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From individual salvation to social salvation: Why evangelist B. Fay Mills changed his revival message

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From Individual Salvation to Social Salvation:
Why Evangelist B. Fay Mills Changed His Revival Message
Constance P. Murray

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated with love to:

my parents, Henry and Catherine Pair, who have given me an inheritance that will not pass away; spiritual giants of whom I can truly say that this world is not worthy;

my husband David, my beloved and my soul-mate;

our growing family, each an immeasurable gift from God:

Brandon, Colleen, Rosie, and Scarlett;

Derek, Carianne, Audri, Kaelyn, and Josiah;

Kevin;

And any who may yet join the family circle;

my sisters and dearest friends, Deborah and Shelby, and their families; and the memory of my brother Bobby, childhood companion, who loved history; and his family;

the Murrays, my second family, who kindly grafted me in.

“Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.” (Psalm 16:5-6)

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As an older student returning to the classroom after two decades in the field of education, I wondered what it would be like to once again sit on the “other side” of the desk. I quickly learned that the transition would be rewarding, that the experience would be enriching, and that the faculty and staff would be supportive beyond what I had imagined. The dedicated historians at JMU go the extra mile with the graduate students, and I have often been so inspired by their generosity with their knowledge and time.

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Preface

In 1857, the year in which B. Fay Mills was born, a revival broke out in New York City that had bankers, businessmen, and clerical workers rushing to churches at the noon hour to pray. What drove them through the open doors was the financial panic of 1857, which caused thousands of businesses to fail and the ranks of the unemployed to rise. Starting in the Old Dutch Church on Fulton Street, but rapidly filling nearby churches and auditoriums, the noon prayer meetings offered anxious souls a place to find comfort in numbers and to petition God for help. Testimonies, songs, scripture readings, prayers—and reports of answers to prayer—filled the hour. Word of what was happening spread quickly.

On leaving the churches, men dashed to the nearest telegraph office and dictated the hour's results, where telegraphers tapped out the narration to interested persons at the other end; some offices transmitted the news free of charge at specified times in the day. The *New York Tribune* and *New York Herald*, rival newspapers of the penny press, devoted ample space to reports of conversions and miraculous answers to prayer. Soon people from all walks of life were crowding the sanctuaries and auditoriums. In a few short months, revival fires had ignited meetings in other large cities and small towns across the nation, as residents there also took to their homes and churches for prayer. Lasting for two years, this lay-led movement crossed denominational lines and resulted in thousands of conversions and over half a million additions to the churches.¹ In later years

¹ See Grace W. Woods, *The Half Can Never Be Told* (Harrisburg, PA: The Evangelical Press, 1927); Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 63-72; William G. McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern*

Mills would speak of the Great Prayer Meeting Revival of 1857-1858 as a highlight in the chronicle of the nation.²

As history would have it, the two interwoven strands of revival and business in Mills' birth year would also comprise much of the evangelist's interests during the period of his life that this thesis investigates. During the middle years of the 1890s, Mills was both a revivalist of great renown and a messenger who sought to harness runaway capitalism to a concern for the economically left behind. Mills' voice was only one among many as he spoke out for the less fortunate, but what made him unique was his approach of using the revival platform to address social issues. In the past, the itinerant evangelist gathered a crowd for the purpose of pushing individuals to commit their lives to Christ. Mills built his considerable reputation on being a highly successful practitioner of persuasion. At his death, obituaries noted that between 200,000 and 500,000 conversions had resulted from his preaching of the orthodox, evangelical Gospel.³ As time went on, however, his public emphasis changed from preaching a message aimed at individual transformation to one aimed at social reconstruction. His sermons no longer asked his audiences to engage the question, "What must I do to be saved?" but rather "What must society do to be saved?" Behind his shift in focus lay a change of heart. Mills had been undergoing a personal realignment, one that signaled a loss of interest in "the old-time religion" of his former days for a new vision of social improvement as a path to progress. This thesis will uncover reasons for his change.

Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1959), 163; and George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 8th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 463-464.

² *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 7, 1896.

³ "Some Famous Evangelists: Passing of B. Fay Mills Recalls Other Noted Speakers Who Drew Immense Crowds," *Washington Post*, May 14, 1916.

I became interested in the life and public ministry of B. Fay Mills after reading the two paragraphs given to him in Martin Marty's *The Irony of It All*, the first volume in his series *Modern American Religion*. Marty wrote of Mills as an exception to the revivalist tradition. Where fellow ministers of the Gospel called individuals in their audiences to make a decision for Christ, Mills by 1894 was still holding big meetings but now preaching a message that emphasized social concerns and the coming Kingdom of God on earth, which Christians could inaugurate by their own righteous acts. Arousing suspicion from his former evangelistic peers, Mills later confirmed their skepticism by admitting that he had become convinced of "most of the conclusions and hypotheses of what might be called modern thought concerning the unity of the universe, the development of the world, and the progressive character of revelation."⁴ From this point, Marty continued, Mills was "shut out" of revivalism by evangelical churches, and Mills took his own course for the next fifteen years, after which time he returned to traditional Presbyterianism with its insistence on innate depravity in the human condition.⁵

Further investigation revealed that a pattern of shifts in theology and activity marked Mills' life journey. As successive waves of current concepts influenced Mills, his theological beliefs evolved along the following stages: mainline orthodoxy; a social gospel Christianity; Unitarianism; "Free Religion," which included elements of humanism, spiritualism, theosophy, and metaphysics; and finally, in the last year of his life, a return to orthodoxy. I became intrigued with Mills' responses to the challenges of his day, and found myself asking how an influential, prominent life could be marked with

⁴ Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 1: *The Irony of It All, 1893-1919* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 214-215.

⁵ Marty, 215.

so many changes—all made before the public eye. No full-scale treatment of Mills' life had been done, except for Daniel W. Nelson's 1964 doctoral dissertation "B. Fay Mills: Revivalist, Social Reformer, and Advocate of Free Religion." Nelson's 303-page work developed his argument that Mills was not a first-tier thinker and activist who shaped his times, but rather was a cultural follower who was shaped and often reshaped by the powerful climate of change in the religious and social order of his time period—the two decades on either side of the turn of the twentieth century. Thus, according to Nelson, Mills' interest in liberal religion merits study because it reveals the power of the forces arrayed against the fortress of Protestant Christianity.⁶

Studying Mills' life presents a challenge because no body of collected papers survived his immediate family members. His evolving thoughts must be construed from the few books and pamphlets that he published, articles that were printed in religious journals, sermons that were recorded in the newspapers of cities where he preached, and accounts and commentaries on his activities reported in the press. In addition, four books were written to commemorate revivals that he conducted. Nelson cites a fifth such book that I have not been able to locate.

Nelson draws mostly from primary source newspaper accounts and the few books and pamphlets that Mills wrote, as well as William G. McLoughlin's 1959 classic study *Modern Revivalism: From Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham*. In fact, the half chapter that McLoughlin devotes to Mills constitutes the largest amount of space given to Mills in a published work to date. Mills' contributions to the field of revivalism find their

⁶ Daniel W. Nelson, "B. Fay Mills: Revivalist, Social Reformer and Advocate of Free Religion" (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 1964), iii-vi.

way into several other secondary works, but are limited to a few sentences and paragraphs—surprising, in light of the fact that many of his contemporaries accounted him in the top rung of revivalism, and some said that he was second only to the century’s most eminent evangelist, Dwight L. Moody.⁷

Hence, the way is open for a fresh look at Mills in any number of his transitory life stations, and this thesis will focus on his transition from orthodox Christian revivalism to the Social Gospel. Because Nelson’s dissertation surveyed the whole scope of Mills’ life, he missed the prominence of the evangelist during a small period of time. Where his study discussed the broad confluence of ideas that produced successive shifts over the course of his life, this thesis focuses more intently on a narrower time frame, and finds significance in the power of one idea—the coming of the Kingdom of God and the social transformation that had to occur ahead of it—powerful enough to move an evangelist at the top of his field to risk his reputation on it. Mills gambled his fame as a revival preacher on his efforts toward a future earthly glory, and it cost him his legacy. This account of the impact of a utopian dream on a renowned evangelist deserves to be told.

Accordingly, this thesis will examine circumstances surrounding his decision to change his message and his agenda as he addressed congregations of spiritual seekers, the curious, and the skeptical. It will find the precipitating cause in Mills’ association with the brief but important Kingdom Movement, an early and highly influential progenitor of the Social Gospel emphasis within Christianity. Of the various personalities that found

⁷ “1,000 Professed Conversions,” *The New Haven Evening Register*, May 14, 1890; Frederick Campbell, “Lingering on the Pacific Coast,” *New York Evangelist*, July 14, 1892.

common purpose within the Kingdom group, the movement's prophet George D. Herron resonated most clearly with Mills, who called Herron a "modern-day Jeremiah."⁸ But answers to the question "Why?" are not usually one-dimensional, and there is more to this thesis than the fact that Mills followed Herron into the Social Gospel movement. One might ask again, "Why did he follow Herron so closely and avidly? What inclined him toward this movement in the first place?" Answers to this question will be offered in Mills' background, educational choices, and personality.

This thesis is divided between historiographical and biographical material, necessary for piecing together clues from Mills' life, and an analysis of a five-month period between October 1895 and February 1896, when his new emphasis on the Social Gospel was well-developed. Chapter One locates Mills' place and contributions in the secondary literature. Chapter Two gives personal background into Mills, from his parents through his most successful period of revivalism. Chapter Three documents his growing interest in the Social Gospel and his involvement with George D. Herron and the Kingdom Movement. Chapter Four looks at Mills' revival in Louisville, Kentucky, one of the southernmost cities where Mills preached. Chapter Five focuses on his meetings in New Haven, Connecticut, a city with a mixed population of highly educated and working class residents. And finally, the Conclusion gathers up the strands of argument and answers the question posed by the thesis, and an Epilogue briefly traces the path Mills took after his Social Gospel phase.

⁸ Rev. Palmer S. Hulbert, D.D., "The Theology of Rev. B. Fay Mills," *The Treasury of Religious Thought* 12 (January 1895): 775-778.

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Abstract

Rev. B. Fay Mills was a popular, late nineteenth century Protestant evangelist whose fame approached that of the eminent Gospel preacher, Dwight L. Moody. Preaching to audiences in large urban settings, Mills' revivals captured headlines and significant column space as he preached sermons of individual salvation from sin from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy. Yet, just as he was reaching the very top of the field of itinerant evangelists, he changed his message to reflect his growing interest in and association with the Social Gospel movement. This thesis investigates the reasons for his shift in theological viewpoint and public proclamations.

Since Mills' personal papers did not survive, evidence had to be gathered from his few published writings, four books written to commemorate his revivals in specific American cities, and newspaper and religious journal articles. This study provides relevant biographical material on Mills and then focuses on his meetings in the cities of Louisville, Kentucky, Columbus, Ohio, and New Haven, Connecticut, because they were his biggest revivals conducted under the inspiration of his new message.

Mills' shift to the Social Gospel resulted from external and internal forces. The precipitating cause was the influence of Rev. George D. Herron, D.D., a charismatic speaker whose preaching of total social reconstruction and the human inauguration of the Kingdom of God drew Mills into his circle of followers. Mills responded to Herron's vision, however, because of inclinations already at work, which included his family background, personal independence, disregard for abstract theological formulations, and preference for spiritual experience as a guide to truth. As these motivations combined in

Mills, he attempted to innovate and use the traditional revival platform to advance his progressive agenda for the social transformation that he believed must precede the imminent advent of a perfect moral order on earth. Mills would find that the medium of church revivals did not mix with the message of radical reform in the minds of conservative Protestant leaders. He could not secure a following, and his popularity waned.

Chapter One

At Once Flourishing and In Crisis:

The Paradox of the Protestant Church in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

In 1897 B. Fay Mills and his son Thornton struck out on a tandem bicycle trip across the state of Ohio. Mills was riding a new technological wave, because bicycles—both one- and two-seaters—were just coming into their own in the latter part of the nineteenth century. During the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, bicycles as a new means of transportation were a featured attraction.⁹ But innovations could be tricky to master: all did not go well with the father-son bicycle trip. Somewhere near Columbus, the elder Mills was thrown from his seat, and sustained what appeared at the time to be a serious injury to his hip. He was picked up by a local farmer and taken into town for help. Happily, no bones were broken, and he recovered.¹⁰ These new inventions could be fraught with peril, as Mills himself discovered.

During the Gilded Age in which Mills lived most of his life, changes were transforming the cultural landscape with locomotive speed. Some changes brought improvements to daily life; others created hardships. The apt opening line in Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* put it well: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." In the years following the Civil War, Americans enjoyed material benefits from an explosion of inventions and conveniences. As historian Mark Wahlgren Summers put the numbers, "in the seventy years leading up to 1860, the U. S. Patent Office issued

⁹ Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Gilded Age, or, The Hazard of New Functions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1997), 1-2.

¹⁰ "Evangelist Mills Hurt," *Marietta Daily Leader*, August 11, 1897; "Evangelist Mills Is Injured," *Scranton Tribune*, August 12, 1897.

36,000 patents. In the next three decades, it granted 440,000 more...”¹¹ Sewing machines, vacuum cleaners, and canned goods eased the homemakers’ burden in the house, while typewriters, telephones, and mimeograph machines did the same for clerical workers at the office. The phonographs invented by Thomas Edison brought musical entertainment into the spaces where people gathered, and his affordable electric lights enabled the enjoyments of the day to linger well into the night. Transportation between home and work place improved with the innovation of cheap steel rails and the electric streetcar, and expanding lines of track meant greater personal mobility and less horse manure to clean off the streets.¹²

The improvements brought by industry and commerce, however, came with a price for some of those who labored to produce the goods. Underpaid wage workers and newly arrived immigrants were left to deal with the stuffy, overcrowded conditions of inner city life, as the more affluent took advantage of the new mobility and deserted the city, opting to build their homes farther and farther away from the congested downtown.¹³ While discoveries in medicine were beginning to improve the length and quality of life, contagious diseases such as tuberculosis were still not under control, with perhaps as many as one in five deaths resulting from the infection.¹⁴ Crowded conditions in tenements and other tight living spaces proved a conducive environment for its spread, and provided a ready supply of hosts for the proliferation of the bacteria. Other problems resulted from illiteracy among foreign-speaking populations, sanitation issues from

¹¹ Summers, 5.

¹² Summers, 7.

¹³ Summers, 2-7; George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 8th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 597.

¹⁴ Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the “Gilded Age,” 1865-1905* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 150-156.

cramped and under-developed housing areas, and crippling poverty helped along by the over-consumption of alcohol by unskilled, low-earning workers. The saloon culture comprised such a big part of city life that by 1900 over ten thousand saloons were open for business in greater New York.¹⁵

At the same time that the material life of the Gilded Age had its pros and cons, so too did the religious life of the time period. Mills lived at a time when Protestantism was at once flourishing and in crisis. The paradox resulted from an increase in evangelistic activity simultaneous with a decrease in trust in the authoritative word of the Bible and church. Concerning the latter, a growing host of skeptical thinkers demanded an accounting from the Protestant fortress on such issues as the higher criticism of the Biblical text, the Darwinian theory of evolution, and explanations of human behavior resulting from the two new academic disciplines of sociology and psychology. Most troubling of them all were the challenges questioning the authenticity and veracity of the Bible; this cut to the core of belief, because Protestants regarded the Scriptural text as the ultimate source of divine authority for faith and practice.¹⁶

For some Protestants—and B. Fay Mills was one—these assaults proved too persuasive to be ignored. They relinquished the traditional faith and tried to salvage what they could from the traditional edifice. George Marsden in *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* maintains that liberalism in Protestantism first grew up, not so much as a rejection of Christianity, as an attempt to salvage it from the ravages of the latest scientific, literary, and academic developments. Marsden identified three

¹⁵ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 17.

¹⁶ George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 37.

emphases around which the expanding group of liberal, or “modernist,” Protestants forged their new faith. First, they tended to “deify” the historical process, by maintaining that God revealed Himself not so much through a single book as through the upward, increasingly enlightened sweep of human progress. In this construct, the Bible retained value as an account of how an ancient people interacted with God, but the revelation of God continued throughout history. Jesus occupied a special position in place and time because He united in His person the divine and historical, and taught His followers how to inaugurate the culmination of history: the kingdom of God on earth. Second, they emphasized ethical behavior over correct doctrine. Even if liberals thought that much in the biblical record fell before the new modern tests, they nevertheless believed that Jesus’ ethical teachings still remained timeless and true. Third, religious feeling was stressed over doctrinal precepts and scientific evidence. Since the realm of religious sense operated outside the domain of scientific fact, progressive thinkers believed they could spare Christianity from the damaging effects of scientific inquiry by accentuating spiritual consciousness. To liberals these highlights provided the perfect solution to the spiritual crisis of the Gilded Age: they had the advantage of sidestepping the concerns raised by modern thought, while simultaneously retaining some of the essentials of Christianity.¹⁷ This liberal road, which stressed progressive revelation, ethical behavior, and religious experience, is the one that Mills would travel.

The Protestant church not only fended off threats from the outside, but it also wasted precious energy contending with quarrels and controversies on the inside, as competing versions of orthodoxy vied for preeminence. In fact, some of the same fights

¹⁷ George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 32-36.

carried on with the nonreligious were tearing at relationships among believers and denominational organizations. George Marsden in *Fundamentalism and American Culture* stated that “the issues debated so intensely in the denominations usually centered on the authority of Scripture, its scientific accuracy, or the supernatural elements in Christ’s person and work.”¹⁸ For example, several heresy trials—the most famous being that of Professor Charles Briggs, who was dismissed from Union Theological Seminary over his contention that the original biblical manuscripts may have contained errors—roiled the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.¹⁹

Other disputes that divided the church related to issues regarding denominational polity and theological interpretations. In the case of denominational polity, an outcry arose among conservative Presbyterian and Congregational clergy concerning the capitulations of Congregational Conferences to popular pressure in the ordaining of a new corps of evangelists, whose role was to press for conversions among unbelievers and to increase the spiritual fervor in established churches. Opponents of creating a permanent office of evangelists argued that it suggested an incapable regular clergy, and put the Gospel message in the hands of rash young upstarts who operated under the pressure of generating “constant excitement.” These wandering pulpитеers, the antagonists continued, took the Gospel out of the hands of seminary trained or carefully groomed, learned clergy who could be trusted to correctly interpret truth and provide a constant care of souls. Roving itinerant evangelists such as Augustus Littlejohn, who was

¹⁸ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 103.

¹⁹ Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930* (University: The University of Alabama Press, 1982), 27-29. Briggs’ loss of his professorship at Union led the seminary to remove itself from the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., and assume an independent status. Thus Briggs ultimately kept his place at the Seminary after all.

described as “a mad evangelist” and “grossly unsound in doctrine”—and who proved his unfitness for ministry by more than one instance of marital infidelity—only served to make the point for this viewpoint.²⁰ This put the issue of the education of clergy on the agenda of denominations such as the Presbyterian Church, which responded by creating in 1857 a new Education Department and installing as its first chair the Rev. Thornton. A. Mills, none other than the father of B. Fay Mills himself.²¹

The controversy over polity was rooted in a theological argument. Earlier in the century, the Presbyterian and Congregational churches had been consumed with disputes over the relationship between God’s sovereignty and the human being’s free will. The Congregational denomination was spared some of the divisiveness because their church organization left local congregations independent of denominational governance, but the hierarchical Presbyterian denomination, which needed consensus among the many churches to maintain its functions, formally split in 1837 between two schools of theological interpretation.²² Old School Presbyterianism still held firmly to a view of total human depravity and a divine providence that orchestrated events and determined human action, including who was chosen to be saved. Adherents of this school understood a revival as an act of God, originating from His sovereign will and direction, and thus were predisposed to wait on God for His initiation of it. They believed, for example, that God had acted without human help in the First Great Awakening, as reflected in Jonathan

²⁰ McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1959), 122-133.

²¹ “General Assembly,” *New York Evangelist* (June 4, 1857): 178. The great irony is that B. Fay Mills would choose not to get a formal theological education, but to pursue his studies according to his own interests.

²² McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 15. McLoughlin says on page 65 that the two schools had reunited in 1870, but Professor E. D. Morris, D. D. wrote in the April 1, 1880 issue of *the Independent* (page one) that the formal separation ended on November 11, 1869, when the two schools “became ecclesiastically one.”

Edwards' account *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*.²³ Ultimately losing their former place of dominance, by the end of the century the strict Calvinists of this school only held a few outposts. Of these, Princeton Theological Seminary was by far the most preeminent. On the other hand, the New School of Presbyterianism embraced the viability of human agency, and welcomed and sought to continue the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, which occurred roughly between the years 1795 and 1835.²⁴ Believing that ministers of the Gospel could actively shape the spiritual environment and purposefully craft a compelling message, they took up the call of God and summoned sinners to the cross of Christ where salvation was freely offered to all. In doing this, they were following the trail blazed by Charles G. Finney, the single greatest revivalist of the Second Great Awakening.²⁵

New School Presbyterianism, and other denominations and individuals who followed this line of thought, gained innumerable converts, but in opening the door to human initiation in matters of the Gospel, they weakened the ability of the clergy to press the faithful to adhere to a prescribed set of theological doctrines. Finney's more human-centered theology drew upon John Wesley's belief in the possibility of Christian perfection, as well as popular acceptance of the republican ideals of human autonomy.²⁶ In so doing, it unleashed a boundless energy that spread out in all directions. Some found in his formulations religious justification for the exaltation of all things human, and

²³ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 301-302.

²⁴ McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 8.

²⁵ McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 11, 15, 27.

²⁶ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War As a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 22-24. Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 235.

eventually wandered out of the faith. Some went the other way and asked God to turn the searchlight of the Spirit upon their sin, in order to eradicate it and create in them holiness of life. Believing they had found the potential to continue on toward perfection, some seekers sought a life that was entirely sanctified, holy, and perfect—at least in regard to intentionally committed sin. They aimed for entire sanctification through the Baptism of the Holy Spirit as a second work of grace.²⁷ Still others channeled their energies into the reformation of society, because if the individual life could be improved and or even perfected, then so could the society made up of free human agents. Thus many reform efforts were begun in the decades leading up to the Civil War, including the abolition of slavery, temperance in regard to the consumption of alcohol, and more humane conditions in prisons, insane asylums, and housing districts.²⁸ Then there were those who radically reinterpreted Christianity and formed a religion apart, such as Joseph Smith and the Mormons, or crazed zealots such as the man who doused his clothes in kerosene and burnt himself to death in an attempt to “expiate his sins and to propitiate the favor of the Almighty.”²⁹ With the exception of the emphasis on social reform, onlookers in the Old School tradition might well conclude, and did, that Finney had opened Pandora’s Box.³⁰

But there were yet more who simply tightened their grip on the traditional doctrines of the faith and the Holy Scriptures from which they issued. Rather than compromise their stand on the “sola scriptura” of Reformation Protestantism, they plunged deeper into the texts and took seriously and literally what they found. Professors

²⁷ Noll, *A History of Christianity*, 235.

²⁸ Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 154-162.

²⁹ “Suicide of a Religious Zealot,” *Providence Evening Bulletin*, January 30, 1890.

³⁰ McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, chapter two.

at Princeton Theological Seminary were especially known for their defense of the inerrancy doctrine, which they formulated in 1892 in the *Portland Deliverance*: the “inspired Word, as it came from God, is without error.”³¹

Many biblical literalists were especially fascinated with eschatology, the doctrine of last things or end times. Because both Old and New Testaments contained prophecies concerning future events, the church had always cherished eschatological hopes and incorporated future events into its creeds and doctrinal statements. Two prophecies yet to be fulfilled involved Jesus’ bodily return to earth and a one-thousand-year reign of Christ. Expectations of these two end-time events pervaded the 1900s, although interpretations differed as to precisely how the one thousand years would begin and conclude, and at what point Christ would return to earth.

Ernest Sandeen, in his pathbreaking study entitled *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930*, began his book by presenting millennialist expectations of the church in historical stages. While the early Christians anticipated Christ’s imminent, physical return, later Christians followed the fifth century Bishop of Hippo St. Augustine in allegorizing Christ’s return, and held that Christ had returned by being spiritually present in the ministries of grace in the church. During the eighteenth century, Enlightenment and rationalist optimism linked the spirit of progress to millennial views, and averred that Christians were empowered to carry the world forward to increasing perfection, thus embodying the spiritual presence of Christ in the world until He physically returned.³² This was the optimistic, post-millennial view (*post*

³¹ Ahlstrom, 814.

³² Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 4-5.

because Christ's personal return occurred *after* the one thousand years) that Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney embraced, and that contributed toward the social reform activities in the decades before the Civil War.

After the Civil War, however, more sober-minded Christians who had witnessed the brutality of man against man on the battlefields of the East began to assert that, because human nature was thoroughly corrupted with sin, substantial reformation of the social systems was an impossible project. Priority should instead be given to saving souls rather than to overhauling social structures. Jettisoning the hopeful anticipations of the earlier post-millennialism, and searching for alternate explanations of the millennium, they mined the sacred Scriptures for eschatological insight, and devoted themselves to organizing the scattered prophetic texts into a consistent chronicle of final events. One such Biblical expositor was John Nelson Darby, who strenuously promulgated his sequencing of events, in which Christ would return before the millennium and lift believers off the earth in a sudden, "secret rapture." Later, Jesus would return physically to earth in a manner that all would see, as described in Matthew 24.³³ Darby put forth his views from the 1830s through the 1870s and gained a wide following among those who accepted the doctrine of inerrancy and a literalist approach to the interpretation of the Bible.³⁴

But in another arena of activity, the Protestant church flourished. Partly in response to the pre-millennial urgency of rescuing souls before the rapture of the saints, an explosion of evangelistic activity—despite challenges within and without the church—

³³ Sandeen, 62-64.

³⁴ Sandeen, chapter three; James F. Findlay, Jr., *Dwight L. Moody: American Evangelist, 1837-1899* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 125.

was spawned after the Civil War. Dwight L. Moody, the great revivalist of the nineteenth century, had come to accept pre-millennialism by the 1870s.³⁵ A transitional figure who bridged both millennial worlds, Moody was involved in some urban rejuvenation organizations such as the Y. M. C. A. and Sabbath Schools for inner-city youth, while at the same time retaining a pessimism about the ultimate prospects of setting the world to rights.³⁶ Reflecting on the fact that his belief in pre-millennialism had spurred his evangelistic efforts and made him want to work “three times as hard,” he followed it up with his most famous quotation: “I look on this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a life-boat, and said to me, ‘Moody, save all you can.’”³⁷

“The most celebrated evangelist of [the last half of the nineteenth century] on both sides of the Atlantic,” Dwight L. Moody took the Gospel message to the streets of the largest urban centers in the United States and Britain.³⁸ Having begun his adult life in the business world, Moody shrewdly recognized the advantages that business principles such as advertising could bring to evangelism. By incorporating marketing techniques, Moody transformed the revivalism of his own day, and his innovations have carried over into recent times. Bruce J. Evensen in *God’s Man for the Gilded Age* explains how Moody set the new trend of merging mass evangelism with the mass media of newspapers. Both Moody and the press realized that they needed each other, claims Evensen. Moody needed the press for drawing attention to his meetings, and the press

³⁵ Findlay, 250.

³⁶ Findlay, 16, 63, 72-74, 126, 249-254.

³⁷ Findlay, 253.

³⁸ David Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 45-46; McLoughlin, 166.

needed Moody to provide them with good cover stories to increase circulation.³⁹

Evangelists after Moody—such as Mills—could count on the secular press to publicize their meetings and create interest among the reading public.

Another reason for the success of Moody's campaigns was the financing he received from wealthy evangelical capitalists, according to William G. McLoughlin in *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*. The 1870s, when Moody's revivalism began to take off, was also a decade of banking panic, financial stress, and unemployment for many thousands in major urban centers. McLoughlin contends that capitalists believed that Moody's combined message of God's providence and the American dream could calm the potentially volatile jobless, and give them hope for the soon return of good times. For this same reason, Moody was despised by socialists, who, like Friedrich Engels, called Moody and his song leader Ira Sankey "tools of the capitalist class."⁴⁰ Moody did try to reach the working classes, including "the foreign-born [and] Catholic poor who made up so large a proportion of the labor class," but admitted later that he could not induce them to attend his meetings. His audiences ended up being composed mostly of the middle class, who had come to the larger American cities from rural areas in search of better employment opportunities, and who were predisposed toward a ready reception of an evangelical and nationalistic message.⁴¹

However much Moody may have changed the conduct of revivalism by his connections to the business world, he did not alter accepted evangelical doctrine to suit

³⁹ Bruce J. Evensen, *God's Man for the Gilded Age: D. L. Moody and the Rise of Modern Mass Evangelism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 187-188.

