

# THE CENTURY OF EVANGELICALISM

by David A. Rausch and Carl Hermann Voss

“What! Have you found me already? Another Methodist preacher!” exclaimed the shocked settler who had just pitched his tent on the ground of his future western home in 1814. “I left Virginia to get out of reach of them, went to a new settlement in Georgie, . . . but they got my wife and daughter into the church. . . I was sure I would have some peace of the preachers, and here is one before my wagon is unloaded!”

The Methodist missionary, Richmond Nolley, looked the bewildered man straight in the eye and counseled: “My friend, if you go to heaven, you’ll find Methodist preachers there; and if to hell, I am afraid you will find some there; and you see how it is in this world; so you had better make terms with us, and be at peace.”

## Modern Evangelism

The nineteenth century was the great age of the modern Evangelical movement. Protestantism was permeated with the revivalistic spirit, and its compulsion to spread the message of the gospel to every corner of the earth was fervent and aggressive. Its goals went beyond revamping society. Indeed, optimistic nineteenth-century initiatives were to remake the world.

The term “evangelical” (pertaining to the gospel or good news) had been used to describe Lutherans in their assertion of Protestant principles during the Reformation era and soon had been commonly applied to all German Protestants, Lutheran and Reformed. By 1800, the word connoted a broader, ecumenical spirit that influenced the Protestant movement in Britain and America. Evangelical enthusiasm to “spread the gospel” and “win precious souls to Christ” soon recaptured portions of the German churches as well, and spread through France, Holland, and other parts of Europe.

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In the United States, the mainline Protestant churches considered themselves “evangelicals” and called themselves “evangelicals.” A century ago, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists were *all* within the framework of evangelicalism. Their eschatology (their view of the future) was largely *postmillennial*. In other words, they believed that the Protestant Christian church would bring in “the millennium,” a thousand-year period of peace and prosperity, and that through the auspices of Protestantism the world would be “Christianized.” They believed the world would become progressively better, and *then* Jesus Christ would return to earth. Postmillennial Evangelicalism was socially acceptable, and it dominated the culture of the nineteenth century.

### **English Revival and Reform**

As England moved into its industrial revolution in the 1700s, Evangelicalism was a small minority movement within the Church of England. Although some lower church clergymen supported the work of Wesley and Whitefield, revivalism met with considerable resistance from the higher church clergy. Through the leadership of Evangelicals such as Charles Simeon (1759-1836), vicar of Holy Trinity Church, and Isaac Milner (1750-1820), a professor of science, Cambridge University became the training center for Evangelical clergy. Revivalism also spread in Scotland and Wales.

Gradually the British middle class were drawn to the movement, as well as some gentry and aristocrats. William Wilberforce (1759-1833), Tory Member of Parliament, became an influential Evangelical layman of the upper middle class; and by the nineteenth century, Evangelicalism was the most vital religious force in England. The first Evangelical to become a bishop in the Church of England was appointed in 1815, and such distinguished Evangelical Anglicans as Lord Shaftesbury (1801-85) and William E. Gladstone (1809-98) were leading political personalities.

English Evangelicals achieved their most notable successes in philanthropic endeavors and social reform. Wilberforce, for example, joined other Evangelicals in fighting for the abolition of the slave trade, and in 1807 Parliament issued the Abolition Bill. Wilberforce joyfully wrote in his journal (March 22, 1807): “How wonderfully the providence of God has been manifested in the Abolition Bill! . . . Oh, what thanks do I owe the Giver of all good, for bringing me in His gracious providence to this great cause, which at length, after almost nineteen years’ labour, is successful!” Subsequent laws and treaties led most other Western nations to abolish slavery. In some instances, the British Navy was used to enforce newly enacted abolition legislation.

A member of the Clapham sect, a group of politically active Evangelicals centered in the London suburb of Clapham, Wilberforce was also influential in the formation of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East in 1799 and the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804. His book, *Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System*

*of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country Contrasted with Real Christianity* (1797), sold extremely well for four decades of the 1800s.

