Popular Media and the Global Expansion of American Evangelicalism in an Imperial Age

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This article examines the crucial role that print media played in the global expansion of American evangelicalism during the late 1890s: a moment when the United States was exercising new forms of military, economic, and cultural power to extend its influence in world affairs. Analyzing the strategies that publicists employed to make the popular press an effective medium of spreading American evangelicalism sheds light on the theological and social factors that influenced – and circumscribed – the ways in which evangelicals imagined, fostered, and undermined the creation of a global Christian community in this increasingly imperial era.

At half-past nine o’clock, on the night of 14 May 1894, the celebrated American preacher Thomas de Witt Talmage descended the steps of his home in Brooklyn, New York to set out on a “round-the-world journey” that would take him from the rail station in Manhattan across the continent to California, then by steamship to the Hawaiian Islands, New Zealand, Australia, and India. The trip had “long been a cherished dream of his.” Having traveled to Europe and the Holy Land in 1889, and then to Russia in 1892, this most recent voyage would enable the renowned divine to complete his “Earth Girdling” circuit. After five months of visiting “the curious people and the strange and wonderful sights … that go to make up a world,” Talmage returned home full of anecdotes about his adventures that he recounted for fellow American Protestants in the Christian Herald & Signs of Our Times, the popular evangelical newspaper he had edited since 1890. One of the highlights of his tour, Talmage reported, was being “brought face to face with many thousands who, though living on the other side of the globe, had already become acquainted with him by reading his sermons in the columns of the Christian Herald.” Through the medium of the religious press, he joyfully confirmed, a “great community of
believers … have been drawn together in conscious brotherhood … in this and other lands.”

During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, many American evangelicals shared Talmage’s enthusiasm for the power of popular media to foster a universal Christian fellowship that transcended denominational differences, geographical distances, national borders, and even cultural barriers. Although communication technologies had played a crucial role in the expansion of evangelicalism around the globe since the movement’s emergence in the early eighteenth century, innovations in print journalism and photography in the 1880s, coupled with the remarkable growth of the foreign missionary movement in these years, fueled optimism about the religious press as a means of spreading Christian faith to the ends of the earth and creating solidarity among believers from all tribes and nations. As numerous scholars have shown, newspapers and periodicals served as crucial vehicles for “rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” in the globalizing world of the late nineteenth century. By examining how entrepreneurial publicists such as Talmage and his colleagues at the Christian Herald sought to harness the power of the printing press to forge a worldwide community of faith, this essay sheds light on the theological ideas, social factors, and ethical sensibilities that shaped American evangelical conceptions of the “global” kingdom of God during these years.

The Christian Herald offers a particularly useful case study through which to explore the role of popular media in the global expansion of American evangelicalism because the editors’ efforts to reach a broad and diverse readership


proved remarkably effective. While many other religious journals also hoped to advance God’s kingdom through their pages, most remained rooted in a particular denominational tradition, and none could claim the wide national and international circulation that the *Christian Herald* achieved during the 1890s. With Talmage at the helm, the newspaper garnered almost a quarter-million subscribers by the turn of the twentieth century — nearly double the number of its closest competitor among American religious periodicals (the *Sunday School Times* had approximately 140,000), and on par with or well in excess of comparable general-audience publications like *Collier’s* (with a circulation of 263,131), *Leslie’s Illustrated* (70,300) or *Harper’s* (with a subscription rate somewhere between 40,000 and 75,000).³

According to Talmage and his associates, the *Christian Herald’s* commercial success confirmed that popular religious media could serve as an influential means of strengthening and extending the American evangelical community both at home and abroad. The first two sections of this essay analyze the strategies that Talmage and his colleagues employed as they strove to make their newspaper a medium of evangelical expansion. First, by adopting cutting-edge journalistic methods and visual technologies, these publicists hoped to broaden the *Christian Herald’s* appeal among a widening class of readers around the world who might otherwise be attracted by the unwholesome sensationalism of the secular press. Second, by publishing news articles and photographic images that emphasized the common humanity of all God’s children, the editors aimed to cultivate unity among this expanding constituency — bridging barriers of denominational, racial, ethnic, and national separation at a time when these categories of discrimination were becoming increasingly rigid both within the United States and overseas.

Even as they celebrated the *Christian Herald’s* potential for spreading the gospel and promoting kinship among the faithful of every nation, however, American evangelicals were grappling with significant challenges threatening to undermine this cosmopolitan project. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, concerns about the effects of increasing immigration, rising racial tensions, and growing religious diversity on the nation’s economic prosperity, social structure, political culture, and dominant Protestant identity exercised citizens throughout the United States. The advent of American imperialism during the Spanish–American War and the ensuing conflicts in the Philippines heightened anxieties about all of these issues, prompting evangelicals to engage in vigorous debates about the proper relationships among military, economic, cultural, and religious expansion.

By examining how publicists like Talmage and others deployed popular religious media as a forum for navigating disputes about American empire, the final section of this essay sheds light on the social, political, and ideological pressures that shaped – and limited – the ways in which evangelicals imagined and pursued the creation of a global Christian community in this contentious period. Although some critics of imperialism worried that the policies of the United States imperiled efforts to create a worldwide family of all God’s children, the *Christian Herald*’s coverage during these years makes clear that most American evangelicals embraced their nation’s expansionist program as a divinely ordained opportunity for extending the kingdom of Christ. By publishing articles and pictures that increasingly linked the advance of global evangelicalism with the spread of American power, the *Christian Herald* helped bolster the image of the United States as redeemer nation specially appointed by God to play a unique role in the salvation of all humanity. While Christians around the world have continually contested this equation of evangelicalism and American empire, the allure of this vision has remained strong, and exercised an enduring influence both on the foreign relations of the United States and on the shape of global Christianity from Talmage’s time to our own day.