⁴⁰ William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 142-144.

⁴¹ McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 144-145.

his immense urban audiences. Evangelical belief varied within certain parameters, such as how one looked upon end time events, but certain articles of belief were paramount, according to David Bebbington in his recent book *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody*. Bebbington has identified four cardinal truths that crystallized evangelical belief in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The first truth regarded the Bible as “the supreme evangelical court of appeal.” The Scriptures, as God’s very Word, constituted the Protestants’ source of authority—a final, unchanging revelation—and the ultimate reference point for all formulations of doctrine and answers to perplexing questions. The second article of belief concerned the centrality of the cross, the place where salvation was won for individuals by Jesus’ sacrificial, substitutionary death. Because original sin caused an eternal separation of every person from God, a price must be paid to restore fellowship with Him. Jesus was qualified to pay the debt because He was sinless; His voluntary death satisfied humanity’s debt. Called the atonement, this doctrine made much of Christ’s bloodshed on the cross and was a most precious article of faith to the evangelical community. A third focal point of doctrine centered around conversion. Conversion was a real, actual change wrought in the individual life by supernatural intervention. When persons came to faith in Christ, they were changed on the inside by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit—“It was the start . . . of authentic Christian existence.” Fourth and finally, evangelical believers possessed an activist mentality: as individuals who had experienced salvation for themselves, it was their God-given assignment to pass on to others how to be saved. This responsibility was incumbent upon clergy and laity alike.⁴² Evangelicals such as Moody

⁴² Bebbington, 23-40.

adhered to these articles of faith, in the face of assaults from a growing movement of secular challengers and liberal clergy who criticized them for their lack of willingness to compromise.

Despite the flourishing of evangelical activity, family feuds within the Protestant church toward the end of the nineteenth century were deepening into a rift, tearing apart basic unity. The organic rupture of a few years hence had not yet separated modernists and fundamentalists into hostile camps. Liberals could sound like holiness preachers as they urged the infilling of the Holy Spirit, and conservatives could echo social gospellers as they pointed out that the poor sought the saloon for comfortable living space and communism for the money that wealthy Protestants hoarded, as Grant Wacker has pointed out in his article “The Holy Spirit and the Spirit of the Age in American Protestantism, 1880-1910.”⁴³ But a split in the Protestant body was widening and deepening, with conservative, inerrantist, pre-millennialists on one side, and liberal, progressive, post-millennialists on the other. In the latter group, reform-minded clergy and laity retained the optimism about redeeming social institutions, as spreading urban blight caught their attention and awakened their consciences. Where before Protestants had espoused a spiritual individualism, now some were motivated to rethink the faith in more collective terms. The term “social Christianity” first designated those who belonged to this group.⁴⁴

Robert Handy separated the ranks of the socially concerned into three main categories. At one extreme were conservative Christians who were motivated toward

⁴³ Grant Wacker, “The Holy Spirit and the Spirit of the Age in American Protestantism, 1880-1910,” *The Journal of American History* 72 (June 1985): 45-62.

⁴⁴ Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 5.

social action, but still operated within an individualistic viewpoint. At the other extreme were radicals who pushed their views into the realm of Christian socialism, which rejected the existing social order and promoted “sweeping reconstruction.” At the center of these two views stood those whose views would become known as the Social Gospel. This category was occupied by religiously motivated individuals who wished to hold on to some important elements within Christianity, but who were also progressive and forward-looking in their efforts to find solutions to the social dilemma. Social Gospel advocates in the latter years of the nineteenth century found most satisfying a mediated position between “inherited Christianity and modern thought.” Caught up in the exuberant optimism of their times, eagerly anticipating the better world still waiting in the wings, and appreciative of the new insights emerging from the progressive elements of academia, Handy called them “evangelical liberals.”⁴⁵ While keeping the person and work of Jesus Christ central to their theology, they also sought to reinvigorate Christianity by emphasizing the immanence of God more than His transcendence, preferring the real and actual over abstractions, and advocating the “progressive unfolding of Christian truth” rather than staying bound to “static categories.”⁴⁶ Rev. Washington Gladden, sometimes designated “the father of the social gospel,” held these views.⁴⁷ During the middle years of the 1890s, Mills straddled the middle and extreme positions on the social Christianity spectrum, and conducted a series of meetings as a social gospeler in Gladden’s home city of Columbus, Ohio.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Handy, *The Social Gospel in America*, 6.

⁴⁶ Handy, *The Social Gospel in America*, 7-8.

⁴⁷ Handy, *The Social Gospel in America*, 7.

⁴⁸ *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, ed. Henry Stauffer (Columbus, OH: W. L. Lemon, 1895).

In these years when immigrants flooded the limited resources of the cities, and poverty resulted from a shortage of jobs or work that paid very little, mammoth social alterations were transforming the U. S. For instance, the population of one of the nation's fastest growing cities—Chicago—doubled every decade from 1860 to 1890. The rapid growth occurred primarily due to masses of immigrants coming from Ireland, Germany, Scandinavia, Bohemia, and Southern and Eastern Europe.⁴⁹ The *Northwestern Christian Advocate* called Chicago “a foreign city with no more than one-fifth of the population Americans.”⁵⁰ In many industrial cities, labor disputes dominated the headlines, and in some places, the problems of the workers reached a crisis. The railway strike of 1877, The Haymarket Riot in 1886, and several big strikes in the 1890s involving hardship and death, all called the attention of the American public to serious disagreements between capital and labor: each saw the other as the source of the problem.

Life was hard and workers sought escape; wage-working men often found it in the saloon. Where the church doors were closed except for a few hours a week, saloons were open long after working hours, and offered an environment where weary workers could socialize, sing, and gamble. In addition, although individual saloons barred certain categories of people on the basis of gender, ethnicity, race, or neighborhood, those who could enter found a safe haven which accorded equal treatment and respect.⁵¹ For married women, on the other hand, leisure activities were much more restricted and confined. Women were bound by the constant demands of household chores, child care, and the

⁴⁹ Bruce C. Nelson, *Beyond the Martyrs: A Social History of Chicago's Anarchists, 1870-1900* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 15.

⁵⁰ Nelson, 16.

⁵¹ Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 58.

lack of money of their own; some could find no other entertainment, if they had time for it, than to sit on their steps and talk to neighbors. They frequently voiced their opposition to their husbands' alcohol consumption at saloons because it created a drain on the already scarce family income.⁵² Wherever each gender in the immigrant neighborhoods located its social networking and amusements, however, it was increasingly not behind the doors of the Protestant church. One of the reasons why the working class did not frequent the church, a manufacturer explained in 1870, was because it was "too aristocratic for the clothes they (the working people) are able to wear."⁵³

Mother Jones, the radical and flamboyant labor activist, put the estrangement of labor from the church in her characteristically tart manner of speaking: "What is it to us if the church bell tolls each Easter morning and announces the resurrection of the Christ? It has never yet tolled for the resurrection of Christ's children from their long dark tomb of [wage] slavery."⁵⁴ The disappearance of Protestant churches from the cities compounded the alienation of working classes: empty buildings were left behind when the wealthier classes fled the deteriorating conditions in the overpopulated cities. In the twenty years from 1868 to 1888, for example, "seventeen Protestant churches abandoned the area south of Fourteenth Street in Manhattan. In the center of Chicago, 60,000 residents had no church, Protestant or Catholic."⁵⁵

In the context of the urban crisis, theologically liberal clergy led the Social Gospel movement, but it would be wrong to conclude that evangelicals possessed no social

⁵² Kathy Peiss, 17-27.

⁵³ Rosenzweig, 57.

⁵⁴ Elliott J. Gorn, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 147.

⁵⁵ Tindall and Shi, 643.

conscience or that they shunned inner city residents. To the contrary, Moody organized Sabbath schools as a type of mission to the poor in Chicago, and influenced others to do the same. By 1865, Moody's biographer writes, "there were thirty-one such mission schools listed in the Chicago city directory, of which twenty-seven were sponsored by the four major evangelical Protestant denominations."⁵⁶ Likewise, Reuben A. Torrey, Moody's successor at the Chicago Bible Institute, had earlier used his church in Minneapolis "to meet the medical, educational, recreational, and spiritual needs of the urban poor." In addition, he had worked with "liberal or liberally inclined reformers such as Graham Taylor, Josiah Strong, and Jacob Riis" in the organization of the Convention of Christian Workers, "an institution ranked by the historian Aaron Ignatius Abell as one of the two most influential social-reform groups of the era."⁵⁷

Distress in the homes, in the workplaces, and on the streets so dominated public discussion that ministers found themselves grappling with these issues when they gathered among their peers. Denominational conventions addressed topics that often turned to social problems. A participant in a Congregational gathering in 1894 who had not attended the session for ten years discovered that the topics under discussion had changed from ecclesiastical and theological concerns to social issues.⁵⁸ All denominations experienced this trend. A study comparing themes in denominational meetings in the twenty-five years before 1894 showed that where social concerns had largely been absent before, in the latter year agendas were now dominated by questions about labor unrest, the coming of the Kingdom of God, and how the church should

⁵⁶ Findlay, 73.

⁵⁷ Wacker, 51.

⁵⁸ Robert T. Handy, "George D. Herron and the Kingdom Movement," *Church History* 19 (June 1950): 97.

respond to the growing social movements.⁵⁹ Publications reflected this orientation as well. In a review of books for the year 1894, a journal found that the most pervasive topics all converged around the social themes of “socialism, social reform, sociology, political economy, and social aspects of Christianity.”⁶⁰ Handy argues that it was in the 1890s that the Protestant church at large felt the permanent impact of the social movements developing within Christianity.⁶¹

A complex and multi-faceted movement, the Social Gospel movement gathered around it leaders who diverged in the way they applied Christian principles to society. However, according to Handy, they held core beliefs that revolved around similar key concepts: they were confident that the social teachings of Jesus were still trustworthy as an ethical model and should be applied to the needs of the individual and society. They were convinced that Jesus “stress[ed] ... the immanence of God, the goodness and worth of man, and the coming kingdom of God on earth.”⁶² Social Gospel adherents saw the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth as a real possibility, and believed it would eliminate social injustices and usher in harmony among people. Among those committed to the Social Gospel “there was a high expectation of a much improved if not perfect social order. Thus the whole movement had something of a utopian cast. Spokesmen for the Social Gospel believed wholeheartedly in progress.”⁶³

In the early 1890s a small group spun off from the emerging Social Gospel movement and in turn influenced it. They began meeting for retreats on the campus of

⁵⁹ Handy, “George D. Herron,” 98.

⁶⁰ Handy, *The Social Gospel*, 11.

⁶¹ Handy, *The Social Gospel*, 11; Handy, “George D. Herron and the Kingdom Movement,” 98.

⁶² Handy, *The Social Gospel*, 10.

⁶³ Handy, *The Social Gospel*, 10.

Iowa College and came to be called the Kingdom Movement. Two progressive Congregational ministers led the group: the resident of the college George A. Gates and a sensational and dynamic professor at the college named George D. Herron. Herron created shock waves in the Protestant community with his strident call for the elimination of competitive capitalism and the assumption of a Christ-like, self-sacrificial life style—both of which would result in the equitable leveling of the social classes and a golden age of earthly peace and perfection.⁶⁴

Powerhouse orators like Herron attracted B. Fay Mills to the Kingdom Movement, and he soon enlisted in its cause. He attended all of the retreats except the first, and became one of the speakers in its School of the Kingdom. Like the advocates of the Social Gospel, Gates, Herron, Mills, and other Kingdom leaders preached the application of Christian principles to society. The movement sharply criticized the church as apostate in its mission, accusing it of growing greedy in its wealth and property, and thus abandoning the mission given her by Jesus Christ. The Kingdom sought nothing less than the total reorganization of society in keeping with the teachings of Jesus. In 1895 Kingdom School leaders assigned Mills the topic “Social and Political Reform”—a subject that on the face had nothing to do with religious revivalism. All participants that year spoke on social themes, and one member reported on a communistic settlement that he was establishing near Lincoln, Nebraska.⁶⁵ As Herron grew more and more radical in his social pronouncements, church leaders began to sound the alarm, and soon they

⁶⁴ Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization 1889-1920* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1982), 42-43; Robert T. Handy, “George D. Herron and the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1890-1901” (PhD diss., The University of Chicago Divinity School, 1949), 37.

⁶⁵ “The Retreat and the School of the Kingdom,” *Outlook* (July 20, 1895): 116.

rejected him altogether. Because the Kingdom Movement was so closely tied to Herron, the organization went into quick decline and demise as his reputation plummeted.⁶⁶

But the influence of Herron upon Mills remained long after the movement which first drew its inspiration from the charismatic Herron had died. The intersection of the pathways of Mills and Herron was instrumental in determining the future direction of Mills: the first permanent curve in his track toward the left occurred when Mills encountered Herron. Mills started his public career as a revivalist in the tradition of Dwight L. Moody, but influenced by the Social Gospel and George D. Herron, and drawn along by his own independent mind, restless energy, optimism, and lack of regard for doctrinal formulations, Mills' theology began to leave orthodox constraints even as he searched for other avenues to use his speaking platform.

⁶⁶ Robert T. Handy, "George D. Herron and the Kingdom Movement," 113.

Chapter Two

In the Spiritual House of His Mother and Father:

The Early Life and Ministry of B. Fay Mills

On the face of it, there would have been no reason to think that any child born to Thornton A. and Anna Cook Mills would take a Social Gospel route out of conservative orthodoxy and into a liberal religion devoid of creed. Not all adult children choose to follow after the faith of their parents, it is true, but B. Fay Mills' mother and father were no ordinary set of Christian parents. Both gave themselves wholeheartedly and unstintingly to their faith and its mission, even when it meant personal hardship and great sacrifice. As the earliest shapers of their son B. Fay, their lives deserve attention, especially as his papers did not survive to offer his own insight into his thought processes. Therefore, an examination of their lives is warranted for the clues they might provide into Mills' own personal journey.

Mills was born in Rahway, New Jersey, in 1857, to parents who were deeply committed to the theology and work of the New School Presbyterian Church. The Rev. Dr. Thornton Anthony Mills (1810-1867), from the western state of Kentucky, occupied a respected and influential position in the denomination. Various descriptions of him as a "strong man" with "no graces of manner, except rugged energy may be called such," possessing "executive vigor," a "grand intellect and heart," and "an almost singular devotion to the work of his Master," Mills tirelessly immersed himself in the work of the church.¹ He held a number of pastorates, edited religious journals, was elected Moderator of the

¹ "The General Assembly," *Christian Observer* (June 12, 1852): 93; *New York Evangelist* (March 12, 1857): 88; "Gone," *New York Evangelist* (February 11, 1869):1.

nationwide New School Presbyterian General Assembly in 1860, and served as General Secretary of the denomination's Education Committee for the last ten years of his life. Early on, the energetic Mills joined organizations that involved him with problems concerning slavery, temperance, and missions. At the age of 23, he was elected the Corresponding Secretary of the Kentucky Colonization Society, which sought middle ground on the slavery issue by funding the relocation of blacks to Africa, and wrote several reports of successful resettlement efforts.² A ready writer, he became the corresponding secretary of the Kentucky Temperance Society in 1833, the Common School Society in 1834, and the secretary of a newly formed organization in 1835 called the Kentucky Union for the Improvements of the Colored Race. The stated purpose of the latter organization was to preach at least once a month to the black population in their congregations, and to spend one evening a week teaching them the Scriptures.³ When he moved to Ohio, he maintained his involvement with the American Temperance Union, but added his membership to the American Home Missionary Society, an organization which promoted evangelical activity on the home front, especially on the frontiers of American society.⁴

Mills the elder was a principled man with an independent mind: when he believed it necessary, he could buck liberal opinion and the press. In 1840, the Young Men's Bible Society of Cincinnati solicited funds from the public in order to purchase and distribute

² "Kentucky Colonization Society," *African Repository and Colonial Journal* (April 1833): 58; Thornton A. Mills, "Second Western Expedition to Liberia," *Western Luminary* (May 15, 1833): 3; Thornton A. Mills, "Kentucky State Colonization Society," *African Repository and Colonial Journal* (September 1834): 209.

³ "Temperance Convention at Lexington," *Western Luminary*, (May 22, 1833): 3; "Constitution of the Kentucky Common School Society," *Western Luminary* (February 5, 1834): 119; "Kentucky Union, for the Improvement of the Colored Race," *New York Evangelist* (August 8, 1835): 217.

⁴ "American Temperance Union," *New York Evangelist* (May 23, 1840): 82; "New York Anniversaries," *New York Evangelist* (May 23, 1840): 1.

Bibles in the community. Because a Unitarian was a member of the Society, Mills and five other ministers wrote a letter of protest. Because Unitarians did not hold to the “Supreme Divinity of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, a doctrine so dear to us, that we dare not directly or indirectly, consent to any association, which may bring it under any liability to be injured or undervalued,” they refused further support for the Society. The letter was careful to point out that they wished the society and the Unitarian no harm. Nevertheless, an uproar ensued and both the *Western Messenger* and the *Liberator* condemned the six ministers for violating liberty of conscience.⁵

At the same time, Mills demonstrated that he could uphold freedom of conscience *if* it occurred within the boundaries of the Presbyterian denomination. In 1845, the Synod of Cincinnati suspended Rev. William Graham from the ministry, on a vote of 28 to 6, for preaching that the Bible permitted the possessing and selling of slaves. Mills and two other clergymen not only voted against his suspension, but registered their protest in writing. As one who was “revolted at the alleged rights of the slaveholders,” Mills had already taken a public stand on the bondage issue in his anti-slavery tract entitled “The Family and Slavery,” described as a “calm, well reasoned, and effective argument” against slavery, and as better than one that was written later in the white-hot heat of the immediate antebellum years.⁶ But the three ministers believed that Graham’s suspension destroyed the unity of the church and violated his constitutional rights as a clergyman under the Presbyterian denomination, and so further “reserve[d] for themselves the right to complain to the General Assembly,” which Mills subsequently

⁵ “Appeal for Liberty of Conscience and Christian Union,” *The Western Messenger* (February 1841): 475; “Miscellany,” *Liberator* (March 12, 1841): 44.

⁶ “Death of Dr. Mills,” *Independent* (June 27, 1867): 4; *New York Evangelist* (March 22, 1860): 8; “That Suppressed Tract,” *Independent* (April 8, 1858): 4.

proceeded to do.⁷ In the examples above, Thornton Mills showed himself willing and able to resist the tide of public opinion where faithfulness to orthodoxy constrained him, or to take an independent course of action where freedom of conscience demanded it.

One further incident involving Thornton Anthony Mills deserves note because B. Fay Mills duplicated it later in life. In 1854 Hanover College offered to confer upon Thornton Mills an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree, but he declined to receive it. Not only did he refuse the degree, but he also wrote a lengthy statement condemning the practice of conferring honorary degrees as “evil” and the accepting of them as “vain.”⁸ The *Christian Watchman and Reflector* found humor in the situation and suggested that a new degree should henceforth be adopted: D. D. D., or Doctor of Divinity Declined.⁹ This singular stand by Thornton Mills was another instance of his acting out of principle, free from the influence or persuasion of others. Later in life, B. Fay Mills would follow in his father’s footsteps and refuse an honorary doctoral degree.

Thornton Mills believed whole-heartedly in evangelism and education—to him they were related—and he channeled both through the offices of the Presbyterian Church. His pastorate in Cincinnati drew the commentary from the *New York Evangelist* that his Third Presbyterian Church was experiencing revival under his leadership.¹⁰ He preached a rousing sermon at the Utica, New York, General Assembly in 1850 that was remembered years later for spurring the church toward greater domestic missionary

⁷ “Synod of Cincinnati: Memorial on Slavery,” *Christian Observer* (November 14, 1845): 181; “Memorial to the Assembly in the Case of Rev. Mr. Graham,” *Christian Observer* (June 26, 1846): 101.

⁸ Thornton A. Mills, “A Doctorate Declined,” *New York Evangelist* (August 31, 1854): 1.

⁹ “Ministers and Churches,” *Christian Watchman and Reflector* (September 7, 1854): 142. Yet he is listed as being a recipient of an honorary doctoral degree from Hanover College in the October 5, 1854 issue of the *New York Evangelist*. Seven months later he is referred to as “Rev. Dr. Thornton A. Mills” in the *Independent* (July 26, 1855): 238.

¹⁰ “Ordination,” *New York Evangelist* (October 29, 1836): 175; “Revivals,” *New York Evangelist* (March 28, 1840): 1.

endeavors.¹¹ He started with a call to the denomination to carry the Gospel message to the western regions, and then made the case that the supply of ministers could not meet the demand unless the local church and denominational headquarters committed to giving more priority to the college and seminary education of future clergy.¹² From this point on, the New School Presbyterian tapped Mills for denominational work. First he was put in charge of the Committee on Church Erection, which solicited funds from local churches to build the edifices to house new local assemblies.¹³ Though a rather mundane office, Mills envisioned it as a practical venue through which to expand the reach of the Gospel.¹⁴ His success in this position prompted his denomination to install him full time in the newly created Education Committee. In this spot, he achieved a 20 percent increase in the number of ministerial candidates over a ten year period. After his death, a writer attributed this gain to “the personal magnetism, the fine eloquence, and the organizing power of its secretary of education, the lamented Thornton A. Mills.”¹⁵ His son B. Fay received much from his father, because in future years he would also be known for his energy, charisma, eloquent speech, and organizational genius.

One final note about Thornton A. Mills needs to be highlighted before moving on. In his “magnificent” sermon before the General Assembly in 1850, he concluded with a clear post-millennial vision for the coming years. The pre-millennialism that would characterize future fundamentalists was only just beginning to gain supporters at mid-century, but Thornton A. Mills’ address reveals that he adhered to the older tradition of

¹¹ “Sermon on Church Extension,” *Christian Observer* (May 31, 1851): 85; “1850-1872: General Assembly at Detroit,” *New York Evangelist* (May 16, 1872): 1.

¹² “Sermon on Church Extension,” *Christian Observer*, (May 31, 1851): 85.

¹³ “Domestic: Congregational,” *New York Observer and Chronicle*, (July 28, 1853): 235.

¹⁴ “Domestic: Congregational,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* (July 28, 1853): 235.

¹⁵ E. D. Morris, “Decade the First,” *Independent* (April 1, 1880): 1.

Jonathan Edwards and Charles G. Finney in believing that the millennium could be ushered in by the purposeful efforts of consecrated Christians. He ended his appeal in Utica with the promise of the coming Kingdom: when the Gospel shall have done its work, “this wide land, its plains smiling in beauty ... shall be Immanuel’s land. Its people shall all be righteous. Justice and true equality shall reign, peace and plenty shall abound, all shall be pure, secure and happy, for all shall acknowledge and serve the Redeemer.”¹⁶ Charles Finney could not have said it better.¹⁷

In 1854, at the age of 44, Rev. Mills had taken time out of his strenuous schedule to marry the widowed Anna Cook Whittlesey. Thirteen years later, his life was cut short when he collapsed and died of a stroke while returning home from a church meeting. He left behind his wife, his two sons Thornton A. and B. Fay, and his step-son Charles Whittlesey. B. Fay was only ten years of age. His father’s influence, though now physically absent from the family circle, must still have been felt. Remaining in the church as the family did, B. Fay would have had exposure to people who knew his prominent father, and would have had many occasions to be proud of his father’s accomplishments. Most probably stories about Thornton Anthony Mills would have been handed down to the curious sons by their mother, and his legacy bequeathed to them for emulation. His passion for the mission of the church and his distinction within it, his involvement with social concerns brought on by the plight of the underprivileged, his ability to act on principle and autonomously even when it aroused a negative response—

¹⁶ “Sermon on Church Extension,” *Christian Observer* (May 31, 1851): 85.

¹⁷ During Thornton Mills’ lifespan, pre-millennialism had not caught hold of the conservative churches as it would at the close of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. In later years, B. Fay would not follow them in heralding the rapture of the church out of a sin-sunk world, but stayed true to his father’s post-millennial image of the hastened day when all would live harmoniously on earth in a perfect, God-glorifying society.

all of these could not have failed to leave an imprint on a fatherless boy growing into youth and manhood.

B. Fay was guided through his teenage years by his twice-widowed mother, whom he revered and credited with bringing him to salvation after a rebellious youth. Anna Cook Mills (1820-1890), whose maiden name was also Mills, was born in Morristown, New Jersey, the sixth of ten children born to Jabez and Hannah Coe Mills, who were members of the First Presbyterian Church.¹⁸ In 1841 Anna married Samuel Goodrich Whittlesey (1809-1847) and served with him as a missionary to Jaffra, Ceylon, until his death in 1847. In Ceylon she had two sons and buried her husband.¹⁹ Upon returning to the states with young Samuel and Charles, she lived with her parents until her second marriage to Thornton Anthony Mills in 1854, and together they had two children of their own: Thornton Anthony, named after his father, and Benjamin Fay. At some point, her oldest son Samuel from her first marriage died in childhood. That left her with three sons, all of them eventually becoming Protestant clergymen.²⁰

Even as a child, Anna was deeply devout. Her mother once remarked of her that she had been converted at the age of eighteen months, which B. Fay said that he did not doubt.²¹ She was acclaimed by her son as a godly, praying woman, a “gentle, wise, cheerful, prayerful and persevering” mother in the “care and training” of her children.

¹⁸ Helen S. Ullmann, *A Mills and Kendall Family History: American Ancestry and Descendants of Herbert Lee Mills and Bessie Delano Kendall* (Boston: Newbury Street Press, 2002), 42. This genealogical record states on page 42 that Hannah Coe Mills was said to be seventh in descent from John Alden, the carpenter and cooper on board the Mayflower, and early leader in the Massachusetts colony.

¹⁹ Although the Ullman genealogy makes no mention of it, *The History of the Davis Family* includes the birth of a daughter, Emily Louisa, who was also buried in Ceylon. Albert H. Davis, *The History of the Davis Family* (New York: T. A. Wright, Publisher & Printer, 1888), 128.

²⁰ John Junkin Francis, *Mills' Meetings Memorial Volume* (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Company, 1892), 88.

²¹ Francis, 282.

She kept her spiritual edge: she said more than once that her biggest regret was that her sons had all become ministers rather than leaving her in the United States in order to continue her service on a foreign mission field.²² Here it can be seen that Anna Mills, too, had a strong streak of independence—she could leave her parents and siblings and the comforts of American life to take the Christian gospel to inhabitants of a land almost halfway around the world. Twice-widowed, she could raise three sons to adulthood, maintain a Christian home, and think less of her own needs than those of unnamed souls in far-away lands. Anna Cook Whittlesey Mills possessed the courage of her convictions. This was the measure of the remarkable woman who raised B. Fay Mills.²³

Thornton A. and Anna Cook Mills were deeply committed to the Christian faith and left a positive legacy in their evangelical community and home life. Through their lifestyle and instruction, they set an example of earnest dedication to the cause of the Christian mission. In later years, B. Fay Mills often referred to the excellent character of his parents, the influence they had upon the family household, and the spiritual and moral debt that he owed to his parents, especially his mother.²⁴

What emerges from an investigation of his family background is that a strong, independent streak, coupled with a courageous willingness to follow it, ran in Mills'

²² Francis, 286.

²³ The *New York Evangelist* provides a possible indication of what Anna Mills may have been doing in her widowhood, after her sons were grown and pursuing their own careers. In its account of the Zanesville (Ohio) Presbytery meeting on April 10th, it mentions the increasing attention given to the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of Presbytery by the women of the church, and a report from two "returned missionaries from India": Mrs. Mary Myers and Mrs. Thornton Mills. The women described "their experience and observations, [and] gave new inspiration to the zealous women engaged in forwarding this cause." Although Anna Mills had a daughter-in-law who went by this same name, it seems unlikely that this referred to the younger Mrs. Mills. Thornton Anthony Mills, Jr., would have been about twenty two years of age at this time. The other possibility is that Anna Mills was giving a message about her earlier missionary work in the 1840s. "Zanesville Presbytery," *New York Evangelist* (April 19, 1877): 8.

²⁴ "Thousands," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 30, 1895; "When Change of Heart Came," *Kansas City Times*, November 13, 1892.

parents. Both they and their son exhibited the same autonomy, but there was an important difference: where father and mother exercised theirs in the service of their orthodox Christian faith, from which they did not stray, the son displayed his as he opted for one intellectual novelty after another.