The Clapham group, like many English Evangelicals, worked through voluntary societies as well as through governmental action. They formed Bible societies, missionary societies, and Sunday schools. Among the working classes, they promoted schools for the poor, distributed Bibles and religious tracts. Inspired by Wilberforce and the Clapham group, Hannah More (1745-1833) was a prolific author of Evangelical religious writings and during this period attained celebrity status. The "Old Bishop in Petticoats," she found that her series of *Cheap Repository Tracts* (c. 1788) achieved a wide readership; and the tract became a notable feature of British Evangelicalism.

## The Second Great Awakening

In America, in the early 1800s, a westward migration was taking place that in retrospect was phenomenal. The churches of the United States were increasingly concerned about the unevangelized and unchurched population flowing beyond the mountains and past the Mississippi River. Missouri became a state in 1821, and a rush to the Pacific Ocean was initiated.

With an evangelical fervor, Protestantism was awakened from a post-Revolutionary War lethargy to minister actively to these masses. Looking longingly at the spontaneous Great Awakening of 1740, revivalists sought to produce another spiritual awakening through preaching and missions. Baptists and Methodists quickened religious interest in the new territories, and even the more staid New England Congregationalists experienced scattered revivals in the 1790s. By 1800, revivals and great religious enthusiasm were occurring from western New York to Tennessee.

Quite unpredictably, Yale University experienced in 1802 a religious revival which spread to other college campuses. Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), a respected Congregational minister, author, and educator, became president of Yale in 1795. Grandson of Jonathan Edwards and a champion of conservative Calvinism in New England, Dwight became a supporter of revivalism among the educated elite. Preaching a series of chapel sermons in 1802 to promote godliness among the student body, he was amazed at the explosive response. As a result, one-third of the student body professed conversion and dedicated their lives to serve God unreservedly. Dwight was convinced that revivals could stem infidelity, and his support of Evangelicalism brought many other New England leaders into the revivalist camp. Students from the Yale revival, such as Lyman Beecher (1775-1863) and Nathaniel W. Taylor (1786-1858), carried on the Evangelical tradition and spread its influence.

In the western territories, revivalists were more emotional, pressing for quick decisions among a transitory population. Techniques of

revivalism took shape that affect Protestantism to this day. In 1801, the famed Cane Ridge revival broke out in Kentucky. Assemblies of the faithful or "camp meetings" had been organized in this area by the fiery Presbyterian minister, James McGready (1758?-1817). Joined by Baptist and Methodist ministers who preached for days, audiences were convinced, "reduced to tears," and "slain in the Spirit" from the revivalist messages.

At Cane Ridge, "preaching stands" were erected at different areas of the grounds, and even those who came to carouse and gamble were converted by the preachers. "Falling, jumping and jerking" sometimes took place with an enthusiasm that greatly disturbed conservative Presbyterians. In 1805, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church indicated that this "confusion" was not to be tolerated, and an Old Light (antirevivalist measures) versus New Light (upholding revivalism measures) schism developed. Methodists and Baptists, in contrast, incorporated the camp meeting into their Protestant tradition; and within a few years hundreds of camp meetings were taking place throughout the country. Permanent conference centers, camp grounds, and summer resorts, such as Chautauqua in New York State, also were developed.

Controversial as they were, the revivalists' "new measures" were to shape Protestantism in America and affect the Evangelical movement throughout the world. Opponents had to come to grips with the enthusiasm and conversions that resulted from these spectacles. Methodism, which was not afraid of such "boisterous behaviors" and was on the forefront of frontier missions, became the largest denomination in the United States in the nineteenth century.

In addition, Protestant Charles G. Finney (1792-1875), a newly converted lawyer from Adams, New York, extended the revivalist measures of this western Second Great Awakening to the northern urban areas. Using the tactics of a trial lawyer, he sought to convict his audiences of their sinful ways and to convince them to come forward to an "anxious bench" to pray for or testify to their conversion. Finney also encouraged women to speak and to pray in the churches, and in the Evangelical revivalist movement women occupied an important place.

### **The Benevolent Empire**

A resurgence of revivals from 1857-59 underscored the fact that the power and prestige of Evangelical Protestantism dominated the culture and institutions of nineteenth-century America. Revivalism even created a political ethos for Protestantism that affected the way the British and American populace voted for many years. It stimulated the abolition movement in the United States as well as in Britain.

