

## A THEOLOGICAL HERITAGE FOR NEW EVANGELICALISM AND ITS SOCIAL JUSTICE FOCUS

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There is an awakening going on within American evangelicalism.<sup>1</sup> Something is emerging that is clearly different from that of the Religious Right that has defined evangelicalism in the United States for the last forty years. Theologian Scot McKnight points to the center of that change: a new kind of Christian social consciousness. A submovement within evangelicalism is taking up a broader social agenda that embraces those on the margins of society. McKnight calls the focus on issues generally associated with the political left “the biggest change in the evangelical movement,” nothing less than the emergence of “a new kind of Christian social conscience.”<sup>2</sup>

Based on a review of relevant literature, this article will look at this emerging submovement within evangelicalism that researchers are referring to as “New Evangelicals” and its expanding social consciousness. Then the article will address an issue I believe is of critical importance: a likely theological and historical heritage for New Evangelicalism that can serve as a theological resource and even connection between them and the larger evangelical narrative. The term “heritage” is chosen with intentionality. A heritage is something you may not be aware of, but you can learn to appropriate. I believe connecting New Evangelicals to this heritage is crucial because, as this article will suggest, New Evangelicals are potentially in danger of losing their identity if they do not find a deeper grounding in a theological framework and heritage. In fact, some New Evangelicals are “abandoning the term evangelical altogether,”<sup>3</sup> since too often they associate evangelicalism solely within the context of the Religious Right. While acknowledging that the social consciousness of New Evangelicals is new when compared to that generally seen and practiced over the last four decades, this article suggests that this new kind of Christian social consciousness is really not new but is consistent with evangelical social consciousness dating back to antebellum evangelicalism in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Thus, I will seek to connect New Evangelicals to the

<sup>1</sup>Defining evangelicalism has always been a complex undertaking. As Randall Balmer points out, “Evangelicalism in America has evolved and mutated over the centuries, . . . but it is still possible to identify some generic [doctrinal/theological] characteristics.” Randall Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 2. This article defines evangelicalism by its shared doctrinal/theological characteristics.

<sup>2</sup>Marcia Pally, “The New Evangelicals,” *The New York Times*, 11 December 2011.

<sup>3</sup>Paul N. Markham, “Searching for a New Story: The Possibility of a New Evangelical Movement,” *The Journal of Religion and Society* 12 (2010): 3.

<sup>4</sup>Marcia Pally, “The New Evangelicals.”

deeper religious heritage of evangelicalism and thus demonstrate how they can consider themselves committed evangelicals who share a heritage with those who have gone before.

### *New Evangelicals*

Robert E. Webber was one of the first to write about an emerging movement in evangelicalism in the twenty-first century. He termed this movement “the younger evangelicals.”<sup>5</sup> For him the term “younger” had a triple ring. It referred to “those who are young in age, those who are young in spirit, and . . . to the movement they represented as a new or young movement.”<sup>6</sup>

Webber contrasted the younger evangelicals that he saw just starting to emerge at the beginning of the twenty-first century with the two strong groups he saw contending for leadership at the end of the twentieth century, traditional evangelicals and pragmatic evangelicals. He never suggests that all evangelicals belong in one of these three movements. He clearly acknowledges that evangelicalism is far too complex to reduce to just three movements. However, he does argue that traditionalists and pragmatics were the most visible movements with the loudest voices at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

Moving into the twenty-first century, Webber prognosticated that the emerging younger evangelicals would create a new paradigm for evangelicalism in this century.<sup>8</sup> One of the many areas of change predicted by Webber was in the area of social activism and the social consciousness that drives such activism. Webber identified the Christian Coalition and its predecessor the Moral Majority as the driving force behind the social activism of traditional evangelicals, centering on the social agenda of pro-life and family values. In contrast, he recognized the Megachurch movement as the primary source of the social activism of pragmatic evangelicals with a broadened social consciousness that responds to such felt-need issues, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation and support for single moms and divorcees. He saw the social activism of emerging younger evangelicals being driven by a social consciousness for those on the margins of society, such as the poor, the homeless, and the abused.<sup>9</sup>

As referenced earlier, the group that Webber first dubbed younger evangelicals is being called “New Evangelicals” in current literature. Richard Cizik, David Gushee, and Steven D. Martin adopted the term in forming the *New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good*, established ostensibly to

<sup>5</sup>Webber defines this as the “twenty-something.” Writing from his context right at the turn of the century, this would include all of those born after 1975. See Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelical: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 16.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 235–236.

bring new evangelical ideas to the public.<sup>10</sup> Researchers such as Paul Markham and Marcia Pally have borrowed the term in their research as a descriptor for this new, emerging group of evangelicals.<sup>11</sup>

Markham argues “terminology is critical as scholars seek to label the potential movement. Various terms qualifying ‘evangelical’ are used (e.g. ‘center,’ ‘progressive,’ ‘liberal,’ etc.); however, it is not at all clear that these expressions properly describe the complexity of what is occurring in evangelical circles as these terms have historical political ramifications.”<sup>12</sup> Is the term “New Evangelicals” truly descriptive of this emerging group? In what ways are they both new and evangelical? The latter question will be addressed first.