**THE CHRISTIAN HERALD AS “MISSIONARY EVANGEL” IN A SENSATIONAL AND SECULAR ERA**

When Talmage embarked on his world tour in the spring of 1894, he was one of the best-known evangelical preachers in the United States. Just prior to his departure, he celebrated his twenty-fifth anniversary as pastor of the interdenominational Brooklyn Tabernacle, the largest church in America with a seating capacity of six thousand, an even larger membership, and a national reputation. Famous for his dramatic preaching style, Talmage also owed his success to his savvy deployment of popular media. Since the early 1870s, Talmage had worked as an editor for several different Christian publications including the renowned *Frank Leslie’s Sunday Magazine*. Then, in 1885, one of Talmage’s parishioners – an enterprising publisher named Louis Klopsch – proposed to syndicate his minister’s sermons. Talmage agreed to the “plan of the world-wide pulpit” and within several years his weekly messages were being printed in over three thousand newspapers and reportedly reaching twenty million readers in the United States and other English-speaking

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4 Technically, Talmage was ordained as a Presbyterian but he strongly downplayed his denominational connections and avidly promoted the Brooklyn Tabernacle as a church that welcomed a diverse array of Protestants.
countries, as well as being translated into several foreign languages. When Klopsch invited Talmage to partner with him in producing the *Christian Herald & Signs of Our Times* – the American version of a popular British weekly newspaper that he had recently purchased – the always ambitious minister sensed an opportunity to further the reach of his evangelical ministry. Talmage quickly accepted Klopsch’s offer, and in February of 1890, the two men began working to “extend the circulation and influence of the *Christian Herald*” with the goal of making it “the most widely read religious newspaper in the world.”

From the outset of their venture, Talmage and Klopsch expressed high hopes that their publication would become a potent means of advancing God’s kingdom in and beyond the United States. “We believe that a consecrated printing press is the mightiest of all agencies for lifting the fallen, instructing the ignorant, and saving the lost,” they declared in an inaugural editorial. Since the time of the Protestant Reformation, religious leaders like Martin Luther had deployed printing technologies to spread the gospel, and throughout the nineteenth century Talmage and Klopsch’s predecessors had eagerly embraced the possibilities of popular media to carry forward the evangelical mission. As scholars of religious publishing in the antebellum United States have argued, American Protestants actively participated in the development and distribution of new forms of popular literature – including cheap books, tracts, and especially periodicals – as they sought to transmit the gospel message and sustain evangelical influence in a growing and diversifying nation. Driven by a conviction that the success of the democratic experiment depended on their ability to Christianize the expanding population, evangelical leaders formed interdenominational voluntary organizations such as the American Bible Society (ABS), the American Tract Society (ATS), and the American Sunday School Union (ASSU) to publish and disseminate evangelical literature on a national scale. According to historian David Nord, these agencies quickly became “leading innovators of printing technology and business organization” as they endeavored to fulfill “the millennial dream” of reaching every man, woman, and child in the United States with the printed Word. Such aggressive engagement in the literary and periodical marketplace was necessary, evangelical publishers argued, in order to combat the pernicious influence of “frivolous” or even “vicious” reading material that threatened to undermine the country’s

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Christian character. By flooding the public domain with texts that were both entertaining and spiritually edifying, proponents of popular religious media also hoped to foster common habits, sensibilities, and concerns among American Protestants from a range of theological backgrounds and geographic regions. During these decades of intensifying political turmoil and social change, scholars of evangelical publishing have asserted, many Protestants “placed a messianic faith in the power of the press” to counter moral dissolution, create religious unity, and “bring on the millennium of Christ.”

Despite the “spirit of ecumenical optimism” that inspired religious publishers in the antebellum era, the “evangelical belief in the unifying power of the press was not long-lasting.” By the mid-nineteenth century, historian Paul Gutjahr has argued, American Protestants had begun “to show more faith in, and commitment to, denominational printing enterprises.” This tendency toward “fragmentation and diversification” was exacerbated by the rise of sectionalism, increasing disagreement over slavery, and eventually the outbreak of the Civil War. In the aftermath of this devastating conflict, however, evangelical leaders like Talmage turned again to popular religious media as a means of overcoming divisions among Protestant communities and furthering Christ’s dominion on Earth. Although the challenges of binding together fractured regions and churches remained formidable in the postbellum period, a number factors fueled confidence in the evangelical press as an instrument of both national unity and global transformation.

First, evangelicals like Talmage argued, developments in publishing technologies—including improvements in the machinery that allowed for faster reproduction of text, the inclusion of a broader range of visual imagery, and more efficient distribution methods—had made the possibility of spreading the gospel message across the United States and around the globe more plausible than ever before. Like his antebellum predecessors, Talmage believed that evangelicals ought to exploit these innovations to extend faith to every tribe and nation until the entire world bowed “at the foot of Christ’s throne.” As an ardent postmillenialist, Talmage proclaimed that the kingdom of God was coming through the agency of evangelical Christianity coupled with advances in science, engineering, commerce, education, government, and—perhaps most importantly—popular media. “The cylinder of the Christianized printing press will be the front wheel of the Lord’s chariot,” Talmage enthusiastically asserted in an article celebrating the

7 Gutjahr, 194–95.
missionary capacities of the modern religious periodical. Although a minister 
might preach to a few hundred or even a few thousand people on a given 
Sunday, he proclaimed, the “printing press will take the sermon and preach it 
to millions of people.” By publishing his addresses and circulating them in 
the inexpensive, accessible format of a weekly newspaper, he argued, the Christian Herald would help carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, perhaps even reaching people who would never encounter biblical influences 
through other means.8

Talmage’s emphasis on transmitting Christian truth to new regions of the 
world reflected another important development that inspired renewed excite-
ment about the power of the press among late nineteenth-century evangelicals: 
the phenomenal growth of the foreign missionary movement. While ante-
bellum evangelicals certainly envisioned their publishing efforts as part of a 
strategy for converting “heathens” both at home and abroad, numerous scholars 
have shown that material investments in spreading the gospel across the globe 
increased exponentially in the 1880s and 1890s. Printed texts — including bibles, 
tracts, and periodicals — were an essential component of the expanding missionary 
enterprise in these years, as Talmage’s comments about the Christian Herald make 
clear. Because these materials could carry the biblical message to the far reaches of 
the earth more rapidly than individual preachers, remain behind when itinerant 
ministers moved on, and even make their way into remote communities that mis-
sionaries missed, proponents believed that they were crucial to accomplishing “the 
evangelization of the world in this generation.”9

