W. P. Nicholson and the Rise of Ulster Fundamentalism

by Mark Sidwell

In *Between Faith and Criticism,* evangelical historian Mark Noll offers what he considers the contribution of Billy Graham to the rise of the new evangelicalism, or what Noll prefers to call "the recovery of an evangelical mind":

> The evangelist Billy Graham, by his own admission, is no scholar. Yet he has played a surprisingly large role in many of the ventures that advanced evangelical learning. Graham was the major force behind the founding of *Christianity Today.* ... He has served as a board member for many evangelical institutions of higher education, and he has gone out of his way to present an evangelistic message at many major universities in the United States and abroad. By his friendship with [Harold] Ockenga, [Carl] Henry, and like-minded leaders, he provided the evangelical equivalent of an *imprimatur* for serious engagement with the academic world. Perhaps more than any other figure, Graham has protected evangelical scholars from the anti-intellectual tendencies of the broader evangelical community.[1]

Noll illustrates here the role that evangelists have served in popularizing social and theological movements. Because of their fame and widespread acceptance in the Christian community, evangelists have served to legitimatize movements that Christians might otherwise suspect. In this manner Charles Finney raised abolition almost to a point of theological orthodoxy in the northern United States. D. L. Moody likewise helped popularize premillennialism in the United States more than any other individual. Billy Sunday became the living symbol of the fight for the prohibition of alcohol. To use Noll's example, militant fundamentalists have found one of their greatest

obstacles in opposing the new evangelicalism has been the popularity of Evangelist Billy Graham.

With this observation in mind, the student of church history can begin to appreciate the importance of the career of William P. Nicholson. Although not as famous in America as evangelists such as Moody and Sunday, he ranks as a key figure in the religious history of the province of Northern Ireland (commonly called Ulster). Nicholson's importance there lies not only in his evangelistic campaigns but also in his contribution to the rise of Ulster fundamentalism.

Early Years

William Patteson Nicholson was born near Bangor in the north of Ireland on April 3, 1876, the son of a captain in the merchant marine.[2] His mother was a devout Presbyterian, and two of his sisters and one of his brothers served on the mission field. Nicholson, however, rebelled at his early upbringing and followed his father's vocation, going to sea at the age of sixteen. Nicholson later compared himself to the prodigal son:

> As a young man I left home and loved ones. Tired of piety and family prayers I set out to have a good time. I certainly had a good time too, but never truly satisfied, and the good time was transient and intermittent, until at last, disgusted and disappointed with it all, I saw what a failure I was making of my life. My ideals and ambitions were blighted, my heart was dissatisfied and discontented, my hopes were ruined. This all led home, and soon after to the Saviour.[3]

On one occasion at sea, he endured a frightening storm. "After we had rounded Cape Horn, our cargo shifted and the vessel almost capsized. We cut away all masts to ease her, but she was on her beam end. We sat huddled together on the weather side, expecting every lurch to land us in a watery grave." Another ship approached, but the fierce weather kept her from helping; "she trimmed her sails and made away on her course and left us to our fate." With the wind "shrieking like fury" and "the sea like miniature mountains"[4] Nicholson found himself thinking, "This is the end. No one can save me." Later, he cried out, "Oh, Lord, have mercy on me. Have mercy!"[5] The next day, the weather abated, and the ship survived.

The incident shook Nicholson but evidently did not cause an immediate change. On his return to Ulster after seven years at sea,

he was at least willing to listen to the spiritual counsel of his mother, and he showed more concern about his soul. He recounted how he was converted while reading the newspaper, sitting by his mother at the fireplace. A sense of intense conviction of sin came over him.