Defining what an evangelical is has always been a complex task. As George Marsden points out, evangelicalism is not “a clearly defined organization with a membership list.”<sup>13</sup> Marsden goes on to argue that evangelicalism can best be described as a movement. Though informally organized, it is still “an identifiable set of groups with some common history and traits.”<sup>14</sup> Within this movement are “coalitions of submovements, which are sometimes strikingly diverse and do not always get along.”<sup>15</sup>

The most common traits used to describe evangelicals are D. W. Bebbington’s quadrilateral of: (1) conversionism, (2) activism, (3) biblicism, and (4) crucicentrism.<sup>16</sup> Are New Evangelicals actually evangelicals as described by Bebbington’s typology? Markham questions whether New Evangelicals are adequately described by Bebbington’s typology.<sup>17</sup> However, Cizik, in the recently published manifesto of New Evangelicalism, unequivocally affirms the orthodoxy of New Evangelicals to Bebbington’s typology, while acknowledging some nuances of interpretation regarding the quadrilateral.<sup>18</sup> Numerous scholars have articulated the nuanced views of New Evangelicals to Bebbington’s quadrilateral. (1) Conversionism is morphing into a more “holistic understanding of salvation. Instead of salvation from the world, we are also saved for the world, including the poor, the oppressed, and the

<sup>10</sup>Pally, *The New Evangelicals: Expanding the Vision of the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 19.

<sup>11</sup>See Pally, *The New Evangelicals*, 17–28; Markham, “Searching for a New Story,” 2.

<sup>12</sup>Markham, “New Story,” 12.

<sup>13</sup>George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1780s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 5–17.

<sup>17</sup>Markham, “New Story,” 2.

<sup>18</sup>Richard Cizik, “My Journey toward the ‘New Evangelicalism,’” in *A New Evangelical Manifesto: A Kingdom Vision for the Common Good*, ed. David P. Gushee (St. Louis: Chalice, 2012), 30.

environment. The shift could be seen as moving from a focus on evangelism (with its individualistic focus) to mission (with its expansive and inclusive agenda).<sup>19</sup> (2) Activism remains an important feature characteristic of New Evangelicalism. What has shifted is the focus of their activism. Their activism is not focused on the two issues (pro-life and family values) that have defined evangelical activism over the last forty years. Instead their activism focuses “on poverty relief, environmental protection, immigration reform, and racial/religious reconciliation—and on listening, cooperation, and coalition-building.”<sup>20</sup> (3) Biblicism is still a specific characteristic of New Evangelicals. However, their Biblicism is distinguished by their “public commitment to the ‘red letters’—the words of Jesus that are set apart in red letters in some versions of the Bible.” New Evangelicals “confess that the way of life Jesus taught and practiced is the way [they] want to follow.”<sup>21</sup> (4) Crucicentrism is slowly shifting from a focus on the cross as a substitutionary act of atonement to appease an offended Deity (or the cross as retributive justice), to an exploration of the cross as a vehicle of restorative justice. Rather than ask if the cross represents a victory over sin, death or the devil, it would seem appropriate for [New Evangelicals] to respond ‘all of the above, and more beside.’<sup>22</sup>

As Harris argues, “Gathered around an expansive theology of the cross (a deeper embrace of the crucicentrism Bebbington notes), and committed to a holistic view of salvation (including but moving beyond mere conversionism), and shaped by the transforming narrative of the acts of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as illuminated in the Spirit inspired Scriptures (more than mere biblicism), such a community would have every reason to be actively passionate. It would be a community where the title ‘Evangelical’ names not an identity, but an aspiration.”<sup>23</sup>

While Bebbington’s priorities remain relevant and common traits that link them to the larger evangelical movement, New Evangelicals are also part of a coalition or submovement within the larger evangelical movement. While Bebbington’s quadrilateral marks a place of common gathering within the evangelical movement, what marks the place of departure is the very reason they are referred to as “new.”

