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Anatomy of a Presbyterian Urban Revival: J.W. Chapman in the Pacific Northwest

by Dale E. Soden

THE UNDERSTANDING OF urban revivalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been dominated by the remarkable figures of Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday. These two evangelists were so influential that most American historians have described revivalism almost exclusively from the perspective of these two personalities. The effect has been to minimize the attention paid to other popular evangelists of the time such as B. Fay Mills, Reuben A. Torrey, Charles Alexander, and J. Wilbur Chapman. More specifically the attention paid to Moody and Sunday has created the general impression that all successful evangelists worked in the mode of a single preacher creating an exciting tabernacle experience, punctuated by gospel-singing, and ending with an appeal to the masses to convert to Christianity. The other facet that is commonly associated with urban revivalism of the early twentieth century is that evangelists had totally divorced themselves from social issues. The general understanding is that the advocates of the Social Gospel were pitted in a fierce struggle against the proponents of evangelical religion.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, specific urban revivals have received relatively little scrutiny from historians. Specific revivals have not been studied with the idea of proving more conclusively the relationship between revivalists and social concerns in the early twentieth century. William McLoughlin and Bernard Weisberger have made significant contributions to the phenomena of revivalism in the early twentieth century, but have not written extensively about particular revivals. Lefferts Loetscher, forty years ago, examined revivalism in Philadelphia since the mid-nineteenth century, but not much has been done since.¹

This essay examines a specific urban revival in Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, in March and April, 1905. Led by one of the major Presbyterian evangelists in the nation, J. Wilbur Chapman, the revivals in these two cities reveal a much greater complexity in the strategy and content of the efforts to shape the religious experience of urban dwellers. Chapman was the foremost advocate of a specialized team-approach to revivalism. Consisting of evangelists who focused on groups ranging from children and middle class businessmen to skid row inhabitants and blue-collar workers, the Chapman team attempted to proselytize an entire city. Convinced that people were not at-



J. Wilbur Chapman

tracted to the same experience, Chapman helped orchestrate tent revivals, large cathedral gatherings, marches through red light districts, and small rallies and lectures.

The remarkable aspect of Chapman's technique is that it allowed him to approach revivalism from a situational perspective. Chapman clearly hoped that he could present the Gospel in a way that would be palatable to many different groups and avoid alienating the middle class. This is no more clearly reflected than in the fact that among the team of revivalists Chapman brought to Portland and Seattle was Charles Stelzle, the principal spokesman for the Social Gospel within the Presbyterian church. Stelzle's advocacy of union support and his critique of capitalism could be heard in one part of the city, while the message of repentance and salvation would be preached by Chapman in the large middle class churches.

In fact, Chapman's specialized approach to revivalism has received very little attention from historians of American religion. This essay explores Chapman's

techniques and the varied responses they engendered. Neither historians of revivalism nor Chapman's biographer has acknowledged that this specialization allowed Chapman to include a social activist such as Stelzle. At the very least, Chapman's revivals in the Pacific Northwest provide further evidence that as late as 1905, evangelicals were still comfortable associating themselves with issues linked to the Social Gospel.

The classic urban revival model was established by Dwight Moody beginning in the 1870s. The Moody model centered on creating an exciting tabernacle experience with the focus being on Moody himself supported by outstanding singing led by Ira Sankey. The culmination of the event was the altar call that would hopefully, for Moody, lead to the conversion of thousands of people. In large part, this style was adopted by Billy Sunday and later by Billy Graham.

