William E. Biederwolf and Urban Evangelism

A Fundamentalism File Research Report
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This report is intended to be a resource to help Fundamentalist Christians in studying and evaluating religious leaders and movements. It draws primarily upon materials housed in the Fundamentalism File in the J. S. Mack Library on the campus of Bob Jones University.

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Those interested in the story of urban evangelism in America, whether they be scholars or Christian laymen, usually focus on the most famous evangelists: D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, or another “big name.” Since these preachers embodied and exemplified the movement, such a focus has merit. Yet the careers of other evangelists are just as illuminating and can provide insights not readily apparent with the more famous figures. J. Wilbur Chapman, for example, was perhaps the most prominent evangelist in the United States between Moody and Sunday, a man whose campaigns displayed an innovative methodology. Furthermore, Chapman was in many ways a bridge between the two more famous evangelists—serving as an assistant to Moody early in his career and giving the start to Sunday’s evangelistic career when Sunday was an assistant to Chapman.

Among those evangelists less remembered today but whose careers are nonetheless illuminating is William Edward Biederwolf (1867-1939). He learned the trade from two of the more significant evangelists of his era, Chapman and B. Fay Mills. He served as a promoter of evangelism for both the Federal Council of Churches and the Interdenominational Association of Evangelists. He parlayed his evangelistic work into other ministries, notably leadership of the Winona Lake Bible Conference. William McLoughlin ranks Biederwolf as one of the “second five” evangelists of the period after Billy Sunday. Biederwolf’s modestly successful career as an evangelist and particularly his writing about evangelism provide a window for viewing the history of American evangelism.

Setting: The Golden Age of Urban Evangelism

The word evangelist occurs three times in Scripture: Acts 21:8, Ephesians 4:11, and II Timothy 4:5. These occurrences, however, likely do not specifically designate the “vocational evangelist” of today, although they may include the concept. The word evangelist has the root meaning of one who communicates the “gospel” (Greek evangel). The term is commonly used today of those who make evangelism their calling, or vocation, those full-time ministers who do not serve as pastors but who itinerate to hold meetings in churches or to hold larger meetings as joint efforts of several churches in a community.

For some, the birth of the modern vocational evangelist came in the Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century, especially with the ministry of English minister George Whitefield (1714-70). Particularly in his tours of the American colonies during the Great Awakening, Whitefield traveled across parish boundaries, preaching to crowds (often outdoors) made up from a cross-section of the Protestant denominations. For others, it was Charles Finney (1792-1876) who established the concept of a professional evangelist. Finney’s “protracted meetings” (campaigns held daily over a period of time) along with his organization, his innovative “New Measures,” and his writings on evangelism and revival (notably his Lectures on Revivals of Religion) marked a clear step in the development of the American evangelist.

The era following the Civil War saw the role of the vocational evangelist come into its own on a large scale. The beginning of urban evangelism’s golden age dates to the ministry of D. L. Moody. “Charles Finney made revivalism a profession,” observes William McLoughlin, “but Dwight L. Moody made it a big business.” A converted shoe salesman, Moody became a Sunday school worker in the slums of Chicago, eventually becoming a pastor as well as a noted speaker on Sunday school work. His rise to worldwide fame came in 1873 when he and his song leader Ira Sankey began a preaching tour of Great Britain. After an almost unnoticed start, the Moody-Sankey campaign mushroomed dramatically and was drawing thousands to each meeting by its conclusion in 1875.

When Moody returned to the United States, he found committees from cities across the country urging him to hold campaigns in their locales. In an oft-quoted statement, Moody said, “Water runs down hill, and the highest hills in
America are the great cities. If we can stir them we shall stir the whole country.” Moody’s comment highlights the driving rationale of the urban revivals of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Added to the traditional Christian impetus for evangelism was a growing concern for “the problem of the city.”

The United States was rapidly changing from a predominantly rural nation to an urban one. The crowded conditions and mobile population of the cities defied traditional patterns of American church life that relied on stability and a spiritually nurturing community. The church, in short, needed new methods for a new problem. Furthermore, the cities themselves offered new dangers, notably an anonymity that relaxed the sense of moral responsibility which restrained behavior in rural and small-town settings. Added to this situation were the temptations of the city—saloons, brothels, and other snares. Filling these growing cities were foreign immigrants. On the one hand, native Americans saw these immigrants as a dangerous influence, people needing to be assimilated into the American way of life. On the other hand, the immigrants also provided a ready-made mission field, a body of people needing evangelization. “Citywide” campaigns offered a potential solution to all of these challenges, and the Protestant churches of the United States joined in “union meetings” to promote religion and its benefits in their cities.

