Rediscovering an EVANGELICAL HERITAGE

A Tradition and Trajectory of Integrating Piety and Justice

DONALD W. DAYTON
with DOUGLAS M. STRONG

Foreword by Jim Wallis
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Donald W. Dayton with Douglas M. Strong, Redescovering an Evangelical Heritage

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Contents

Acknowledgment  5
A Note about Editions of This Book  7
Foreword by Jim Wallis  9
A Tradition of Integrated Faith
by Douglas M. Strong  11
by Donald W. Dayton  39
Prologue to the First Edition (1976):
On Coming to Maturity in an Evangelical College in the 1960s
by Donald W. Dayton  47

1. Jonathan Blanchard:
The Radical Founder of Wheaton College  53
2. Reform in the Life and Thought of Evangelist
Charles G. Finney  61
3. Theodore Weld:
Evangelical Reformer  75
4. The Lane Rebellion and the Founding of Oberlin College  85

5. Civil Disobedience and the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Case  95

6. Arthur and Lewis Tappan: 
   *The Businessman as Reformer*  107

7. Orange Scott, Luther Lee, and the Wesleyan Methodists  119

8. The Evangelical Roots of Feminism  135

9. Anointed to Preach the Gospel to the Poor  151

10. Whatever Happened to Evangelicalism?  167

Epilogue to the First Edition (1976): 
*Reflections on Some Unresolved Issues*
by Donald W. Dayton  181

*A Trajectory of Integrated Faith*
by Douglas M. Strong  187

Bibliography  204
Acknowledgment

Thanks to the editors of Post American (now Sojourners) for permission to use material that first appeared in their pages in different form as a ten-part series titled “Recovering a Heritage,” published from June–July 1974 through May 1975.
A Note about Editions of This Book

As of 2014, there are three extant versions of this book. The first edition, titled *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, was published by Harper & Row in 1976. A reprint of that edition, under the same name, and unaltered except for the addition of a new preface by the author, Donald Dayton, was published by Hendrickson in 1988. This current publication, the second edition, has the slightly altered name of *Rediscovering an Evangelical Tradition*. In addition to the original text by Donald Dayton, which has been lightly edited, this second edition includes a new introduction, conclusion, and five chapter postscripts written by Douglas Strong, along with fresh illustrations and a new foreword by Jim Wallis. The second edition was published by Baker Academic in 2014.
When Don Dayton wrote a series of essays titled “Recovering a Heritage” for Sojourners magazine (then called Post American), he was responding to a young evangelical movement that at the time seemed radical, but was in fact a return to an orthodoxy that had been lost. These essays eventually became his seminal book, Discovering an Evangelical Heritage. In it Dayton masterfully recounted the work of revivalist minister Charles G. Finney, reformists Theodore Weld and the Grimke sisters, and the men and women of Oberlin Colony, and he reminded readers of the history of the evangelical movement in America as a call back to our best spiritual values. I had never heard about an evangelical movement that was once committed to social justice and even helped to change America in its time.

In Discovering an Evangelical Heritage Dayton showed that many evangelical Christians in the nineteenth century didn’t distinguish between a private faith focused exclusively on personal salvation and radical concern for the poor and oppressed. Personal piety was largely connected to works that went beyond charity to social reform and justice. It wasn’t an evangelical faith concerned only about heaven and the life hereafter but about bringing the kingdom of God into this world. As a result, evangelicals were heavily involved in the abolition
of slavery, fighting for the poor, and women’s rights. Evangelical revivals called people not only to personal atonement but to putting faith into action. At their “altar calls” people would come to Christ and immediately sign up for the anti-slavery campaign!

Since its founding, *Sojourners* has articulated the biblical call to social justice. For many of us who grew up in the post-war evangelical American churches where faith had been privatized, Don Dayton helped us understand that our longing to embrace the world was grounded in both Scripture and history. He revealed the public evangelical faith that is our great inheritance. And that revelation even helped to renew our faith personally. Dayton’s voice in our magazine was a dramatic historical demonstration that our evangelical heritage involved a deeply personal faith that expressed itself in a commitment to real change—not just in our hearts but in the world that God so loved. The kingdom of God is the central message of the New Testament, intended to change the world and us with it.

In *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage*, an expansion of the original book, Don Dayton and Doug Strong show it is not heretical or “communist” to talk about social justice in the church. On the contrary, a personal faith that issues itself in a fundamental commitment to social justice is the very stuff of orthodoxy and is deeply embedded in American history. Dayton showed us young sojourners that we weren’t the first people to connect faith to justice, but that integrating both goes back into the heart of church history. Separating personal faith from public expression is a rather recent American “heresy.” That was humbling, reassuring, and grounding for us as well.

The good news now is that a new generation of evangelical Christians is hungry to do exactly what these earlier reformers were doing. So I would urge you to read this update of a classic book, and ask how we can put our evangelical faith into action that makes its own history.

Jim Wallis
July 2014
Introduction to the

A Tradition of Integrated Faith

By Douglas M. Strong

Three incidents illustrate the relevance of this book’s message—a relevance that comes from its forty-year reputation of drawing attention to an overlooked interpretation of the evangelical movement and from its enduring capacity to offer a historical foundation for the hopes and longings of American Christians. The first incident comes from 1844; the second from 1975; and the third from a week ago.

In the 1840s, Robert Baird, a Pennsylvanian residing in Switzerland, wrote the earliest comprehensive text describing American religion. Baird published his pioneering work in two places: Glasgow and New York. The Scottish edition assisted the British and Europeans to grasp the seemingly odd faith perspectives of their cousins across the ocean, while the American edition helped Baird’s countrymen and women understand and interpret their own religious milieu. In the verbose style typical of the era, Baird’s title—Religion in America: Or, An Account of the Origin, Relation to the State, and Present Condition
of the Evangelical Churches in the United States; with Notices of the Unevangelical Denominations—revealed one of the central arguments of his writing: according to Baird, American churches could be described most clearly by a category he called “evangelical.” The 1844 printing of Baird’s book, then, provides a convenient chronological point identifying when most nineteenth-century American Christians perceived themselves collectively as evangelicals.

Baird did not coin the term “evangelical.” It had been used since the sixteenth century to refer to Lutherans in Germany and since the eighteenth century to describe the pietistic religious renewal that occurred among English-speaking Protestants. In Religion in America, Baird asserted that evangelicalism had become the normative faith expression in the United States. He admitted that “unevangelical” denominations existed in America, a catchall designation for such unlikely bedfellows as Catholics, Unitarians, Universalists, Shakers, and Mormons. But in Baird’s mind, these unevangelical groups were out of step with the overall American religious spirit because they “oppose religious revivals.” It was evangelicals, he suggested, who were the true paragons of Christianity in the United States.  

What commonalities did Baird find among the wide range of churches he identified as evangelical—various kinds of Presbyterians, various kinds of Methodists (including both predominantly white and African American Methodist denominations), various kinds of Baptists (white and black), Congregationalists, Lutherans, two-thirds of the Episcopalians, some Friends (Quakers), various Anabaptists, and many of those from ethnically based Reformed churches? The primary mark of unity Baird found was that evangelicals in the United States participated in “revivals of religion” so that every American could be spiritually transformed. Baird also determined that, in the United

1. Robert Baird, Religion in America: Or, An Account of the Origin, Relation to the State, and Present Condition of the Evangelical Churches in the United States; with Notices of the Unevangelical Denominations (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1844), 612–57. While Baird’s categorizing of denominations into “evangelical” and “unevangelical” groups, one of which he considered normative and the other not normative, would be viewed by many today as unacceptable, most nineteenth-century Protestants held such a view. See Robert Handy, A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 24–29.
States, evangelicals were unified due to the fact that they upheld the democratic “voluntary system” of support for churches, as opposed to being state-supported. Christianity prospered under voluntarism, Baird contended, and one of the most noticeable results of this religious freedom was that revivals had become “a consistent part of the religious system of our country.”

The major characteristic that drew these varied Protestants together, then, was not a shared belief in a common dogmatic system since the diverse churches he described disagreed strongly about many of their cherished tenets, such as predestination, Christian perfection, believer’s baptism, and the correct understanding of church polity. Neither did Baird assume that they all affirmed a precise view regarding the nature of Christian Scripture; in fact, Baird said almost nothing about the Bible except that evangelical faith was based on its teachings. Rather, what American evangelicals shared was a “vital piety” expressed through revivalism—a revivalism that flourished due to the disestablished nature of the American churches. Baird observed a mutual commitment among evangelicals to encourage every individual to experience a “new birth”—an imminent, transformative, volitional encounter with Jesus Christ. “Nineteen-twentieths of all the evangelical churches in [the United States] believe that there is such a thing as ‘being born again,’ ‘born of the Spirit.’” Evangelicals, Baird wrote, avowed an empirical “feeling of the supernatural,” a “sense of the peculiar presence of God, the sanctifying Spirit.” “The great body of evangelical Christians,” he declared, “nearly all agree” on the need for a “change of heart” by “the direct interposition of God,” resulting in “immediate right action” because “God requires them to become instantly holy.”

None of the evangelical churches Baird described would have denied the importance of orthodox belief derived from Scripture. However,

2. Baird, Religion in America, xiii, 196–217, 220, 267, 269, 270, 287, 414–15, 505–6, 658–64. While not asserting a unified dogmatic system, Baird nonetheless assumed that evangelical churches jointly held to a generic sense of Protestant orthodoxy, which he referred to as “soundness of doctrine.” But he spends only one paragraph of his seven-hundred-page book listing the beliefs that he determined were commonly held: the nature of the Trinity, human depravity, the divinity and atoning work of Christ, the necessity of regeneration, and a final judgment. “On these doctrines . . . there is no difference among the evangelical churches” (414).
American evangelicals in 1844 were not held together primarily by their affirmation of correct doctrine coming from a perfect Bible as much as by their commitment to a sanctified life coming from a personal Jesus. Baird’s interpretation of American religion as being generally evangelical, and his perspective that the main characteristic of evangelical churches was a consensus regarding the need for a decisive, affective conversion to Christ to be followed by holy living, became the dominant understanding of American religious historiography throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century.

