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Evangelical Reform in Early Nineteenth Century America

by John G. West*

To American evangelicals, the new century seemed anything but hospitable.¹ Many Americans had stopped going to church. Some openly doubted Christianity, preferring to place their hopes in reason alone rather than a God who intervenes in human affairs. The nation’s cities were turning into havens of crime, promiscuity, and alcoholism. Radical social reformers dotted the landscape, attracting enthusiastic interest, if not outright support. One of the more provocative of the radicals proposed a “Declaration of Mental Independence” that denounced private property, traditional religion, and marriage as “*a TRINITY of the most monstrous evils that could be combined to inflict mental and physical evil upon [man’s] whole race.*”²

Even in politics, traditional religion and morality were flouted. Thomas Jefferson, one of the era’s most influential presidents, scoffed in private at the miracles of the Bible and historic Christian doctrines such as the Trinity.³ Another popular chief executive, Andrew Jackson, was the only president in American history who had killed another man in a duel.⁴ Yet voters didn’t seem to care.

In many ways, the culture wars of America in the early 1800s seem eerily like some of the cultural conflicts in America today. Yet most historians wouldn’t describe nineteenth-century America as especially secular or amoral. If anything, the period is often held up as the epitome of a Christian America—when Christianity, or at least the Protestant variety of Christianity—was the dominant religion of the state, and when Biblical ethics supplied the basis for social relations. Nor would criminologists describe the nineteenth century, at least the second half of it, as particularly awash in crime. In fact, lawlessness went down in the latter half of the nineteenth century—despite urbanization, industrialization, and other factors typically associated with increased crime rates.⁵

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What is going on here? Both depictions of nineteenth-century America can't be true. Or can they?

As it turns out, the first part of the nineteenth century *was* a time of remarkable spiritual, moral, and civic instability in America. But out of that instability came a social transformation that provides valuable lessons about both the dangers and opportunities for social change inspired by religious activism. What happened in early nineteenth-century America is commonly known as the Second Great Awakening, referring to a series of evangelical revivals that started in the northeast, but ultimately spread to the western frontier.⁶ But these revivals tell only part of the story. They were paralleled by a mass infusion of evangelical Christians into the public arena, where they organized scores of voluntary associations to preach the gospel, diminish poverty, curb practices such as duelling, and reduce alcoholism.⁷

Visiting the United States during the early 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville saw these efforts firsthand and later wrote about how Americans were “forever forming associations.”⁸ The far-reaching network of voluntary associations established by evangelicals helped re-shape both the manners and the morals of American society before the Civil War and enthroned evangelical Protestantism as the *de facto* religion of American culture.⁹ Three of the most influential reform efforts were Sunday Schools, temperance societies, and anti-poverty programs:

- **Sunday Schools.** During a time when public education was virtually non-existent in many areas (particularly on the western frontier), Sunday schools formed the backbone of education in many communities, teaching both children and adults to read and instructing them in the principles of morality and religion. In 1828, an estimated 127,000 pupils attended Sunday classes; by 1835 that figure had expanded to one million. To accommodate such large numbers required an extensive infrastructure of sixteen thousand Sunday schools and more than 130,000 teachers, all of whom volunteered their time without remuneration. Some of the more prominent Sunday school teachers in antebellum America included President William Henry Harrison and U.S. Attorney General Benjamin Butler.¹⁰ The vast majority of Sunday schools were affiliated with the American Sunday School Union, which spearheaded an aggressive program to spread the classes into new areas of the country and published vast quantities of reading material in the hope of reforming the character of American children's literature. By 1830, the Union had produced at least 250 separate works; forty-six of these had been

released within the previous year, adding over six thousand pages of new reading material.¹¹

- **Temperance Societies.** By 1828, more than 400 temperance societies had been established across the United States, including state-wide societies in New Hampshire, Vermont, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Illinois.¹² These societies sought to educate the public about the extent of the alcohol problem and to pressure retailers not to deal in alcoholic beverages. Sometimes pressure was exerted through a boycott of recalcitrant retailers. In other cases citizens urged elected officials to deny liquor licenses to retailers. The temperance society in North Stonington, Connecticut employed the latter approach with considerable success. As a result of its efforts, only three of the town's eleven dealers in spirited liquors even sought renewal of their licenses, and none of the three that sought a new license succeeded in obtaining one. Many local societies pointed to significant drops in liquor consumption as proof of their effectiveness.¹³
- **Anti-Poverty Programs.** A number of local groups focused on helping and educating the poor, but these explicit efforts to help the the hard-core poor were only a small part of the evangelical anti-poverty agenda.¹⁴ More informally, workingmen who were were drawn into evangelical churches found they now had access to a variety of resources that could help them improve their economic status, as Paul Johnson's study of the revivals in Rochester has shown. Wealthy church members in Rochester organized a savings bank for the benefit of the working classes, and they provided capital for budding entrepreneurs among Christian workingmen by forming business partnerships with them.¹⁵ As a result of these measures (and the personal discipline and industry instilled by evangelical theology), converts from the working classes experienced a profound upward mobility.¹⁶ "Of the clerks who joined churches during the revivals and who remained in Rochester in 1837, 72 percent became merchants, professionals, or shopkeepers. Most non-churchgoing clerks left Rochester. Of those who stayed, half skidded into blue-collar jobs."¹⁷ Similar efforts were made to assist poor women. Key associations in this area included New York's Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females (1814-), the Society for Employing the Female Poor in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1825-), and the Magdalen societies in both New York and Philadelphia that sought to rescue

women from prostitution.¹⁸ Female reform societies served as a kind of “informal employment agency” for needy young women. Wealthy female members of the societies sought to find positions for young girls in the households of their friends.¹⁹

