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"The Church or the Wheel?" - Religious Institutions Contend with the American Bicycle Boom

By Chris Sweet, Bloomington, Illinois, USA

These bladder-wheeled bicycles are diabolical devices of the demon of darkness. They are contrivances to trap the feet of the unwary and skin the nose of the innocent. They are full of guile and deceit. When you think you have broken one to ride and subdued its wild and Satanic nature, behold it bucketh you off in the road and teareth a great hole in your pants. Look not on the bike when it bloweth upon its wheels, for at last it bucketh like a bronco and hurteth like thunder. Who has skinned legs? Who has a bloody nose? Who has ripped breeches? They that dally along with the bicycle."

Figure 1: "Even the church has got it!" This satirical cartoon appeared in Puck magazine in 1896. (Vol. 38, No. 83)

In 1896, the *Minneapolis Tribune* published this account of a Baltimore preacher's sermon. Given the preacher's choice of words and the ambiguity of the newspaper story it is not entirely possible to tell if this sermon was given in jest, or if it was completely serious. More than a century later it seems quaint – even bordering on absurd - that American churches were ever threatened by something as innocuous as a bicycle. As this article contends, during the American bicycle boom of the 1890's, many clergymen did, in fact, see the bicycle as a threat to religious values. The development of the pneumatic-tired safety bicycle brought cycling to the masses during the last decade of the 1800's. Specifically, the urban centers of the New England states through the upper Midwest saw an explosion of interest in all things related to cycling. **[Figure 1]**

The European scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had dealt a major blow to the authority and influence of the church. A vestige of this blow was a deep-seated distrust of technology among many Christian denominations. For a short time, the bicycle became a flash-point in American churches. Traditionalists claimed the bicycle was the work of Satan since it often led to cyclists desecrating the Sabbath. Some preachers who advocated for the bicycle were even forced out of their parishes. In a time of intense religion-centered debates over temperance, some claimed the bicycle led to increased drinking among cyclists, while another faction argued that cycling actually kept riders out of the saloons. The Boston-based Woman's Rescue League (a Christian organization) even contended that bicycles led to an increase in prostitution due to their enabling independent movement for women. However, condemnation of the bicycle was not universal within the church. For every critical clergyman, there was another who championed cycling as a way to attract young people to the church. Others quickly recognized that the bicycle could be an aid for evangelism efforts in the vast rural areas of the country. By the end of the nineteenth century the specific debates over religion and the bicycle had mostly been resolved, but the root of the matter, which is the complex relationship between religion and sport, is still a contentious issue today.

Review of the Literature

It goes without saying that much has been written about both the history of bicycles in America and the history of religion in America. However, a substantial gap exists where the two intersect. In his 1972 classic, *A Social History of the Bicycle, Its Early Life and Times in America*, Robert Smith included a few pages of anecdotes and analysis related to the religious response to the bicycle. In 2010, Michael Taylor's article, "Rapid Transit to Salvation: American Protestants and the Bicycle in the Era of the Cycling Craze," provided more extended analysis of protestant churches' responses to the bicycle boom of the 1890's. Taylor established the important connection between the Muscular Christianity movement and bicycling. Advocates of Muscular Christianity believed that physical health and manliness were the answers to the waning influence of turn-of-the century churches. Books by Ladd and Mathisen (1999) and Putney (2001) provide excellent histories of the American Muscular Christian movement, but have very little to say about the role of the bicycle in this movement. At the 20th International Cycling History Conference in Freehold, New Jersey, Professor Kevin J. Hayes delivered a presentation and corresponding paper entitled "Pedaling Preachers: Clergymen and the Acceptance of the Bicycle, 1881-1887." This paper focused on clergymen and cycling during the high wheel era. The natural place to continue this line of inquiry is a more substantive examination of the religious response to bicycles during the boom of the 1890's.

Before the Boom

A brief summary of the relationship between cycling and religion before the boom provides useful context for later developments. During the short-lived American velocipede craze (circa 1868-1870) the famous minister and abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher gave a sermon at Plymouth Church (Brooklyn) on "Rational Amusements":

One of the great questions of the day is in relation to the 'coming man' and how he is to come. I think he is coming on a velocipede (laughter) - a new machine that is bound to play a prominent part in the category of amusements; a toy to some, an instrument of great use to others. I have purchased two for my own boys, and there is every probability of my riding one myself. I am not too old to learn, but I hope it will not be said the velocipede is my hobby. You are none of you too old to learn, and I shall not be at all surprised to see in a short time a thousand velocipedists wheeling their machines to Plymouth Church.