<sup>19</sup>Brian Harris, “Beyond Bebbington: The Quest for Evangelical Identity in a Postmodern Era,” *Churchman* 122.3 (2008): 204–205, [http://churchsociety.org/docs/churchman/122/Cman\\_122\\_3\\_Harris.pdf](http://churchsociety.org/docs/churchman/122/Cman_122_3_Harris.pdf).

<sup>20</sup>Pally, “Understanding the New Evangelicals Activism and Voting,” 13 May 2012, <https://marciapally.com/understanding-the-new-evangelicals-activism-and-voting>.

<sup>21</sup>Tony Campolo, “Are you a Red Letter Christian?” *Read Letter Christians*, 2013, <http://www.redletterchristians.org/are-you-a-red-letter-christian/#sthash.9X1qPbWH.dpuf>.

<sup>22</sup>Harris, “Beyond Bebbington,” 212.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 213.

Most researchers agree that, when compared to the seemingly monovocal evangelicalism of the past forty years, this emerging voice in twenty-first century evangelicalism is new. Yet, in the broader history of evangelicalism, it echoes the voice of a movement in evangelicalism from a previous century. To embrace Cizik's language, "new" is both an efficient term and a misnomer. Thus I have embraced the term New Evangelicals as the most accurate term to describe this new movement within evangelicalism. However, I agree with Markham that those I am describing might not accept this label.<sup>24</sup>

In guided interviews with a group of assumed<sup>25</sup> New Evangelicals, Markham notes that only five out of forty-three interviewees identified themselves as evangelicals.<sup>26</sup> A primary factor is that the millennials, who are a significant part of the New Evangelical movement, simply do not like to be labeled.<sup>27</sup> The resistance of millennials to labels poses a potential problem for New Evangelicalism. Markham offers a summary to the voices of others who have written extensively on the power of narrative and its role in shaping social systems when he states that "personal and public narratives [are] the means through which humans establish their sense of individual and collective identity."<sup>28</sup> Without a clear sense of public narrative, New Evangelicalism is a movement potentially in danger of losing its identity as part of the larger evangelical narrative. This is particularly true since, for many millennials in this category, the larger evangelical narrative is defined solely by the example portrayed by traditional evangelicals, as practiced over the last four decades.

Markham connects the narrative of New Evangelicalism to the larger evangelical narrative associated with Carl F. H. Henry and his 1947

<sup>24</sup>Markham, "A Theology that 'Works,'" in *A New Evangelical Manifesto: A Kingdom Vision for the Common Good*, ed. David P. Gushee (St. Louis: Chalice, 2012), 42.

<sup>25</sup>I use the term "assumed" because Markham describes his research protocol in the following way: "Based on the target population's interest in social justice issues, the research sample was chosen from potential participants in the Mobilization to End Poverty event held in Washington, DC, from the twenty-sixth to the twenty-ninth of April 2009. The event was billed as a historic gathering of thousands of Christians coming together in a powerful movement committed to the biblical imperative of reducing domestic and global poverty." His protocol assumes that attendance at such an event can be correlated with being a New Evangelical. See Markham, "New Story," 12.

<sup>26</sup>Sixteen of those interviewed identified themselves as having no affiliation, and thirteen identified themselves as followers of Jesus. See Markham, "New Story," 14.

<sup>27</sup>Markham, "A Theology that Works," 42–43. A primary reason millennials reject labels is that labels are seen as a means of control. A more in-depth discussion of the reasons millennials reject labels is beyond the scope of this article. The point of this article is not to establish a label for millennial evangelicals, but rather to make them aware of the heritage they share in the larger narrative of evangelicalism.

<sup>28</sup>Markham, "New Story," 7.

publication of *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.<sup>29</sup> While acknowledging this narrative connection, the goal of this article is to acquaint New Evangelicals to the even larger nineteenth-century evangelical narrative and, in particular, one of the submovements in antebellum evangelicalism.

In order to establish this and awaken the New Evangelicals to this potentially rich heritage, it is crucial not to focus on just a particular policy position of New Evangelicals. No movement will have only one policy position. Rather, it is important to focus on the foundational principles that undergird their social activism. Irrespective of the issue, the social activism of New Evangelicals is built on the foundation of:

1. A clear separation of church and state through neutral constitutional law that protects religious freedom for everyone and avoids the politicization of the church.<sup>30</sup>

2. Bridge building through reaching out to people who are not part of their constituency in order to build coalitions “for the common good.”<sup>31</sup>