Typically, Moody would have a team of workers begin preparations for his revival months in advance. The choir, always a key element, was composed of between 600 and 1,000 persons who were divided into two or three groups that would sing on alternate evenings. Generally another 100 to 200 young men were trained as ushers with duties ranging from caring for women who fainted to silencing crying children. Large auditoriums and not churches were desired by Moody, particularly in his early years to house the large crowds. This was due not only to the fact that Moody wanted to be able to seat more people, but he was also concerned about not appearing too sectarian. The auditoriums were arranged to provide space for "inquiry" rooms where individuals could receive in-depth counseling from specially trained church leaders from the local community. The auditorium's focal point was the platform where Moody's lectern and Bible were center stage. Space for the choir, Ira Sankey's cabinet organ, and newspaper reporters was provided on the platform.2

William McLoughlin has argued that Moody was successful because he supported the preconceived notions of middle class urbanites that the capitalist system worked. "Professional revivalism of this sort was an effective stress-relief mechanism for the majority in these vears," McLoughlin argued. "Until the 1890s, evangelists (and their audiences) continued to believe complacently that this was the best of all possible worlds; God was in his heaven, and all was right with America."3 Moody's principal message was one of repentance. He did not preach a harsh Calvinism but simply exhorted his listeners to believe that Christ had died for their sins.4

I. Wilbur Chapman was a student of Moody's approach during the late nineteenth century and worked with him on a number of occasions. Educated at Oberlin College, Lake Forest and Lane Seminary, Chapman began organizing revivals in 1892 after serving a number of Presbyterian parishes. By 1899, Chapman was called to serve the Fourth Presbyterian Church of New York. While pastor of this large congregation, Chapman's national reputation increased and by 1901 he was appointed by the moderator of the General Assembly to a special committee to promote evangelism nationwide. The committee helped organize revivals in the mission districts of nearly twenty states. Chapman helped supervise some fifty-six evangelists, singers, and other support personnel. By 1903 this work was extended throughout the country. While being influenced by Moody in a number of ways, Chapman's work on this committee stimulated his experimentation with a different approach to revivals. Working with so many revivalists, Chapman became enamored, as perhaps no other revivalist before or since, with the concept of specialization. By 1904, Chapman was ready to implement his thinking and for the next five years he attempted to evangelize many of the major cities in the United States.5

While Chapman's biographer does not

make a specific connection, it seems probable that the evangelist was influenced by the overall culture of the Progressive period. Clearly the values of specialization and efficiency dominated the thinking of people in every field from business to city government. It has been suggested that a "culture of professionalization," which was based on specialized training and education, was the key to the rising middle class establishing its power.6 Numerous reform movements from the commission form of government to city manager systems were based on the value of specialization. Certainly the ministry was not oblivious to these currents of thought and clearly I.W. Chapman was convinced that specialization might be the key to urban revivalism.

In 1904, Chapman took seventeen evangelists to Pittsburgh and divided the city into nine districts. By 1905, he was set for a major push and scheduled revivals in Atlanta, Denver, Los Angeles, Portland and Seattle. He brought together a number of leading evangelists as well as individuals who seemed best suited for a particular constituency or group. For example Chapman's group in 1905 included, in addition to Stelzle, W.E. Biederwolf. Billed as an exathlete. Biederwolf would later become one of America's leading revivalists and ardent fundamentalists. Dr. R.A. Walton was a southern Presbyterian and Rev. Henry Ostrom a Methodist. Rev. H.W. Stough and C.T. Schaeffer specialized in children's evangelism. Rev. Daniel Toy was a reformed alcoholic and gambler; he was given the task of addressing the less than respectable element as was Rev. Tillman Hobson, a Quaker who somewhat ironically was a Spanish-American war hero. Chapman was always quick to tell the press how specialized his group was.

Our party is so made up that we can assign one man to every department of work.... One has to approach different characters of men and women in a way that meets their condition, there is no necessity for telling the poor sinner of the slums, the drunken and abandoned man

or woman suffering from degradation and an outcast that he or she is a sinner. They know it well enough. What we have to do with them is show that there is a way out of their condition. It is with the moralist and clean man that an argument must be made to show that he still lacks something.⁷

Chapman clearly hoped that specialization would enable Christianity to make inroads in areas where it had been stymied.

