



The Second Great Awakening and the Remaking of Everyday Life

A circular from 1836 describes the visits temperance activist Abel Brown made to the homes of those targeted for reform in Auburn, New York. With each visit he briefly summarized his findings:

No. 12. Called at a dirty, miserable place, and was met at the door by a respectable looking woman, who bade me welcome. It was one of those filthy hovels in which sin and misery hold the sway. The gentleman of the house sat in one corner of the room; and, knowing from his appearance that he was a sot, I said, are you a temperance man sir?

No. 17. Called at a house which wears a respectable exterior; but within is full of filth and drunkenness. I had been told that the man and his wife both get drunk, quarrel and fight, &c, &c; and at the time I saw them, the woman was so drunk that she could not talk plain or walk straight. Her bloated, filthy form, was but indecently clothed in rags, and she was as loathsome an object as I ever saw. She has four children, dirty and ill-mannered in the extreme; and how can they be otherwise, left to the guidance of such a mother? Her furniture was broken and dirty, and her house was filled with filth past description. She professed to be pious and temperate, and I was obliged to leave her as dull and insensible as a stone.

Nos. 23, 24, and 25. These families live in this house, all of which are degraded by drink. I could not obtain particular relations; but their outward appearance told a tale of misery. They were ragged and filthy in the extreme: almost entirely destitute of the necessities of life. In one family there was not a single chair, and no bed; but a bunch of filthy rags at the sight of which decency hides her face. They have several children, who go to neither day nor Sabbath school. (In Ge. Smith and Brown 1836:5–6)

I quote these observations at length because Brown's descriptions offer a striking look at how religious reformers born of Second Great Awakening ideals connected the external and internal, the material and the moral. In assessing his various hosts and hostesses, Brown describes their behavior as well as their physical appearance and the condition of their homes. Here, intemperance corresponded to filth, unkempt dress, ugliness, uncouth manners, and bad parenting. From his perspective, these individuals could not be moral, respectable Christians given their material and physical realities.

New ideas nurtured in the Second Great Awakening—especially the emphasis on Christian perfectibility and evangelism—led believers like Abel Brown to obsess over their own material worlds and those of people they targeted for reform and conversion. An active and visible faith was encouraged, and what it meant to live the Word was clarified. Changing attitudes about the purity of the Christian body inspired advice on what true Christians should eat and drink and what should surround them inside the true Christian home. These ideas, many of which have clear material referents, came to anchor a lifestyle that was believed to reflect one's piety. Once one turned to Christ, the perfection of spirit, mind, body, and home could be pursued. And once others followed suit, heaven on earth could become a reality.

Perfectionism, Millennialism, and Reform

In sermons that shaped the evangelical Protestantism of the Second Great Awakening and the subsequent age of reform during the antebellum period, preachers and circuit riders delivered a message that spurred their listeners to change. They told the congregations and revival goers that their actions in life were linked to their fate in the afterlife. Discarding traditional Calvinist notions from the Westminster Confession of Faith—of moral depravity, submission to an all-powerful God, and predestination—evangelical preachers like New Yorker Charles Grandison Finney and New Englanders Lyman Beecher, Timothy Dwight, and Nathaniel William Taylor instead adopted the Arminian belief that living a moral life or a sinful one was an individual's choice (Hambrick-Stowe, 1996:28–32; McLoughlin 1978:114; G. M. Thomas 1989:69).

Finney, who was the most influential preacher on the revival circuit during this period, argued that though it was God who attracted sinners to their spiritual awakenings, individual men and women used their own free will to turn to him. Influenced in part by John Wesley's Methodism, Finney clarified

his position in one notable sermon by comparing the conversion process to a man saved from walking—unaware—off the edge of Niagara Falls:

He approaches nearer and nearer, until he actually lifts his foot to take the final step that shall plunge him in destruction. At this moment you lift your warning voice above the roar of the foaming waters, and cry out, Stop. The voice pierces his ear, and breaks the charm that binds him; he turns instantly upon his heel, all pale and aghast he retires, quivering, from the verge of death. He reels, and almost swoons with horror; turns and walks slowly to the public house; you follow him . . . and on your approach, he points to you, and says, That man saved my life. Here he ascribes the work to you; and certainly there is a sense in which you had saved him. But, on being further questioned, he says, Stop! how that word rings in my ears. Oh, that was to me the word of life. Here he ascribes it to the word that aroused him, and caused him to turn. But, on conversing still further, he said, had I not turned at that instant, I should have been a dead man. Here he speaks of it, and truly, as his own act; but directly you hear him say, O the mercy of God; if God had not interposed, I should have been lost. (Finney 1836:46)

In this case, Finney compares the observer to God, who, with the help of preachers, makes a similar appeal to sinners. The endangered man, the sinner, makes the choice to hear the message and change his course of action. In making it a question of choice, Finney argues that salvation was not a glory reserved for the elect. Salvation was open to all men and women who opened themselves to and abided by God's law (Hardman 1987:46–47).