Enthusiasm for the missionary capacities of popular media during the latter 
decades of the nineteenth century also stemmed from the conviction that peri-
odicals like the Christian Herald were especially wellsuited for reaching a 
diverse, worldwide audience in an increasingly fast-paced era when few 
people found time to read long treatises, but more were literate than ever 
before. “The newspaper has for the great masses taken the place of the book,” Talmage wrote. “Portable and easily carried in hand or pocket it is 
read on the way to business or on the way home.” Rather than deploring 
this development, Talmage celebrated the democratizing and globalizing

8 Thomas de Witt Talmage, “The Kingdom Coming,” CH, 7 April 1897, 276; and “A 
9 Scholarship on the growth of the foreign missionary movement is voluminous. For analysis 
of the connections between missions and communications networks see especially Ian 
Tyrrell, Reforming the World: The Creation of America’s Moral Reform Empire 
this generation” was a popular missionary slogan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth 
centuries. For the history of this phrase see Dana L. Robert, “The Origin of the Student 
Volunteer Watchword: ‘The Evangelization of the World in This Generation’,” 
possibilities of popular media. All read the newspaper, he declared: “white and black, German, Irishman, Swiss, Spaniard, American, old and young, good and bad, sick and well, before breakfast and after tea, Monday morning, Saturday night, Sunday and weekday.” Given this expansive reach, he concluded, publications like the Christian Herald could serve as effective channels for communicating the Gospel to people of all races and every social class.10

While Talmage and his colleagues were confident that the Christian Herald could achieve this goal of advancing God’s kingdom among diverse groups, they also warned that the task was an urgent one given the rising competition they faced from popular secular publications that were advancing a very different – and deleterious – agenda. Like their antebellum forebears, late nineteenth-century evangelical publishers believed they had a spiritual responsibility to sanctify the world through the printed word (to borrow a phrase from historian Candy Gunther Brown). By the 1880s, when media moguls such as William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer were “multiplying the numbers of their papers by pandering to the tastes of bad men and worse women,” Talmage proclaimed, the duty to dedicate “the printing press to high and holy objects” was even more pressing. Because the newspaper had become “the most important agency for influencing the public mind,” he contended, evangelical publications needed to harness the power of popular media to counter the injurious effects of unscrupulous tabloids with the salutary influences of the Gospel. Rather than reporting “deeds of crime and sin” or publishing “illustrated pages on prize-fights” or public scandals that were so harmful to public health, the Christian Herald would promote a “purer journalism” that recounted the “grand achievements of Christ’s kingdom.”11

To ensure that their periodical would attract readers away from more salacious publications that spewed “venom and mud and slime,” Talmage and Klopsch endeavored to present the religion of the Bible in exciting and creative ways designed to appeal to a wide audience. “Why should a bright religious weekly such as the Christian Herald lag in circulation behind the leading secular papers?” its publishers asked. Rather than allowing periodicals like

Hearst’s *New York Journal* or Pulitzer’s *The World* to maintain “a monopoly of good paper, bright and newsy matter, beautiful pictures, fine press work and enterprising business methods,” they argued, the *Christian Herald* ought to lay claim to all of these features “for the advancement of the Lord’s cause through Christian journalism.” In keeping with this vision, Talmage and his colleagues experimented with a number of innovative editorial practices, printing processes, and visual technologies.12

From the beginning of their tenure at the helm of the *Christian Herald*, Talmage and Klopsch insisted that their paper would be “full of compressed news” and “vivacious” anecdotes that reflected “the golden sunshine of life.” Maintaining a positive, upbeat tenor would set their publication apart both from the secular papers that focussed on “fraud, forgeries, and failures,” and from more somber and old-fashioned religious journals that emphasized doctrinal disputation or failed to keep up with contemporary topics. “One of the greatest slanders on the religion of Jesus Christ is dullness,” Talmage asserted. Therefore the *Christian Herald* would strive to engage subscribers through entertaining serial stories, up-to-date coverage of current events, adventurous tales of missionary life, and even “a little romance.”

While some critics worried that these editorial methods hewed too closely to the controversial tactics associated with the “new journalism” promoted by Hearst and Pulitzer, Klopsch and Talmage consistently argued that drama and spectacle were legitimate means of advancing an evangelical agenda. “Dr. Klopsch himself did not object to being called sensational,” his biographer avowed. Talmage agreed. “When I am called a sensationalist, I take it as a compliment,” he declared. “God helping me, I will make it more true.” Gripping headlines, stirring stories, and a lively tone, these publicists contended, could create and sustain interest in the cause of Christ among a broad range of readers and show that “the evangelical newspaper had fully as wide a field as the secular one.”13

In addition to including stimulating content that they hoped would establish the *Christian Herald*’s “high reputation as the brightest and best family paper of our day and generation,” Talmage and Klopsch also made changes in the production and formatting of the newspaper in order to present “the Truth in the most attractive manner.” Soon after taking over as publisher, for example, Klopsch changed the layout of the periodical and began to introduce more illustrations alongside the printed text. According to his biographer,

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12 “Newspapers,” *CH*, 4 Nov. 1891, 694; and “Getting Our Million,” *CH*, 14 June 1899, 466.
Klopsch possessed an “intuitive perception of what the great masses of people wanted … of what interests people, of how to reach them in a manner to attract and hold them.” Early on in his career he had realized that people were drawn to publications that included images, and so began to experiment with novel techniques that made possible the mass reproduction of portraits and photographs in popular periodicals.\textsuperscript{14}

