

William E. Biederwolf: Perfecting the Theory and Practice of Urban Evangelism

by Mark Sidwell¹

Christians sometimes think of “worldview” in terms of how Christianity applies to cultural issues in such areas as economics or the fine arts. But a true biblical worldview must be centered on understanding what the Scripture both teaches and emphasizes. For example, however one views the Christian’s cultural mandate that many Christians espouse, it is more important for a Christian to fulfil the gospel mandate stressed in the NT. Part of this gospel mandate is evangelism. This article is the fourth in a series on noted evangelists in American history—their work, methodology, and philosophy—a series that is intended to deepen understanding of the successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, of historic American evangelism.²

The shadows of D. L. Moody and Billy Sunday obscure lesser figures of the golden age of urban evangelism. Moody and Sunday indeed were evangelism’s most prominent leaders during this period. Yet before World War I, there were roughly 650 full-time professional evangelists in the United States, with perhaps twice again as many part-timers.³ Among these was William Edward Biederwolf (1867–1939), a contemporary of Sunday. Biederwolf learned the trade from two noted evangelists of the era, J. Wilbur Chapman and B. Fay Mills. Biederwolf served as a promoter of evangelism for both the Federal Council of Churches and the Interdenominational Association of Evangelists. He parlayed his evangelistic work into other ministries, notably leadership of the Winona Lake Bible Conference. William McLoughlin ranks Biederwolf as one of the “second five” evangelists of the period after Billy Sunday.⁴ Biederwolf’s modestly successful career as an evangelist and particularly his writing about evangelism provides a distinct, even unique, vantage point for viewing the history of American evangelism.

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² The earlier installments are Mark Sidwell, “George Whitfield and the Rise of American Evangelism,” *JBTW* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 53–75; idem, “Between Whitefield and Finney: The Evangelism of Asahel Nettleton,” *JBTW* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2024): 33–47; idem, “J. Wilbur Chapman and American Evangelism,” *JBTW* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2024): 36–57.

³ Charles Stelzle, “The Evangelist in Present-Day America,” *Current History* 35 (November 1931): 225. Stelzle (1869–1941) gives no source for his estimated number of evangelists twenty years before he published the article, but in 1911, Stelzle had served as head of the Bureau of Social Service, Presbyterian Church in the USA, and would have had professional interest in such figures. This article discusses more of Stelzle’s career below.

⁴ William McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 262. The other four were Gipsy Smith, Charles Scoville, Milford Lyon, and Henry Stough.

Life and Career

Biederwolf was born on September 29, 1867, in Monticello, Indiana, the seventh child of German immigrants. Brought up in Monticello's Presbyterian church, Biederwolf was converted as a teenager and made a public profession of his faith at the age of eighteen. Biederwolf originally entered Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, but he transferred to Princeton College and received his bachelor's degree there in 1892. He also earned his MA from Princeton in 1894 and graduated from Princeton Seminary in 1895. Biederwolf made an excellent record as a student and won a fellowship in Greek that allowed him to study at the University of Berlin (1896–97).⁵

During the summers of his years at Princeton, Biederwolf worked in rescue missions in New York City and Scranton, Pennsylvania. After graduation, but before his study trip to Europe, he served with the B. Fay Mills evangelistic team. In 1897 Biederwolf took the pastorate of the Broadway Presbyterian Church in Logansport, Indiana,⁶ serving there until 1900, except for a year's service as a chaplain during the Spanish-American War.⁷

Upon resigning his pulpit, Biederwolf became a full-time evangelist. During the early years he alternated between holding independent meetings and serving on the staffs of other men. In the middle of the first decade of the century, Biederwolf served with J. Wilbur Chapman during campaigns sponsored by the Special Committee on Evangelism of the Presbyterian Church in the USA. During the 1910s, the climactic decade of urban evangelism, Biederwolf rose in fame, popularity, and success.

During the latter part of his career, Biederwolf was closely associated with the Winona Lake Bible Conference in Indiana where he had appeared on the program at least as early as 1902.⁸ In 1922, after the death of Sol Dickey, Winona's founder, Biederwolf became director. The following year, the board made him president of the fledgling Winona Lake School of Theology, which under his direction

⁵ There is one biography of Biederwolf, Ray E. Garrett, *William Edward Biederwolf: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1948). This book is useful but lacks footnotes or a bibliography. Also of value are the papers of Biederwolf, housed in the Archives of Wheaton College, Illinois (Collection 195). The papers include newspaper clippings and sermons as well as handwritten notes and a copy of his thesis from Princeton on the self-testimony of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels and John. Apparently the only scholarly examination of Biederwolf's career is James Paul Cogdill Jr., "A Major Stream of American Mass Evangelism: The Ministries of R. A. Torrey, J. W. Chapman and W. E. Biederwolf" (PhD dissertation. Southern Baptist Seminary, 1990). See also the brief sketch in William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald, 1959), 393–96.

⁶ Biederwolf may have been speaking of this congregation years later when he wrote, "When I began my ministry it was with a church that was known to be somewhat fashionable—in fact, so fashionable that for a goodly number of years they had dispensed altogether with the Sunday night service for the lack of any one to attend it." William E. Biederwolf, *Evangelism: Its Justification, Its Operation and Its Value* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1921), 99.