But by the 1920s, interpreters of American religion recognized that Baird’s broad, experientially based evangelicalism had divided into at least two streams, often referred to as modernism/liberalism and fundamentalism/conservatism. The fundamentalist strain arose primarily from the disputations of Princeton Seminary and the eschatological teachings of dispensational Bible conferences, both of which were reacting against modernist preaching and theology. This fundamentalist voice grew increasingly shrill and culture-denigrating as its influence within American society waned during the early decades of the twentieth century.3

By the post–World War II era, some younger fundamentalists wished to move away from the societally antagonistic attitudes of their parents, and reappropriated the term “evangelicalism” for themselves. While more open to the larger culture than their immediate predecessors, these post-fundamentalist evangelicals4 (or, perhaps more properly, “neo-evangelicals”) still felt a strong need to extend the battle against the perceived errors of Protestant liberalism. To be sure, mid-century liberal theologians and mainline church leaders did, in fact, espouse a number of problematic ideas worth critiquing. Nonetheless, many of those in the mid- to late twentieth century who took on the name “evangelical” tended to articulate their beliefs in a particularly reactive

4. By referring to neo-evangelicals as “post-fundamentalist,” I do not mean to imply that they abandoned fundamentalist doctrinal emphases; rather, they sought to modify and smooth out the sharp edges of fundamentalist rhetoric while generally retaining “orthodox” (fundamental) beliefs.
mode. Rather than challenging liberalism’s theological innovations by reasserting classic Christian affirmations regarding Jesus’s saving action on the cross and the final victory of God’s power over sin, neo-evangelicals instead promulgated strict formulations of biblical inerrancy, narrowly defined neo-Reformed or premillennialist doctrines, and extraneous defenses of the “American way of life.” Indeed, some post-fundamentalists stressed that fidelity to these propositional distinctions and nationalistic views was more indicative of faithful evangelicalism than the older revivalistic understanding—as written about by Baird in 1844 and then commonly used throughout the nineteenth century—that genuine evangelicalism could be identified most clearly by a born-again experience of God’s grace resulting in ethical action.5

The second illustrative event took place in the mid-1970s, while I was an undergraduate at Houghton College, a small, well-respected Wesleyan Methodist institution located in western New York State. I was deeply grateful for the piety represented at the college, which encouraged students to develop a fervent and abiding relationship with a personal, interactive God. However, during my time there, I became increasingly disturbed—as did a number of my classmates—with the apolitical or even regressive social views promoted by some self-described evangelicals, especially regarding issues of race relations, gender roles, and the need to alleviate poverty. These neo-evangelicals did not see any need to confront the existing state of affairs in the country. But to us, such nonactivist attitudes seemed incongruent with the values of a Savior who, according to the New Testament, challenged social structures, broke down ethnic and gender stereotypes, preached to the poor, and lifted up the marginalized.

5. In a famous tract titled The Four Spiritual Laws, created in 1952 by the post-fundamentalist, neo-evangelical Bill Bright, “faith” is dependent on the “facts” of the Bible, with “feeling” coming far behind both faith and facts. Indeed, according to Bright’s tract (p. 12), Christians “do not depend upon feelings,” since trust in God can occur without any affective appropriation of faith. Bright’s mid-twentieth-century articulation of belief tied primarily to propositional orthodoxy can be contrasted to the view of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Pietists, such as John Wesley, and most nineteenth-century evangelicals, who—though maintaining the importance of sound doctrine—also held that an assurance of faith via properly ordered “Christian affections” and the “witness of the Spirit,” resulting in sanctified living, is what is most necessary for believers. See Wesley’s two sermons titled The Witness of the Spirit.

In the spring of 1975, Donald W. Dayton, the son of the college’s president and himself a graduate of the college, came as a guest lecturer. Dayton’s visit provided a hopeful vision because his lectures (some of which subsequently made their way into the first edition of this book a year later) offered example after example of nineteenth-century evangelicals—including the founders of the college—who embodied a New Testament–shaped combination of devotional enthusiasm and social justice advocacy. This integrated spirituality stirred our hearts to action and motivated us to be thoughtful, socially conscious evangelicals. In contrast to the post-fundamentalist, neo-evangelical preoccupation with doctrinal purity, biblical literalism, and anti-Communism, Dayton highlighted a different sort of evangelicalism by unearthing and championing the stories of the revival-oriented evangelicals whom Baird had lifted up back in 1844. Dayton’s narrative of socially active Christians contradicted the negative reputation of revivalism as an otherworldly enterprise concerned only with saving souls. Dayton’s Discovering an Evangelical Heritage became a go-to resource for a whole cadre of folks in the 1970s who were seeking to cultivate personal faith experiences and simultaneously live out what we perceived to be the mandates of an ethic grounded in the narrative of the Bible we were reading.

The third incident comes from a week ago. When speaking with my twentysomething son about the republication of this book, he stated bluntly: “We’ve got to drop the ‘evangelical’ label. My friends and I don’t want to be referred to that way because it carries such baggage.” This is from a young man who, by any objective standard, would be characterized as the epitome of a millennial-generation evangelical—a proud alumnus of an esteemed Christian college, a member of the audio visual crew at a regionally well-known megachurch, and an eager employee of a start-up video production firm founded by an entrepreneurial Christian businessman. Because he’s concerned about the way evangelicalism is being perceived by the larger culture, he’s not impressed by the fact that his college or his parents or his church have long been connected with this movement.

A 2012 article in the New York Times described the lack of interest among younger evangelicals in their religious heritage. Why is that? Richard Flory of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the
University of Southern California responded in a letter to the editor that “if Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and the forefathers of the evangelical right have done anything for evangelicals, they have made large segments of a generation embarrassed to call themselves evangelicals, leading many to head out the church doors.” Not all of these young men and women have left the church, but many are disillusioned with what they perceive of evangelicalism. Even so, Flory’s research found that contemporary Christians still seek faith communities where they can know God, be known by others, and serve one another and the broader community. “If evangelicalism is to have a future, it must examine why younger people are leaving and construct congregations and ministries within which they can be active participants.”

This book is the story of nineteenth-century evangelicals who established precisely that type of faith community. By their example, these predecessors provide a model for a different breed of evangelical—a breed Dayton raised up in the 1970s and who can now be a model for a new generation of emerging adults. This current generation may not be persuaded to adopt again the moniker “evangelical,” due to the negative sociopolitical caricature of the term portrayed in American popular culture, but they may nonetheless be evangelically minded—in the pietistic sense—for they too want to live out an ethos of scripturally grounded, spiritually passionate, socially active Christian faith.

The conviction that an integrated evangelical tradition still has currency and, indeed, can offer a way forward for twenty-first-century Christians is what motivates the publication of a new edition of this book. The book’s 2014 reissue highlights three distinct periods of American church history, as represented by the three incidents related above. First, Donald Dayton’s original chapters (which follow this newly written introduction) chronicle a half century or so in the nineteenth century when self-described evangelicals (of the Robert Baird revivalistic variety, not the post-fundamentalist variety) provided a powerful witness


of spiritually enlivened Christians engaged in biblically prompted social change. In this second edition (2014), new “postscripts” have been added to many of the original chapters, in order to provide further insight on the various subjects and to highlight their relevance.

Second, the original occasion for the writing of Dayton’s chapters was a series of articles that he published in Post American (later renamed Sojourners), a 1970s alternative Christian magazine, and then collated into the book. (Dayton also presented some of the chapters as lectures, such as the ones I heard at Houghton College during the same period.) The reception this book received at the time reveals much about the era in which it was published, particularly since it became an iconic text among the younger Christians of that era, and especially for “progressive evangelical” leaders such as Jim Wallis, the founder of the Sojourners community. Discovering an Evangelical Heritage represented a moment in time, in the aftermath of the turbulent 1960s, when Christians sought to reclaim this heritage for the challenges of a new day. The book, then, is both a secondary and a primary source from two eras—the nineteenth century and the post-Vietnam/Watergate period of the twentieth century.

Third, in the midst of a new generation brought up in the twenty-first century, American Christians currently find themselves in a very different cultural context religiously, where liberal, mainline Christianity is in serious decline and disarray; conservative, neo-evangelical Christianity, which had become dominant, has stagnated (except among immigrant groups); and established religion in all forms is on the defensive. Yet, still, there is a desire, especially among young adults, for a form of scripturally based Christianity in which social justice is perceived as the natural outworking of deep faith—an evangelicalism much like the one Dayton discovered from the 1800s, uncovered for the 1970s, and that can be rediscovered again for today.10

8. The magazine’s title was variously presented as The Post-American or Post American. Later, the name changed to Sojourners.
10. One of Dayton’s original ideas for a title for this book was “Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage,” but that idea was rejected by Harper & Row’s editors. By using...
The Dayton Thesis—Articulated and Critiqued

While Dayton did not refer to Baird’s *Religion in America*, his interpretative perspective in *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* corresponded with Baird’s premise that conversionistic, affective faith was the major expression of nineteenth-century Christianity. Dayton described the historical context of this experiential faith more definitively than Baird, by stating that “when American church historians use the term ‘evangelical,’ they generally refer to the emergence of the Arminian, pietistic revivalism that was epitomized in [Charles G.] Finney.” Dayton then went even further by spotlighting those particular nineteenth-century evangelicals who worked for social change.