A series of urban evangelists followed Moody, some prominent, some not so famous. R. A. Torrey and J. Wilbur Chapman probably vied most directly (though perhaps not consciously) to assume the mantle of Moody as America’s leading evangelist. In the South, the blunt and fiery Sam Jones was unmatched in popularity and visible success, even by Moody. Eventually Billy Sunday took the urban evangelism movement to its greatest public heights with a series of huge campaigns in large cities in the 1910s, climaxing with the New York campaign of 1917.

In the 1920s, however, the popularity of the urban campaigns waned. At first the change was gradual, as the major campaigns shifted from America’s largest cities to its mid-sized ones. Then the 1930s proved to be as depressed an era for urban evangelism as it was for the United States’ economy. Only after World War II would the urban idea revive, this time under the influence of Youth for Christ, John R. Rice and his paper Sword of the Lord, and, most important, Billy Graham. It is the latter half of evangelism’s golden age, when Billy Sunday was its leading figure (c. 1900-1920), that provides the milieu for the evangelistic career of William Edward Biederwolf.

The Life of an Evangelist: A Biographical Sketch of Biederwolf

If historical caucaustion means anything, William Biederwolf almost could not help becoming a Fundamentalist. He was a student at Princeton Seminary during its rigorously orthodox days, and, as a Presbyterian, Biederwolf belonged to a denomination that saw one of the bitterest fights of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. As an evangelist, William Biederwolf entered a vocation that promoted a firm alliance with Fundamentalism in defense of the supernatural faith both proclaimed. As the director of a Bible conference, Biederwolf led an institution that served both as a birthplace for Fundamentalism and as a vehicle for the movement’s propagation. In short, the life of William Biederwolf represented the intertwining of several of the strands from which historians claim that Fundamentalism derived.

William Edward Biederwolf was born on September 29, 1867, in Monticello, Indiana. He was the seventh child of Michael and Abolina Biederwolf, German immigrants and members of Monticello’s Presbyterian church. Biederwolf was converted as a teen-ager and made a public profession of his faith at the age of eighteen. Biederwolf originally entered Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, but he received his bachelor’s degree from Princeton College in 1892. He earned his M.A. from Princeton in 1894 and then attended Princeton Seminary, graduating in 1895. He made an excellent record as a student and won a fellowship in Greek that allowed him to study at the University of Berlin (1896-97). During the summers of his years at Princeton, Biederwolf worked in rescue missions in New York City and Scranton, Pennsylvania. After graduation from Princeton but before his study trip to Europe, he worked with the B. Fay Mills
evangelistic team. In 1897 Biederwolf took the pastorate of the Broadway Presbyterian Church in Logansport, Indiana. He served there until 1900, with the exception of a year’s service as a military chaplain during the Spanish-American War.

Upon resigning his pulpit, Biederwolf became a full-time evangelist. During his early years he alternated between holding his own independent meetings and serving on the staffs of other men. In the middle of the first decade of the century Biederwolf served with J. Wilbur Chapman during campaigns sponsored by the Special Committee on Evangelism authorized by the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. After working with Chapman, Biederwolf took more and more independent meetings. During the decade from 1910 to 1920, the great decade of urban evangelism, Biederwolf rose in fame, popularity, and success. (His evangelistic career is discussed more fully below.)

In the latter part of his career, Biederwolf was closely associated with the Winona Lake Bible Conference in Indiana and its associated ministries. He had appeared on the program of the Bible conference at least as early as 1902. He served as Associate Director of the Bible Conference during the 1910s and also served on the board and as president of the short-lived Winona College. After the death of Winona’s founder, Sol Dickey, Biederwolf took over as Director of the Bible Conference in 1922. The following year, the board made him president of the fledgling Winona Lake School of Theology.

Since Winona Lake took up its time only in the summer, Biederwolf was free to commit himself to other labors. He continued to conduct evangelistic meetings and made his first overseas tour, to the Far East and Australia, in 1923-24. Biederwolf became interested in the plight of the lepers, and his fund-raising efforts on their behalf resulted in the establishment of the Biederwolf Home for Lepers in Korea. In 1909 the evangelist had founded the Family Altar League, an organization dedicated to encouraging family prayer and devotion, and he remained associated with it throughout his career. From 1929 to 1939 Biederwolf served as pastor of the Royal Poinciana Chapel of Palm Beach, Florida. The chapel had been erected for winter visitors to the area. Therefore, it was open only during the winter season, and Biederwolf preached there only about a dozen Sundays a year.