Even under the tutelage of such parents, and later of his resolute mother who finished the raising of her sons alone, Mills' independence asserted itself early as he led a rebellious youth. Describing himself as a boy without a conscience, he said that he did not "consciously have a conscience until I was fifteen or sixteen years of age. I can not [sic] explain it to you; I am not going to try."²⁵ He called himself as "ungrateful a boy as there ever was."²⁶ The *Mount Vernon Democratic Banner* in 1916 agreed: it reported that Mills justified the old adage that ministers' sons were wild, calling him "dissolute and a wastrel."²⁷ Mills made haste to prove it. After one year at Hamilton College,²⁸ he set out for Australia, where he could escape the conventions of a more civilized society. On his way, he stopped off in San Francisco and stayed long enough to engage in real estate business and contract some debts. He attempted to pay them off by winning money at the gambling tables.²⁹

Mills' conversion resulted from his dire straits, as he recounted the story. One night at a saloon he won a large sum of money, sufficient to pay his debts with some left over. On his way out, someone called him back to the table, and getting interested in the

²⁵ Francis, 286.

²⁶ Francis, 286.

²⁷ "Some Famous Evangelists Who Drew Large Crowds," *Mount Vernon Democratic Banner* (May 30, 1916): 8.

²⁸ Daniel W. Nelson, "B. Fay Mills: Revivalist, Social Reformer and Advocate of Free Religion" (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 1964), 4.

²⁹ "When Change of Heart Came," *Kansas City Times*, November 13, 1892; "Benjamin Fay Mills," *Portland Morning Oregonian*, May 10, 1916.

game then underway, he took a hand—and soon lost all of his money. In great despair, he went back to his room, with the idea of ending his life. As he flung himself on his bed, a book from the shelf above was jarred loose and hit him on the head. He angrily threw it to the far side of the room. Recognizing by the feel of it that it was the book of Psalms given to him by his brother, he felt guilty and went to retrieve it. The book lay open on the floor. Curious to find out what was on the opened page, he lit the gas lamp and read this verse at his thumb: “Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of his countenance” (Psalm 42:5). He immediately perceived these words as spoken to him directly by God. Simultaneously, an image of his praying mother rose before him, and he cried out, “O mother, O God,” and got down on his knees and “pour[ed] out his soul to God.”³⁰ Anna Mills must have told him her account of this incident, because Mills would later say that his mother, lying sick some three thousand miles away, prayed for him and both received this answer from God:

You think now that, knowing what she knew, she would almost have lost heart and given up hope, but it was then that she shut herself up alone with God. Her hope in any human influence . . . had failed; her confidence in herself was all gone; and there with God she so cried out with her soul and claimed the promise of God unto her, that as the prayer went up to God there came down His mighty power, and touched me and cleansed me and saved me, and brought me back to her and unto my Father’s house.³¹

In years to come, he said of this experience that his whole life was utterly changed “in one great critical hour” and he “began to love the things which once I had hated, and hate the things which once I loved.”³² The impulsive and deeply experiential quality of Mills’

³⁰ “Incidents and Reflections,” *The Friend; A Religious and Literary Journal* (Dec. 30, 1893): 179. 67, 23.

³¹ John Junkin Francis, 287.

³² Nelson, 5. Mills never went to Australia.

conversion portended future developments in his life, as religious liberals preferred spiritual experience to Bible-based doctrine. Mills showed himself at this point to be on track for such an orientation.³³

Mills' college years also prefigured his subsequent career in that he made frequent shifts in direction. After returning to the East and beginning his preparations for ministerial work, he decided not to resume his studies at Hamilton College. In quick succession, Mills enrolled in Wooster College in Ohio, where he stayed for one year, then moved on to Carleton College in Cannon Falls, Minnesota, where he spent only one semester. He moved to Carleton because he was offered a pastorate in a small, nearby Congregational Church, where he could preach while pursuing his studies. A parishioner at the church later recalled that the young twenty-year-old quickly dazzled his congregation: he was "a born orator, brilliant in intellect, versatile in language, with a knowledge of the Bible surpassed by few if any of his age, he 'captivated' us all." Notwithstanding this, he failed his first ordination examination because of questionable answers, and had to undergo a second round of questioning a few weeks later before he satisfied them on his orthodoxy. Soon after his installation and ordination, he preached a successful revival, which resulted in many converts being added to the church.³⁴ The fact that his first revival was met with such success testifies to his powers of oratory, for which he would be known for most of his life.³⁵

³³ By contrast, Mills' friend J. Wilbur Chapman's conversion was less spontaneous and more thoughtful. It occurred at a Moody revival, in which Moody sat down with Chapman in the after-meeting and reasoned with him on the basis of a Bible passage. Ford C. Ottman, *J. Wilbur Chapman: A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1920), 29-30.

³⁴ Nelson, 6.

³⁵ Nelson, 7. According to Nelson, Mills was an active participant in debating and forensic teams during his college years.

Notwithstanding his having pastored a church and presided over a fruitful revival, Mills' pent up youthfulness burst out and got him into trouble the following school term when he left the Minnesota church and continued his education at Lake Forest University in 1878-79. That winter Mills received one faculty censure. In the February 24, 1879 *Faculty Minutes*, it was written: "Resolved that Mr. Mills be informed that his conduct must be amended as otherwise his connection with the college will cease."³⁶ Whatever he did remains a mystery, but it seems clear that some vestiges of impropriety or rebellion still lurked beneath the surface.

He completed the Classical studies program and received a B. A. degree in 1879. While at the school, he met a lifelong friend J. Wilbur Chapman. Both he and Chapman would pastor churches in the early stage of their careers, and both would take to the itinerant evangelistic circuit later on. As students they attended a Dwight L. Moody revival, and Chapman was converted, and unlike Mills, never turned back. Their friendship would last through all the years of Mills' later sojourn in Unitarianism and Free Religion.³⁷

A few months after his graduation, Mills married Mary Russell whom he had met while pastoring his first church in Cannon Falls. She was the daughter of the Honorable Henry Hill Russell, a judge in the Superior Court of Minnesota. She was not only his life-long companion, but also an intellectual equal and partner in ministry. Mills called her by the nickname "Queen" and honored her both inside and outside the home.³⁸ The couple

³⁶ Nelson, 8.

³⁷ It was through Chapman's influence and recommendation that Mills was received back into the Presbyterian denomination in 1915. Ford C. Ottman, *J. Wilbur Chapman: A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1920), 28.

³⁸ Nelson, 10.

would have six children: Thornton Anthony (1881), Henry Hill (1882), Ethelwyn (1884), Charles Howard (1881), Faith (1891), and Mary (1894). All survived into adulthood, although Faith contracted a very serious illness in childhood from which she never fully recovered, and all were born during the period when Mills was either a pastor or an evangelist in the orthodox Christian ministry. While Mills was an evangelist, the family was comfortably middle class, living in large houses attended by a few servants, “with nurses for the smaller children and a tutor for the older children.” Mills himself loved horses and kept a stable, and also obtained an automobile when they first went on the market.³⁹

Those who knew Mills described him as abounding in energy, extroverted, and responsive to the people around him. Physically, he stood 5'7" tall, possessed keen blue eyes, had a crop of wavy, auburn hair, and spoke with a resonant, pleasing voice. He was a natural-born leader; his personality was commanding—editorialists often referred to him as a “General.”⁴⁰ In 1896, when a Rev. Dr. Jones of Louisville, Kentucky, was asked for his assessment of Mills, he replied that Mills was “a born general—with a genius for details. I have never known his equal as an organizer.”⁴¹

The typical route for young men bound for the ministry was to obtain a seminary degree before taking on a church. Mills’ own father had made a name for himself within the Presbyterian church by urging the education of young men for the ministry. But the independence that Mills shared with his father was now directed against his father’s goals: he opted not to go for formal theological training. Instead, his wife later explained

³⁹ Nelson, 11.

⁴⁰ “Mills Coming,” *The Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 16, 1895.

⁴¹ “The Mills Meetings,” *New Haven Morning Journal & Courier*, January 2, 1896.

that “he visited several theological seminaries, but was so impressed with the lack of adaptability to the needs of modern life that he determined to prosecute his theological studies privately.”⁴² This assessment reveals two things about Mills which would characterize the rest of his life: the priority he gave to his immediate cultural surroundings, and the independent streak he manifested which led him to seek alternate rather than conventional routes. Further, had Mills received what seminaries routinely offered—biblical languages, systematic theology, the study of Old and New Testament books, church history—it is quite possible that Mills’ professional life would have followed a more orthodox course. It is true that many who went to seminary came away with liberal ideas—for example, men such as Charles Briggs. But they were able to fashion their new theology as a reaction to the older theology which they had studied. Mills’ lack of grounding in theology left him open to ideas for which he had an insufficient conceptual framework (few considered him a deep theological thinker⁴³), and set up the possibility that would actually transpire in his mental life—that of bouncing around from one idea to the next. Instead, led by his autonomous spirit, he plotted his own course and followed the authors of the various books that he read, rather than getting his view from the minds of the theological, historical giants of the church, as his friend J. Wilbur Chapman had done.⁴⁴

⁴² “Benjamin Fay Mills,” *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: James T. White & Company, 1917), 178. Nelson reports that the biographical entry for Mills was “based on material directly supplied by Mary Russell Mills,” B. Fay’s wife, and is therefore authoritative. Nelson, 2.

⁴³ “A Remarkable Conversion,” *Kansas City Journal*, September 4, 1897; “A Big Attendance at the Mills Meetings Yesterday,” *Portland Morning Oregonian*, March 31, 1892; “Another Somersault,” *Christian Advocate* (November 26, 1903): 1900.

⁴⁴ Ford Ottman quotes directly from one of Chapman’s contemporaries, and details the course of study which Chapman pursued at Lane Seminary, which included courses in a Christo-centric theology, hermeneutics, for which the seminarians studied New Testament books, Hebrew—the language as well as Old Testament books, church history, and the practical art of preaching and public speaking (31-33).

After doing missionary work in the Black Hills of South Dakota for three years (1879-1881), and receiving an M. A. from Lake Forest University in June, 1881, he left the West for the East, accepting a call as pastor to the Reformed Church of Greenwich, New York (1881-1883).⁴⁵ While there, he was instrumental in getting his friend Chapman a call to the Dutch Reformed Church in Schuylerville, just across the Hudson from Greenwich.⁴⁶ Mills was the president of the Saratoga regional governing body of the Dutch Reformed Church. The following was written in Mills' hand underneath Chapman's call by the Consistory:

Approved by Classis of Saratoga at West Troy, Apl. 17/83,
B. Fay Mills, President.⁴⁷

The college friends were able to enjoy each other's company and together made trips to hear some of the great preachers of the day: T. DeWitt Talmage and Henry Ward Beecher of Brooklyn, Dr. John Thompson at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, and a Dwight L. Moody revival in Albany.⁴⁸ However, by June 1883, Mills resigned from his church for health reasons.⁴⁹

Sometime later in 1883 or 1884 Mills' health returned and he accepted a call from the West Parish Church in Rutland, Vermont. This church offered a difficult charge; dissension had compromised its reputation in the community and stymied its outreach as

Ironically, B. Fay's father Thornton A. Mills had been a member of the Board of Trustees at Lane Seminary, and soon after his death in 1867, his widow donated his 880-volume library to the seminary. Lane Seminary would have been a strong option for the younger Mills. "Letter from Cincinnati," *New York Evangelist* (November 5, 1868): 2.

⁴⁵ Nelson, 11.

⁴⁶ Ottman, 42-44.

⁴⁷ Ottman, 44.

⁴⁸ This friendship, and particularly Chapman's dedication to Mills, would continue through all of the years of Mills' life. One year before his death, it would prove instrumental in bringing Mills back into the Presbyterian faith which he had previously denounced. Chapman's life journey also provides an interesting counterpoint to the direction taken by Mills.

⁴⁹ Nelson, 12.

a result. Consequently, it gave Mills a staging ground to prove his mettle, and this he did. Not only did his outgoing personality, infectious enthusiasm, and earnest preaching unite the church and heal the breaches,⁵⁰ but under his ministry, plans were launched and a contract signed for the building of a new house of worship to be completed in 1886.⁵¹ Of even more decisive importance for Mills' career, it was in Rutland that he held his first big revival, which resulted in 89 members being received into the church, a large number considering the church had a membership of only 214 the previous year⁵²—a 41 percent growth from a single revival!

This kind of visible success soon had other pastors writing to him and inviting him to their churches. At first he declined the offers,⁵³ but then decided to accept the invitation from the Rev. Dr. Spear of the Middlebury Congregational Church, about thirty miles from Rutland. As this was also the location of Middlebury College, it “offered the severest test of the ability of the evangelist.”⁵⁴ Meetings began in the middle of January and lasted for fifteen days; only fifty persons attended his first service. Soon, however, his audiences grew until he and his sermons became “the talk of the town.”⁵⁵ Though originally invited by only one church, others quickly joined the cause. *The Independent* reported that “the town was stirred to its depths”: businesses closed in the evenings so that employees could attend, college professors and students were “thoroughly awakened,” and everywhere the question could be heard, “What shall I do to be saved?”⁵⁶

⁵⁰ *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, ed. Henry Stauffer (Columbus, OH: Nitschke Brothers, 1895), 11.

⁵¹ <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~vermont/RutlandTownHist05.html>.

⁵² Nelson, 13.

⁵³ Stauffer, 11.

⁵⁴ Stauffer, 11.

⁵⁵ Stauffer, 11..

⁵⁶ “General Revival Notes,” *The Independent*, (March 25, 1886): 13.

Three hundred people were converted. But the most astonishing statistic came from the college students: all were converted except five.⁵⁷ In addition, before Mills left the town, he had organized a Young Men's Christian Association.⁵⁸ As a result of this revival, he came to believe that he was called to be an evangelist.⁵⁹

He returned to his church at Rutland, Vermont, and asked to be released into full-time evangelism, but the congregation refused. They compromised by granting a three-month leave of absence for him to devote to evangelistic work. He immediately began to accept invitations, which initially numbered about forty.⁶⁰ Judging by the results he achieved, it soon became obvious even to his loyal but tenacious church members that this was the path he should take, and so they regretfully let him go.⁶¹

At this point, Mills launched his itinerant revival career. For the next ten years, Mills would criss-cross the Northeast and Northwest, and make one long trip across the interior of the country to the West Coast and back again, which would take him away from home for over a year. He would need his boundless vitality, as he took on one revival meeting after another, in a different place every two to six weeks. Newspaper reporters and magazine editorialists followed his movements, as he progressed from small successes to ever larger ones. Along the way, on through the late 1880s and into the early 1890s, press commentators began to compare him to the eminent evangelist Dwight L. Moody.⁶²

⁵⁷ Francis, 89.

⁵⁸ *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 178.

⁵⁹ Stauffer, 11.

⁶⁰ Francis, 90.

⁶¹ Francis, 12.

⁶² "1,000 Professed Conversions," *The New Haven Evening Register*, May 14, 1890: "The Evangelist meetings held in Bridgeport by the Rev. B. Fay Mills, who is accounted by many as second only to Moody as an Evangelist..." Frederick Campbell, "Lingering on the Pacific Coast," *New York Evangelist*, July 14,

Mills quickly leaped to the top of the evangelistic field, and it was evident from his initial efforts that he was a rising star. The first of Mills' evangelistic meetings to receive noteworthy coverage in the Christian press was the one held at his brother's church in Flanders, New Jersey. The *New York Evangelist* in its March issue devoted a lengthy spot to the ministries of the brothers, both of whom were praised in the article. Rev. Thornton A. Mills, who had just finished his first year as pastor of the church, was commended for his leadership: his one-year pastorate had resulted in the growth of church membership by 25 percent and benevolent contributions by 400 percent. Turning to B. Fay Mills, the article called him a young man with great power over a congregation, and noted that the meetings he had just concluded had witnessed a quickening of the Spirit never before seen in that church. Family altars were rebuilt, backsliders were restored, and many souls were converted; shops were closed, farms were deserted, while the church was filled to capacity, in spite of February rain and mud.⁶³

In a revival that followed in North Adams, Massachusetts, "the great question, 'What must I do to be saved?' was everywhere heard."⁶⁴ The task of the true evangelist, according to Mills, was to "minister on special occasions with the design of stimulating the faith of believers and leading the unconverted to repentance."⁶⁵ That he was successful in doing this was amply attested in the religious journals such as *Zion's Herald*, which described him as "the most successful, perhaps, in immediate results, of

1892: "He is our most distinguished evangelist now active in America, and he begins to attract attention abroad."

⁶³ "Ministers and Churches," *New York Evangelist* (Mar 11, 1886): 4.

⁶⁴ "General Revival Notes," *The Independent* (March 25, 1886):13.

⁶⁵ S. L. Loomis, "Methods Employed by the Rev. B. Fay Mills," *The Independent* (June 5, 1890): 1.

the excellent corps of evangelists now before the country.”⁶⁶ It is worthy of note that this statement was made after Mills had been a full-time evangelist for only two years. There was no question that he was a gifted and persuasive speaker.

The meetings that launched Mills into big city revivalism were held in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1891. Forty-six evangelical churches in the city of 270,000 united for the series.⁶⁷ The meetings lasted for a month, and were conducted several times throughout the week. On one Wednesday, he asked business leaders to close their shops, and over five hundred responded including the larger retail stores, some of which Catholics and Jews owned. Many saloons also shut down. During this day, Mills preached three times to over 14,000 people. On the last Sunday of his services in Cleveland, so many people tried to get in to the building that in order to control the crowd, the police compelled the doors to be closed. After this service,

the Spirit was manifested more powerfully than any of us had ever seen, and Mr. Mills himself felt almost transported. When the opportunity was given to those who had accepted Christ during the last few weeks to rise and confess Him with their mouth, the scene baffles description; three, four, sometimes it seemed a dozen were speaking at once from all parts of the house; old men and boys, timid maidens and matrons, rose before the thousands to confess their faith in Jesus... The impression upon the unconverted by these testimonies, was profound. A great number rose to signify their resolve to lead henceforth a Christian life.⁶⁸

In all, over seven thousand people were converted.⁶⁹ The revival in Cleveland sealed Mills’ reputation as one of the country’s big name evangelists, and subsequently his campaigns drew packed audiences in large urban settings.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ “Magazines and Periodicals,” *Zion’s Herald* (March 28, 1888): 99.

⁶⁷ Nelson, 25.

⁶⁸ P. E. Kipp, “The Great Revival in Cleveland,” *New York Evangelist* (May 21, 1891): 2.

⁶⁹ P. E. Kipp, “The Great Revival in Cleveland,” *New York Evangelist* (May 21, 1891): 2.

⁷⁰ Nelson, 25.

Because the crowds of people were so large that flocked to hear him speak, and because few cities had existing structures that were large enough to hold the multitudes, Mills invented a plan that allowed for greater accommodation of people. Called the District Combination Plan, it was a product of his organizational genius. In order to reach every part of the city, it was divided into three or four districts, and he and his associates would preach simultaneously in each district, with only the people residing in that district allowed to attend that service. Then the preachers would exchange churches for the next service. A few days before the end of the meetings, services would be held in the largest building at the center of the city, and Mills himself would close out the revival as the sole speaker.⁷¹ Mills implemented this plan for the first time in Cleveland in 1891, and would continue to use it in many of his large urban revivals thereafter.⁷²

Statistics like the ones in Cleveland gave Mills star power among evangelists. His anticipated presence could excite a whole city. New Rochelle, New York, prepared for his arrival by posting “huge sign boards” all over town. As if no further explanation were required, they were painted with just three large words: “He is coming!”⁷³ When he came, he did not disappoint. He set about “sweeping the converts” into the churches.⁷⁴ Mills’ immense success aroused comment among the religious journals and newspapers. *The New Haven Evening Register*, as early as 1890, reported that he was “accounted by many as second only to Moody as an Evangelist.”⁷⁵ Two years later the *New York*

⁷¹ Mills originated this ingenious plan of reaching an entire city, and many evangelists used it after they saw it in action under Mills. Mills’ District Combination Plan was a permanent contribution to the field of evangelism.

⁷² John Junkin Francis, *Mills’ Meetings Memorial Volume* (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Co., 1892), 2-3, 91.

⁷³ “Unique Religious Revival,” *New York Herald*, June 5, 1891.

⁷⁴ “Revealed Religion and Free Thought,” *New York Herald*, June 21, 1891.

⁷⁵ “1,000 Professed Conversions,” *New Haven Evening Register*, May 14, 1890.

Evangelist went one better when it pronounced Mills “our most distinguished evangelist now active in America, and he begins to attract attention abroad.”⁷⁶

Following on the heels of his success in Cleveland, his revivals the next year in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and Cincinnati, Ohio, were such spectacular successes that each was memorialized in the publication of a book. The book published in Elizabeth described the event as a “great religious awakening” and “the greatest spiritual uplift our city has ever seen.” One hundred and three pages recount virtually every meeting, when it was held during the day and on which day of the week, which segment of the population attended, what Biblical texts were used in the preaching, how the verses were expounded upon, which hymns were sung, and how the congregation responded to what they heard. Over 2,000 cards were signed by those who wished to express their intention to become Christians.⁷⁷

A. G. Crane, who attended some of the early services, reported on the revival while it was still in progress: “No such scenes have been witnessed in this generation as are now transpiring from day to day as the vast throng listen to the simple, earnest presentation of the old, old story. Mr. Mills holds his audience in breathless silence....” He went on to put Mills in a league with the great:

I have lived to have been a witness of revivals under the preaching of the Rev. Asahel Nettleton in Newark, N. J., and in the old Chatham-street Chapel by the Rev. Charles G. Finney... Having been connected with the First Church in Elizabeth ... I thank God that I have lived to witness a revival there of the good old type, under this God-sent and God-prepared evangelist.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ “Lingering on the Pacific Coast,” *New York Evangelist*, (July 14, 1892): 8.

⁷⁷ Joseph D. Lowden, *The Story of the Revival: A Narrative of the Mills Meetings, Held in Elizabeth, N. J., From December 29, 1891 to January 15, 1892* (Compiled from Reports in the *Elizabeth Daily Journal*, 1892), 6, 8.

⁷⁸ A. G. Crane, “Wonderful Meetings in Elizabeth,” *New York Evangelist* (January 14, 1892): 4.

The services in Cincinnati—the city where his father had pastored a church and published a Christian journal—inspired the publication of an even bigger book which documented every phase of the event in well over three hundred pages. Seventy-three churches from sixteen denominations, representing over twenty thousand members, combined for the services, which lasted for six weeks. Mills’ acceptance letter was published, and it itemized his explicit instructions on how to coordinate the efforts for such a large undertaking. The directives revealed the minute, highly organized planning for which Mills was considered so gifted. Mills virtually dictated every move of the committees.⁷⁹ Two full sermons were reproduced, with summaries of many of the others. One sermon exhorted the listeners to give up their sins. The message was illustrated by a story of a “wretched looking man” who came forward one night at the invitation and pulled out a flask filled with whiskey. He laid the bottle on the altar and said, “This is my worst enemy. Good-by!” Mills then asked everyone to rise who would be willing to give up every known sin. Nearly every man, woman, and child in the congregation stood up.⁸⁰

Cincinnati, the “great and wicked city,” noted for Sabbath desecration,⁸¹ Sunday saloons, Sunday theaters, and stores opened on Sunday, was “stirred throughout.” Thousands came and thousands had to be turned away due to a lack of sufficient seating. On one Wednesday Sabbath, at the request of Mills, between three and four thousand businesses closed so that employees could attend.⁸² Going by the numbers, Cincinnati

⁷⁹ Francis, 1-32.

⁸⁰ Francis, 254.

⁸¹ The act of depriving Sunday of its holy character, as in not attending Church or observing a day of rest.

⁸² Francis, 83, 288.

was the single largest revival Mills ever held, and was an immense success. Around eight thousand people were converted.⁸³

In terms of his soaring popularity and fame, these were Mills' glory days. From his high point in Cincinnati, Mills boarded a train and headed for the West Coast. Reaching his first stop in Portland, Oregon, in mid-March, he conducted a revival there and then went on to such places as Salem, Oregon, and Tacoma, Washington, as well as the California cities of Los Angeles, San Diego, Santa Barbara, Sacramento, Oakland, and San Francisco. Sweeping up and down the coast, and then turning east again, he stirred city after city and drew in thousands to the tabernacles constructed especially for his meetings. Scoop-hungry newspapers gave him front-page coverage. Converts numbered in the thousands, though not as many in any one place as he had made in Cincinnati—but then, none of the cities were nearly as large as Cincinnati, and his western meetings were of shorter duration. This independent-minded evangelist—with no formal theological training, who made no secret of his dislike for dogma and creeds, but who placed considerable weight on spiritual experience—still preached the Gospel, even while a social theme was now beginning to emerge. Sprinkled in with his Gospel message, these additions signaled no big change yet.

But that was coming, sooner than would be expected of this favored son of the evangelical church.

⁸³ "A Big Religious Revival in Cincinnati," *New York Herald-Tribune*, March 5, 1892.

Chapter Three

From Individual Salvation to Social Salvation:

The Influence of George D. Herron upon Reverend Mills

A “remarkable coincidence” of “great magnitude” had just occurred in their city, announced a reporter from the *San Francisco Morning Call* in August of 1892. The idea of establishing a mission house in San Francisco had “entered the minds of two great evangelists almost to a day.” The evangelists to whom he referred were B. Fay Mills, who was in the city for a series of revivals, and “the Millionaire Evangelist” C. N. Crittenton, who was quoted as saying that he desired a work of God in the city whose reputation had carried a reproach for too long. Teamed together, Mills would lend his name and influence and Crittenton would part with some of his money. The paper quoted Crittenton as saying that a large portion of the credit for the mission went to Mills, who had “planned and outlined” the various components of outreach.¹

Like his father before him, Mills’ Christian faith included a certain bent toward social concerns. Even before social themes came to dominate his platform message, he had acted to challenge business interests, address inequities, and alleviate the needs of the poor. In San Francisco, he had seen the need for a way station to help those who wanted to help themselves. The mission would not only provide food and shelter, but also employment opportunities at nearby industries that had agreed to offer work to the residents—and these aids would be extended to down-and-out women as well as to homeless men. The hope, according to the reporter, was that the mission would eliminate “the tramp nuisance” and give the indigent some respectability. But that was not all.

¹ “Practical Christianity,” *San Francisco Morning Call*, August 28, 1892.

Trained volunteers would be recruited to conduct services every night of the year, not only for the occupants of the mission but also for any others on the streets and in the city who could be induced to attend.² Yes, Mills told a packed assembly a year later in 1893, the mission he had helped to found in San Francisco had housing and occupational ministries, but a key element in its purpose was the salvation of souls. He noted with satisfaction that this rescue mission he had co-established preached the Gospel to an average audience of eight hundred people every night.³

Mills was throwing his reputation behind urban projects even before his efforts in San Francisco. After his big revival in Cleveland in May of 1891, he returned to the city in November to appeal for the construction of a home for vagrant men. Given his big-name draw, a considerable crowd filled the lower seating section and half the balcony of Music Hall. The proposed mission would accommodate “wayfarers who now go to cheap and vile lodging houses in the slums,” and would provide a bed, “equipped with a mattress, a sheet, a quilt, and a night shirt,” and a place to take a bath for 400 men. The need for such a place in Cleveland was obvious, the article reported, as an estimated 10,000 outcasts a year were arrested for drunkenness and vagrancy, and that that very night 1500 would be sleeping outdoors somewhere in the city. The home would cost between \$30,000 and \$35,000, and Mills challenged his audience to give until it hurt. Sponsored by the city’s Evangelical society, this mission reflected Mills’ priorities in that

² “Practical Christianity,” *San Francisco Morning Call*, August 28, 1892.

³ *The Great Awakening: a report of the Christian Convention of the Northwest* (Minneapolis: Horace B. Hudson, 1893), 23.

lodgers would first be required to hear an evangelistic message before receiving a night's accommodations.⁴

Those without jobs received his attention, but so did those who were gainfully employed in business pursuits. On his western tour, Mills made history in Kansas City, Missouri, by preaching to the speculators in wheat and corn at the Commercial Exchange. After beginning with a prayer, "the first audible prayer that ever ascended from the grain pit," Mills challenged the traders to keep religion in business.⁵ A few days later he mixed compassion with condescension" when he said that within Christianity there was room for all classes, the rich and the poor, and that the great mass of the educated were already within the church but that the "great mass of those who are too ignorant to understand what is best for them are outside of it."⁶ After he left, a small notice in the paper indicated that Mills could "walk the talk": he had contributed to a Thanksgiving donation of "provisions and clothing" to the "deserving poor" of Kansas City.⁷

The *Sunday World-Herald* registered an astute observation when Mills conducted a revival in Omaha the following month. The reporter was on to more than he might have known:

He did not perplex people in attempting to unravel a mysterious "plan of salvation." He did not discourse much on faith. He said creed not once. He did not hold over hell fire. His doctrine was that there is a God who is good and wise and that the best thing a man can do is to sustain a manly relation to his Maker.⁸

The writer continued approvingly that, along with impelling them toward conversion, Mills taught men that the best apostle in the New Testament was the Good Samaritan.