3. Self-identification as civil actors who advocate for their social agenda at times through public education, lobbying, coalition building, and negotiation, but most often through engaging in the economic, social, and charitable spheres of American life through the programs they develop and run largely through volunteerism.<sup>32</sup>

4. The church’s prophetic role to critique government and political parties and not be a partisan partner of them.<sup>33</sup>

5. Eschatologically, they are “not satisfied with just an evacuation plan that leaves the earth behind to be destroyed.” They desire to live as good, responsible citizens and, while they are here, entertain the possibility that, “through faith, contemporary crises can be faced and overcome.”<sup>34</sup>

### *Early Nineteenth-Century Evangelicalism*

Scholars take different views regarding the origins of American evangelicalism. Some believe that the Great Awakening introduced evangelicalism to American society.<sup>35</sup> Others, such as Mark Noll, believe that while injecting

<sup>29</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). In this publication, Henry addresses fundamentalism’s lack of humanitarian consciousness and their indifference to the social implications of their religious message. See Markham, “New Story,” 4–5.

<sup>30</sup>Pally, “Understanding the New Evangelicals Activism and Voting,” and Cizik, “My Journey,” 31.

<sup>31</sup>Cizik, “My Journey,” 30.

<sup>32</sup>Pally, “The New Evangelicals.”

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Brian McLaren, “The Church in America Today,” in *A New Evangelical Manifesto: A Kingdom Vision for the Common Good*, ed. David P. Gushee (St. Louis: Chalice, 2012), 6; Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelical*, 235.

<sup>35</sup>See Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 2; Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 27.

“an evangelical element into American churches, [the Great Awakening was] more successful at ending Puritanism than inaugurating evangelicalism.”<sup>36</sup> Determining whether American evangelicalism was introduced by the Great Awakening or by subsequent events is beyond the scope of this article. Regardless of its precise origins, most scholars agree that the story of American evangelicalism and its impact on American society really begins in the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

What created an environment for evangelicalism to flourish moving into the nineteenth century was the end of state-sponsored churches in America. The First Amendment to the federal Constitution reads in part, “Congress will make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”<sup>38</sup> This clause, along with similar clauses that also existed, soon found their way into nearly all the state constitutions, opening up a free marketplace of religion in America.<sup>39</sup> With this deregulation of religion, numerous groups that were previously only on the margins of American society began to capitalize on their new opportunities for ministry across previously closed parish boundaries.<sup>40</sup> One of the groups that benefitted the most was the Methodists.<sup>41</sup> According to Sweeney, “in 1770 fewer than one thousand Methodists lived in America.”<sup>42</sup> By 1820 that number had grown to 250,000 and doubled to a half a million members only ten years later.<sup>43</sup>

Noll attests that “from no where . . . and over a remarkably short span, Methodism became the most pervasive form of Christianity in the United States.”<sup>44</sup> The disestablishment clause and the subsequent growth of Methodism would profoundly impact American evangelicalism in the early nineteenth century.

The separation of church from state gave the church a new sphere from which to operate. Originally, some Christians, especially the Congregational and Presbyterian heirs of the New England Puritans, were frightened about disestablishment. They feared it would destroy the influence of Christianity on American cultural life. However, the burgeoning evangelical movement

<sup>36</sup>Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 193.

<sup>37</sup>See Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 185; William G. McLoughlin, *The American Evangelicals, 1800–1900: An Anthology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 1.

<sup>38</sup>Commager, Henry Steele, ed., *Documents of American History* (New York: F. S. Croft, 1938), 146.

<sup>39</sup>See Nicholas Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment: Dissenting Protestants and the Separation of the Church and State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 152–154.

<sup>40</sup>Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story*, 61.

<sup>41</sup>Baptists were the second fastest growing group. See *ibid.*, 64.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>Noll, *America’s God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 169.

in the beginning years of the nineteenth century would come to embrace the new social order that disestablishment produced.<sup>45</sup> As Pally attests, “There were [no longer] two terms, ‘church’ and ‘state,’ but now there were three terms, ‘church,’ ‘state’ and ‘civil society.’”<sup>46</sup> Evangelicals discovered that civil society was where things really happened in America and where they could make the deepest impact on society through voluntary associations.<sup>47</sup>

The exponential growth of Methodism aided by disestablishment would change the theological landscape of early nineteenth-century evangelicalism. Before disestablishment, the two major establishmentarian churches in America were the Presbyterians and Congregationalists, which were both Calvinist. As Methodism grew, it introduced Arminianism to American culture. Arminianism, with its hopeful concepts of free will and universal atonement, found a receptive audience. Balmer points out that Americans “who had only recently taken their political destiny into their own hands [believed] that they controlled their religious destiny as well.”<sup>48</sup> America was now ripe for the Second Great Awakening.

