

## D. L. Moody Lay Evangelist

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Among the greatest of laymen ever to take up evangelistic preaching was D. L. Moody, a man whose education was practically non-existent.

He nevertheless left a tremendous and lasting impress upon Christianity, not only in America, but in Britain as well. He stands in remarkable contrast to evangelists like Wesley, Whitefield, Edwards and Finney—all of whom had extensive education and theological training.

Born in 1837 in Northfield, Massachusetts, Moody was known affectionately as "The Commoner of Northfield." This commoner came to be known, loved, and followed by people in all walks of life, many whose intellects far outdistanced his own, many of wealth, influence, and distinction. He did this not by asserting his own qualifications, but by exemplifying the love of God in every particular of his life. It wasn't necessary that he have the world's credentials of spiritual leadership, because he had become, by his utter dedication and God's power, a true spiritual leader.

Moody's thought was never cluttered with theological quandaries. He had a simple faith and simple words to express it. His preaching didn't degenerate into a series of learned quotations or a mass of long words. In fact one friend said that Mr. Moody was the only man he knew that pronounced "Jerusalem" in two syllables. That Moody's ready communication with uneducated people was aided by his own background is easily seen. More remarkable was his appeal to the learned. His childlike open-mindedness made him very attractive to them and drew many to him. He would frequently inquire of this or that person what they could tell him about Christ.

Though Moody was for a time uncomfortable in addressing college audiences, he eventually had resounding success with them. At Princeton in 1876 Moody spoke and left 100 converts. College officials declared that at Moody's departure there was scarcely a student who was not more or less serious about his personal salvation. He spoke at Oxford-Cambridge in 1882, and after overcoming the hecklers succeeded in converting a great number.

By 1885 he was quite at home on campuses and when invited to Yale in that year the college president called him "the greatest evangelist of our time" and requested that the students' attitude be one of "unusual expectancy and respect" -- an honor formerly given only twice.

### A deprived child

Obviously, it was not education that placed D. L. Moody in the hand of God. What, then, was it? To answer this we have to know a little more about Mr. Moody. He was in many ways a "deprived child." His father, who died when D. L. was only four, left his wife with nine children and a mountain of debts. The creditors left only the house and small mortgaged acreage. Mrs. Moody was determined to keep the family together.

Her remarkable Puritan austerity and sacrificial spirit made this possible. Her creed was nominally Unitarian— which was at that time much more orthodox than today—but her practice was much simpler, being based only on deep trust in God.

The family remained together and shared what little they had. In one instance the children voted to give some of their scant meal to a hungry beggar. Sunday attendance at church was the law of the household. The little troupe left in the morning, stayed for the afternoon sermon, and then returned home.

In the summer the children carried their shoes and stockings, wearing them only within sight of the church. Though young D. L. learned little from these sessions in church, he was later grateful for the habit of church attendance they fostered in him. As the children grew older they left home during the winter months to stay with various families.

There they would do the chores in exchange for board and attend school. When D. L. was ten he went to

board with an elderly couple 13 miles from home. He was very homesick. He managed to get through roughly the sixth grade.

Later he got a job addressing papers in a printing plant, but was fired for bumbling the numbers. He worked for a time in the fields, but became so discouraged one day while cutting some trees that he said, "I'm sick and tired of this. I'm not going to stay around here anymore." He was 16 then. Soon, at 17, he was on his way to Boston-against all advice. His job-hunting was woefully fruitless.

At last he approached his uncle, keeper of a Boston shoe store, and asked for employment. When the uncle hired his nephew there were numerous conditions. D. L. was not to try to run the store, but ask questions when he didn't know something. His uncle also required that he avoid questionable amusements, board where his uncle chose, and attend church and Sunday school. He turned out to be a wonderful shoe salesman. When no customers came in, young Moody would go out and get them. It wasn't long before he was outselling the other clerks.

### **New birth**

His experiences at Boston's Mt. Vernon Church, which he duly attended, were mixed. He was ridiculed by his Sunday school classmates for his ignorance. Not only did he thumb through the Old Testament in search of the book of John, but he stumbled through the passages once he located them and tried to read them. In church services he often slept. One day in April, 1885, his Sunday school teacher, Mr. Kimball, felt urgent need to speak to Moody concerning his soul. He went to the back of the store where Moody was and, in Kimball's words, "I went up to him and put my hand on his shoulder...I simply told him of Christ's love for him and the love Christ wanted in return." Evidently this came at the crucial moment, for Moody experienced then and there a conversion.

The next morning Moody writes:

*The sun shone a little brighter and the birds sang sweeter...the old elms waved their branches for joy, and all Nature was at peace...it was the most delicious joy that I'd ever known.*

He used to say, "I was born twice, once in '37; once again in '55."