This was Dayton’s specific contribution to American religious historiography: popularizing and making accessible a tradition of evangelical social activism. In his original chapters, Dayton brought to life a nexus of pastors, evangelists, educators, businesspeople, reformers, colleges, seminaries, voluntary societies, mission organizations, and split-away denominations who were galvanized by their evangelical faith to advocate for the transformation of American society. Their awakened social conscience created ferment for more than a generation through the auspices of “New School” Presbyterian and Congregationalist revivals, Methodist camp meetings, city missions, the Holiness movement, and (discussed in Dayton’s later writings) early Pentecostalism. From the 1830s through the 1890s, Dayton demonstrated, evangelicals led the charge in social movements to abolish slavery, to advance the rights of women, to advocate for the poor, to urge the temperate use of alcohol in order to stem degradation and domestic abuse, to resist the commercialization of society, and to work against urban blight. Rather than being isolated or idiosyncratic

the term “rediscovering” in this edition, we hearken back to Dayton’s first inclinations while also emphasizing the renewed relevance of the book.

instances of the integration of a social and personal gospel, Dayton’s case studies compellingly showed that there is (in Dayton’s words) “a great heritage of Evangelical social witness.”

Indeed, this social-reform heritage represented the natural fruit of evangelical piety while the now-dominant post-fundamentalist forms of (neo-)evangelicalism represent a deflection from (and perhaps a hijacking of) authentic evangelical identity. Dayton acknowledged that traditions and preachers who opposed revival-generated social reforms were part of the religious movement referred to as evangelicalism, but he contended that those church bodies “were not at the heart of American evangelical experience.” As Dayton writes: “In the nineteenth century, Finney’s ‘New School’ Presbyterian views dominated evangelicalism, but the twentieth century has seen the increasing impact of the ‘Old School’ Princeton Theology. This shift is widely discernible in evangelicalism. . . . The significance of such developments for evangelical social reform is that the Princeton Theology incarnated extremely conservative social views.” For Dayton and those who have followed in his line of thought, rather than accepting the usual depiction (in the press, for instance) of the word “evangelical” as synonymous with the word “conservative,” these terms ought instead to be perceived as oxymoronic. Yet many in the major media continue to overidentify evangelicalism (as a religious movement) with conservatism (as a political movement).12

Why is there such a pervasive perception that evangelicals are, and always have been, conservatives—not just theologically, but also socially and politically? The problem, Dayton asserted, in his tenth chapter, titled “Whatever Happened to Evangelicalism?,” is that the integrated heritage of socially active piety “was buried and largely forgotten” by the 1950s and ’60s. Dayton states that this historical amnesia occurred due to several factors: a routinization and institutionalization process common among dynamic movements diluted the reform impulse; the challenge of complex social realities and entrenched systems of power deflated the reformers’ hopes for social change; a shift occurred among

evangelicals from an optimistic postmillennial eschatology to a fatalistic premillennial end-times perspective (expecting the imminent return of Christ without the transformation of society); and the promulgation of Protestant scholasticism created a pessimistic worldview resulting in a “great reversal” regarding the need for Christians to work for social change.  

Both Dayton’s depiction of socially engaged, faith-based reform in the nineteenth century and his narrative of the decline of that impetus by the mid-twentieth century struck a chord with many 1970s Christian activists, who instinctively understood both the promise and the precariousness of a movement for evangelical social action. Jim Wallis, for instance, regularly described himself as a “nineteenth-century evangelical.” In addition to the young, evangelical social reformers who grabbed onto this narrative as their own, a host of historians and theologians also adopted and then furthered Dayton’s argument—some explicitly and others more indirectly. For a popular book derived from serialized articles—never intending to be a scholarly monograph—Discovering an Evangelical Heritage nevertheless had quite an influence on the academic community. Dayton’s own scholarly trajectory also built on the themes he first developed in this book: particularly the definition and usefulness of evangelicalism as a category; the deleterious effect of upward mobility on religious movements for social change; and the implicit radicalism of the nascent Holiness and Pentecostal movements.

But not all scholars agreed with Dayton. As with any bold thesis, some proffered alternative views; in this case, the scholarly challenge

13. The term “great reversal” was coined by Timothy L. Smith in Revivalism and Social Reform, and then picked up by David O. Moberg in The Great Reversal: Evangelism Versus Social Concern (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1972).

came from two directions—the right and the left. Not surprisingly, the first pushback originated from the post-fundamentalist, neo-evangelical establishment. Indeed, even before Dayton’s book focused new attention on the role of Charles Finney, the famous nineteenth-century revivalist’s reputation as a positive exemplar of evangelical faith had been questioned by a certain strand of conservative historians and theologians such as J. Edwin Orr, Richard Lovelace, and John Gerstner. Gerstner, for example, called Finney “the greatest foe of nineteenth century Evangelicalism,” due to Finney’s New School theology. Presumably, for Gerstner, only a certain type of Old School Presbyterian could count as truly evangelical. Others dismissed the evangelical orthodoxy of Finney and anyone who deviated theologically from a very particular kind of conservative Calvinism.\(^\text{15}\)

A more substantive and specific challenge to Dayton’s argument appeared the year after the publication of Discovering an Evangelical Heritage, when a debate ensued in print between Dayton and religious historian George Marsden. In a review essay, Marsden contended that Dayton overextended his case when he claimed that Finney, Jonathan Blanchard, Luther Lee, and the Tappan brothers represented the mainstream nineteenth-century evangelical current. Marsden declared that Dayton’s argument that “radical reform was a trait of most of those near the center of nineteenth-century evangelicalism” was wishful thinking. Marsden countered that Finney’s ideas were not accepted widely and that other nonrevivalistic traditions were more prototypical of evangelicalism. Marsden stated that most evangelicals, and even most Methodists, took socially conservative stances and did not tout social reforms. He charged that Dayton ignored the widespread conservative leanings of the evangelical movement, especially in the political arena. Marsden also asserted that Dayton neglected the fact that the primary means by which the revivalists lived out their commitment to the poor and oppressed was through

effecting individual conversion. Marsden believed that Dayton’s depiction reoriented “these evangelicals’ priorities [in] an unnecessary concession to the standards of twentieth-century liberal culture.”

In sum, Marsden contended, Dayton had made nineteenth-century revivalistic social reformers out to be more popular and more liberal than they actually were.¹⁶

Though it is true that those who stood up for the rights of women, African Americans, and other socially marginalized people were a minority of the religious population of the United States, nevertheless, this minority had an outsized impact on antebellum culture. Dayton never claimed that social activists were a majority of the nation, just that their views had more influence on modern revivalism—and ultimately on evangelicalism—than they have been given credit for.

Beyond the sphere of influence affected by Finney and his colleagues, the argument between Dayton and Marsden actually concerns something larger: the historiographical foundations of American evangelicalism as a whole. In essence, the debate hinges on whether US evangelicalism can best be interpreted through the lens of a Puritan/Old School Presbyterian/fundamentalist/neo-evangelical paradigm or a Pietist/New School Presbyterian/Methodist-Holiness/Pentecostal paradigm. Neither line of religious tradition, of course, should be construed as the only legitimate lens through which to observe evangelical history. Wesley and Edwards, Finney and Hodge, Phoebe Palmer and B. B. Warfield, William Seymour and Billy Sunday all influenced American evangelicalism. But a basic question continues to haunt the historiography: What is the primary way to understand evangelicalism—mental assent to certain inviolable doctrines and definitive views about the authority of the Bible or the living out of a particular kind of Christian piety that is informed by the gospel narrative and manifested in ethical activity? According to a study from 2005, neo-evangelical historians have claimed that “evangelicalism was synonymous with orthodoxy” and that the history of evangelicalism can best be discerned by studying Christians who perpetuated a

correct conservative theology, especially those rooted in Puritanism and its Reformed successors. Daytona’s argument is that the history of evangelicalism (at least in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century embodiment) can be understood most clearly in light of an experiential core, in which born-again faith resulted in a distinct type of moral behavior. Dayton’s accomplishment, then, was to “rediscover” a strand that had largely been obscured in the historical narratives, while Marsden objected that Dayton’s elevation of the role of evangelical Pietist-activists overemphasized their historical significance.

A different critique is offered by D. G. Hart. Hart accepts Dayton’s interpretation of evangelicalism as “something much bigger and broader” than the interpretation represented by neo-evangelical historians such as Marsden who “misrepresented evangelical history” with their “Reformed bias.” If, however, evangelicalism is more diverse than often described by the “Reformed hegemony” in historiography, that doesn’t mean that this expansive characterization of the movement is necessarily a good thing (in Hart’s opinion) because the resulting, broadly defined evangelicalism is “more abstract and virtually meaningless.” Hart thinks that Dayton’s “gallery of evangelical reformers” is too diffuse since it includes people and events that were religiously “notorious” (Finney), theologically questionable (Weld, since he became a Unitarian at the end of his life), and historically “obscure” (such as the Lane Seminary revolt and the Oberlin civil disobedience case). Most bothersome to Hart is that Dayton seemed to agree with and promote Finney’s “redemptive utopianism,” even implying that the revivalist’s quixotic ideas were “at the heart of the evangelical faith.” By contrast, Hart contends that Finney “was deluded to think that such a[n idealistic] society could take root in America through revivalism’s conversions and reforms.” Finney’s “staggering view of human potential and civil society” is incompatible with Hart’s pessimism regarding the possibility of thoroughgoing personal or social transformation.


Finney’s views regarding human nature did, in fact, move perilously close to a notion that individuals and society could perfect themselves. Most of his revivalist contemporaries, however, were more careful to insist that Christian perfection always starts with the work of God and then humans are invited to participate in that work. The majority of the social activists Dayton describes in the following chapters, then, were not Pelagians, who believed they could bring about the millennium unaided, but simply Arminians who were hopeful regarding God’s intent to restore the earth through the agency of evangelical reform. Nonetheless, even that extent of confidence in the power of God’s grace to renew this existing world, Hart believes, presents a profound theological problem. Hart, along with other theologically conservative Calvinists, is convinced not only that Finney was in error but also that all of Finney’s social reform cohorts were.