While the First Great Awakening planted the seeds for American evangelicalism, the Second Great Awakening shaped it in profound ways, the most significant being theologically.<sup>49</sup> The Arminian “free-will” strand of Protestantism in America embraced Hugo Grotius’s conception of the “moral government of God.” The moral government of God “expresses the belief that God Himself operates in a just and moral manner toward the beings He has created.”<sup>50</sup> The moral-government-of-God construct was a natural outgrowth of the Arminian concept of “free will.” As Nicholas Miller argues, “the moral government of God can function only in a universe of moral beings who have the freedom to make responsible moral choices . . . . Of course, fallen humans have lost the ability to make good moral choices, but through God’s prevenient grace they can make the one choice that matters—that of choosing God’s help. . . . [through this choice] true free will is restored, and they can once again make moral choices.”<sup>51</sup> Miller is making the case that the belief in human free will and the moral government of God are intertwined. Human “free will” and the moral government of God had a clear practical effect as those who held these joint views “began to seek civil freedoms and to expect high standards of morality from human governments.”<sup>52</sup> Methodists who

<sup>45</sup>Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 195–203.

<sup>46</sup>Civil society is the arena outside of the family, the state, and the market where people associate to advance common interest. See Pally, *The New Evangelicals*, 43.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 48, and Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), xv.

<sup>48</sup>Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 4.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>50</sup>Nicholas P. Miller, *The Reformation and the Remnant* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2016), 36–37.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 40–41.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 42.



embraced both human free will and the moral government of God were some of the most ardent supporters of abolitionism, women's rights, and many other reform movements during the antebellum period.<sup>53</sup>

Among the Calvinist strand of Protestantism, the acceptance of the doctrine of the moral government of God led some Congregationalist and Presbyterian theologians and pastors to embrace universal atonement and human free will.<sup>54</sup> They realized it was not possible to harmonize the Calvinistic view of predestination—with its inherent arbitrary view of God's sovereignty—with the concept of God's justice and fairness toward humanity. Nathaniel Taylor, a Congregationalist theological professor at Yale (1822–1858), is viewed as the father of what the Congregational Calvinists called the “‘New Haven Theology,’ and [what] the Presbyterians called [the] ‘New School Presbyterianism.’”<sup>55</sup> Taylor not only embraced the moral government of God theory, he also took it to its logical conclusion: “a truly moral God would provide opportunity for all to be saved.”<sup>56</sup> While Taylor is viewed as the father of the New Haven Theology/New School Presbyterianism, the Presbyterian, Albert Barnes, was perhaps the primary apologist for the new school. His numerous commentaries promoted the moral government of God along with universal atonement and human free will.<sup>57</sup>

However, it was the Presbyterian evangelist, Charles Grandison Finney, who embraced Congregationalism and brought Arminianism into the American mainstream.<sup>58</sup> Scholars debate whether Finney moved away from Calvinism because of theological or pragmatic reasons. Whatever his motivation, Finney's approach to revivalism was based on the Arminian soteriology that salvation was available to all and that, by the exercise of volition, anyone could repent and receive salvation. Finney's Arminianism (his insistence that individuals control their own religious destiny) connected with the growing American identification with rugged individualism and self-determinism.<sup>59</sup> Donald Dayton argues that “this implied new role for the human will and a new emphasis on human ability . . . when transported into the social sphere . . . meant that God had given men and women a role in the

<sup>53</sup>Gaustad, *Rise of Adventism*, 47.

<sup>54</sup>Miller, *Reformation and the Remnant*, 46.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 46–47.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>57</sup>For Seventh-day Adventists, there is a connection between pastors and theologians of the New School and the development of Seventh-day Adventist theology. Miller claims “there can be little doubt that Ellen White was heir to a moral government of God outlook both through her Methodist roots and through her acquaintance with Barnes's commentaries” (ibid., 48).

<sup>58</sup>McLoughlin, *The American Evangelicals*, 11–12.

