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Evangelicalism and Revivalism

By Michael S. Hamilton

This painting depicts the historic moment when Whitefield preached one of his most moving sermons, close to Halliwell, Bolton UK in June 1750. Whitefield in contemporary accounts was held to be the founder of Methodism rather than John Wesley. He was also possibly the first modern celebrity and people flocked to hear his rousing sermons.

EVANGELICALISM AND REVIVALISM are a related set of terms that label aspects of Christianity.

Evangelism

Evangelism is the promulgation of the Christian religion among those who are not Christians. Evangelism has been a central impulse of Christianity since its beginning in the first century AD, and is one of the main reasons the Christian religion has spread around the globe. In American history, Christians have employed an enormous variety of activities for evangelism – preaching, Sunday schools, catechism classes, music, drama, publishing, radio and television broadcasts, special interest activities, small-group meetings, person-to-person relationships – and a set of activities commonly summed up in the term "revivalism."

Revivalism

Revivalism is a set of religious practices that produce an atmosphere of spiritual intensity with two goals in mind: to convince non-Christians to convert to Christianity, and to convince Christians to revitalize their faith. Revivalism centers on vigorous preaching and audience singing of popular religious songs. The preaching and the singing aim at eliciting both rational and emotional responses from the audience.

Protestant revivalism developed out of two late seventeenth-century European movements – English Puritanism and Continental Pietism. The Puritans contributed an emphasis on visible conversion. Adults or older children were expected to be able to tell the story of how they had become aware of their sinfulness and its ultimate

consequence – death – and how they had become Christians as a result. The Puritans often described the event of becoming a Christian as the “New Birth.” At other times and places, it has been described as “trusting Christ,” “experiencing salvation,” making a “decision for Christ,” or being “born again.”

Pietism contributed an emphasis on personally experiencing the divine, resulting in holy living. Pietism developed in Germany in reaction against the formalism of state-church Lutheranism and the aridity of Protestant theology. The early Pietists formed small groups for prayer, Bible study, and exhortation to live by Christian principles. They emphasized the priesthood of all believers, and that true Christian faith led one to a relationship with God rather than mere knowledge about God. They avoided theological disputation, favoring instead devotional activities and charitable acts.

Puritanism and Pietism were not insulated from each other; in the late seventeenth century they mingled each other's main characteristics. They fused most dynamically in the 1740s in the Methodist movement of John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield. Two of its most innovative elements were field preaching and popular hymnody. When Whitefield met resistance from Anglican clergy, he moved his preaching venues outside the churches to homes, meeting halls, and even pastures. Charles Wesley was the movement's songwriter, and all the Methodist preachers used his singable and memorable hymns to reinforce the movement's message. Methodism eventually became a main source for American revivalism, and open preaching-and-singing services on denominationally neutral ground became one of revivalism's hallmarks.

These fused Puritan and Pietist elements were transplanted to the English North American colonies in the 1720s and 1730s. Several colonial preachers – the best-remembered is the Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards – gained regional notoriety for effectively preaching a message of individual conversion and holy living. Then revivalism became an intercolonial phenomenon when Whitefield undertook a series of itinerant preaching tours that drew enormous crowds throughout the middle colonies and New England. Between 1740 and his death thirty years later, Whitefield may have been the most famous person in the colonies. Historians have called this upsurge of revivalism America's “First Great Awakening.” It instituted the main pattern for subsequent American revivalism: nondenominational settings, the absence of social distinctions in the audience, using popular religious songs to engage audience participation and passion, and itinerant preachers exhorting people to New Birth, holy living, and “revival” of religious zeal in local churches.

Existing denominations and local churches divided sharply over whether revivalism helped or hurt them. Many revivalists, Whitefield included, antagonized local clergy by accusing them of spiritual deadness. Some leaders of Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Reformed, and Anglican churches welcomed the revivalists; others believed that revivalism undercut their authority, diluted their theology, and diminished the distinctiveness of their denomination.

Revivalism was therefore both divisive and unifying. On one hand, it split existing denominations into pro-revival and anti-revival parties; and it shepherded many of the newly awakened into pro-revival denominations. In the First Great Awakening, Presbyterians split into New Side and Old Side, Congregationalists into New Lights and Old Lights. Meanwhile, revivalism greatly expanded Baptist numbers throughout the colonies.