Participation in evangelical voluntary associations reached phenomenal levels before the Civil War in major population centers such as New York City. By 1829, more than “40 percent of the children in New York City between the ages of four and fourteen were said to attend Sunday schools” and “by 1860... nearly *half* of all adult Protestant males in the city were members of at least one church-related voluntary association.”²⁰ The impact of this wave of reform efforts could also be seen on Americans’ consumption of alcohol, which had risen dramatically early in the 1800s and was fostering brawling and other forms of civil disorder in America’s cities. By 1850, after decades of temperance efforts, per capita consumption of alcohol in America had plummeted by 80%.²¹

Though far from perfect, evangelical reformers in the early 1800s were remarkably successful in bringing about cultural change, and their efforts offer several practical lessons for those seeking to revitalize American culture in the new millennium.

Lesson 1: Use Private Associations to Provide Public Goods

The first lesson concerns the importance of using private associations to deliver public goods. Prior to the Second Great Awakening, many American evangelicals tended to look to government to promote both piety and morality. They thought that in order for religion to flourish, government had to promote it through public days of fasting and thanksgiving, strict laws against sabbath-breaking, and the use of tax dollars to pay the salaries of ministers. Congregationalist evangelicals in New England were the fiercest supporters of the view that piety had to be promoted through law. They almost seemed to think that vibrant religion depended on government. Thomas Jefferson and his political party disagreed, and they advocated an end to state subsidies to churches. When the Jeffersonians began to triumph in state and local elections in New England, disestablishment—the ending of official government support for churches—finally came even to such congregationalist bastions as Connecticut and New Hampshire in 1818 and 1819.

Congregationalist evangelicals first thought disestablishment was the end of the world. The Rev. Lyman Beecher recalled in his autobiography that the day state support

of religion was voted down in Connecticut he had “the worst attack [of depression] I ever met in my life... It was as dark a day as ever I saw... The injury done to the cause of Christ, as we then supposed, was irreparable.”²² Or was it? Beecher continued: “For several days I suffered what no tongue can tell *for the best thing that ever happened to the State of Connecticut.*”²³ Disestablishment, said Beecher, “cut the churches loose from dependence on state support. It threw them wholly on their own resources and on God.”²⁴

State support had been a crutch that had kept the churches crippled. While congregationalists in New England looked to government as their savior, they had little incentive to do much on their own. As a result, their churches dwindled and unitarianism won the hearts and minds of the people. When state support was removed, however, New England evangelicals finally realized that they had to go out and hustle. They had to try to persuade people that their religious beliefs were right. They could no longer depend on government subsidies or government compulsion. Of course, some evangelicals had known this truth all along, especially Baptists. That’s why many of them supported Jefferson. But for congregationalists and Presbyterians from New England, the free enterprise system in religion was a radical innovation. Once they accepted it, they prospered. And so did evangelicalism in general. The scores of voluntary associations organized for evangelism, missions, and social and political reform transformed American society in a way that few government programs ever could.

Beecher became one of the chief theoreticians of this movement, delivering a series of sermons articulating a system that one historian has dubbed America’s “‘voluntary establishment’ of religion.”²⁵ Government used to promote civic virtue by compelling people to “support the gospel and attend the public worship of God,” Beecher told legislators in Connecticut. “But these means of moral influence the law can no longer apply; and there is no substitute but the voluntary energies of the nation itself, in associations for charitable contributions and efforts, patronized by all denominations of Christians, and by all classes of the community who love their country.”²⁶

Beecher advocated replacing government support for religion and morality with a network of voluntary societies that would spread the gospel, inculcate moral habits in the young, and reclaim the dissolute. In those cases where government action might still be necessary, the associations would seek to create a public consensus through educational efforts—because in a free society, Beecher realized, persuasion had to precede coercion.

“They say ministers have lost their influence,” Beecher wrote years later. “The fact is, they have gained. By voluntary efforts, societies, missions, and revivals, they exert a deeper influence than ever they could” have by state support.²⁷

There are obvious ways in which this lesson can be applied today to such areas as welfare and education. During the past decade, there has been increased recognition of the importance of private welfare initiatives, especially those tied to churches and other religious organizations. As Marvin Olasky has shown in his pathbreaking books, private faith-based efforts are often far more effective than government programs in moving people out of poverty.²⁸ The success of faith-based welfare efforts has encouraged initiatives such as the charitable choice provisions of the 1996 federal welfare reform act that encourage the use of private associations to deliver public welfare services. Similarly, many people are advocating ending the government school monopoly and increasing the ability of middle class and poor parents to send their children to privately run educational institutions that are free to fully incorporate religious and moral instruction into their curricula.