<sup>59</sup>Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 23.

shaping of society.”<sup>60</sup> That is just what Finney’s converts set out to do. The Second Great Awakening unleashed a passion for social reform.<sup>61</sup>

While representative of the general spirit of evangelicalism during the period of the Second Great Awakening, it would be historically inaccurate to suggest that antebellum evangelicalism manifested itself as a singular movement. Curtis D. Johnson has shown that there were at least three distinct movements in antebellum evangelicalism: (1) Formalist, (2) Anti-formalist, and (3) Black evangelicals. Each movement had differing approaches to, among other things, ecclesiology and social activism.<sup>62</sup> In the interest of full disclosure I must also add a disclaimer. The contributions of many antebellum evangelicals made “1830 to 1860 . . . the greatest age of reform enthusiasm the nation has ever known.”<sup>63</sup> Yet, numerous other antebellum evangelicals participated in “ethnocentrism, racism, the slave trade, discrimination, and segregation.”<sup>64</sup> Most of these evangelicals were “Old School Presbyterians.” Old School Princeton theologians like Charles Hodge, who adhered to the Calvinistic school of rigid orthodoxy, defended existing institutions, including but not limited to slavery. “New School” theologians, such as Nathaniel Taylor and Albert Barnes, who embraced the moral government of God and free will, were outspoken abolitionists. Finney’s Oberlin College was founded in part to oppose and work against slavery. However, the intent of this article is not to follow all the movements and submovements in the antebellum evangelical narrative. Rather my goal is to focus on the one that can serve as a theological and historical heritage for New Evangelicals in the larger narrative of evangelicalism. It is my contention that the theology and revivalistic preaching typified by Finney and his colleagues spawned the growth of a submovement in antebellum evangelicalism that offers a public narrative, which New Evangelicals can embrace as part of their larger evangelical heritage.

### *Finney’s Antebellum Evangelicalism*

While, generally speaking, the Second Great Awakening unleashed a passion for social reform throughout America, it was more prominent in Northern towns and cities, and particularly in New York, where Finney was the leader of the revivalistic movement.<sup>65</sup> Like numerous new school pastors

<sup>60</sup>Donald Dayton, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 63–64.

<sup>61</sup>See *ibid.*, 61–73; Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 20–25; McLoughlin, *The American Evangelicals*, 10–12; Sweeney, *American Evangelical Story*, 67–70.

<sup>62</sup>Curtis D. Johnson, *Redeeming America: Evangelicals and the Road to Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee), 7–8.

<sup>63</sup>McLoughlin, “Revivalism,” in *The Rise of Adventism: A Commentary on the Social and Religious Ferment of Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, ed. Edwin Scott Gaustad (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 145.

<sup>64</sup>Sweeney, *American Evangelical Story*, 108.

<sup>65</sup>See Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 197–198; Sweeney, *American Evangelical Story*, 66–76.

and theologians who embraced free will and the moral government of God, Finney believed that the spirit of every true Christian “is necessarily that of the reformer. To the universal reformation of the world they stand committed.”<sup>66</sup> Though he was always first and foremost a revivalist, Finney understood that revival and reform were inseparably linked. Revival always brought with it an impulse for reform. Finney was careful to always put reform before revival. He also recognized that resistance to reform was an obstacle to revival, arguing “revivals are hindered when ministers and churches take wrong ground in regard to any question involving human rights.”<sup>67</sup> In particular, he had slavery in mind, insisting that “the church cannot turn away from this question.”<sup>68</sup>

Finney’s adoption and adaptation of another Methodist doctrine, perfectionism, intensified the impulse for moral reform among his converts. Methodism had promoted John Wesley’s concept of “perfect love,” since the eighteenth century. However, it was not until “the later 1830s and 1840s—when a new generation of preachers such as Rev. James Caughey (1810–91) and Phoebe Palmer (1807–74) repackaged the doctrine for mass consumption.”<sup>69</sup> As he had done with Arminianism, it was Finney who brought the concept of perfectionism more fully into American evangelicalism. The promise of man’s perfectibility, combined with social idealism, released a deep passion and a mighty impulse for social reform.<sup>70</sup> Finney’s converts—both men and women—“became active participants in almost every forward movement of their time.”<sup>71</sup>

The natural outlet for this impulse was the formation of interdenominational benevolent societies.<sup>72</sup> It is important to note that, in addressing issues of social justice, antebellum evangelicals did not primarily seek to align with political parties. Neither Whigs nor Democrats could claim to be the party of the evangelicals.<sup>73</sup> Instead of perusing political alignment, antebellum evangelicals, through their benevolent societies operating in the realm of civil society, served a prophetic role as a critic of government and not a partisan partner with political parties. Various benevolent reform societies “effectively channeled the religious energies of the converted into the doing

<sup>66</sup>McLoughlin, *The American Evangelicals*, 12.

<sup>67</sup>Dayton, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 65.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Sweeney, *American Evangelical Story*, 136.

<sup>70</sup>McLoughlin, *The American Evangelicals*, 12; Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 4; Timothy Lawrence Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-nineteenth-century America* (New York: Abingdon, 1957), 15.