After his purchase of the \textit{Christian Herald}, Klopsch continued to pioneer new approaches to “pictorial journalism,” always seeking to keep the newspaper at the forefront of this emerging field in order to capture and keep the attention of a growing constituency. In 1895, for example, he announced that the \textit{Christian Herald} would henceforth include colored illustrations in every issue. “This new departure will be a very pleasing one to our readers,” he declared. “Episodes of Christian work and progress in our own day, thus pictured, will acquire a new and rare charm and a far greater value … We believe that if there is any power for good in color printing, the Lord’s cause should have the benefit of it.” Talmage concurred wholeheartedly with Klopsch’s convictions. “The age of pictures is here,” he declared. “Periodicals that decline them will seem dull in comparison with those adorned with wood-cuts and engravings,” therefore the \textit{Christian Herald} would take full advantage of photographs, artistry, and other forms of illustration to assure that the newspaper remained at the cutting edge of popular journalism.\textsuperscript{15}

By making the \textit{Christian Herald} eye-catching, exciting, and edifying, Talmage and Klopsch aimed to ensure that their newspaper would appeal to an increasingly diverse audience during this era of escalating competition from the secular press. “Our ambition,” Talmage wrote in an early editorial, “is to be spiritual, enterprising, and, in a wide-awake sense, evangelical,” so that the \textit{Christian Herald} would become “the most successful religious newspaper in the world” — an “avant-courier of the Lord’s coming” and an agent of the “world’s final evangelization.” Within several years, these publishing strategies seemed to be achieving the desired results. Subscriptions were growing at a steady rate, and the \textit{Christian Herald} was gaining market share among popular periodicals both religious and secular. When Klopsch first acquired the publication in 1890, the newspaper had achieved a respectable circulation of approximately 30,000. By the time Talmage returned from his globetrotting journey in the fall of 1894, the subscription list had expanded exponentially to 166,351. Moreover, letters to the editors confirmed that the

\textsuperscript{14} “Christian Herald for 1895,” \textit{CH}, 5 Dec. 1894, 777; and Pepper, 4–5, 309.

Christian Herald was being read “not only in our great cities, but in the lonely log cabin, on the Western ranch, in the miner’s hut, in isolated farm-houses far away from any church, under the broiling sun of Equatorial Africa, amid the snow and ice of Arctic regions.” Based on his interactions with this growing body of readers both at home and overseas, Talmage was convinced that the journal was successfully furthering the kingdom of God by spreading the gospel, thwarting the injurious influences of disreputable tabloids by promoting a “purer journalism,” and engaging evangelicals of every nation in its task of “world-wide ministration.”

THE CHRISTIAN HERALD AND THE MAKING OF EVANGELICAL SOLIDARITY IN A GLOBALIZING AGE

If Talmage’s travels throughout the United States and abroad affirmed his confidence in the power of popular media to advance God’s kingdom among a geographically dispersed and increasingly diverse population, his encounters with readers from around the world also heightened his commitment to drawing this expanding group of disciples into closer fellowship. “We must remember that other people do not differ more from us than we differ from them,” he declared. Explaining that his visits to Europe, Asia, and Africa had enlarged his own capacity for empathy, Talmage indicated that the Christian Herald would seek to nurture a similar attitude among its subscribers in order to bind evangelicals from across the United States and beyond into a “great, united, happy family circle of Christian believers.”

From the beginning of his tenure as editor, however, Talmage recognized that fostering mutual regard among a global evangelical community would be an especially challenging task. For even as he rejoiced that travel and media technologies were bringing “all the world so near together,” many of his contemporaries worried about the implications of heightened interactions among peoples of various cultures—especially in the United States where immigrants were arriving in massive numbers during the 1890s. Within this context, a number of influential theorists were devising increasingly rigid, hierarchical schemes of classification designed to assert and maintain the superiority of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism and western civilization. The rising prominence of scientific racism and social Darwinism bolstered support for exclusionary immigration policies to prevent “foreigners” from diluting the


17 Talmage, “A Greeting,” 136; and Pepper, 370.
“Christian” character of the United States, encouraged the passage and judicial affirmation of segregationist legislation throughout the American South, and validated the imperial projects of European nations scrambling for colonies in Africa and elsewhere around the world.  

As we will see, Talmage and his colleagues at the Christian Herald were certainly not immune from the presumptions and allure of these powerful ideologies. Yet unlike theorists of polygenesis or proponents of racial segregation, these evangelicals insisted that “all nations must belong to one family” and that the advance of Christ’s kingdom on earth was bringing about the “comingling” and “intertwining” of people of every clime and culture “under the blessing of God.” Citing the scriptural claim that “God hath made of one blood all nations of men,” Talmage contended that popular periodicals ought to promote this “Christian theory” of “universal brotherhood” by drawing together “high, low, titled, rich, poor” into a common fellowship.

In order to cultivate an “all-embracing sympathy” among evangelicals both at home and abroad, Talmage asserted, the Christian Herald would showcase the ministries of faithful believers from diverse racial, ethnic, social, and national backgrounds working in different regions within and beyond the United States. From his earliest days as editor, Talmage actively solicited stories of evangelical endeavors to advance the kingdom of God. “We invite all lay workers to send us all the encouraging things they know of about men and women and children and good institutions,” he wrote in his introductory message to subscribers. In subsequent issues, the Christian Herald included articles highlighting the virtuous pursuits of pastors, missionaries, and lay people as a regular feature. In July of 1890, for example, the newspaper publicized the globe-trotting campaign of African American evangelist Amanda Berry Smith, who was taking the gospel message from the United States to Europe, India, and Africa. Several months later, the efforts of the Pioneer American Western Sunday School Union to bring “religious privileges” and basic education to both “white children” and “Indians” throughout the Southwest received front-page coverage. Most weeks, readers also learned about the lives and ministries of Christians from other nations—such as African missionary Cecil Majaliwa, who was having great success as director of the prosperous mission station at Chilanagi, near Zanzibar; or Japanese

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18 “Newspaper Reading,” 614. The literature on scientific racism in this period is voluminous and growing. For a particularly helpful study that discusses the intersections of racial ideology, religious ideas, and American national identity see Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth McAlister, eds., Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

convert Tell Sono, who hoped to open a Christian school for her countrywomen in her native Tokyo; or Syrian pastor Malik Yonan, who preached to large crowds from a caravan in northwestern Persia.²⁰

