and these Finney used, and urged others to use them, in order to obtain God's blessing.

Finney was an evangelist all his life; but he was also a theologian and a college president. He lived a long, useful life and by the time of his death he had successfully married the Frontier to the East; the new measures with the old; and the new mass evangelism with the old frontier revivalism.

D. L. Moody and His Business Evangelism

When D. L. Moody left business in 1860 to give himself full time to evangelism, the nation was torn with the slavery question and teetered on the brink of Civil War. A decade later the industrial revolution caused an exodus of young men to the cities with its consequent moral and spiritual degradation. And two decades later the church began to feel the effects of higher criticism and its resultant questioning of Biblical authority. All of these issues Moody treated with one remedy: the gospel. To a dying soldier in a military hospital Moody offered the good news; the same message he gave to the lonely, wayward, youth fresh in from the farm; and the same again to a Bible critic whether learned or ignorant.

Moody's great joy was the gospel; his great optimism was that the gospel worked; and his chief ability was to convince thousands of people to give it a try.

As an evangelist, Moody was a trail blazer. In the area of ideas he cut a new path with his emphasis on God's love. All previous proclaimers preached harshly, emphasizing conditions which had to be met and doleful consequences if they were not. Moody on the other hand captured the "sweet south side" of Jesus Christ and preached a hopeful, possible gospel offered by a God to whom man really meant something.

It was Harry Morehouse, the Dublin ex-prize fighter who opened Moody's eyes to this new dimension of truth. In the Chicago Avenue church, Morehouse preached for a whole week on John 3:16 until Moody was melted. "I never knew," he said, "that God loved us so much. This heart of mine began to thaw out...I could not help loving people."[3] In a day of great social disruption, such an emphasis as this in Moody's preaching made him irresistible.

In another area, also, Moody took a new turn. Previously all major evangelists had been post-millennialists. Their revivalistic efforts, they believed, would hasten the establishment of the kingdom on earth. Not so with Moody. He embraced the Dispensational interpretation of the Bible expoused by the Plymouth Brothers. He preached a progressively

3. Richard K. Curtis, *They Called Him Mister Moody* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 134.

darkening end time and a premillennial return of Christ as the only hope of mankind. For Moody, evangelism was a means of plucking survivors from a sinking ship before the whole vessel went down to destruction.

Further, Moody was the first major evangelist to perform as successfully abroad as he did at home. In fact, Moody's "Six Miracle Years" (1873-79) actually began in Scotland where he achieved astounding success in 1873-74. He returned to England a decade later and was equally as successful. It is true that Finney preached in England during the 1859 revival, and was helpful, but not on the scale in which Moody captured the hearts of the British.

By the time Moody died in 1899 he had perfected United States mass evangelism techniques which were continued by Billy Sunday and, in our day, by Billy Graham. The techniques logically grew out of Finney's philosophy, but Moody added zest, physical stamina, bigness, excitement, and an emphasis on the education of new converts.

Billy Sunday and the Patriotic Pitch

With Billy Sunday, the ex-baseball player, American evangelism took a decidedly patriotic turn. He was a blend of the Roosevelt ideal of Americanism and physical fitness. In content, Sunday was the weakest of all the evangelists, in delivery the strongest.

Backing into evangelism when J. Wilbur Chapman suddenly canceled his commitments, Sunday borrowed a few of Chapman's sermons and began to preach in Garner, Iowa in 1896. "As an evangelist," said McLoughlin, "Sunday was a success from the start."[4] From 1896 to 1901 he held over sixty campaigns in the Middle West. At this time he had no staff, no musician, and made no financial demands. He continued Moody's type of message and his techniques, except he had no inquiry room. Like Moody, Sunday had a magnetic personality.

In 1898 Sunday began to use tents to accommodate his crowds, a custom Finney used in his summer revivals at Oberlin. Sunday's growing success caused him to try a tabernacle type structure in Perry, Iowa in 1901. This highly economical move became a hallmark of Sunday from then on. Huge tabernacles went up all over the nation, housing multiplied thousands who pressed in to hear him.

