



Evangelist Mills - A Study in Contrasts

More than 1200 people edged their way into the Presbyterian Church on Thursday evening, March 17, 1891, to hear the Rev. Benjamin Fay Mills preach his farewell sermon. Local revival meetings were an annual event of interest chiefly to church-goers in that day; but B. Fay Mills was no ordinary revivalist. He was an actor with the personal magnetism and eloquence of an Edwin Booth. Churchmen referred to him as the successor of Moody. He drew people into the church from the high-ways and by-ways. If they came to scoff, as perhaps some of them did, they remained to pray. All eyes were fixed upon him when he stepped forward to the edge of the platform and stretched out his hand. "This," said he, "is the moment of decision! Come, sinner, come! There is yet time for you to be saved." And as the choir sang softly "While We Are Praying For You, Come, Sinner, Come," the penitent walked slowly down the aisle and knelt before the altar."

After the service, a large crowd accompanied the evangelist to the station, and sang hymns while waiting for the express to Philadelphia, where he was scheduled to preach for a week. "As the train rolled in,

they all joined in singing the Doxology, and with this old hymn ringing in his ears, Rev. B. Fay Mills stepped aboard and was whirled on his way."

During his three days in Westfield, he had preached eight times—twice at over-flow meetings—to over 7000 people. The total population of the township, including Mountainside and part of Garwood, in that year, was about 3000. . . .

A few years after his visit here, when at the height of his fame, Rev. B. Fay Mills withdrew from evangelistic work to become the pastor of a Unitarian Church in Boston and preach to a congregation of Emersonians. Here is a study in contrasts—not merely a change in form but in fundamental belief—a seeming paradox. Mills, the evangelist, appealed to the emotions, "held his audiences spellbound" by his dramatical recitals of the miracles wrought by salvation through repentance; Mills, the settled preacher, appealed to the reason, attracted large congregations by the force and clarity of his thinking. He preached of Christ, the perfect exemplar of righteousness, the unattainable ideal.