> It was Christ or Hell. Not good living or good deeds of any kind that would determine my destiny, but my acceptance or rejection of Christ. All my righteousnesses, not my wickednesses, were as filthy *rags* in the sight of God. So one Monday morning, between 8.30 and 8.45 o'clock I came to Jesus as I was, guilty, worn, and sad, and accepted Him as my personal Saviour. All my guilt and gloom vanished the early dew and the morning cloud. My condemnation and fears gave place to peace and joy. The Holy Spirit witnessed to the Blood and told me I was born of God.[6]

He turned to his mother and said, "Mother, I am saved."
"When?" she asked.
"Just now," he replied.
"Where?"
"Here where I am sitting."
Nicholson reported that she "cried with joy unspeakable."[7]

After his conversion, Nicholson did some evangelistic work with the Salvation Army and later attended a Bible institute in Glasgow, Scotland. After finishing his program in 1903, he served with an evangelistic organization in Scotland. He conducted small campaigns in Scotland, often working (as he tended to do throughout his career) among the laboring classes. He somehow attracted the attention of the evangelistic team of J. Wilbur Chapman and Charles Alexander. He joined their organization for a campaign in Australia (1909-10), followed by meetings in the United States. After briefly supplying a pulpit as an interim pastor in Glasgow, Nicholson moved to the United States in 1914. He became an evangelist in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and later became a staff evangelist for the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA).

Ulster Awakening

While Nicholson had seen some success in his earlier evangelistic work, it was the campaigns he held in Ulster in the 1920s that gave him a reputation of historical note as an evangelist. The province was in the midst of troubled times. Dominantly Catholic southern Ireland had long been campaigning for self-rule (virtual independence) from Great Britain. The dominantly Protestant north wished

to remain attached to Britain. In 1922 Britain partitioned the island. The Catholic south became the Irish Free State (later the Republic of Ireland); the north remained part of Britain. The division was not made without violence. Militant Catholic and Protestant groups throughout the island had been armed for years. Uneasy Ulster preserved its ties to Britain, but tension sometimes exploded into violence in the province.

In the middle of this upheaval, Nicholson returned to Bangor in 1920 to launch a campaign. He eventually held two series of evangelistic meetings across the province, the first series lasting from 1920 to 1923 and the second from 1924 to 1926. Reported conversions at each campaign numbered in hundreds, sometimes in the thousands. Factory workers thronged to his campaigns. Shipyard workers in one campaign marched en masse to the meetings. One such worker, moved by the sight, wrote a poem celebrating the event. The opening lines read,

> What means the curious eager throng
> That line the street and wait so long,
> And what went ye out for to see?
> The Island men in dongaree,
> These are the men that have been won
> For Christ by Pastor Nicholson.[8]

Nicholson's campaigns, despite his Presbyterian background, were interdenominational. Indeed, some accounts present the Methodists being as supportive as the Presbyterians. The large numbers of reported conversions were unlike anything Ulster had seen since the revivals of 1859. As one indication, from 1920 to 1924 the number of new communicants in the state Presbyterian church increased by over four thousand each year; in 1922 and 1923 the increase was over six thousand. Other denominations reported similar increases on a smaller scale.[9]

Nicholson's supporters and admirers reported the same social effects that resulted from the campaigns of other urban evangelists: decline of alcohol consumption, reduction in thievery and petty graft along with restitution for earlier wrongdoing, and a general improvement in public morale. What makes these campaigns remarkable historically is how these effects calmed the province in the midst of its troubles. One contemporary observer of the revivals wrote, "Ulster's time of awakening has come after the trying years of bitter national strife and provincial unrest and dread."[10] Other supporters, noting some criticisms of Nicholson, wrote toward the close of the second series of campaigns, "But one thing is indisputable—that God has

used him mightily, in these recent years, for the spiritual transformation of Ulster."[11] Significantly, admirers have liked to characterize the impact of his campaigns as carrying Ulster "from civil war to revival victory."[12]

After the great revivals in Ulster, Nicholson continued to hold other, albeit smaller, campaigns around the world, in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and especially the United States, which he continued to made his home. He made lengthy visits to Ireland, however, and desired to return there for his final years. Unfortunately, as he was on his way there in 1959, he had a heart attack during the sea voyage. Nicholson was put ashore in the south of Ireland and died in a hospital there on October 29, 1959.