⁷ See W. E. Biederwolf, *History of the One Hundred and Sixty-first Regiment, Indiana Volunteer Infantry* (Logansport, IN: Wilson, Humphries and Co., 1899), available at <http://www.archive.org/details/historyofonehund01bied>; a sketch of Biederwolf himself is found on 225–28. According to a publicist for the Biederwolf team, Biederwolf "wrote its [the regiment's] history simply because, so far as I can find out, the more or less arduous duties of chaplain of an American Regiment in a foreign land were not enough to keep him busy." Edward Marshall, "Biederwolf: The Evangelist and the Man," *The Awakening of the Church*, December 1905, 4, folder: "Biederwolf, William," #00963165, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

⁸ One of Biederwolf's earliest books, *The Man God Tried to Kill* (Chicago: Glad Tidings, n.d.), consists of sermons he delivered at men's prayer services at Winona.

evolved into a degree-granting seminary despite its summers-only schedule.⁹ Winona Lake became a base of operations for Biederwolf for the rest of his life.

Because Winona Lake occupied only his summers, Biederwolf could commit to other ministries during the remainder of the year. He continued to conduct evangelistic meetings, making his first overseas tour (to the Far East and Australia) in 1923–24. In Asia Biederwolf became interested in the plight of lepers, and his fund-raising efforts on their behalf resulted in the establishment of the Biederwolf Home for Lepers in Korea.¹⁰ In 1909 he founded the Family Altar League, an organization dedicated to encouraging family prayer and devotion, with which he remained associated throughout his career. From 1929 to 1939 Biederwolf served as pastor of the Royal Poinciana Chapel in Palm Beach, Florida. The chapel had been built for winter visitors and was open only during the winter season. Biederwolf preached there about a dozen Sundays a year.

Biederwolf remained active into old age. At age seventy, he wrote to J. Palmer Muntz, his successor at Winona Lake, “Yes my dear boy, I am working too hard. I never could stand it if God had not given me an iron constitution. I am up every night to 12:30 and 1 P.M. [*sic*] and as tho I did not have enough to do I have gone ‘nuttty’ on Florida shrubbery and am writing a book.”¹¹ Biederwolf published numerous books, most of them collections of his sermons. Other books were more ambitious, such as his works on evangelism (discussed below). Probably Biederwolf’s most notable publication was *The Millennium Bible* (sometimes reissued under other titles such as *The Second Coming Bible* and *The Second Coming Bible Commentary*), a one-volume commentary on the prophetic passages of Scripture that reflected his interest in Bible prophecy.¹²

Evangelism and Fundamentalism

Biederwolf represented the close association of American evangelism with fundamentalism, a Protestant movement in the early twentieth century that attempted to defend major tenets of Christian

⁹ On Winona Lake, see Mark Sidwell, “The History of the Winona Lake Bible Conference” (PhD dissertation. Bob Jones University, 1988); Vincent H. Gaddis and Jasper A. Huffman, *The Story of Winona Lake: A Memory and a Vision* (Butler, IN: Higley Huffman, 1960); Terry White and Steve Grill, *Winona at 100 Third Wave Rising: The Remarkable History of Winona Lake, Indiana* (Winona Lake: BMH, 2013); and Michael S. Hamilton and Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, “Keeping the ‘Fun’ in Fundamentalism: The Winona Lake Bible Conferences, 1895–1968,” in *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 300–317. On the Winona Lake School of Theology, see Mark Sidwell, “Fundamentalist Intellectualism: The Winona Lake School of Theology,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 34, no. 2 (November 2000): 113–22.

¹⁰ See his own account, William Edward Biederwolf, “Lepers as I Saw Them,” *Winona Echoes* 1922 (N.p.: Winona, 1922), 23–33; see also Garrett, 47–55.

¹¹ William E. Biederwolf to J. Palmer Muntz, February 15, 1938, Grace College, Winona Lake.

¹² William E. Biederwolf, *The Millennium Bible* (Chicago: W. P. Blessing, 1924). McLoughlin claims that “Biederwolf considered the premillennial theory of the Second Coming part of the Christian fundamentals” (McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 396). The evidence, however, does not support this claim. According to his biographer, Biederwolf was uncertain of his millennial position until the mid-1910s, when he converted to premillennialism. Garrett, 75. Afterwards he seems to have remained charitable in his views. Custer observes that in *The Millennium Bible* Biederwolf “quoted a great array of biblical authorities without slanting his work toward premillennialism, amillennialism, or postmillennialism.” Stewart Custer, *Tools for Preaching and Teaching the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1998), 197.

orthodoxy (essential, or “fundamental,” doctrines) against the onslaught of liberal biblical criticism.¹³ The name *fundamentalist* likely derived from *The Fundamentals*, a series of pamphlets published in the 1910s and distributed without charge to pastors and laity across the country. *The Fundamentals* printed essays by noted authors (not all of whom eventually identified with the fundamentalist movement) who defended key doctrines, such as the deity and virgin birth of Christ and the inspiration of the Bible.

In 1920 Baptist newspaper editor Curtis Lee Laws urged that those “who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals” be called “fundamentalists.”¹⁴ In the 1920s and 1930s there ensued just such a “battle royal,” the fundamentalist-modernist controversy (liberals often being referred to as “modernists”). Fundamentalists sought to purge modernism from the major American denominations and to cleanse denominational agencies (seminaries, mission boards, publishing houses) from modernist influence. Although most evangelists sympathized with fundamentalism, some feared that theological controversy might hamper evangelism. Some modernists had supported evangelistic campaigns, either because they thought the campaigns might lead to social and moral improvement or, more pragmatically, because their own churches might benefit from an influx of converts. Still evangelists felt greater kinship with those who stood for the orthodox doctrines that they preached. Evangelists stressed that only Christ could save the lost and asserted that such a Savior must be God himself, who made atonement for humanity’s sins by his death, and who physically rose from the dead in triumph over sin.