By the time the Chapman party reached Portland, they had previously held major revivals in Atlanta, Denver, and Los Angeles where reportedly in each city approximately three to six thousand converts were made.8 Once in Portland, and again in Seattle, Chapman and his team organized the city into nine districts. More specifically Chapman had developed four modes of attracting an audience and communicating his messages of salvation, moral reform, and social improvement. These included semi-impromptu services under a big tent, highly organized services in the large congregations, well publicized marches through sections of town and finally small rallies, gatherings and meetings designed to address a particular group such as working class men, women, children, skid row residents and the mid-

Use of the "Gospel Tent" in revival had been a long part of the American religious experience. It was typified by fiery preaching that attempted to appeal to the emotions; generally it was loosely organized which allowed the leader to build his own momentum and utilize whatever strategy seemed most appropriate to achieve the greatest success. Success itself was traditionally measured in new converts and/or the level of enthusiasm generated in the crowd.

In Seattle, there were a number of large tents strategically placed in the downtown area on those early spring evenings in 1905. Typical of what transpired in the tent was reported in the Seattle newspapers on the first two evenings of the revival. On the first night, 11 April, a large group congregated in one of the downtown tents. "It

was a hurried gathering," reported one newspaper, "a commingling of Salvation Army enthusiasm, noise and song with a prayer and preaching service."9 On the second night of the revival one of the tent experiences was led by the Reverend Daniel Toy. Once a hardened gambler and alcoholic, Toy was believed by Chapman to be particularly able to reach the social deviants who might wander into the tent. On this particular evening, the air was quite brisk and the wind was strong enough to shake the tent periodically. And Toy certainly used the climatological circumstances to his advantage. ". . . I guess I'd just as soon go to heaven from Seattle as from any other city, so let the tent come down if it will," Toy preached. Described by one reporter as having "eyes fairly ablaze with determination, and a voice that trembles with emotion," Toy seemed fully in control of the crowd as he asked them to ask for forgiveness and turn their lives over to Christ.10

Toy had been an equally exciting attraction in Portland if not more so. The Oregonian provided the details of Toy's life story after he preached his message of repentance and reform. The ex-alcoholic vividly described his family circumstances that led him to drink but acknowledged his full responsibility in the matter. He proceeded to recite one tragic occurrence after another which resulted in his alcoholism and a suicidal tendency. It was only a chance meeting with a Christian in Philadelphia that saved him from an early death. Thereafter he was able to renounce the ways of the world and take up the task of trying to save others.11

Toy seems to have played a critical role for the Chapman team; he apparently satisfied middle class expectations that a major purpose of the revival was moral regeneration among the social misfits of the community. Although there seems to be no overt public expression of this expectation in the newspapers, the amount of attention given to Toy seems to reveal a fascination on the part of the middle class for

the seamy side of urban life. Perhaps equally important was the fact that Toy's life story and the manner in which he told it were capable of being sensationalized to some extent. In an era when "yellow journalism" was not uncommon, the fact that Toy could attract publicity was important for the revival as a whole.

If the tent experience and in particular the message of Daniel Toy were important relative to the enthusiasm and visibility of the revival, the large congregational experience was crucial to the success of the revival relative to the middle class. This was a second distinctive approach to the revival. Again one finds some link with the Progressive period. Consistently seen as a reform period of the middle classes, Progressive reformers attempted to separate themselves from the wild-eyed enthusiasm of Populists. This sense of propriety can also be detected in Chapman's approach. He made sure that his group was not perceived as an assortment of frontier itinerant preachers who would say or do anything to attract a crowd. "We are not a sensational party of preachers as some people insist on calling us," Chapman told Seattle reporters upon his arrival. "At least we are not sensational in a ridiculous and outrageous way, although there are many that consider our way of telling the truth sensational."12 At the very least he wanted to make this message clear to his middle class audiences.

The major Protestant churches in town were selected as the sites for the revival in both Portland and Seattle. In Portland, following the first night, the *Oregonian* commented:

Every seat in the big church was filled.... The preacher knows what moment to choose, and after he had spoken and while the house was silent with the stillness of death, men and women in the audience rose up one by one until scores were standing. They asked for prayers. From that moment dates the "awakening" in Portland. 13

Always well organized, the services in the sanctuaries included excellent musical performances and often Chapman himself

would deliver the message. This particular mode was very similar to the style employed by Moody. Typical of the many congregational gatherings was one at Seattle's First Presbyterian Church.