In 1900 Sunday began to create a staff, to make more financial demands, and to become more bold and flamboyant in his style and delivery. America, on the threshold of emerging as a world power, loved this aggressive evangelism and opened its heart to this glittening pulpiteer. He began to preach more on social topics and to blend his gospel appeal with Prohibition and Clean Government. His campaigns became crusades against social evils and in this way he went beyond his contemporaries

4. William G. McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (University of Chicago Press, 1955), 15.

and even his predecessors. He became more vaudevillian in his platform antics, offered entertainment as a bait to lure in the unsaved and was compared favorably to Clara Morris and George M. Cohan.

During the First World War, Sunday moved to the major cities of the nation, attacking New York itself in 1917 at the peak of his career and the peak of the war fever against the Kaiser. President Wilson invited him to the White House to ask his personal help on behalf of the war effort because, as he said to Sunday, "You have the ear of the people."

Sunday responded with characteristic fervor, sold hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of war bonds. He also generalized his invitations to those who would take "their stand for God and country." People responded to such appeals by multiplied thousands.

By the time the 1920's arrived, Billy Sunday's work began to decline. The war was over, Prohibition had won its day, and the evangelist, who had so successfully wedded the gospel with relevant issues found himself without a message. Sunday made the mistake of becoming too contemporaneous, of identifying the gospel too closely with issues which were bound to change and thus put himself out of business. Plagued by family sorrow, by scandal concerning his own staff, by his handling of finances, Sunday's influence declined until he suffered a fatal heart attack on November 6, 1935.

Billy Graham and World Outreach

William Franklin Graham Jr. was a high school student when his evangelistic predecessor, Billy Sunday, died in 1935. Converted in a tent revival on his father's farm, Graham did not evince much spiritual ardor until he attended the Florida Bible Institute at Tampa where he was exposed to leading evangelists of the day and where a yearning to restore mass evangelism to its earlier respectability was born within him. While at school he began to preach and almost from the start he exhibited the ability to persuade people, most noticeably in his invitations, during which time, by his own confession, he sensed the power of God in an irresistible manner.

Friendship with members of the V. R. Edman family brought Graham to Wheaton College where he and the president became close friends. After graduation he assumed the direction of a radio program, *Songs in the Night,* formerly run by Torrey M. Johnson, who began to conceive of a youth work which later came to be known as Youth For Christ. When the work started, Johnson persuaded Graham to join the staff and tour the country in "one night stands." This increased Graham's popularity, and exposed him to leading evangelicals. Later Graham gathered his own evangelistic staff and, with growing success, moved slowly away from the auspices of the youth organization.

In the fall of 1949 Graham broke into the headlines, with his astound-

ing success at the "Canvas Cathedral" in Los Angeles. Outwardly speaking, William Randolph Hearst's decision to "puff Graham," plus the conversions of a few renowned "sinners," caused Graham's rise to fame. Inwardly, the causes may be attributed to Graham's revitalized grasp of Biblical authority, and an intense prayer atmosphere generated by Christians who supported the "Canvas Cathedral" meetings.

The nation received Graham with both joy and misgiving. Only gradually did he win the esteem of the press, leaders of the more liberally minded denominations, and the general public. He was enthusiastically endorsed by conservatives, except by members of the extreme right wing.

Graham continued the same methods which Finney, Moody, and Sunday used before him. Unlike Sunday, Graham put himself on salary, eliminated the theatrical from his meetings, and by sincerity was able to put mass evangelism on the level of a Moody-type respectability. Graham's followup methods are probably the most intensive of any evangelist. Further, Graham has been exported abroad as no other American evangelist has. His campaigns in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and other places have won for him many plaudits, honors, and titles. He is truly America's "ambassador of good will;" just as truly he is also God's ambassador of the gospel to all men. In addition, Graham uses the multiplied outreach of the electronic media, unknown in the days of the other evangelists. Thus he has become the most heard, seen, and read evangelist in the history of the church.

In the use of meeting places, Graham differs from his predecessors. Finney was the first to popularize the tent, Moody used Opera Houses and Auditoriums, Sunday built his tabernacles, but Graham uses Amphitheatres and Athletic stadiums. His ideas, however, are a continuation of the Moody-Sunday tradition, especially with regard to eschatology. Like Moody and Sunday also, Graham is personally appealing, although he preaches a harsher message than did Moody, and is less reform minded than Sunday (although there are signs of a change in this direction).

Graham's contributions to American evangelism may be summed up as: (1) an international appeal; (2) the use of electronic media; and (3) the use of large stadiums. All of these indicate the widening influence of the American type evangelism in the modern world.