Soon after he delivered this early clerical pronouncement in favor of the velocipede, that particular cycling fad came to an end. It would be another twenty years before Ward's vision of thousands of cyclists riding to church would become a reality. American interest in cycling was revived again in 1878 when Albert Pope began producing and marketing Columbia high wheel "ordinary" bicycles in the United States. Pope was a savvy promoter of anything related to cycling. He realized early on that to sell bicycles to the masses they needed to be viewed as a legitimate means of transportation and recreation for respectable men (and later on, respectable women). One of the ways Pope worked towards these ends was by creating and subsidizing an early cycling magazine called *The Wheelman*. Pope created a contest with cash prizes for the best essays on cycling written by clergymen. Between 1882 and 1883 *The Wheelman* published 15 of the winning essays. Unsurprisingly, these essays consistently lavished praise on a wide-range of benefits for clergy who used bicycles. Many bicycle manufacturers followed suit, publishing testimonials from clergymen in their catalogs and advertisements.

One other significant event pertaining to religion and cycling that occurred during the pre-safety era was "The Clerical Wheelmen's Tour." These multi-week tours covered a few hundred miles and were organized for clergymen only. Clerical Wheelmen's Tours took place in 1885 and 1886 (there were possibly others after these dates). The tours were covered by newspapers and cycling publications of the time. An article in *Bicycling World* noted: *"No better illustration of the change that has taken place in public opinion is wanted than the fact that several dozen of the smartest and most eloquent young clergymen in America are now doing the country astride of bicycles. These men are not city hoodlums nor college boys out on a lark. They are cultured men, fully impressed with the responsibility that their chosen vocation imposes."*

In summary, cycling during the velocipede and high wheel eras did not cause any conflicts of note within the church, nor did clergymen flock to the bicycle en masse. Cyclists were still few in number and bicycles were seen as more of a novelty than a threat. A few years later, the bicycle boom would change all of that.

America at the End of the 19th Century

To make any sense of the debates between the church and the bicycle some basic historical context is necessary. Clergymen who either vehemently damned the bicycle or passionately advocated for it reflected larger fissures in American society. The latter half of the nineteenth century saw a massive rural to urban migration. As large-scale industrialization became firmly established, people flocked to cities to work long hours in huge factories. During the "Gilded Age" America's first large corporations (and monopolies associated with them) led to accumulation of enormous wealth for a few elites. These corporations required a vast laboring force. Oftentimes this laboring class was composed largely of immigrants. White, elite, and middle-class males found themselves in mid-level sedentary office jobs that no longer required much in the way of physical labor or exercise in general. Strikes, lockouts, boycotts, and riots often pitted the working class against the elite owners and managers. The physical discrepancies between the two classes led Progressive Era reformers to endorse artificial exercise for the first time. Swimming, weight-lifting, outdoor camping, and bicycling were promoted as methods of strengthening America's upper and middle classes and combating the ill effects of city-dwelling.

America's churches were struggling with similar issues. Victorian city life came along with overcrowding, alcoholism, prostitution, as well as a host of other entertainments that kept people away from the church. In England during the 1860's the concept of "Muscular Christianity" was championed as a strategy for combating modern social ills and keeping the church strong. In his 1861 novel *Tom Brown at Oxford*, Thomas Hughes outlined the basic precepts of this new movement: *"The least of the muscular Christians has hold of the old chivalrous and Christian belief, that a man's body is given him to be trained and brought into subjection, and then used for the protection of the weak, the advancement of all righteous causes, and the subduing of the earth which God has*

given to the children of men." Similar to the desk-bound managers, many believed the church had become slothful and overly tolerant of physical weakness and effeminacy. Between 1880 and 1920 Muscular Christianity was a very popular idea among American Protestants in particular, and other denominations to a lesser degree. In a history of *American Muscular Christianity,* authors Ladd and Mathisen identify its four defining characteristics as: manliness, morality, health, and patriotism. Muscular Christians believed that the body was not meant just for mindless physical labor, but should be used for the greater Christian good. The establishment and growth of the YMCA is probably the most recognizable early result of the Muscular Christianity movement, but it was far from the only outcome. Given the widespread interest in Muscular Christianity, it would seem that bicycles should have been readily embraced by Christians as a means to greater physical health and as an aid to evangelism efforts. This was not always the case.

Figure 2: Puck's suggestion to his reverend friends. "If the Wheelmen won't go to church, the churches will have to come to the Wheelmen." The placard on the church wagon reads: "St. Ixion's Sunday service for Wheelmen. Century run including morning and afternoon sermon." (Puck, vol. 37, no. 962, Aug. 14, 1895)

Diabolical Devices of the Demon of Darkness

If velocipedes and high wheel bicycles were only ridden by a small fraction of the American population, then the numbers that flocked to the new "safety" bicycles constituted a true craze. In 1885, Englishman John Kemp Starley began producing Rover Safety Bicycles. The Rover was the first mass-produced bicycle to feature wheels of about the same size with a mid-wheel pedal-actuated drive system coupled to the rear wheel with a chain-drive. Shortly after this, the Irish veterinarian John Boyd Dunlop developed the pneumatic tire. The combination of a stable, easy-to-ride bicycle and the cushioning of pneumatic tires made bicycle riding readily accessible, and attractive, to a wide range of people. The 1899 Census of Manufacturers shows that more than one million bicycles were made that year by American factories. This would have been at the very end of the bicycle craze. A few years earlier the manufacturing numbers were estimated to have been closer to two million. In a short period of time cycling became the fashionable thing to do for the elite and middle classes. Cycling clubs built elaborate clubhouses for their members and bicycle racing rivaled baseball as a spectator sport.