And he wrote:

*One night the Bible was as dry as last year's almanac... but the next morning it was a new book. The light of heaven shone on every page. It seemed as if the ink hadn't got dry, and it dropped down deep into my soul.*

Within days of his conversion, Moody was in Northfield, trying to kindle the faith of his family. Unsuccessful, he returned to Boston in discouragement. Mid-September, 1856, saw Moody bound for Chicago, where he had hopes of making a fortune. The prospects at his uncle's were too limited for him, with his low wages and the resentment of his fellow clerks at his aggressive salesmanship. In Chicago he took his uncle's letter to a shoe shop, and was soon hired and handling the store's "unmanageable" customers. He continued his street-selling when the shop was empty.

### **Mushrooming Sunday school**

He joined the Plymouth Congregational Church and a Methodist group also. In the church he rented five pews and filled them each Sunday with people he talked to. With the Methodists he visited saloons, hotels, and such, distributing literature and invitations. When he discovered a small mission in the city he begged for a class to teach and was told that he could teach as many as he could bring. The next Sunday, overjoyed, he brought 18 ragged children to add to the 16 already in the school. That summer he taught on the shore of Lake Michigan.

When winter came he secured an abandoned saloon. His spiritual energy was boundless. He bought a pony to help in his rounds, and the children clamored to ride on it. He would visit the families of each pupil, gain parental support and perhaps some additional pupils. He found new quarters, a large working saloon this time, which he would sweep, clean and ventilate each Sunday morning in preparation for his meeting. At the end of the first year he had 650 pupils. There were a thousand by 1859, and 1500 eventually.

Paradoxically-yet predictably-as his focus on God's work sharpened and intensified, his experiences broadened. There was tremendous variety in his life now: encounters of tenderness, dangers, pathos, diplomacy, power, and fulfilled faith. A friend who had counseled Moody to study a list of recommended books left Chicago, and Moody promptly abandoned the reading.

As one biographer says, "But what no book could teach Moody was fast learning from his religious and

secular work. His experiences were intimate, vivid, and sure. Here was no secondhand learning. And his 'sermons,' if skimpy and superficial in content, were coined from life and death contact that breathed into them a freshness and earnestness that penetrated, gripped, and persuaded." His ingenuity in the work was wonderful. To gain the trust of the Catholics, he bargained like Abraham with a Bishop until they prayed together, and Moody was dubbed "Father Moody" by the North Side Catholics.



*The Great Revival -- Mr. Moody preaches at the Hippodrome.*

### **I am doing all I can**

Nevertheless, after a three-month inner struggle, he gave up his secular employment entirely. This was a momentous decision. As he put it, "If I am in doubt about my own salvation ... I am not fit for God's service... Before I can pull anyone else out of the water I must have a firm footing on shore myself."

From this point D. L. Moody's life opens so quickly and widely, we can't hope to retrace it all. All he later became had its roots in his first undertakings and in the attitude behind them. In Moody's words:

*... when I first tried to work for the Lord...I did not know which way to turn; what was the best thing I could do. But I did something. I did my little work the best way I could. And then God blessed me, and kept giving me more and more to do.*

Action was the keynote of Moody's success. Though he was mindful and even regretful of his deficiencies-particularly intellectually- he never postponed work because of them or used them as an excuse. A sympathetic critic once told Moody that the only drawback to his sermons was his imperfect knowledge of

grammar and English. Moody replied that he knew and deplored this as much as anyone.

Then added Moody, "But I am doing all I can for God with the gifts I have. Are you?" Even so, not everyone found Moody's preaching deficient. In 1885 the president of Yale called Moody "an exponent of a rare type of eloquence-eloquence which, by reason of its appeal to the heart and conscience, is not always recognized by that name, yet truly an eloquence of a high order."

### **Lively prayer meetings**

Moody busied himself now not only with his Sunday schools but with the Y. M. C. A. He took up residence there after quitting his job, and slept on a bench. The Y at that time was not the play room it has become. Then it was first and foremost a *Christian* association. Moody's dismay at the noon prayer meetings, which were dull and barely attended, led him to do something about it.

The old men who did attend seemed very narrow and disdainful of everyone outside their circle. Moody stormed the place, praying fervently for 40 minutes prior to every meeting and buttonholing passersby to attend. Before long the hall was filled daily. He livened things up with hymns and testimonies which he solicited from the audience. If someone talked too long- which by Moody's standards most people did -- he would say, "That's enough, brother. That's just perfect. Say another word and you'll spoil it!" Or he would call for a hymn.

Prayers were kept equally brief- a precedent Moody continued all his life. Once, much later during his British crusade, someone's praying was going on and on. Moody stood up and bellowed, "While our brother is finishing his prayer, let's all sing a hymn." This act broke down the resistance of one skeptic in that audience, and made him so deeply receptive that he eventually became a medical missionary and was knighted for 20 years' service in Labrador. This was Sir Wilfred Grenfell. Besides these noon meetings, Moody was chairman of the Y visitation committee, and went from house to house through the city on his pony. By 1865 Moody was the main pillar of the Y and was made president for two years.