Evangelistic Methodology

Nicholson does not appear to have been a pace-setter in evangelistic methodology. He seems to have copied much of his approach from the American evangelists he encountered. Steve Bruce observes that Nicholson probably helped popularize American methods of evangelism in Ulster, although he notes that Moody introduced them earlier in his British campaigns.[13] For example, like many evangelists, Nicholson devoted the first meetings of his campaigns to preaching to believers. Likewise, following the pattern of evangelists such as Torrey and Sunday, he held Sunday afternoon meetings for men only. In one respect, however, he was unusual. Most of the leading evangelists had song leaders to direct their music program and to serve as a sort of emcee. Nicholson often led his own singing and, in fact, directed the whole service himself. He also disliked choirs and avoided using them.

Nicholson was sometimes bold to use unorthodox methods. On one occasion, he thought his audience was taking the gospel lightly. During a Friday night he preached a ferocious sermon on hell. At the close he said, "You would not take God's forgiveness last night? Then take His judgment tonight!" With that he stalked off. An acquaintance chided him: "The folk will not come to hear you any more." Nicholson replied, "If hell is half as bad as I painted it tonight, then by Sunday night they will be glad to get out of it." There was, in the end, a strong response at the close of the Sunday service.[14]

Many leveled criticisms at the evangelist; probably the most common was that Nicholson used pungent language. Nicholson obviously had these opponents in mind when he said in one of his sermons,

"The worst of it is, not only will many who call themselves Christians do nothing to save their fellows, but they will do all they can to hinder those who are doing all they can to snatch them as brands from the burning, by criticizing their methods and messages and calling them coarse and vulgar, saying they are too emotional and sensational, etc."[15] One church actually tried to set up a campaign with the restriction that Nicholson speak in a manner "acceptable to man and glorifying to God." Nicholson refused, giving as not the least of his reasons the impossibility of doing both at the same time.[16]

Nicholson was not unusual in using "common language" as an evangelist; Finney, Moody, and Sunday all received the same criticism. They had offered excuses, such as Moody's claim that it was the best he knew how to do. Billy Sunday sometimes sounded embarrassed about the fact. He told a reporter in 1914, "As you see, I use slang scarcely at all in ordinary conversation. I deem it necessary in my work. I try to reach the man on the street. ... I want to reach the people so I use the people's language."[17] Nicholson, on the other hand, was bold in his use of the vernacular. The introduction to a volume of Nicholson's sermons said,

> Mr. Nicholson is man by himself, and has his own inimitable way of putting things, often racy, always forcible. Probably not even his kind supporters ... would endorse every word that follows. Let it be remembered that he is an Irishman, and that before the Lord called him, his calling was that of a jolly mariner. His native humour and his facility in trenchant speech he regards ... as gifts to be consecrated to high ends. Some may question his judgment in this.[18]

Nicholson himself said, "But ninety per cent. of my audiences are babies. If I was to stand solemnly in the pulpit you would say, 'That is dry, it is dead'; so I have to tickle you and keep you in good humour, and all the time you are laughing and feeling good I am jagging at you and getting something down."[19]

Theological Emphases

By every standard, Nicholson was an orthodox Protestant but apparently not a distinctively denominational one. Although he was a Presbyterian, his sermons do not abound in references to Calvinistic theology. In fact, he even attacked the Reformed view of limited atonement.[20] As mentioned earlier, he received warm support from other denominations, including the Methodists.

Like nearly all evangelists after Moody, however, he was strongly premillennial, saying that "the Bible will be a sealed book unless we believe in a literal, personal, pre-millennial return of our Lord" and that "every doctrine of the Bible is associated with it." [21] Also like many of the early urban evangelists (including Moody, R. A. Torrey, and Chapman), Nicholson showed a definite influence from Keswick holiness teaching. He plainly believed in the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a post-conversion experience resulting in holy living (but not in gifts such as tongues speaking). Apparently the evangelist came to this view early in his Christian life, and he claimed to have had such an experience some seven months after conversion. He said in one of his sermons, "Let us remember that this blessing is not the same as conversion or being born again, and does not take place at the same time. It is always a deeper and a second experience. I suppose there is no reason why we should not be converted and baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit at the same time, but this never takes place today, and the Word of God teaches it always as a second, separable blessing from conversion."[22]