⁴ "Weary Wayfarers," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, November 28, 1891.

⁵ "A Talk to the Traders," *The Kansas City Star*, November 17, 1892.

⁶ "Culture and Christianity," *The Kansas City Times*, November 26, 1892.

⁷ "City Summary," *The Kansas City Times*, November 30, 1892.

⁸ "The Mills Meetings," *Omaha Sunday World-Herald*, December 18, 1892.

The Mills' converts were encouraged to go to work in the Rescue and Industrial Home of Omaha, where true religion took on tangible reality in the form of "beds, bread, and clothing."⁹

Mills' involvement as an evangelical with human rehabilitation should not be seen as unusual. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, theologically conservative clergy and laymen at times took an active interest in social causes—just as they had done in reform movements in the first half of the century.¹⁰ For example, a notice appeared in the *Worcester Daily Spy* in 1892 announcing an upcoming convention to be held in Boston under the title "An Ecumenical Christian-At-Work Convention." Leaders of the meeting extended an invitation to any who were interested in aggressively reaching the "heathen at home," and assured potential delegates that no denominational or theological issues would be discussed. Rather, the time would be given to an exchange of ideas and practical workshops. Topics included such themes as how to reach street boys and working women, medical relief for the poor and sick, rescuing drunkards through industrial agencies, work among criminals and fallen women, and B. Fay Mills' plan of districting cities in evangelistic work.¹¹

In addition, exhibits would be put on display for delegates to view, and would include such "material ways and means used in Christian work" as a gospel wagon, a gospel push cart ("lighted by electricity and used in open air work in the slums and alleys of the city"), a colportage carriage (made like a Pullman palace car and put atop an

⁹ "The Mills Meetings," *Omaha Sunday World-Herald*, December 18, 1892.

¹⁰ Grant Wacker, "The Holy Spirit and the Spirit of the Age in American Protestantism, 1880-1910," *The Journal of American History* 72 (June 1985): 46.

¹¹ "An Ecumenical Christian-at-Work Convention," *Worcester Daily Spy*, November 18, 1892; "Christians to Meet," *Wichita Daily Eagle*, November 15, 1893.

automobile frame which would serve as living quarters for traveling evangelists), and a movable boys' club building. Rev. R. A. Torrey, "superintendent of Moody's Chicago Bible Institute," would preside over the convention. Although these meetings were expected to draw ten thousand persons, only five thousand came. Notwithstanding, it was held again the next year in Atlanta, Georgia, and this time featured more socially progressive speakers such as Jacob A. Riis, author of *How the Other Half Lives*, and John R. Commons of the new Institute of Christian Sociology.¹² Clearly, evangelicals were addressing social issues, especially if they also appealed to the spiritual condition.

Mills' record on adjusting inequalities did contain a gaping hole. Curiously, he made no public point of taking up racial issues. The legacy left by Rev. Thornton A. Mills to his son included concern for African Americans as a part of his agenda, at least insofar as he assessed their needs. He had joined the Kentucky Colonization Society and written articles promoting the welfare of blacks; he had joined the Kentucky Union for the Improvements of the Colored Race, which contributed to the spiritual needs of black congregants within Presbyterianism; and he had written a "well-reasoned," anti-slavery tract that was highly regarded by some abolitionists. But B. Fay Mills did not turn his attention to the racial injustices of his day, a time when African-American gains during the immediate post-Civil War period were being swept away by vicious discrimination and segregation laws.¹³ Perhaps Mills' outreach in revivalism gave him a more universal perspective. He did, at least, include all races in his services.

¹² "An Ecumenical Christian-at-Work Convention," *Worcester Daily Spy*, November 18, 1892; "Christians to Meet," *Wichita Daily Eagle*, November 15, 1893.

¹³ Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Gilded Age: Or, the Hazard of New Functions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 156-161.

A few newspapers and journals, in their accounts of Mills' revivals, made scattered references to the presence of African-Americans. The *Tacoma Daily News* reported that prior to his arrival, the city had been thoroughly canvassed, with the distribution of printed invitations going out to 10,000 "residences in the central portion of the city, including the nigger tract."¹⁴ After his biggest revival in Cincinnati, a commentator noted that the compass of the revival was universal, and that contrary to the usual class and life-station divisions among people, this time all constituted one "brotherhood." The "black man as well as the white man," he continued, stood together and confessed Christ as savior from their sins.¹⁵ Bowing to Jim Crow customs, segregation prevailed in Mills' revival in the southern city of Louisville, Kentucky. Many "colored" persons occupied one side of the balcony, while whites sat on the other side.¹⁶ Nevertheless, some response did occur from the segregated section. The *Courier-Journal* described as a "striking event" an incident in which a church elder led a nineteen-year-old "colored man" to the front of the sanctuary where it was announced to everyone that he had received Christ.¹⁷ In his first sermon in Louisville, Mills commended to his listeners the example of a pious Negro washerwoman—dark of skin but "spotlessly white" of soul—whose audible communion with God was so riveting and powerful that he knew of "eager saints" who would walk for miles on bitterly cold winter nights just for the spiritual experience of getting down on their knees beside her.¹⁸ For all this, Mills made no special point of attacking the grievances caused by prejudice.

¹⁴ "Evangelist Mills Meetings Begin Here Tonight," *Tacoma Daily News*, April, 13, 1892.

¹⁵ "The Church and the Clergy," *The Kansas City Times*, November 6, 1892.

¹⁶ "Sorry to Go," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 16, 1895.

¹⁷ "Many Arose," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 12, 1895.

¹⁸ "Come!," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 23, 1895.

Even though Mills had attended social conferences and was beginning to pick up social themes in his sermons, his preaching still sounded orthodox and pietistic themes. His revival in Minneapolis in March of 1893 is a case in point. In one of his sermons, he defended the Bible as the only source from which to preach. “Nobody can believe the Bible more than I do,” he said, and he continued: “I would not preach anything but the Bible.”¹⁹ In his sermon on Philip and the Ethiopian court official, when Philip began to teach the African from the book of Isaiah, Mills mocked the proponents of higher criticism who were suggesting that the Old Testament book had actually been written after Isaiah’s death. Biblical critics doubted Isaiah’s authorship and counted its prophecies—including the one that foretold the coming of the Jewish Messiah—as unworthy of study. Not so, countered Mills. The Old Testament should not be treated as a “poetic figment,” but as “one great hand that pointed to Jesus Christ.”²⁰ Just three years later, however, Mills publicly defended Charles A. Briggs’ historical criticism of the Bible, for which many in the Presbyterian denomination pounced upon and denounced him.²¹ A year after that, he admitted in an open letter that he had come to accept literary and historical criticism of the Bible, and a progressive revelation in place of a static disclosure of God to His creatures in a single text.²²

Much of the time at Minneapolis was devoted to spiritual practices and holiness themes. For the purpose of seeking God’s intervention, he held a prayer meeting at noon

¹⁹ *The Great Awakening: a report of the Christian Convention of the Northwest* (Minneapolis: Horace B. Hudson, 1893), 23.

²⁰ *The Great Awakening, a report of the Christian Convention of the Northwest*, 27.

²¹ “Is B. Fay Mills a Heretic?” *Wilkes-Barre Times*, July 6, 1896.

²² B. Fay Mills, “Religious Intelligence,” *Independent* (September 9, 1897): 15.

every day throughout the series of meetings lasting sixteen days.²³ When Mills talked about “the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit” and being entirely consecrated to God, he could have been a protégé of Charles Finney himself. In fact, he quoted Finney about the evil of not being filled with the Spirit.²⁴ Then after a sermon on the necessity of the baptism of the Holy Ghost for abundant life and fruitful service, he gave his testimony about just such an occurrence in his own life. About three years ago, he told his audience, after struggling with spiritual powerlessness and encountering the devil face-to-face, he sought God for a special blessing, and He answered by baptizing him with the Holy Ghost.²⁵ The acute awareness of God which had come as a result had made so much difference in his life and ministry.

Although his messages in Minneapolis expounded many evangelical and holiness themes, it is also true that there were glimmers of a tacit liberalism occasionally surfacing in his speech. For instance, he exalted religious experience over doctrine. He compared the independent action of Holy Spirit in a believer’s life, apart from a specific Bible passage, to the Quaker doctrine of an indwelling inner light.²⁶ After riveting his audience with the emotional story of his baptism in the Holy Spirit, he cried out, “Oh brethren, away from the theological notion . . . away from everything but God! Are you not ready to be emptied of self and to be filled with God?”—as though to imply to his listeners that they should make a choice between theology and experience, and that theology kept a person from experiencing the fullness of God.²⁷ This exclamation revealed not only his

²³ *The Great Awakening: a report of the Christian Convention of the Northwest*, 3.

²⁴ *The Great Awakening: a report of the Christian Convention of the Northwest*, 64.

²⁵ *The Great Awakening: a report of the Christian Convention of the Northwest*, 111-112.

²⁶ *The Great Awakening : a report of the Christian Convention of the Northwest*, 96.

²⁷ *The Great Awakening : a report of the Christian Convention of the Northwest*, 178-182.

disregard for theology, but also his growing reliance on spiritual experience as a source of truth. As already noted, religiously liberal thinkers were moving in this direction in their attempt to save Christianity from biblical critics, and Mills too was jumping on this bandwagon.

Still, for the most part, Mills' messages during his March, 1893, revival in Minneapolis could have been uttered from the pulpits and platforms of any of his contemporaries in the evangelical church. However, by the time he got to Louisville in October of 1895 and New Haven in January of 1896, the subjects of chapters four and five, he had clearly embraced not only the Social Gospel but also a Christian socialism—a remarkable change in so short a time. What had intervened between these latter meetings and the earlier one in Minneapolis? In a name: George D. Herron.

Mills encountered George D. Herron during the summer of 1893, when he attended a retreat at Iowa College. The college president George A. Gates had organized the first retreat the preceding year as a forum for progressive clergy to exchange ideas on how the churches could confront burgeoning social challenges. Although only seven men gathered at the initial event, including the Congregationalists George D. Herron and Josiah Strong, attendance widened during the next few years to the point that 400 participants were present in 1894. The retreats quickly rose into public awareness and took on a name: the Kingdom Movement. It would influence the Social Gospel out of all proportion to its size. At the center of the movement stood the figure of Herron, whose

personality and charisma dominated the annual summer gatherings and the religious spin-offs generated by the retreats.²⁸

President Gates himself acknowledged that Herron provided the animus that propelled the meetings to national attention: “it is to him more than to any other or to all of us that whatever of right or power there may be in the movement is due.”²⁹ Herron’s rise to fame was sudden and brief, but while his star was ascendant he exerted a gravitational pull on many reform-minded religious leaders. By this time in his career, Mills himself was a luminary who could count the conversions made at his revivals in the scores of thousands, and whose name in newspapers received front page billing, but even he was overshadowed by Herron at the Iowa College gatherings and in the Kingdom Movement. It would not be long before contemporary observers would agree with Gates in giving Herron the top billing as the prophet of the new movement, and Mills a secondary role as the movement’s evangelist, who followed after Herron and echoed his words.³⁰

The influence that Herron exercised upon Mills was powerful and life-changing. After 1893, sections in Mills’ sermons so reflected Herron’s thoughts and wording that it could just as well have been Herron speaking. Undeniably, Mills’ thoughts parallel Herron’s, and it can be shown that Herron was preaching a liberal, explicitly Social Gospel two or three years before Mills was preaching it, and that contemporaries considered Herron to be the leader of the Kingdom Movement, of which Mills was a part.

²⁸ Robert T. Handy, “George D. Herron and the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1890-1901” (PhD diss., The University of Chicago Divinity School, 1949), 50-51, 65.

²⁹ Handy, 51.

³⁰ Newman Smyth, D. D., “Recent Revivalism and the Franciscan Rule,” *Congregationalist* (March 5, 1896): 372.

After a year or two with the Kingdom group, Mills' message had so picked up the themes associated with Herron that a former evangelical associate of Mills mourned his theological alliance with and admiration for Herron, exemplified by Mills' calling of Herron a "Modern Jeremiah."³¹ Mills' sounding of Herron's ideas constitutes a sizeable part of the answer to the question of why Mills changed his pulpit thrust from evangelical revivalism to the Social Gospel, and therefore justifies a brief digression into the life and thought of Herron.

Robert T. Handy, a historian of the Social Gospel who wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the Rev. George D. Herron, D. D., describes him as "one of the most colorful, conspicuous, and controversial figures in the American churches" during the 1890s and "about whom several of the most important movements of the social Christianity of that period developed."³² Handy credits Herron's ability to draw attention to the social issues with the "vehemence and earnestness" of his personality, and with the "great spiritual intensity and great powers of eloquence" which grew out of his idealism.³³ His spellbinding platform speech enthralled his audiences. A contemporary who heard him said this:

I have heard great orators tear passion into tatters in some vast meeting ... but in the thrilling intensity of his passion for righteousness, in the white-hot glow of his love for man—the underman, the underdeveloped [sic] one, the one without opportunity—no speaker, teacher or author of modern times equals Dr. Herron When his oratory is at its height, he appears so sublimely unconscious of self as to be a flame of power, vivifying, enlightening, enthusing, glorifying.³⁴

³¹ Rev. Palmer S. Hulbert, D.D., "The Theology of Rev. B. Fay Mills," *The Treasury of Religious Thought* 12 (January, 1895): 775-778.

³² Handy, ii-iii.

³³ Handy, iii-iv.

³⁴ Handy, 58.

Herron rose to prominence quickly, seeming to materialize out of nowhere. Poverty-stricken in his childhood and youth with no formal schooling beyond a year and a half of college preparatory school, this self-educated Congregational minister burst on the national scene with a stinging address he delivered to the Minnesota Congregational Club in 1890 entitled “The Message of Jesus to Men of Wealth.” He shocked his audience with the invective that he hurled at both Western civilization and complacent middle-class churches: the former was founded in self-interest, the latter lacked an understanding of the way of the cross. Before this address he was an obscure rural clergyman; afterwards, he fairly leaped into the limelight as a social prophet.³⁵ His star power was brilliant but brief. By 1896, the churches had begun to reject him for his radicalism. However, on his way to the top, he attracted many followers, including B. Fay Mills. Before long, Mills was following Herron’s trail.

That Herron was ahead of Mills in the public proclamation of the Social Gospel message is not difficult to show. While Mills’ messages in Minneapolis were still sounding the conservative, evangelical themes, by 1893 Herron had already identified himself with the theologically liberal Social Gospel movement, and was stridently pushing its agenda. The very reason that Herron was asked to preach his 1890 message was because he had already joined the Society of Christian Socialists, and through that organization had come to the attention of the Minnesota Congregational Club. The Christian Socialist society stated in its platform, as paraphrased by Handy, that “all social, political, and industrial relations should be based on the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, that the teachings of Jesus lead directly to some form of

³⁵ Handy, 1.

Socialism, and that the Church ought to apply itself to the realization of the social principles of Christianity.”³⁶ By the time he came to prominence in 1890, he had already become liberalized with a social message.

After his exposure to the religious public from the 1890 message, Herron published several books in quick succession. His first work entitled *The Larger Christ* asserted the all-encompassing claims of Christianity upon the individual and corporate life of every society:

The authority of Jesus extends over the bank, the store, the factory, the railway, as truly as over the individual The principle of Christ’s life must be the principle of the market, the social room, the gas company, the college, the kitchen, the locomotive, the bed room, the club house. They are things no less bought by the blood of Christ than men and women.”³⁷

The Larger Christ, along with other writings that would follow, including the 1893 *New Redemption: A Call to the Church to Reconstruct Society According to the Gospel of Christ*, attracted attention among church-goers and received some favorable reviews in Congregational and other religious periodicals, as well as the secular press. Any criticism of his thought was at first restrained, as most chose to emphasize the earnest and challenging nature of his assertions, and the much needed application of them to the church.³⁸ Almost certainly, Mills would have known of Herron’s work during the first three years of the 1890s, and before long was including in his own messages remarks that were very similar to the one above.³⁹

³⁶ Handy, 18.

³⁷ George Davis Herron, *The Larger Christ* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1891), 32.

³⁸ Handy, 43-46.

³⁹ Mills said this in one of his sermons in Columbus, Ohio: “Let us find out what Christ taught about property and society and industry and every human relationship, and believe Him enough to practice what He taught, and summon others to do the same. Let us say to the State and the city and factory and railroad

If they had not met personally before, they met in 1893 when Mills arrived on the campus of Iowa College for the retreat that featured the ideas and presence of Herron. In 1894 and 1895 Herron organized and ran a School of the Kingdom, which was planned as a follow-up to the retreat. Mills presented papers at both sessions of the School of the Kingdom.⁴⁰ Gates testified to “the central place of Herron in the movement.” Gates said, “It is to him more than to any other or to all of us that whatever of right or power there may be in the movement is due.”⁴¹ Another contemporary observer designated Herron as the prophet and Mills as the apostle of the movement, and added that he had called Herron the prophet because “his theories have been stated with the greatest precision, his position assumed with the utmost confidence, and his demands upon the Church urged with the utmost vehemence.”⁴² For a brief time, Herron and Mills were closely associated in the movement and some of its spin-offs, including *The Kingdom* magazine, which was launched to further the message and included both as associate editors.⁴³ But it was Herron’s vision, acknowledged Gates, that gave the *raison d’être* to the magazine.⁴⁴

Herron’s sights were set on nothing short of the total transformation of the social order. At the beginning of his visibility within ecclesiastical and social circles, he held lofty hopes that the Protestant church could be jolted into taking moral responsibility for disinherited human wastelings. The church had the answers, he believed, but did not use them. Jesus’ teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount where true justice prevailed,

and the trust, ‘You belong to Christ.’” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, ed. Henry Stauffer (Columbus, OH: W. L. Lemon, 1895), 55.

⁴⁰ Another socially minded clergyman who spoke along with Mills at the School of the Kingdom was Charles Sheldon, author of the instant best-seller *In His Steps*, which popularized the expression, “What would Jesus do?”

⁴¹ Handy, 51.

⁴² Handy, 51.

⁴³ Handy, 66.

⁴⁴ Handy, 67.

contained everything necessary to heal social wounds.⁴⁵ When Jesus' philosophy was joined with voluntary self-sacrifice, which God had modeled for humanity in the death of Jesus on the cross, the perfect society would come. But instead a worldly church had pursued the same self-interests as the culture around it. He found a good part of the reason for this phenomenon in her over-preoccupation with abstract theology. Theology was important, he acknowledged, but it should be more ethical than metaphysical. As it had developed, it was essentially "unchristian."⁴⁶ According to Handy, Herron would come to be criticized in the religious press for his assertion that "few pulpits have any intelligent conception of what Christianity really is; that which the mass of Protestant preachers proclaim is not the gospel."⁴⁷ Thus he fired his broadsides in an attempt to provoke the body of Christ into action.

There was nothing beautiful about the social vista that Herron woke up to every morning: a calamitous world pulsing with the selfish pursuits of sinful men interposed itself between him and his vision of the perfect moral order. The original, harmonious state of nature had been corrupted by evil, and one of the greatest of all evils was capitalism. Because of its foundation in indulgent, personal interests, capitalism was inherently immoral and could not self-correct.⁴⁸ As the corporate system spread its monopolies, combinations, and trusts over the economic landscape, both society and human lives were consumed. The wage system was nothing more than industrial slavery, and flourished because capitalism treated with contempt the mass of humanity, who

⁴⁵ Handy, 22, 38.

⁴⁶ Handy, 34.

⁴⁷ Handy, 33.

⁴⁸ Handy, 30.

existed to aggrandize the holdings of the propertied classes. Sparks of discontent arising from capitalism would ignite and prove to be more explosive than dynamite.⁴⁹

If the capitalistic network burned to the ground, the way would be cleared for the building of a new social structure. Herron dreamed of such a day. Then would come “a golden age, a kingdom of God on earth,” where salvation would be drawn down to the “here and now, or wherever and whenever life becomes human by being made divine through oneness with the will of God.”⁵⁰ The social problem boiled down to the need to Christianize—according to Herron’s definitions—all of life, including the state and the church.⁵¹ When a human-serving true gospel prevailed rather than a mammon-serving false gospel, the Kingdom of God would reign on earth.

The timing was impeccable: the economic troubles of the middle 1890s helped Herron’s urgent agenda to resonate with his audiences. In 1893, the economy spiraled downward to unprecedented lows, as it sank under the weight of withdrawn London investments, overextended business ventures, and dwindling government gold reserves. As a result, nervous domestic investors and the failure of the National Cordage Company precipitated a stock market plummet that lasted for months.⁵² Workers, finding themselves on the streets as employers tried to protect their bottom lines, were grievously hit: “In some industrial states, unemployment reached 25 percent, and the national average was near 20 percent. Multitudes more were forced into lower paying jobs and part-time employment.”⁵³ The financial crisis spread throughout the next four years, and

⁴⁹ Handy, 30-32.

⁵⁰ Handy, 37.

⁵¹ Handy, 38.

⁵² Summers, 235.

⁵³ Summers, 236.

provoked labor demonstrations such as the march of “Coxey’s Army” and the turbulent strikes by Pullman Palace Car Company employees and coal miners in the Northeast and the state of Illinois.⁵⁴

The combination of Herron’s highly charged orations and the frightening economic woes brought the crowds to his speeches, and the reform-minded to the retreats and Schools of the Kingdom at Iowa College. It drew B. Fay Mills into his orbit where he revolved for the next few years. No lover of theology, Mills found Herron’s advocacy of ethical action well-suited to his restless temperament. His interior life that craved spiritual experience received waves of energy from Herron’s themes of self-sacrifice for the glory of God. His optimistic nature rejoiced, not in the celebration of the material progress that gained ground despite financial setbacks, but in the spiritual progress that signified the gathering advance of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Before 1893, he warred against the sin that would keep his auditors from heaven; after that year, he inveighed against the competitive capitalism that drove the poorly paid into an earthly hell. Before that year, he invited sinners to the mercy seat of God to receive Christ’s free offer of salvation for their fallen natures; after that year, he urged individuals to go out into the alleyways, rookeries, and slum districts, and offer themselves as Christ-types for the betterment of the human race. Before that year, he reveled in the joy of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, wrought by God’s own hand; after that year, he gloried in the Kingdom of God, brought by sacrificial human effort. In so changing, he did not retain his individual salvation message and add social justice to it. Rather, as he turned to the Social Gospel, he also began to walk away from the Christian

⁵⁴ Summers, 236, 241-243.

faith bequeathed to him in the spiritual house of his mother and father. This is what stirred the consternation of many of his friends and peers in the camp of orthodoxy.

The life-changing influence of Herron on Mills was documented by Ford C. Ottman, the biographer of Mills' lifelong friend J. Wilbur Chapman. Ottman spent much time in the company of Chapman as a personal friend, counselor, and traveling companion. Ottman had Chapman's confidence, and Chapman disclosed to him that it was Herron's influence, coupled with Mills' lack of training in systematic theology, that turned Mills toward the Social Gospel and his ever more liberal religious journey.⁵⁵ A commentator under the pseudonym "Augustus" corroborated Chapman's viewpoint. Writing for the *New York Observer and Chronicle*, he reported that those who knew Mills well dated his "doubts and defection from evangelical views to the influence of George D. Herron and his writings."⁵⁶

Judging by press accounts, it was clear that some kind of alteration was in the works. Where once Mills' activities produced eager anticipation and attracted front-page banner headlines, at the end of 1893 and through the year 1894, they were reduced to small print buried in large sections in the social columns. In addition, the size and scope of his meetings were noticeably scaled back. In November of 1893 his meetings in "several NorthSide churches" received a few words on a large page.⁵⁷ A few days later, the *New York Herald Tribune* mentioned that Mills had returned to the city of his birth

⁵⁵ Ford C. Ottman, *J. Wilbur Chapman: A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1920), 28. Ottman expressed it this way: "Mills had no education in systematic theology and when he came under the influence of George D. Herron, his unstable foundations crumpled beneath him."

⁵⁶ Augustus, "Starting a New Evangelism: A Wandering Star is the Evangelist the Gospel for an Age of Unrest," *New York Observer and Chronicle* (April 14, 1904): 459.

⁵⁷ "Rules Not Obeyed," *Chicago Daily Inter Ocean*, November 18, 1893.

and was holding a two-week revival in one church, the First Presbyterian Church of Rahway, New Jersey.⁵⁸ In January of the following year, notice of an upcoming Mills' revival was almost lost in fine print, between news of a local casting for the play "Drummer Boy" and an incident concerning the milkman Charles A. Judd, whose near miss with a cow's horn almost cost him his right eye.⁵⁹ It would be wrong to conclude, however, that Mills was no longer an entity to be reckoned with. He was actually regrouping for his next phase: the proclamation of the Social Gospel under the auspices of the traditional revival platform. The content of his messages during these small revivals did not escape the attention of a Congregational church pastor, who presented a paper to the Reformed Pastors' Association entitled "The Theology of B. Fay Mills."⁶⁰ The paper expressed grave concern about the theological direction in which Mills was heading, and remarked about his association with Herron which bore upon his new course.⁶¹

In 1894 Mills withdrew from the revival trail for a year and took a pastorate in Albany, New York. He told others, and the press reported, that the reason for his recess was to spend more time at home with his growing children, especially his three sons, from whom he was often absent.⁶² He maintained this afterwards, but added that he had also been feeling pressed to delve into personal study.⁶³ At a still later time, he further revealed that a primary reason had been to devote time to reading and studying some

⁵⁸ "New-Jersey," *New York Herald-Tribune*, December 22, 1893.

⁵⁹ "Hampshire County," *Springfield Daily Republican*, January 23, 1895.

⁶⁰ "Chicago Gets a New-York Minister," *New York Herald-Tribune*, December 4, 1894.

⁶¹ Palmer S. Hulbert, "The Theology of B. Fay Mills," *The Treasury of Religious Thought* 12 (January 1895), 775-778.

⁶² "Churches and Churchmen," *Kansas City Times*, August 26, 1894.

⁶³ "Rev. B. Fay Mills Answers Dr. Dille's Sunday Sermon," *Oakland Enquirer*, October 31, 1899.

religious questions that had been nagging at him. He disclosed that he came away from his year of study no longer believing in the Bible as the unchanging revelation of God to humanity, or in the exclusive divinity of the God-man Jesus.⁶⁴

Mills did not reflect publicly at this time upon his changes. However, in 1898 when he addressed a group in Boston, he explained some of the reasons for his shift in thought and course. He had become disillusioned, he said, with the efforts of the traditional church to grapple with social realities. While the church was still teaching her “crudest superstitions” and allowing men of the most “unholy interests” to dominate her programs, he continued, she was neglecting the practical pathways by which she might actually do some good in this world. Since he had become involved more recently in reform movements, he had found some of the most noble and inspired participants in these causes to have no interest whatsoever in the activities of the churches. To them, the church had become irrelevant. He concluded this section of his remarks by saying that “the greatest regenerative, social movements of to-day are largely administered by those who have no direct association, or only a nominal connection with the Orthodox churches.” Mills understood this latter—this inability of the church to capture the allegiance of the most consecrated humanitarians—to be a severe indictment and deserved sentence upon the enfeebled moral authority of the church. In addition to corroborating their judgment, his own attachment to the traditional church had also waned as he had accelerated his study of the findings of modern science, historical

⁶⁴ “Founded Upon Reason,” *Portland Morning Oregonian*, April 12, 1901.

criticism, and current philosophical trends. He could no longer preach the historic doctrines of the church.⁶⁵

Mills had come a long way in the three short years when his momentous revivals had so moved the cities that five books had been written to commemorate the events: two of them put the term “the Great Awakening” in their titles, one subtitled the work “the great revival,” and one pronounced it a “great religious awakening” in the introductory comments.⁶⁶ In Minneapolis in 1893 he had told his captivated audience that when he was a pastor he “never was anything but an evangelistic pastor” and that “we never had anything in our church except direct effort for saving souls”⁶⁷; then he urged upon them the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But by the time he got to Louisville, Columbus, and New Haven, he had altered his message substantially. Now he implored the crowds to consider living in the slums, to sacrifice self for the cause of humanity, to conduct business as a service rather than for profit, and in doing these things, to progress toward the coming Kingdom of God, when all of humanity would live harmoniously and communally in a perfect moral order.