But welfare and education are not the only areas where private associations might be able to help re-invigorate public life. Civic religion is another area. For much of American history, most Americans have accepted the idea that religion is a public good because its holidays and rituals helped tie citizens together into a common culture. From prayers in public schools to nativity scenes on the courthouse steps, public expressions of religion were regarded as part of the community-building process. Many of these public expressions of religion have been curtailed due to Supreme Court decisions since the 1960s, and a great deal of political energy has been expended trying to overturn these decisions without much success.

Private associations supply a fresh way to recapture some of the community-building activities of the past. Many civic rituals involving religion can be reconstituted merely by changing the sponsorship of the event from government to a private association. If a community would like to celebrate the religious aspects of a holiday such as Christmas, or hold a Thanksgiving parade down Main Street that gives thanks to God, or even stage a prayer service for its public schools, it can do so by having these events sponsored by local business or community groups (including churches) rather than the government.

An example of this approach was a back-to-school prayer rally held in 1998 in the city of Federal Way, Washington. The event was publicized by stories in local

newspapers, and it was promoted by the superintendent of the school district, who spoke at the event. There were no legal threats over this event, yet it took place in the public high school stadium, was a community event, and was promoted by a government official.²⁹ For all practical purposes, this was a civic ceremony. But its official sponsor was a group of community—primarily church—leaders rather than the government. In short, the event was what might be called privately-sponsored public speech—speech and activities that are in the public square but are not officially sponsored by the government.

If citizens wish to encourage religion in their community's civic life, they can sponsor public ceremonies that include the religious segments of their community. The possible variations on this principle are endless. High school baccalaureate ceremonies can be reconstituted by making them privately sponsored. Creches, crosses, and menorahs can be displayed on public property by private groups when the public property is opened to private displays.³⁰ Holiday parades can incorporate religious elements (and keep out certain groups that run counter to the traditional moral views of a community) if they are sponsored by private associations.³¹

In modern America, public goods are too often thought to be the exclusive domain of government, and public life is routinely equated with activities of the government. But as nineteenth century evangelicals came to realize, the public square encompasses far more than government, and private associations can often provide public goods when government cannot.

Lesson 2: Cultivate Common Ground

A second lesson that can be taken from nineteenth century evangelical reform is the importance of cultivating common ground and building coalitions. One reason for the success of evangelical initiatives in the 1800s was the conscious effort to forge coalitions across denominational lines and mount an “evangelical united front” on social issues. Overlooking their differences on such issues as church governance and liturgy, members of America's Protestant churches became increasingly willing during the nineteenth century to join together on behalf of common social objectives. They came to understand that they could retain their theological differences even while combining to bring about reforms based on their shared morality.

Such interdenominational cooperation was key to the development of associations at the national level that focused on particular issues.³² These national associations included the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, the American

Colonization Society, the American Temperance Society, and the American Sunday School Union. A nonsectarian spirit prevailed among most of these groups, and the boards of many of them boasted members from all the major Protestant denominations. Evangelical unity became so marked at the national level that several of the major associations began holding their annual meetings together each May in New York City.³³

The same kind of interdenominational cooperation could be seen at the local level. The membership rolls of the Moral Society of East Haddam, Connecticut, for example, included Baptists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians.³⁴ During a revival in Rochester, New York, meanwhile, “Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal ministers preached from the same pulpit, and the place of meeting shifted indiscriminately between churches.”³⁵

Making all of these joint efforts between Christians possible was the adherence to a common moral framework supported by reason and well as religious authority. Evangelicals of the period had a firm belief in God’s general revelation—that God revealed his moral laws to all human beings by writing them on their hearts. This belief in general revelation can be seen most clearly at evangelical colleges, which had a long history of offering courses in moral philosophy. During the eighteenth century, the Rev. John Witherspoon told his students at Princeton that moral philosophy by definition was “an inquiry into the nature and grounds of moral obligation by reason, as distinct from revelation,” and they should have no problems with using it to that end.³⁶ According to Witherspoon, Christians who wondered whether it was dangerous to study morality by reason should not worry. “If the Scripture is true, the discoveries of reason cannot be contrary to it; and therefore, it has nothing to fear from that quarter.”³⁷ Indeed, said Witherspoon, moral philosophy might strengthen belief in Christianity by confirming the moral teachings of the Bible.

