

Church in the Wild: Evangelicals in Antebellum America

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Review

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In the early nineteenth century, more Americans than ever before were praying in the woods. With fallen leaves crunching beneath their bended knees, these men and women raised their voices to heaven hoping for divine communication. And, according to their reports, that is precisely what they received. Religious periodicals of the era are replete with narratives of supernatural visions in American forests, narratives that typically ended with the seekers discovering Christian conversion and membership in an Evangelical Christian church.

Scholars have written extensively about this historic development in American religious culture. In *Church in the Wild*, Brett Malcolm Grainger builds upon that body of scholarship and offers a fresh view of the ways that praying in the woods altered evangelical Christianity in the United States and Americans' understandings of the natural world. "Evangelicals participated in the most popular movement of nature spiritualism in nineteenth-century America," Grainger argues, "a movement based upon the conviction that the natural world was enlivened by Christ, the alpha and omega of all created things" (p. 3).

While some evangelicals initially met outdoors as a pragmatic necessity, Grainger explains that many preachers came to view "field preaching" as a spiritual necessity. There was biblical precedent for worship outside of chapels and evangelical preachers noted that it was in nature that the lessons of the scriptures made the most profound impressions on men and women. Furthermore, those who sought solitude in the woods to pray easily saw signs of God's presence. "Every natural event," Grainger writes, "could be interpreted as a sign of Providence" (p. 32). Be it a dramatic and sudden thunderstorm disrupting a moment of spiritual meditation or the peaceful reflection of natural beauty—branches of trees pointing toward heaven, for instance—

nineteenth-century evangelicals increasingly looked to the natural world for evidence of God's existence and will.

However, this development raised doctrinal tension in the country's religious culture. For centuries Protestant Christians had criticized Catholics for "idolatry," warning of the spiritual pitfalls of too much reverence for icons and relics. This included the natural world. To some Protestants, "Camp meetings were idolatrous innovations that corrupted rather than restored the primitive simplicity of worship described in the Bible." Conversion in the woods, Grainger explains, led many evangelicals to look for "a localized sacred," to see the field or grove in which a conversion experience occurred as a sacred place rather than to focus on "God's universal presence in creation" (p. 21). Grainger argues that in justifying their reverence for nature, evangelicals discovered a tolerable idolatry.

Grainger connects the privileged place of nature in the evangelical worldview to other social developments, including the exploration of metaphysics. However, one especially interesting part of the book's analysis focuses on how, in many instances, the penchant of nineteenth-century evangelicals to seek God in nature appears to have influenced their attraction to natural healing. Grainger explains that hydrotherapy was particularly popular among evangelicals and he links their increasingly spiritual view of nature with their belief in the medicinal properties of mineral springs and water-cure therapies. "Thinking of water cure as a form of spiritual practice," Grainger writes, "helps us to see how antebellum evangelicals viewed the healing power of nature as a mark of divine benevolence and a universal gift to creation. For the regenerate, the pursuit of bodily health and healing was a powerful analogue to spiritual conversion and an expression of the 'new life' in Christ that sought an ever-deepening share of scriptural holiness and purity" (p. 135). Accordingly, evangelicals embraced hydrotherapy just as spa culture emerged in the United States, viewing the practice as congruent with their spiritual world view that was more closely connected to the natural world than it had been in past generations.

Church in the Wild is well-written and provocative. It is essential reading for scholars interested in American religious history as well as those interested in the history of American romanticism and related movements associated with nature, such as Transcendentalism. In fact, the greatest strength of Grainger's work might be the way that he blends these fields of study. Through the lens Grainger provides, we see a broader, more complex history of Americans

seeking answers to existential questions in the wild. As Grainger puts it, “Unlike the followers of Emerson and Thoreau, revivalists went to the woods not to free themselves from orthodox patterns of belief and practice but rather to renew them” (p. 8).

Spencer W. McBride is a historian and documentary editor at the Joseph Smith Papers and the author of Pulpit and Nation: Clergymen and the Politics of Revolutionary America. He is currently writing a book on Joseph Smith’s presidential campaign and editing a documentary history of New York’s Burned-over District.