Though crowded to the doors by a throng that stood in the aisles and open ways until the service concluded, the gathering at the First Presbyterian Church contained the residence district people. There were attractive gowns and well-groomed men in the audience, the song service was of high order and the evangelists appeal was fitted to his audience.¹⁴

It was a message that affirmed middle class values and attacked the traditional vices; repeatedly, however, Chapman emphasized the importance in trusting in the Savior.¹⁵

The third mode appropriated by the Chapman team was the march into the red-light district. In some ways this mode capitalized on the work of Daniel Toy and the publicity he generated with his work among the indigents. But in other ways

Present-Day Evangelism

By J. WILBUR CHAPMAN

NEW YORK: THE BAKER & TAYLOR CO. 33-37 East Seventeenth St., Union Sq. North

this experiment in bringing the Gospel to the "heathen" operated differently. For one thing the march allowed a great many middle class Christians to band together in almost crusade like fashion. In fact the notion that somehow the red-light district or tenderloin could be liberated was very much a part of the rhetoric. In Seattle the march took place on 17 April. On that evening, a crowd estimated a more than 15,000 took to the streets and marched through the red-light district hoping to make converts. The Salvation Army furnished a marching band and each of the nine districts that Chapman had divided the city into provided a contingent of marchers. It was reported to be the most remarkable evangelistic demonstration in Seattle history. As they marched up and down the streets of the district, the evangelists were met by ladies of the night and saloon patrons curious about the commotion.

The procession was headed by the First Presbyterian contingent, so many people that there was no one who would give an estimate. This part of the line was headed by Wagner's band and was led by Dr. Chapman. Dr. Matthews, Dr. Wharton and a number of other ministers were in line at the head of the detachment.¹⁶

Dr. Matthews was Mark Matthews who helped organize the revival and who was in the process of building the largest congregation in the denomination at First Presbyterian in Seattle with close to 10,000 members.

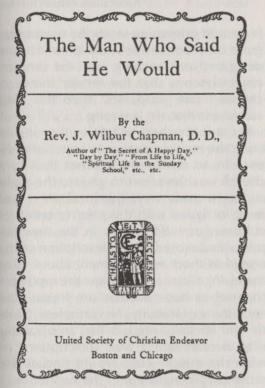
On the afternoon of the following day, 18 April, C.T. Schaeffer led a children's parade. It was estimated that 100 boys and girls came marching in the formation of a cross and were followed by another 1,000 as they marched through the business district. Periodically Schaeffer would yell to the marchers, "How many of you can honestly say, 'I love Jesus,' put up your hands," with all of the children responding enthusiastically. At the end of the march, Rev. Stough told the children that God had "more interest in the boys and girls of Seattle than in any others." This

was because they would be the future leaders in the church. Subsequently he proceeded to tell them the story of the Crusades in the Middle Ages when Christians marched off to recover the tomb of Christ from the Moslems.¹⁷

The last mode used by the Chapman group was the small rally and lecture to a particular group by a religious specialist. On the surface Chapman's basic message did not appear to be very complex. He argued that all one needed was to accept Christ and work for a righteous community. Chapman frequently emphasized how traditional he was and how accessible his message was. "There are two things I will not do," said Chapman, "and that is, I won't allow anyone to tell me the days of revival are over, for they have just begun, and I will not preach a denominational sermon. I am first, last and all the time a Christian."18 Yet Chapman believed that in order to be successful the gospel message must be tailored to specific audiences. Chapman believed you must take the message out of the cathedral and into unfamiliar environments.