Mills’ adoption of Herron’s message, combined with his own optimistic belief in moral progress, his disinterest in theology but gravitation toward spiritual experience, his

⁶⁵ B. Fay Mills, “Why I Became a Liberal in Religion,” *Twentieth Century Religion*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: The Co-operative Press, 1898), 4-8.

⁶⁶ *The Great Awakening: a report of the Christian Convention of the Northwest* (Minneapolis: Horace B. Hudson, 1893); *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, ed. Henry Stauffer (Columbus, Ohio: W. L. Lemon, 1895); John Junkin Francis, *Mills’ Meetings Memorial Volume* (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Company, 1892); Joseph D. Lowden, *The Story of the Revival; A Narrative of the Mills Meetings, Held in Elizabeth, N. J.* (Elizabeth, NJ: compiled from Reports in the *Elizabeth Daily Journal*, 1892). A fifth book, H. A. Blodgett *Times of Refreshing: Story of the Mills Revival in St. Paul, Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN: H. A. Blodgett & J. J. Symes, 1893), has not been located.

⁶⁷ *The Great Awakening, a report of the Christian Convention of the Northwest*, 18. Mills continued: “We used to have fifteen meetings every week. There never was any time when a person could not find Christ in connection with the meetings of our church, night or day.”

restless and independent spirit, propelled him in the direction of the interests of the Kingdom Movement. Already inclined toward social concerns, Mills followed the trail that Herron had cut away from the historic, well-worn paths of the Protestant church. Further, it seems safe to say that Herron's brief luminescent popularity provided the cover that Mills needed to break away from the conservative, evangelical fold. For indeed, in less than two years after collaborating with Herron in Iowa, Mills was asking his audiences to consider not the question, "What must *I* do to be saved?" but instead the very different question, "What must *society* do to be saved?"

That Mills had integrated the Social Gospel into his appeals was clear when he stood behind the pulpits and lecterns in Louisville, Kentucky, Columbus, Ohio, and New Haven, Connecticut.

Chapter Four

A Revolutionary Message in Louisville, Kentucky:

Evangelist Mills Proclaims the Social Gospel

When B. Fay Mills stepped off the morning train in Louisville on October 22, 1895, he entered a city with a history of riverboat gambling, horse racing, distilling and brewing interests, and tobacco production. Old money strolled the streets in the form of Kentucky gentlemen who sported white linen suits and trimmed goatees, with fashionably dressed ladies at their sides. But any number of others might be seen treading the same streets or riding the mule-drawn streetcars: politicians, lawyers, bankers, small tradesmen, clerks, working girls, bartenders, and descending further on the social ladder, white and black laborers, tramps, and prostitutes.¹ These comprised the potential pool of congregants from whom Mills would draw his audience. Although his congregations would be composed mostly of the wider spectrum of the middle class, Mills had in mind to try to reach the lowest of the low.

Louisvillians took pride in being known for their great manufacturing industries in tobacco and alcohol products. “Of Bourbon whisky [sic], otherwise known as fine Kentucky whisky, Louisville claims to be headquarters. The largest distilling interest in the state is owned by Louisville houses, and the major part of the whole Kentucky product is handled here,” a writer boasted.² Indeed, this city of roughly 162,000 residents

¹ George R. Leighton, *Five Cities: The Story of Their Youth and Old Age* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939), chapter 2; George H. Yater, *Two Hundred Years at the Falls of the Ohio* (Louisville, KY: The Heritage Corporation, 1979), chapters 9 and 10; and John E. Kleber, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Louisville* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

² Yater, 122.

was home to nineteen distilleries in the mid-1890s, netting huge profits for some in Louisville.³ Not to be outdone, beer production skyrocketed from 52,111 barrels to 534,750 barrels between the years 1863 and 1902.⁴ Local brewers often operated saloons adjacent to their manufacturing sites.⁵ The atmosphere Mills imbibed in Louisville was saturated with the smell of horse flesh, tobacco smoke, and distillery fumes—not to mention the money they generated. Mills liked horses and did not comment on the use of tobacco, but he despised the alcohol industry, and he intended to take aim at this corrupter of society, a courageous thing to do in Louisville.

“Does Louisville need and want a revival of religion?” the Rev. S. L. Hamilton asked the congregation that was gathered for a preparatory meeting. It will come if individuals desire it badly enough, he answered.⁶ In giving every opportunity for success, no stones were left unturned. *The Courier-Journal* mentioned seven committees—Executive, Finance, Printing, Music, Devotional, Ushers, and Women’s—and they set to work at once. Prior to opening night, the Finance Committee had secured most of the money it needed to meet expenses. Over 100,000 invitations had been printed, and these would be distributed to every household in the city, as well as to every office and business. Three choirs of at least 75 voices each were assembling regularly to practice the singing of hymns. The Devotional Committee had arranged for a series of sermons to prepare the spiritual ground in the week before Mills’ arrival. The ushers who volunteered were instructed to put aside all thoughts of sectarianism; one’s denominational affiliation was irrelevant in this revival. Women ran their own

³ Yater, 122.

⁴ Kleber, 117.

⁵ Kleber, 116.

⁶ “The Need of a Revival,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 14, 1895.

committee. Once the revival began, they would meet every day in the center of the city under a rotating leadership among committee members. Mrs. Mills, who sometimes traveled with her husband on his evangelistic trips, would conduct some of the meetings herself.⁷

Prior to his arrival in Louisville, Mills' well-oiled organizational machine was already in place and humming along. With his ability to understand the relationship between the component parts and the whole, Mills had thought out and systematized every phase of the revival. In order to secure his services, Mills insisted that the participating clergy not only agree to everything he required, but also to his being left in complete charge of the smallest details of the whole arrangement. If his requirements in the Cincinnati revival can be taken as normative, his stipulations were exacting to the point of being burdensome. A clergyman in Cincinnati expressed it this way:

This [organizational plan was implemented with] every minutest feature of it under the personal supervision of Mr. Mills. To many of those ... under his direction, ... the mechanical features of the preparations seemed at times unpleasantly obtrusive, and some were disposed occasionally to criticize, and to question the necessity or propriety of it all, for a great spiritual work. But Mr. Mills was firm, and insisted upon attention to every detail. When at length the time came for the services to begin, the wisdom of the master-mind ... became at once apparent. The great machine, so perfect in all its parts, was put in motion ... [and] it did its work, and accomplished its purpose. There was no further thought of criticism.⁸

Mills' organizational plan could be exasperating, but it got results. It was not for nothing that he was sometimes referred to as "the general."⁹

⁷ "Plenty of voices," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 1, 1895; "The Mills Meetings," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 7, 1895; "The Mills Choirs," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 8, 1895; "Mills Coming," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 16, 1895; "Ushers Appointed," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 21, 1895.

⁸ John Junkin Francis, *The Mills Meeting Memorial Volume* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1892), 2-3.

The Ministerial Association in Louisville, Kentucky, had agreed to Mills' terms, and the four weeks of October 23 to November 19 were set for the revival. A few days out, the paper focused on Mills and his team of associates, and included artist sketches of each. Mills would be accompanied by six men who would aid him in his work. Three evangelists and three song leaders would work in pairs—one preacher and one singer—and they would alternate partners and districts so that all sectors of the city would be exposed to every leadership combination, as equally as possible. The fourth evangelist was brought along to help Mills reach out to the unchurched. He would also hold overflow meetings, in case the building that Mills was using could not accommodate the crowds. Mills, of course, was the feature attraction and the unquestioned leader of the team. Mills had “probably preached to more people than any other man in America,” the paper reported.¹⁰ The press fed the public appetite for news about his appearance, manner, and persona. An anonymous source was quoted as portraying him this way: “He is young, he has blue eyes ... there is a cordial in his smile. He is confident, buoyant, happy. The brow is broad and clear; the mass of fair hair waves and curls. A short man, with quick step, a clear-glancing eye, a voice soft and musical, but with tones in it that can be very decisive; an easy manner.”¹¹ Both press and public were intrigued by the man, and anticipation for the day of his arrival mounted.

In answer to Rev. Hamilton's question to the citizens of Louisville about whether they wanted a revival, they answered him by voting with their feet. Once the revival began, the crowds increased daily. Except for one day when attendance slacked off due to

⁹ “Sorry to Go,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 16, 1895.

¹⁰ “Mills Coming,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 16, 1895.

¹¹ “Mills Coming,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 16, 1895.

the pouring rain—good news, since the area had been suffering from a severe “drouth”¹²—attendance grew to such proportions that additional chairs were placed in the aisles, people sat on the steps leading up to the platform, the ushers found it difficult to seat the guests or distribute the decision cards, and simultaneous overflow meetings had to be conducted by the other evangelists.¹³ One night at least, “colored” residents occupied fully one-half of the upstairs gallery.¹⁴ All of these people had come to hear the famous evangelist, whose Gospel invitations had left thousands of new believers at his stops along the way. The *Courier-Journal* paid tribute to him just prior to his coming by saying that “in the six years of his evangelistic experience, Mr. Mills has so wonderfully developed his powers that he is known throughout the world as one of the most conspicuous soul-winners and leaders of men of the day.” With evangelistic billing such as this, those who lavishly populated his services were not expecting to hear messages leavened with a new theology of social salvation, nor would they have known that this well-known preacher of God’s Word no longer believed the scriptures to be the permanent revelation of God to humanity, or that Jesus Christ was the exclusively divine Son of God. Beneath the trappings of revivalistic methods and speech lay a social reform agenda which he would disclose as the days went by.

Mills’ sermons in Louisville, many of them faithfully recorded in the *Courier-Journal*, reveal his evolving ideology. They contained redefined elements of orthodox

¹² “*Too Many Murders*,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 1, 1895; “Drouth’s Effect,” November 9, 1895.

¹³ “Widening,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 25, 1895; “By Scores,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 26, 1895; “*First Waves*,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 29, 1895; “Thousands,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 30, 1895; “An Awakening,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 4, 1895; “Growing,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 11, 1895; “Sacred Homes,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 13, 1895; “Sorry to Go,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 16, 1895.

¹⁴ “Sorry to Go,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 16, 1895.

theology, and definite explications of a socially charged Christianity. In sifting through his sermons, the following can be said of his thought: it was *not explicitly doctrinal* in the orthodox sense, but it was *ethical, practical and volitional, social*, and preoccupied with *the Kingdom of God*. Each of these patterns of thought will be discussed in turn.

Mills' thought contained little evangelical doctrine. In Louisville, as elsewhere, Mills based each of his sermons on a Bible verse, or even a small phrase in one verse, but in this revival he never chose texts that suggested the cardinal doctrines of Christian evangelical orthodoxy. He made few references to the atonement, being "born again," regeneration, hell, or other doctrinal terms. When he did use doctrinal terms, he subtly recast their meaning. Three examples will illustrate this point.

In his message on Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who mourn," Mills exhorted the people to mourn for the sinful condition of the world. Using the language of orthodoxy, he put it this way: "... the only way for the world's deliverance will be through those who enter into fellowship with the Lamb of God that beareth away the sin of the world in the realization of its shame and the complete sacrifice of the life in an atoning deliverance."¹⁵ In other words, the way to deliver the world from sin is to sacrifice one's own life for the improvement of others. When the Christian lives self-sacrificially and shoulders the burden of sin, he enters into a blessed fellowship or partnership with the Lamb of God as they both atone for the sin of the world. Mills used the familiar words of the faith, such as "deliverance from sin," "Lamb of God that beareth away the sin of the world," "atoning," "sacrifice," but he employed them in a subtly but significantly different way. He reduced the atonement to a

¹⁵ "Widening," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 25, 1895.

sacrificial effort toward the common good, and suggested that humans could be atoning partners on a par with Christ.¹⁶

A second example of Mills' theological hedging comes from the same sermon. He chided people for being too heavenly minded, for using the expectation of the redress of grievances in the afterlife to let them off the hook for involvement in this present life. Longing for heaven, a far-away place of "oriental inactivity"—in his conception, a place of passive repose conceived by the Middle Eastern mind—had drained off social concern, and Christians had not engaged and throttled sinful practices such as the "damnable traffic in intoxicating liquor [that] curses whole cities." It is easy, he continued, "to form a creed of deliverance for the individual into some far-off heaven of freedom from temptation and characterless bliss, but let me ask you this question: What do you think of this world? Is it what it was meant to be? ... Is it what it ought to be? Is it what it shall be?"¹⁷ After characterizing heaven as a place of "oriental inactivity" and "characterless bliss," he immediately engaged his auditors with the present, clamoring needs of this world.

A third example of his lack of traditional doctrine had to do with how he talked about conversion. Rather than the sinful heart being blood-washed by the savior in preparation for a supernatural regeneration, Mills made conversion a matter of "being better" or choosing to live a better life.¹⁸ For example, when he preached in a saloon to some of the "acknowledged women of the world," he convinced ten of them to promise

¹⁶ Two seminaries, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, were located in the city. The November 6, 1895, issue of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, reported that seminary students actively participated in the Mills' revival.

¹⁷ "Widening," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 25, 1895.

¹⁸ "An Awakening," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 4, 1895.

to “lead better lives.”¹⁹ A Christian, according to Mills, was someone who received inspiration from Christ’s example and thereby decided to live a virtuous life. Since he passed over the evangelical imperative of an inner, supernatural transformation, his formulation for living the sacrificial, righteous life did not necessarily require the Gospel. A nonreligious person could be inspired by some other notable figure and attempt the same result by so resolving.

Eschewing orthodox doctrine, Mills’ Louisville sermons concentrated on his new priorities, especially the *ethical behavior* of the Christian. Mills had always stressed moral conduct, but he had linked the ability to live the Christian lifestyle with personal salvation brought about through Christ. Now, he dropped the necessity for individual regeneration and pushed his audiences to make a choice to represent God in the daily affairs of this earthly life. Be a Christian and do right, Mills implored the crowds. In assuming that they possessed the natural ability to be God-like, his theology had become less theocentric and more humanistic.

For Mills there was nothing complicated about the Christian motive and lifestyle: ethical behavior was based on love. This constituted his theme of themes in Louisville: the certainty of God’s love and the necessity of human love for one’s neighbor. Mills enjoined his audiences to emulate God by loving the unlovable, and to use that love to transform debauched lives and embittered groups. He gave them examples. Love could win back a wayward family member, such as Senator John Sherman had described in his book, where he told of being rescued from drunkenness by his mother’s love. Striking miners in Colorado, Mills continued, had been brought to the arbitration table by the

¹⁹ “Money Will Preach,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 14, 1895.

words of President Slocum of Colorado College, a Christian man who won over a bristling, rifle-toting crowd by speaking in a gentle spirit of love.²⁰ The reason why more dark clouds of human bondage were not dispersed is that people content themselves with the mere holding of correct doctrine—even while their heads are “all right,” their hearts are “all wrong.” Love is resistless and must always succeed. For his own part, he had been taught how to love by his “sainted mother” who had helped him to “be right.”²¹

Mills’ optimistic nature foresaw the inevitable triumph of love. The only way to change the “world system,” he told a noon gathering, was to love it; individuals transformed the system by being witnesses against it until it is willing to live by love.²² It was working, he said: “Now is the time when men are learning to love.” To illustrate improvements in the hearts of men, he cited the statistic of seventy-five disputes that the United States had been involved in in the nineteenth century that in earlier times would have led to war. On the subject of love, he was prone to generalized sweeping statements such as, “Love is a mighty power. It has conquered, is conquering, and is marching on to mightier victories.”²³ The love ethic inspired Mills deeply, and he believed that, for all its faults, the world he lived in constituted a better day, and that in the end, love would triumph.

Many of Mills’ sermons were sprinkled with references to God’s love, and some were organized around it, but other than occasional statements about Christ’s death on the cross as a sacrificial example for believers to follow in showing their own love, they were general and abstract and not specific to God’s acts in this world. And while other

²⁰ “Thousands,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 30, 1895.

²¹ “Thousands,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 30, 1895.

²² “Fruitful,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 2, 1895.

²³ “Many Stood Up,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 31, 1895.

evangelists might also have spoken of other attributes of God such as His holiness, jealousy, or wrath against sin, Mills' conception of God focused only on His nature of love.²⁴ A theistic ethicist could have said most of what Mills preached on this subject.

With much of his focus concentrated on human behavior, Mills addressed many of his remarks to the practical and volitional side of human affairs. Consonant with his own restless energy in ceaselessly undertaking one task after another, Mills construed life as a product of individual decisions to act or not act. Ethical behavior and practical volition were the two sides of the same coin: one made the choice to conduct his or her life in righteous ways. In his earliest book, *Victory Through Surrender: A Message Concerning Consecrated Living*, published in 1892, he asked his readers why few Christians avail themselves of the richer, fuller life in Christ. It came down to: "Are you willing?" The proper response to God is "show me, and *I will do it.*" [Emphasis his.] Frequently he repeated his urgings, as when he followed up the above words with: "Let it be now ... let it be definite. Let it be done now."²⁵

Not surprisingly, then, Mills' first two evening services in Louisville targeted the free will. His first sermon asked his audience to give their lives to God and closed with the twice-repeated question: "Will you do it now? Will you do it now?"²⁶ The second night he followed up with the biblical question, "What do you more than others?" He reminded his audience that God so loved the world that he gave the dearest thing in

²⁴ "Thousands," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 30, 1895.

²⁵ B. Fay Mills, *Victory Through Surrender: A Message Concerning Consecrated Living* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1892) 17, 21, 26, 27.

²⁶ "Come!" *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 23, 1895.

existence for it—the life of His son. Therefore, a child of God should follow suit and give his life for the transformation of the world.²⁷

Although Mills was sometimes described as a preacher who appealed to the rational side of human nature, he did not hesitate to push the emotional button to move the will, and he often did. He told stories of praying mothers, crying fathers, suicidal children, ragged wastrels, and restored sinners—all to persuade his listeners to sign the decision cards that the ushers passed out. He encouraged his audience to “feel the emotion of Christ.”²⁸ Mills himself was an emotional man. The journalist of the *Omaha World-Herald*, Elia Peattie, wrote that “Mr. Mills’ greatest power . . . lies in his genius for sympathy.”²⁹ “Mills is ruled by his emotions, not his intellect,” his friend Elbert Hubbard said of him several years later.³⁰ At his next to last meeting, the congregants broke down into tears, his choked up song leader “croaked” when he tried to sing, and, he confessed, “even I cried.”³¹ Just as his sensitive nature created empathetic currents that flowed back and forth between speaker and audience, so his sympathies were aroused by what he saw when he walked the slum district streets and read about poverty-stricken laborers in the newspapers.

Mills’ new social agenda figured prominently in his messages in Louisville. Mills had been raised in the home of a temperance advocate, and had himself concluded that the consumption of alcohol had contributed heavily to the degeneration so evident in the

²⁷ “Churches Too Small,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 24, 1895.

²⁸ “First Waves,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 29, 1895.

²⁹ Elia Peattie, *Impertinences: Selected Writings of Elia Peattie, a Journalist in the Gilded Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 142, 144.

³⁰ Elbert Hubbard, “Benjamin Fay Mills” extracted from *Hundred-Point-Men: Elbert Hubbard’s Selected Writings, Part 10* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, n. d.), 143.

³¹ “Farewells,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 19, 1895.

ramshackle dwellings in the inner city. A key part of the social reformation that Mills desired was the total eradication of the manufacture of alcohol in any form. He railed against it because he saw it as a terrible destroyer of lives, homes, and whole communities of people. He told the story of a man whom he had personally known whose addiction to alcohol had reduced his wife to helpless weeping and his family to rags, and whose son, not being able to take the family's degradation any longer, went out one night and hanged himself.³² Calling liquor "the damnable traffic in intoxicating liquor [that] curses whole cities," he denounced it unapologetically in this city that boasted of its finest bourbon, and blamed it for the high divorce rate in Louisville of 400 per year.³³

Putting distilleries and saloons in the same league with the "gambling hells" and brothels, Mills determined to meet the threat on its own ground.³⁴ He had come to Louisville with an innovative strategy. If he could find saloons that would open their doors to him, he would go inside and preach the Gospel to the patrons seated in the chairs and at the bar. For this endeavor, he had a weapon in his arsenal: the Rev. John H. Murray, "the convicted burglar No. 17,322 in the Ohio Penitentiary" in 1885. Murray had landed in prison because of armed robbery and shooting a man, but after being converted in his cell and obtaining what he called a miraculous release, he dedicated his life to preaching the Gospel to those who would never darken the door of a church.³⁵

The October 27 paper contained the attention-grabbing headline: "The Mills Meetings: Prayer Services to be Held in a Saloon Monday Night." The article stated that

³² "Practicability of Christianity," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 28, 1895.

³³ "Widening," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 25, 1895; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 13, 1895.

³⁴ "Widening," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 25, 1895.

³⁵ "Practicability of Christianity," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 28, 1895; "First Waves," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 29, 1895.

the Mills' team had offered Mr. Bierod, the owner of the saloon, the price of one night's business. He had accepted, and Murray did most of the preaching because of his experience with the "lower classes."³⁶ Tuesday's paper contained a descriptive account of the service. Six hundred were present. Mills and Murray officiated, although Mills arrived later, rushing there from his evening meeting "as if he were going to a fire."³⁷ Murray spoke informally, telling the crowd that there were no rules. Consequently, the paper noted, many kept on their hats, took off their coats, or smoked throughout the informal "talks." The Reverends Maxwell and Hillis, two of the soloists, sang touching songs, and at times the whole crowd joined in the singing of familiar religious hymns. Both Mills and Murray interacted with the crowd, and Murray told the story of his life of crime, burglary, and conversion.³⁸

It was an evening that hit the sentimental chords. After Rev. Hillis sang "Where Is My Boy Tonight?" Mills asked the men how many had praying mothers: "Every hand went up." At the conclusion of the service, Mills invited any who wanted prayer to come and take the hand of either Murray or himself. The men responded so eagerly that they "were almost knocked off the table on which they stood." The ministers left that night with the names of many who said they were going to try to live a better life.³⁹

They held a similar meeting in Woerner's saloon and dance hall, this time drawing crowds of both men and women, who were "the worst types of saloon hangers-on." At the conclusion, the reporter noted, "the women hung their painted faces in shame,

³⁶ "The Mills Meetings," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 27, 1895.

³⁷ "First Waves," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 29, 1895.

³⁸ "First Waves," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 29, 1895.

³⁹ "First Waves," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 29, 1895.

and the men left quietly as if they did not care to look their old comrades in the face.”⁴⁰ Perhaps this publicity had proved good for business, because the article ended with the note that yet one more saloon had offered its premises for another such meeting. But these meetings were having some effect. Afterwards, some in attendance left the saloon and went across the street to Rev. Steve Holcombe’s mission, where “five wretched men and one sinful woman were soundly converted.”⁴¹

Mills’ new social priorities were nowhere more evident than in the content of his noon meetings. Mills had been rotating around the city with two of the evangelists at the 3:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. daily meetings, but the noon meetings at Library Hall he reserved exclusively for himself.⁴² Where in Minneapolis he had set aside the noon hour as a prayer time for the efficacy of the revival, in Louisville he reserved the lunch hour as a time to gather and address the businessmen of the city on social and Kingdom topics. Following Herron before him, Mills saw the two as intricately intertwined. Innately more optimistic than Herron, Mills believed the Kingdom of God was advancing rapidly, and was hindered in its approach only by social injustice and inequalities.⁴³ Pressing and mammoth as these may be, Mills yet thought that individuals possessed all of the human agency necessary to tackle the problems, if only they would work in concert with single-minded purpose. Again like Herron, he laid the bigger part of the blame at the robber barons who had amassed their personal fortunes at the expense of their laborers. The other part of the blame was laid at the doorsteps of the churches and middle class

⁴⁰ “In the Slums,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 3, 1895.

⁴¹ “Good Cheer,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 5, 1895.

⁴² “Thousands,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 30, 1895.

⁴³ “Fruitful,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 2, 1895; Mills’ optimism waxed poetic when he said: “This is the great day of the world’s history. This is the age of the ages.”

residences, where apathy toward the impoverished had allowed the wealthy business owners—often church members—to get away with their rapacious misdeeds.

Occasionally he spoke to the business interests in his evening services, as when he told his audience on the second night that a Christian is more to be recognized in the ethical conduct of business than in the occupying of a pew in the church, and then asked them if they could imagine Jesus operating a “cut-throat business.”⁴⁴ But it was in the noon hour that he fired his heaviest volleys at human greed and middle class indifference. He reached a good cross-section of the city’s employers and employed, as “business men, professional men, workingmen and clerks crowded” their way into the noon meetings.⁴⁵ As the days went by, his noon addresses became more pointed. For those who stuck with him, it is safe to say that they heard a message quite unlike any that they had ever heard from other revival preachers. The general reading public could catch the gist of it in the next day’s paper.

In his first few noon meetings, he kept to less salient pronouncements about current business practices. Sounding very much like Herron, he commended the lifestyle of sacrifice to Christian businessmen, and told the story of a shoe manufacturer who cared about his unkempt workers and preached the gospel to them. When strikers walked off their jobs across the city, his men remained loyal and stayed put. The owner prospered to such an extent that he had to run two shifts at a time when other businesses had been forced to close.⁴⁶ Mills doubted whether store owners were really Christians who sold their merchandise at marked up prices, or peddled liquor, or grabbed their

⁴⁴ “Churches Too Small,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 24, 1895.

⁴⁵ “By Scores,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 26, 1895.

⁴⁶ “By Scores,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 26, 1895; “Practicability of Christianity,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 28, 1895.

impoverished creditors “by the throat” and forced them to pay up when they did not have the means to do so.⁴⁷ Driving the destitute into the ground had awful human consequences. He had seen “cheap tenements” and had personally witnessed 80 families in one house, five in one room, “with them some chickens and pigs. We are responsible for this.” Low wages for men necessitated the factory labor of women and children. Immigrants lived on a “few cents a day.” And worse than all of this, young women sometimes were forced to sell their bodies in order to make ends meet. Men who took advantage of the economic vulnerability of women “should be put in the pillory and their wealth divided.”⁴⁸

Politics played a big part in social transformation because much wickedness in the city could be eliminated if Christians would vote for socially conscious public servants. To Mills, voting was more than a civic responsibility; it was a spiritual requirement. “The man denies Jesus Christ who does not vote,” Mills said. If a vote is cast wrongly for someone who refuses to involve himself in the extermination of sin, then the curse of God is upon him.⁴⁹

Where the above might be considered as pruning the branches to make a healthier tree, more controversial topics that he took up at noon could be regarded as chopping at the trunk or digging up the roots. Mills waited until his final few days to unfold his more progressive thoughts about social reengineering. He started with Christian marriage. The married couple constituted the foundational unit of society and “God’s mighty agency for establishing His Kingdom,” he said, and so they should use their influence to help in the

⁴⁷ “Practicability of Christianity,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 28, 1895.

⁴⁸ “Sacred Homes,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 13, 1895.

⁴⁹ “Practicability of Christianity,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 28, 1895.

rescue of inner city inhabitants. Rather than making their home as high up the scale as their means would allow, they should ask “What is the loving thing to do?” For many, that would mean prayerfully choosing to live in the slums, and redeeming it and making it bloom like the original Eden, even inviting the hungry and ragged in for dinner. He related a personal experience where he had once moved out to the country for rest, but then had determined to throw God’s kind of party. Like in the biblical parable, he prepared a feast and went into the city and found the poorest tenement dwellers and invited them out to his country house. He had great fun, he said—“I was never so happy in my life”—laughing until he cried. Christians are on earth “to give the poor a taste of heaven before they go there.”⁵⁰ On the subject of the relationship between the sexes, he found himself in accord with the Kentucky sentiment that a man who violated a woman’s sanctity should be killed.⁵¹

The next day, he revealed that he was moving closer toward socialism, although he had not yet fully embraced it. He was not against the right of property ownership, he claimed in a sermon entitled, “Money Will Preach.” Both Old and New Testaments recognize the right of a person to possess property, so nothing intrinsically unrighteous adheres to its ownership. On the other hand, the Christian maxim is: “not that thine is mine, or mine is thine, but that all things belong to God, and I am His steward to do what He wants done.” In other words, God held the ultimate titles to all property, and the role of human beings was to act as His stewards in its management. The question becomes, how shall I use God’s property? If it is used lovingly to advance the Kingdom of God,

⁵⁰ “Sacred Homes,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 13, 1895.