Long Sunday bicycle rides soon became the important social events of the week. This practice of riding on Sunday soon became a main point of contention between the church and the bicycle. In an era of 6-day work weeks, cyclists who rode on Sundays were seen as desecrating the Sabbath in two ways. First, many decided to just skip Sunday morning church services and go for a ride instead. However, even those who did attend a church service before sneaking in a ride later in the day were risking eternal damnation since the Ten Commandments specify that the Sabbath should be a day of rest:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.

The church had other objections to cycling, including the belief that cycling led to alcoholism and that it undermined strict Victorian courtship practices, but it was the issue of cycling on the Sabbath that led to the deepest divisions. In 1895 (during the peak of the bicycle boom), Rev. David Beaton of Unity Church in Dearborn, Illinois, spoke for many conservative clergymen across the country when he told reporters at the *Chicago Daily Tribune: "No greater crime against civilization can be committed than the action of bicycle clubs to hold meets, parades, races, and other sports on Sunday. It is a question of health and civic virtue. For to trample upon the religious use of Sunday as a day of rest and worship is to poison the life-blood of our American civilization."* One would imagine that when he questioned the "health" of cycling, Rev. Beaton was referring to spiritual health rather than physical health. Sermons against the evils of cycling came from small rural parishes and from some of the most notable religious figures of the day. The famed evangelist, Dwight Moody, railed against the bicycle in many of his sermons. Moody had come to Chicago in 1856 as a shoe salesman. From 1865 to 1860 he was president of the Chicago YMCA. In the latter years of the 19th century Moody became

one of America's foremost evangelists as he popularized urban revivalism. He went on to found the Northfield Schools (Massachusetts), Chicago's Moody Bible Institute, and the Moody Press. Moody was one of many who saw the bicycle as a threat to good Christians everywhere:

I don't believe any one can see the vast throng of young men in our cities — and I am sorry to say, bad women, too — on their bicycles going off into the country and fields and woods to spend the Sabbath, and trampling the law of God into the dust, filling their pockets with Sunday newspapers — and these are their bibles — it wouldn't have been tolerated a few years ago!

It is tempting to write off these sorts of sermons as over-reaction or just an extension of the traditional fire and brimstone sermon designed to keep parishioners on the straight and narrow Christian path. However, an observation from another one of Moody's sermons indicates that the threat from the bicycle was quite real. In this sermon Moody recounts how he was recently in Brooklyn and noticed a bicycle club starting a Sunday morning "run" directly across from the church where he was about to preach. He notes:

"It wasn't the scum of Brooklyn that were there, but some of the leading young men. And in that church where I preached there hardly seemed to be twenty-five young men."

In many Midwest and New England urban cities, cycling's impact on church attendance was a well-known fact. **[Figure 2]**

Some of the more progressive clergy saw no problem between the church and the wheel which led to deep divisions within parishes. On more than a few occasions, clergy who promoted cycling were pressured to leave or were officially reprimanded. In 1894, the Rev. F. M. Johnson of the Swedish Congregational Church in Rockford, Illinois, had taken up cycling. Conservative members of his congregation thought this behavior unbecoming of a minister and called for his dismissal. In such cases, the bicycle question often exposed a divide between more conservative rural areas and larger urban cities which tended to be more progressive. *The Chicago Daily Tribune* caught wind of this squabble and noted *"If Pastor Johnson occupied a Chicago pulpit, he could hump himself over a wheel to his heart's content, for none of the clergymen or people of his nationality [here] appear to think that the gates of heaven are closed to all except pedestrians."* Reporters from the *Sandusky Register* (Ohio) were even more blunt in their assessment of the case, writing that *"Probably the disgruntled prefer that he should ride the foal of an ass."*

A few years later Rev. J.A. Rondthaler of Indianapolis found himself in a similar situation. Rev. Rondthaler had not only embraced cycling himself, but he also took the additional bold step of forming a cycling group called Rondthaler's Angels which consisted of many of his church's younger members. Older members of his congregation objected to this frivolous behavior and formally censured their preacher. Again, Chicago, which was a major center of the bicycle boom, took note of Rondthaler's troubles and offered him a position at the more progressive Fullerton Avenue Presbyterian Church. After some delay and debate, Rondthaler ended up accepting the new position in Chicago.