Biederwolf was constantly active. At the age of seventy, he wrote to J. Palmer Muntz, his successor at Winona Lake, “Yes my dear boy, I am working too hard. I never could stand it if God had not given me an iron constitution. I am up every night to 12:30 and 1 P.M. [sic] and as tho I did not have enough to do I have gone ‘nutty’ on Florida shrubbery and am writing a book.” Indeed Biederwolf published numerous books. The majority of these works were collections of his sermons and required little extra work to prepare. Others were more demanding. Probably Biederwolf’s greatest work was The Millennium Bible (sometimes issued under other titles, such as The Second Coming Bible and The Second Coming Bible Commentary), a one-volume commentary on the prophetic passages of Scripture.

Theologically, Biederwolf was a militant Fundamentalist. After he took over as director of the Winona Lake Bible Conference, the 1924 program for the conference proclaimed,

We trust that the personnel of the Conference Committee is sufficient guarantee that Winona is to be kept true to the Fundamentals of the Faith, once, and for all, delivered to the saints. We want no uncertain note in this respect to sound from the Winona platform. Christ’s Virgin Birth and consequent Deity, His vicarious Sacrifice, His bodily Resurrection, Ascension and Return—these are the truths which Winona holds essential and dear, and we welcome no voice in this program that does not subscribe to and champion them.

When Biederwolf led in the reorganization of Winona Lake in the 1930s, which involved the creation of a new board, he made it clear that he wanted an avowedly Fundamentalist organization. Recalling the reorganization some twenty years later, Alva McClain remembered Biederwolf saying, “We are determined to bring nobody on this Winona Board who is not a fundamentalist.” McClain asked, “What if they die?” Biederwolf replied, “When one dies, we’re going to find another fundamentalist to take his place.”

Shortly after the 1938 Winona Bible Conference, Biederwolf fell ill and spent much of the
next few months in the hospital. On September 3, 1939, he died at his home in Monticello.

The Apprenticeship of an Evangelist: Biederwolf with Mills and Chapman

“In my own younger days,” Biederwolf recalled, “I sought opportunity to sit at the feet of every successful evangelist in the United States.” During his early career Biederwolf worked on the staffs of two leading urban evangelists, B. Fay Mills and J. Wilbur Chapman.

B. Fay Mills (1857-1916) is a largely forgotten figure in the history of evangelism, mostly because of his later doctrinal aberrations. But he was a pioneer in refining the methodology of urban evangelism. A classmate and close friend of J. Wilbur Chapman, Mills went from the Congregational ministry to a career of full-time evangelism in 1887. By the early 1890s, with his pronounced oratorical skills and talent for organization, Mills had become one of America’s noted evangelists.

Two features of his evangelistic methodology stood out. First, he formalized use of the decision card. By having respondents to his altar calls fill out such cards, Mills was able to document the number of conversions and reconsecrations with greater precision than most evangelists. In addition, the cards facilitated the referring of respondents to local churches for follow-up work. The second distinctive feature of Mills’s campaigns was his District Combination Plan. This scheme, Nelson observes, arose from “the notion that he [Mills] could best conquer a city by first dividing it.” Instead of holding one series of meetings in a single location, Mills held several shorter series of meetings in venues throughout an urban area. In this way, Mills sought to spread the impact of his campaigns and draw audiences from throughout the area.

Mills fell from evangelical favor in the late 1890s, when his theology took a more liberal turn. He first embraced the social gospel and left evangelism, after trying vainly to unite the two. Then he went to California where he became pastor of a Unitarian church and then an advocate of “free religion,” taking views beyond even those of the Unitarians. Then, suddenly, in 1914, Mills announced his return to orthodoxy, and he began again to visit evangelical pulpits, but he died shortly thereafter.

Biederwolf worked with Mills just as the evangelist was beginning his shift from evangelism to the social gospel. Biederwolf served as an assistant in Mills’s 1895 campaign in Columbus, Ohio, in which Mills tried to fuse evangelism with his new social emphasis. Biederwolf did not follow Mills in this shift. Although he would sometimes make comments such as “Social service means serving society, and if a man is not saved for that he is not saved at all,” Biederwolf’s evangelistic focus would be on the conversion of individuals, not the reform of society.