⁵¹ “Sacred Homes,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 13, 1895.

then wealth can be a means of lifting up the downtrodden rather than climbing on their backs.⁵²

Practically, this could mean spending three dollars for a necktie rather than ten cents. It might be better to purchase the expensive tie because the “cut price” is crushing the life out of the laborer who produced it. In the same way, although extravagant consumption is deplorable, Mills recalled a rich woman whose ordering of a \$500 baby outfit provided work for a group of “sewing girls” for a week. And as for taxes, men should “rejoice” when tax time comes because taxes are an “enforced contribution” toward the welfare of society, and therefore a participation in divine fellowship.⁵³

Although Mills used the foregoing as proof that wealth could be used for good purposes, he was also quick to point out that abuses in property ownership abounded in his day. Judged in the light of Jesus’ teachings, he found current business practices to be “hellish.” Rather than using the precepts in the Sermon on the Mount as a guide, in which a person gives whenever asked with no thought of gain from its use or even with the intent of the lent item being returned, the prevalent business principle reversed the divine order: cooperation was seen as bringing a curse and competition as bringing a blessing. He summarized the current system as being based on three rights: private property, free contracts (“hire as low as you can”), and competition (“every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost”). Mills was aware of some of the latest scientific management techniques, because he decried the practice of training labor in only one part of a job—with the inevitable result that the person was “helpless in any other department.” The

⁵² “Money Will Preach,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 14, 1895.

⁵³ “Money Will Preach,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 14, 1895.

degraded worker dreams of dynamite, warned Mills; indeed, “the day of explosion is nigh.”⁵⁴

Although Mills posited God’s absolute ownership of property, he vacillated on the human side of entitlement. He declared in this message more than once that he believed in the individual, private ownership of property, but he also circumscribed the right of possession. “Has not a man the right to use his money as he pleases?” Mills asked his audience. “No,” he answered. The Apostle Paul had admonished the early Christians to look after others and not out for themselves. And yet, continued Mills, he was not against private property:

Property is holy. I believe in socialism; I am not an anarchist. An anarchist and socialist are the opposite of each other. I believe in socialism, leading men to live as Christ lived. While a man has a right to make and to keep, let him labor so that he can give.⁵⁵

However, he continued, a human being does not have an absolute right to land, nor to the riches that it contains—riches such as gold, iron, or oil—no more than he has an absolute right to the air that he breathes. God made all natural resources for the benefit of His children. One dare not make claim to them and profit from them at the expense of another! While a property “owner” could rightfully act as a steward of the land on which he lived, he could not claim personal ownership over what lay buried beneath the soil. How one might live on a piece of property while its riches were being mined and carted off for the use of others he did not say. Nor did he address to whom belonged the fruit growing on the trees and in the gardens above the soil. Mills seemed to have trouble finding a consistent line of thought on this subject.

⁵⁴ “Money Will Preach,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 14, 1895.

⁵⁵ “Money Will Preach,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 14, 1895.

What was undeniable, however, was the interest that his audiences took in his thought. It was his vision and rhetoric, not his logic, that reached the crowd. They occasionally murmured approval, greeting some of his remarks with a smattering of light applause and some “amens” voiced around the hall. Mills’ popularity with the congregants was not hurt by his material preoccupations.⁵⁶

What really drove Mills’ new social agenda was his fixation on the Kingdom of God. By the time he got to Louisville, the passions of Mills’ emotional nature were no longer excited by the cardinal doctrines of the church. Heaven as a far-away place of “oriental inactivity” and “characterless bliss” no longer moved him; now he was animated by “heaven come down to earth and God’s kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”⁵⁷ Mills was aflame with his perceptions of the perfect moral order, which he was careful to distinguish from the post-millennialist views of some of his peers. His absorption with the Kingdom of God had an immediacy to it. Mills told a noon throng that he had heard some say that Christians should work toward some future fulfillment of the righteousness and justice in the Sermon on the Mount. He wanted none of it. Individuals would live justly and righteously in the here and now. He knew it because Jesus had assumed it.⁵⁸ The realization that this Kingdom could be wrought now by human activity on the basis of the social philosophy of Jesus, he acknowledged, had revolutionized his thought life and spiritual imagination, and filled him with a new purpose and fresh hope for the brightest day just around the corner.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ “Money Will Preach,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 14, 1895.

⁵⁷ “Widening,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 25, 1895.

⁵⁸ “Many Sheaves,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 15, 1895.

⁵⁹ “Mills Meetings,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 6, 1895.

Mills had used his noon meetings to expose the Louisville business sector to the more provocative elements of his social message. In like manner, he utilized the lunch hour to pull back the curtain on his exuberant certainty of the unfolding heavenly Kingdom. In a series of meetings devoted to the topic of “The Kingdom of God on Earth,” he presented his ideas of a glorious new day on earth. He began with the Lord’s Prayer, and said that he conceived of “the locality of Heaven [as] anywhere that God’s kingdom had fully come and where His will was cheerfully and perfectly done.” He did not want to snatch from people their longing for Heaven as a future home, but wanted them to also consider that Christ had taught his disciples to pray for a Heaven upon earth. This earthly Heaven was to be a place of “perfect individuals in a perfect society”—a place where there would be no more hunger, thirst, disease, pain, sorrow, death, impurity, nor any of the sins of selfishness. Wherever the law of love fully reigned, wherever individuals and whole communities of people gave themselves to the service of humanity, there would be found the Kingdom of God. In a certain sense, he said, “no individual could be saved until he lived in a perfect society.”⁶⁰ The perfect society could be achieved when Christians stoop to take upon their own shoulders the sin and shame of the degraded members of the human family. He summed it up with a quotation from Professor Herron: “God is praying to us to deliver [sinful humanity] from the evil.”⁶¹

In his last noon sermon to a packed house, Mills painted the picture of the nearing “golden age” that would not be located in heaven above but on earth below. He remonstrated with Christians for wrongly scorning the Jews in their anticipation of a future terrestrial kingdom rather than a spiritual one. Their Old Testament scriptures

⁶⁰ “Mills Meetings,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 6, 1895.

⁶¹ “Widening,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 25, 1895.

spoke often of a perfect earthly paradise. Heaven would indeed come to earth when people from all the nations of the earth yielded themselves to the relentless power of love. Starting with the individual, he declared that love had the power to transform not only the mind but also the physical body. When first the mind is spiritualized by love, then the body follows suit. Humans would become like Christ, whose spiritual body had resulted from his loving sacrifice. “So far the world has seen only one Christ,” Mills stated, with the intimation being that more Christs would follow when more people fully surrendered themselves to love. Spiritual humans would work communally in industry and commerce, where robbery and “unholy speculation” would cease and the “nightmare” of monopoly would be banished forever. The “damnable mouth of hell” would be closed when the distillery and saloon—“the deadly blight of years that ha[d] hardened the heart and deadened the conscience and paralyzed the industry of this city and Commonwealth”—was wiped from the face of the earth. The state, which exists for the common good, would be an instrument of love, and legislatures would no longer pass laws of their own making, but simply seek to discover and apply the laws of God that already existed. Courts would become the advocates of the weak and helpless.⁶²

And as it went with the state, so it would go with the nations. They would sacrifice their own interests for the greater good of humanity. They would conclude peace treaties, and their warriors would beat swords into plowshares. One could already glimpse in the hastening dawn the age of “permanent international tribunals” for the “settlement of all disputes.” There was yet one final use for arms, and that was to unsheathe the sword from the scabbard and cut down all of the unholy institutions of

⁶² “Sorry To Go,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 16, 1895.

men, which intervened between the tawdry present and the imminent shining future. In this last militaristic metaphor, he quoted Professor Herron.⁶³

In the way that it reported on the Mills' meetings, the *Louisville Courier-Journal* captured the electrical quality that charged the spaces between the speakers and the people. The very air vibrated with contagious excitement, spiritual gains, visionary rhetoric, and creative innovations. There were light moments, when a collegial rivalry developed between two of the soloists, and the dueling singers pitched their talents to the amused assemblies. The paper had egged along the contest by declaring early on that Rev. Maxwell was the crowd favorite. Soon after, not to be outdone, Rev. Hillis surprised everyone by posting in the gallery a quartet of vocalists, who from their perch echoed the chorus in his solo.⁶⁴ There was a grave but touching incident when someone decided to test how far the commitment of the Mills team to the desperate would go: an anonymous person left an abandoned baby girl on the doorstep at the boarding house where Rev. Maxwell stayed. Mills offered to take the baby; however, other arrangements must have been made for the infant, because he did not end up with the child.⁶⁵ And throughout their stay in the city, Mills and his associates introduced new methods into revivalism by preaching not only in churches and saloons, but also in railroad shops, the Louisville Workhouse, and the Indiana State Prison South.⁶⁶ On one occasion they parked a Gospel Wagon in a rundown neighborhood, and sent out volunteer evangelists to solicit any who

⁶³ "Sorry To Go," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 16, 1895.

⁶⁴ "Widening," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 25, 1895; "Thousands," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 30, 1895.

⁶⁵ Mills had six biological children, and no future source ever made reference to a seventh adopted child. There was also no further reference to the baby in subsequent articles on the revival.

⁶⁶ "Thousands," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 30, 1895; "Growing," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 11, 1895.

would listen. A fallen woman did: “the most degraded looking white woman I ever saw, resolved to lead a better life. She gladly signed the card.”⁶⁷

After Mills’ four weeks in the city of Louisville, early estimates put the number of conversions at nearly 4,000.⁶⁸ He preached to respectable members of society, “colored” people, average wage workers, and drunkards and prostitutes. Throughout, he encouraged the down-and-outers to look up and the up-and-comers to look down. What he really wanted to say to all was encapsulated in a message he preached on his third night in the city:

I can conceive of a revival that shall ... regenerate society, business and politics...that shall cause the muttered cravings of revolution to be drowned in the exultant songs of a new Pentecost; that shall permeate humanity until the gospel to the poor shall be the practical abolition of the causes and effects and existence of poverty; that shall enter the individual and commercial heart, and in a new birth of the brotherhood of men shall cause them to work in the Divine philosophy of Jesus and of Paul, every man looking no more upon his own things, but every one upon the things of others... until we shall see pure cities of God and nations living in the spirit of the eternal kingdom of peace, and ... heaven come down to earth and God’s kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.⁶⁹

Toward the end of the Mills meetings, a reporter button-holed a pastor who gave him this quote: “Mr. Mills’ sermons are revolutionary. They will make me a different preacher, and this city will never be the same.”⁷⁰

In Louisville in the autumn of 1895, Mills unveiled his theological interpretation on how to restructure a failing social order. The crowds reacted with enthusiasm; some clergymen resolved to take the Gospel into unsavory places that they had hitherto

⁶⁷ “Many Arose,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 12, 1895.

⁶⁸ “Gave Freely,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 18, 1895.

⁶⁹ “Widening,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 25, 1895.

⁷⁰ “Sorry To Go,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 16, 1895.

avoided. Only one voice openly dissented—the editor of the *Christian Observer*—and he criticized Mills for neglecting the doctrines of human sin and Christ’s atonement for it. He hinted that no revival attendees that he questioned had been able to reassure him on this point.⁷¹ About a month later, a Louisville pastor named Rev. Dr. Jones was interviewed by a New Haven newspaper. He said of Mills, in retrospect, that he could have criticized the evangelist for some of the “startling” things he said in his sermons—he did not specify what they were—but that the standard for righteousness that he raised was so glorious and challenging, that he and other pastors had decided not to protest but instead to pray. Mr. Mills was a “thoroughly loveable man,” he stated, and one could not be in his presence very long “without feeling the spell.”⁷²

The observations of these few were right on the mark. Mills had lost faith in the evangelical doctrines of the Protestant faith, but was instead enamored by a progressive faith in human beings who could be counted on to sweep away inequality and injustice, and with every stroke simultaneously set up by compounding increments a perfect moral order. Sometimes calling it the Kingdom of God and at other times the Kingdom of Heaven, he meant by the designation a soon-to-be-realized time when terrestrial earth, human communities, and physical bodies would be transformed by love into vibrant,

⁷¹ “The Recent Mills Meetings,” *Christian Observer* (December 18, 1895): 2. The editor went on to say: “We are not aware that he explained . . . how it is that God pardons sin through the merits of Christ’s vicarious work. It may be that some of his associates were more satisfactory than he was upon these points. One other thing seemed to us to be a defect in the services. The time and care given to the reading of the Scriptures and prayer, was far less than many desired. . . . He denounced all creeds. . . . In many respects Mr. Mills’ doctrinal views are not those which are accepted in our Church.” Those who had responded to Mr. Mills’ messages, he concluded, might end up shipwrecked in their new-found faith, because after all that they had heard, “they were not told what it is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

⁷² “The Mills Meetings,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 2, 1896.

radiant, harmonious, spiritualized life. What others thought of as happening in a far-off heavenly realm, he asserted would occur on this alluvial home.

Mills left Louisville buoyed along by the exuberant commendations of those who had crowded around him. At his final noon session he told his well-wishers that he had “never had a better time in [his] life.”⁷³ With those words, he was off to Columbus, Ohio, and then on to New Haven, Connecticut.

⁷³ “Farewells,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 19, 1895.

Chapter Five

Following in Christ's Footsteps for the Sake of Humanity:

Making Heroes in New Haven, Connecticut

As Rev. B. Fay Mills wound up his revival in Louisville, and started for Columbus, Ohio, he was preaching an explicitly Social Gospel message. So far, concerns emanating from the conservative Protestant churches in which he preached were muted. Still riding the crest of his popularity, he had been enthusiastically received in Louisville, Kentucky, and the welcome mat would be rolled out for him in Columbus, Ohio, as well. The first hints of change in his acceptability to clergy, religious leaders, and perhaps a few in the general public would begin to surface while he exhorted the people in New Haven, Connecticut. This chapter focuses briefly on Columbus, and then turns its main attention to New Haven.

During his revival seasons, B. Fay Mills kept up a relentless schedule. On November 18th he preached his last sermon in Louisville at 8:15 p.m.; at 2:30 a.m., he left the city on a train bound for his next stop in Columbus, Ohio. His meetings began the evening of the same day he arrived, on November 19th. Reverends William Biederwolf and John Murray accompanied him on this trip, along with the song leaders Messrs. Hillis and Maxwell.¹

Mills had been invited to the city by thirty-eight cooperating churches, among which was the First Congregational Church, with the eminent Social Gospel advocate Rev. Washington Gladden as pastor. Gladden wrote the preface to the book that a

¹ "Farewells: The Great Revival Brought To a Close," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 19, 1895.

clergyman published to commemorate the Columbus revival, and in it he called Mills “a new type of evangelist.” His doctrine had not deviated in substance from that which had been proclaimed eighteen hundred years ago, Gladden explained, but his approach to it was novel: it was his “conception of Christ[,] of his [sic] relation to God and to the race, of the nature of His kingdom, of the meaning of His gospel” that captured the hearts and stirred the minds of believers today. On his new track, Gladden added, Mills had definitely departed from the way the Gospel had been presented in Reformation churches over the last three hundred years.² Gladden applauded Mills for reclaiming the original Gospel message, lost after centuries of theological tampering.

With Gladden’s endorsement, and under the auspices of a city-wide ministerial body inclined toward a social and Kingdom message, Mills unfurled his new banner in Columbus in ringing tones. In his last appeal in Louisville, he implored the people that packed the house to “come to Jesus.”³ In Columbus, he changed the preposition when he announced: “I bring to you a glorious invitation. Come, come and be saviours, come and help Jesus ... come with Jesus and come with us.”⁴ Behind the prepositional change lay a world of theological difference.

One senses in Mills’ public proclamations in Columbus a fresh energy and unleashed optimism. He clearly saw himself in the vanguard of a new movement, a concerted action on the part of a select few to proclaim an ancient, but now rediscovered message. The church through the ages had gotten much of it wrong, he told his intent listeners in Columbus. First, the church had incorrectly maintained that she was the

² Washington Gladden, “The New Evangelism,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, ed. Henry Stauffer (Columbus, OH: W. L. Lemon, 1895), 5.

³ “Farewells: The Great Revival Brought To a Close,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 19, 1895.

⁴ B. Fay Mills, “The kingdom of heaven on Earth,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 49.

primary vehicle through which the Spirit of Christ would work in bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. Mills called the church “incidental,” and only “one of [God’s] agencies.”⁵ Second, the church had so focused on individual salvation that believers through the ages had lost sight of Jesus’ true mission, which was the salvation of the world. “The Church is called to do the work of Jesus,” Mills said, “and the work of Jesus is to set up and manifest this kingdom of love upon the earth.”⁶ Because Sunday morning congregants thought of church primarily as a gathering place for worship and prayer, they left at noon to resume their own pursuits. Instead, Mills wanted the church to be understood as a mobilization unit, tasked to work toward the eradication of sin and its effects in the public and private spheres. He cited several biblical texts to prove his point that Jesus had articulated His mission in terms of reaching the world rather than the individual.⁷

Mills pointed the finger of blame at the church’s historic orientation toward the individual: it had resulted in social misery. The goal of saving one’s own soul was rooted in selfishness, Mills asserted, and this fitted the individual not for heaven but for its reverse: hell. The aim of believers must be the one embraced by Jesus, who was willing to sacrifice the glories and comforts of heaven in order to enter the sin-infested world and save it. This understanding comprised the theory behind his social gospel. Josiah Strong had said something similar, and Mills paraphrased it from his book *The New Era*: “The work of Jesus was not to get a few people out of the ruined and sinking wreck, but it was to save the wreck, to quiet its confusion and disorder and cause men to live with one

⁵ In another sermon, which will be cited later, Mills announced his belief that the state surpassed the church as God’s most important agency of reform.

⁶ B. Fay Mills, “The Church and the kingdom,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 51.

⁷ B. Fay Mills, “The Church and the kingdom,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 51-55.

another in peace.”⁸ Mills also quoted Professor George D. Herron: “He is a Christian who organizes his life to save rather than to be saved from the evils that he sees devouring the world.”⁹ Mills made it crystal clear that he thought the church’s preoccupation with the salvation of the individual soul had been damaging, but now was a thing of the past. The new and final wave would be the transformation of earthly life so as to reclaim the earth for Christ and thus usher in the Kingdom of God.

Mills waxed exuberant as he gloried in the day in which he lived. His was an unparalleled day: the church at long last was released from the fetters of her wrongful conceptions and now could march forth as a mighty army to redeem the world. To the extent that the church would embrace her mission—and he believed that she would do just that once she understood her task—the church would be able to achieve more than Jesus or His apostles had accomplished. Christians of his day were poised to see more mind-bending displays of power than the early church or any time since.¹⁰ The church had an important ally in the state, which was also designed as an instrument of change. Church and state were not identical in function. The church should not become the state, nor the state, the church, but the church should provide the inspiration for all the authoritative activities of the state, as the latter creates character building kindergartens and schools, offers help to the poor and the unfortunate, designs resorts for the old, dispenses free medicines for the sick, reforms the prisons and the criminals, builds better transportation networks, and purifies the drinking water. Along with this, the church should “find out what Christ taught about property and society and industry and every

⁸ B. Fay Mills, “The Church and the kingdom,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 52.

⁹ B. Fay Mills, “Christianity and Socialism,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 64.

¹⁰ B. Fay Mills, “The Church and the kingdom,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 53.

human relationship, and believe Him enough to practice what He taught, and summon others to do the same. Let us say to the State and the city and the factory and railroad and the trust, ‘You belong to Christ.’”¹¹ Here Mills divulged his conception of the new order. Divine principality would reign over the terrestrial Kingdom of Heaven, with all earthly powers and authorities being derivative of the divine. With human agents in church and state following the teachings of Jesus, it could only succeed.

At a deeper level, motivating his conceptions of advancing the Kingdom of Heaven and reconstitution of society, lay his progressive spirit. To Mills, God’s revelation was not confined to the words of the Bible. “God is always marching on,” he said in his sermon entitled “The kingdom of heaven on Earth,” and His forward movement meant that people in a later day would be more spiritual than even those apostles who had walked the dusty roads at Jesus’ side and experienced the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.¹² This time—the 1890s—was more illuminated than any previous time in history, which is why social conditions seemed worse: consciences were more developed. Mills quoted Josiah Strong as saying that people had now progressed to the point where they understood that taking the Golden Rule as their only creed qualified them to consider themselves to be Christians.¹³

Mills took his Columbus congregations into his confidence. His updated personal testimony, quoted below, is justified in its length because it shows the paramount importance he placed on his new conceptions, the primacy he gave to spiritual experience, and the emotional nature of the man:

¹¹ B. Fay Mills, “The Church and the Kingdom,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 55.

¹² B. Fay Mills, “The kingdom of heaven on Earth,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 46.

¹³ B. Fay Mills, “The Church and the kingdom,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 54.

I would be false to my experience if I did not say that for myself, more than that hour when I was first willing to abandon [sic] my sins and yield my will unto the spirit of God and there came to me a consciousness of personal forgiveness of sin, more even than that most holy day, when it seemed to me that I went through the narrowest sort of a door into the largest sort of a life, has been to me this mighty, cleansing, uplifting, strengthening and inspiring conception of the Kingdom of God. I had been troubled for a good many years But when at last after prolonged study of the scriptures and reading and rereading, and trying the effect of it upon pure and simple minds, at last when I came to the place where I could see just the one thing, the great gospel of the Kingdom of God, from Genesis to Revelation, I was so full of [the glory of] it Oh, friends, this is the inspiration. Brother ministers, this is the Gospel that the people must understand, that parents must teach their children, and when they realize their responsibility, go forth to the conquest of places and powers of sin [This realization] will get into the blood. I fairly thrill with it. I feel like shouting as I go about your streets.¹⁴

Such a “passion of joy” filled him that he could find no mortal words to express it.¹⁵

It was in the friendly environment of Columbus that Mills gave his fullest, most poetic expressions of his new orientation and future dreams. The crowds received him well. The editor of the book that commemorated the revival noted how the audience had responded to some of his points. They had laughed, sometimes heartily; they had applauded, sometimes thunderously; they had shouted replies to his remarks, and once called out for him to preach on past his time limit, which he did.¹⁶ Savoring this sweet victory, he left Columbus on December 16th for a few days of rest before his next big revival in New Haven, Connecticut.¹⁷

After spending four weeks in the southern city of Louisville, Kentucky, and several days in the Midwestern city of Columbus, Ohio, Mills turned north to ignite

¹⁴ B. Fay Mills, “The kingdom of heaven on Earth,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 46, 47, 48.

¹⁵ B. Fay Mills, “The kingdom of heaven on Earth,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 49.

¹⁶ B. Fay Mills, “The kingdom of heaven on Earth,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 46; B. Fay Mills, “The Church and the kingdom,” *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio*, 56, 58, 59, 60.

¹⁷ S. W. Seeman, “A Great Awakening in Columbus,” *Independent*, December 26, 1895, 13.

religious fires for four weeks in the New England community of New Haven. This old city was steeped in Puritan history. Founded by the minister John Davenport in 1638, colonial leaders “enforced stricter principles of church membership and took the example of ancient Israel more seriously than any other of the Bible Commonwealths.”¹⁸ The establishment of Yale College both resulted from and reinforced these strong religious convictions.¹⁹ Ministers were deeply concerned about declining piety and the college was meant to carry the torch for renewal. From roughly 1850 to 1890, however, significant changes in the attitudes of college presidents and professors had begun to incline the institution toward accommodations to new discoveries in all educational fields. While still desiring to stay true to basic Christian doctrine, certain academics in the college and divinity school nevertheless demonstrated a willingness to incorporate some of the latest thought, including theistic evolution, into their primary effort to undergird the historic faith.²⁰ Town and gown cross-pollinated, as for example when the nationally known pastor and author Dr. Newman Smyth came to accept theistic evolution after spending hours in Yale laboratories.²¹ The mix of perspectives on religious matters was not necessarily calm, but neither did it contain the vitriolic quality that would come to characterize disagreements in the near future.²²

When New Haven’s Puritan leaders chose the site along the coast, they had in mind a society based directly on the law code contained in the Bible, but also one that

¹⁸ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 107.

¹⁹ Ahlstrom, 162-163, 295.

²⁰ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 370-372.

²¹ Ahlstrom, 771.

²² Noll, 369.

could cash in on the benefits of coastal and transatlantic trade.²³ After American independence lifted the restraints imposed by British mercantilism, the economy in the New Haven area began to flourish. By 1860 the city had over 215 manufacturing centers. By 1897, just one year after Mills' meetings, New Haven's commercial sector had sprouted wings, listing 742 different manufactories, including "137 major metal industries, 83 paper and printing companies, 65 garment makers, 55 vehicle-related companies, and hundreds of other consumer commodity industries."²⁴

Because of its location on the coast and its growing industrial base, many Irish, Italian, and Russian Jewish immigrants made their way to New Haven in search of jobs. By 1900, foreign-born residents stood at 28 percent of the population, with the Irish being the largest immigrant group. Also in that year, the population of the city numbered 108,000, and New Haven had the distinction of being the largest industrial center in Connecticut.²⁵ Thus, Mills' new social message which emphasized an ethical conduct of business by owners and the importance of a just treatment of labor found a ready market of listeners in New Haven. The combination of old and new, Protestant and Catholic, academic elites and working class populations all mingled to produce a richly diverse community in New Haven. Mills surely had in mind the mixture of disparate groups as he arrived in the city.

Some of the New Haven churches had attempted to secure Mills for revival meetings in 1890, but he had refused to come because three pastors of prominent churches had "decline[d] to submit their churches to the conditions of association which

²³ Michael Sletcher, *New Haven: From Puritanism to the Age of Terrorism* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), chapter one.

²⁴ Sletcher, 43, 107.

²⁵ Sletcher, 104, 108.

Mr. Mills lays down.”²⁶ Mills insisted on absolute compliance with his terms, communicated in advance, before he would accept an invitation to conduct a revival. Once the churches consented to his requirements, he sent his carefully crafted instructions, and preparatory work commenced. After he arrived in the city, he personally supervised all of the details. His revival in New Haven in 1896 operated according to his organizational scheme. Several committees—executive, finance, advertising, music, ushers, canvassing, devotion, place, auditing, and a ladies’ committee—had done much advance work.²⁷ The city had been mapped and blocked into sections, facilitating the plan to reach every house with a printed and verbal invitation. And not only the residences, added the *New York Evangelist*, but the plan also included large factories, shops, “colleges, schools, stores, and offices.”²⁸ Volunteers visited door-to-door and distributed 30,000 invitation cards, all with the intent of reaching as many people as possible. A day before the start of the revival, the canvassing committee reported satisfaction with their efforts to contact residents.²⁹

As in Louisville, on most days there would be three meetings: noon, 3:30 in the afternoon, and 7:30 in the evening. In addition, a prayer meeting just for the ladies would be held every afternoon from 2:30-3:15. All meetings other than the one at noon were scheduled to begin at Calvary Baptist Church, which had a sanctuary with a seating capacity of 1200; a plan was in place to seek other options if seating proved inadequate for the crowds. In anticipation of the large numbers of people that would be seated on the platform, construction had extended the staging area so that it could hold twice as many

²⁶ *Springfield Republican*, October 11, 1890.

²⁷ “First Mills Meetings,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 7, 1896.

²⁸ “B. Fay Mills in New Haven,” *New York Evangelist*, January 9, 1896.

²⁹ “The Mills Meetings,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 6, 1896.

people. This was necessary because of the one hundred-voice choir and the other clergy who would occupy the platform with Mills and his associates. The chief usher had a desk at the front of the stage from which to survey and direct the work of the volunteers under his charge.³⁰

Organizationally, this series of month-long meetings was scaled back from those in Louisville. This could have resulted from New Haven's smaller population, which was two-thirds the size of Louisville's. In Kentucky, he had used his District Combination Plan, in which the city was divided into three sectors, with a different combination of evangelists and song leaders at the meetings. In New Haven, however, Mills brought along only two additional preachers and one song leader. Further, the city was not divided into sections, but used only one primary preaching location for each meeting, with another place scheduled for overflow meetings if they should become necessary (and they often were). Rev. William Biederwolf assisted Mills in conducting the main revival preaching, and Rev. John Murray helped as an additional speaker to overflow crowds. Murray also preached a few times in nonconventional settings, such as to the residents of the Calvary industrial home and the prisoners at the jail, and once accompanied Mills on a midnight tour of the "seamier side" of the city.³¹ On the whole, however, Mills and his team initiated less outreach to the unchurched in New Haven than they had done in Louisville.

Besides the smaller organizational plan and less innovative engagement with non-churchgoers, other discernible differences between Louisville and New Haven signaled a

³⁰ "The Mills Meetings," *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 4, 1896; "Overflow Has Begun," January 9, 1896; "First Mills Meetings," *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 7, 1896.