Few evangelists embodied the evangelists’ embrace of fundamentalism more than Biederwolf. He had been a student at Princeton Seminary during its rigorously orthodox days, and, as a Presbyterian, Biederwolf belonged to a denomination that experienced one of the bitterest fights during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. As the director of a Bible conference, Biederwolf led an institution that served both as a birthplace for fundamentalism and as a vehicle for the movement’s propagation. In short, the life of Biederwolf represented the intertwining of several strands from which fundamentalism derived.

Theologically, Biederwolf was a militant fundamentalist. After he took over as director of the Winona Lake Bible Conference, the 1924 program for the conference proclaimed,

We trust that the personnel of the Conference Committee is sufficient guarantee that Winona is to be kept true to the Fundamentals of the Faith, once, and for all, delivered to the saints. We want no uncertain note in this respect to sound from the Winona platform. Christ’s Virgin Birth and consequent Deity, His vicarious Sacrifice, His bodily Resurrection, Ascension and Return—

¹³ On the history of fundamentalism see George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1986); and Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (1970; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978). For a thorough, cumulative study of recent scholarship on the movement, see Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

¹⁴ See Beale, 195.

these are the truths which Winona holds essential and dear, and we welcome no voice in this program that does not subscribe to and champion them.”¹⁵

At the same time, Biederwolf illustrates the flexibility inherent in defining a fundamentalist. Although he became a premillennialist, he did not emphasize that eschatological position as necessary to defending the faith. He worked for a time to promote evangelism through the Federal Council of Christian Churches, an organization (and its successor the National Council of Christian Churches) that fundamentalists viewed as representing the theological compromise they opposed. In the battle for the Presbyterian Church in the USA, he clearly stood on the conservative side while maintaining ties to the denomination in hopes of making it a vehicle for religious renewal. He invited to the Winona Lake conference moderators of the PCUSA, Charles Erdman in 1925 and Lewis Mudge in 1931. He hosted conservative spokesman J. Gresham Machen at the conference as well as for a summer session in the School of Theology.¹⁶ Yet he also invited the point man for the moderate faction in the Presbyterian Church, Robert Speer, multiple times. In 1937 Biederwolf begged off an appearance at Bob Jones College, excusing himself from the visit because the date clashed with the Presbyterian General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio, telling Bob Jones Sr., “I must be there.”¹⁷ In 1935, the very year the Presbyterian Church defrocked Machen, Biederwolf challenged an audience with the dangers and opportunities of the present era, saying near the conclusion, “The hour is at hand. If any Church is to lead the way, why not this one—the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.? Surely there are forces enough and leadership enough to marshal and direct them in such a way as will, under God, cause us to see the mighty tides of revival grace for which we have so long prayed and yet waited for in vain.”¹⁸

When Biederwolf led in the reorganization of Winona Lake in the 1930s, which involved creating a new board, he made it clear that he wanted an avowedly fundamentalist corporation. Recalling the reorganization some twenty years afterward, Alva McClain of Grace Schools remembered Biederwolf saying, “We are determined to bring nobody on this Winona Board who is not a fundamentalist.” McClain asked, “What if they die?” Biederwolf replied, “When one dies, we’re going to find another fundamentalist to take his place.”¹⁹

¹⁵ *Winona Lake Bible Conference: The Thirtieth Annual, August Twenty-two to Thirty-one, 1924*, 2, Grace College.

¹⁶ See Mark Sidwell, “Was J. Gresham Machen a Fundamentalist?,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 31, no. 2 (1997): 71–80.

¹⁷ William Biederwolf to Bob Jones Sr., n.d. (c. 1937), folder: “Biederwolf, William” #00957639, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

¹⁸ William Biederwolf, “For Such a Time as This,” *Winona Echoes* 1935 (N.p.: Winona Lake Institutions, 1935), 12–13.

¹⁹ Alva McClain, transcript of an address delivered on J. Palmer Muntz Day in Winona Lake, August 17, 1958, 2–3. Grace College. Biederwolf wrote to Bob Jones Sr., “I am going to tie Winona so tight to the Fundamentals the Modernists won’t even have a look in.” William Biederwolf to Bob Jones Sr., n.d. (c. 1937), folder: “Biederwolf, William” #00957639, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

The Apprenticeship of an Evangelist

“In my own younger days,” Biederwolf once recalled, “I sought opportunity to sit at the feet of every successful evangelist in the United States.”²⁰ Biederwolf worked with B. Fay Mills just as the evangelist was beginning his shift from evangelism to the social gospel and away from Protestant orthodoxy. Biederwolf served as an assistant in Mills’s 1895 campaign in Columbus, Ohio, during which Mills tried to fuse evangelism with his new social emphasis.²¹ Although Biederwolf appears to have learned from Mills the value of organization and efficiency, he did not follow Mills’s departure from orthodoxy. Biederwolf later said that “social service means serving society, and if a man is not saved for that he is not saved at all,”²² but his evangelistic focus remained the conversion of individuals with reform of society being only a by-product.²³

Biederwolf underwent a longer apprenticeship with J. Wilbur Chapman, participating as an associate in the simultaneous campaigns that Chapman made famous.²⁴ Associate evangelists in these campaigns often advertised their work as focused outreach to a specific group. For instance, Charles Schaeffer specialized in children’s work, and labor advocate Charles Stelzle directed his meetings toward blue-collar workers. Biederwolf set his sights on teens and young adults by stressing his athleticism. He followed the example of evangelism’s rising star, former baseball player Billy Sunday, by advertising his athletic achievements with Princeton’s football team. When Biederwolf was still working with Mills, advertisements described the young evangelist as “a good specimen of muscular Christianity,”²⁵ a phrase that reflected a theme of urban evangelism. Fearing that American Christianity had become “feminized” with the church becoming more a province of women (as shown by women’s higher rates of church attendance), churchmen sought “manly” attractions to challenge men with the claims of Christianity. Former athletes such as Sunday, with his energetic, almost swaggering, presence on the platform, fit the bill for “muscular Christianity.”²⁶ Biederwolf well fit the

²⁰ Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 91.