On the other hand, revivalism produced a common-denominator Protestantism that transcended denominational differences and stimulated ecumenical activity. The ecumenical power of revivalism became clear after the “Second Great Awakening,” beginning around 1800 at several outdoor meetings in Kentucky. By the 1830s, Charles Finney had taken his highly successful mass revivals from upstate New York to Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City. There were new elements in this awakening – the American Revolution gave it a language of liberty that underwrote powerful anti-Calvinist sentiments; African Americans were for the first time Christianized in large numbers; and a genuinely new American religion, Mormonism, emerged. But in style and outcome the basic patterns repeated. Existing denominations split. Anti-revivalists – from establishment Old-School Presbyterians to immigrant groups like German Lutherans, Calvinists, and Mennonites – struggled to maintain their distinctiveness against the ecumenical, doctrinal, and liturgical corrosions of revivalism. And the

ranks of pro-revival denominations – Baptists, Methodists, and Christians (Disciples of Christ – swelled. The revivalists' success in preaching conversion and holy living prompted Protestants to cooperate across denominational lines to form societies that would convert America and make it holy. This was how the Evangelical United Front – a network of interdenominational organizations like the American Bible Society, American Sunday School Union, American Temperance Society, and others – began in the 1810s and 1820s.

The Evangelical United Front was anti-Catholic, but in spite of this, Roman Catholics in the United States had their own form of revivals called "parish missions." These originated in sixteenth-century Europe when some religious orders set out to revitalize Catholicism through itinerant preaching. When these orders immigrated to the United States, they brought parish missions along with them. The revival began in the 1850s, gained momentum in the 1860s, and did not decline until the 1890s. Like Protestant revivals, parish missions employed music and sermons aimed at conversion, the direct experience of God, and holy living (which often included signing a temperance pledge). Unlike Protestant revivals, the parish missions remained thoroughly Catholic, retaining ritual, sacraments, catechism, and confessional. The result was a personal religion of the heart that resembled revivalistic evangelicalism, but in form and structure remained clearly Roman Catholic.

After the Second Great Awakening, revivalism remained part of the religious landscape. The Revival of 1857-1858, centered in urban prayer meetings, was a truly national event influencing millions of people in every Protestant denomination. The holiness movement expanded rapidly after the Civil War (1861-1865), reintroducing revivalism into sectors of Methodism that had abandoned it, and spinning off a host of new denominations and institutions. Continuing revival activity within the holiness movement launched the Pentecostal movement (with its singular emphasis on "speaking in tongues") in the first decade of the twentieth century, and this has since spread around the globe.

The most important revivalist of the nineteenth century was Dwight L. Moody, a layman who led enormously successful revival meetings throughout the United States and Britain in the quarter century after 1876. The Evangelical United Front had represented a consensus that revivalism and social reform – in other words, religion and politics – traveled hand in hand. This had begun to change in the Revival of 1857-1858, and by the end of Moody's life (1899), the consensus had come apart. Moody focused his efforts on exclusively religious activities and institutions. Meanwhile, the preachers of the new Social Gospel movement (some of whom were Moody's pupils) resurrected the old Unitarian assertion that revivalism inhibited social reform. These developments, along with historical criticism of the Bible and the increased prestige of science, divided American evangelicalism into modernist and traditionalist groupings.

The Social Gospel's critique of revivalism also had a lasting impact on historical writing about revivalism. Since then, the question that has preoccupied historians has been, "To what extent has revivalism led to social reform?" In general, historians of religion whose personal roots lay outside revivalism have argued that modernism, not revivalism, most advanced social improvement, while historians with backgrounds in revivalist traditions have argued that revivalism promoted social reform. Despite the vigor of this discussion, it has had little influence on historians who write surveys of American history. They generally ignore religion when discussing social reform between the Civil War and the 1980s Reagan Revolution. When revivalism is discussed at all, it is treated as a reactionary force impeding social progress.