Characterized by an ecumenical spirit, Protestantism gave birth to a multitude of voluntary societies and missionary enterprises, some of which continue to this day. Often drawing membership from an interdenominational base and carrying out their activities with little church

or state control, Protestant cooperative agencies throughout the world sought to reform society and perhaps eventually purify the world. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810) sent thousands of missionaries to distant parts of the world. In Germany, the Inner Mission organized by J.H. Wichern (1808-81), a Hamburg pastor, was concerned with the plight of destitute children. Wichern believed that such works of love would unite all classes in Christian community, an effort that blossomed into a number of philanthropic enterprises.

In addition to the British societies and movements discussed earlier, America promoted other associations. The American Bible Society was organized in 1816 and by 1820 had distributed nearly 100,000 Bibles. The American Tract Society (1823?) followed in the footsteps of British efforts, and soon had distributed one million tracts, children's books, and devotional literature. The American Education Society (1826) expanded from funding scholarships for poor theological students to a movement for male and female education throughout the United States. English endeavors to promote Sunday schools in the latter eighteenth century (note the English Sunday School Union of 1803) influenced similar efforts in Philadelphia and then in New England. In 1824, the American Sunday School Union was formed, providing a national organization to establish Sunday schools for the children of the nation. Later, the International Sunday School Association (first conference 1875; formally incorporated 1907) would give a boost of enthusiasm to the enterprise through the incorporation of lay leadership. It is important to note that these societies were intricately connected to Evangelical Protestantism, and through interlocking directorates sought to move in a harmonious and concerted fashion of interdenominational cooperation and influence.

In addition to the American abolition movement that will be discussed later, American Protestant societies sought to influence every citizen toward moral good. The American Society for the Promotion of Temperance (1826) and the American Temperance Union (1836) under a growing female leadership became a springboard for women's rights, as well as, for a time, successful in passing prohibition laws in various states and the adoption of the Prohibition Amendment a century later.

For example, Frances E.C. Willard (1839-98), president of Evanston College for Ladies (later absorbed by Northwestern University), became president of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union in 1891. She helped organize the Prohibition Party in 1882, and was extremely active in the Association for the Advancement of Woman (founded 1873). As arguments over the woman's role in Protestant churches became more animated in the late nineteenth century, Frances Willard reminded the American public in 1888 that "there are in the United States five hundred women who have already entered the pulpit as Evangelists, and at least a score (exclusive of the 350 Quaker preachers) who are pastors, of whom several have been regularly ordained." She pointed out that the Methodist, Baptist, Free Baptist, Congregational, Universalists,

Unitarian, and Society of Friends churches had ordained women, and “in face of so much prejudice,” shared letters from some of those women describing their successful ministries.

Dubbed by historians a worldwide “Benevolent Empire,” thousands of Protestant societies worked with the handicapped, sought reform in medical and mental health facilities, and fought for individual freedoms. As the challenge of immigration and poverty increased, Protestant philanthropic enterprises expanded to solve these problems. Protestantism incorporated social, economic, political, intellectual, and religious reform as part of its basic lifeblood — as part of its mission. Its mission transcended revivalistic Protestantism to include Jews, Catholics, Unitarians, Antirevivalists, secularists, and others in its errand of mercy. And, while its optimism was utopian and its methods were sometimes paternalistic and elitist, its impulses and purposes are an integral part of the modern meaning of Protestantism.

### Sectarianism

The ecumenical spirit of early Evangelical Protestantism eventually waned and even the word “denomination,” originally an *inclusive* term, took on new connotations. John Wesley’s proclamation, “From real Christians, of whatever denomination, I earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all,” became less of a standard; sectarianism increased.

In America, Princeton’s Samuel Miller (1769-1850) had declared that “it would never occur to us to place the peculiarities of our (denominational) creed among the fundamentals of our common Christianity,” and Albert Barnes (1798-1870) insisted in 1840 that “the Church of Christ” was not exclusively under Episcopal, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Congregational “form,” but all were “to all intents and purposes, to be recognized as parts of the one holy catholic church.”