If post-fundamentalist neo-evangelicals on the right have disagreed with Dayton’s argument that the normative posture of nineteenth-century evangelicalism was a hopeful revivalistic piety issuing forth in social activism, so too have thinkers on the left who contend for greater social justice advocacy than what they perceive in nineteenth-century evangelicalism. These writers doubt that evangelicals (especially white evangelicals) were ever truly systemic in their social reform efforts. Rather than Finney and friends being too progressive, such critics maintain that they were not progressive enough. Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, for example, in an influential book titled *Divided by Faith*, assert that Finney was a compromiser on issues of race. And since Finney was an important evangelical forerunner, his policies affect today’s evangelicalism, which continues to perpetuate racial division. Such scholars insist that white abolitionists (most of whom were evangelicals) were motivated by their guilt over complicity with slaveholding more than their concern for the human rights of African Americans. “Although calling for a people to be freed, they did not call for an end to racialization.” Meanwhile, in regard to evangelical women, scholars such as Priscilla Pope-Levison have

drawn attention to the mixed social reform legacy of some female Holiness evangelicals. The evangelist Alma White, for instance, acted in ways that were openly nativist and anti-Catholic at the same time that she pushed for women’s rights.¹⁹

These scholars’ points of view provide constructive nuance to Dayton’s argument. Pope-Levison’s analysis, for instance, helps us to recognize that Holiness women and men displayed a variety of attitudes and behaviors. And a closer look at Finney reveals that he sometimes prevaricated on issues of race. On occasion, he allowed congregational seating to be segregated. He also urged caution regarding the degree to which evangelical abolitionists engaged in politics, for fear that their political campaigning might eclipse their primary commitment to evangelistic preaching. While Finney insisted, on the one hand, that a revival could not occur unless churches took socially advanced views “in regard to any question involving human rights,” he and many other evangelicals believed, on the other hand, that the conversion of individual men and women to personal faith took precedence over any other allegiance—including social transformation.²⁰

Nonetheless, there are difficulties with these liberal criticisms of Finney and other nineteenth-century evangelical reformers. First, judging their motives and level of dedication by contemporary standards of social justice is anachronistic. It is true that the reformers were not always consistent; that their actions did not always reflect the high level of their rhetoric; that their urgent belief in the need for individuals to be evangelized sometimes trumped their commitment to social change; and that some of them espoused views that were not completely egalitarian. Nevertheless, their stances on race and gender inclusion were significantly advanced beyond what had been common in the previous generation, and their views were exceedingly more forward-thinking than the racist and sexist attitudes held by the


vast majority of their contemporaries. Perhaps the governing question should not be, How far from our standards of social inclusion were the evangelical abolitionists? but rather, How different were these people from the norm at the time? Indeed, Finney’s opponents called him and his colleagues “radicals” and “ultraists” and regularly indicted them with the scandalous charge of inciting African Americans to think of themselves as equal to white Americans. As African American evangelical abolitionist Samuel Ringgold Ward wrote, referring to his white evangelical colleagues: “in the face of bad social customs, education, and religion, God enabled some whites to do and to endure all things for our cause.”

The debating and agitation of evangelical social activists popularized the connection of religious faith with social action and moved the mid-nineteenth-century ethical discussion along in ways that eventually led toward greater equality for women and people of color. Though structural understandings that later became common among twentieth-century social scientists were yet to be developed, evangelical social reformers nevertheless challenged systems of power, at least in a preliminary way, and provide an example that counters the claim that evangelicals inherently resist engagement with structural social change.

A second difficulty with the criticism of some liberal scholars is their assertion that that nineteenth-century evangelicalism was a movement composed only, or at least primarily, of white men with conservative social attitudes. In contrast to this characterization, nineteenth-century evangelicalism was diverse: for starters, women made up the majority of the movement. Evangelical women became significant reform leaders—by their organizing, teaching, and even preaching. As Dayton recounts later in this book, small evangelical denominations such as the Wesleyan Methodists and the United Brethren affirmed

the public leadership of women decades before their counterparts in mainline denominations.

In terms of the racial composition of evangelicalism, the movement included large numbers of African Americans as well as whites. Most nineteenth-century African Americans considered themselves to be Christians in the revivalistic, evangelical sense described by Baird in *Religion in America*. They proclaimed and witnessed to a personal, biblically informed relationship with Jesus and preached the necessity of conversion to Christ. Indeed, many African American religious leaders—such as Amanda Berry Smith, Samuel Ringgold Ward (both mentioned later in this book), Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, Willis Hodges, Jermain Loguen, Daniel A. Payne, J. W. C. Pennington, Charles B. Ray, and Emma J. Ray—clearly identified themselves as evangelicals, in full partnership with their white brothers and sisters in the twin causes of Christian evangelism and social justice.23

And regarding white evangelicals, although it is true that many of them (in the North as well as the South) held to socially conservative positions, other white evangelicals became abolitionist agitators, a position always considered to be extremist by nineteenth-century standards. While some abolitionists, including Finney, stopped short of advocating complete racial amalgamation, other white evangelicals were thoroughly radical in their views of full racial equality and in their critique of white privilege. In the chapters that follow, Dayton describes such radical evangelicals as Catherine and William Booth, Luther Lee, B. T. Roberts, Orange Scott, Charles T. Torrey, and Theodore Weld. There were also others, not highlighted in this book, such as William Goodell, Beriah Green, Gilbert Haven, and Gerrit Smith. Similar to many evangelical abolitionists, Lewis Tappan forcefully spoke out against the sin of “prejudice” and “hateful caste feeling” that undergirded slavery, not only against the practice of slaveholding. For Tappan, there should be “honor in white and black the same,” since all people bear the image of God. (By contrast, most nineteenth-century

“modernist” or theologically liberal opponents of revivalistic evangelicalism promoted an evolutionary view of racist Anglo-Saxon supremacy. In yet another example that illustrates the social radicalism of evangelicals, a number of white Baptist and Methodist preachers in 1838 identified with their oppressed Cherokee co-religionists by vehemently opposing the forced relocation of Native Americans and, facing derision, accompanied the Natives on the infamous Trail of Tears. As a religious movement, then, nineteenth-century evangelicalism incorporated a range of people. While some evangelicals adapted to the prevailing culture, other evangelicals—including women and men, African Americans, Native Americans, and whites—spoke out and acted against the “principalities and powers” of that age.24

Dayton’s Argument Popularized within the 1970s Context

When published in 1976, the first edition of Discovering an Evangelical Heritage created something of a sensation for younger adult Christians, arriving as it did at a pivotal juncture in American church history. During the previous decade of the 1960s, almost all who called themselves evangelicals (more accurately, post-fundamentalist neo-evangelicals) remained aloof—at best—from the protests regarding the Vietnam War, the fight for racial equality and civil rights, concerns about environmental degradation, and feminism. Some neo-evangelicals actively opposed these movements. But by the beginning of the 1970s, many twenty- and thirtysomething evangelicals felt they could no longer stay quiet regarding pressing justice issues.

Several factors propelled this 1970s shift in the evangelical subculture toward social activism, especially among disaffected college students and other young believers. The spiritual stirrings of the charismatic movement, for instance, propelled some experientially centered Christians to support justice concerns. Drawing from such diverse

sources as Pentecostalism and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the charismatic renewal broke out in the 1960s in Protestant churches and on Catholic university campuses. Charismatics expected to receive a direct bolt of power from the Holy Spirit. They seemed disinterested in the propositional arguments of the neo-evangelicals; neither did they feel connected to the “cultural captivity” of conventional post–World War II mainline churches. The ideology and teachings of liberal Protestantism did not appeal to charismatics. In their enthusiastic zeal, charismatics distrusted any rationalistic or culturally accommodating religion. The affective, therapeutic spirituality of the charismatics manifested many similarities to the emotive faith expression characteristic of pietistic nineteenth-century evangelicals.

The charismatic renewal opened the door to the Jesus movement, rooted in the California hippie culture’s disenchantment with the status quo of American society. Though some exponents of the Jesus movement (Chuck Smith, for instance) eventually veered back to social conservatism or cultivated a personalistic gospel that demanded no social responsibility, the more typical attitude of the “Jesus freaks” reflected the institutional questioning inherent in the movement’s antiestablishment origins. The desire for an ascetic, simple lifestyle, for example, led to intentional Christian communities, some of which became communal living experiments, such as the Shiloh youth revival centers, Reba Place Fellowship in Chicago, the Christian World Liberation Front in Berkeley, California, and hundreds of lesser-known communities. Even my rural hometown of just four thousand people had a charismatic, semi-intentional Christian community in the 1970s known as Celebration. (A communitarian precursor and model, though not charismatic, was the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC, begun in the late 1940s by Gordon Cosby, which focused on inward contemplation and outward social-justice-oriented “mission groups” to the city.) Similarly, many students volunteered with Youth With A Mission, Operation Mobilization, World Vision, and other faith-based organizations such as the Mennonite Central Committee.

Yet others—as epitomized by Ronald Sider’s book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*—denounced unbridled American consumerism.

The rise of Christian rock concerts represented a related development. As an alternative to Woodstock, new Christian believers established “Jesus Festivals” throughout the country. The first of these music events—the Ichthus festival, held in Wilmore, Kentucky, in 1970—began as the aftermath of a notable revival on the campus of Asbury College. The festival was the brainchild of Robert W. Lyon, a pacifist New Testament professor at neighboring Asbury Seminary. Donald Dayton was on the staff of Asbury Seminary in those years, during the same heady time that Gilbert James, another justice-minded professor at the seminary, influenced Dayton’s vision of evangelical social witness. And Dayton preached about the heritage of piety and justice at the second Ichthus event in 1971.26

A parallel early Christian music festival, along with the formation of a rock group called Resurrection Band (Rez Band), grew out of the ministry of Jesus People USA. Founded in Chicago in 1972, Jesus People USA is one more example of countercultural evangelicalism developing from the original Jesus Movement. An observer described Jesus People USA as a “blend of Christian socialism, theological orthodoxy, postmodern theory, and an ethos of edgy artistic expression.” The nonconformity of pioneering Christian rock musicians, such as Larry Norman and Randy Stonehill (who produced the first Christian rock albums), demonstrated that evangelicalism in the early 1970s had moved away from its relatively unified post-fundamentalist conservatism and had instead become a “diverse, complex movement.”27

The civil rights movement also strongly affected evangelical social action. As mentioned, most African Americans were traditionally evangelical in their religious disposition—at least when the term is understood in the nineteenth-century pietistic sense Baird described.