Above all, an intense personal piety marked Nicholson's character. He described religion very strongly in heartfelt, experiential terms. "I do not know anyone in the world that I know better than the Lord. I do not know my wife or my mother the way I know the Lord. I do not know the best friends I ever had the way I know the Lord. We walk together, my Lord and I, because we are in fellowship, and there is nothing that I have but is His. All my sins were made His one day, and all my joys are His now. Glory to God, we laugh together."[23]

Fundamentalism of W. P. Nicholson

William P. Nicholson may be accurately described as the forerunner of Ulster fundamentalism. Fundamentalism has historically been a predominantly American phenomenon,[24] and Nicholson's years in the United States and his association with fundamentalist leaders such as J. Wilbur Chapman and institutions such as BIOLA naturally raises the question of whether he "imported" fundamentalism into Ulster in the 1920s.[25] It is a question nearly impossible to answer. However, he could never have successfully introduced the fundamentalist position to Ulster had there not been a receptiveness to it in the province. Furthermore, such a contention appears overly simplistic. The internal religious history and culture of Northern Ireland must

receive due credit as major factors in the rise and development of an Irish fundamentalist tradition.

Regardless of its provenance, fundamentalism found agreeable lodging in Nicholson's personality. In his sermons, he berated the liberal position: "Will it help any man to believe in Jesus if I doubt or deny His virgin birth, His authority and the infallibility of His utterances, His vicarious, sacrificial death, His bodily resurrection, ascension, and coming again? Yet how many there are in the name of science and scholarship doing this very thing."[26] He warned listeners, "Take care what sort of church you join. If the minister denies or doubts the *Book* or the *Blood* have no fellowship with him, or you become a partaker with him in his evil deeds."[27]

Nicholson was particularly rough on what he saw as the baleful influence of modern religious education. "There was a day when you had to go to the Custom House Steps or the Theater to hear an infidel lecture," he said. "It is all changed to-day; the infidels are in many of the pulpits of the churches and professorial chairs of our colleges."[28] He encapsulates the battle he saw himself waging in Ulster in his description of Nicodemus as "principal of the Theological College in Jerusalem. We never knew a theological man to do much for God. God takes the nobodies to confound the somebodies: 'not many wise are called.' If we wanted somebody to do something, *we* would get somebody with the initials of the alphabet after his name; but God takes up Billy so-and-so."[29]

Some observers—neutral and sympathetic as well as critical—conclude that Nicholson's attacks on liberalism were a secondary factor in bringing to an end the successful Ulster campaigns of the 1920s. "By 1925, he was being seen, not as a unifying force who increased Protestant solidarity, but as a divider whose preaching against the evils of modernism and liberalism would split the denominations."[30] However, most agree that, humanly speaking, it was the end of the crisis atmosphere of the Irish partition that contributed most to the slacking off of the revivals.

Nicholson never reached the place of advocating separation from bodies that permitted liberalism in their midst. In this he differed both from C. H. Spurgeon and his own contemporary Ulsterman James Hunter. But "he was increasingly aggressive in his preaching against the liberals in the Irish Presbyterian theological colleges."[31] Nicholson set an important precedent for those who followed. "For many Ulster Protestants, Nicholson was both the voice of orthodoxy against the rising tide of modernism *and* the instigator of the last great religious

revival in Ulster. To be able to put oneself in the tradition of which Nicholson was part is to be able to claim an important resource."[32]

One Ulsterman who would seem to have followed Nicholson's path is Ian Paisley (b. 1926), moderator of the separatist, fundamentalist Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster and political leader of the Ulster faction opposed to unification with the Catholic Republic of Ireland. A long-time admirer of Nicholson, Paisley was taken aback to see Nicholson in the congregation for Paisley's first morning service after his ordination. After the sermon, Nicholson walked to the front and said, "I have one prayer I want to offer for this young man. I will pray that God will give him a tongue like an old cow. Go in, young man, to a butcher's shop and ask to see a cow's tongue. You will find it is sharper than any file. God give you such a tongue. Make this church a converting shop and make this preacher a disturber of Hell and the Devil."[33] After recounting that incident to the BBC, Paisley added with a laugh, "And some people would say perhaps that prayer has been answered far more abundantly than we can ask or think."[34] Others have followed Nicholson's example, but none more prominently than Paisley.