²¹ A description of Mills’s 1895 Columbus campaign, in which Biederwolf was an assistant, along with the texts of many of the sermons delivered, is found in Henry Stauffer, ed., *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio, Under the Labors of Rev. B. Fay Mills* (Columbus: W. L. Lemon, 1895). The volume contains an address by Biederwolf, “The Power of the Holy Spirit,” 139–42. Mills’s new emphasis on adding the improvement of society to the salvation of the individual is seen in that same volume in “The New Era in Evangelism,” 146–47, and in the preface by Washington Gladden (a pastor in Columbus and a leading proponent of the social gospel), “The New Evangelism,” 5–6.

²² Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 72.

²³ In her study of Mills’s career, Constance Murray includes a description of Biederwolf’s work with Mills in the New Haven campaign of 1896. She notes how newspapers heaped praise on Biederwolf in a manner almost to eclipse Mills, describing Biederwolf’s affecting impact on audiences. Constance P. Murray, “From Individual Salvation to Social Salvation: Why Evangelist B. Fay Mills Changed His Revival Message” (MA thesis, James Madison University, 2011), 105–7.

²⁴ See Sidwell, “J. Wilbur Chapman,” 49–51,

²⁵ Stauffer, 13.

²⁶ For an overview of the concept of “muscular Christianity,” particularly as advocated by American evangelists during the golden age of urban evangelism, see Josh McMullen, *Under the Big Top: Big Tent Revivalism and American Culture, 1885-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 58–88; see also the lengthy footnote McMullen has on page 202 for a list of pertinent literature.

mold. Colleague Charles Stelzle recalled how the Chapman evangelistic team relaxed by gathering in a hotel room where they “told stories, engaged in gymnastic stunts, or general tomfoolery.” Stelzle noted that “Biederwolf was always the leader at these nightly festivities. He was a natural athlete and often he tossed me close to the ceiling, sometimes to my own alarm.”²⁷

Later in his career a chastened Biederwolf seems to have regretted this approach. Biederwolf chided the evangelist who chose to “go to the photograph gallery and put himself into all sorts of ridiculous attitudes that would do justice to a prize pugilist or a circus contortionist, and then use these camera productions in advertising himself and [his] work.” He added ruefully, “The writer frankly confesses that to some degree he has been foolishly guilty with his brethren.” Having “long ago put away the things of a fool,” Biederwolf said that he could never look at such pictures “without feeling that an operation above the eyes would have brought enough relief to have prevented the thing from ever taking place.”²⁸

Nonetheless, in his later career Biederwolf continued to focus on ways to reach men. As with other evangelists of the era, he held special meetings for men only. There he often delivered the sermon “The White Life” (“white” as in “pure”) to condemn male vices and call men to their responsibilities as husbands and fathers.²⁹ Although he followed the pattern of preachers such as Billy Sunday, his tone was more temperate. In Sunday’s “men only” sermons the evangelist became so graphic describing such topics as venereal disease that men often fainted.³⁰ By contrast, a publicist for Biederwolf wrote that issues in his message were “so chastely handled that it might have been delivered to a mixed audience, except that its counsel was to men alone.”³¹

Methodology and Practice

Biederwolf located his own work as an evangelist within the overall context of Christian evangelism. He identified five forms of evangelism: “Personal, or Individual” in which Christians

²⁷ Charles Stelzle, *A Son of the Bowery* (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), 218. Stelzle later became disenchanted with the method of evangelistic campaigns. See Stelzle, “The Evangelist in Present-Day America,” 224–28. Even then, however, he singled out Biederwolf as an exception who sought to lift the level of evangelistic work (225).

²⁸ Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 48. Biederwolf does not appear to have maintained his athletic fitness. In 1905 a publicist for the Biederwolf team wrote, “Born with amazing strength and agility of body and splendidly constituted, he has, through sheer forgetfulness of self, strained that constitution well nigh to the breaking point. There is no good, strong, healthful color in his cheeks. His fingers, because of the sheer asceticism of his life, sometimes shake as do a toper’s. His shoulders, when he is at rest, are stooped. . . . When you see Dr. Biederwolf stand up in the pulpit to tell you about religion, you will be convinced by his gaunt, slightly stooped figure, by his rugged, lined and pasty-colored face, that he is, not figuratively but literally, pouring his strength into the work of evangelism.” Edward Marshall, “Biederwolf: The Evangelist and the Man,” *The Awakening of the Church*, December 1905, 3–4, folder: “Biederwolf, William,” #00963165, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

²⁹ For a description of one of Biederwolf’s men’s meeting and the substance of the “The White Life” sermon, see Edward Marshall, “Armory Scene of Remarkable Demonstration,” *The Awakening of the Church*, April 1907, 10, 20, folder: “Biederwolf, William,” #00963165, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

³⁰ Homer Rodeheaver, *Twenty Years with Billy Sunday* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1936), 32.