Since the vast majority of white neo-evangelicals avoided the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and ’60s, however, African American evangelicals felt little affinity toward their fellow white believers. Nevertheless, some black Christian preachers in the late 1960s, such as Tom Skinner, William Pannell, William Bentley, and especially John Perkins, became known for both their evangelism and their civil rights activism. These leaders were joined by John Alexander, a young white evangelical whose publication *Freedom Now* drew the interest of a small number of whites and blacks.

A group of white Mississippi Methodist pastors who penned a protest statement against their state’s virulent racism in 1963 provided a notable, but rare, example of prophetic evangelical courage. Tom Skinner and white evangelist Leighton Ford spoke out about racial division at the 1969 US Congress on Evangelism, and a similar focus by Skinner, Samuel Escobar, and David Howard enthralled the attendees at InterVarsity’s Urbana conference in 1970. Eventually, in the early 1970s, a few more white evangelicals spoke out for civil rights, emboldened by the combination of faith and justice modeled by their African American brothers and sisters. Significantly, the struggle for racial equality prodded some late-twentieth-century Christians to look once again at the central role evangelicals played in the agitation against racism during the antebellum period. And neo-evangelicalism in the 1970s took tentative steps toward becoming more diverse when African Americans (such as Perkins, Skinner, and Pannell), Latinos (such as Escobar, Orlando Costas, and Rene Padilla), and women (such as Sharon Gallagher, Nancy Hardesty, and Roberta Hestenes) exhorted their fellow Christians to action.

Yet another decisive factor toward evangelical social justice in the 1970s involved the increase in political action by evangelicals. Partly because the last significant political push by Christian churches—the drive to prohibit the manufacture and use of alcohol—ended ignominiously in 1933, most mid-twentieth-century neo-evangelicals avoided overt politicizing. From the 1930s until the 1970s, conservative Christians stayed clear of partisan involvement, an ostensibly apolitical position that actually had the general effect of supporting the status quo. But a number of evangelical young adults, including students from...
leading neo-evangelical seminaries (Trinity, Fuller, Gordon-Conwell), became politically active in the early 1970s. This renewal of evangelical civic engagement began during the heated election campaign of 1972, when Ronald Sider established “Evangelicals for McGovern,” a group that dared to connect pietistic faith with progressive politics. Richard Quebedeaux described activists such as Sider in his 1974 book, *The Young Evangelicals*. Richard Mouw wrote about political evangelism from a Reformed perspective; and at the National Prayer Breakfast in 1973, Mark Hatfield, an evangelical Republican senator from Oregon known for his support for civil rights, audaciously prayed for repentance of the “sin that scarred the national soul,” referring to the Vietnam War. Other evangelicals entered politics, such as Congress- man John Anderson and Paul B. Henry, Anderson’s legislative aide and the son of neo-evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry. A whole slew of subgroups—organizations such as Evangelicals for Social Action (established by Sider), magazines such as *The Other Side* (formerly *Freedom Now*), *Radix, Inside, Transformation, Daughters of Sarah*, and especially *Post American* magazine, edited by Wallis—encouraged advocacy for political and social change. (Dayton was the first book editor for *Post American.*)

In his introductory editorial for *Post American*, Wallis issued a pointed challenge to conventional US Christianity, a challenge that arose from “the questioning of a new generation . . . in the midst of a radical awakening.” Wallis used the term “radical” eight times in this brief opening article. Such word choice indicated his conviction that Christian faith is grounded in a biblically based commitment to Jesus Christ and that such commitment “is a liberating force which has radical consequences for human life and society.” Wallis contrasted “radical evangelicals” with “established evangelicals.” Regarding the latter, Wallis wrote: “We fault a narrow orthodoxy that speaks of salvation but is often disobedient to the teaching of the prophets, who clearly state that faith divorced from a radical commitment to social justice is a mockery.” But he did not leave mainline Christians


off the hook. “We fault also a naïve and inadequate liberal theology which neglects man’s need of personal transformation and liberation, perverts the historic content of the Christian faith and reduces Jesus Christ to a Galilean boy scout.” Instead of these accommodations to “a materialistic faith which supports and sanctifies the values of American society rather than calling them into question,” he spoke for his young evangelical colleagues when he affirmed that they wanted “to commit [them]selves to discipleship to Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the total Christian message of personal and social liberation . . . to be Christian and to be radical.”

Wallis found the story of nineteenth-century evangelical activists to be heartening. In the disappointing aftermath of Nixon’s landslide reelection over McGovern, Wallis took encouragement in the “evidence that large numbers of Christians do believe that the gospel has necessary social and political consequences.” In that light, Wallis provided his readers

... a little historical perspective. The evangelical movement of the last [nineteenth] century played a major role in the achievement of improved conditions for human life. Nineteenth century evangelism stimulated in the people a concern for social issues which resulted in the abolition of slavery, prison reform, humane treatment of the mentally ill, and improved working conditions for industrial laborers. There was at that time no dichotomy between spiritual renewal and social compassion.

He continued: “During the first few decades of this [twentieth] century a new [dispensational] theology was born which emphasized man’s relation to God, and said very little about man’s relation to man. No doubt this was partly due to the fact that much of liberal theology stressed social action and neglected personal transformation. But nothing can excuse the heresy that prides itself in preaching the true gospel, while refusing to apply that message to the totality of human affairs.” Thankfully, Wallis reported, “the evangelical...

community was about to reverse the great reversal, and return to its historic, biblical stance.”

The pivotal event for this “new generation of radical Christians” was a gathering of (mostly) young leaders in November 1973 that


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produced the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern. Sider convened the group after gaining organizational experience with his efforts on behalf of Evangelicals for McGovern. The Chicago Declaration’s fifty-three signatories included Dayton, Wallis, Sider, Perkins, Escobar, Gallagher, and others “whose faith is Christ centered,” who “hold an unapologetic Biblical faith,” and who share “a common spirit and commitment to the priorities of discipleship and the urgent need for an obedient and prophetic church.” They saw themselves representing “new stirrings and directions in the evangelical church . . . the spreading of radical Christian consciousness.”

In the exhilarating period that followed the Chicago Declaration, Wallis asked Dayton to write ten articles for *Post American* in 1974–75 that would help young evangelicals position their activism within a larger historical context. After the series ran in the magazine, Dayton assembled the articles into *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, published in 1976. Two other important evangelical books came out that same year on similar themes: Wallis’s *Agenda for Biblical People*, a manifesto for social action among evangelicals, and Perkins’s *Let Justice Roll Down*, about the need for a Jesus-centered movement for racial justice.

These three books, by Dayton, Wallis, and Perkins, appeared during the nation’s bicentennial year, providing the immediate context for their reception—a fortuitous timing. As most of the United States prepared to celebrate the anniversary with unreserved patriotism by retelling the stories of traditional American heroes, other citizens, including young evangelicals, wanted to broadcast a fuller narrative regarding the nation’s past. A different, more inclusive history began to be explored, as exemplified by the 1977 television series *Roots*, which sought to discover the background of formerly enslaved African American families.

In this setting, the evangelical songwriter Ken Medema composed an alternative musical number for the bicentennial that, according to


32. *Post American* 3, no. 5 to iss. 4, no. 5 (June 1974–May 1975).
Medema, was intended “to bring another perspective on all the noise and grandstanding around the big 200th birthday bash.” Instead of writing an unvarnished paean to American illustriousness, Medema authored these more balanced lyrics in his song “I See America”:

I have seen the dauntless pilgrims who came from foreign shores and braved the raging peril of the sea . . .
But I’ve seen how first Americans were driven from their land and I’ve seen the slave ships come from far away . . .
I see America through the eyes of love; I long for all her people to be free.
And if you see, put your hand to the job for there is work that must be done,
Till freedom’s song is sung and freedom’s bell is rung from sea to shining sea.\(^34\)

Evangelicals like Medema still affirmed the possibility of hope in America, but they did so chastened by the events of the 1960s and were less sanguine about the positive intentions of the US government. Like the evangelical abolitionists who confronted the Fugitive Slave Law in the 1850s (see chapter 5), the 1970s social activists criticized their nation but also looked forward to the possibility of God’s reign breaking forth.

In addition to the bicentennial celebration, 1976 was also a presidential election year, with a campaign dominated by an upstart, publicly evangelical candidate—Jimmy Carter. The Georgia governor appeared to embody a squeaky-clean break from the corruption-and-violence-stained decade that extended from the Birmingham church bombing and Kennedy’s assassination through the agony of the Vietnam War and Watergate (1963–74). For many, Carter’s earnest religious expression seemed to accentuate the promise of a new beginning for the country and for American Christianity. His opponent, Gerald Ford, also lifted up his evangelical credentials. (Ford’s son studied at

\(^33\) Personal communication between Ken Medema and Douglas Strong, June 20, 2013.
Evangelicalism was recognized as an untapped, potent political force, especially since evangelical churches were adding members much faster in the 1970s than non-evangelical churches. *Newsweek* dubbed 1976 “The Year of the Evangelicals,” particularly because of the way in which Carter’s Southern Baptist piety and social progressivism represented an unexpected twist on the usual pejorative perception of evangelicalism. Educated Americans could no longer view evangelicalism as a backcountry artifact gradually giving way to the cultural dominance of mainline Protestantism. The unabashed faith of both presidential candidates symbolized evangelicalism’s 1970s rise out of obscurity. But this public rehabilitation could only have happened because of the emergence of a different kind of evangelical—an enthusiastic, activist, even radical evangelical spirit. Many of these new evangelicals took their inspiration from their nineteenth-century forebears, and *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* gave them the material to use. Arriving during the bicentennial and the election of a self-professed evangelical president, this book was a tract for the times.