Witherspoon’s lectures on moral philosophy were dutifully transcribed by his students and later used at a number of colleges where Princeton graduates taught. The lectures were also repeatedly published in the early 1800s.³⁸ As the nineteenth century progressed, other evangelical scholars wrote full-blown textbooks on moral philosophy, including Presbyterian Samuel Stanhope Smith (Witherspoon’s son-in-law), Baptist Francis Wayland, and Episcopalian Jasper Adams. Despite their differences in theology and politics, all three men firmly agreed with the proposition that morality could be known apart from special divine revelation.³⁹ Even die-hard Congregationalists like

Timothy Dwight and Nathanael Emmons—who espoused a fairly bleak view of human nature—acknowledged that men retained a natural capacity to understand the basic principles of morality.⁴⁰

Nineteenth century evangelicals’ belief in general revelation meant that they had no problem in articulating political and social objectives on secular grounds. Because of this, when they fought the practice of duelling, or objected to slavery, or promoted prison reform, they were able to join together with people from different theological traditions, sometimes including Unitarians. None of this is to suggest that nineteenth century evangelicals were perfect in cultivating common ground. Of course, they were not. According to today’s standards, their efforts to build coalitions were rather parochial. For example, while evangelicals promoted interdenominational efforts among Protestants, they remained strongly opposed to any sort of coalition with Roman Catholics.⁴¹ Moreover, some evangelicals tried to frame policy issues in specifically religious terms.⁴² But these exceptions do not disprove that evangelicals on the whole tried to forge a united front based on a common morality.

Nineteenth-century evangelicals’ belief in a moral common ground has definite implications for contemporary efforts to reform culture. One of the most significant challenges facing those who wish to influence public life today is the need for a common moral vocabulary that can be accepted by both religious adherents and secularists. For too long much of American public life has been based on the assumption that traditional morality is based only on personal religious preferences and therefore cannot be used as a standard for public policy. In this frame of reference, cultural conflicts are almost invariably seen as religious wars, which raise the rhetorical stakes to dangerous levels and balkanize citizens based on their religious affiliations. America’s nineteenth century experience shows the importance of articulating moral positions in a way that is understandable to the broadest number of citizens. The recent revival of interest in the concept of natural law among both Protestants and Catholics is a step in the right direction.⁴³ So is “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” a declaration seeking common ground between traditional Protestants and Catholics on cultural issues.⁴⁴

Lesson 3: Employ the Constitution as a Defense

A third lesson from nineteenth-century evangelical reform concerns how to handle criticism. By the 1820s, evangelical voluntary associations came under harsh attack from critics ranging from Unitarians and freethinkers to pietist evangelicals who did not

believe in social reform. Though by this time disestablishment had taken place in every state except Massachusetts, critics regularly accused evangelical reformers of intolerance and seeking a “union of church and state.”⁴⁵ Even Sunday Schools were not immune from allegations of evildoing. In 1828, the Pennsylvania legislature refused to grant the American Sunday School Union a charter of incorporation, fearing that it was part of a conspiracy to unify church and state, destroy freedom of the press, and exclude non-evangelicals from political power.⁴⁶

Such attacks forced evangelical reformers to defend their actions, and their defense was based squarely on the principles of American constitutionalism. Seizing the moral high ground, evangelical reformers claimed that their efforts were protected by religious liberty and accused their detractors of being intolerant with all their cries of “priestcraft” and “persecution.” The Rev. F. Freeman declared that “this cry of persecution is itself the bitterest persecution. This charge of intolerance is the very hand of intolerance itself, stretched forth with unrelenting grasp.”⁴⁷ Religious liberty encompasses the freedom to speak as well as the freedom to think, said Freeman, and no person has the right to hinder another person from candidly expressing his views. That nation is not free where one group of people cannot express their views about God and morality without subjecting themselves “not only to the jeers and revilings of the debased, but to every unamiable feeling shewn by those who profess respectability and would fain be considered liberal....”⁴⁸

When evangelicals were condemned as theocrats for petitioning Congress to shut down post offices on Sundays (so that postal workers would not be compelled to work on the sabbath), they responded appealing to the First Amendment’s right of petition: “Have not religious persons the same right as others to petition Congress?” asked one pamphleteer. “And when they have done so, are they to be denounced before the nation as a treasonable combination to change the government...?”⁴⁹

Other evangelicals drew implicitly on American constitutional theory to show that evangelical voluntary associations could not credibly lead to a church-state union. In an address titled “On the Misrepresentation of Benevolent Actions,” the Rev. David Ogden pointed out that evangelical reform was spearheaded by all major evangelical denominations, and he contended that it was unreasonable to think that these different denominations (each with its own peculiar doctrines and form of worship) would join together on behalf of church-state union. This was true however one defined such a union. Evangelical reformers could not be working toward the establishment of one

denomination over the rest, because they could never agree which denomination to establish. They could not even be working together for nonpreferential aid to all sects, because “some large [evangelical] sects as a body, and individuals in all [evangelical] sects believe that this is an unchristian way of supporting religion. And then there are innumerable small sects, besides a multitude of infidels and men indifferent to all religion, who would join together on this subject, and defeat such a plan.”⁵⁰

In other words, the sheer multiplicity of sects in America discouraged evangelical union on any other grounds than the common good. According to Ogden, this was precisely the motive that had spurred Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists, and Presbyterians to join together for evangelical reform. They sought to promote the “moral welfare of their species” by distributing the Bible to those who could not afford it, by educating children so they would not become delinquents, and by promoting “respect for the Sabbath which they believe to be essential to our political prosperity.”⁵¹