Moody's successor in the public eye was Billy Sunday, a professional baseball player-turned-evangelist. He began his revival career in 1896, and by the 1910s he was drawing huge crowds in Boston, Chicago, and New York City. His career peaked during the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1920s, when the large northern Protestant denominations finally rejected fundamentalist demands for theological conformity. For the last ten years of his life, Sunday worked the small towns instead of the big cities, and observers interpreted this as a parable about the decline of revivalism. With the breakup of the evangelical consensus of the nineteenth century, revivalistic mass evangelism seemed doomed. Little did anyone guess that revivalism would not only survive, it would thrive; and out of the subculture of evangelicalism the greatest revivalist of all time was yet to come.

Evangelicalism

The term “evangelicalism” has multiple meanings. In the eighteenth century, it designated an insurgent Protestant religion of experience employing revivalistic methods. The Wesleys and Whitefield were the classic exemplars. In nineteenth-century America, “evangelicalism” referred to the Protestant establishment – rooted in revivalism, located in large denominations of high social standing, and cooperating in trying to embed Protestant morality into American society. Lying outside the evangelical establishment were many liturgical denominations (such as Lutherans), immigrant groups resisting revivalism (such as Mennonites), Roman Catholics, and Jews.

After the unraveling of the evangelical consensus between 1890 and 1925, “evangelicalism” came to be used in three ways. The most recent usage holds that evangelicalism consists of all Christians who hold a defining set of religious beliefs. These typically include the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation from sin, the authority of the Bible, and the importance of evangelism aimed at a conversion experience. By these criteria, at the end of the twentieth century, 20 to 30 percent of American adults were evangelicals. They can be found in every Protestant denomination, in the Roman Catholic Church, in messianic Jewish congregations, and among those who belong to no organized religious group.

Since the 1920s, the term “evangelicalism” has also been used to designate Protestant groups that retained a strong supernaturalist understanding of Christianity. Under this definition, evangelicalism is a mosaic composed of fundamentalists, the holiness movement, Pentecostals, most African American groups, Southern Baptists and Methodists, many immigrant groups, Seventh-Day Adventists, and various conservative Lutheran, Presbyterian, Congregational, Episcopalian, and Restorationist denominations. Non-evangelical denominations are the large northern Protestant groups whose leaders have de-emphasized supernaturalism – the United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), American Baptist Convention, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Reformed Church of America, and Episcopal Church.

The problem with this definition is that many of the supernaturalist groups resist being called “evangelical,” and many individuals within non-evangelical denominations hold supernaturalist evangelical beliefs. So it may be more helpful to think of evangelicalism as being composed of people who hold evangelical beliefs and who also identify with the trans-denominational movement that calls itself evangelicalism. The institutional center of this movement is found not in denominations, but in interlocking networks of independent, special-purpose, parachurch organizations like evangelistic and missionary agencies, relief and social service organizations, publishers, broadcasters, schools, and summer camps. There are perhaps some 30, 000 such organizations; the largest and best known include Campus Crusade for Christ and World Vision.

Moody was the midwife for these networks. He popularized lay leadership, entrepreneurialism, and independent nondenominational parachurch agencies. His evangelistic tours, summer conferences, and other enterprises brought together transatlantic revivalism, Keswick holiness, premillennial dispensationalism, the Student Volunteer Movement, faith missions, Bible institutes, and Princeton Seminary ideas about the inerrancy of the Bible. Moody fused these elements into a genuinely ecumenical form of Christianity that gave twentieth-century evangelicalism its characteristic texture.

The fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s was the most acrimonious moment in the unraveling of the evangelical consensus. Modernists were members of the large northern denominations who wanted to update Christianity in light of contemporary science. Underlying their program was an impulse to minimize supernaturalism and maximize concern for social issues. Fundamentalists were evangelicals who wanted to force the modernists out of the denominations. In the middle were evangelicals who believed that cooperation between modernists and evangelicals was still possible. When the fundamentalist campaign failed, some left to form their own denominations while others remained as dissenters. Over time, however, modernists and their theological descendents gradually came to dominate the leadership of the large northern denominations.