Immediately after this introduction, you will find the preface Donald Dayton wrote for the 1988 reprint of the first edition. His original (1976) prologue and chapters follow in succession. In these chapters the reader will quickly perceive the effect that Dayton’s message had among socially active Christians in the 1970s and ’80s—and also how that message may become similarly transformative among faithful people today.

By Donald W. Dayton

I write this preface for a reprint of the first edition of Discovering an Evangelical Heritage shortly after attending my twenty-fifth college reunion (not at Wheaton College—as so many of the reviewers of the original publication assumed because of the first chapter) and in the midst of something of a revival of interest in the issues and culture (music, persons, etc.) of the 1960s. Both experiences have impressed on me the wisdom of those who have insisted that this book be reprinted, not only because of the wide use that it has found in classrooms, but also because of the continuing relevance of the issues with which it deals.

In the dozen years since its original publication I have been astonished at the reception that has been accorded this small book, which was originally prepared as a series of essays for Sojourners magazine (then the Post American) by a young graduate student who I now think made his professors a little nervous by making his publishing debut in such a format, without the usual scholarly apparatus. To my surprise the book made Eternity magazine’s list of the twenty-five most important books of the year. And since then I have been
gratified by the response to the book—in the diversity of places it has been used (ranging from Bible colleges through liberal seminaries to a Marxist commune) and in the range of classes (from Sunday schools through graduate school) in which it has found a role (from “evangelical studies” through “women’s studies” to “social ethics”). I was especially moved by some of the responses to the book in travels abroad (from Latin America through Europe to South Africa), where I was told that a book that I had thought to be peculiarly North American was full of relevance to other contexts. But most of all I have treasured the many people who have written to express their appreciation for the personal tone of the book in revealing my own pilgrimage and struggle in ways that enabled the book to touch their own experience and to help resolve questions of identity and evangelical commitment.

All of this has made the task of revision especially difficult—and indeed conflicts over the extent and character of revisions with the original publisher are a large part of the reason for the delay of this reprint and its appearance with another publisher. I am pleased that Hendrickson Publishers (in particular David Townsley, with whom I first discussed the idea, editor Patrick Alexander, with whom I have worked, and founder and president Stephen Hendrickson) has agreed that the book needed to be available again. Hendrickson is a publisher with roots in the Pentecostal tradition that is a major carrier of the concerns and to some extent the theology of the theological traditions celebrated in this book. This reprint is thus a happy marriage of content and publisher.

Some reviewers noticed a certain energy and advocacy in the book. For some this was a lamentable lapse into “soap-box” history; for others it was a refreshing “enlivening” of history that made the book more useful for the average person outside the academic world. For the former I would be glad to share the letters from historians of the movements involved testifying to its accuracy and objectivity—or the review by one astonished reader who attempted independent verification and concluded that I had if anything understated my case. I have become more and more convinced that most historical writing is implicitly a form of advocacy or a search for a “usable history.” I have
tried to be more self-conscious about this fact than many historians of
the “evangelical experience”—and thus have been reluctant to change
or omit the prologue, which from the beginning I have considered an
essential part of this book.

This book has been reprinted [in 1988] essentially without change
and needs to be understood in terms of its place in my own pilgrim-
age and against the backdrop of the cultural struggles alluded to in
the prologue. Personal experience and cultural questions can open
up true insights into Christian experience and the Scriptures as well
as obscure them. The question is not whether the book is rooted in a
specific experience (it obviously is—as are all writings whether such
is acknowledged or not), but whether there is value in the insights
into Christian truth and experience that are to be found therein. But
this fact has made revision difficult in that little changes threatened
to unravel the whole and require a new book. It seemed preferable
to keep the book as it is and to let it be read in terms of the histories
(personal and cultural) out of which it arose.

This decision was confirmed by the fact that in several rereadings I
found very little to revise. The few times that I use the word “recent”
to refer to events that are now a little less recent should not be too
distracting. The only substantive change that I might make now would
be to indicate in chapters 2 and 8 that many of the “new measures” of
the revivalism of evangelist Charles Grandison Finney were probably
borrowings from earlier Methodism that became more visible and
controversial when adopted by Presbyterians. (I now see that it’s an
interesting comment on evangelical historiography and on those who
do the writing that such things as the ministry of women apparently
really only begin to happen when they happen in the circles of those
cultural elites who write most about such things!) Other than this I
would not wish to change a single line in the book. I stand behind
what I have said in both detail and general interpretation.

I would like to call attention to the title. I continue to be amazed
at the ways in which it is repeatedly cited incorrectly. My own origi-
nal working title was Whatever Happened to Good Old-Fashioned
Evangelicalism?, but that was not acceptable to the original publisher.
I proposed Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage, but had to give
up the “re-” as an apparent redundancy that offended the publisher’s sensitivities. The irony has been the number of times it has been cited as “Rediscovering.” [The 2014 second edition has restored the word “Rediscovering” to the title.] No matter; I see the point. More significant is the “an” (rather than “the” or “our” that is often substituted in citations) that I had to fight for to make clear my own understanding of the limited claims of the book. I understand very well that there are other strands of what might be called “evangelicalism.” But I do insist that I am working directly with the fountainhead of modern revivalism and thus with the central tradition of what most people mean by “evangelicalism.” Probably the greatest change in the book or its title if it were to be rewritten today would be an increasing doubt about the use of the word “evangelical” and its ability to communicate today. I am even more impressed today by the contrast and even contradiction between the way in which the word was used in the nineteenth century (and is still carried perhaps most consistently in my own Wesleyan tradition) and the way in which the word is used today by the “neo-evangelicals” in the wake of fundamentalism. This issue is discussed in the epilogue; and here I only indicate the continuing relevance of this point for the understanding of the book.

Those who wish to understand the issues better may wish to follow the discussion in what I consider to be the most useful review/dialogue with the book by George Marsden (who has since emerged as a major interpreter of the evangelical/fundamentalist experience) under the title “Demythologizing Evangelicalism” in *Christian Scholar’s Review*, volume 7 (1977): 203–10. There Marsden follows the “neo-evangelical” line to suggest that “evangelical” should be understood as the “orthodox” or “traditional” wing of Protestantism that resisted “modernity” and the rise of “liberalism.” This position is difficult to reconcile with, among other things, the data I bring forth in chapter 8 about the widespread ministry of women in “evangelical” circles (continued especially in Holiness and Pentecostal churches)—a non-traditional practice that sets such “evangelical” groups apart from the “traditional” Protestant churches that are only now beginning to move toward such practices. In my view (developed somewhat in the


(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
above-mentioned CSR dialogue) “evangelicalism” is better understood as a specific wing of the nineteenth-century revivalist tradition that took shape before the emergence of fundamentalism and along different lines—and that the fundamentalist experience will be understood finally only when it takes such issues into account. This difference between my perspective and those working more directly out of the “neo-evangelical” tradition has become increasingly important to me. In part the issue is in the sources that we use to develop our interpretations. Marsden tends to work with the more elite Presbyterian and Baptist traditions, while I find the more grassroots Methodist (and ensuing Holiness and Pentecostal) traditions more illuminating for the interpretation of the “evangelical experience.” Those who are interested in how my thinking has continued on these questions are referred to Theological Roots of Pentecostalism (Scarecrow Press and Francis Asbury Press of Zondervan, 1987), which I intended as something of an “alternative historiography of evangelicalism” as well as a study of the topic announced in the title. I have attempted to spell out some of the historiographical issues in an essay titled “Yet Another Layer of the Onion: Or Opening the Ecumenical Door to Let the Riffraff In” (Ecumenical Review, January 1988). I suspect that the issues will be even more discussed in the future. (They were pursued in a systematic way in the 1990s under the sponsorship of the Wesleyan/Holiness Study Project at Asbury Theological Seminary with funding from the Pew Foundation.) I find that the questions and issues that have driven me toward this “historical revisionism” are found in kernel here in Discovering an Evangelical Heritage.

Probably the single most important development since the book first appeared has been the heightened public awareness of the influence of the “New Religious Right” and the associated “electronic church” with its own form of social and political activism. I am often asked how such relates to this book—sometimes with the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that I have been too successful in calling “evangelicals” to political and social engagement; I doubt there is much connection between this book and the Religious Right, but full treatment of the question is beyond the limits of this preface. There certainly are continuities—particularly along the lines of issues of morality and

vice—between the earlier period and the contemporary phenomenon. But there are also significant differences that seem important to me—especially the tendency of the movements of the 1980s to major on issues of personal morality and vice and to neglect the issues of poverty and justice that were more to the fore in the nineteenth century. In a sense the 1980s movements sometimes seem to be more committed to an ethic of the “preservation” of supposed “Christian values” in an age in which these are being eroded than to the extension of justice and the concern to follow the biblical mandate to identify with the “poor and oppressed.” (For me chapter 9 is perhaps the most important in this book.) But the issue is very complicated, and though I do not entirely sympathize with the new Religious Right, I do think that we have something to learn from it—and that it needs more sympathetic treatment than it tends to get from the secular media and from some other Christians.