Biederwolf’s apprenticeship with J. Wilbur Chapman was longer. After the turn of the twentieth century, Chapman headed a special committee sponsored by the Presbyterian Church to promote evangelism. For Chapman, the main responsibility became directing his own campaigns. He devised the Simultaneous Evangelistic Campaign, basically a refinement of Mills’s idea. Instead of a single evangelist holding meetings in different locations in a city, Chapman held the main meetings in a central location while associate evangelists held the remote ones.

It was as one of these associates that Biederwolf participated in Chapman’s campaigns. Each assistant often advertised his work with a focus on outreach to a specific group. Evangelist Charles Schaeffer on Chapman’s staff specialized in children’s work. Labor advocate Charles Stelzle directed his meetings toward the working class. Biederwolf set his sights on teens and young adults. He followed the example of evangelism’s rising star, former baseball player Billy Sunday, by advertising his athletic achievements with Princeton’s football team. Even before this time, when Biederwolf was on the Mills team, advertisements described the young evangelist as “a good specimen of muscular Christianity.”

The phrase “muscular Christianity” reflected a secondary theme of urban evangelism. Fearing that American Christianity had become “feminized” and the church more a woman’s province (as shown by women’s higher rates of church attendance), churchmen sought “manly” attractions to challenge men with the claims of Christianity. Former athletes such as Sunday, with his
energetic, almost swaggering presence on the platform, fit the bill for “muscular Christianity.” Biederwolf fit the mold as well. Colleague Charles Stelzle recalled how the Chapman evangelistic team relaxed by gathering in a hotel room where they “told stories, engaged in gymnastic stunts, or general tomfoolery.” Stelzle added, “Biederwolf was always the leader at these nightly festivities. He was a natural athlete and often he tossed me close to the ceiling, sometimes to my own alarm.”

Biederwolf may have later regretted the approach of his early evangelistic work. In his lectures on evangelism, Biederwolf chided the evangelist who chose to “go to the photograph gallery and put himself into all sorts of ridiculous attitudes that would do justice to a prize pugilist or a circus contortionist, and then use these camera productions in advertising himself and [his] work.” He then added, “The writer frankly confesses that to some degree he has been foolishly guilty with his brethren, and while he is yet only becoming a man he long ago put away the things of a fool and bears witness now that in after years he never looks upon such a likeness of any preacher without feeling that an operation above the eyes would have brought enough relief to have prevented the thing from ever taking place.”

The Vocation of an Evangelist: The Career of Biederwolf

The evangelistic itinerary of William Biederwolf does not stand out particularly from those of other urban evangelists. He held numerous meetings in small towns and mid-sized cities, along with a few campaigns in larger cities. Rather than diminishing his importance, however, this fact reveals how representative of urban evangelists Biederwolf is, in a way that the biggest names, such as Moody or Sunday, could never be. Few (if any) other evangelists experienced what Billy Sunday did, with over 1.5 million people attending his New York City campaign. But most could have readily related to the work of Biederwolf in Goshen, Indiana, or Piqua, Ohio.

There is not, apparently, a complete list of all of Biederwolf’s campaigns. His earliest recorded meetings were at venues such as Flemingsburg, Kentucky (1901), and Elkhart, Indiana (1902). After working with the Chapman campaigns, Biederwolf held meetings in large cities, such as in Boston at the Tremont Temple (1911) and in Los Angeles (1919). Yet even after he had become more famous, Biederwolf would alternate larger with smaller venues. Only rarely did he feature campaigns in large metropolitan areas.

Biederwolf was not an innovator in evangelism. Generally he adopted—and adapted—the methods of others. In Rush County, Indiana, in 1912, he mixed the standard union evangelistic campaign with a program of one-on-one personal evangelism called the “Individual Campaign.” According to Garrett, Biederwolf preached in Rush County, a predominantly rural region in mid-central Indiana, September 22-28. Then, after “some days for prayer and organization,” the local churches launched the Individual Campaign November 3 through December 8. The goal in this case was to blend the general appeal of the evangelistic campaign with individualized attention—the broad public call of the general campaign with personalized follow-up.

One of Biederwolf’s most ambitious efforts was the “Kansas Forward Movement” (1908-1909), which as Cogdill notes was an attempt to apply Chapman’s simultaneous revival method on a statewide basis. In this case, Biederwolf served not as a solo evangelist but as the director of an intensive effort involving seventy-five campaigns in different Kansas towns. By such an effort the evangelist and his staff sought to blanket an area in a manner otherwise impossible in the era before television or radio.