³¹ “Notable Meeting for Men,” *The Awakening of the Church*, December 1906, 8, folder: “Biederwolf, William,” #00963165, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

witnessed to others as they were able; “Parental, or Domestic” in which parents won their children to Christ; “Parish, or Visitation,” an organized effort by teams of two Christians to reach their community; “Pastoral” conducted by the minister personally, which Biederwolf called “the most important” of all forms; and “Professional, or Vocational,” as Biederwolf himself practiced.³²

William Biederwolf’s evangelistic itinerary was unremarkable compared with those of other moderately successful evangelists of his era. He held numerous meetings in small towns and mid-sized cities, with a few campaigns in larger cities, thus making Biederwolf more representative of urban evangelists than the bigger names such as Moody or Sunday. Few (if any) other evangelists experienced what Billy Sunday did, with over 1.5 million people attending his New York City campaign. But many could have readily related to the work of Biederwolf in Goshen, Indiana, or Piqua, Ohio.

Biederwolf’s earliest recorded meetings were in towns such as Flemingsburg, Kentucky (1901), and Elkhart, Indiana (1902).³³ After working with Chapman, Biederwolf held meetings in larger cities, such as in Boston at the Tremont Temple (1911) and in Los Angeles (1919). Yet even after he had become more famous, Biederwolf alternated larger with smaller places. Only rarely did he conduct campaigns in large metropolitan areas.

Nor was Biederwolf an innovator. Generally he adopted—and adapted—the methods of others. A good example is his campaign in Rush County, Indiana, a predominantly rural region in mid-eastern Indiana, where he preached in the fall of 1912. Following Chapman he referred to this effort as a “simultaneous campaign” with meetings conducted by others in streets, schools, and workplaces in addition to the central meetings at the tabernacle led by Biederwolf.³⁴ In Rush County he also included a program of one-on-one personal evangelism called the “Individual Campaign.” After Biederwolf completed his meetings, local churches participated in a focused follow-up effort.³⁵

One of Biederwolf’s most ambitious efforts was the “Kansas Forward Movement” (1908–1909), which as Cogdill notes was an attempt to apply Chapman’s simultaneous revival method on a statewide basis.³⁶ In this case, Biederwolf served not as a solo evangelist but as the director of an intensive effort involving seventy-five campaigns in different Kansas towns, an attempt to blanket the area in a manner otherwise impossible in the era before radio or television.

³² W. E. Biederwolf, “Evangelism,” *Bob Jones Magazine*, June 1929, 4.

³³ One may find descriptions of various campaigns, not in chronological order, in Garrett, 25–46.

³⁴ “Pay Your Debts and Get Right,” *Rushville Republican*, September 24, 1912, 1.

³⁵ Garrett, 38. Such a follow-up effort resembled the “Simultaneous Campaign of Personal Evangelism” Biederwolf had used earlier in his career. Following a campaign, the Biederwolf team recommended that the churches united for the work continue to cooperate for a period afterwards by—among other things—holding meetings to recruit a “Personal Workers’ League” to pray and conduct personal work, selecting a General Secretary for the League to coordinate efforts, and holding midweek meetings both in individual churches and jointly with other congregations for prayer and organization, as well as conducting cottage prayer meetings. “After the Revival What?” *The Awakening of the Church*, February 1907, 2, folder “Biederwolf, William,” #00963165, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

³⁶ See Cogdill, 270–73, and Garrett, 38. Biederwolf’s 1912 campaign in Rushville, Indiana, was likewise slated to be the first phase of an “entire state campaign,” but this united Indiana campaign does not seem to have materialized. “Pay Your Debts and Get Right,” 1.

Biederwolf's compensation was generous but not extravagant. During his 1916 campaign in Allentown, Pennsylvania, Biederwolf responded to attacks on the profits of evangelists by saying, "My income for last year . . . was fifteen thousand dollars. I gave nine thousand dollars to The Family Altar League and four thousand dollars to Winona College. I carry heavy insurance for Mrs. Biederwolf's protection in case of my death. I own my own home and outside of those things I have little use for money."³⁷ Biederwolf's associates bear out his claim. For instance, Stelzle said, "He was generous beyond belief in his dealings with his associates."³⁸ When his Rushville, Indiana, campaign threatened to falter because his committee was short of funds to pay for the tabernacle, Biederwolf authorized them to finish the structure with his own money.³⁹

The most public of an evangelist's skills was his speaking ability and pulpit style. McLoughlin cites Biederwolf, along with J. Wilbur Chapman, as an evangelist who marked a transition in American evangelism "from the pious soul-winning of D. L. Moody to the barn-storming, 100 per cent Americanism of Billy Sunday."⁴⁰ On at least one occasion, Biederwolf tore down the "red flag of the saloon" during a service and trampled it before raising the American flag in its place.⁴¹ After he denounced tobacco in his Akron campaign, men abandoning the habit littered the platform with plugs of chewing tobacco, pipes, cigars, and cigarettes.⁴² He also couched his appeals in masculine terms: "A man who refuses to sign a remonstrance [against alcohol] or to lend his influence against the iniquity damning the community, for fear of losing the sale of a few pounds of sugar or yards of calico is as small a piece of manhood as ever walked in breeches."⁴³ Even Biederwolf's admirers suggested that the evangelist borrowed from Billy Sunday. Ray Garrett, Biederwolf's student and biographer, says Biederwolf preached in the style of Sunday,⁴⁴ offering the following excerpt to illustrate:

I'd rather be a dog with gratitude enough to wag his tail, a foul-featured orang-ou-tang of the jungle, a leather-hided rhinoceros, my jaws dripping red with the blood of slaughtered prey, a dodo, an ichthyosaurus, a hippopotamus, or any sort of a cloven-hoofed, web-footed, sharp-clawed creature of God's earth, than to be a man with a soul so contemptibly mean as to sit down at the

³⁷ Garrett, 29–30.