Unnoticed at the time were two shifts in the Protestant landscape that would set the direction for the development of evangelicalism. The first was that the percentage of churchgoing Protestants attending mainline churches began to decline, while the percentage attending evangelical churches began to rise. This phenomenon went unobserved partly because the mainline numbers were so much larger to begin with, and partly because the absolute numbers of mainline attendees continued to grow. Nevertheless, the trend continued, and by the 1960s, mainline denominations were experiencing declines in absolute numbers. At the end of the twentieth century, more than half of all churchgoing Protestants attended evangelical churches.

The second shift saw evangelicalism's institutional center of gravity relocate out of denominations and into its networks of parachurch organizations. After the modernists won their right to remain in the denominations, evangelicals gradually lost influence there. But for the most part, instead of creating new denominations, they poured their religious energies into building parachurch agencies, especially Bible institutes, mission agencies, and evangelism organizations. Between 1925 and 1940 the term "evangelical" received little use, but after that (the National Association of Evangelicals was founded in 1941) the term came to designate this interdenominational network.

The evangelical network's highest-profile figure was also the man who revived mass evangelism – Billy Graham. Steeped in America's revival tradition, Graham rose to prominence in the late 1940s as a traveling evangelist with the nondenominational Youth for Christ. In 1950 he formed the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and launched a television program; in 1954 he became an international figure with a hugely successful "crusade" in England. In the twenty years after 1960 he preached to unprecedented crowds in the United States and all over the world, functioned as the unofficial chaplain of the American presidency, organized major international evangelism conferences, and was a powerful ecumenical force nearly everywhere he went.

Before Graham, interdenominational evangelicalism drew most heavily from northern Baptist and Presbyterian denominations (Graham himself was ordained a Baptist). But after Graham, the story of evangelicalism is one of steadily expanding ecumenical reach. Early on, Graham cooperated with mainline church leaders in his crusades, narrowing a gap that had opened wider since the 1920s. Pentecostal and evangelical theology had always been nearly identical, but worship practices kept the two movements apart. After World War II, however, Pentecostal and evangelical networks increasingly overlapped. Evangelical parachurch organizations began welcoming Pentecostals, and ordinary evangelicals increasingly participated in the activities of Pentecostal parachurch organizations like the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International. The widest gap of all, between evangelicalism and Catholicism, was closed considerably by Vatican II, the charismatic movement of the 1970s (which brought Pentecostal worship practices into Catholic and mainline Protestant churches), shared moral revulsion at legalized abortion, and the growing open-mindedness of key leaders in both camps. By the 1990s, many evangelical parachurch groups were treating Roman Catholicism as just another denomination, and Catholic authorities were approving evangelical literature – even evangelical versions of the Bible – for their parishioners. A formal marker of the new dispensation was the "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" statement of 1994, in which influential evangelical and Catholic leaders mutually affirmed the centrality of common elements of the faith.

Historians studying evangelicalism's social impact have tended to focus on the narrow matter of politics. During World War I, a coalition of progressives, scientists, and evangelicals capitalized on the spirit of wartime sacrifice to institute a short-lived nationwide prohibition of alcoholic beverages. Some historians argue that evangelicalism was responsible for laws that prohibited the teaching of evolution in public schools in the 1920s, while others have argued that since only southern states passed such laws, regional factors were more important. In the 1970s, the Moral Majority and the Religious Right emerged from conservative Republican efforts to mobilize apathetic evangelical voters, from opposition to legalized abortion, and from threats by the Carter administration to suppress the growing network of evangelical private schools. Some scholars have credited the Religious Right with swinging the 1980 presidential election to Ronald Reagan; but regardless, it is clear that

the evangelicals who made up the bulk of the Religious Right became a powerful part of the Republican Party coalition after 1980.

However, focusing on the Religious Right distorts vision when thinking about the social impact of evangelicalism, for two reasons. First, evangelicalism is politically diverse. For every evangelical who votes Republican, there is another who votes Democratic. Second, and more importantly, politics is but a tiny aspect of evangelical activism. Of the 30, 000 evangelical parachurch organizations, less than one percent are concerned with politics; and of all the money evangelicals give to parachurch organizations, less than one percent goes to political organizations. Most evangelical organizations focus on evangelism, social service, overseas relief and development, foreign missions, education, and media communication. In these areas evangelicalism's social impact has been most profound, but least understood by historians.