Biederwolf’s compensation as an evangelist was comparatively generous for the times, but not extravagant. During his 1916 campaign in Allentown, Pennsylvania, Biederwolf responded to attacks on the profits of evangelists by saying, “My income for last year … was fifteen thousand dollars. I gave nine thousand dollars to The Family Altar League and four thousand dollars to Winona College. I carry heavy insurance for Mrs. Biederwolf’s protection in case of my death. I own my own home and outside of those things I have little use for money.” Biederwolf’s associates bear out his claim; Stelzle says, for
instance, “He was generous beyond belief in his dealings with his associates.”

An important component of the urban evangelistic meetings was the song director. In fact, the names of some song leaders became forever linked to certain evangelists, such as Ira Sankey with D. L. Moody and Homer Rodeheaver to Billy Sunday. The song leader served not only as music director for congregational singing and choirs, but also sang solos and became the virtual emcee for the meetings on the evangelist’s behalf. Some, notably Sankey and Rodeheaver, parlayed their work into the development of richly successful music publishing ventures. Biederwolf was never associated with a single song leader but used several during his career, among whom was Rodeheaver in his pre–Billy Sunday days.

The most public of an evangelist’s skills was his speaking ability and pulpit style. McLoughlin cites Biederwolf as one of the evangelists who marked the transition in American evangelism “from the pious soul-winning of D. L. Moody to the barn-storming, 100 per cent Americanism of Billy Sunday.” Even Biederwolf’s admirers suggest that the evangelist borrowed from Sunday. Garrett, Biederwolf’s student and biographer, says Biederwolf preached in the style of Billy Sunday, and he offers a lively excerpt from a Biederwolf sermon that seems to illustrate:

“I’d rather be a dog with gratitude enough to wag his tail, a foul-featured orang-ou-tang of the jungle, a leather-hided rhinoceros, my jaws dripping red with the blood of slaughtered prey, a dodo, an ichthyosaurus, a hippopotamus, or any sort of a cloven-hoofed, web-footed, sharp-clawed creature of God’s earth, than to be a man with a soul so contemptibly mean as to sit down at the table three times a day and gulp down the good that God has provided and never once lift my heart in thanksgiving to God who gives it all.”

At the same time, Biederwolf maintained some dignity; his words were not flowery, but they were carefully chosen. Bob Jones Jr., who heard Biederwolf preach during the evangelist’s later years, wrote, “He was one of the two or three evangelists whose pulpit style incorporated most of the elements of great preaching. His scholarship was broad; his use of the English language was concise, accurate, and powerful; his sympathies were deep; his heart was warm; and his doctrinal position was not given to extremes of interpretation.”

A Philosophy for Evangelism: Biederwolf’s Writings on Evangelism

Critics often charge Fundamentalism with being anti-intellectual. Though there are unquestionably elements of the Fundamentalist movement that display anti-intellectualism, in reality Fundamentalists lived in a tension between the demands of intellectual inquiry and commitment to faith, rather than a simple retreat into the safe confines of unquestioned dogma. The number of schools and seminaries that Fundamentalists founded bear witness to a concern for study and learning with a proper theological basis.

American evangelism also bares the brunt of such criticism. In his Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, Richard Hofstadter devotes a chapter to “Evangelicalism and the Revivalists” and then quotes Billy Sunday declaring, “When the word of God says one thing and scholarship says another, scholarship can go to hell.” Yet this is likewise a one-sided picture. In his dissertation on American evangelism, James Cogdill focuses on three particular evangelists—R. A. Torrey, Chapman, and Biederwolf—because they were among the better educated of the evangelists of their time, each with significant postgraduate study. Certainly Biederwolf possessed the intellectual and literary skills necessary to provide an answer to a charge of anti-intellectualism. His fellowship to study in Europe is one example. Acquaintances noted, in another instance, that Biederwolf would use his Greek testament in the pulpit, translating the text as he went along. His intellectual abilities enabled him to write cogently about evangelism.

In fact, one point that sets off Biederwolf’s career as an evangelist is that he gave great thought to the theory of his vocation and set his thoughts down in print. As early as 1904 he lined out for the audience of the Winona Lake Bible Conference the basics of his philosophy of evangelism. He later refined and expanded on these basic ideas.