Nevertheless, Princeton Seminary’s Charles Hodge (1797-1878), professor of theology for fifty years, wrote in *Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* as early as 1836 words that foreshadowed a shift in the interpretation of Protestant denominationalism. He declared that “no such thing exists on the face of the earth as Christianity in the abstract. . . Every man you see is either an Episcopalian or a Methodist, a Presbyterian or an Independent, an Arminian or a Calvinist. No one is a Christian in general.”

Such divisions within Protestantism engendered far greater prejudice toward those outside the Protestant fold. In the United States, nativist impulse (fear of the stranger) permeated the Century of Evangelicalism, tarnishing the image of inclusive cooperation and benevolent empire. A key paradox in the history of immigration to the United States is that while newcomers were welcomed as cheap labor, they were scorned and abused for being “different.”

The rapid and obviously belated movement of the United States into the Industrial Revolution and its expansion of territory definitely man-

dated new settlers and cheap labor. Without immigrants, most felt that Evangelical Protestant America could not grow and prosper; and by the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Americans actively recruited European, Asian, and Latin American peoples. This immigration would not only change the British dominated stock of the colonial period, but would also change the religious complexion of Protestant America. In 1882, nearly 800,000 immigrants came to America's shores. While this was the peak year for immigration in the nineteenth century (1907 with nearly 1.3 million was the peak year in the twentieth), the United States received a total of 27 million immigrants between 1880 and 1930.

An important source of conflict between native-born and immigrants in the nineteenth century was religion. In earlier decades, Americans objected to the infusion of Irish Catholics. "Protestant America" worried that the Pope in Rome would rule if the Irish population increased, and "Irish Need Not Apply" signs were posted by employers. Anti-Catholic tracts abounded, and nativist attitudes at times flared into mob violence. In 1834, an angry mob burned an Ursuline convent on the outskirts of Boston. Even respected Americans, such as Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872), the inventor of the telegraph, spread wild rumors of a Jesuit plot to take over the United States. In like manner, the Evangelical Alliance formed in London and in 1846 to "confess the unity of the Church of Christ," and to foster worldwide "brotherly love" through Evangelical principles, received great impetus from the anti-Catholic, nativist sentiment of its American leaders. By the 1850s, the Order of United Americans or the nativist Know-Nothing party, primarily bound together by the anti-Catholic sentiment of its Protestant constituency, had scored some political victories.

Many immigrants who had expected a land of opportunity and progress were unprepared for the often hostile reception accorded them. They clung together for protection and survival. None of the immigrant groups escaped denigration and persecution. Germans were accosted for drinking beer, Jews had to face vicious anti-Semitism, and Greeks were physically attacked. Poles were called "stupid animals," and Italian immigrants were said to be "criminal by nature." Chinese on the West Coast, the "Yellow Peril," incurred the abuse and violence of natives and immigrants alike. Blacks must also be considered under the rubric of the "immigrant experience," although they were forced to immigrate. By the Civil War, there were 4.4 million black slaves in the United States.

As in colonial America, however, the new immigrants persisted in spite of the difficulties. From ethnic neighborhoods that included extended family, church, schools, and newspapers, immigrant children and grandchildren moved into the mainstream of American life, enriching the quality of culture and religious experience. The mosaic of American Protestantism would profit from the diversity of immigrant Protestant groups and from the challenge presented by other religious, cultural and ethnic traditions.

In the first place, immigrants generally infused an Old World spirit into the New World's Protestantism. Among Protestants, Lutheranism benefited the most from the growing immigrant tide, and by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Lutherans were the third largest Protestant group. Methodists and Baptists being the first two. The Reformed churches (Dutch, German, and Hungarian) were bolstered as well, and even small conclaves of Mennonites felt the influence of Protestant immigration.

In regards to the challenge, Protestant America was increasingly becoming a pluralistic religious unit. The Jewish community expanded from a quarter of a million adherents in 1880 to three-quarters of a million in 1900. Eastern Orthodox Christians would number 200,000 by 1915, and even Buddhism would establish a foothold on American soil. Roman Catholicism gained the largest number of new immigrants and by the turn of the century accounted for over 15 percent of the population of the United States. Protestantism would have to respond to both the intellectual and social challenges of such changes. A maturity and broadening would occur in the innovative, though often painful, process.