Clergy were not the only part of American religious institutions that were taking sides on the bicycle question. Christian organizations waged their own battles for and against the wheel. The Epworth League was a large Methodist young adult organization. During the height of the bicycle craze' 700 members of the Epworth League swore this oath: *"I promise that I will not ride my wheel on the Sabbath, only as it will honor my Master, and as I believe he would like to have me do. I also promise to exert all possible influence to discourage others in the use of the Sunday wheel."* Another Christian organization, the Boston Woman's Rescue League, made what is perhaps the most outlandish claims against cycling. The League circulated a pamphlet outlining their many objections to cycling:

"A great curse has been inflicted upon the people of this country because of the present bicycle craze, and if a halt is not called soon 75 per cent of the cyclists will be an army of invalids within the next ten years. Bicycling by young women has helped more than any other medium to swell the ranks of reckless girls, who finally drift into the army of outcast women of the United States. 'Bicycle run for Christ,' by so-called Christians, should be properly termed 'Bicycle run for Satan,' for the bicycle is the devil's advance agent, morally and physically, in thousands of instances."

In a time when suffragists and women's rights activists were celebrating the bicycle as aiding in the liberation of women, the Woman's Rescue League claims that bicycling led women into prostitution was met with derision in the press. *The Times Herald* (Chicago) published this rebuttal: *"A woman who will violate the decencies and proprieties of life while wheeling will violate them upon other occasions when the opportunity is offered. Where one woman rides to destruction on the wheel a thousand ride to good health and maintain all the decorum, modesty, and circumspection that characterize the well-bred, self-respecting women from the ideal American homes." The Tribune* (New York) published an even stronger (and surprisingly progressive) response to the League's claims about the bicycle:

To say that the use of the bicycle by women of any age is a prolific cause of disease is flatly to contradict the all but unanimous opinion of intelligent physicians as well as the results of experience. We trust we may be pardoned for accepting the judgment of the medical profession rather than that of the Woman's Rescue League. To say that a practise which takes women into the open air and into communion with nature, which develops their muscles, strengthens their nerves, gives them truer poise of mind and body, and teaches them self-help and self-reliance, is transforming them into physical wrecks and moral lepers is an affront to common sense which would be more amusing if it were less revolting.

It is clear that during the 1890's the role of the bicycle in American society was rapidly evolving. The bicycle craze challenged a variety of social and religious norms. Although churches were primarily concerned about how the bicycle was impacting church attendance, and how riding on the Sabath affected cyclists, these were not the church's only concerns about cycling. Church leaders and Christian organizations also claimed that the bicycle led to alcoholism.

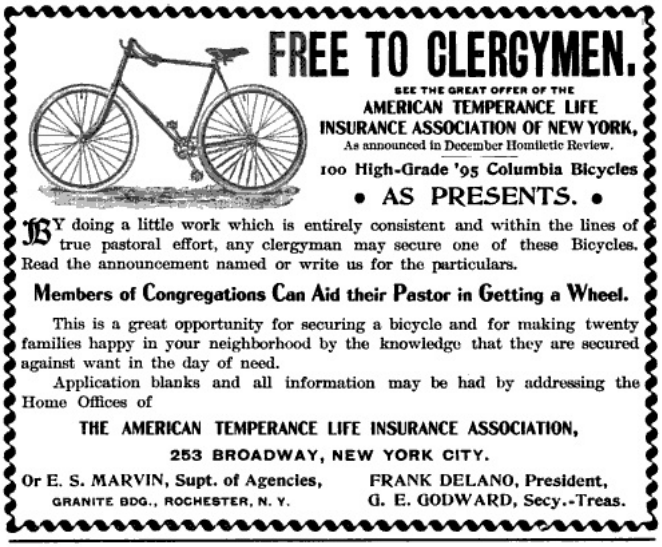
The Bicycle and the Temperance Movement

Alcoholism had always been a problem in American society, but during the nineteenth century drinks with high concentrations of alcohol - like rum and whiskey - became readily available. As a result, alcoholism became an even greater national problem that strained the moral fabric of society. Alcoholism led to high rates of spousal abuse, family neglect, health problems, and chronic unemployment. Churches and religious organizations be-

came leading temperance advocates. The Catholic Total Abstinence Union of America was founded in 1872 and followed two years later by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). By the 1920s, the WCTU was an influential international organization with nearly eight hundred thousand members in 40 countries. The WCTU along with the Anti-Saloon League (1893) succeeded in getting the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution passed. This law banned the manufacture, transportation and sale of intoxicating liquors, and it led to the period of American history from 1920-1933 known as Prohibition.