Whenever possible, the Christian Herald’s editorial team illustrated these accounts of evangelical workers with images intended to draw together subscribers from distant geographies and divergent cultural settings. Klopsch explicitly encouraged contributors who sent in reports of ministerial and missionary endeavors to include a picture along with their written descriptions. If it was impossible to obtain actual photographs, the editors would solicit help from their “genial artist Mr. Albert Hencke,” to “portray in beautiful colors many of the most interesting phases of Christian activity in this country and elsewhere.” Through Hencke’s “magic brush,” Klopsch declared, “will the American people have an opportunity of being brought practically face to face with the scenes of which they have frequently heard in the past with almost consuming interest but upon which, thus far, they have never been permitted to gaze.” Talmage agreed that illustrations could bring Christians together across territorial distances. Visual depictions, he argued, also transcended the particularities of place and dialect. “Pictures are not only a strong but a universal language,” he intoned. “The human race is divided into almost as many languages as there are nations, but pictures may speak to people of all tongues … the pictorial is always a world-wide language and printers’ types have no emphasis compared with it.” When both geography and culture made communication difficult, Talmage believed, images could create connections. From this perspective, adopting the latest advances in visual technology was an essential means of fostering a global evangelical fellowship.²¹

With this goal in mind, the Christian Herald began to send out special correspondents equipped with portable cameras to document the activities of evangelical workers across the United States and around the world. Photographic essays, the editors asserted, enabled subscribers to “visit and explore new scenes in many lands” and to become better acquainted with their “brothers and sisters” around the globe. In the fall of 1893, for example, Klopsch commissioned the famous author Marion Harland (Mary Virginia Terhune) to travel to the Holy Land and “write her experiences


there for the benefit of *Christian Herald* readers.” Over the course of 1894, the newspaper printed Harlan’s accounts of her interactions with the inhabitants of Palestine “abundantly illustrated by photographs taken by the lady herself expressly for this paper.” Several of these missives told the stories of Syrian Christian women, such as Mrs. David Jamal, who had established a school for providing young girls with industrial skills and religious teaching. Readers of the *Christian Herald*, Harlan wrote, ought to “take up the cause” of this worthy evangelical enterprise by supporting Jamal’s work with prayer and financial contributions. The accompanying image, which featured Harlan participating in a carpet-weaving class alongside Jamal and several Syrian girls, invited subscribers to consider how effectively Christians could be brought together across geographical and cultural differences to build God’s kingdom around the world through the medium of the religious press.22

Harlan’s stories of encounters in the Holy Land proved so popular that the *Christian Herald* continued to engage journalists to travel abroad on behalf of the newspaper and its subscribers. In addition to commissioning their own reporters, Talmage and Klopsch also cultivated connections with missionaries, evangelical workers, and native believers from diverse denominations stationed all around the world, and regularly included their letters and pictures in the *Christian Herald*’s columns. At a time when secular newspapers were just beginning to deploy foreign correspondents to cover international affairs, the *Christian Herald* endeavored to build its own global reporting network to provide evangelicals with news “in regard to the doings of Christ’s kingdom” in all corners of the earth. By publishing these contributions from Christians of every nation, Talmage and Klopsch sought to draw an increasingly disparate group of disciples into closer fellowship.23

The confidence these evangelical publicists expressed in the power of popular media to foster empathetic engagement among dispersed and diverse believers was rooted in long-standing assumptions about the role of narratives and images in evoking sympathy for other sentient beings. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke, David Hume, Frances Hutcheson, and Adam Smith began to develop a theory of ethics that located morality primarily in the emotions, and encouraged individuals to practice virtue by imaginatively identifying with the experiences of strangers. Reading stories and viewing pictures that stimulated the affections by depicting the struggles and triumphs of others became an important avenue for fostering personal moral sensibilities and inspiring connections among disparate populations in an era of increasing

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23 “Religious Newspapers,” 392.
encounter. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the expanding “culture of sensibility” helped fuel the production of popular forms of literature and pictorial representations designed to arouse empathy for new categories of people. During the antebellum era, for example, abolitionists published heart-rending descriptions and depictions of the suffering of slaves in order to demonstrate the humanity of these fellow beings.

By the 1890s, when Talmage and Klopsch took over the *Christian Herald*, many evangelicals had fully embraced the theory and practice of “sentimental ethics” as a strategy for bridging territorial, social, and cultural divides. By incorporating narratives and images that stressed the common humanity and shared commitments of Christians around the globe, Talmage and his associates contended, their newspaper was helping to knit together a worldwide family of the faithful bound by mutual affection and a collective mission to advance the kingdom of God. Evidence of their success, they contended, came from subscribers of every tribe and nation who described how the *Christian Herald* had helped strengthen their sense of solidarity with fellow believers. In December of 1892, for example, the Reverend J.W. Wadman wrote from Hirosaki, Japan to commend the journal for its coverage of the recent Russian famine which had enabled his congregation to “know more about these neighbors than ever before, and … love them with a greater love, for they are our brothers as well as neighbors.” Several years later, Mrs. Elizabeth R. Terziera of Samokov, Bulgaria thanked the *Christian Herald* for informing her community about the persecution of fellow Christians in nearby Armenia. “We all feel for them here in Bulgaria,” she declared. In addition to publishing testimonials like these, the editors also regularly printed lists of financial contributions the paper had received from readers and forwarded to various causes and ministries in and beyond the United States. These donations, Talmage and his colleagues believed, offered proof that “the brotherhood of man [had] been wonderfully widened” through their popular evangelical periodical.

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In their enthusiastic deployments of stories and photographs to unite believers across borders, Talmage and Klopsch hoped to break down the racial, social, and national barriers that many of their contemporaries were attempting to reinforce during these years of growing fear about the effects of increasing interactions among diverse peoples around the globe. As many scholars have shown, however, the ethic of “spectatorial sympathy” that these American evangelicals so eagerly embraced often worked to reinscribe the very boundaries of difference, hierarchy, and subordination that they were seeking to overcome in their efforts to build a universal Christian fellowship. While Talmage and his associates at the *Christian Herald* clearly rejected the overtly racist theories of society that were gaining popularity in this period, they were less astute at recognizing the more subtle ways in which assumptions about the superiority of American values of self-governance, industry, progress, and education influenced their vision, presentation, and propagation of global evangelicalism. As the United States began to pursue new forms of political, economic, and cultural power during and after the Spanish–American War, debates about how imperialism would affect evangelical efforts to advance God’s kingdom and cultivate worldwide Christian fellowship brought these presumptions of American preeminence into sharper relief.

