

Editorial Reflections

Are We in a “Kingdom Era”?

I think so. Not that the old personal salvation days are gone, fortunately. The new days are here. A large and growing proportion of mission donors are relentlessly concerned about suffering people in the here and now. More and more people in our churches see the task now as seriously more than getting people saved in the purely personal eternal sense or even in the personal this-world prosperity sense. In the Bible the word saved has always referred rarely to eternity but rather mainly to an earthly deliverance from all kinds of evil. In the September–October 2007 issue of *Mission Frontiers* magazine (available at missionfrontiers.org), you will find a serious article I wrote entitled “The Future of Evangelicals in Mission.” Here I propose that 19th Century “First Inheritance” Evangelicals, led by civil leaders, sought to transform both individuals and to beat down the evils of this world. In the next century millions of “Second Inheritance” Evangelicals, lacking civil influence and generating Bible Institutes instead of colleges, had little or no stake in society, and consequently generated a focus on the next world, just as the so-called Negro Spirituals talked only about heaven.

But now all 157 of those early Bible Institutes have changed into colleges and universities, and Evangelicals have loomed large in the professions, civic affairs, Congress, etc. The old awareness of God’s concern to conquer (not just flee) evils in this world is coming back as the result of new and sweeping Evangelical influence echoing the qualities of “First Inheritance” Evangelicals. This is a two-paragraph summary of that ten page paper.

Undoubtedly not everyone will embrace the partially healed polarization. Two dangers can be anticipated. One danger will be that the “Second Inheritance” avoidance of extensive social transformation may endure in some circles—because there are still quite a few disenfranchised, non-college masses in America to be won, not to mention the apparently vast readership of “Left Behind” books, which perpetuate the assumption that we don’t need to bother with fixing up this world since we will soon be raptured out of it.

The opposite danger will be a renewed focus on social transformation stripped of an adequate emphasis on the crucial individual transformation that is, ironically, so very essential to any significant social transformation. All the recent books on international development acknowledge the truly major problem of corruption—books like *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* by William Easterly, and *The Bottom*

Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It by Paul Collier. Both Easterly and Collier are eminently qualified to assess corruption as perhaps the biggest roadblock to the success of practically any project or program. Meanwhile, the mission/Christian community abroad has almost a monopoly on people of honesty and integrity, and that morality comes mainly from a vertical awareness of the living God. Otherwise good deeds easily become merely good business. Indeed, the enormous sums floating around the world in the form of financial aid have created an equally enormous “aid-industry” which soaks up most of the money before it ever gets where it is supposed to go, or gets to what it is supposed to do.

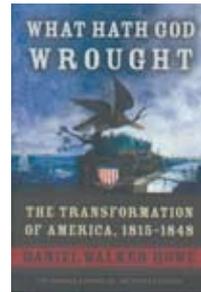
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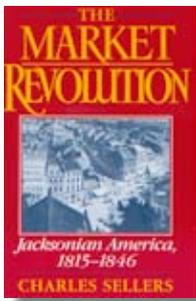
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All of this to say that it would be very important for anyone with a nose for the future to reread the astounding impact of the Gospel, individual and societal, in the period between the close of the War of 1812 and the Civil war. A recent Oxford book of 900 pages is actually entitled, *What Hath God Wrought? The Transformation of America 1815–1848* (by Daniel Walker Howe, 2007). It would appear that in no similar period in the history of the world has any nation ever changed so profoundly morally and materially—in that order—and the unique force for morality and transformation was clearly the Evangelical movement. This British author does not apparently have the inhibitions of many modern Americans against giving any credit to Evangelicalism for changes in society.