Ogden did not invoke James Madison in his discourse, but his analysis rested squarely on Madisonian principles. Echoing Madison’s argument in *Federalist* #10, Ogden essentially argued that America had such a variety of sects, evangelical and otherwise, that the only successful religious combinations would be those based on the “principles... of justice and the general good.”⁵²

Similar arguments can be made today to deflect the inevitable criticism sparked by religious-based reform efforts. In modern America, the Constitution remains a symbol of moral authority, and cultural reformers should never allow that authority to be ceded to their opponents. For example, when groups such as the ACLU assert that vouchers for private schools violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, supporters of vouchers should not only rebut this claim but make a principled argument for why religious liberty and the rights of conscience actually encourage government policies that accommodate the needs of religious believers. Similarly, when constitutional arguments are offered against government funding for faith-based charities, a positive case for funding can be offered based on the principles of equality and religious liberty.

A good example of the efficacy of positive constitutional arguments can be seen in the “equal access” movement during the 1980s and 90s. By the late 1970s, religious groups were routinely discriminated against in their access to public facilities. This fact was especially apparent in public schools. High school students who wanted to pray or read the Bible during lunch or before school were frequently denied access to school facilities, even though non-religious student groups were allowed to meet at the same

times. Students were sometimes prevented from distributing religious tracts to classmates, even when the distribution of political leaflets was allowed. Religious groups were also prohibited from renting school facilities after hours, even in school districts that allowed a wide variety of non-religious community groups to rent school facilities.

These restrictions were usually justified as being mandated by the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. However, those who worked to overturn the restrictions decided not only to rebut the Establishment Clause claim, but to offer a positive argument against the restrictions. They argued that the First Amendment's Free Speech clause *required* that religious individuals and groups be accorded the same access to public facilities as nonreligious individuals and groups. For example, if a city allowed a community group to stage a rock concert at a public park, it should also have to allow a religious group to hold a worship service there—otherwise it would be discriminating against certain groups on the basis of the content of their speech. Congress eventually guaranteed religious student groups equal access to public high schools in the Equal Access Act of 1984, a law which the Supreme Court upheld in *Board of Education v. Mergens* (1990). The Supreme Court subsequently guaranteed religious groups equal access to the rental of school facilities in *Lamb's Chapel v. Center Moriches Union Free School District* (1993) and to university activity fees in *Rosenberger v. The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia* (1995).⁵³

Lesson 4: Look to the Future

A fourth lesson from nineteenth century-evangelical reform is the need to focus on the future. Too often reform efforts try to solve current problems simply by turning back the clock. While there was an element of looking backward in evangelical reform during the 1800s, there was also a healthy interest in looking to the future.

Lyman Beecher was one of the ones who understood the importance of the future. In the 1830s, Beecher left a thriving pastorate in Boston for the much rougher environs of Cincinnati, Ohio. Recognizing that the United States was expanding westward, Beecher saw that the future of the nation was in the west, and that if evangelicals wanted to continue to thrive they would need to be as aggressive in establishing churches and voluntary associations on the frontier as they were in the established cities of the eastern seaboard. With this vision in mind, Beecher helped create Lane Seminary in order to educate clergy who could help spread the gospel in the territories.⁵⁴

Beecher's vision was strategic. He focused on influencing the culture not by

recapturing the current power elites but by shaping the leadership class of the next generation. Adopting a long-term view, Beecher sought to win over the culture by raising up leaders among the next generation who would impact the nation as it expanded.

Beecher's long-term outlook is particularly relevant for today. Rather than simply dousing the cultural brush-fires of the moment, those interested in genuine cultural revival need to start thinking in terms of the next generation rather than just the next election. Money and resources should be directed to long-term intergenerational change, not just short-term battles. For example, those concerned about the negative cultural effects of TV and film should spend less time trying to influence current members of the entertainment industry and more time seeking to mold the artists, writers, musicians, and executives of the next generation. Similarly, those worried about the lack of high-caliber leaders in politics should devote resources to training young people who will be political leaders a decade from now. Long-term cultural investments can be a hard sell in an age of immediate gratification. Philanthropists, policy makers, and citizen activists all tend to demand quick results for their actions and donations. But long-term efforts are the only credible way to bring about sustained reform.

Lesson 5: Embody Integrity

A fifth lesson from nineteenth century evangelical reform is the importance of personal integrity. During the 1790s and through the first years of the new century, many conservative Protestants had allied themselves with the Federalist Party against the Jeffersonians. During these years, some ministers virtually became party hacks, demonizing members of the other political party and using the pulpit to generate support for the political agenda of the Federalist Party. Eventually there was a backlash against this harsh partisanship among Christians, and there was an increasing recognition among many religious leaders that Christians in politics had not lived up to the requirements of their faith and had to do better. They had to guard against the dangers of pride and hatred even while striving to stand up for the truth.