### **Three meetings a day**

When the Civil War broke out in 1861 Moody decided to extend his ministry to the soldiers. Rather than

joining as a regimental chaplain, he wanted to be free to visit many different regiments, and remained a civilian. Someone records, "Moody was ubiquitous, hastening from one barracks to another, day and night, weekdays and Sundays, praying, exhorting, conversing with men about their souls." Perhaps some excerpts from a letter he wrote to his brother in 1862 can show just how dedicated he was.

*Dear Bro.*

*What am I doing this winter ... I am agent for the City Relief Society that takes care of the poor... I have some 500 or 800 people dependent on me for their daily food... I keep a Sadall horse to ride around with and then I Keep another horse and man to wait on the folks as they come to my office I make my headquarters in the rooms of the Y. M. C. A. I have just raised money enough to erect a chapel for the soldiers at the camp 3 miles from the city I hold a meeting down their every day and 2 in the city. So you see I have 3 meetings to attend to every day besides calling on the sick and that is not all I have to go into the country about every week to buy wood and provisions... also coal wheat meal and corn then I have to go hold meetings like 36 miles just to one prayer meeting at Elgin I am also raising money to buy Him books for the Soldiers I am one of the Army Committee and we hold meetings once a week... and then distribute books to different Companies... I do not answer I letter out of 10 that I get It is 11 to 12 every night when I retire and am up in the morning at light. Wish you would come in sometime about 1 to 3 o'clock my office hours and see the people waiting I do not get 5 minutes a day to study so I have to talk just as it happens.*

In August, 1862, after a two-year engagement, Moody married Emma Revell, a teacher in his Sunday school five years younger than himself. He had known her for five years. She worked with him on his campaigns and was his hostess for the endless guests he would bring home. Her most noted service was in the Inquiry Room, which I would like to explain. After preaching, singing, praying, calling for testimonies, and finally asking those to come forward who wished to yield their lives to Christ, there was the Inquiry Room. Those who had come forward and been prayed over were then gathered into another room, where workers talked with them more deeply and answered their questions, leading them into personal prayer. This was something that Emma did well. "Love flowed from my fingertips."

Moody made his first trip to England in 1867 with Emma, largely for her health. He also wanted to learn. There was one great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, whom he particularly wanted to hear. He met Spurgeon and other evangelical voices, but he himself didn't preach on this trip. The greatest influence that came to him was, however, unexpected, in the person of Harry Moorehouse, ex-prizefighter. Moorehouse looked very young, and when he asked to come to Chicago to preach in Moody's church he wasn't taken seriously. Nevertheless, Moorehouse followed Moody to America, and wrote from New York to say that he was still available.



*Moody with his first Sunday school class at North Market Hall, Chicago*

At last Moody agreed that he could come. Moorehouse preached beautifully and powerfully for seven

nights taking John 3:16 as his text. Each night he would take a different aspect of the text and then go through the Bible from cover to cover elucidating it. The congregation brought their Bibles and followed carefully. Moody was most impressed. Moorehouse told him, "Mr. Moody, you are sailing on the wrong track. If you will change your course, and learn to preach God's words instead of your own, He will make you a great power for good."

Moody took him very seriously. He began studying and memorizing the Bible every morning from 4:00 to 6:00. He marked his Bible so thoroughly and consistently that those markings became the famous *Notes from My Bible*. He studied his Bible by topics, dwelling on "Love" until, as he said, "Love flowed from my fingertips." He studied the compassion of God until, in his words, "I lay on the floor with my face in the book and cried like a child." On his annual vacation he would reread the entire Bible-to "tune up the old instrument" as he put it.

### **Like an artesian well**

Even more important in his life was the event that happened in New York a few months later, when he received the power of the Holy Spirit. That he should be filled with the Spirit had been the fervent prayer of two women who knew his preaching in Chicago. He had joined himself in their plea; for though his meetings had been crowded and his schedule packed, he had felt for some time that something was missing. With his New York experience-which came on him like a rushing wind as he was walking in Brooklyn wondering what was wrong -- he felt everything was right again. Where a moment before there had been yearning for deliverance from his soul's weariness, now there was a surging sense of power and joy. He said it was like one foot said "Glory!" and the other "Hallelujah!!!" as he put them down. A friend said Moody explained that before this experience he had been trying to *pump* water out of a well that seemed dry.... He pumped with all his might and little water came....

Then God made his soul like an *artesian* well that could never fail of water. The Holy Spirit had powerfully and overwhelmingly taken possession of his life.