Evangelicalism's popularity and institutional growth stem partly from its ability to foster grass roots ecumenism. This is rooted in a few common elements shared by many Christians – faith in Christ, authority of the Bible, holy living, and spreading the faith. These were the same themes stressed by all the major revivalists, from Whitefield to Graham. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the large number of Americans who regarded these elements as the core of Christianity, and who participated in the life of evangelical parachurch organizations, provided surface indications of the deep impact evangelicalism and revivalism have had on American society.

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Further discussion:
Evangelicalism presents problems for traditional churches

In the early 19th century, New England was experiencing the impact of the "Second Great Awakening." It was a time of religious revival with renewed emphasis on personal religious experience and conversion. Within the Presbyterian denomination, in which Horace Bushnell served as a pastor, those who embraced the revivals and emphasis on personal experience were known as "New Lights" or "New Side," while those who were uncomfortable with this insistence on a conscious personal conversion experience were known as "Old Lights" or "Old Side." The controversy began with the "First Great Awakening" in the 18th century but was reignited during the new revival movement of the early 19th century.

One of the issues that arose within this context was the spiritual status of children and the best way to reach them in the Christian faith. Old Lights emphasized the covenant relationship of a believer's family with God and instruction toward embracing the faith children were baptized into. While not viewed as baptismal regeneration, the expectation was that if parents taught and guided their children in the light of the gospel, they would confirm this faith as their own when they reached an age of discretion. New Lights emphasized the necessity of a more specific personal religious experience and the ability to give a testimony of conversion and faith in Christ. In their view, without this experience, the child was not in the right relationship with God, and parents were to let them know this, and teach to promote a personal conversion experience. In essence, the theological emphases of both pietism and in Anabaptist perspective were influencing what was viewed as normative for children growing up within a denomination whose roots were influenced more by Calvin and Zwingli.

Horace Bushnell, [in his *Discourses on Christian Nurture* (1847)] presented an argument for his major thesis that the true idea of Christian education is that the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise: "*Infant baptism… sees the child in the parent, counts him presumptively a believer and a Christian, and with the parent, baptizes him also. Furthermore, you will perceive that it must be presumed, either that the child will grow up a believer, or that he will not. The Baptist presumes that he will not, and therefore declares the rite to be inappropriate. God presumes that he will, and therefore appoints it. The Baptist tells the child that nothing but sin can be expected of him; God tells him that for his parents sake's, who's face he is to follow, he has written his own name upon him, and expects him to grow up in all duty and piety."*

Source: Drawn from *Understanding Children's Spirituality: Theology, Research, and Practice*. Chapter 7, Baptismal Practices and the Spiritual Nurture of Children, An Historical Overview by Keven E. Lawson.

Editorial Note: It seems clear in the above narrative about problems that Bushnell was an Old Light pastor who was speaking on behalf of God against those who disagreed with him, whom he labeled "Baptists." The opposite of his thesis could also be true, namely that what he says "Baptists" presume is actually God's

approach to the matter and that what he claims God is saying is merely a restatement of an Old Light approach to the problem. How many who have been baptized as infants actually end up converting to Christ? Let's apply Bushnell's argument to the wearing of seat belts where the two possible presumptions are that the person either will or won't be in a serious accident. Is infant baptism a fail-safe seatbelt, just in case, or a practice based on false presumptions of security? What is more important, to be baptized as an infant or to convert to Christ through conviction and repentance?

Other revival-related problems for traditional religious people

Jesus ran into significant problems with the religious establishment of His day, even though they shared the same Scriptures and were supposedly looking forward with the same hopes and expectations drawn from the Word of God. However, when He came they consistently failed to recognize Him, even though He was gentle and lowly, performed remarkable miracles of compassion, and illuminated the Word of God in his teachings and personal manner. Jesus reserved some of his most poignant rebukes for the religious leaders of the time and spoke about this disconnect in some rather challenging ways:

> *"No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, 'The old is good.'"*
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> Luke 5:36-39

> *"Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering."* Luke 11:52

> *"I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."* Luke 12:49-53

Which side do you want to be on, the "new wine" side where the fire is or the side where "the old is good"?