<sup>71</sup>William Warren Sweet, *Revivalism in America, Its Origin, Growth and Decline* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1944), 160, as quoted in Dayton, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 75.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>73</sup>Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 132.

of good for the whole society.<sup>74</sup> Much of this activity and energy was aimed at intemperance and slavery through the formation of the American Anti-Slavery Society (1833) and the American Temperance Union (1836).<sup>75</sup> Smith argues that “Finney won as many converts to the cause [of abolitionism] as did William Lloyd Garrison.”<sup>76</sup> Certainly some of Finney’s converts played major roles in the movement. Timothy Weld trained “agents” for the American Anti-Slavery Society; “Arthur Tappan [was the] first president of the American Anti-Slavery Society; and Joshua Levitt was the editor first of *The Evangelist* and then *The Emancipator*.”<sup>77</sup> Add to these names a vast array of new converts who became new recruits for the army of reform.<sup>78</sup>

However, these were not the only causes that these antebellum evangelicals invested their time and energy in. In Rochester, NY, evangelical women, empowered by Finney’s practice of allowing them to pray and speak in open meetings,<sup>79</sup> created “the Female Charitable Society to aid the poor, the Female Moral Reform Society to redeem prostitutes, the Rochester Orphan Society to rescue the parentless, and the Female Anti-Slavery Society.”<sup>80</sup>

These examples exemplify the broad social consciousness of one of the movements within antebellum evangelicalism and their expansive social agenda. Throughout the antebellum period these evangelicals, through civil society volunteerism, bolstered education through common school advocacy, assisted in founding special needs institutions, led the campaign to end dueling, worked for the rehabilitation of criminals, opposed government attempts to relocate Native Americans, and made important contributions to feminism, the peace movement, the doctrine of civil disobedience, and many other reforms of the era.<sup>81</sup> In fact, most major antebellum reform movements had “a strong evangelical component.”<sup>82</sup> Numerous books and articles have been devoted to evangelicals like Theodore Dwight Weld, Frank and Arthur Tappan, Orange Scott, and Luther Lee, who were powerful leaders in many of these benevolent societies. However, I believe the argument that Gilbert Barnes has made in the context of abolitionism is applicable to all of these societies and their impact on American culture. The impact [of these societies] “was accomplished not so much by heroes of reform as by very obscure

<sup>74</sup>Noll, *America’s God*, 185.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 183.

<sup>76</sup>Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 180.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 181.

<sup>78</sup>McLoughlin, “Revivalism,” 145.

<sup>79</sup>Dayton, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 63, 138.

<sup>80</sup>Johnson, *Redeeming America*, 96–97.

<sup>81</sup>See Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 30; Dayton, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 90–93, 98; Johnson, *Redeeming America*, 159; Sweeney, *American Evangelical Story*, 74–75.

<sup>82</sup>Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 2.

persons, prompted by an impulse religious in character and evangelical in spirit.”<sup>83</sup>

In their effort to reform society, these antebellum evangelicals were willing to build bridges by reaching out to people outside of their constituency in order to create coalitions for the common good. Evangelicals and Unitarians formed an alliance to kindle the first blaze of abolitionism that swept over the nation. It was not uncommon for Unitarians to speak “against slavery in evangelical pulpits.”<sup>84</sup> However, the alliance did end in 1845 when William Lloyd Garrison “ousted the evangelicals from the American Anti-Slavery Society.”<sup>85</sup> Another example of evangelical bridge building for the common good was alliance with the Congregationalist-turned-Unitarian, Horace Mann, in support of public education.<sup>86</sup>

Most of the reform efforts of these antebellum evangelicals were aimed at those on the margins of society—slaves, Native Americans, women, the poor, the orphan, prisoner, and those with special needs.<sup>87</sup> Even temperance reform was an expression of “real concern for the outcasts of society.”<sup>88</sup>

At least some mention must be given to the influence of postmillennialism on each submovement within antebellum evangelicalism. With the exception of the Millerites, antebellum evangelicals were postmillennialist. Conversely, bellum evangelicals en masse adopted a dispensational premillennial eschatology following the Civil War. Since Marsden notes that from “1865 to about 1900 interest in [social] activism diminished, though it did not disappear among revivalist evangelicals,”<sup>89</sup> many assume that postmillennialism fueled the fires of antebellum reform and bellum premillennialism put out the fire. However,

<sup>83</sup>Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds., *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké and Sarah Grimké, 1822–1844* (Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1965), xvi, as quoted in Dayton, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 77.