**THE CHRISTIAN HERALD, IMPERIALISM, AND THE LIMITS OF AMERICAN EVANGELICALS’ GLOBAL VISION**

From the outbreak of the Spanish–American War in April of 1898, Talmage, Klopsch, and their colleagues at the *Christian Herald* acknowledged that this conflict posed a significant challenge— if not an outright threat—to their endeavors to promote evangelical solidarity both at home and abroad. “It is inevitable that many Christian people of the United States should be distressed and perplexed by the decision of our government to engage in war,” Talmage avowed just after the eruption of hostilities. Throughout his career, he had staunchly advocated peace and arbitration in international affairs, and since taking over as editor of the *Christian Herald* had consistently promoted these positions in the newspaper’s columns. In keeping with his buoyant optimism about the world’s progress toward the coming millennial reign of Christ, he was sure that God was working through Christian nations like the United

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States to bring about global harmony, prosperity, and goodwill. The only battles to be fought were spiritual, and these struggles for the souls of humankind would take place not between armies but in the pages of popular journals. “The great Armageddon of the nations is not to be fought with swords, but with steel pens,” he averred, “not with bullets, but with type; not with cannon, but with lightning perfecting presses.” As the United States military attacked Spanish troops in the Caribbean and Pacific islands, Talmage and his associates were forced to revise their predictions and wrestle with the implications of these unexpected events for their efforts to promote a unified evangelical fellowship.\(^{27}\)

In addition to disrupting Talmage’s optimistic assumptions about the course of world history, the war with Spain was also causing damaging divisions within the American evangelical community. From the beginning of the conflict, some applauded the United States government’s decision to intervene on behalf of Cubans fighting for their freedom while others condemned war as a “barbaric” relic of uncivilized societies that could only result in devastation and destruction. When the United States won rapid victories that left the nation in control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippine islands, discord among American evangelicals (and the broader public) intensified as critics of imperialism warned that retaining these territories violated both constitutional principles and biblical values, while proponents celebrated the acquisition of an empire as a sign of the nation’s divinely ordained calling to spread freedom, democracy, prosperity, and Christian civilization among oppressed, needy, and benighted people.\(^{28}\)

As these debates about the propriety of war and colonialism escalated over the course of 1898, Klopsch and Talmage struggled to mediate between interventionists and pacifists, imperialists and anti-expansionists. Rather than fully embracing or condemning any single stance, these evangelicals tried to make room within their imagined community for all opinions – in every case striving to show how their subscribers could remain in solidarity with one another and continue to work together toward the creation of a global fellowship of faith. From the outset of armed combat with Spain, for example, the Christian Herald made clear that the paper, in principle, continued to reject war as a terrible calamity. “War is organized atrocity,” Talmage declared in May of 1898. “It is the science of assassination. It is the convocation of all horrors.” But, he continued, “war is here, and it is time now to preach on its alleviations.” Since the United States was engaged in a battle with Spain, he explained, evangelicals needed to find ways to make the best of this awful

\(^{27}\) “A Righteous War,” CH, 4 May 1898, 392; and Talmage, “Two Thousandth Publication,” 144.

\(^{28}\) “War or Peace,” CH, 13 April 1898, 320.
situation. In his sermons and editorials, Talmage proposed several strategies for continuing to advance God’s kingdom in the midst of, or perhaps even through, the tragedy of war.  

First, he argued, even the staunchest evangelical pacifist could take comfort in the fact that conflict with Spain was not an act of aggression or aggrandizement, but rather a fight “forced upon us by considerations of humanity” and “inspired by mercy.” “We did not want the Hispano-American war,” Talmage insisted, and the United States government had done everything in its power to prevent an outbreak of hostilities. When Spain refused to stop mistreating the Cuban people, however, the United States had no choice but to accept armed conflict “as a last alternative.” Although “war is always to be deplored as a calamity,” he contended, “there are times in the history of nations when it would be a sin and a shame to hold aloof from quarrels, and when interference by force would be a righteous cause.” Christians could be confident that the situation in Cuba met the criteria of a just and necessary intervention on behalf of the afflicted. Like the Good Samaritan, the United States was coming to the aid of a suffering stranger; statesmen and soldiers were carrying out the Golden Rule. “It is quite true that Christianity is a religion of peace,” Talmage asserted, but in this case, “God has put into our hands a sword” to “vindicate and deliver those that are oppressed.” By obeying biblical principles of sympathy and self-sacrifice, the United States was fulfilling a divine mandate to extend the reign of Christ through “holy warfare.”

Once evangelicals could acknowledge that God was working through military means to bring about justice and righteousness, Talmage maintained, they would also be able to recognize other ways in which this war might prove beneficial for the expansion of Christ’s kingdom. Armed intervention was not only an instrument of saving Cubans from oppression, but also an opportunity to bring political and religious liberty to subjugated peoples in all of Spain’s colonies. “There can be no doubt that this Hispano-American war has already opened a golden-gated entrance for us into the Orient,” Talmage proclaimed. “War is God’s way of throwing those portals apart, and giving us what he intends to be our share in the enlightenment and enfranchisement of the whole world.” For centuries, the Spanish had denied political independence to their imperial possessions while also imposing a tyrannical ecclesiasticism through the Catholic Church, which thwarted the efforts of Protestant missionaries to evangelize or educate native

peoples in these regions, Talmage explained. As a result, the majority of the population in Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam remained “in heathen darkness,” “entirely ignorant,” impoverished, and incapable of self-rule. Peace-loving evangelicals, therefore, could embrace this war as a means “for the advancement of the sublime principle of liberty, which will yet encircle the earth,” and for the extension of good government, economic opportunities, education, and the true Gospel into these benighted territories.  