Even for the most adamant preachers and teetotalers, connecting the cycling craze with increased alcoholism was something of a stretch. Still, there were those that argued that in addition to facing eternal damnation from desecrating the Sabbath, cycling also led to drunkenness. In New York's Calvary Baptist Church Rev. Frank Rogers Morse declared: *"drinking is nowadays one of the adjuncts of the bicycle. Will not the wheel lead many a young man and young woman into this vicious and destructive habit?"* There may have been a kernel of truth to some of these accusations. It was true that a common practice among wheelmen was to ride to some distant country inn or tavern, enjoy a meal and possibly a few drinks and then return home. Cyclists may not have all been strict teetotalers, but one can imagine that balancing a bicycle after more than a drink or two would have been difficult and downright dangerous. Churches also claimed that young people who had access to bicycles could easily evade supervision and get themselves into a variety of troubles; of which drinking was just one. Of course, where some saw damnation, others saw entrepreneurial opportunities. In 1895, Thomas Jerkins of Indianapolis found a creative way around Indiana's Nicholson Law which essentially allowed any voter to stall approval of a liquor license for up to two years. Jerkins made special coats and slacks with many hidden pockets to hold flasks of whiskey. He then took to his bicycle to sell his wares to other cyclists and pedestrians. His bootlegging operations were put to an end when he was arrested by local authorities.

A few outliers like Jerkins aside, the bicycle was generally embraced by temperance reformers. The Rev. J.W. Fifield put it succinctly when he told the *Chicago Tribune: "The bicycle has a moral glory. It is emptying the billiard halls and saloons and filling the country roads. It has one great virtue- a drunken man cannot ride it. Had the devil tried to invent his own gallows he could have done no better than to have made the bicycle."* The bicycle craze was attributed with a reduction in profits not only for vices such as alcohol and tobacco consumption, but also proper Victorian pursuits such as attending the theater or purchasing a piano. In 1897, the Commissioner of Internal Revenue noted that in the previous year whiskey consumption was down by 6 million barrels and beer down by nearly 1.5 million barrels. A nationwide economic depression certainly accounted for some portion of this decrease, but most believed that the bicycle craze also contributed to the decrease. Even the American Temperance Life Insurance Association got into the game by recruiting clergymen as sales agents. In 1895, they offered a free high grade Columbia Bicycle to any clergymen who secured twenty new members. **[Figure 3]**


FREE TO CLERGYMEN.

SEE THE GREAT OFFER OF THE
AMERICAN TEMPERANCE LIFE INSURANCE ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK,
As announced in December Homiletic Review.

100 High-Grade '95 Columbia Bicycles
• AS PRESENTS. •

BY doing a little work which is entirely consistent and within the lines of true pastoral effort, any clergyman may secure one of these Bicycles. Read the announcement named or write us for the particulars.

Members of Congregations Can Aid their Pastor in Getting a Wheel.

This is a great opportunity for securing a bicycle and for making twenty families happy in your neighborhood by the knowledge that they are secured against want in the day of need.

Application blanks and all information may be had by addressing the Home Offices of

THE AMERICAN TEMPERANCE LIFE INSURANCE ASSOCIATION,
253 BROADWAY, NEW YORK CITY.

Or E. S. MARVIN, Supt. of Agencies, GRANITE BDG., ROCHESTER, N. Y.
FRANK DELANO, President, G. E. GODWARD, Secy.-Treas.

Figure 3: American Temperance Life Insurance Association of New York advertisement to clergy. (Homiletic Review, vol. 30, 1895: 182)

Clergymen were not the only ones to recognize the bicycle as a useful tool in forwarding the temperance movement. Frances Willard was born in New York and educated at North Western Female College in Evanston, Illinois. She later became a leading progressive reformer, best known for being one of the founders (and longtime president) of the large and influential Women's Christian Temperance Union (1874). Willard came to cycling later in life, first learning to ride at age 53 during the beginning of the bicycle boom (1892). She was so struck by the experience of learning to ride that she wrote a book about it: *A Wheel within a Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle, with Some Reflections by the Way*. Willard describes learning to ride for health benefits but also because she strongly associated cycling with the advancement of the temperance movement. Once when she was asked about the possibility that cycling led to consumption of alcohol she responded, *"Oh folly! In Chicago there is nothing so hated by the saloon keeper, the cigarette dealer, and the proprietor of the low theater as the bicycle. They say the people are all scurrying for the parks."* For Willard, the bicycle was *"the greatest agent of temperance reform."*

Bicycles and Evangelism

Aiding temperance efforts was only one area where bicycles were strategically used by churches and religious organizations. As safety bicycles grew in popularity during the early 1890's, many churches realized that rather than fight a losing battle to keep people from riding, they should embrace the bicycle to further their evangelism work. Evangelism is a core component of the American Christian tradition and is defined as the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or by giving witness. Bicycles were a boon to evangelists for the same reason they were wildly popular among the urban American middle-class; that is, they were far cheaper to own and operate than horses. One contemporary clergyman estimated the cost of keeping up a carriage and feeding a horse at $150 per year compared to only $2.50 per year for the bicycle. His estimate for bicycle maintenance may have been on the low side, but even so the yearly maintenance cost differences between horses and bicycles were massive. The lower cost of bicycles allowed preachers and their parishioners to more easily undertake evangelism efforts - particularly in the