Timothy Dwight was one of the people who recognized this. President of Yale, Dwight himself had been one of the fiercest critics of Jefferson and a staunch supporter of the Federalist party. But he came to realize dangers of tying Christianity so closely to party politics, and he began trying to counteract it.

In his commencement address of 1816, he told students that

the prejudices, the fervour, and the bitterness, of party spirit are incapable of vindication. I may be permitted to think differently from my neighbour; but I am not permitted to hate him, nor to quarrel with him, merely because he thinks differently from me.

... Our countrymen have spent a sufficient time in hostilities against each other. We have entertained as many unkind thoughts, uttered as many bitter speeches, called each other by as many hard names, and indulged as much unkindness and malignity; as might satisfy our worst enemies, and as certainly ought to satisfy us. From all these efforts of ill-will we have not derived the least advantage... Friends and brothers have ceased to be friends and brothers; and professing Christians have dishonoured the religion which they professed.⁵⁵

One of Dwight's students from a few years before was a young man named Jeremiah Evarts. Of all the politically active evangelicals during the early 1800s, perhaps Evarts was the one who displayed most clearly during this period a reconciliation between personal holiness and political action. Evarts was a lawyer, a journalist, and missionary leader. He was active in taking a stand on such issues as slavery and alcohol abuse before those issues were popular. But his greatest legacy was his defense of the treaty rights of the Cherokee Indians in Georgia.⁵⁶

The Cherokee had become Christians and adopted a democratic form of government. They had been promised their treaty lands forever by the federal government. But in the late 1820s, a concerted effort was made to take away the Cherokee's land and compel them to move further west. The effort finally succeeded in a tragic episode of American history. But it took years to actually force the Cherokee to move—and that was largely due to the gallant efforts of Jeremiah Evarts and his missionaries. Evarts' activities on behalf of the Cherokee literally drove him to exhaustion and death.⁵⁷

Even most opponents of Evarts respected him. An indication of why they did so can be seen from his daily prayer list found among his papers after his death. Evarts prayed daily that he would “be preserved from rash and imprudent speeches in regard to the government” and pleaded for help with avoiding self-righteousness: “Whenever I hear of sinful actions, before I say a word by way of censure, [let me] remember how much I find to blame in myself, though under so great advantages.”⁵⁸

Evarts was a powerful example of how one can stand up strongly for what one believes to be right and still do it in a responsible manner. He was an example of what St. Paul called “speaking the truth in love.”⁵⁹ Avoiding the twin wrongs of self-righteousness and unprincipled pragmatism, Evarts showed what it truly means to be a

person of faith in politics.

Lesson 6: Act Prudently

A final lesson to be culled from nineteenth century evangelical activism is the need for the virtue of prudence. Prudence involves selecting the best means to actually achieve noble goals. To be prudent is to be an idealist about goals, but a realist about methods. Prudence is of particular relevance to religious activists in public life because they are especially susceptible to disillusionment if they cannot immediately reach their goals. Religion is usually idealistic, and as a consequence religious people in public life can be moralistic and uncompromising. That is their great strength; but it is also their weakness. The danger of religious idealism in public life is that when the idealists don't get their way they will give up on the system, perhaps even work to undermine it.

Evangelicals faced this problem after the failure to save the Cherokee Indians in the 1830s. After every legal and political remedy to prevent Cherokee deportation had been exhausted, the evangelical missionaries were faced with the question of whether to counsel the Cherokee to continue to resist or to seek the most favorable removal agreement possible. Most evangelicals urged the Cherokee to conclude a new treaty with the federal government, realizing that outright resistance would now be futile. The only prudent course was to try to make the best of an admittedly bad situation. A few evangelicals, however, supported continued resistance by the Cherokee.⁶⁰

The debate over Cherokee resistance was prophetic. It underscored the difficulties religious reformers can sometimes have in dealing with the hard realities of politics, and it foreshadowed a much larger debate that would take place in the 1840s and 50s about slavery. The question then was how far Christians should go to oppose slavery in a country where its existence was constitutionally protected. Some abolitionists sought to work within the system to stop the spread of slavery and ultimately make it unsustainable. Others attacked the Constitution itself as a corrupt document and advocated going beyond the law to dismantle slavery.

Civil disobedience has a long and honored pedigree in America, and anyone who accepts the idea of a higher law ought to accept at least a theoretical right to sometimes disobey unjust laws. Nevertheless, this is perilous territory, as Abraham Lincoln suggested in his justly famous Lyceum Address.⁶¹ The danger of taking the law into one's own hands is that in the process one may destroy the very foundations that make law itself possible. If one is seeking to establish a legal right for someone, it is

problematic to undermine the legal system in order to assert it.

Unless religious idealists have a firm grasp of the idea of prudence, religious idealism in politics has the tendency to be overzealous and even politically destabilizing. What is needed to counteract this tendency is a heavy dose of realism. As usual, Lyman Beecher was someone who understood this. In one of his earliest sermons on reform, he discussed the possibility that the reformers would not achieve all their goals, and he warned his listeners about adopting an all-or-nothing approach toward reform.