Talmage’s defense of the nation’s conflict with Spain also proved useful for justifying ongoing American intervention in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam in the months and years following the formal conclusion of the war. Although he admitted that determining whether to retain possession of Spain’s former colonies posed difficult questions for the United States, Talmage insisted that American evangelicals need not divide over the issue. “Fevered and angry discussion, in and out of Congress, is most inappropriate and bad,” he wrote as debates about American imperialism intensified in the spring of 1899. “Equipoise, faith, prayerfulness, are the moods we should all cultivate.” Whether or not the United States annexed the islands or granted them independence was ultimately irrelevant, he argued, as long as evangelicals could unite to undertake “a campaign of moral and religious expansion … on widest and grandest scale.” Surely American military forces had “opened up a way for a kind of expansion we all believe in,” he proclaimed. “The expansion of the knowledge and intellectual qualification of all those islandy[sic] regions is the desire of all intelligent Americans.” Even more important than promoting educational uplift, Talmage argued, was the task of spreading the gospel by sending missionaries, bibles, and pure literature (including newspapers like the Christian Herald) to these territories. Rather than wrangling over diplomatic questions, he advised, American evangelicals ought to focus on the prospects these islands presented for extending their faith into new regions. “Cuba and Puerto Rico and the Philippines are stepping stones for our American Christianity to cross over and take the round world for God,” he declared. “We need a new evangelical alliance organized for this one purpose.” Embracing this common mission would enable American evangelicals to advance Christ’s dominion on earth no matter what the outcome of the nation’s deliberations over imperialism. While the United States government argued about the political destiny of its new acquisitions, Talmage counseled, “let us join in a campaign of religious expansion – expansion of affection that can take all the world in.”

Emphasizing the evangelical dimensions of American expansionism enabled Talmage and his colleagues at the Christian Herald to place their newspaper at the forefront of this movement to embrace the populations of Spain’s former colonies as members of a growing global family knit together by bonds of mutual concern. The religious press, Talmage argued, was the perfect instrument for enabling American citizens to “become better acquainted with the character and possibilities” of the people “brought under our protection.” Through articles and images describing “scenes in our new colonial possessions,” the Christian Herald would make known the many needs and great potential of the inhabitants of these islands, encouraging readers to see these former strangers not just as imperial subjects but also as adopted family members or cherished friends. “These Puerto Ricans are our own brothers and sisters,” Talmage declared in an editorial urging subscribers to provide relief to island communities following a devastating hurricane in August of 1899. “They are now our own; we have adopted them, and to whom shall they turn in their direst need, if not to us?” Several months later, long-time contributor Margaret Sangster made a similar plea for the Filipinos. “Shall we not think of them as friends, these people in whom, by God’s providence, we have become so vitally interested in these last days?” she asked. “A few years ago, the Philippine Islands were to our eyes only a group on the map and we had no concern either of ever seeing them ourselves or sending our sons and brothers there to fight or dwell or labor.” But now that “war has cleared the way,” Sangster wrote, “schools and churches and missionaries and teachers may bring them the best fruits of American civilization” and, even more importantly, “a knowledge of Christ as their Savior.” To this end, the Christian Herald had commissioned a special edition of the Gospel of John printed in both English and Spanish so that the people of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines would be able to read about “Jesus Christ in their own language – a privilege which, under the rule of Catholic Spain – they had never enjoyed.” By contributing funds to this project, readers could help advance the knowledge of God and strengthen their connections with these new members of an expanding evangelical network.

Many of the Christian Herald’s subscribers participated enthusiastically in the newspaper’s campaign to incorporate the people of the United States’ recently acquired territories within their widening evangelical family. Some sent money to support the distribution of Gospel literature in the islands;

others contributed to educational projects and missionary crusades. Still others sought to strengthen the bonds of affiliation through commerce. Indeed the connections formed through economic interactions, Talmage acknowledged, might prove even more influential than those resulting from other kinds of engagement. As local populations began to experience the blessings of “Christian civilization” and “American ingenuity”—such as “machinery to sow and reap” and technologies to cultivate their natural resources, he predicted, they would be increasingly desirous of becoming part of the prosperous and progressive evangelical community. “The comfortable homes” of Christian converts among the islanders would serve as advertisements for the Gospel to those who resisted more conventional forms of missionary outreach. “The Puerto Rican and the Filipino will come out from his uncleansed, and low-roofed, and uninviting kennel, and say to his neighbor of beautiful household: ‘Why cannot I have things as you have them?’” Talmage declared. When these inquirers discovered that their friends attributed this newfound material prosperity to the Bible, he surmised, they too would be quick to embrace the faith that promised such “earthly alleviations.” The advancement of trade, the growth of free enterprise, and the expansion of a flourishing modern economy, from this perspective, were also ways of building up Christ’s kingdom around the globe.34

Although Talmage’s sanguine interpretations of American military and economic expansionism appealed to many of the Christian Herald’s constituents, some subscribers did raise questions about the ethics of this approach. Over the course of hostilities with Spain and the ensuing conflicts in the Philippines, a number of readers sent letters asking the newspaper’s editors to clarify how they could reconcile war and imperialism with the Gospel of peace and Christian liberty. “On what grounds are civilized and educated nations that quarrel and resort to killing, burning, and destroying justified, exalted, and applauded and upheld in so doing by Christian men and women when God says ‘thou shalt not kill’?” demanded Robert S. Scofield in August of 1898. Six months later, a reader wondered how the Christian Herald could support ongoing intervention in the Philippines as a missionary strategy:

Do you think God ever intended to drive men into his kingdom? Do you not think that if we would give them freedom, set before them a Christian example, and give them a helping hand, the influence we would exert would go far more toward bringing them out of heathenism than if we were to annex them against their will, riveting in their minds hatred for Christians? A taste of empire seems to lead to the fatal step of aggrandizement.