<sup>84</sup>Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 181.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid. An exploration of why William Lloyd Garrison took this step is beyond the scope of this article. However a primary factor was that Garrison would ultimately deny the plenary inspiration of the Bible. He stated, “The human mind is greater than any book. The mind sits in judgment on every book. If there be truth in the book, we take it; if error, we discard it. Why refer this to the Bible? In this country, the Bible has been used to support slavery and capital punishment; while in the old countries, it has been quoted to sustain all manner of tyranny and persecution. All reforms are anti-Bible.” Additionally, the indifference of many clergymen to the slavery issue brought Garrison into open conflict with orthodox churches. See Massachusetts Historical Society, “William Lloyd Garrison Papers,” January 2007, <http://www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fa0278> and Freedom from Religion Foundation, “William Lloyd Garrison,” n.d., <https://ffrf.org/news/day/dayitems/item/14699-william-lloyd-garrison>.

<sup>86</sup>Johnson, *Redeeming America*, 28–29.

<sup>87</sup>See Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 82.

<sup>88</sup>Dayton, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 153.

<sup>89</sup>George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 86.

such a view does not take into account other extenuating circumstances in the late nineteenth century that led to the retreat of evangelicals from social issues.<sup>90</sup> Nor does it address the fact that there are examples of premillennial antebellum evangelicals and bellum evangelicals who were engaged in social reform.<sup>91</sup>

Clearly, there were factors other than postmillennialism that fanned the flame for social amelioration among Finney's antebellum evangelicals. One factor that should not be underestimated is the Arminian soteriology that undergirded Finney's revivalism. As noted earlier, Arminianism gave a new role to human will and human ability. When applied to social reform it implied a God-given role to men and women in the shaping of society. Second, belief in the moral government of God led people to pursue civil freedoms and to hold government to high moral standards. A third factor that must be taken into account is another Wesleyan doctrine incorporated by Finney, the concept of "perfect love"/perfectionism. The theory of perfectionism, combined with social idealism, led to an intense impulse for social reform.

Postmillennialism, Arminianism, the moral government of God, and perfectionism were all factors in the passion and labor of Finney's converts for social justice. Yet, perhaps there was something at an even deeper level that drove their passion for social reform. The editor of the *Zion Herald* declared in 1854 "that spirituality must be expressed in irreproachable morality and unceasing efforts to reform society, lest the adversaries of Christ be permitted to appear more interested in the welfare of mankind than the friends of the gospel."<sup>92</sup> As Timothy P. Webber suggests, American evangelicalism tradition has "an enormous Christian compassion" and the "conviction that the converted should express their new life in Christ through acts of love and social involvement."<sup>93</sup>

### Conclusion

The pressing concern of this article was to explore a theological and historical heritage for New Evangelicalism that could serve as a point of connection between it and the larger evangelical narrative. This is crucial because personal and public narratives are how individual and corporate identities are formed.

<sup>90</sup>These include but are not limited to the rise of Darwinism and the historical-critical method, as well as the perceived liberal agenda of the social gospel. See Dayton, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 171–180; Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 92; Sweeny, *American Evangelical Story*, 162–163.

<sup>91</sup>Following the "Great Disappointment," the band of Adventists who would ultimately form the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1863 were avowed premillennialists that were also radical abolitionists. The Salvation Army is an example of bellum premillennialists who were also active social reformers. See Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 36.

<sup>92</sup>Timothy P. Webber, *Living in the Shadow of the 2nd Coming: American Premillennialism 1875–1982* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 97.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

Millennials' rejection of the evangelical narrative of the last four decades is causing them to discard their evangelical heritage. This puts them at risk of losing both their personal and corporate identities.

The salient point of the account of antebellum evangelicalism and, in particular, the movement kindled by Finney and his converts, is to offer this to New Evangelicals as a valuable model. Though there are contemporary nuances, the socially progressive form of New Evangelicalism has a heritage extending back to nineteenth-century antebellum evangelicalism. On one level, this can be seen in the passion of both antebellum evangelicals and New Evangelicals for social justice, particularly for those who are on the margins of society. At a deeper level, this is seen in the foundational principles that undergird social activism. The five foundational principles of social activism that are central to New Evangelicals: church/state separation, bridge building, volunteerism, the prophetic role of the church, and a passion to live as good, responsible citizens of earth while they are here, are not entirely new. Rather, they are versions of the same foundational principles upon which the social activism of antebellum evangelicals and, in particular, the submovement led by Finney and his colleagues were built.

The connection of millennial evangelicals to a broader evangelical public narrative offers them an opportunity to have their individual and corporate identities formed by a shared heritage with those who have gone before.