“We are not angels, but men,” he declared. “If we can gradually improve ourselves, and improve the society in which we live, though in a small degree, it is an object not to be despised.”⁶² In an era when many Americans expect almost instantaneous improvement because of the wonders of technology, Beecher’s words supply a healthy caution for would-be cultural reformers.

¹ This essay uses “evangelical” in the sense that it was employed during the period under study. In the 1800s, the term applied to any Protestant group that adhered to traditional Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, salvation by grace, personal sanctification, and the atoning death and bodily resurrection of Christ. The term was not confined to religious groups typified by enthusiasm, populism, and revivalism. Hence, in the nineteenth century, Presbyterians and Episcopalians were regarded as evangelicals just as much as Methodists and Baptists. Non-evangelical groups included Unitarians and Roman Catholics. See Robert Baird, *Religion in America; or An account of the Origin, Relation to the State, and Present Condition of the Evangelical Churches in the United States, with Notices of the Unevangelical Denominations* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1856), 438-539, 665.

² Robert Owen, “Oration, Containing a *Declaration of Mental Independence*,” Robert Owen in the United States, edited by Oakley C. Johnson (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), p. 70, emphasis in original.

³ For a discussion of Jefferson’s religious beliefs, see John G. West, Jr., *The Politics of Revelation and Reason: Religion and Civic Life in the New Nation* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 56-67, 79-80.

⁴ See Don C. Setz, *Famous American Duels* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1929).

⁵ James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein, *Crime and Human Nature* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 434.

⁶ For coverage and discussion of the Second Great Awakening and its various revivals, see Nelson R. Burr, *A Critical Bibliography of Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), IV: 155-156; Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972); Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965); Garth M. Rosell, “Charles G. Finney: His Place in the Stream of American Evangelicalism,” in *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, ed. by Leonard I. Sweet (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 131-147; Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald Press, 1959); Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957); Charles Roy Keller, *The Second Great Awakening in Connecticut* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968); Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). Also see final chapter in Alan Heimert, *Religion and the*

American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), especially 540-552.

⁷ See West, *Politics of Revelation and Reason*, chapter 2.

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. by J.P. Mayer (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969), 513.

⁹ See charts in Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp.16, 55.

¹⁰ *First Report of the American Sunday School Union* (Philadelphia: I. Ashmead and Co., 1825), 21-22; Baird, *Religion in America*, 313-314.

¹¹ Baird, *Religion in America*, 314; *Sixth Report of the American Sunday-School Union* (Philadelphia: 1830), 13-15; *Seventh Annual Report of the American Sunday School Union*, second edition (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1831), 17-24.

¹² E.C. Tracy, *Memoir of the Life of Jeremiah Evarts* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1845), 75; Lyman Beecher, *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, ed. by Barbara M. Cross (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1961), I: 179-184; II: 22-25; Beecher, "Lectures on Intemperance," *Works of Lyman Beecher* (Boston: Jewett, 1852), I: 347-425; Anson Phelps Stokes, *Church and State in the United States* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), II: 40-41; *Second Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance* (Andover: Flagg and Gould, 1829), 9.

¹³ *Second Annual Report of the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance*, 12, 15.

¹⁴ Charles Foster, *An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 275-279; Theodore Frelinghuysen, *Address Delivered... Before the Meeting of the Society for the Education of Poor and Indigent Children of the Parish of Orange* (Newark: W. Tuttle and Co., 1827); Beecher, *Autobiography*, I: 253-256.

¹⁵ Johnson, *Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 118, 124-125.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Foster, *Errand of Mercy*, 188-189, 275-279.

¹⁹ Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 118-119.

²⁰ Wilson and Herrnstein, *Crime and Human Nature*, 432; emphasis in the original.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 433.

²² Beecher, *Autobiography*, I: 252.

²³ *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-253.

²⁵ Elwyn A. Smith, "The Voluntary Establishment of Religion," *The Religion of the Republic*, ed. by Elwyn A. Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 155.

²⁶ Lyman Beecher, *A Sermon Addressed to the Legislature of Connecticut* (New Haven: I. Bunce, 1826).

²⁷ Beecher, *Autobiography*, I: 253.

²⁸ See, for example, Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1992); *Renewing American Compassion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

²⁹ Sally Macdonald, "Back to school prayer rally has approval of state officials." *The Seattle Times* (September 11, 1998), www.seattletimes.com.

³⁰ See *Capitol Square v. Pinette* (1995), No. 94-780, where the Supreme Court ruled that a cross placed in the Statehouse plaza of Columbus, Ohio by a private group does not violate the Establishment Clause.

³¹ See *Hurley v. Irish-American Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Group of Boston*, 515 U.S. 557 (1995), where the Supreme Court allowed the private sponsor of Boston's St. Patrick's Day Parade to exclude a homosexual group from the parade.

