
Dwight Lyman Moody

1837-1899

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Dwight L. Moody was one of the great evangelists of the nineteenth century.

Born to a poor Northfield, Massachusetts family of nine children, his father died when he was four. He only received a fifth-grade education and left home at age 17. He became a Christian at 18, and moved to Chicago. Rather than seek a personal fortune, he focused on helping the poor, establishing a Sunday school in a Chicago slum in 1858.

He refused to fight in the US Civil War, claiming that with respect to war he “was a Quaker”—meaning a pacifist. Nevertheless he worked to evangelize Union troops.

By 1861 his missionary activities were so successful that he withdrew from business to devote himself full time to missionary work. In 1870 he partnered with Ira Sankey, and the two spent years touring in evangelistic campaigns in the United States and Great Britain. He believed that music would be an effective tool as part of preaching, and recruited Sankey to join him and sing hymns to the crowds. Their selection of hymns became popular and widely used and generated over a million dollars in royalties. It is estimated that more than 100 million people attended the Moody-Sankey revival meetings.

He became convinced there was a need to train other evangelists, both men and women. In 1879 he established the Northfield Seminary for girls, and in 1881 Mount Hermon School for boys. In 1886 he founded the Bible-Work Institute of the Chicago Evangelization Society, later renamed the Moody Bible Institute. The royalties from his successful hymnal were used to fund these projects.

He believed in being Christian above every other thing in life. He taught, “Christians should live in the world, but not be filled with it. A ship lives in the water; but if the water gets into the ship, she goes to the bottom. So Christians may live in the world; but if the world gets into them, they sink.” He could put a profound sermon in a single quip: “Moses spent forty years thinking he was somebody; forty years learning he was nobody; and forty years discovering what God can do with a nobody.”

He lived his life trying to be an example of Christian faith, and taught those who heard him to do likewise. He admonished Christians, “Out of 100 men, one will read the Bible, the other 99 will read the Christian.” Also, “The world does not understand theology or dogma, but it understands love and sympathy.”

He believed in the Calvinist tradition. His sermons were filled with insightful quips, personal allusions and penetrating insights. His limited education did not control his destiny, and he had a formidable command of the English Bible text. He could be blunt, and had little pretense in his demeanor.

Although he was praised and respected, he never seemed to fall under its control. He stressed God’s love and mercy rather than God’s anger and the risk of hellfire.