## TRENDS IN PROTESTANT THEOLOGY

In the nineteenth century, Protestantism in northern Europe exhibited new currents of thought and creative theological systemization that have had an important impact on modern philosophy, history, and literature. The center of Lutheranism was Germany, which had the largest body of Protestants on the Continent, and as a center of intellectual inquiry, German Protestantism held a position of leadership in the field of theology and religious philosophy. Dominated by the universities, German intellectual life promoted academic freedom and religious speculation. Although criticized for its lack of a sense of crisis and taunted as an "empire of the air" (Britain, it was said, had the sea and France had the land), the richness and variety of German religious thought fascinated contemporary thinkers — a tribute to a Protestant enterprise where one viewpoint never dominated. In the land of the Reformation, a theological revolution took place in the nineteenth century.

### Friedrich Ernst Daniel Schleiermacher

Schleiermacher (1768-1834) has been called the Father of Liberal Protestant Theology. Born in Breslau, the son of a Reformed army chaplain and educated in the Pietist tradition by the Moravians, he continued his education at the University of Halle in 1787, encountering the philosophy of Kant, but struggling with the cold rationalism of his age. An excellent speaker, he was appointed Reformed preacher at the Charite in Berlin, where he was affected by the Romantic movement. He believed that this movement was a humanizing influence that saved him from the doubt in which rationalism had chained him. His *Speeches on Religion to the Cultured Among Its Despisers* (1799) defined religion as "sense and taste



for the infinite." For Schleiermacher, religion was not a form of knowledge or a system of morality, but was grounded in feeling rather than a reason. He sought to show his friends in the Romantic movement that religion must occupy an important place in human life.

He became dean of the faculty of theology at the University of Berlin, and in his subsequent and more mature work, *The Christian Faith* (1821-22), Schleiermacher elaborated upon his definition describing religion as a "feeling of absolute dependence," a fundamental expression of human need. He proclaimed that all other activities of humankind, including science, art, and moral philosophy, were incomplete without religion. For him, the purest expression of religion was to be found in Christian theism, "God-consciousness," the provision of redemption through Jesus Christ. Pointing out that Jesus' disciples were drawn into Jesus' God-consciousness prior to their belief in the resurrection, he contended that an individual's experience of conversion comes through participation in the corporate life of the church.

All Christian doctrines that could not be directly related to the feeling of absolute dependence were expendable from Schleiermacher's viewpoint — they did not belong in the theological enterprise at all. He thus contributed to a critical approach in that no external authority, that is, Bible, church, or creed, could take precedence over the God consciousness of the believer. Karl Barth (1886-1968) would criticize Schleiermacher for reinterpreting historic doctrines of the church and compromising the Christian faith; but American liberal Protestants of the latter nineteenth century were strongly influenced by his precepts.

### **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel**

Hegel (1770-1831) was a colleague of Schleiermacher whose work overshadowed Schleiermacher's during their lifetimes. Born in Stuttgart, he studied philosophy and theology at Tübingen. In 1818 he was appointed to the chair of philosophy at the University of Berlin, where, as an eloquent lecturer, he soon gained many disciples.

Hegel insisted that reality be seen as a whole and declared that the *process* of reason was reality itself. His method of exposing incompleteness or contradictions of thought was to pose a "thesis" and question it by means of an opposite, "antithesis," in order to achieve "synthesis." Viewing Christianity as the synthesis of human religious development, Hegel underscored the importance of history as an expression of the Absolute, God. All reality was the expression of the divine mind, the dynamic thought of the Spirit of God. Even the political sphere was but a moment in the Spirit's mind.

To Hegel, the state was humanity's highest social achievement, a universal expression of family love. It was the highest revelation to the "world spirit." Hegel paved the way for both the Second Reich of Bismarck and the Third Reich of Hitler as well as the historical dialectic of Karl Marx by declaring that the state "has the supreme right against the individual,

whose supreme duty it is to be a member of the State." While he predicted that Germany's great hour lay in the future and her mission would "regenerate the world," he viewed this historical fruition as a release from narrow dogmatism or partial systems. The state would become the "Kingdom of God," where an ordered moral life would abound.