First came his book The Evangelistic Situation (pub. c. 1916). This work was the result of
the research he did as General Secretary of the Commission on Evangelism of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. McLoughlin describes this commission as an attempt “to put some check upon the irresponsible antics of … foolish or unscrupulous revivalists,” and says that the burden of the committee’s work fell on Biederwolf. Although it was a personal work and not an official statement of the FCCC position, Biederwolf’s book was a helpful—and sometimes pointed—look at urban evangelism in the 1910s.

Biederwolf’s other major book on the topic, *Evangelism: Its Justification, Its Operation and Its Value* (1921), also borrowed heavily from the research he did for the FCCC. More comprehensive in its treatment of evangelistic campaigns than the first book, it was also more positive, though not uncritical, in its outlook. Biederwolf delivered its contents originally as lectures to, among other schools, Princeton Theological Seminary, Xenia Theological Seminary, and Moody Bible Institute.

It is possible Biederwolf saw these academic lectures as remedying a deficiency in Christian education. He once said, “Our schools for ministerial training have lent in the past no encouragement to the work of evangelism and have therefore given absolutely no training to their students such as would fit them for this most essential administration of the Christian ministry.” Of his own days at Princeton, he added, “I passed through one of the best of these schools and can bear witness today that what little reference was made to this matter was by way of disparagement rather than otherwise.” Biederwolf’s philosophy of evangelism was evidently based in large part on practical experience and observation more than classroom theory.

**Revival and Evangelism**

Biederwolf assumes in his writings a fundamental Christian orthodoxy on the part of the evangelist. He asserts in no uncertain terms, for example, that someone who does not believe in the Word of God should not be in a pulpit. Conversely, evangelism is necessary to orthodoxy: “The church that is not evangelistic ceases to be evangelical.” Part of his theological definition involves the terms evangelism and revival. Biederwolf sees “evangelism” as being for the unconverted and “revivalism” for the converted but spiritually cold. In his writings, however, Biederwolf treats the terms almost interchangeably.

Revival is, to Biederwolf, woven in the warp and woof of the church’s life and history as part of “the Natural Law of Progress.” The history of God’s people after all is little more than the story of revival,” he says. He argues, “All progress is in fact through a revival. Nowhere is advance ever made through a monotonous and unbroken continuity. Everywhere we find the ebb and flow of the tide.” He is, in fact, fond of illustrations from nature. Ebb and flow is a law of life, of civilization, of nature. “What is springtime but a revival in nature?” He sees revivals as a part of the natural rhythm of the life of the church, like periods of waking and sleeping.

Yet there is not overall a strong emphasis on theology in Biederwolf’s writings on evangelism. Perhaps he considered the theological imperative as self-evident. At any rate, he gives much more attention to practical issues. In his stress on the need for organization, Biederwolf insists that one must maximize the place of the Holy Spirit. “To work without Him and to work through Him—or rather to have Him work through us—is all the difference between trying to run a big machine by hand and attaching it to the dynamics of a powerful electric motor. The results of a revival effort that is wholly man-made cannot prove otherwise than pitifully disappointing.” Yet he also says that “the human equation dare not be eliminated,” and, “If we work as though the revival were entirely our own and pray as if it were entirely God’s there will be no doubt as to what God will do.”

There clearly remains an emphasis on human means in Biederwolf’s system of evangelism. He claims that an evangelist “carries with him oftentimes a personal magnetism which all pastors do not possess.” Biederwolf says, “All this talk about the crowds that will pack your church and the multitudes of people that will be converted if only you are a man filled with the Holy Spirit is utter nonsense with which healthy minds ought to be done.” He thinks evangelists have “peculiar ability for leading men to a definite decision for Jesus Christ. We call it magnetism. That may not be the best name for it
but it is a union of certain physical and psychical powers by which some men move others.” Admitting, “It is true that much of it [this “magnetism”] is God-given and native,” he nonetheless insists, “but it also true, I believe, that it can be to a certain extent acquired.”

Vocational Evangelism and Union Meetings

Although he thinks that revival is a part of the church’s spiritual life through history, Biederwolf admits that the modern citywide campaigns of professional evangelists are a newer development. “The revival in the sense of a protracted meeting or an evangelistic campaign is of comparatively recent origin.” He says that all Christians support evangelism but notes controversy over the “Vocational or so-called Professional Evangelism, especially as it operates in union revival services where all or the majority of the churches of a given community unite in a general evangelistic campaign.” Biederwolf himself has no doubts about the office and calls for the specific position of evangelist on the basis that “scientific specialization should … exist in religious work as in every field of endeavor.”