In 1872 he made a short visit to England, where he preached with such power and attained such results that the English begged him to stay. He left England, but the following year returned with Ira D. Sankey, the great singing evangelist. In their two-year campaign that followed thousands were converted in England, Scotland, and Ireland.

America soon learned of the popularity and success of these evangelists. Upon their return requests came from churches all over America for their evangelistic services.

The first opened in October, 1875, in Brooklyn. From there they went to Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Boston, and many other cities. Their efforts were greatly blessed, with vast numbers turning to God.

### **Moody-Sankey campaigns**

During the rest of the century, through the many campaigns led by Moody and Sankey, the tide of revival in America remained high. *The New York Times* wrote concerning the campaign:

*Whatever philosophical skeptics may say, the work accomplished by Mr. Moody in this city for private and public morals will live. The drunken have become sober; the vicious, virtuous; the worldly and self-seeking, unselfish; the ignoble, noble; the impure, pure. The youth have started with generous aims; the old have been stirred from grossness.*

A new hope has lifted up hundreds of human beings; a new consolation has come to the sorrowful; and a better principle has entered the sordid life of the day through the labors of these plain men. Whatever the prejudiced may say against them, the honest-minded and just will not forget these labors of love.

Having found capable people to carry on in Chicago, Moody decided in 1875 that Northfield would be his new base of operations for the world mission which had fallen to him. It was his custom to spend most of each summer there. His eyes were open to the needs of his immediate community, and he was as well loved there by the people who knew him in daily life as he was by the huge crowds that heard him preach. Seeing the need for high school training for Christian work and everyday living, he founded in 1879 Northfield Seminary, a girl's secondary school, and later in 1881 Mt. Hermon, a similar school for boys. The influence of Moody in these schools was very strong. There were students from all over the world as well as the vicinity. They were expected to do the farming and domestic chores of the schools in addition to academic work, and were graded on the former as well as the latter.

During the summers when the girl's school was empty, Moody held conferences in the buildings. The Northfield Conferences were wonderful gatherings of Christians from America and Britain, and were sources of great inspiration. -:- In 1886 Moody started the Chicago Evangelization Society, now known as

Moody Bible Institute. This was to be a school where laymen of all educational levels could study the Bible. He wanted it to train "gap men"-people to fill the gap between ministry and laity. Though the Institute's standards have been raised to increase its usefulness, it still seeks to follow the principles of its founder.

Moody's preaching was plain and scriptural. He knew well that God's love is the motive to right action and refused to appeal to men's fears. Prayer and the Holy Spirit were the essentials to true conversion, he knew. It is impossible to determine the numbers he reached. We can safely assume that hundreds of thousands were converted as a result of his work in the English-speaking world. Between 1870 and 1880 about three and a half million members were added to the evangelical churches of America.

### **Friend to all Christians**

Moody himself never affiliated with one denomination or another. His mother was Unitarian, his wife, Baptist. He had been a member of the Congregational church in Boston and worked with the Methodists in Chicago. He was friend to all Christians, provided they were sincere. There is a famous story that the Catholics of Northfield were going to build a church.

Moody gave them the largest donation they received, much to the chagrin of his fellow townspeople, who were thoroughly Protestant. When the time came for Moody to construct his own church building in Northfield, the Catholics cut and hauled to the intended site enough stone for its foundation.

The eulogies he received after his death in 1899 were many and ardent. Five months before his death Moody had said, "Someday you will read in the papers that Moody is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now....I was born of the flesh in 1837. I was born of the spirit in 1855. That which is born of the flesh may die.

That which is born of the spirit shall live forever." Henry Drummond, the Scot who wrote *The Greatest Thing in the World*, knew Moody well. In his essay on Moody he recounts some of Moody's achievements as noted by one of Moody's American associates.

1. No other living man has done so much directly in the way of uniting man to God, and in restoring them to their true center.
2. No other living man has done so much to unite man with man, to break down personal grudges and ecclesiastical barriers, bringing into united worship and harmonious cooperation men of diverse views and dispositions
3. No other living man has set so many other people to work, and developed, by awakening the sense of responsibility, latent talents and powers which would otherwise have lain dormant.
4. No other living man, by precept and example, has so vindicated the rights, privileges and duties of laymen.
5. No other living man has raised more money for other peoples' enterprises.
6. No other evangelist has kept himself so aloof from fads, religious or otherwise; from isms, from special reforms, from running specific doctrines, or attacking specific sins; has so consecrated his life upon the one supreme endeavor.

A Dubliner once told Moody, "The world has yet to see what God can do with and for and through and in a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him." Moody never forgot it. I don't think God will ever forget Moody.

As he was dying, on the evening of December 21, 1899, Moody wrote, "To see his star is good but to see his face is better." Then, in slow, measured words, he said:

*Earth recedes, heaven opens before me! This is no dream. It is beautiful. It is like a trance. If this is death it is sweet. God is calling me and I must go. Don't call me back!*