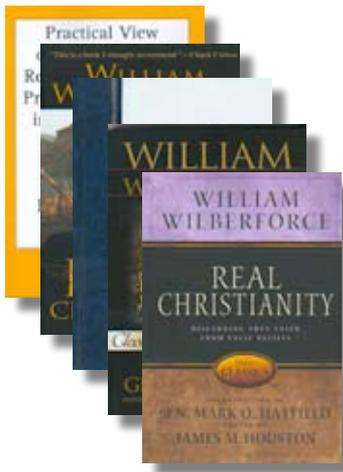
But to me the fascinating thing is not just where we are. It’s where we are apparently moving. The First Inheritance Evangelicalism was when Evangelicals were the most influential leaders in the country and catalyzed huge this-worldly transformations. Such efforts were then downplayed for the next hundred years. But they are now resurfacing as the Second Inheritance Evangelicals (common people won by Moody to Graham) are regaining power, but without a theology of this-world transformation (e.g. a “Public Theology”). It is no longer whether you believe in a Pre- or Post-Tribulation. Whichever you believe does not change the fact that Jesus heralded a Kingdom of God that was to involve His will being done on earth. We can agree on that. Missionaries, working intuitively (not theologically) have

sensed that God is glorified by defeating evil not just by “communicating” spell-binding words about the next life or even promises of prosperity in this life.



Okay, we’re moving. One possible evidence is the boldness of the title of Howe’s book, which, as I say, would not so likely be suggested by an American. Why I think this is important is that Oxford published another book on the very same period as recently as 1994. Its title would not as forthrightly tell you that its interior gives a splendid account of the revivals

and transformation that occurred in that period, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination*. That is not all. Oxford published a third hefty book on the very same hinge-of-history period only three years earlier, in 1991, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846*. That far back the title and even the subtitle would never in the world tip you off to the unique, astounding transformations of that period. However, facts are hard to avoid. The text acknowledges a great deal of transforming religious activity.



So I see a trend even at Oxford in their discernment of American markets. But not only Oxford. Take one more example—the recent publishing history of books by and about William Wilberforce. Wealthy or influential Evangelical leaders in the 1815–1848 period identified with this wealthy British politician who was so active in social transformation.

Millions of non-college Evangelicals in this country in the next 100 years didn’t, couldn’t identify. Now recently we are wealthy enough, educated enough, and influential enough to identify with him. Proof? Today you hear about him all the time. And, his major book, that shook England and all of Europe in many other languages, was out in 14 editions by 1820, each time extensively condensed and paraphrased, as was the custom in those days—especially with a 450-page fine-print original.

I have right on my desk five different recently republished editions. The closest to the original is also the most expensive (Amazon \$23). It employs the full 23-word original title, *Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*. This is an exact

reproduction of the 14th (1820) edition and carries no contemporary date being part of a series of old books republished by Kessinger Publishing, Montana, USA.

The second is a Hendrickson Christian Classic, hard-bound, in 1996, *A Practical View of Christianity*.

The third is by Bridge-Logos, in 2005, *William Wilberforce: Greatest Work, Excerpts from A Practical View of Christianity*. This one has an audio CD in the back.

The fourth is by Regal, in 2007, *Real Christianity: A Paraphrase in Modern English*.

The fifth is a Victor Classic, also in 2007, *Real Christianity: Discerning True Faith from False Beliefs*.

Seems to me this highlights a definite trend. All of these editions are reset in type with modern language except for the first. Their page counts, respectively are 406, 330, 222, 200, 208. It is obvious that they have extracted differently. The paraphrasing is startlingly different as well.

Now, this excursion into publishing histories in order to detect a trend may seem strange, but it is a form of “Cliometrics,” which is the academic field of quantitative history, similar to Sociometrics and Biometrics. It just means that you take advantage of countable facts in discerning history. (“Clio” is the Greek god of history). Robert Fogel at the University of Chicago is the founder of this new academic field. We will hear from him in a later issue. He is a Nobel Prize winner who wrote an entire book, *The Fourth Great Awakening*, because he was so convinced that four “Great Awakenings” have had a key role in the formation of our country.

If you are interested in a much more detailed view of the rationale for thinking we are heading into the midst of a Kingdom Era, be sure to read my *Mission Frontiers* article mentioned at the beginning.

Note, finally, the connection between the surge of Evangelical influence described here and the need for such in the discussions in this issue about the usefulness of using certain words (Hoefer, Love, and Winter). The meanings of those words may change for the better if Evangelicals will rediscover the meaning Jesus attached to the coming of the Kingdom of God. **IJFM**