I have also struggled with how much to revise the bibliography. There is a sense in which the original bibliography was a substitute for footnotes rather than a guide to the literature on the theme. As a guide to the literature, it is now, of course, somewhat dated. There is a new history of Wheaton College (chapter 1), finally a substantive biography of Finney (chapter 2), a new biography of Theodore Weld (chapter 3), a plethora of new literature on the women mentioned in chapter 8 (for an expansion of the argument in this chapter see Nancy Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the 19th Century*, Abingdon, 1984), and so forth. I have decided to leave the bibliography as it was—in the nature of footnotes so that those who want to trace my steps can follow in terms of the actual literature on which the book is based. Some of the literature behind this book has been reissued in facsimile reprints under my editorship in a series titled “The Higher Christian Life” (Garland Publishing). I have also been coediting with Kenneth Rowe of Drew University a monograph series “Studies in Evangelicalism” (Scarecrow Press). Several of the books in that series expand on themes in this book.

Perhaps I should mention, in view of what I make in chapter 2 of the expurgated editions of Finney’s works, that Bethany Fellowship asked me after the publication of this book to edit an unexpurgated

edition of Finney’s “Letters of Revival.” This is available as Charles G. Finney, Reflections on Revival (Bethany Fellowship, 1979) and contains the missing letter that I quote in chapter 2 as well as other material. And finally, I would like to dedicate this reprint to my son, Charles Soren Dayton, whose name expresses something of my own complicated spiritual pilgrimage and my own admiration for Charles Finney.

August 1988
Donald W. Dayton
Professor of Theology and Ethics
Northern Baptist Theological Seminary
Lombard, Illinois
Prologue to the First Edition (1976)

On Coming to Maturity in an Evangelical College in the 1960s

By Donald W. Dayton

Whether the fact is admitted or not, most books arise out of the author’s personal history. This book is no exception. In an age perhaps excessively conscious of the subliminal influence of social and psychic history on one’s thinking and sensitivities, fairness to the reader requires frankness about the life situation behind one’s writing. This book is a product of the author’s struggle to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable in his own experience: the evangelical heritage in which he was reared and values bequeathed him by the student movements of the 1960s.

The cultural trauma of the 1960s is now the common heritage of all America—and much of the world! That decade saw wave after wave of social protest and the emergence of new movements for justice and equality: the civil rights movement with its sit-ins, freedom rides, marches, confrontations, and deaths; the great revulsion against the
Vietnam War expressed in protest, draft resistance, draft-card burn-ings, exiled youth, and conspiracy trials; and the discovery of unno-ticed minorities and a history of neglect and oppression that tarnished the images of the United States on which we had been nourished in grade school. Few would defend all that happened in the 1960s, but most would allow that in that decade fundamental principles came to light that can no longer be ignored. There was no going back to the innocence of the 1950s.

There was, however, in the 1960s at least one relatively safe bastion of escape from this turmoil—the subculture that despite its diversity is encompassed by the label “evangelical.” The basic transmitters of this tradition are a series of “Christian colleges” (some independent and some denominationally anchored). These schools, usually situated in rural, small-town, or suburban locations, are scattered across the country but tend to cluster in the Midwest. They are not widely known, but their names (Wheaton, Houghton, Malone, Greenville, Seattle Pacific, etc.) are revered within evangelicalism as fortresses against the modern world, in which evangelical youth can be educated and mate without threat from the pagan ideologies and lifestyles of the secular world.

It is difficult to re-create the atmosphere of such a college in the 1960s. No doubt the incidents that loom so large in memory were not the whole of campus life. But the contrast between the petti-ness of the issues that troubled us and the magnitude of the issues that were being dealt with in society is frightening. Campus life was circumscribed by cultural patterns and ethical mores called “pru-dentials” at my college. These included the traditional evangelical prohibitions against drinking, smoking, dancing, card-playing, and theater-going. Our lives were largely bound up in testing the limits of these prohibitions. While other students responded to calls for civil rights workers or took to the streets in protest about Vietnam, we fought our administration over whether the yearbook could picture male swimmers without T-shirts, struggled for the right to watch TV in the lounge on Sundays, and wondered if the Christian should attend the theater (legitimate or cinema) or read twentieth-century literature.
We tended to be apolitical, but when political instincts did surface, they were conservative. Like most evangelicals of the decade, we supported Richard Nixon and Barry Goldwater in presidential elections. I was aware of only one voice of dissent on campus, a rather moderate Democrat who was harassed into leaving over his “liberal” political views and questionings of the campus ethos. Our great fear was Communism, and we found signs of its influence everywhere. We believed that the protest movements were manipulated by Communist agitators. Our editorial complaints that the campus lacked sufficient diversity for the dialogue that was an essential part of any liberal education were interpreted as the first steps in a campaign to bring a Communist speaker to campus or even to start a Communist cell.

Cultural insularity and reactionary social perspectives converged to produce what John Oliver of Malone College termed “A Failure of Evangelical Conscience.” Evangelical Christianity rather consistently opposed currents of the 1960s that demanded social justice and civil rights. Oliver traced this through the editorial pages of *Christianity Today*, the journal that spoke for evangelicalism in that decade. Claiming to represent the “biblical point of view,” the editors defended “voluntary segregation,” charged of Martin Luther King that “communism . . . is implicit in his integrationist ideology,” condemned categorically demonstrations and civil disobedience, decried as a “mob spectacle” the 1963 March on Washington at which Martin Luther King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, praised Mississippi’s refusal to admit black student James Meredith to its state university, and were horrified at the suggestion of interracial marriage. Concerning the war in Vietnam, the editors supported the American presence, stating that it was necessary for the security of Christian missions. They rebuked the critics of the war and called for the enforcement of laws against destroyers of draft cards and records while insisting that justice be “tempered with mercy” for those convicted of war crimes. They denied that the United States had any economic or

1. John Oliver, “A Failure of Evangelical Conscience,” *Post American*, May 1975: 26–30. To keep scholarly apparatus to a minimum, only material from modern, secondary literature has been documented. The bibliography indicates the major sources consulted in the preparation of each chapter.
other “ulterior motives” for its presence in Indochina. The journal, of course, altered its position on most of these issues, but only in response to a reversal of popular consensus or official national policy.

The full significance of this “failure of evangelical conscience” has yet to be understood. To many of us, the civil rights movement and its principles of fundamental human equality seemed not only more right but also more biblical and Christian than the positions taken by our elders. We learned that what had been claimed as biblical and therefore absolute was often the deification of cultural patterns not only relative but in some cases even pernicious and demonic. Sizable contingents of several generations of evangelical college students responded to these insights by leaving the orbit of evangelicalism. Those that did not abandon the Christian faith altogether have found places of service in other parts of the church.

The trauma generated by these conflicts was intense. Torn between evangelicalism and the imperatives of the civil rights movement, I chose the latter—though troubled with a continuing “bad conscience” acquired through years of conditioning in the evangelical world. I worked with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party in the election of 1964, I lived with blacks on the edge of Harlem during the riots of the summer of 1964, and I identified in successive years with various black churches and inner-city ministries. Cut loose from evangelicalism, I threw myself into the secular education of Columbia University and went to Yale Divinity School, seeking a theological reconstruction that could bring my intellectual world back together. In several years of study and experience I found that reformulation in the recovery of a biblically grounded and classically Christian faith amenable to the development of social responsibility—and even a biblically grounded “Christian radicalism.”

Having established an independent standpoint, I was able to look back on evangelicalism with some equanimity. In what was intended to be a casual aside in a graduate program in theology, I took up the study of the roots of the denomination in which I had been reared. Though never helped to understand its history in college or in church life, I discovered much to my surprise that the denomination was a product of the closest parallel to the civil rights movement in American
history—the abolitionist protest against slavery in the pre–Civil War period. The founders of my denomination and college were advocates of principles in which I had come to believe by a very indirect route. As I pursued this story, I discovered the sweet irony that this denomination was not unique, but shared a reformist heritage with other aspects of evangelicalism. I had been struggling with the wrong end of evangelical currents that had once reverberated with vitality and reform activity, but had over the course of a century fallen into a form of decadence. This book is an overview of that history—a history that has forced me to rethink, not only my own relationship to evangelicalism, but also the broader significance of that movement in American culture.
If there is a single symbol of modern evangelicalism, it is Wheaton College, situated just to the west of Chicago in the “All-American City” of Wheaton, Illinois. This school of about two thousand students is the most prestigious and perhaps the oldest of the “Christian colleges” that lie at the core of evangelical culture and tradition. The city of Wheaton is itself a mecca for evangelicals. Headquartered here and in the surrounding area are many of the publishers, independent mission boards, and interdenominational agencies that compose the network of evangelical life and activity. Also in Wheaton are the offices of the National Association of Evangelicals, an “ecumenical” organization founded in 1942 that, by the 1970s, drew together some thirty denominations in an evangelical counterpart to the National Council of Churches.

Closely associated with the post–World War II neo-evangelical renaissance of scholarship that spawned the National Association of Evangelicals, Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, and
Christianity Today, Wheaton College was the alma mater of many leaders of mid-twentieth-century neo-evangelicalism. Among these were Harold Lindsell, editor of Christianity Today; Edward J. Carnell, Fuller apologist and philosopher of religion; and Carl F. H. Henry, founding editor of Christianity Today. But the most famous alumnus of Wheaton College is evangelist Billy Graham, class of 1943. Through his position on the board of trustees and in other ways Graham was a dominant force in the life of the college—as in all of the evangelical world.

Billy Graham rather consistently expressed what may be taken to be the position of the National Association of Evangelicals, Christianity Today, much of Wheaton College, and most of the evangelical world: that the primary mission of the church is the spiritual one of preaching a gospel of “personal salvation” through faith in the atonement of Christ. Social witness may be an extension of the life of the individual, regenerated person in society but should not be incorporated into the life of the church as a primary goal.