³¹ "Hypocritical Prayers," *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, February 1, 1896; "Laboring Men Addressed," February 3, 1896; "Mills' Midnight Trip," *New Haven Register*, January 17, 1896.

possible weakening of support for Mills and his message. The issue of finances was a case in point. In New Haven the delicate subject of finances kept raising its embarrassing head. It had been Mills' custom to receive his payment from free-will offerings made by the congregation toward the end of the meetings. Congregants gave their money in sealed envelopes, and Mills did not disclose the amount that he received.³² Contributions must have been generous, because Daniel Nelson stated in his dissertation that during the revival years the Mills family owned a spacious house, maintained their property and stables with servants, and employed nurses for the younger children and a tutor for the older ones.³³ Before conducting a revival, Mills had already communicated his method of receiving payment. Yet after being in New Haven for a week, speculation and rumors circulated about how much remuneration Mills would receive for his services in the city—so much so that the chairman of the Executive Committee Dr. Twitchell was compelled to issue a printed statement (which must have been awkward for Mills), saying that no amount had been promised, and that Mills and the committee had not conversed on that topic. Twitchell emphasized that Mills would receive remuneration from free will offerings that the audience voluntarily contributed toward his services.³⁴ Some kind of agitation over what Mills was going to get was stirring the community.

Another financial front that portended potential trouble for Mills concerned his requirement that all of the operating expenses for the revival must be raised in advance. Moreover, Mills customarily refused to begin services until all money had been gathered. Churches began enthusiastic campaigns to collect the funds, and papers often reported on

³² "Many Sheaves," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 15, 1895.

³³ Daniel Nelson, "B. Fay Mills: Revivalist, Social Reformer and Advocate of Free Religion" (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 1964), 11.

³⁴ "The B. Fay Mills Meetings," *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 14, 1896.

the progress toward that goal, but no note stating that the goal had been reached appeared in any New Haven newspaper prior to his start date.³⁵ Indeed, mid-way through the revival, at the Sunday service in the Grand Opera House, Dr. Twitchell announced that \$2,000 needed for the revival—fully *half* of the necessary operating expenses—had yet to be subscribed, and emphasized that this need was wholly separate from Rev. Mills’ compensation. Twitchell reiterated that no contract had been made with Mills, whose only remuneration would be given by free will offerings. After this statement, a collection was taken to defray the costs.³⁶ A day after the revival had concluded, part of the headline of an article stated that expenses for the revival had been “nearly paid by collections.” A note at the end of that same article said that the expenses on one side of the ledger and the collections and subscriptions on the other were “about the same amount.”³⁷ Evidently, Mills had dropped his requirement of a full treasury prior to beginning his meetings, and it is tempting to speculate that he had relinquished it due to a narrowing of his opportunities to conduct revivals, based on mounting criticisms of the evangelist and his message from the newspapers and religious journals.

But there was more. Perhaps it was just a disparity in the way the newspapers of the two cities reported the revivals, but the New Haven meetings breathed less energy and excitement than those in Louisville. No artist sketches of the Mills’ team accompanied articles. Because Mills and associates seldom ventured out into the underside of the city, the papers contained no eye-catching headlines about sermons in saloons to drunkards or efforts on the streets to reach fallen women. Mills liked to hold

³⁵ “Money First, Revival Afterwards,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, March 9, 1893.

³⁶ “Attended by 13,500 people,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 20, 1896.

³⁷ “Mills Meetings Closed,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, February 4, 1896.

what he called “good cheer” meetings, which were weekly spontaneous sessions devoted to opportunities to praise God and express appreciation to the evangelists for the spiritual victories accomplished among them. In Louisville, Mills had held three, and the *Courier-Journal* had reported them with avid attention to detail. The paper gave the names of individuals and what they said, and put human faces on touching and humorous incidents. It included impromptu personal testimonies and shouts of praise that erupted from all over the auditorium. These jubilant reports of the trophies of God’s grace lent immediacy and momentum to Mills’ meetings in Louisville.³⁸

In New Haven, the first good cheer meeting came two weeks after the revival began, and Mills, after asking that testimonies be kept brief, followed it up with a striking request: that if there were any “unpleasant things to report,” to please refrain from mentioning them. The reports then proceeded, and they consisted mostly of one church after another telling of how many conversion cards had been signed: 80 in one church, 75 in the next, then 38, 114, and so on. A few individual testimonies were given. Mills reported that one Sunday School teacher had persuaded seven “Chinamen” to sign. On the whole, this meeting seemed like a recitation of dry statistics, sprinkled with a few accounts of mediocre interest.³⁹

It was as if Mills, tiring of his task, was losing his edge. Indeed, the reporter for the *New Haven Daily Palladium* fastened on to Mills’ dynamic young associate, the Rev. William Biederwolf, and gave him outstanding coverage in the revival. He playfully pitted Biederwolf’s Princeton education against New Haven’s Yale education, and

³⁸ “Good Cheer,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 5, 1895; “Many Arose: ‘Good Cheer’ Meeting Full of Rich Testimonials,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 12, 1895; “Farewells,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 19, 1895.

³⁹ “Have Secured the Armory,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 21, 1896.

suggested that Biederwolf had proved wrong their arrogant assumptions about the university that stood upon stilts in the midst of a New Jersey swamp, from which one could hope for nothing bright “except a firefly or a will-o’-the-wisp.”⁴⁰ Enjoying the jest, the editor chimed in that Princetonians were “kindred with amphibious barbarians” and their brains were a “minus quantity” whose skulls were “full of water”—or so the conception had been until the advent of the powerful physical and oratorical presence of Biederwolf.⁴¹ The Princeton gymnastics athlete had strode into the land of Yale and had taken the college by storm, quickly becoming a favorite of the student body of the more prestigious school.

On a more serious level, however, the reporter rose to heights of rhetoric in describing Biederwolf not attained in his portrayals of the seasoned, but famous Mills.⁴² The writer seemed at times to sense the unthinkable—that the twenty-eight-year-old novice and protégé was eclipsing his famous mentor—because he hastened to adjust the imbalance by saying something positive about Mills somewhere in the article or at least in the closing words.⁴³ But it was Biederwolf who moved the audience to suddenly drop to their knees and ask for the baptism of the Holy Spirit and sing the closing song with bowed heads.⁴⁴ The headline “They Knelt and Sobbed” was followed by the next line: “A Whole Congregation Succumbs to Biederwolf.”⁴⁵ After Biederwolf gave the closing

⁴⁰ “The Church Denounced,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 16, 1896.

⁴¹ “Rev. Mr. Biederwolf,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 17, 1896.

⁴² “The Rev. Mr. Biederwolf’s delivery was full of fire and force, pathos and beseeching, dramatic attitudes and gestures, high-pitched utterances, abrupt stops and low, slow, stern warnings. His delivery gave a fascinating strength to all his words.” “Anathama and Love,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 15, 1896.

⁴³ “In Squalor Amid Slums,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 14, 1896.

⁴⁴ “In Squalor Amid Slums,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 14, 1896. In this article the writer observed that “it was a rare sight to see a congregation all singing with bowed heads.”

⁴⁵ “They Knelt and Sobbed,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 25, 1896.

prayer for one of Mills' sermons, parents crowded in around him rather than the renowned evangelist, held up their children, and asked him to bless their little ones.⁴⁶ When Biederwolf preached on the subject of the three kinds of people gathered beneath the cross of the dying Christ, the writer gushed that it was the "most brilliant sermon of the revival so far."⁴⁷ A few days later he continued his praise by saying that, though the young preacher had only been doing evangelism since he joined Mills in Louisville the preceding year, he was "surpassed only by the Rev. Mr. Mills among all the evangelists in this wide nation."⁴⁸ And it was not just the *Palladium* that sang Biederwolf's praises. The *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier* reported a comment by Rev. Mr. Griffin, pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church where Biederwolf had just preached, in which he "stated that he had 'never seen the likes' and that it as the nearest thing to heaven he ever saw."⁴⁹

It is not that Mills did not get good coverage from the *Daily Palladium*—he did. In a front-page article three days before the kick-off of the meetings, the paper pushed Mills' noon meetings for businessmen, stating that wherever these meetings had been held, they had proved to be "unique and of vital interest." It continued: "Don't fail to go early next week (these meetings begin Tuesday noon) and hear for yourself what Mr. Mills has to say and how he says it. You are sure to be well repaid."⁵⁰

And it is not as though New Haveners did not crowd the buildings wherever Mills spoke—they did. Time and again, the people-packed auditoriums not only quickly

⁴⁶ "Ex-Convict Evangelist," *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 17, 1896.

⁴⁷ "The Church Denounced," *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 16, 1896.

⁴⁸ "Hillis Was a Minstrel," *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 18, 1896.

⁴⁹ "Attended By 13,500 People," *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 20, 1896.

⁵⁰ "The Mills Meetings," *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 4, 1896.

yielded no seats, but attendees were forced to stand for the duration in the aisles and back spaces. On the third night of the revival, a dramatic push and shove contest got underway, as the ushers stationed at the doors tried to keep them closed, while people outside pushed with all their might against the hands, feet, and weight of the doorkeepers. Mills “should hire some Yale athletes” to guard the doors, the writer joked.⁵¹ At a later meeting, a sign was posted on the door at 7:30 saying that nobody else was to be admitted. Then the author’s wit: “There proved to be 200 nobodies and nearly all managed by hook or crook to get in.”⁵² Mills noon meetings, too, were proving popular with businessmen. They were either eating no lunch or were eating it as they hastened along the streets to the Grand Opera House.⁵³ And sometimes the audience responded emotionally. When Mills preached his well-known sermon on Peter, women cried and men “pretended to be simply blowing their noses.”⁵⁴ When he preached on David, who had just received the awful news of the death of his son Absalom, his words spoken in “piercing agony” caused faces to “blanch” and handkerchiefs to dab at eyes.⁵⁵

Other changes were not departures from what had happened in Louisville, but further extensions along the same line. By the time of New Haven, Mills was putting much less emphasis on signing conversion cards than he had previously done. In the earlier years of his itinerant revivalism, Mills had stressed the importance of signing the cards as a tangible indication of a spiritual commitment. He had pleaded with his congregants not to leave the building before such a step had been taken, as one’s future

⁵¹ “Overflow Has Begun,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 9, 1896.

⁵² “Packs the Hyperion,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 22, 1896.

⁵³ “Anathema and Love,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 15, 1896.

⁵⁴ “Made Them Shed Tears,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 10, 1896.

⁵⁵ “Made Them Shed Tears,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 10, 1896.

state in eternity depended upon it. In Connecticut, some of the services were closed with a prayer and the singing of a hymn, and occasionally ushers produced the cards to register a decision. In addition, Mills was focusing less on his evening meetings, which favored mixed audiences, and more on his noon and afternoon meetings, when he targeted businessmen, professional men, and university students.⁵⁶ He urged women to pack lunches for their husbands, sons, or brothers so that they could attend the noon and afternoon meetings.⁵⁷ In making employers and employees his primary focus, he demonstrated that his emphasis had changed from individual salvation to social salvation.

When Mills opened his meetings in New Haven, he had to contend with a ferocious adversary: severe weather gripped the city. It was bitterly cold—on January 6 the thermometer registered three degrees at 8 p. m.—but a whirling snow kept some away from his meetings.⁵⁸ The many who did brave the cold and snow ventured out to take their measure of the evangelist “who has won fame for his energy and efficiency as a religious revivalist.”⁵⁹ The sermons they would hear on the first night and throughout the four weeks contained much continuity with those he had preached in Louisville. They were not deeply theological, but instead were ethical, practical, social, progressive, and focused on the Kingdom of God.

Although Mills continued to appropriate the language of orthodoxy in his use of such words as *hell*, *heaven*, and *salvation*, he reconfigured their meaning. On his first night in the city, Mills put this revival in the context of the long sweep of religious

⁵⁶ “First Mills Meetings,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 7, 1896.

⁵⁷ “Moods and Salvation,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 8, 1896.

⁵⁸ “Temperature Yesterday,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 7, 1896; “Moods and Salvation,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 8, 1896.

⁵⁹ “A Revival Has Come,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 7, 1896.

awakenings in American history. He hoped that this month of meetings would not only contribute toward “the welfare of the community” but also “add to the powers of civilization, education, enlightenment [sic] and religion,” and that New Haven would be stirred just as Jonathan Edwards had once awakened his congregation in New England. But his use of Edwards only went so far. Edwards had preached a sermon that had people holding on to the backs of pews for fear of being dragged down into eternal torment, “and their souls and bodies ... wrapped in white-hot, everlasting flames.” “Was this sermon true?” he asked. “No,” he answered, “and not any church of the present day would allow it to be preached.”⁶⁰ Mills was not only assuming that contemporary preachers would not frighten their audiences as Edwards had done, but he was also supposing that hell as a place of eternal physical suffering had ceased to be a part of the Christian doctrine and message preached from pulpits across the land. He more often used the words *hell* and *hellish* as synonyms to connote a bad state of affairs.

Mills also persisted in locating heaven in the earthly sphere. Even Jesus himself, Mills said, did not preach about it as a “far away” place, but as a kingdom on earth that had come among them.⁶¹ On the subject of sin, which orthodox doctrine taught as an inherent condition that kept individuals from heaven unless Christ’s meritorious work on the cross had been applied to their souls, Mills had a different conception as well. “There really is no evil **within** the wicked man,” Mills said; “he is encrusted with it and we must melt the crust by love.”⁶² [Emphasis mine.]

⁶⁰ “A Revival Has Come,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 7, 1896.

⁶¹ “Halpin in the Pulpit,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 24, 1896.

⁶² “Ex-Convict evangelist,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 17, 1896.

So how is one saved, an attentive listener in his audience might ask? Mills answered: “Here is the thing that will save you: Give yourself up now to love, to live love and to answer the prayer that God’s kingdom will come on earth.”⁶³ He had personally witnessed the power of love to save, and he gave an anecdote from his own life to illustrate it. Beggars had asked money of him at times, and he told them that he would give them what he had, because his possessions were not really his own—“not his money, nor his coat, nor his shoes.”⁶⁴ God’s love saves, but humans must be the agents to impart it to others: “He gives us all abundant opportunities to merit Heaven and lift up the souls of others with our own.”⁶⁵ Corroborating Washington Gladden’s observation in Columbus, Mills no longer subscribed to Reformation theology, in which an individual is justified by faith alone and cannot earn heaven by good works.

Mills’ ethical message was unswervingly grounded in loving behavior. Love was the most powerful force on earth for moving the multitudes toward righteousness, and it could not be resisted. Love between “men and men” and “classes and masses” would banish all prejudice and bitterness, and Mills earnestly wished that “men filled with the spirit of love” would speak reassuring words to those “oppressed by the awful systems that have been the growth of years of industrial and commercial despotism,” and tell them to put aside their unrest and terrible threats and to patiently wait for a better day “which even now is dawning.”⁶⁶

On the subject of “What is Love?” Mills echoed the Kingdom group as he defined love in terms of self-sacrificial behavior. Love is far more than an emotion; it is an action

⁶³ “Packs the Hyperion,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 22, 1896.

⁶⁴ “Believers Are Scarce,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 30, 1896.

⁶⁵ “In Squalor Amid Slums,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 14, 1896.

⁶⁶ “Meetings Well Attended,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 15, 1896.

that God demonstrated to mankind at the cross when He purposed to have Christ crucified to show the extent of His love toward His creatures. Only this kind of self-effacing love had the power to win the heart. Christ succeeded in His earthly life because of His assurance of the love of God. Human effort will come to nothing without such an assurance.⁶⁷

Mills did not mince words when it came to putting love into action, and expending human effort toward righteous behavior—the practical side of faith: “If we have not a practical Christianity we shall not be saved.”⁶⁸ God would do a great work in New Haven if the people would “give up believing in prayer alone.”⁶⁹ Action must accompany belief and prayer. What would one think of a farmer, he went on, who did not work his fields, but simply sat and prayed for rain? His prayers would do no good, because the rain would cause the weeds and briars to overtake his crops and thus result in a “curse” rather than a “blessing.” Human souls are no different: “We must put them in the proper condition to receive and drink in God’s grace.”⁷⁰

For all his concern with a practical Christianity, Mills himself stayed on the theoretical level of speech making and idea dissemination: he was not one to roll up his sleeves and lead a band of followers to work in the soup kitchens or settlement houses. It was not as if preaching and getting one’s hands dirty could not mix. Soon after the first eight Salvation Army “soldiers” had disembarked in New York and claimed the United States for God, their brigades had marched into the slums with the twin offers of salvation for the soul and sustenance for the stomach. Although they never lost sight of

⁶⁷ “Many Asked for Prayers,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 16, 1896.

⁶⁸ “Moods and Salvation,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 8, 1896.

⁶⁹ “First Mills Meetings,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 7, 1896.

⁷⁰ “Moods and Salvation,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 8, 1896.

their core goal of spiritual conversion, they set about operating rescue missions for homeless men and prostitutes, soup kitchens for the hungry, and daycare for the children of working mothers. Workers in these facilities made no judgments about whether or not the destitute “deserved” their station in life, but simply went about aiding the needy and delivering the gospel.⁷¹ In an evening sermon, Mills commended the Salvation Army for their willingness to dive into the squalor of the slums and to wear the same ragged clothes in order not to cause envy among the occupants of the most wretched districts in New York. But, he abruptly asked his audience with a pointing forefinger, “what have you done, what testimony can you bear?”⁷² One would be tempted to turn Mills’ finger around one hundred and eighty degrees and ask him to answer the same question.

Mills would probably answer that his time was better spent exercising his speaking gift to enlighten Christians toward their duty. Mills had begun to transform the pulpit into a lectern, at which he broadcast his emerging ideas regarding the sorry state of society and what to do to fix it. One problem to which he returned repeatedly concerned the issue of private property. Back in Louisville, Mills had upheld God’s ultimate ownership of property, but he had also conceded the human right to land ownership, maintaining that since both Old and New Testaments recognized this right, individuals should be allowed to own a piece of earth. He had qualified the right of ownership by saying that no one should have title to the resources that the land contains, those life-enhancing and life-sustaining material gifts such as iron, coal, and oil, which were put in the earth to be freely used by all of God’s creatures. In New Haven, however, Mills went

⁷¹ Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the “Gilded Age,”* 2 ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 166-167; Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Gilded Age: or, the Hazard of New Functions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 171.

⁷² “In Squalor Amid Slums,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 14, 1896.

further. Now, land joined natural resources in being out of the reach of ownership: it was also a free gift of God to all of His children. Any system that endorsed private titles to land was built on “force and fraud,” because barons bought them up and then sold their vital resources at confiscatory rates that further impoverished the people.⁷³

Capitalist greed vexed Mills. Industrialists acquired technologically advanced machinery, not to make work easier for the laborer, but to heap up more profits for themselves. Factory owners turned beneficial labor-saving tools into a means of stripping workers of jobs and income. In Mills’ equitable scheme, the one person left operating the machine should be paid the combined amount of all those who had lost their jobs, but instead the capitalist paid the machine operator the same low wage, and pocketed the surplus. After robbing from the hands of the laborer, he built churches, hospitals, and mission houses—charitable institutions made necessary by his actions, and now directed toward helping those he had pushed out on to the streets—all so that he could parade himself and his family before the public as generous benefactors. Mills lamented: “Why does not everybody realize the truth that all property belongs to God and should be utilized according to His law of love?”⁷⁴

Echoing the philosophy of the Kingdom group, though not mentioning their names in New Haven, Mills contended that the heart of the problem with capitalism was competition, a recent and malevolent downturn in the economic system. He outlined economic history using the same stages laid down by Karl Marx, and explained the evolution that had taken place: in earliest times men owned their land together, then came

⁷³ “Jumps on Them All,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, February 1, 1896.

⁷⁴ “Jumps on Them All,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, February 1, 1896; “Hypocritical Prayers,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, February 1, 1896.

slavery, and after that, feudalism. Finally, capitalism based on competition had developed, where the capitalist exploited the laborer and took everything from him except for life itself.⁷⁵ In fact, Mills' indictment of capitalism moved him toward the wage-slave argument of the antebellum South. "The oppression of man by man under competition seems worse to the workmen than the slavery of former days," he said, "and they are right. The capitalist to-day takes everything but the laborer's food."⁷⁶ He rounded up his denunciations of competitive capitalism when he declared that "competition means the destruction of life. It is the atheism of civilization ... To-day I charge it as being the death of Christianity. This horrible, deadly principle of competition does not believe in Christ. Take the Standard Oil company" [sic]. He did not elaborate on his implication of the John D. Rockefeller company—or if he did, the paper did not report it—but he made his point. The Rockefellers of the world were starving the workers and killing the possibility of a truly Christian civilization.⁷⁷

Mills believed that Christian socialism provided the only answer to the problem of how to institute a just organization of society. The view that Christianity and socialism occupied incompatible positions was held by "ignorant, re-actionary, or pietistic" Christians on one end of the spectrum, and selfish or materialistic socialists on the other. The fact is, explained Mills, the two ideological systems needed each other to be complete. Both the principles of Christ and those of socialism aimed to produce a righteous society.⁷⁸ The individualism that had dominated Western society since the sixteenth century was now ameliorated in the twentieth by the voluntary socializing of

⁷⁵ "Hypocritical Prayers," *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, February 1, 1896.

⁷⁶ "Mills on Property," *New Haven Union*, January 31, 1896.

⁷⁷ "Hypocritical Prayers," *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, February 1, 1896.

⁷⁸ "Mills for Socialism," *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 28, 1896.

the individual into the spirit of the “loving sacrifice of Christ.”⁷⁹ He quoted Proudhon, Adolph Held, Kirup, and F. W. Sprague in support of his position. Sprague asserted, and Mills agreed, that capitalism with its unequal distribution of wealth, and its consequent implicit approval of the grinding poverty of the “weaker brother,” was unavoidably pitted against the ethical teachings of Jesus Christ.⁸⁰ Human selfishness was the culprit, because people looked upon their possessions as belonging to themselves alone. When addressing this theme in Louisville, Mills had given the axiom: “not that thine is mine, or mine is thine, but that all things belong to God, and I am His steward to do what He wants done.”⁸¹ Now in New Haven, Mills modified and narrowed the formula: it is “not ‘all thine is mine’ but ‘all mine is thine.’”⁸² Stewardship had given way to collective sharing.

Politics, too, played a huge role in the socialization of institutions because the electorate must vote for public servants who possessed the actual power to rework the social order. The government had become so important in Mills’ new paradigm that he proclaimed the state to be “the highest and holiest fellowship, a fellowship higher and holier than that which breaks the sacramental bread at the communion table.”⁸³

Yet Mills was not a thoroughgoing socialist because he believed that “the primary need of men is spiritual rather than material.”⁸⁴ Where Karl Marx thought the essence of life to be material, Mills followed the Kingdom thinkers in holding that the essence of life is spiritual and in need of some kind of conversion—not the old kind, where individuals avail themselves of the atonement provided in Christ, but a new kind, where people

⁷⁹ “An Overflow Meeting,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 28, 1896.

⁸⁰ “Mills for Socialism,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 28, 1896.

⁸¹ “Money Will Preach,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 14, 1895.

⁸² “Audience of Over 1600,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 14, 1896.

⁸³ “At Ease in Zion,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 13, 1896.

⁸⁴ “Mills for Socialism,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 28, 1896.

voluntarily give themselves in sacrificial love in order to renovate human organization one person at a time. Offering up of self would convert the giver, the recipient, and society as a whole.

Mills believed that the conversion of the social arrangement was imminent. At core, Mills was an optimist and a progressive. He had little use for church creeds, doctrines, and dogmas, because he saw them as binding to the past those who believed them. “The test of fellowship in the church should not be doctrine,” he remarked. He finished his point by joking: “I believe in creeds just as I believe in mummies; both die.”⁸⁵ To Mills, spiritual truth exhibited the same dynamic as material, scientific, and intellectual life: it continued to evolve along paths of greater perfection. Progress hewed the path for his new doctrine of love and the Kingdom.

Mills unfurled his doctrine of progress to his audiences in New Haven. A better day was coming, one in which knowledge of God might well exceed that which had been held by the apostle Paul. He put it this way: “Old religious statements are dying out. Let them go. We know more as the ages roll.”⁸⁶ He gave the example of the outdated notions of the biblical King David, who had operated out of an understanding of God as a “deity of war.” He reckoned that his age had progressed beyond the limited concepts of the Hebrew sovereign and psalmist, because the enlightened understanding now was that God was love and that He conquered through love. Or again, he thought that few of his hearers still considered heaven to be as described in the biblical book of Revelation—a place of golden streets and elaborate mansions. He supposed that many of those to whom he spoke thought of it rightly as a “perfect society of perfect individuals” on planet

⁸⁵ “A Strong Appeal to Men,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 25, 1896.

⁸⁶ “First Noon Meeting,” *New Haven Union*, January 7, 1896.

earth.⁸⁷ Further, this advanced comprehension of heaven led individuals to conclude that it was attainable in the here and now, and enabled him to say that all of them under the sound of his voice had the potential for more spirituality than anyone who had yet lived, and if this were not so, he could not continue as a Christian.⁸⁸ This evolution exemplified the forward march of progress.⁸⁹

In looking to the spiritual future, Mills was diametrically opposed to the pre-millenarians, but neither did he fit the post-millennialist camp. In effect he made an end run around competing versions of millennium thought when he admitted that “the millenium [sic], as it is generally understood, does not cut much of a figure in my theology.” The biblical prophecy of the reign of Christ, and the binding of the devil for the same period of time, would occur, but it would not be limited to one thousand years. It would “endure forever and forever.” In stressing the eternity of the future world order, and bypassing the predicted millennium, Mills revealed again that he had parted company with biblical literalists.⁹⁰

Progressive theology had practical ramifications, even when applied to awful human extremities. He assumed, he told his New Haven audience, that they all agreed that “wars should be abolished.” Christians with their practice of love were perfectly positioned to implement a world order where international conflicts were settled by arbitration not weapons.⁹¹ Mills projected this pacific outlook onto a big news story of 1895 and 1896. The papers were regularly reporting a brutal rampage of the Turks

⁸⁷ “The Hyperion Meeting,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 22, 1896.

⁸⁸ “The Hyperion Meeting,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 22, 1896.

⁸⁹ “The Church Denounced,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 16, 1896.

⁹⁰ “Mills on Atheists,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 23, 1896.

⁹¹ “Attack on Congress,” *New Haven Union*, January 30, 1896.

against the Armenians and Christian missionaries who lived within the Ottoman Empire ruled by Sultan Abdul Hamid II, and who were supposed to have been granted protection under his government.⁹² Certain segments of the Turkish population, however, had begun the slaughter of non-Muslims living in some of the provinces, and the government had been unable to quell the uprising.⁹³ By late 1895 some estimates put the number of massacred Armenians at ten thousand, and others went as high as fifteen thousand.⁹⁴ According to reports, soldiers had joined the rebellion, and rumors were afoot that the government was secretly colluding with the murderous factions.⁹⁵ The papers published eyewitness accounts from letters smuggled out of the empire, and the public followed it avidly.⁹⁶ Armenian citizens in Chicago sent an urgent request for intervention to the British, Russian, German, and American governments.⁹⁷ Churches took up collections for the relief of the Armenians and missionaries, and papers printed dollar amounts pledged for the cause.⁹⁸ The eminent clergyman Dr. T. DeWitt Talmage advocated in a sermon preached “to the chief men of this nation and other nations” in Washington that “the warships of Europe [should] ride up as close as is possible to the palaces of Constantinople and blow that accursed government to atoms.”⁹⁹

Statements such as this one incensed Mills. There had never been a righteous war, and war was “always” wrong. He had strong words for “so-called” Christians who urged the U. S. government to send armies to protect imperiled missionaries in Turkey: it was

⁹² M. C. Gabrielian, *Armenia: A Martyr Nation* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1918).

⁹³ “Russia: Threatens To Drop In on Armenia,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 8, 1895.

⁹⁴ “Time for War,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 13, 1895.

⁹⁵ “Still At It,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 14, 1895.

⁹⁶ “Relief for the Armenians,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 20, 1896.

⁹⁷ “For the Armenians,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 11, 1895.

⁹⁸ “Relief for the Armenians,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 20, 1896.

⁹⁹ “Talmage on the Cry of Armenia,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 13, 1896.

“shameful,” because “how can we inculcate the gospel of love except through love?” “Grapeshot and canister” and “bloodshed” would not procure it. He continued: “If I thought that the Stars and Stripes meant war I would curse the flag of my country.” War never accomplished anything that could not have been achieved righteously by conciliating measures. Even the “late war,” concluded three decades earlier, could not be justified, because the North resorted to violence when instead “the slaves could have been set free by peace.” He bemoaned the condition of the antebellum South, where if only the gospel of love had ruled, no chains could have been forged “strong enough to hold even the weakest negro.”¹⁰⁰ Mills’ own brand of idealistic progressivism led him to overly simplistic conclusions about human conditions and events of terrible magnitude.