³⁸ Stelzle, *A Son of the Bowery*, 217. On complaints about the remuneration of evangelists, Biederwolf bluntly observed, "In plain Anglo-Saxon, if the evangelist is getting too much money, it is because somebody is guilty of giving it to him." William E. Biederwolf, *The Evangelistic Situation* (Chicago: Glad Tidings, [1917]), 70.

³⁹ "Makes Night Trip to Monticello," *Rushville Republican*, September 17, 1912, 7.

⁴⁰ McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 364.

⁴¹ "5000 People Hear Biederwolf in Two Sermons Sunday," *Rushville Republican*, October 8, 1912, 1.

⁴² "Trains Guns at the Hypocrites," *Rushville Republican*, September 27, 1912, 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁴ Garrett, 40.

table three times a day and gulp down the good that God has provided and never once lift my heart in thanksgiving to God who gives it all.⁴⁵

A reporter observed, “Persons who love good acting need go no further than the Biederwolf tabernacle, for nobody ever saw better acting than was witnessed on that stage on Saturday night,” although he hastened to add that, unlike the theater, there was no sense of “sham” with Biederwolf.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Biederwolf maintained a certain dignity in the pulpit. His words were not flowery, but they were carefully chosen. Bob Jones Jr., who heard Biederwolf preach during the evangelist’s later years, wrote that he “was one of the two or three evangelists whose pulpit style incorporated most of the elements of great preaching. His scholarship was broad; his use of the English language was concise, accurate, and powerful; his sympathies were deep; his heart was warm; and his doctrinal position was not given to extremes of interpretation.”⁴⁷ Although he could play to an audience, Biederwolf also tried to elevate the level of preaching, using for instance sermon illustrations from classic sources such as art and mythology.⁴⁸

A question worth considering is how Biederwolf reconciled his evangelistic theology with his background at Princeton Theological Seminary. Princeton was a bastion of Old School Presbyterianism, maintaining a solidly traditional, confessional position often suspicious of American urban evangelism. The Old School looked askance at the flavor of Arminianism in the theology and methods of most American evangelists. Billy Sunday was also nominally a Presbyterian, although he said on one occasion, “I don’t know any more about theology than a jack-rabbit knows about ping-pong, but I’m on my way to glory.”⁴⁹ J. Wilbur Chapman, another Presbyterian evangelist, even had a seminary education. However, he had attended Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, which leaned more toward the New School Presbyterian faction, which was more accepting of interdenominational evangelism. Biederwolf seems not to have expressed himself regarding any tensions between Princeton’s stance and his own evangelistic career, except for a comment cited below that he thought Princeton could have better cultivated an atmosphere to prepare evangelists.

Philosophy of Evangelism

Critics often charge American evangelicalism in general, and fundamentalism in particular, with being anti-intellectual.⁵⁰ Certainly Biederwolf possessed the intellectual and literary skills necessary to

⁴⁵ Quoted in Garrett, 44; Cogdill makes the same observation about similarities between Biederwolf and Sunday (239–40). McLoughlin thinks that some of Biederwolf’s sermons were “so similar to Sunday’s that plagiarism or permissible borrowing must have taken place.” McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name*, 263.

⁴⁶ “Biederwolf Scars Audience with Sabbath Desecration,” *Rushville Republican*, October 1, 1912, 1.

⁴⁷ Bob Jones, *Cornbread and Caviar* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1985), 99.

⁴⁸ See William E. Biederwolf, *Illustrations from Mythology* (Fort Wayne: Glad Tidings, 1927); and *Illustrations from Art* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930). For an example, see William Biederwolf: “Niobe and the Wrath of Latona,” *Bob Jones Magazine*, October 1930, 12.

⁴⁹ Quoted in William T. Ellis, *Billy Sunday: The Man and His Message* (Chicago: John C. Winston, 1936), 147.

⁵⁰ See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), particularly chapters 4 and 5.

deflect this charge.⁵¹ His fellowship to study in Europe is one example. Acquaintances noted likewise his use of the Greek NT in the pulpit, which he translated as he went along.⁵² Furthermore, his intellectual abilities enabled him to write cogently about evangelism, his writings making a significant contribution to its history. As early as 1904 he lined out for the audience of the Winona Lake Bible Conference the basics of his philosophy of evangelism,⁵³ and he later refined and expanded on these basic ideas.

Biederwolf wrote two major works on evangelism. *The Evangelistic Situation* (1917) was the result of research he did as General Secretary of the Commission on Evangelism of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. McLoughlin describes this commission as an attempt “to put some check upon the irresponsible antics of . . . foolish or unscrupulous revivalists” and says that the burden of the committee’s work fell on Biederwolf.⁵⁴ Although it was a personal work and not an official statement of the FCCC position, Biederwolf’s book was a helpful—and sometimes pointed—look at urban evangelism in the 1910s.

Biederwolf’s other major book on evangelism was *Evangelism: Its Justification, Its Operation and Its Value* (1921), which borrowed heavily from research he did for the FCCC. More comprehensive in its treatment of evangelistic campaigns than the earlier book, it was also more positive, though not uncritical, in its outlook. Biederwolf originally delivered its contents as lectures to, among other schools, Princeton Theological Seminary, Xenia Theological Seminary, and Moody Bible Institute.