Chapman's commitment to bringing the message of Christianity to people in unusual places apparently stemmed back to his work in Philadelphia. In the 1890s Chapman was an enthusiastic participant in the institutional church movement. Specifically this meant that the church itself should be organized into a number of departments that served a variety of spiritual and social needs. As the pastor of Bethany Church in Philadelphia, Chapman helped develop a hospital, and an industrial bureau which provided for the sick and unemployed. Bethany College was developed under the auspices of the church for the purpose of providing a variety of educational opportunities from physical geography and architecture to dressmaking and domestic science.19

By the time Chapman was organizing his team of evangelists in 1905, his personal involvement with issues of social concern had waned. William McLoughlin has de-



scribed Chapman's approach to social issues as "conservative in the extreme [and only committed to] soul-winning, inculcating personal morality, and encouraging almsgiving."20 Certainly the sermons he preached in Portland and Seattle had very little social criticism beyond the question of personal vice. Yet McLoughlin's judgment seems too strong. Chapman must have been somewhat sympathetic to the issues of social Christianity or he would not have brought Charles Stelzle to the Pacific Northwest. In 1903, Stelzle had been called by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. to a special mission to workingmen. For the next ten years Stelzle worked to improve relations between the clergy and the labor force.

Stelzle devoted only one chapter in his autobiography to his evangelistic experiences, but he reflected on his commitment to bringing social Christianity into a context of revivalism.

I have a conviction that the right kind of an evangelist, who has a message which is broad and deep and thoroughly evangelist, but with a social spirit backed by knowledge of social conditions and principles, could win his way in every community in this country. He would

need to be frank in his criticism of workingmen, of employers, of churches, of civic conditions, giving credit where credit was due and pointing the way to higher and better things with no visionary programs but with practical plans for utilizing the agencies in existence."²¹

As suggested earlier, Stelzle had earned a national reputation for his support for unionization and his work among the laboring class. In both Seattle and Portland, Stelzle's message was one of reconciliation between working men and management, and also labor unions and the church. Stelzle expressed great concern about the inroads that socialism had made on Christianity because the church was not responding directly to the needs of working class Americans. Stelzle would attack socialism for being non-Christian but he would also attack the clergy for being insensitive to the problems of the poor.

Personally I will acknowledge that the average minister would be hopelessly lost if he were suddenly confronted with the problem of taking care of a convent of the slums. He doesn't know what goes on down there. He doesn't know the terrible life those people live. He doesn't understand their temptations and how they must be led carefully back into the right path.²²

On a number of occasions Stelzle exhorted his middle class listeners to apply a Christian ethic to the system of capitalism. "We should make the workingman understand that the church does not uphold the present social system if it is wrong," Stelzle argued. "That we stand simply for the principles of Jesus Christ applied to society in all its ramifications. That we favor only so much of the present system as will stand the test of these principles." ²³

Stelzle seems to have been well received in both Seattle and Portland. Stelzle's method of operation was to visit working halls, shops, and major businesses. In both cities he organized meetings of delegates from labor organizations with delegates from the cities' ministerial alliances.²⁴ On only one occasion did Stelzle meet significant opposition and that occurred when one business banned

him from speaking after the owners heard that he was a member of the International Association of Machinists.²⁵ However, in general, Stelzle met almost daily with labor unions and held several large rallies which stressed the responsibility of the church to the workingman and the necessity for certain pieces of social reform.²⁶

The Chapman revival team specialized in other areas in addition to the working man. W.J. Walton "is a member of the party that may be called the woman specialist." ²⁷ In both cities, Walton would meet frequently with all-women's groups and preach a fairly consistent message; he argued that God had women "placed in the world for the uplifting of mankind." ²⁸ He stressed repeatedly the responsibility of women for building the character of young men and women while providing a wholesome home environment. There was no evidence that any of the evangelists supported women's suffrage.

W.E. Biederwolf was described in the newspaper to be particularly expert at addressing the concerns of men. Part of the method was again to separate this particular group and meet their specific needs. "He [Bierderwolf] knows just how to get their attention and even before he begins his address he wins their confidence...," said one reporter. "There is no 'college' in his talks. With every-day language, using plain and simple arguments, he handles anything else in straight, business style." 29 Describing the evangelist as the one he liked best, Charles Stelzle spoke fondly of Biederwolf's "wholesome human characteristics."30 Biederwolf's message, as well as that of most of the other revivalists, was one of self-discipline. Men are called "to this strenuous life" of controlling the self. "If self be really under control," said revivalist Henry Ostrom, "then you are practically a victor everywhere."31