During his four weeks in New Haven, Mills drew great crowds who braved the bitter cold, sleet, and snow to listen to his opinions on biblical topics, social themes, and the dawning new age. He got the best response from the working classes, who overfilled the spaces where he preached. His specially arranged sermon to the Central Labor Union affirmed the dignity of every kind of work, and compared constructive human labor to the creative activity of God, “the great builder.” At the meeting’s conclusion, “the labor men crowded upto [sic] Mr. Mills, shook his hands and elbows and poured forth compliments until the evangelist was almost armless and dumb.”¹⁰¹ On another occasion, when Mills supplicated heaven that the day would soon come when the government would own the railroads and telephone companies, the crowd burst into spontaneous applause.¹⁰² Once again at his last service in New Haven, he looked into the future—not

¹⁰⁰ “Pipe Organ and Cornet,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, January 31, 1896.

¹⁰¹ “They Rally to Mills,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, February 3, 1896.

¹⁰² “Men Should Marry,” *New Haven Union*, January 28, 1896.

very far off—and beheld the time when the material world and all that it contained would be spiritualized because love would be universal. He envisaged a day when the out-of-luck and loveless would be caught up into the love of God, and only cowards would try to prevent the forward impulse of Christ. “But those that follow in Christ’s footsteps for the sake of humanity are heroes,” he concluded. With that, the people rose from their seats and surged toward the stage for a chance to bid him farewell.¹⁰³

In Louisville, Mills by his own admission had experienced one of his greatest times in the revival pulpit; in Columbus the warmly conducive atmosphere allowed him full expression of his mind and heart, amounting at times to a rhapsody in words; in New Haven one senses a dryer, more perfunctory delivery creeping in. Perhaps repercussions from his use of the revival platform to advance his Social Gospel goals were catching up to him and stifling his enthusiasm, because public criticisms were surfacing. A few days before beginning the meetings in New Haven, an evangelical editorialist in the *New York Observer and Chronicle* regretted that he must censure Mills for his neglect of the doctrine of the atonement in his preaching. He noted that others as well had been “pained to remark” upon Mills’ exclusive concentration on the love and mercy of God, without sufficient attention to these being grounded in the supreme sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Mills’ preaching was “sentimental,” shallow, and short of the doctrinal mark.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, a New Haven paper reported that Rev. Dr. Jones and others of Louisville had been shocked by the content of some of Mills’ sermons, but had decided to pray rather than criticize.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ “Sang Hymns at Depot,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*, February 4, 1896.

¹⁰⁴ “Notes,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* (January 2, 1896): 11.

¹⁰⁵ “The Mills Meetings,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, January 2, 1896.

Despite Mills' good coverage in the New Haven papers, and positively glowing reports in the *New Haven Daily Palladium*, trouble was brewing for Mills. Concern was expressed on several fronts. Some took issue with his social, political, and economic views, some with his theology, and some with his changed methods that produced fewer converts. The papers reported two heavyweights in the elite community who opposed Mills. About a week after the end of the revival, the ministers of New Haven held a closed-door meeting to discuss the recent Mills' meetings. Notwithstanding the locked doors and secrecy, the *New Haven Register* reported that Dr. Newman Smyth "criticized Evangelist Mills very severely." The nature of the criticism remained unknown, because one of the ministers had made a motion, which passed, that Dr. Smyth's views should not be circulated. The paper passed on a hint from an anonymous individual, however, that Dr. Smyth had contested Mills' coming from the outset because he "did not consider him to be sincere in his work."¹⁰⁶

A month later, an article by Smyth appeared in the *Congregationalist*, in which he lampooned Mills' message. Although affecting the high tone of objective analysis, the article exuded a witty sarcasm of Mills' "new rule of the social prophet and evangelist," which he had gained by sitting at the feet of Professor Herron of Iowa College. Smyth mocked Mills for several things: for his failure to practice what he preached in regard to his own possessions; for his failure to define his notion of "rights"; for his repudiation of war (which would include the war for independence) and "giv[ing] to charity the task of governing the nations"; and for his stirring up of the antagonisms that already existed "between the churches and the working classes by social teachings which are not well

¹⁰⁶ "Behind Locked Doors," *New Haven Register*, February 10, 1896.

considered.” He concluded by pretending to seek answers to the questions of whether men who taught social ethics should first be required to pass through some formal training, and whether it was wise to combine “socialistic propagandism with endeavors to awaken a revival of religion in the churches.” A “little study of economics” might well be a pre-condition “before letting loose this form of social evangelism” among the churches and society at large.¹⁰⁷ It is worthwhile to note that Dr. Newman Smyth had not attained his considerable local and national standing as a conservative, but as a liberal who endorsed not only theistic evolution but also the priority of religious experience in Christianity.¹⁰⁸

Similarly, a few days after the conclusion of the revival, the paper ran a synopsis of a lecture by Dr. George Harris of Andover under the heading “The Social Problem: Scholarly Discourse By Prof. Harris of Andover,” and then under that: “Competition, Nor Desire For Luxuries Not All Bad.” Harris, in vaunted academic language, refuted the idea that the wealthy contributed nothing good to society, and that competition only brought ill to the working classes. Against these ideas, he suggested that checks in a democratic society were capable of curbing excesses, and that capitalism remained the best system yet devised by man for supplying the wants of a populace. He advanced the idea that sometimes the “incapacity and vices” of laborers lowered their own conditions, rather than the hard-heartedness of capitalists. Further, handing all control of economics over to the state might well stifle innovation, and fixed incomes might cause a spirit of indolence among the workers. When Harris finished his lecture, he was crowded by “congratulating

¹⁰⁷ Newman Smyth, “Recent Revivalism and the Franciscan Rule,” *Congregationalist* (March 5, 1896): 372.

¹⁰⁸ Ahlstrom, 771, 776, 782.

men.” The reporter noted that the speech, by demand, had already made its way into the printer’s office. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this address, and the enthusiastic reception given to it, was a response—in opposition—to the social and economic messages just spoken among them only days prior.¹⁰⁹

Disagreement with Mills and his thought, however, was by no means confined to Dr. Smyth and Dr. Harris. Presiding Elder C. J. North of the New York East Methodist Conference stated that the meetings in New Haven fell far short of their expectations, and that the “actual results in conversions were practically nothing.”¹¹⁰ Mills had lost his focus, commented a writer in the *Watchman*. A preacher of the Gospel must decide what priority to give to the various truths of Scripture. If his emphasis is to be the salvation of society, then he should take that message to the church, but he should cease trying to win the souls of the unconverted with a social message, for the message and the audience were incompatible. Reports coming in from his recent revivals confirmed his point: while church members had been awakened to greater action, conversions of the lost were minimal.¹¹¹

Later in the summer, officials in the New Jersey Young People’s Christian Endeavor Society withdrew an invitation to Mills to preach at their convention. An article entitled “Is B. Fay Mills a Heretic?” stated that his services as a speaker were at first eagerly sought and anticipated. Not long afterwards, however, when Mills came out in support of Union Theological Seminary’s Charles A. Briggs in his fight to integrate the higher biblical criticism into an understanding of the Scriptural text, he had aroused

¹⁰⁹ “The Social Problem,” *New Haven Union*, February 10, 1896.

¹¹⁰ B. Fay Mills, “The Work of an Evangelist: A Personal Explanation,” *Independent* (April 9, 1896): 12.

¹¹¹ “Notes,” *Watchman* (April 16, 1896): 8.

comment in his own Presbyterian General Assembly that he was holding heretical views. Whereupon, the Christian Endeavor Society rescinded their invitation, and announced that they would instead invite Dwight L. Moody to be their speaker.¹¹²

In fact, rumblings about Mills' growing unorthodoxy had been sounded before his revival in Louisville. Rev. Dr. Palmer S. Hulbert, pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York, had written an essay in January 1895 that disparaged Mills' connection with Dr. Herron, and pointed out an area of great consternation in Mills' theology, which found expression in his revival preaching. He was right to call men to repentance and salvation, and right to believe that humans possessed within themselves the ability to respond to God's invitation, but wrong in his omission of the doctrine of the atonement upon which it was all based. Mills no longer preached a single sermon on the atonement or regeneration, said Hulbert, and therefore made salvation a matter of human effort alone, rather than rooted in the great work of Christ on the cross. This was analogous to filling a rotten, leaky sea-going vessel with "a valuable cargo of gold or precious stones," and then sending it out upon the stormy waters. Hulbert was not alone in his concern for Mills; he was hearing much talk among fellow clergy about the "doctrinal unsoundness" of their brother in the ministry.¹¹³

Mills had started and given early shape to his ministerial life in the orthodox fold. He knew now that the tide of evangelical opinion was rolling against his evolving thought

¹¹² "Is B. Fay Mills a Heretic?" *Wilkes-Barre Times*, July 6, 1896. Wilkes-Barre was the city where Mills' older brother Dr. Thornton A. Mills had been a beloved and successful pastor of Memorial Church for some time.

¹¹³ Palmer S. Hulbert, "The Theology of B. Fay Mills," *The Treasury of Religious Thought* (January 1895): 775-778.

and methods. In an editorial that he wrote for the *Independent*, in response to their request for him to clarify his views—he had received similar requests from other papers, he said—he admitted what was obvious, that his work and methods were in a transition phase. He had not yet learned how to call people to his new vision of leading a selfless life, in which they would invest themselves in the needs of this world rather than satisfying themselves with the selfish purchase of tickets to a “frivolous and inactive Heaven of characterless bliss.” His enlarged ministry had stirred enthusiastic response, he quickly added, and appeals for his message were coming from many cities. He planned to spend the next year in answering some of these calls, but most of his time would be given to contemplation, study, and prayer, in order to better prepare himself for “the glorious ministry of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God,” which he would preach until “God’s will shall be done on earth as it is in Heaven.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ B. Fay Mills, “The Work of an Evangelist: A Personal Explanation,” *Independent* (April 9, 1896): 3.

Conclusion

B. Fay Mills' birth in 1857 coincided with a spontaneous revival that spread across the country. One of its main features was the noon time prayer meeting, at which worried businessmen prayed in churches for their concerns brought on by the financial panic of that same year. The lunch hour worked well as a time for prayer, and later on, Mills appropriated that time slot to encourage men and women to gather to pray for the outpouring of God's Spirit at his own revivals. By the time he held his revivals in Louisville, Columbus, and New Haven, however, Mills had seized upon the coveted free hour at noon to press home not the need to pray, but the urgent need to throw all of one's energies toward social reconstruction, so that the Kingdom of God could arrive in direct proportion to each incremental step forward. His transformation of the noon hour was more than a change in scheduling: it manifested a revolution in Mills' own thought life and personal mission.

Mills received his early upbringing in the home of two ministers of the Gospel. As the son of a prominent New School Presbyterian clergyman and a former Presbyterian missionary to India, Mills was nurtured in an environment that brought its most precious energies to bear on the exalting of the Gospel in the individual heart. Later, as he embarked on a professional life of his own, Mills followed his parents in appealing to the human mind and heart with this same message. Starting as a clergyman, and then launching out as an itinerant evangelist, Mills generated excitement and drew large crowds wherever he went, as he focused their attention on the essential question that addressed their eternal destiny: "What Must I Do To Be Saved?" Like his father before him, Mills had demonstrated some concern with the social issues of his day, but the

primary goal of his evangelism centered around individual conversion. His natural gifts as a speaker, organizer, and leader catapulted him to the top of the field of evangelists, so that some remarked that he was second only to the evangelical giant of the period, Dwight L. Moody, and Moody himself was reported to have said that Mills was the greatest living evangelist. In city after city, Mills' meetings brought thousands to profess faith in Christ. At his death some estimates put the number of conversions at 200,000; others went as high as 500,000.¹

Yet at the peak of his profession, just at the point where he might have assumed a large part of the generous mantle of Moody, he began a leftward track that slowed his ascent and curved him away from the top ranks of revivalism. Mills had rather abruptly thrown in his lot with the corps of early Social Gospel spokesmen. His coming into contact with the Kingdom Movement that originated on the campus of Iowa College precipitated his move into the social Gospel camp. More particularly, the influence of the sensational Kingdom leader George D. Herron proved decisive for Mills' future direction. Herron's oratorical brilliance and rapt utopian vision exerted a powerful pull on Mills, and drew him away from the evangelism of the individual Gospel and into a proclamation of a social gospel. Soon Mills was expressing his concerns in the same language first used by Herron. He called for sacrifice as the antidote to selfishness, the elimination of competitive capitalism as the driving force behind economic inequality, and all human effort conjoined in the thrust to actualize God's Kingdom on earth. Along with Herron and other Social Gospel leaders, Mills believed that the historic church had misunderstood her mission, as bequeathed by Christ. Christ's example of loving sacrifice

¹ "Some Famous Evangelists: Passing of B. Fay Mills Recalls Other Noted Speakers Who Drew Immense Crowds," *Washington Post*, May 14, 1916.

provided the blueprint for the reconstruction of society, and to the extent that that occurred, the Kingdom would arrive. His friends—those who knew him best—thought that the influence of Herron and his writings is what fixed Mills in his religiously leftward course. Beyond a doubt, Herron exercised a powerful sway upon Mills, and helped to move him into the Social Gospel and progressive wing of religious liberalism.

But Herron's magnetic message and vision found such a ready reception in Mills precisely because Mills was already predisposed toward the Kingdom direction. Put another way, Herron's perspective and popularity furnished both the content and the cover that Mills needed to move out of Christian conservatism and into religious liberalism. Other inclinations were already at work that impelled Mills toward the progressivism so prevalent in his time: his independence, his confidence in the experiential over the theological, and his inherent optimism that led him to progressive religion. Each combined with and led into the others.

First, Mills imbibed the *independence* so demonstrated in his family life, and made his decisions based on the authority of his own perspective rather than on the ordinary rules of convention. In preparing for the ministry, he decided not to take the usual route of a seminary education because he perceived that the academic programs of divinity schools were out of touch with contemporary issues. Instead, he chose to undertake a course of study which he devised for himself, consulting the counsels of his own mind. This choice marked his future direction more than he would have known at the time. Rather than deepening his understanding and disciplining his mind in the historic articulations and languages of the church, such as his friend J. Wilbur Chapman had done, he read widely and perhaps piecemeal as he went from one author of interest to

another. Chapman attributed Mills' leftward course to his lack of seminary training: "Mills had no education in systematic theology and when he came under the influence of George D. Herron, his unstable foundations crumpled beneath him."²

His autonomy in choosing his own educational path leads directly to the second point, his *dislike of the doctrines and dogmas of the past, in favor of the experiences of the present*. For Mills, life consisted of change—this was good and as it should be—and no sacred texts or abstract formulations or personal experiences of those Biblical figures in the past should be allowed to restrain the blooming possibilities of the present and future. The theology of the church that had developed for centuries was outdated, inadequate, and misconstrued. In fact, tying Christianity so closely to the past had allowed some errors to persist through the centuries. Mills envisioned himself in the vanguard of a small group of enlightened leaders who would release the church from the dogmas of the past in order to embrace Christ's real mission and example for the church: the salvation of society by applying Jesus' advanced moral philosophy.

Mills' grip on theology had always been tenuous: he had failed the ordaining board's first examination. His instinct was to rely on his religious experience as he guided himself into his own belief system. Rather than allowing Biblical content to inform and shape his experience, as the conservative theological perspective would have prescribed, he inverted the orthodox manner of truth-finding so that his religious thought grew out of what he experienced. His adventures shaped his life: when one ran out of gusto, he sought another, and thus he went from the successive high points of conversion

² Ford C. Ottman, *J. Wilbur Chapman: A Biography* (Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1920), 28.

to baptism in the Holy Spirit to the new enthralling imagination of the coming Kingdom of God on earth.

He was that rare individual who was an extrovert, but also in tune with his own inner dynamics. His experiences resonated strongly, and he responded to them emotionally. His effectiveness as a speaker had never come from his logical analysis of sacred texts or the human condition, but from his innate ability to generate sympathetic currents toward his auditors and then receive them back again. His connections to congregations energized him, and he loved and needed the public platform as a thrilling and self-authenticating experience.

Taking his cues from his personal experiences and cultural surroundings, Mills responded to the 1890s by calling for an overhaul of the social order. The Kingdom of God was what he wanted, but disparities between selfish capitalists and the impoverished destitute was what he saw. Like his mentor Herron, Mills' vista was beclouded by scenes of the violent scramble for this world's goods. He determined to use his speaking platform to awaken the church to her ancient task of inspiration, by which all members of society and especially the authoritative instrument of the state would work to bring all of the institutions and structures of this world into conformity with God's morally upright purposes. He attacked the church for receiving the money that robber barons had extorted from the hands of labor. He encouraged a new understanding of how to appropriate the earth's resources: to be shared rather than owned.

Thirdly, because Mills was an *optimist*, he believed that if he pointed out the path to perfection, others would see the direction and catch the spirit and follow in his train. He had come to see sin not as an original state that was inherent within the person, but as

an encrustation of wrong understandings and experiences that enveloped the person, which proper education and love would remove. Mills had every hope that the perfect day was dawning. Experience showed him that progress was the one dynamic of life. It was unstoppable in its forward march and would sweep out of its path all of the injustices and inequalities that besmirched human dealings. When he stood before congregations and proclaimed the Social Gospel and coming Kingdom, he entertained no doubts but that the utopian dream would catch hold and be realized, and that the earth would soon be transformed; perhaps he might even live to see some of it. God had a new name, and the name was Progress.

Mills' confident nature enabled him to innovate boldly. Taking his sermons into the saloons and on to the dirty streets was one thing; converting his message from individual salvation to social salvation was quite another. The traditional evangelical Gospel, calling individual sinners to repentance and faith in Christ, was theologically orthodox. In using the revival platform to push a liberal viewpoint, calling for a social revolution by the use of Christian principles, Mills was attempting what had never been done before. To the theologically and biblically attuned in his old audience, it was an odd and objectionable mix: a conservative medium used to convey a radical agenda. It would prove impossible to sustain.

In 1895 and 1896, Mills set out to do his part in transforming the social order. He intended to work tirelessly on behalf of his captivating goal of inaugurating the Kingdom of God on earth. In keeping with the progressive faith that he worshipped, Mills was moving on.

Epilogue

B. Fay Mills' Social Gospel turn was relatively short-lived and amounted to just one more stop on his way to other spiritual destinations. After leaving New Haven, Connecticut, in February of 1896, he conducted a few more revivals, but soon switched his attention from evangelism to creating public awareness of the suffering Christians in Armenia, and raising money to alleviate their distressed conditions.¹ A year later, Mills announced in an open letter that he had arrived at a gradual transformation of his beliefs, that he no longer believed in some of the cardinal doctrines of Christianity, that he would be speaking to the Unitarians at their Saratoga Convention, and that he had accepted an invitation to lecture to a nondenominational assembly in the Music Hall in Boston for a few Sunday evenings beginning in October, 1897. If it turned into a regular speaking platform, he would be immensely pleased. He would address the needs of the day, which consisted of framing a larger Gospel for contemporary minds, and urging action on "Social Reconstruction."²

He ended up speaking in Boston for two years. He did not deliver on the second half of his statement that he would give himself to addressing the issues demanded by social need. A glance at the titles and content of his 1898-1899 program shows that most of his themes concerned conceptualizing a new, progressive religion. Of the thirty lectures listed from October 2nd through April 23rd, only six touched on topics of social concern, and they did not seriously grapple with the practical problems facing the

¹ "Help for Armenia," *Wilkes-Barre Weekly Times*, June 11, 1896; "Message from Gladstone," *New York Herald-Tribune*, October 27, 1896.

² B. Fay Mills, "Religious Intelligence: The Position of the Rev. B. Fay Mills," *Independent* (September 9, 1897): 15.

impoverished in the cities and countryside. Instead, his subject matter more often dealt with debunking the traditional Protestant faith and outlining his proposals for a new religion of progress. This is not surprising. Mills' motivation for attacking greed and indifference in Louisville, Columbus, and New Haven, was to effectuate his higher objective of hastening the arrival of the perfect moral order.³

In 1899, Mills discontinued his lecture series. Caustic observers stated the reason as being that his addresses did not carry enough intellectual punch to stimulate the educated minds of Boston.⁴ Whatever the reason for his change of venue, Mills left the East Coast in 1899 and was installed as pastor of a Unitarian Church in Oakland, California.⁵ He stayed in this ministry until 1903, when he resigned his position and attempted to resume an itinerant revivalism based on his progressive religious perspective.⁶ The churches did not receive him, so he next set about establishing an organization called The Fellowship in Los Angeles. One thousand members had joined at its founding. It was described as a New Thought movement, having no belief requirements and welcoming anyone into its circle.⁷ When he was away on speaking trips, his wife Mary Russell Mills, who lectured on the poetry of Emerson, took over the

³ B. Fay Mills, *Twentieth Century Religion*, vols. 1 and 2 (Cambridge, MA: The Co-operative Press, 1898).

⁴ "Another Somersault By B. Fay Mills," *Christian Advocate* (November 26, 1903): 1900.

⁵ "In Brief," *Congregationalist* (December 21, 1899): 963.

⁶ "B. Fay Mills," *Herald of Gospel Liberty* (January 14, 1904): 17. He may have been too liberal for the Unitarians because it was reported in 1900 that when he told an assembly of Unitarians and religious liberals that he would rather have a copy of Emerson's essay entitled *Nature* than a million Bibles, an audible gasp of protest and regret was heard all over the building. "In Brief," *Congregationalist*, (May 31, 1900): 798.

⁷ W. B. Day, "B. Fay Mills Church of the Zeitgeist," *Congregationalist and Christian World* (December 2, 1905): 830; "Magazines," *Zion's Herald* (June 21, 1905): 791; "Benjamin Fay Mills," *Portland Morning Oregonian*, May 10, 1916.

podium and did the speaking; she served as the associate minister with him during these years.⁸

Mills put his administrative skills to work and had the multi-faceted Los Angeles Fellowship started from scratch in less than four months. In addition to conducting weekly services, the group ran committees that helped care for the city's poor, ran a sewing circle to provide clothes for the destitute, organized a support club for graduates of the juvenile detention center, offered legal counsel for the lower income groups, provided recreation and amusements for the youth, and held a dance night including lessons for the adults. In his lectures, Mills addressed topics that showed that he no longer believed in original sin, the atonement, heaven or hell as an actual place, or in God or the devil "as personalities." God and the devil, said a writer, "are but names of opposing influences, like the negative and positive poles of a magnet."⁹

Along the way, Mills dabbled with operating a health resort, studying Christian Science, and lecturing on the reality of psychic phenomena.¹⁰ When Mills took the platform at a Spiritualist conference with John Salter, a medium, a writer for *Zion's Herald* asked the question, "What next?" Mills remained with The Fellowship for a few years, but sometime after 1910, began spending more time in the Grand Rapids, Michigan area, where he conducted meetings on religious and aesthetic topics. As the election of 1912 approached, he jumped on the bandwagon of the Progressive Party and Theodore Roosevelt. During the month of October he campaigned vigorously in several

⁸ W. A. Corey, "The Benjamin Fay Mills Movement in Los Angeles," *The Arena* (June 1905): 593.

⁹ W. A. Corey, "The Benjamin Fay Mills Movement in Los Angeles," *The Arena* (June 1905): 593.

¹⁰ [advertisement] *New York Observer and Chronicle* (July 14, 1910): 64; "Benjamin Fay Mills," *Portland Morning Oregonian*, May 10, 1916; "Shame of Science," *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, September 14, 1910; "Personals," *Zion's Herald* (September 9, 1908): 1159.

places in the Northwest for Roosevelt, telling crowds that the Bull Moose Party was “a political expression of the mightiest moral movement in human history.” If elected, Mills was convinced that Roosevelt and his party would enact a leveling of the social classes and ensure justice for all anywhere on the social spectrum.¹¹

After the campaign ended in failure for Roosevelt, Mills resumed an occasional speaking tour. Intimations by this time were that Mills’ involvements were beginning to fizzle and flop.¹² By 1915 he was lecturing in support of a “motion picture drama league.”¹³ Mills did create some stir, however, when he revealed in July, 1915, that he had reconsidered the claims of Christianity and would once again espouse them.

As he spelled it out in “Why I Return to the Church of My Fathers,” he reverted to Christianity for internal and external reasons. On a personal level, he had recognized his need for a revelation that transcended his own experience. In the outer world, his eyes had been opened by behind-the-scene glimpses of greed in politics and business, the destructive absence of any moral authority in society at large, and the “increase of crime and vice and insanity and suicide.” These, along with the cataclysmic war that was tearing apart the civilization of Europe, had shaken his faith in progress and caused him to turn again to the explanations offered by Christianity: that human beings are fallen in nature and need an individual rescue from sin, already provided for them by the atonement of “the historic, the pre-historic, and the eternal Christ.”¹⁴

¹¹ “Says Progressives Have a Wider Aim,” *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, October 14, 1912.

¹² Ford C. Ottman, *J. Wilbur Chapman: A Biography* (Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1920), 28; “Back to Orthodox Fold,” *Kansas City Times*, August 21, 1915.

¹³ “Rev. B. Fay Mills Will Return to Old Beliefs,” *Grand Rapids Press*, June 14, 1915.

¹⁴ B. Fay Mills, “Why I Return to the Church of My Fathers,” *Herald of Gospel Liberty* (July 8, 1915): 842.

Mills applied to the Presbyterian Church and asked to be reinstated as a minister of the Gospel. He gave the Chicago presbytery “a thrilling hour” as he held them spellbound with the reasons for his return, after which they examined him regarding his beliefs. His answers satisfied their queries and they accepted his application to the ministry.¹⁵ Mills purposed to pick up where he had left off in revival work.

Mills did not draw the large crowds and get the sensational results his second time around. Some questioned if he had abandoned his heterodoxy, but his friend J. Wilbur Chapman stuck by him and thought his return to the Christian faith was genuine.¹⁶ Soon after returning to evangelicalism, Mills received an invitation from the Committee of One Hundred to preach at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in the autumn of 1915. The Committee, members of the evangelical community, had set up a “Missionary Exhibit” to offer a spiritual alternative to the crowds that flocked to the “Golden Gate to witness the latest in human achievement.”¹⁷ The twelve evangelists who proclaimed the Gospel were well-known, including Billy Sunday, R. A. Torrey, and Mills’ former associate William Biederwolf. After the Exposition concluded, the Committee wrote a book to memorialize the achievements of the Missionary Exhibit and its speakers. One chapter briefly reviewed the contributions and impact of each of the men. Of the twelve noted evangelists, Mills alone did not receive favorable comments:

Rev. Benjamin Fay Mills ... was once a most commanding figure in the religious

¹⁵ “B. Fay Mills Again,” *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, August 17, 1915.

¹⁶ Ford C. Ottman, *J. Wilbur Chapman: A Biography* (Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1920), 28.

¹⁷ H. H. Bell, *A Modern Task or the Story of the Religious Activities of the Committee of One Hundred Appointed by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America During the Panama-Pacific International Exposition at San Francisco, California 1915* (New York: Church Peace Union, 1915), 13-14.

life of America. When Mr. Mills was doing that splendid evangelistic work of some twenty years ago, Mr. D. L. Moody is said to have said of him, "B. Fay Mills

is the greatest living evangelist." Thousands of others then agreed ... but that was before Dr. Mills became side-tracked from the Evangelical faith As yet his old-time fire has not fully returned, nor his ability to preach the old truth! Yet Dr. Mills can be assured of the sympathetic interest and the earnest prayers of us all for the full return of his former powers and evangelical efficiency.¹⁸

The sermons of the other speakers were described in glowing terms, with italicized descriptive words and sometimes exclamation points.¹⁹ The book was published in March 1916. If Mills read it or heard about it, it must have cut him to the quick.

Death may have spared him that embarrassment. On May 1, 1916, Mills died in a Grand Rapids, Michigan, hospital after a brief, undescribed illness.²⁰ He was fifty-eight years old. Several journals and newspapers noted his passing, and summarized some of his life accomplishments. One also offered a bit of commentary: "He appears to have had no steadfast convictions," wrote an editorialist from the *Portland Morning Oregonian*, "except that all his life he was a preacher and a teacher, and he was guided by sound and decent moral precepts. He welcomed change, and he practiced it."²¹ Thus was encapsulated the errant life and roving course of the Rev. B. Fay Mills.

¹⁸ Bell, 59-60.

¹⁹ Bell, 51-64.

²⁰ "Rev. Benjamin F. Mills, Evangelist of Note, Dies in Gr. Rapids Hospital," *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, May 2, 1916.

²¹ "Benjamin Fay Mills," *Portland Morning Oregonian*, May 10, 1916.

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