Perhaps Biederwolf viewed these lectures as remedying a deficiency in Christian education. He once said, “Our schools for ministerial training have lent in the past no encouragement to the work of evangelism and have therefore given absolutely no training to their students such as would fit them for this most essential administration of the Christian ministry.” Of his own days at Princeton, he added, “I passed through one of the best of these schools and can bear witness today that what little reference was made to this matter was by way of disparagement rather than otherwise.”⁵⁵ Therefore, Biederwolf’s philosophy of evangelism seems to have been more on practical experience and observation than on classroom theory.

Revival and Evangelism

In his writings Biederwolf said that an evangelist should be an orthodox Christian. He asserted in no uncertain terms that someone who did not believe in the Word of God should not be in a pulpit.⁵⁶ Conversely, evangelism was necessary to orthodoxy: “The church that is not evangelistic ceases to be

⁵¹ McLoughlin describes “the educated but evangelistic clergymen which descended from Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield,” among whom he lists B. Fay Mills, Torrey, Chapman, and Biederwolf. *Modern Revivalism*, 365.

⁵² Stelzle, *A Son of the Bowery*, 217.

⁵³ William Edward Biederwolf, “The Office of an Evangelist,” *Winona Echoes 1904* (Chicago: Winona, 1904), 131–49.

⁵⁴ McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 449–50.

⁵⁵ Biederwolf, “The Office of an Evangelist,” 133.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

evangelical.”⁵⁷ Part of his theological definition involved the terms *evangelism* and *revival*. Biederwolf viewed “evangelism” as being for the unconverted and “revivalism” for people who were converted but spiritually cold.⁵⁸ In his writings, however, Biederwolf treated the terms almost interchangeably.

Revival was, to Biederwolf, woven into the warp and woof of the church’s life and history as part of “the Natural Law of Progress.”⁵⁹ “The history of God’s people after all is little more than the story of revival,” he said.⁶⁰ He argued, “All progress is in fact through a revival. Nowhere is advance ever made through a monotonous and unbroken continuity. Everywhere we find the ebb and flow of the tide.”⁶¹ He, in fact, widened this application: Ebb and flow is a law of life, of civilization, of nature. “What is springtime but a revival in nature?”⁶² He viewed revivals as a part of the natural rhythm of the life of the church, like periods of waking and sleeping.⁶³

Biederwolf tended to define a “revival” as an evangelistic effort. Like most urban evangelists, he abandoned the idea of the Great Awakening that a revival was an unpredictable, inscrutable work of God. Biederwolf showed some affinity for Charles Finney’s idea that human instrumentality is key to creating a revival. A publicist for Biederwolf’s campaign in Salina, Kansas, wrote of “what is expected to be the greatest revival in the history of Salina. . . . Whether or not it will be a revival of religion of the Lord Jesus Christ, Dr. Biederwolf says, depends entirely upon the Christian people of this community.”⁶⁴

Biederwolf did not strongly emphasize theology. He paid more attention to practical issues. In his stress on the need for organization, Biederwolf insisted that one must maximize the place of the Holy Spirit. “To work without Him and to work through Him—or rather to have Him work through us—is all the difference between trying to run a big machine by hand and attaching it to the dynamics of a powerful electric motor. The results of a revival effort that is wholly man-made cannot prove otherwise than pitifully disappointing.”⁶⁵ Yet he also wrote that “the human equation dare not be eliminated,”⁶⁶ adding, “If we work as though the revival were entirely our own and pray as if it were entirely God’s there will be no doubt as to what God will do.”⁶⁷

⁵⁷ Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 85.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 19. Interestingly, this concept lay at the heart of a famous work by Jonathan Edwards, *The History of the Work of Redemption*, vol. 9 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Later adherents of the New England Theology picked up on this emphasis and may have influenced other American Protestants such as Biederwolf.

⁶¹ Ibid., 39–40.

⁶² Ibid., 40.

⁶³ Despite his stress on conversion and evangelism, Biederwolf appears to believe it is possible for a child to be reared so that he or she would not experience a noticeable conversion (Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 52–53, 92).

⁶⁴ “Inaugural Meeting of Great Revival,” *The Awakening of the Church*, February 1907, 2, folder: “Biederwolf, William,” the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

⁶⁵ Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 120.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 121.

Biederwolf's system of evangelism clearly emphasized human means. He claimed that an evangelist "carries with him oftentimes a personal magnetism which all pastors do not possess." Biederwolf said, "All this talk about the crowds that will pack your church and the multitudes of people that will be converted if only you are a man filled with the Holy Spirit is utter nonsense with which healthy minds ought to be done."⁶⁸ He believed evangelists had "peculiar ability for leading men to a definite decision for Jesus Christ. We call it magnetism. That may not be the best name for it but it is a union of certain physical and psychical powers by which some men move others." He admitted, "It is true that much of [this magnetism] is God-given and native," but he also insisted "that it can be to a certain extent acquired."⁶⁹

Vocational Evangelism and Union Meetings

Although he thought that revival had been part of the church's spiritual life throughout history, Biederwolf admitted that the modern citywide campaigns of professional evangelists were a newer development: "The revival in the sense of a protracted meeting or an evangelistic campaign is of comparatively recent origin."⁷⁰ While all Christians supported evangelism per se, he noted controversy over the "Vocational or so-called Professional Evangelism, especially as it operates in union revival services where all or the majority of the churches of a given community unite in a general evangelistic campaign."⁷¹ Biederwolf himself had no doubts about the office, and he called for the specific office of evangelist on the basis that "scientific specialization should . . . exist in religious work as in every field of endeavor."⁷²

Biederwolf offered five reasons to justify union campaigns: God had blessed the method historically, it was adapted to the evangelistic and revival needs of the present era, it had observable numerical results, it provided a united Christian testimony of Christ, and it made an "impression" on the community.⁷³ Daniel Nelson, in evaluating the campaigns of B. Fay Mills, makes a similar observation to Biederwolf's fourth and fifth points: "Statistical analysis is one way to assess a revival, but it should be noted that it is not necessarily the only way or the most valid way. The main value of a Mills revival was not in the number of accessions to church membership but in the remarkable focus it brought to bear on the cause of evangelical Christianity in a particular community and by the way in which it afforded an opportunity for an entire community to unite on a festival occasion to publicly share common values."⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Biederwolf, "The Office of an Evangelist," 135.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 136.