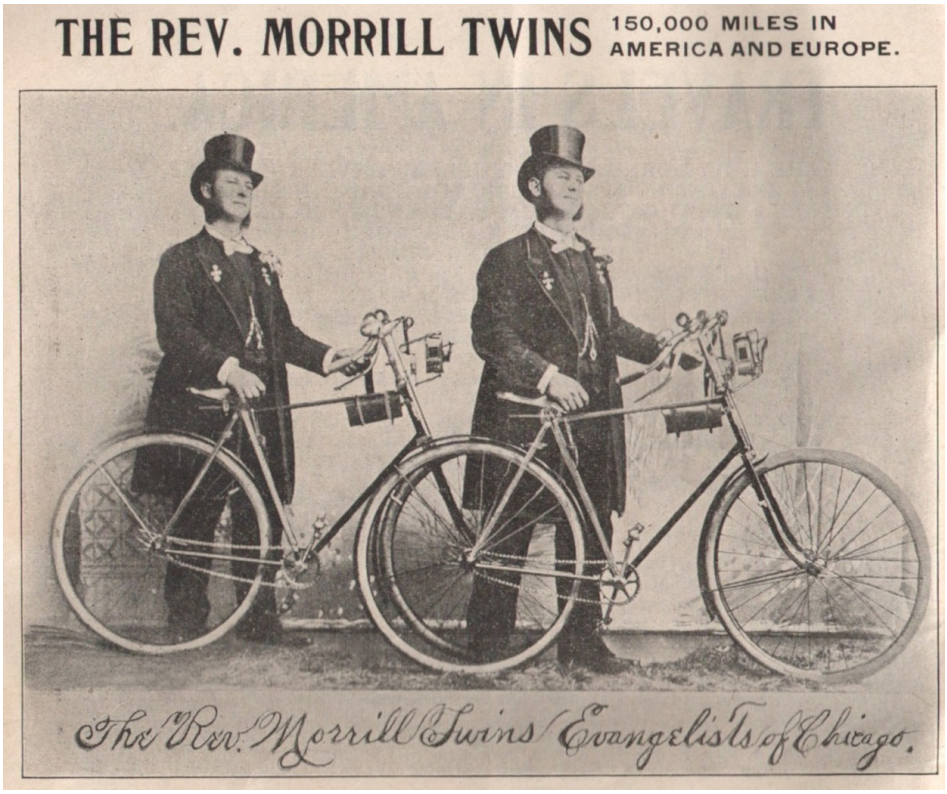


Figure 4: The Rev. Morrill Twins: singing and riding evangelists. (undated newspaper clipping)

expansive rural areas that were not directly accessible by train or streetcar in the nineteenth century. Some members of a Baptist church in Chicago exhibited admirable resourcefulness in their evangelism efforts when they mounted sails on their bicycles to take advantage of prairie winds. As the Muscular Christianity movement gained in popularity it was easy to make the case for the bicycle as an aid to greater physical fitness and therefore greater capacity to spread the word of God. Writing in *The Wheelman* prior to the bicycle boom Rev. John Scudder contended, *"My firm belief is, that if bicycles were more generally used by American preachers, there would be fewer hollow chests, round shoulders, sensitive stomachs, and torpid livers; These would be superseded by strong muscles, clearer heads, sweeter tempers, [and] less soporific sermons…"*

Among the most eccentric of the bicycle-evangelists were the Rev. Morrill Twins of Chicago. **[Figure 4]** Herbert and Horace Morrill were identical twins committed to a life of Baptist evangelism. Among the twins many schemes was the construction of a "Gospel Ship" building on Chicago's west side. The "ship" was 100 feet long, 25 feet wide, and included 40 porthole windows. It was made of iron and designed to seat 500 people. The twins held many services in the gospel ship and profited nicely to boot. Even more than the gospel ship, the twins were known for their use of the bicycle for evangelism. In 1895, *The Daily Republican* (Monongahela, Pennsylvania) reported that *"The Rev. Morrill Twins," the evangelists, probably attract more attention when they go forth on their wheels than any other of Chicago's great army of bicycle riders. Wherever they go on their 'bikes' people line the streets to watch them pass by; wherever they stop is a crowd. It is rather unusual to see two men in silk hats, Prince Albert coats, and looking as much alike as two peas in the pod…"* The twins sometimes rode a tandem bicycle and sometimes matching safety bicycles. In addition to preaching, they would often sing together while riding. The bicycles helped attract people to their street corner sermons and rural revivals. As previously mentioned, riding bicycles also had the fringe benefit of helping to reduce the brothers' travel costs.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Salvation Army was a major Christian evangelistic organization. **[Figure 5]** The original Salvation Army was founded in London by William Booth and focused on evangelism to the poor, the homeless, the hungry, and the destitute. During the 1890's, when some clergy were vehemently opposed to cycling, Booth contended *"Prejudice sometimes tells us, 'You never saw Christ on a wheel.' But neither did you hear of him speaking through*