Biederwolf offers five reasons tojustify union campaigns: God has blessed the method historically, it is adapted to the evangelistic and revival needs of the present era, it has observable numerical results, it provides a united Christian testimony of Christ, and it makes an “impression” on the community.

Daniel Nelson, in evaluating the campaigns of B. Fay Mills, makes a similar observation to Biederwolf’s fourth and fifth points: “Statistical analysis is one way to assess a revival, but it should be noted that it is not necessarily the only way or the most valid way. The main value of a Mills revival was not in the number of accessions to church membership but in the remarkable focus it brought to bear on the cause of evangelical Christianity in a particular community and by the way in which it afforded an opportunity for an entire community to unite on a festival occasion to publicly share common values.”

Warnings About Evangelism

Criticisms—Although a staunch advocate of professional evangelism, Biederwolf was not blind to the problems that often arose. In his writings he sets out some of the errors he sees in the movement. He criticizes, for instance, those whose sermons “are little else than a string of stories—just tellers of anecdotes.” He mentions also those who puff up statistics by asking for decisions for temperance or patriotism, and then counting them as Christian professions of faith. Later he says that

in this day … we now talk of “hitting the trail.” In some way the idea has prevailed with many that walking the aisle and taking the evangelist’s hand is all that is needed and as a consequence many of our evangelistic campaigns have degenerated very largely into a general proposition of hand-shaking and card-signing or name-getting. But this is a sorry spectacle for a time like that when an eternal destiny is hanging in the balance.

As mentioned before, his book The Evangelistic Situation took aim especially at the excesses of the movement.

Need for Oversight—Running throughout Biederwolf’s philosophy of evangelism is his advocacy of some kind of regulation of the evangelistic ministry. In 1904 he complained to the audience at Winona Lake that the church had never tried to supervise evangelists. Later he argued that the church “ought to have a larger share in providing these [evangelists’] credentials.”

As Biederwolf hints here, one possible source of regulation was denominational oversight of campaigns. Chapman’s campaigns conducted through the Presbyterian Church’s special committee would be one example and may have influenced Biederwolf’s thinking. But most citywide campaigns were union meetings of several denominations, limiting the extent of regulation a single denomination could exercise. Another possibility was the Interdenominational Association of Evangelists, headquartered at Winona Lake, a professional organization aiming to provide guidelines for the conduct of an evangelistic ministry. Biederwolf supported the IAE and served as an officer, but its voluntary nature and lack of disciplinary power hindered its ability to regulate vocational evangelism.

Probably the most serious effort to regulate evangelistic work was the aforementioned Commission on Evangelism of the Federal Council of Churches, to which Biederwolf served as secretary and chief researcher. His report on that
research resulted in his most detailed proposals for what could be done. Biederwolf says that as long as churches hold union evangelistic campaigns, “there will be a demand, and a crying one, for some sort of ecclesiastical sanction or direction over this particular, this important and delicate phase of Christian activity” (emphasis in original).61

Furthermore, Biederwolf’s ideas are not simply theoretical. He provides a form for credentials committees to use in order to investigate the background of potential evangelists and to set up a basic ethical framework for matters such as reporting statistics.62 Biederwolf lines out a basic code of evangelism ethics63 and adds an insistence on belief in the fundamentals of the faith as essential to evangelistic endeavor.64 A separate incident underscores this last point in Biederwolf’s position. According to R. K. Johnson, biographer of Bob Jones Sr., Jones and Biederwolf served at one point as president and vice president of the IAE, respectively. During their term, they proposed and saw passed unanimously a resolution that no member of the association would knowingly hold campaigns under the sponsorship of liberal churches and clergy.65

Motivating Biederwolf’s concern for oversight was, then, not so much a desire for control as a deep concern that evangelists maintain a high level of personal and financial integrity and that they adhere to a strict fidelity to Protestant orthodoxy. Oversight was not to be a burden to evangelistic work but a means to preserve and improve it.

Conclusion

Although not one of the “giants” in the field of evangelism, William Edward Biederwolf was nonetheless significant. Historically, he well typifies the interests and activities of the evangelists of the golden age of urban evangelism. Furthermore his writings speak to the present to provide explanation and defense of his chosen vocation. His career and contribution enrich our understanding of the golden era of America’s citywide evangelistic campaigns.

1 William McLoughlin, Billy Sunday Was His Real Name (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 262. The other four were Gipsy Smith, Charles Scoville, Milford Lyon, and Henry Stough.