Hegel's followers were criticized for trying to fit all areas of reality into his system, and many of them certainly believed that every problem could be solved through the system. For example, Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860) introduced the Hegelian system to the study of early church history and the origins of Christian doctrine. He theorized that Peter represented the ancient theological system of Judaism (thesis), which Paul opposed in his "purer" gospel theology (antithesis), from which the postapostolic theology of Christianity emerged (synthesis).

Baur's student David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74) shook the theological world to its foundations in his two-volume *Life of Jesus* (1835). Strauss questioned the historical accuracy of the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, arguing in Hegelian fashion that religion presented the truth, but only in an incomplete and inadequate form. Criticized even by Baur for his weakness in historical literary analysis of the Biblical documents, Strauss progressed in Biblical criticism until he eventually accepted a Darwinian view of faith. His final work, *The Old and the New Faith* (1872), rejected belief in a personal God, insisting that too little is known about the historical Jesus to determine religious feeling.

Although Hegel's followers would split sharply into left and right factions, and his system would suffer critical rebuke, Hegel brought critics and admirers alike back to the importance of history and the historical process. With regard to the study of theology and philosophy, even of the Bible itself, historical perspective would become central to proper interpretation.

### **Søren A. Kierkegaard**

Kierkegaard (1813-55) was a Danish Lutheran theologian who questioned Hegel's system and who for a time sought refuge in Berlin. For Kierkegaard, the basis of Christianity was not its reasonableness or its system, but rather was rooted in faith. Through faith, man could know God directly. Faith to Kierkegaard, however, meant decision and commitment; risk and denial of oneself. He criticized Christendom for the "crime" of "playing at Christianity," insisting that Christian existence was a constant struggle to become, of acting on the truth.

In the midst of a theological trend to humanize God, Kierkegaard underscored the transcendence of God. He took little interest in the historical criticism of his day, but quoted uncritically from the Biblical sources themselves. Kierkegaard believed that in Jesus Christ, God has acted, and God gives faith as a gift because God truly transcends human history. Salvation and grace occur in "the moment," the encounter of God and individual.

Kierkegaard's emphasis on the subjectivity of truth (in contrast to Hegel's objective theory of knowledge) and his belief that true Christianity centers on a person's very existence, not merely on the intellect, have been interpreted by some as the origin of twentieth-century existentialist thought. Certainly, existence as a constant struggle, the struggle to become, is found in Kierkegaard, as well as themes of subjectivity, dread, despair, and hope. Existentialism would travel a path different from Kierkegaard's with respect to these themes; yet their continuing attraction for intellectuals definitely shows philosophical theology's debt to him.

Nevertheless, it is perhaps his critique of the human condition and of the theological enterprise that has undeniable implications for the modern meaning of Protestantism. In his criticism of the church of his day, Kierkegaard reminded his readers that individuals and their God must not be lost in theological extrapolations and systematic haggling. Furthermore, the institution and organization of the church must always be open to question, and the mirror of social responsibility and "costly faith" in the midst of a comfortable society is to be held high by Protestantism itself.

### **Toward Liberalism and Fundamentalism**

The nineteenth century presented many challenges to Protestantism — challenges that actively guided the movement into the twentieth century. Industrialization, immigration, and urbanization presented social and economic dilemmas that demanded response, yet seemingly defied solution. A number of new religious movements first appeared in this century and would demand their fair share of respect from the Protestant churches. Biblical criticism and Darwin's theory of evolution would require a creative theological response, and Protestant missions in the Third World would soon force a global perspective beyond Western mentality. Twentieth-century fascist and communist movements would test the constructs of nineteenth-century Protestantism. One must be constantly reminded, however, not to build a false polarity between these movements. Extreme religious viewpoints do exist, both right and left, but there are in actuality a spectrum of parties within Liberal and Conservative Protestantism as well as denominational groupings. Groups such as "evangelical christocentric liberals" and "moderate confessional conservatives" defy strict categorical structures.



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