Many Presbyterians in the state Presbyterian Church, eager to retain Nicholson for their cause, resist the characterization of Paisley as a successor of Nicholson. Secular sociologist Steve Bruce, after studying both men, disagrees with those who say Paisley cannot claim Nicholson because Nicholson was not a separatist. Admitting that Nicholson "was leading a ginger group *within* the church rather than a separatist movement," Bruce nonetheless denies "that Paisley was motivated by beliefs which Nicholson did not hold." He says, "Paisley and Nicholson were very close in theology. What had changed between the world of the twenties and thirties, and Paisley's world of the fifties was the degree of 'apostasy' in the Irish Presbyterian Church. ... I see nothing in Nicholson's beliefs which would have led him to act in a manner different from Paisley had he been faced with the same circumstances."[35]

Conclusion

Nicholson undoubtedly viewed himself as both an evangelist and a defender of the Faith, and he successfully conducted a ministry that furthered both causes. Both were, to him, matters of faithful proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nicholson said in one sermon, "'John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this Man

were true. And many believed on Him there ... .' I would covet no greater eulogy in this life or over my corpse when dead." Appropriately, that passage (John 10:41-42) was engraved on his tombstone.

Notes

[1]Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), pp. 97-98.

[2]The only biography of any sort of Nicholson is S. W. Murray, *W. P. Nicholson: Flame for God in Ulster* (Belfast: The Presbyterian Fellowship, 1973); although useful, it is a sketchy work of only forty-eight pages. The story of Nicholson's conversion is found in V. Raymond Edman, "Sea Fever to Soul Winning," *Christian Life,* August 1958, pp. 12-13; Edman also collected the article in his *Crisis Experience in the Lives of Noted Christians* (Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.), pp. 87-96. Often cited on Nicholson's Ulster evangelistic campaigns is J. A. Gamble, *From Civil War to Revival Victory: A Souvenir of the Remarkable Evangelistic Campaigns in Ulster from 1921 to December 1925 Conducted by Rev. W. P. Nicholson* (Belfast: Emerald Isle Books, 1976). Also of interest is Ian Paisley, *Nicholson Centenary 1876-1976* (Belfast: Martyrs Memorial Publications, 1976); the text of an address given by Paisley, it is a retelling of Nicholson's story with extensive quotations from Nicholson's own writings. A brief biographical sketch by an acquaintance is found in Leonard Ravenhill, *Sodom Had No Bible* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1971), pp. 163-69.

[3]W. P. Nicholson, *The Evangelist: His Ministry and Message* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, Ltd., n.d.), p. 63.

[4]Ibid., p. 81.

[5]Edman, "Sea Fever," p. 12.

[6]Nicholson, *The Evangelist,* p. 12.

[7]Quoted in Murray, p. 7.

[8]Quoted in Murray, p. 21.

[9]Ibid., p. 35.

[10]Quoted in Murray, p. 24.

[11]Foreword to W. P. Nicholson, *On Towards the Goal!* (Edinburgh: "Bright Words" Offices, n.d. [c. 1925]), p. 6.

[12]Not only is this the title of J. A. Gamble's account of Nicholson's work but also Ian Paisley uses the theme in his published address on the career of Nicholson.

[13]Steve Bruce, *God Save Ulster! The Religion and Politics of Paisleyism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 204.

[14]Recounted in Ravenhill, pp. 167-68.

[15]W. P. Nicholson, *God's Hell* (Belfast: Johnstone Printer, n.d.), p. 2.

[16]Murray, p. 34.

[17]Quoted in William G. McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 163-64.

[18]Foreword to Nicholson, *On Towards the Goal!* p. 6.

[19]Nicholson, *On Towards the Goal!* pp. 40-41.