Often, the moment one chose to hear God's voice took place at a revival or camp meeting, and at times it was accompanied by a physical and/or verbal outburst that marked the conversion. Some condemned these showcases of unbridled and uncivilized emotion, but Finney argued that helping sinners turn to God involved both the heart and the head. Trained as a lawyer, he was known to use "hot passion and cold logic" while preaching (Hambrick-Stowe 1996:35). During his early career in northern New York, he often preached without notes, allowing the Holy Spirit to inspire him in the moment, and his message could inspire effusive expressions of enthusiasm such as falling and laughing from the power of the Spirit in that moment (Hambrick-Stowe 1996:45; Perciaccante 2006:41). But ultimately Finney took care to emphasize that preachers should seek to control their listeners' emotions, which he viewed as an involuntary aspect of an individual's personality. A person's will, on the

other hand, was voluntary and as such could be used to control emotions. Appeals to one's intellect through spiritual arguments grounded in reason could inspire potential converts to use their will in this regard—to stifle any “animal feeling” that was preventing those of carnal minds and hearts from seeing “the operations of the Holy Spirit” at work in themselves and the world around them (Finney 1836:191; also Rosell 1984:138–139).

The interplay between the head and the heart continued even after a convert chose to turn to God, and evangelicals added a believer's hands and feet into this dynamic as they sought to realize their perfectionist and millennialist visions in people's earthly lives (Rosell 1984:146). Once converted, Christians walked in God's light, which involved abiding by Christ's law and encouraging others to do the same so as to bring on the Second Coming. In many respects, the vision for Christian perfection of this period involved a constant checking of one's own animal feelings and a continued and forceful campaign against those entities that served to nurture them. The vision was about pursuing intellectual, emotional, social, physical, and material perfection with an acute sense of self-discipline; it involved encouraging others to do the same at a time when many were gravely concerned for the moral health of their young nation. Evangelicals worked to spread the Word through revivals, tract societies, and the Sunday school movement, and they organized on behalf of overcoming a range of sins.

Their concerns manifested differently depending on the region and the issue. In the North an increasing number of believers argued that the nation could not be saved until it cleansed itself of the stain of slavery. Abolitionists who were inspired by evangelical ideals viewed the oppressive institution as detrimental to their millennialist goals since slaveholders sinned through their participation in a cruel and inhumane system. Slaveholders were condemned as violent oppressors, and slavery itself was demonized because it fostered a culture of dependence and not self-respect among the enslaved (Walters 1978:82).

Others targeted the perceived depravity of a growing number of working-class men, women, and children who were not benefiting from the expanding economic system and instead were increasingly associated with sinful lifestyles. Industrialization and urbanization had brought the poor and an increasing number of immigrants to cities, where the realities of poverty shocked visitors who offered disturbing accounts of the rampant crime, prostitution, drunkenness, gambling, and violence that they observed. Temperance, moral reform, land reform, and institutional reform of schools, prisons,

and asylums were social movements that gained momentum as more and more Americans sought to create environments that would quell animal passions and awaken the Spirit among potential converts in cities and elsewhere (Mintz 1995).

Though the movements attracted diverse groups of believers—black and white, female and male, rich and poor—they were often directed by a white middle class that aimed to civilize poor whites, immigrants, African Americans, and others thought to be most in need of moral uplift. But ultimately, all evangelicals also needed to police their own morality, and many used participation in the organizations, institutions, and initiatives that formed as part of these movements as observable reassurances of their own holiness. In this way, walking in God's light required reformers to direct their attention outward and inward as they journeyed toward salvation.

The morality of some ecclesiastical abolitionists, for example, was revealed by membership in groups organized at the local, state, and national levels and support for political parties that carried an antislavery agenda. Many Garrisonian abolitionists believed that only moral suasion and not legislation could generate real change; supporters of “perfectionist politics” (Strong 1999) created third parties such as the Liberty Party and the Free Soil Party to realize aspects of their goals politically and actively canvassed candidates from the mainstream parties to divulge their positions on the slavery issue. The religious ultraists, who rejected more moderate antislavery positions, rallied for the immediate abolition of slavery and believed all true Christians must vote for their candidates, participate in local antislavery meetings and conventions, actively support freedom seekers through the Underground Railroad, sign antislavery petitions to be sent to Congress, and belong to a church that took a strong antislavery position (Abzug 1994; Stewart 1976).

While these ideas related to the social and political dimensions of a true Christian lifestyle, others emerged that made the physical and material worlds of evangelicals equally relevant and similarly reflective of one's piety. These ideas related to the overarching importance of self-discipline and restraint and reflected new notions about Christian aesthetics and the sanctity of the Christian body and home. A new Christian materiality emerged from these Second Great Awakening ideals that had significant impacts on the consumer culture of nineteenth-century America and brought the fight for Christian souls onto new battlegrounds (R. Bushman 1992; Merish 2000). At times public and at times private, these struggles consistently reflected how one navigated one's spiritual and earthly relationships.