In their replies to these and similar enquiries, the newspaper’s editorial team did their best to allay concerns by maintaining a middle ground between strict pacifism and outright imperialism, and by keeping an optimistic outlook about the federal government’s intentions to grant the islands independence in due course. While this strategy seems to have satisfied many potential detractors, some critics remained staunch in their resistance to any hint of compromise between evangelicalism and empire.\(^{35}\)

One of the most vocal opponents of American imperialism was, like Talmage, a pastor made famous through his contributions to the popular press. In 1896, Congregationalist minister Charles M. Sheldon published a serial story in the Chicago Advance that became a literary sensation. *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* was reprinted many times in novel form and made Sheldon a household name throughout the United States within several years. At the height of the Philippine War and the *Christian Herald*’s campaign to reconcile American expansionism with the evangelical mission of extending God’s kingdom around the globe, Sheldon determined to go public with his criticisms of United States foreign policy and its effects on the Christian community both at home and abroad. The forum he chose for communicating his message was the popular newspaper. Like Talmage and his associates, Sheldon recognized “the potency of the public press to make or mar our civilization.” In March of 1900, with the backing of a generous donor, Sheldon took over as editor of the *Topeka Daily Capital* in his home state of Kansas to conduct a one-week experiment in religious journalism. Recognizing that evangelical weeklies like the *Christian Herald* served as “one of the greatest moral levers” for contemporary society, Sheldon hoped that he could show that a Christian daily newspaper would have immeasurably more “lifting power.”\(^{36}\)

In contrast to the *Christian Herald*, however, Sheldon’s publication would make no concessions to American military and economic intervention in Spain’s former colonies. The very first issue contained a front-page article decrying the “war spirit” that was plaguing the United States like a dreadful disease, an editorial declaring “abhorrence of war as it is being waged today in the Philippines and everywhere else,” an exposé about alcohol abuse and immoral behavior among American troops, and extracts from an address by


Supreme Court Justice David Brewer openly criticizing imperialism. Rather than interpreting the acquisition of the Philippines and other colonial territories as a God-given opportunity to promote material prosperity, political liberty, and true Christianity among a destitute, benighted, and morally degraded population, the articles in Sheldon’s newspaper argued that imperialism violated the principles of equality, self-determination, and religious freedom enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. Subsequent installments of Sheldon’s daily went on to criticize the notion that the United States was particularly suited to “vindicate and deliver those that are oppressed.” The government’s disgraceful treatment of Indian tribes inspired little confidence in the nation’s ability to respect the rights of “dependent races.” Nor should American citizens assume that “all the influences going out from this Christian nation” would be “purifying, Christian, elevating.” If history was any guide, the United States was likely to send “more hogheads of rum than missionaries, more gallons of whisky than Bibles,” to its colonial possessions. Indeed, the “civilization” that Americans were exporting through “the exercise of brute force” in these regions, Sheldon charged, was not authentic Christianity but “barbarism.” The war in the Philippines, in his view, was not a mission of liberation to free a suffering and subjugated people from domination, but a “deplorable” act of aggression fueled by “commercialism and militarism.” To disguise imperialism as a form of mission, philanthropy, or evangelical fellowship “under the cloak of patriotism” was to betray American ideals and abandon the most basic teachings of Christ, the Prince of Peace.

At a time when many politicians and publicists were promoting American expansionism as a sacred responsibility, Sheldon’s was a relatively lonely voice crying out in the wilderness. Although some readers of the Christian Herald continued to express concerns about the newspaper’s support for American foreign policy, most seem to have shared the editors’ convictions that the United States conducted its colonial regimes “with the wisdom and magnanimity that should characterize an enlightened Christian nation, seeking not its own aggrandizement, but the moral and material elevation of mankind.” Indeed, the Christian Herald’s subscriptions surged during the height of the conflict with Spain and the Philippines, rising approximately 40 percent.

from 1897 to 1899. Although circulation decreased somewhat after the official close of the Philippine War (and Talmage’s death) in 1902, the paper retained a significant portion (approximately 13 percent) of the new subscribers added during these crucial years of American imperialism. Sheldon’s paper, by contrast, failed to sustain any lasting influence. After the weekly experiment was over, he decided to return to the pastorate rather than continue to pursue a career in journalism.38

Although Sheldon’s stint as the editor of a popular religious periodical was short-lived and seemingly inconsequential for shaping views of expansionism among the broader evangelical public, his efforts to highlight the incompatibilities between American empire and the kingdom of God exposed the limits of the Christian Herald’s more conciliatory approach. While Talmage and his associates tried to paper over theological disagreements about the probity of military, economic, and cultural imperialism in an effort to sustain evangelical solidarity, Sheldon insisted that a truly Christian publication could not ignore the troubling implications of American policies in the Philippines for the creation of a global fellowship of faith. By disregarding – or spiritualizing – the violent tactics, consumerist assumptions, and racial prejudices that fueled the United States’ actions during and after the Spanish–American War, he indicated, evangelical newspapers like the Christian Herald promoted a distorted image of Christian community premised upon profane presumptions that contradicted biblical values of peace, spiritual simplicity, and equality.

Over the course of the twentieth century, tensions over the proper relationship between the enlargement of United States empire and the extension of God’s kingdom to the ends of the earth continued to exercise American evangelicals. As the emergence of new media and communications technologies such as radio, television, and the Internet offered expanding opportunities for evangelicals to broadcast their message to an increasingly diverse and dispersed population, debates about how to cultivate solidarity and reciprocity among a growing worldwide family of believers within the context of the rising status of the United States as a superpower proliferated. Some evangelicals followed in the footsteps of critics like Sheldon – harnessing the popular press, then the airwaves, and finally cyberspace, to expose the ungodly motivations that fueled imperialist policies and undermined efforts to establish a truly universal Christian fellowship. Many more took Talmage’s tack – deploying and consuming religious media that equated the expansion of the United States with the progress of Christ’s earthly reign and promoted a global faith

shaped in the image of American evangelicalism. Exploring how earlier generations employed popular communication techniques as they strove to spread the gospel around the world, create a cohesive kinship among diverse constituents, and wrestle with the spiritual implications of political and economic empire, exposes the complex, enduring, and ongoing entanglement of American nationalism and the global history of evangelicalism.

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