[20]Nicholson, The *Evangelist,* pp. 81-82.

[21]Ibid., pp. 104-5; emphasis in original.

[22]Ibid., p. 116. Like many holiness advocates, Nicholson distinguished between willful sins and mere weakness of the flesh: "You may know the difference between imperfection and sin. Before I understood it I was in a fix about it. Sin is a voluntary transgression of the law; infirmity is an involuntary transgression of the law. The one is deliberate and willful and the other may be a spontaneous thing, the outcome of wrong judgment or ignorance or weakness on your part or mind in an unguarded moment" (Nicholson, *On Towards the Goal!* p. 32).

[23]Nicholson, *On Towards the Goal!* pp. 24-25.

[24]See George Marsden, "Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon, A Comparison with English Evangelicalism," *Church History,* 46 (June 1977):215-32. In a footnote, Marsden does note that Northern Ireland is "an exception" to the generalization that only in America "did this type of Protestant response to modernity [fundamentalism] have such a conspicuous and pervasive role both in the churches and in the natural culture" (p. 216).

[25]The idea that Nicholson "imported" fundamentalism from the United States into Ulster is suggested by R.F.G. Holmes, *Our Irish Presbyterian Heritage* (Belfast: Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1985), pp. 152-53. Although by no means downplaying Nicholson's influence, Steve Bruce sees a number of other native factors playing a role in the development of Ulster fundamentalism (*God Save Ulster!* pp. 17-26).

[26]Nicholson, *The Evangelist,* p. 17.

[27]Ibid., p. 26.

[28]Ibid., p. 31.

[29]Nicholson, *On Towards the Goal!* p. 58.

[30]Bruce, p. 19; see also Murray, pp. 34-35.

[31]Bruce, p. 20. For discussion of Spurgeon's separatism in relation to the "Downgrade Controversy" among British Baptists, see Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), pp. 139-89; and R. J. Sheehan, *C. H. Spurgeon and the Modern Church* (London: Grace Publications, 1985). For more on Hunter's career, see Bruce, pp. 19-26, and Iain R. K. Paisley, "60 Years On: The Trial of Prof. J. E. Davey for Heresy," *The Revivalist*, June 1987, pp. 23-32.

[32]Bruce, p. 34.

[33]Paisley, *Nicholson Centenary,* p. 23.

[34]Bruce, p. 34.

[35]Ibid., p. 35.

[36]Nicholson, *The Evangelist,* p. 16.

The Pastor's Bookshelf

The Suffering Saviour by F. W. Krummacher. 1854; rpt. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1992. 444 pp.

Very rarely, but occasionally, a book is published whose worth it would be nearly impossible to exaggerate. Krummacher's *The Suffering Saviour* is such a book. First published in German in 1854, the work is, in my estimation, the unrivaled standard by which any work on these precious last hours of our Lord's earthly life must be judged. For many years, the only copy I could obtain was a pre-Civil War, 1858 English edition once owned by an unknown preacher whose careful notations in the margins testify that he, like me, was profoundly stirred by these moving meditations. I think I can safely say that there has been scarcely a single time when I have officiated at the Lord's Table but that this book has been my soul's preparation during the Sunday afternoon preceding the service. It is the only book in my library which has moved me, again and again, to tears.

F. W. Krummacher (1796-1868) was probably the greatest preacher Germany has produced in at least two centuries. Dargan's *History of Preaching* can cite no name or ministry his equal in nineteenth-century German preaching. There are some, in fact, who have insisted that he was the greatest evangelical preacher in all of Europe. Krummacher preached the ordination service of the brilliant church historian, Philip Schaff. The day after the service Schaff wrote, "Every word was a two-edged sword. I was stunned by the eloquence, and would have fallen to the ground had I not held on to the table where I was standing." Later, in a tribute written after Krummacher's death, Schaff remembered him as a preacher who "was endowed with every gift that constitutes an orator, a most fertile and brilliant imagination, a vigorous and original mind, a glowing heart, an extraordinary facility and felicity of diction, perfect familiarity with the Scrip-