Graham expressed this position in a “clarification” issued early in 1973. When the peace negotiations in Paris broke down and the United States resumed its bombing of North Vietnam, a number of American churchmen appealed openly to the evangelist to use his friendship with President Richard Nixon to try to stop the bombing. In his response Graham said:

I am convinced that God has called me to be a New Testament evangelist, not an Old Testament prophet! While some may interpret an evangelist to be primarily a social reformer or political activist, I do...
not! An evangelist is a proclaimer of the message of God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ and of the necessity of repentance and faith. My primary goal is to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The basic problem of man is within his own heart. That is why evangelism is so important.¹

This position is generally assumed to be what evangelicals have always believed. To some extent this is true. But while Billy Graham sometimes uses the language of repentance and faith to avoid questions of social responsibility, earlier generations of evangelicals understood that repentance involved turning from apathy into the heart of struggles for social reform. While Billy Graham contrasts the “New Testament evangelist” and the “Old Testament prophet,” earlier evangelicals combined these roles. One of the most significant figures of that earlier generation was Jonathan Blanchard, the founder of Wheaton College.

The central building on the Wheaton College campus is Blanchard Hall. At the top of a split winding staircase just inside the main entrance are two plaques honoring the men for whom the building is named. These men are Jonathan Blanchard and Charles A. Blanchard, father and son, the first and second presidents of Wheaton. These two men held the office for more than twenty and forty years, respectively. Together they guided Wheaton College through its first sixty-five years.

Each plaque contains a quotation that calls into question the evangelical perspective expressed by Billy Graham. On the plaque honoring Charles Blanchard is an affirmation of the reformist aspiration of youth.

The need of a developing nation is to increase in wisdom, righteousness and strength and to cast off whatever is inconsistent with that noble age to which youth aspires. Only that which is true and right can abide. (From an address on the Day of Prayer for Colleges, “The American College”)

More striking is the quotation on the plaque honoring Jonathan Blanchard, the founder of Wheaton College. It is taken from an address titled “A Perfect State of Society,” originally delivered before the

Society of Enquiry during the commencement exercises of Oberlin College in 1839. (The significance of Oberlin will emerge later, in chaps. 4 and 5). The plaque reads:

Society is Perfect where what is right in theory exists in fact; where Practice coincides with Principle, and the Law of God is the Law of the Land.

This passage is the thesis of Blanchard’s address in which he treated “not so much the principles of the doctrines of Christ, as the form they will give society, when they have done their perfect work upon mankind.” Among the affirmations of Blanchard at Oberlin was that “every true minister of Christ is a universal reformer, whose business it is, so far as possible, to reform all the evils which press on human concerns.” Blanchard fully realized that one “cannot construct a perfect society out of imperfect men,” but argued that “every reformer needs a perfect state of society ever in his eye, as a pattern to work by, so far as the nature of his materials will admit.”

This somewhat utopian vision was grounded in a doctrine of the kingdom of Christ reflected in the Wheaton College motto, “For Christ and his Kingdom.” Blanchard understood the kingdom of God as “Christ ruling in and over rational creatures who are obeying him freely and from choice, under no constraint but that of love” and argued that what “John the Baptist and the Saviour meant when they preached the ‘kingdom of God’” was “a perfect state of society.” He opposed those who emphasized that such a kingdom is not to be sought in this world, insisting that though “this kingdom is not of this world, it is in it.” Carrying this affirmation to its logical conclusion, Blanchard warned against both those who “locate Christ’s kingdom in the future to the neglect of the present” and those who seek “to construct a local heaven upon earth, . . . thus shutting out the influences and motives of eternity.”

Prompted by this vision of a “perfect state of society” and compelled by obedience to Christ’s command to “seek ye first the kingdom of God,” Blanchard was propelled into a life of reform that climaxed in the founding of Wheaton College. His life was so dominated by
reform that upon his death the Political Dissenter commented that “in the death of Dr. Jonathan Blanchard, American reformers have lost one of their foremost leaders. No more fearless voice ever rang out on the platform, or from the pulpit. No keener or more valiant pen has been wielded against popular wrongs, and in defense of unpopular truth.”

Born in Vermont in 1811 and a graduate of Middlebury College, Blanchard studied theology at Andover Theological Seminary. There he came under the influence of Theodore Weld (for the significance of Weld, see chap. 3) and became, in the words of the Dictionary of American Biography, a “violent abolitionist.” When the administration of Andover tried to stop his antislavery work, Blanchard withdrew and spent a year in Pennsylvania working as an agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society. (Agents were “agitators” who traveled around lecturing and organizing local chapters of abolitionists.) Blanchard endured mob violence, threats on his life, and other forms of abuse in this work. He then finished his education at Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, where he continued his abolitionist activities. Upon graduation he was called to pastor Cincinnati’s Sixth Presbyterian Church, a congregation widely known as the “nigger church” for its abolitionism. In spite of Blanchard’s reformist orientation, the church added during his seven-year pastorate some five hundred members to the original one hundred twenty.

Blanchard’s commitment to reform soon propelled him into an important leadership role among the abolitionists. He held office in the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society. In 1843 he was elected to the American vice presidency of the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London. In 1845 he was called upon to represent the Cincinnati Abolition Society by debating against N. L. Rice the affirmative of the proposition that “slaveholding is in itself sinful and the relationship between master and slave a sinful relationship.” This debate, in Cincinnati’s largest auditorium and lasting several days, was widely advertised and published in a five-hundred-page book that went through several editions. This work is so important for understanding the abolitionist movement that several twentieth-century publishers reprinted it as a major resource for black studies programs.
After this debate Blanchard carried his reform ideas and work into education. For twelve years he served as president of Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. After controversy forced his resignation, he was offered the presidency of a half dozen other colleges, but he eventually accepted the position at Wheaton. This school had actually been started in 1848 as Illinois Institute by the Wesleyan Methodists, an abolitionist body that had split from Methodism in 1843 over the question of slavery. (See chap. 7 for a discussion of the Wesleyan Methodists.) A few years later the Congregationalists joined the Wesleyans in support of the young institution, and when the Wesleyans failed to muster sufficient financial support, the college was rechartered in 1860 under Congregational control.

This change was made only after a covenant that Wheaton would continue Wesleyan reform principles. These were expressed in an advertisement for the college that appeared in 1859, vowing to preserve “the testimony of God’s word against slave-holding, secret societies and their spurious worship, against intemperance, human inventions in church government, war, and whatever else shall clearly appear to contravene the kingdom and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Jonathan Blanchard was one person whom all could agree upon to be president of the college. His reformist temperament promised the continuation of the ideals upon which Wheaton was to be established. Blanchard accepted the invitation, and, as he put it himself, “I came to Wheaton in 1860, still seeking ‘a perfect state of society’ and a college ‘for Christ and his Kingdom.’” And to Wheaton he gave the rest of his life.

Blanchard grounded his vision for the Christian college in the prophetic texts of Scripture. He pointed to the “schools of the prophets” where the “ancient people of Jehovah sent up their youth to learn the pure principles and practical application of his law.” In those schools, according to Blanchard, the “truth of God” was explained to young “prophets” who were to see that this truth was “faithfully applied to correct the follies and the errors of the nation.”

Blanchard’s position on reform can best be understood through an examination of the Cincinnati debate. He affirmed the radical equality of the slaves in these words: “I rest my opposition to slavery upon
the one-bloodism of the New Testament. All men are equal, because they are of one equal blood.” He argued that slavery was a sin to be immediately abolished and suggested that church discipline be brought to bear upon those who held slaves or supported the institution of slavery. He did not view the question of slavery as an individual matter of personal purity, but insisted that “slave-holding is not a solitary, but a social sin,” desiring attack on all fronts.

But we must also understand the position of his opponent, N. L. Rice. Though Blanchard attempted to brand him an advocate of slavery, Rice insisted that he, too, was an abolitionist, but committed to gradual abolition and “colonization” (sending the slaves back to Africa). He feared that the radical abolitionists were pushing too hard and were “upturning the very foundations of society in order to abolish slavery.” He expressed concern for the “spiritual welfare” of slaves and slaveholders. He argued that if Southern ministers should become abolitionist, they would be expelled and all would be left without the “preaching of the gospel.” Rice was concerned that the minister not move too far ahead of his congregation.

Blanchard insisted that Rice’s position made his “religion . . . the religion of a privileged class” by perpetuating an evil system. Blanchard maintained that the churches and individual Christians must radically identify with the oppressed and wished after his death to be remembered only as “one who having humbly striven in all things to follow his Lord, like Him, also has been faithful to His poor” (Blanchard’s final words in the Cincinnati debate).

Controversy still rages over whether the abolitionists were misguided fanatics or clear-sighted moral reformers. Earlier historiography dismissed them and bewailed their tendency to bring into the arena of public policy moral absolutes that could not be accommodated to the compromises of political solutions. Sensitized by the 1960s, scholars in the 1970s took a more sympathetic look at the abolitionists and discovered one of the most profound reform movements in American history—a movement that was largely grounded in evangelical Christianity.

But whatever modern American historians may decide about the abolitionists, it is clear that Blanchard was completely on their side.
He called the abolitionists “honest, simple-hearted, and clear-sighted; but few of them dwellers in high places; who take up the truth and the cross with it, to bear both after Christ.” Indeed, he went so far as to identify the early Christians as “a poor despised set of abolitionists who were everywhere accused of ‘uprooting society’ to get rid of its evils, and ‘turning the whole world upside down’ to correct its errors and reform its abuses.”

The debate between Blanchard and Rice was not between an abolitionist and a proslavery defender of the status quo, but between two divergent strategies for the elimination of slavery. Rice viewed Blanchard as an extremist upsetting the gradual process of amelioration of slavery effected by the preaching of the gospel, while Blanchard viewed Rice as a compromising equivocator unwilling to act on the radical implications of the gospel. To use more modern terminology, it would appear that Jonathan Blanchard, the founding president of Wheaton College, was, at least on the issue of slavery, a radical rather than a liberal.