³² Beecher laid the groundwork for these larger single-issue groups by noting that they could serve a vital coordination function by “collect[ing] facts, and extend[ing] information, and, in a thousand nameless ways... exert[ing] a salutary general influence... Associations of this general nature, for the promotion of the arts and sciences, have exerted a powerful influence; and no reason, it is presumed, can be given, why the cause of morals may not be equally benefited by similar associations.” Beecher, “Reformation of Morals,” *Works*, II, 96.

³³ Foster, *Errand of Mercy*, 130-131, 146-154; Clifford Griffin, *Their Brothers’ Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1960), 66.

³⁴ Foster, *Errand of Mercy*, 134.

³⁵ Johnson, *Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 118-119.

³⁶ John Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Jack Scott (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982), [Lecture I], 64.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁹ See Samuel Stanhope Smith, *A Comprehensive View of the Leading and Most Important Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion*, second edition with additions (New Brunswick: Deare and Myer, 1816), 11-71; Samuel Stanhope Smith, *Lectures...on the Subjects of Moral and Political Philosophy* (Trenton, NJ: Daniel Fenton, 1812), I: 184-188, 300-321, II: 10-116; Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Moral Science*, edited by Joseph Blau (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1963), 39, 42-75; Jaspas Adams, *Elements of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Folsom, Wells, and Thurston, 1837), 1-37.

⁴⁰ See Nathanael Emmons, “Dignity of Man” in *Works of Nathanael Emmons*, edited by Jacob Ide (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1842), II: 27-28; Dwight, as transcribed in Theodore Dwight, Jun., *President Dwight’s Decisions and Questions Discussed by the Senior Class in Yale College, in 1813 and 1814* (New York: Jonathan Leavitt, 1833), 347; Timothy Dwight, “The Nature and Danger of Infidel Philosophy. Sermon I,” in *Sermons by Timothy Dwight* (New Haven: Hezekiah Howe and Urie and Peck, 1828), I: 334, also see comments on 317.

⁴¹ For a discussion of evangelical anti-Catholicism, see West, *Politics of Revelation and Reason*, 104-106.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 133-134, 209-210.

⁴³ See J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997) and Michael Cromartie, editor, *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁴⁴ Richard John Neuhaus and Charles Colson, editors, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word, 1995).

⁴⁵ See, for example, *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine* (August 30, 1828), 34; Robert L. Jennings, “Religion Necessary to Make and Keep People Virtuous,” *Free Enquirer* (December 24, 1828), 71; “Orthodox Attack on Congress,” *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine* (February 4, 1829), 130; Frances Wright, “Address,” *Free Enquirer* (October 18, 1829), 3-4; A Layman, “To Any Member of Congress,” *Free Enquirer* (February 27, 1830), 138-140; “Plots and Masks,” *Working Man’s Advocate* (October 30, 1830), 3.

⁴⁶ “Sunday School Union, or Union of Church and State,” reprinted in Ezra Stiles Ely, *The Duty of Christian Freemen to Elect Christian Rulers* (Philadelphia: William F. Geddes, 1828), 18-28.

⁴⁷ F. Freeman, *Religious Liberty: A Discourse* (Plymouth, MA: Benjamin Drew, Jr., 1832), 23.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁹ *Review of a Report of the Committee... by the Honorable Richard Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: 1829), 21.

⁵⁰ Ogden, David Longworth, “Second Discourse, On the Misrepresentation of Benevolent Actions,” in *Two Discourses* (Hartford, CN: Hudson and Skinner, 1830), 28.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 26, 31-32.

⁵² James Madison, Federalist #51, *The Federalist Papers*, edited by Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1963), 322, 325.

⁵³ *Board of Education v. Mergens*, 496 U.S. 226 (1990); *Lamb's Chapel v. Center Moriches Union Free School District*, 508 U.S. 384 (1993); *Rosenberger v. The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia*, No. 94-329 (1995). For a more detailed discussion of the background and development of equal access, see John G. West, Jr., "The Changing Battle over Religion in the Public Schools," *Wake Forest Law Review*, 26, no.2 (1991): 361-401.

⁵⁴ See Vincent Harding, *A Certain Magnificence: Lyman Beecher and the Transformation of American Protestantism* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1991), 281-302; Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati: Truman and Smith, 1835).

⁵⁵ Dwight, "On Doing Good," *Sermons*, 540-541.

⁵⁶ See Tracy, *Memoir of the Life of Jeremiah Evarts*; John A. Andrews, *From Revivals to Removal: Jeremiah Evarts, the Cherokee Nation, and the Search for the Soul of America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992).

⁵⁷ West, *Politics of Revelation and Reason*, 171-197.

⁵⁸ Tracy, *Memoir of the Life of Jeremiah Evarts*, 429.

⁵⁹ Ephesians 4:15.

⁶⁰ West, *Politics of Revelation and Reason*, 203.

⁶¹ Abraham Lincoln, "Address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois," (1838) in *Abraham Lincoln, Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858* (New York: Library of America, 1989), 28-36.

⁶² Beecher, *The Practicality of Suppressing Vice by Means of Societies Instituted for that Purpose* (New London, CT: Samuel Green, 1804), 17.