Figure 5: These two women cyclists were part of the Salvation Army's bicycle brigades. (From the Cycling Photographica Collection of Lorne Shields, Toronto Canada)

a telephone. The opportunities of today are wide and God-given, and we should be blind indeed if we failed to recognize and seize the greater facilities they give our holy fight." The Salvation Army did indeed "seize the greater facilities" of the bicycle through the formation of multiple different bicycle brigades. In fact, William Booth's daughter, Evangeline, was a leader of the bicycle brigades campaign. The brigades were something of a novelty used to attract people in the same way that the Salvation Army also used brass bands and parades. The bicycle brigades traveled from city to city seeking converts. The use of bicycles substantially lowered the costs of this type of evangelism. The Salvation Army even commissioned its' own line of bicycles (including both men's and women's models) that were sold at reduced rates to Salvation Army members. Clearly it was becoming commonplace for many churches and religious organizations to use bicycles as tools for evangelistic work. Noting this phenomena, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that *"Many local ministers…think it would be a good stroke of policy for the church to divert some of the missionary funds from the old-time channels and subsidize a cycle factory or two that the conventional prices may be cut and people get wheels as reasonably as they now can get New Testaments and prayer books."* Other than some subsidized bicycles such as those sold to Salvation Army members, this particular scheme was never brought to fruition.

During this same time period, another major religious organization, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), was also undergoing tremendous growth in the United States. The YMCA exemplified the Muscular Christianity ethos with its emphasis on developing a healthy body, mind, and spirit (even today these are the three points of the YMCA triangle). During the bicycle boom, various YMCA's formed bicycle clubs and offered bicycle storage to their residents. In 1892, the YMCA Chicago Central offered indoor storage for more than four hundred bicycles for their dormitory residents. The Marshalltown, Iowa, YMCA even allowed 15 women to be part of its bicycle club.

In the years before motorcycles and automobiles, the bicycle was an ideal tool for evangelism. Not only did it reduce travel costs and extend the range of evangelists, but bicycles also had the added benefit of strengthening the body in the process. For adherents of Muscular Christianity there was no question about the morality of cycling, provided one rode in moderation and attended Sunday services.

Good Roads

As bicycles gained in popularity in the United States, so did the Good Roads Movement. First discussed among cyclists in the 1870s, the Good Roads Movement really took off during the 1890s as one of the main initiatives of the League of American Wheelmen (L.A.W.). The primary goal of the Good Roads Movement was improving roads in the U.S. At first glance, linking religious institutions to the Good Roads Movement seems like another stretch of the imagination. There were certainly plenty of economic and social arguments for better roads, but religious arguments? Unsurprisingly, the church's support of Good Roads again resided in a greater ability to spread Christianity (particularly to rural areas). In 1892, the *New Catholic World* wrote an editorial pointing out *"Good roads are good civilizers, because they facilitate the intermingling of the people, and the consequent interchange of ideas. Moreover, good roads are an aid to religious advancement, enabling people to attend religious services with greater facility."* The L.A.W. even strategically chose to co-opt the language of the preacher when it created and printed 20,000 free copies of *The Gospel of Good Roads: A Letter to the American Farmer* (1891). This "gospel" was meant to convince farmers that good roads were in their best economic interests. From temperance to evangelism to Good Roads, religious attitudes towards the bicycle were rapidly evolving.

Figure 6: "We have plenty of scriptural justification in defense of the bicycle." (Brown, H.E. Betsy Jane on Two Wheels: A Tale of the Bicycle Craze. (Chicago, 1895): 70

The Church and the Wheel

As the nineteenth century came to a close bicycling had become commonplace in American culture. The tidal wave of cyclists that had swept the country forced the resolution of debates about the religious propriety of cycling. Churches could not continue to condemn an activity that so many of their upstanding members participated in. In addition to using bicycles for evangelism, some clergy argued in favor of embracing cycling to bring more people to the church. **[Figure 6]** In 1894 the Rev. John Scudder put it this way:

> *If men and women will ride on Sunday why not invite them to ride to church and provide a place for their machines? Why not allow them to stack their wheels in the lecture room or build a shed for bicycles as the country church provides a shelter for horses and carriages? People living at a distance might thus be induced to come to church who otherwise would certainly stay away. Surely riding a bicycle to church is not a sin. It is a saintly procedure compared with riding on horse cars and elevated railroad trains for these forms of travel necessitate the labour of drivers, conductors and brakemen and prevent their attending divine service.*

Scudder's characterization of cycling as a "saintly procedure" falls on the opposite end of the religious spectrum from clergy who saw the bicycle as the work of the devil. Scudder's argument that cycling on Sunday is preferable to riding horse cars or elevated trains because those modes of transportation require drivers and operators to miss church services is a compelling Christian moral argument in favor of the bicycle. It is not clear if Rev. Scudder enacted the bicycle-friendly reforms that he mentioned, but other clergy certainly did.

The Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones was a Unitarian minister who founded the All Souls Church on Chicago's South side. **[Figure 7]** As a historical note, the Rev. Jones was also the uncle of Frank Lloyd Wright. His ideas about religious architecture heavily influenced his young nephew. Among Rev. Jones' many progressive religious reforms was his advocacy for the bicycle. In 1896, the Rev. Jones garnered headlines in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* for encouraging cyclists to ride to services at All Souls Church. Not only did Jones encourage cyclists to ride to his church, but he also provided valet bicycle parking in the church basement. Reporting on these events the *Chicago Daily Tribune* wrote:

The bicycle is every man's carriage. An ever increasing number of people are bringing it into their personal service. Its attractions are many. It undoubtedly will come into competition with the church services on Sunday. From this time on, if it is 'the church or the wheel' one needs no prophetic eye to see which will win in thousands of lives. All Souls' Church, Chicago would fain avert the conflict by saying 'the church and the wheel.'

Conclusion

By the end of the 19th century the bicycle boom had come crashing down. By this time though, most clergy had come to agree with Rev. Jones that the church should welcome – or at the very least tolerate - cyclists. In a classic case of "what goes around, comes around," the invention of motorcycles, and then automobiles, briefly ignited similar debates about their role in religious life. In 1904, the Rev. E.W. Taylor wrote an article in the *Motor-Car Journal* entitled, "Are Motor-Bicycles Desirable for Clergymen?" In this article, Taylor makes much the same case for the motor bicycle for evangelism and parish outreach that his predecessors made for the bicycle:

During the last two years a motor-bicycle has been doing service, and the writer is frank so say that with it he can cover a much larger district, reach more people, and do it quicker and easier than is possible with the bicycle…I find that about three calls can be made with the motor-cycle to one in the ordinary way. This means that with the motor-bicycle a much larger flock can be shepherded, and that more effectually, than would otherwise be possible.

Here, then, we can identify one of the broader themes illustrated by the church's debates over the bicycle during the 1890's. The real threat to the Church's power and control wasn't

BIKES IN THE CHURCH

The Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones Makes an Innovation.

HE WILL CHECK WHEELS.

Cyclists Can Attend All Souls' in Peace of Mind.

MINISTERS ARE WITH HIM.

Storage Rooms Likely in Many Houses of Worship.

RAPID TRANSIT TO SALVATION.

Figure 7: Headline from the Chicago Daily Tribune, Apr. 16, 1896.

bicycles *per se*, but rather, technological progress in general. Recall that prior to the European Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Church exerted an extraordinary level of control over the average person's daily life. The Scientific Revolution had eroded a great deal of this control. In nineteenth century America, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing. Corporations and profits were kings, churches were antiquated. Bicycles were yet another technological challenge to church authority. The church controlled courtship practices and marriage, but the bicycle undermined that control by allowing young people independence of movement. Attending services on the Sabbath was a cornerstone of being a good Christian, yet many chose the bicycle over the church pew. In historical terms, the debate over the bicycle was rather short-lived, but it would be supplanted by a long string of technological developments that the church had to contend with including the automobile, radio, television, and the internet. Like the bicycle, the television was initially met with distrust by the church, but it wouldn't take many years for televangelists to become commonplace.

One of the positive outcomes of the Industrial Revolution was that Americans began to have true leisure time as opposed to continually working just to survive. The Church had to contend with a variety of entertainments and products that were vying for this new-found leisure time. Therefore the bicycle's role in the development and furthering of the Muscular Christianity movement is another important outcome of the religious debates over cycling in the 1890's. This movement began in the 1860's but really began to play an important role in American Christian churches during and directly after the boom. Muscular Christianity adherents embraced cycling wholeheartedly as a means of strengthening the body and mind in order to do God's work. Muscular Christianity has continued to be an important element of American Christianity. Nineteenth century organizations such as the YMCA continue to thrive today while promoting a form of Muscular Christianity. Likewise, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (founded in 1954) also utilizes sports for evangelism purposes. They follow a model quite similar to that developed by evangelists who used cycling to promote Christianity. Still, debates over the role of sports in Christian life are far from universally resolved. For example, Apostolic Christian interpretations of the Bible have led that denomination to ban adult members from participating in - or even attending - sporting events. This ban even extends to attending their own children's sporting events. In his 2004 autobiography, former Apostolic Christian, Tom Speicher, recalled how his brother's work as a volunteer youth football coach caused deep divisions within their church. When his brother was nominated to be a Sunday school teacher, conservative members of the parish strongly objected to this appointment. It would appear that more than one hundred years after bicycling divided congregations, some of the same tensions between religion and sport still persist. ●