⁷⁰ Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 19.

⁷¹ Ibid., 109.

⁷² Ibid., 16.

⁷³ Ibid., 110–15.

⁷⁴ Daniel W. Nelson, "B. Fay Mills: Revivalist, Social Reformer and Advocate of Free Religion" (PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 1964), 113.

Warnings About Evangelism

Although a staunch advocate of professional evangelism, Biederwolf was not blind to its problems. He criticized evangelists whose sermons “are little else than a string of stories—just tellers of anecdotes.”⁷⁵ He also noted those who puffed up statistics by asking for decisions for temperance or patriotism and then counted them as Christian professions of faith.⁷⁶ Later he wrote that

in this day . . . we now talk of “hitting the trail.” In some way the idea has prevailed with many that walking the aisle and taking the evangelist’s hand is all that is needed and as a consequence many of our evangelistic campaigns have degenerated very largely into a general proposition of hand-shaking and card-signing or name-getting. But this is a sorry spectacle for a time like that when an eternal destiny is hanging in the balance.⁷⁷

Running throughout Biederwolf’s philosophy of evangelism was his advocacy for some kind of regulation of the evangelistic ministry. In 1904 he complained to an audience at Winona Lake that the church had never tried to supervise evangelists⁷⁸ and argued that it “ought to have a larger share in providing these [evangelists’] credentials.”⁷⁹ As Biederwolf hinted, one possible source of regulation was denominational oversight. Chapman’s campaigns conducted through the Presbyterian Church’s special committee may have influenced Biederwolf’s thinking. But most citywide campaigns were union meetings of varied denominations, limiting any regulation that a single denomination could exercise. Another possibility was the Interdenominational Association of Evangelists, headquartered at Winona Lake, a professional organization that tried to provide guidelines for the conduct of an evangelistic ministry. Biederwolf supported the IAE and served as an officer, but its voluntary nature and lack of disciplinary power hindered its ability to regulate vocational evangelism.

Probably the most serious effort to regulate evangelistic work was the Commission on Evangelism of the Federal Council of Churches, to which Biederwolf served as secretary and chief researcher. His report on that research resulted in his most detailed proposals for what could be done. Biederwolf said that as long as churches held union evangelistic campaigns, “*there will be a demand, and a crying one, for some sort of ecclesiastical sanction or direction over this particular, this important and delicate phase of Christian activity.*”⁸⁰

Furthermore, Biederwolf’s ideas were not simply theoretical. He provided a form for credentials committees to use in investigating the background of potential evangelists and for establishing an

⁷⁵ Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 214. Biederwolf, however, by no means disdained the importance of illustration. He recalled that he at first eschewed illustration when he began preaching but found that he put audiences to sleep and discovered that using illustration required more skill than he realized. *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 206–7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁷⁸ Biederwolf, “The Office of an Evangelist,” 132–33.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁸⁰ Biederwolf, *The Evangelistic Situation*, 32 (emphasis original).

ethical framework for matters such as reporting statistics.⁸¹ Biederwolf outlined a basic code of evangelists' ethics,⁸² including an insistence on belief in the fundamentals of the faith as an essential.⁸³ According to R. K. Johnson, biographer of Bob Jones Sr., when Jones and Biederwolf were serving as president and vice president, respectively, of the IAE they proposed and saw passed unanimously a resolution that no member of the association would knowingly hold campaigns under the sponsorship of liberal churches and clergy.⁸⁴

Motivating Biederwolf's concern for oversight was, then, not so much a desire for control as a deep concern that evangelists maintain a high level of personal and financial integrity and that they adhere strictly to Protestant orthodoxy. Oversight was not intended to burden evangelistic work but to preserve and improve it.

Conclusion

Shortly after the 1938 Winona Bible Conference, Biederwolf fell ill and spent much of the next few months in the hospital. On September 3, 1939, he died at his home in Monticello. Although not one of the giants in the field of evangelism, William Edward Biederwolf was nonetheless significant, typifying the interests and activities of evangelists during the golden age of urban evangelism. Furthermore, his writings provide both an explanation and a defense of his vocation. Biederwolf's career enriches our understanding of the golden era of America's citywide evangelistic campaigns, and it deepens our knowledge of the nature of evangelism in general. Perhaps his most notable achievement was in further refining evangelistic efforts. With his research and writing providing both theory and critique, he sought to elevate the standards for evangelistic work. By his own example of language and sermon content, he established a model for others to consider and emulate. In short, William Biederwolf not only followed but also set a pattern for American evangelists.

⁸¹ Biederwolf, *The Evangelistic Situation*, 37–39.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 45–46.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

⁸⁴ R. K. Johnson, *Builder of Bridges: A Biography of Dr. Bob Jones Sr.* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1982), 106. Unfortunately, Johnson does not give the date of this event, simply describing it as “before World War I.”