

D. L. MOODY

## GRUFF GRACE AND GODLY GROWTH

*Gwilym Pryce*

Dwight Lyman Moody did not fit the mould of a nineteenth century Christian leader. He was brash, boisterous, outspoken, quick tempered and an incorrigible practical joker. He loathed long pious prayers and was utterly disrespectful of Victorian etiquette. Born the son of an impoverished farmer in Massachusetts, Moody showed little sign of greatness. How did God do so much with so little, and what spiritual fertiliser caused such massive growth in faith and stature?

His Christian life began in the back of his uncle's shoe shop in 1855, following an impromptu visit from a local minister. From the outset Moody was a zealot. He threw the full weight of his reckless energy into the local Sunday School, and his boyish winsomeness drew the roughest children from the city streets.

Intimidated by the length and polish of contemporary sermons, Moody thought he would never speak in public, but when teachers were unavailable at these small youth meetings, he was obliged to contribute, and gradually learned to recount simple Bible stories. But he would only preach to children, and for many years "would start trembling and go tongue-tied" if adults entered.

A turning point came when Moody heard evangelist Henry Varley remark, "the world has yet to see what God will do through a man fully consecrated to Him". The words burned in Moody for weeks: "Varley said 'a man', any man.... he didn't say he had to be educated, or brilliant or anything else. Just a MAN. Well by the Spirit in me, I'll be that man."

A year later Moody was preaching in cities across England and Scotland. Fruit of his submission to God was evident. In contrast to the thundering oratory of contemporary preachers, Moody spoke "to thirteen thousand as to thirteen". The British loved him.

Dockers and duchesses, miners and ministers all came the way of the Cross. Moody's informality blew away the cobwebs of Victorian Christianity and he became known as the man who "put one hand on Britain and the other on America and lifted them both nearer to God".

Perhaps the profoundest irony of Moody's life was the impact of his ministry to intellectuals. Reluctantly agreeing to speak to a disorderly gathering of 1,700 Cambridge undergraduates, Moody preached on the appropriate theme of "Daniel in the lions' den". His monosyllabic "Dan'l" provoked noisy hilarity. "If uneducated men WILL come to teach, ... they deserve to be snubbed", scoffed student Gerald Lander. Three nights later, Moody preached again, inviting those who wanted Christ to ascend the clattering iron staircase to the inquiry room. An awful silence came over the meeting. One by one, outstanding intellectuals and athletes climbed the staircase to salvation. These unlikely converts formed the Student Volunteer Movement, taking the Gospel to the furthest reaches of the globe. Among them was Lander, who went on to pioneer churches throughout South China.

Moody's life is an inspiration to those of us who disqualify ourselves for our shortcomings. He demonstrated that our greatest weakness can be our greatest strength. God will often do more with what we are NOT, than with what we are; with what we LACK than with what we have acquired. It was because Moody was NOT an educated Englishman that he reached the educated English. Because he lacked any denominational status, denominations were united under his preaching. His common failings enabled him to bring redemption and hope to the failed lives of common men.

The fertiliser that fuelled Moody's growth had simple ingredients: zeal, integrity and submission. If we have these in abundance, God will do the rest.

*(All quotes are taken from Pollock, J. (1995) "Moody: A Biography", Christian Focus Publications, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan. An earlier version of this article was published in Power for Living magazine in 1997.)*