4 There is one biography of Biederwolf, Ray E. Garrett, William Edward Biederwolf: A Biography (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1948). This book is useful but lacks footnotes or a bibliography. Garrett’s work is a fair summary of the subject’s life but does little in interpreting either Biederwolf’s thought or his times. Also of value are the papers of Biederwolf, housed in the Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Illinois (Collection 195). The papers are predominantly newspaper clippings and sermons. A helpful guide to these papers is available online at http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/195.htm. One particularly useful feature of this guide is a partial list of Biederwolf’s evangelistic campaigns. Apparently the only scholarly examination of Biederwolf’s career is James Paul Cogdill, Jr., “A Major Stream of American Mass Evangelism: The Ministries of R. A. Torrey, J. W. Chapman and W. E. Biederwolf” (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Seminary, 1990). See also the brief sketch in McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, pp. 393-96.

5 Biederwolf may have been speaking of this congregation years later when he wrote, “When I began my ministry it was with a church that was known to be somewhat fashionable—in fact, so fashionable that for a goodly number of years they had dispensed altogether with the Sunday night service for the lack of any one to attend it.” William E. Biederwolf, Evangelism: Its Justification, Its Operation and Its Value (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1921), p. 99.


7 One of Biederwolf’s earliest books, The Man God Tried to Kill (Chicago: Glad Tidings, n.d.), consists of sermons he delivered at men’s prayer services at Winona.

fiche. The volume contains an address by Biederwolf, “The Power of the Holy Spirit,” pp. 139-42. Mills’s new emphasis on adding the improvement of society to the salvation of the individual is seen in “New Era in Evangelism,” pp. 146-47, and in the preface by Washington Gladden (pastor in Columbus and a leading proponent of the social gospel) in his preface, “The New Evangelism,” pp. 5-6.

18 Biederwolf, Evangelism, p. 72.

19 Stauffer, p. 13.


21 Biederwolf, Evangelism, p. 48.

22 The Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, where Biederwolf’s papers are housed, has prepared a partial list found in its online guide at http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/195.htm. One may also find descriptions of various campaigns, not in chronological order, in Garrett, pp. 25-46.

23 Garrett, p. 38.


26 Stelzle, p. 217. On complaints about the remuneration of evangelists, Biederwolf bluntly observes, “In plain Anglo-Saxon, if the evangelist is getting too much money, it is because somebody is guilty of giving it to him.” William E. Biederwolf, The Evangelistic Situation (Chicago: Glad Tidings Publishing, n.d.), p. 70.

27 McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, p. 364.

28 Garrett, p. 40.

29 Quoted in Garrett, p. 44; Cogdill makes the same observation about similarities between Biederwolf and Sunday, pp. 239-40.


32 Likewise McLoughlin describes “the educated but evangelistic clergymen which descended from Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield,” among whom he lists B. Fay Mills, Torrey, Chapman, and Biederwolf. (Modern Revivalism, p. 365.)

33 Stelzle, p. 217.


37 Ibid., p. 141.
38 Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, p. 85. The same idea was put more pungently by his fellow evangelist Bob Jones Sr.: “It takes evangelistic unction to make orthodoxy function.”
39 Ibid., p. 11.
40 Ibid., p. 39.
41 Ibid., p. 19.
42 Ibid., pp. 39-40.
43 Ibid., p. 40.
44 Interestingly, in support of this idea Biederwolf quotes Horace Bushnell (*Evangelism*, pp. 40-41), despite Bushnell’s reputation as a liberal. Elsewhere, Biederwolf appears to believe it is possible for a child to be reared so that he would not experience a noticeable conversion (Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, pp. 52-53, 92), a concept advanced by Bushnell in his *Christian Nurture* (1860).
45 Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, p. 120.
46 Ibid., p. 120.
47 Ibid., p. 121.
49 Ibid., p. 136.
51 Ibid., p. 109.
52 Ibid., p. 16.
54 Nelson, p. 113.
55 Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, p. 214. Biederwolf, however, by no means disdained the importance of illustration. He recalled that he at first eschewed illustration when he began preaching but found that he put audiences to sleep and discovered that using illustration required more skill than he realized. (Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, p. 75.) He also wrote several books of sermon illustrations, such as *Illustrations from Mythology* (1927) and *Illustrations from Art* (1930).
57 Ibid., p. 217.
59 Ibid., p. 140.
60 Information on the IAE is scanty, and the briefest of sketches is found in McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, p. 365.
61 Biederwolf, *The Evangelistic Situation*, p. 32.
63 Ibid., pp. 45-46.
64 Ibid., pp. 46-47.