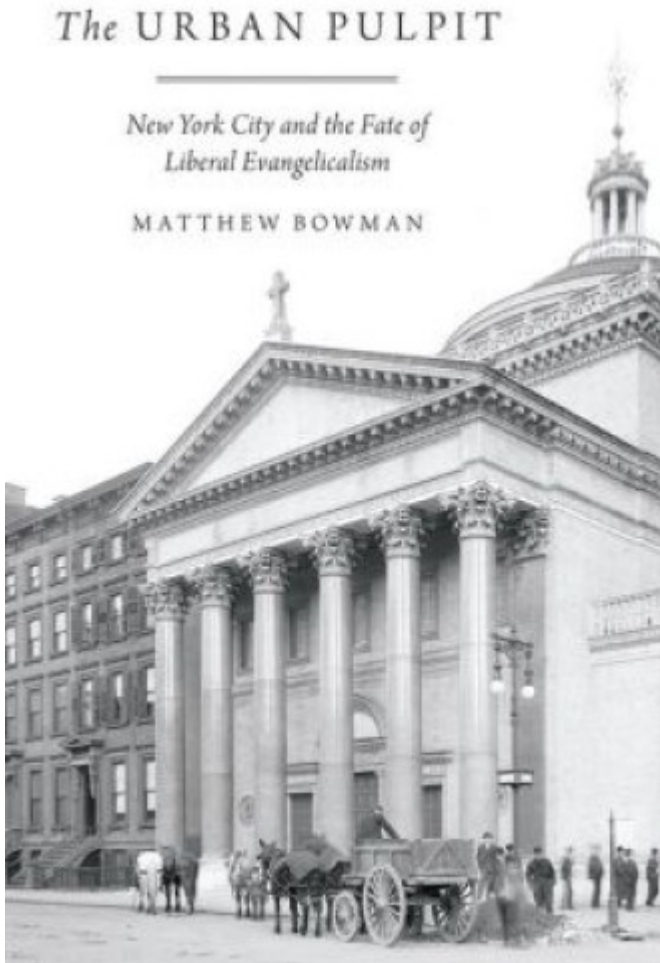


The Urban Pulpit, by Matthew Bowman

reviewed by [Mark Edwards](#) in the [June 11, 2014](#) issue

In Review



The Urban Pulpit

By Matthew Bowman
Oxford University Press

Since the 1970s, culture warriors have been inventing an irreparable break between liberal and evangelical churches. But Matthew Bowman transports us to a time when evangelicalism as a “style of being religious” was still up for grabs.

His deeply researched and masterfully written new book invites readers to re-discover the once-powerful promise of liberal evangelicalism. Now that historians are returning to study liberal and ecumenical church leaders not named Niebuhr or Tillich, the question must be asked: What is there left to learn about these self-credentialed white male elites?

A lot, actually. For Bowman, liberal evangelicalism was a pastoral middle way between the secular city and fundamentalism. Liberal churchmen were at war with New York pluralism, commercialism, and social scientism as often as they accommodated to them. The term *liberal evangelicalism* itself was coined by Madison Avenue pastor and Union Theological Seminary president Henry Sloane Coffin, who claimed in 1915 that “we are liberals on behalf of our evangelicalism.”

Coffin’s faith conjoined the gothic, sacramental style of Henry van Dyke’s Brick Church, the moral establishment of gowned crusader Charles Parkhurst, the experiential-over-doctrinal emphases of religious educator George Coe, and the comprehensive Christianity of Riverside Church’s Harry Emerson Fosdick. “Theirs was the essential struggle of liberal religion more generally,” Bowman observes—“the problem of simultaneous embrace of expansiveness and identity, the difficulty of maintaining a vitalizing connection to tradition while exploring change.” The liberal evangelical embrace of new views of the Bible and human origins—of the conviction that everything is determined by its environment—led Bowman’s men to double down on, not reject, long-standing determination to Christianize America and the world. Tolerance and inclusivity served liberal evangelicals’ tough-minded desire to convert souls as well as social structures.

Bowman’s strength is his thick description of liberal evangelicalism and the contentious cultural life of turn-of-the-century New York. His book is as much about the urban fundamentalism of Billy Sunday, John Roach Straton, and the Harlem Pentecostals as it is about the liberal mainline. That is because liberal evangelicals defined themselves by what they were against as often as by what they were for. Bowman’s subjects never constituted a unified and self-confident Christian aristocracy. They were instead desperate to salvage the spiritual and moral power of evangelicalism in a time and place that seemed hostile to it. Pastoral necessity proved to be the mother of significant Christian American inventions, including the social gospel and what David Bains has called the mainline’s “liturgical impulse.”

Even still, Bowman concludes that the history of liberal evangelicalism “is a story of failure, and a melancholy one.” He faults 1960s radical pastors for not holding fast to the mediating faith of the liberal evangelicals. The radicals’ “obsession with the social and the ethical and their discomfort with the raw assertions of faith that more conservative evangelicals embrace have left a mainline that, as these critics describe it, might well simply be the Red Cross.”

Possibly Bowman would have moderated his criticism had he chosen a longer timeline and broader base for his study. New York’s liberal evangelicalism was just starting to get interesting when *The Urban Pulpit* ends in the 1930s. Union Theological Seminary students like Henry Pitney Van Dusen, John Coleman Bennett, and Samuel McCrea Cavert thereafter exported Coffin’s cautiously cosmopolitan faith to the national and global ecumenical movements. As Van Dusen would write in 1947, a year before the World Council of Churches was inaugurated, “the philosophy of the world Christian mission is that of liberal evangelicalism.”

These same second-generation liberal evangelicals also supported Billy Graham’s Manhattan crusade in 1957, believing that with some coaching from them, Graham could be God’s chosen instrument to effect the Christian society that had been evangelicals’ passion from the beginning. Graham’s postfundamentalists did not win over Fosdick’s descendants. They merely occupied the blast zone after the liberal evangelical implosion over identity politics and Vietnam during the 1960s. Graham’s followers subsequently “invented” several of the ministry tactics that liberal and ecumenical mainline churches had been employing for decades.

Bowman has offered a solid and impressive foundation for future study of a rich tradition. The liberal evangelical stress on experimentalism over dogmatism, on “open,” classless churches, and on faith-based community activism all marked the major feature of American religious liberalism then and now: generosity of mind, body, and especially soul. *The Urban Pulpit* is indispensable reading for anyone hoping to understand the origins of the liberal and ecumenical branches of mainline Protestantism.