C.T. Schaeffer was often referred to in the press as the children's evangelist. He would organize gatherings of different age groups and the sexes would often be divided as they were for the adults. Schaeffer would primarily preach the message of good behavior and self-discipline. He was described as preaching "just the simplest object lessons that the tender minds of children can grasp, and then the plain statement that sin is wrong. . . ."³²

Perhaps the best example of trying to bring the revival message to a special audience in an environment other than in a church was the effort to go into the night clubs. In many ways the local press was most intrigued with this confrontation of cultures; as much space in the newspapers was devoted to the description of the crowd as there was comment about what the evangelists said. Perhaps the reporters themselves had never before frequented such dens of iniquity. Nevertheless, Seattle and Portland readers had an opportunity to read rather vivid descriptions of what the middle class would find as the more sordid night life in the two cities.

Through the curtains of the boxes there were to be had glimpses of benevolent-faced houris and 'representative business men' discussing bottled beer. On the ground floor was collected the motliest array of male humanity which the North End can turn out, and all the time cash registers were doing their best.³³

This crowd of people was met with a group of singing evangelists and the "crowd began removing hats, and with exceptions maintained quiet." The preaching continued to emphasize middle class virtues. "He talked manhood, respect for women, love for little children and the wisdom of being decent."34 Chapman himself addressed more than 2,000 at the Strand Theater, a noted night club in Seattle.35 "From the boxes the women of the place looked on with interest. Some of them wept when the speaker touched some forgotten chord of the past." When Chapman asked for a show of hands of those who desired prayer, it was reported that one third of the audience did so and then knelt in prayer.36

The Chapman revival seems to have been fairly well received in the press and in the community as a whole. There was

apparently no major upsurge in church attendance nor a sudden outburst of moral reform however. Editorials during the course of the revival were generally favorable, although there was some ambivalence toward what was perceived as excessive moralism.37 The Oregonian became involved in a minor controversy when it criticized the extent to which Rev. Toy revealed the rather lurid details of his life story. "Most people are decent people and moral people," the editor argued. "They have an invincible repugnance to exhorters who undertake to preach virtue and morality and religion by telling how bad they themselves have been."38 Otherwise, the revivals did not seem to generate much controversy and were generally regarded as a positive phenomena.

A closer look at Chapman's revivals in the Pacific Northwest reveals two important points. First Chapman recognized that specialization and professionalization were key ingredients in urban and middle class culture. Undoubtedly Progressivism exerted some influence on Chapman's thinking. More so than any other evangelist before or since, Chapman attempted to adapt the revival experience to these new values. And second, this technique of specialization allowed Chapman to incorporate social concerns in the form of Charles Stelzle's preaching in a manner that has not been acknowledged by other historians. Chapman himself was not an advocate of the Social Gospel, and his sermons never threatened middle class assumptions. He fought against personal vice but was not strongly committed to broader social legislation. However, his link with Stelzle provides evidence of some of his sympathies and suggests his willingness to at least be associated with the concerns of social Christianity.

J. Wilbur Chapman's experience in the Pacific Northwest should remind historians of how complex the urban religious response was in the early twentieth century. The interplay of political, social, and intellectual forces in the Progressive period makes it important to examine the work of some of the less studied religious figures in order to gain a more complete understanding of the period.

NOTES

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17 Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 19 April 1905.

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- 21 Charles Selzle, A Son of the Bowery (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1926), p. 215.

²² Seattle Times, 16 April 1905.

²³ Ibid., 17 April 1905.

24 Ibid.

- ²⁵ Ibid., 14 April 1905.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 18 April 1905.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 16 April 1905.
- 28 Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 13 April 1905. ²⁹ Portland Oregonian, 26 March 1905.
- 30 Charles Stelzle, A Son of the Bowery, p. 217.
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- 32 Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 15 April 1905.
- 33 Portland Oregonian, 30 March 1905.
- 35 Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 20 April 1905.
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- 38 Portland Oregonian, 28 March 1905.