The Legacy of Leslie E. Maxwell

W. Harold Fuller

Though he himself never served as a missionary, Leslie E. Maxwell (1895–1984), cofounder of Prairie Bible Institute (PBI) in Three Hills, Alberta, left a legacy that has had a major impact on the world Christian mission. James Hudson Taylor III told this author that Maxwell’s ministry was felt not only in Canada but also around the world, including inland China. Bible conference speaker Stephen F. Olford, himself the son of missionaries, says that Maxwell’s mentoring produced a distinctive type of missionary.

In the pool halls of his youth, Maxwell’s companions would have scoffed at the idea that this feckless youth would ever become a preacher and a world missions leader. Born to a farmer in Salina, Kansas, the eldest of nine children, Maxwell as a young man was terrified of public speaking and spent more time playing pool than sitting in church. Religion was not part of his family life, though a godly grandfather would read from the Bible during the visits of his grandchildren. Years later, Maxwell characterized his youth as playing ball, playing pool, and playing the fool.

He and his family experienced a tragic episode when a younger brother, Ernest, was crushed to death under the wheel of a grain wagon. But what drove Leslie, in his late teens, to repentance and faith was the hellfire preaching of a Methodist evangelist and a Presbyterian minister’s invitation to “come to Christ.” Maxwell made his personal transaction with the Savior and turned full circle. He stayed up most of that night reading the Bible, and the next day he left his poolroom companions.

The young convert began to realize the tenacity of a praying aunt, Christina. Her prayers had preceded his conversion and now stayed with him through his early Christian growth. When he left for France to serve with the U.S. Army during World War I, she gave him a Bible motto: “The blood of Jesus Christ saves us from sin.” Shortly after his discharge from the army, his father died, leaving him responsible for the support of his widowed mother and five siblings. Aunt Christina helped by securing a clerical job for Leslie at a bank in nearby Kansas City.

The job in the city also enabled him to study at the newly opened Midland Bible Institute in Kansas City. The principal of the school was William C. Stevens, former head of Nyack College, founded by A. B. Simpson of the Christian and Missionary Alliance. In Maxwell’s last year at the school, a plea came to Stevens from a farmer, Fergus Kirk, in the remote village of Three Hills, Alberta. Kirk’s sister had taken one of Nyack’s Bible correspondence courses developed by Stevens, and Kirk had used the material to teach a Bible class. Feeling the time had come to employ a Bible teacher, he inquired whether Stevens knew of a student who could come to Three Hills for a couple of years to teach the class.

And so it was that in 1922 Maxwell found himself in the grain-elevator town of Three Hills in southern Alberta. After a two-year stint, the young Kansen stayed on. Although neither Maxwell nor Kirk intended to start a full-blown Bible school, the class of eight students in fact became the nucleus of Alberta’s first continuing Bible institute. Within twenty-five years it had become one of North America’s largest.

In spite of Maxwell’s early fear of public speaking, his personal gifts of wit and drama, coupled with spiritual insight, transformed classes into unforgettable encounters with the Scriptures. “He was the most significant teacher I ever had,” says Elisabeth Elliott, noted author and conference speaker. “A riveting speaker, a man of deep compassion, side-splitting humor, and an unwavering determination to follow his God!”

Soon in demand as a conference speaker, Maxwell traversed the continent and later the globe. He was a guest speaker at the first student mission conference sponsored by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, held in Toronto in 1946. As word of this spartan school and its effervescent leader spread, students came from all parts of North America and, increasingly, from other continents. The largest enrollment followed World War II, when servicemen and servicewomen came with the vision of taking the Gospel to areas of the world where they had seen great physical and spiritual need. The school with the motto “Training disciplined soldiers for Christ” had its own appeal to these war veterans. As the campus grew, Maclean’s, Canada’s weekly newsmagazine, called it “Miracle on the Prairies” in a main feature.

**Missons, the Church’s First Business**

“Christians must become convinced and convinced that missions is the first business of the church,” Maxwell frequently declared. He saw missions in the entire Bible, beginning with the Abrahamic covenant and Israel’s role as a witness to the nations. This emphasis is followed in the Gospels by the risen Lord’s Great Commission, which is then enacted by the apostles through their witness, with the ultimate fruit—“a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues”—unveiled in the Book of Revelation.

Stephens, under whom Maxwell studied at Midland, strongly believed that the return of Christ depended upon global evangelization. PBI emphasized the imminent return of Christ, but above all else the school saw world evangelization as a matter of obedience and fulfillment of God’s purpose for the church. All peoples must have the opportunity to accept Jesus as Lord before he returns to judge the earth.

Always in financial straits in the early years, the school and its supporters may have seemed an unlikely base for giving to missions, but they practiced what they preached. At the first PBI missionary conference, in 1923, guests—mostly struggling farmers—pledged $2,000 for missions. Within four years, friends of the school channeled some $10,000 (many times that in today’s currency) to foreign missions. Moreover, by 1930 three of the faculty’s five members left to help found and staff a Bible school and mission in the Caribbean.

As PBI graduates shared the Gospel in other lands, the churches they helped establish also gave priority to missions. Within two years of first hearing the Gospel, converts from a warring tribe in Nigeria took up an offering to send an evangelist into neighboring Dahomey (now Benin). Within six years of organizing, the Evangelical Churches of West Africa, an indigenous Nigerian denomination, launched its own mission society, the Evangelical Missionary Society, with a PBI graduate as a

W. Harold Fuller, a graduate of Prairie Bible Institute, entered missionary journalism with SIM in 1951, becoming editor of West Africa’s largest circulation monthly. The most recent of his eleven books is Maxwell’s Passion and Power (2002).
cofounder. In 2002 the Alumni Association stated that alumni—numbering 17,000 with the majority serving in missions or churches—were working in 114 nations.

However, this missions-minded leader did not limit himself to raising funds and training recruits. From his own missionary travels he developed a progressive missiology. Discussing the urgency of missions in the face of anti-Christian forces gaining strength, Maxwell wrote: "What then is the chief need of this eleventh hour in missionary history? It seems to me that the real problem is the mode of procedure to establish in each country a self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating group of indigenous churches. The only adequate answer to this acute problem is to train the greatest possible number of nationals in the shortest possible time."

Lifestyle: Sacrificial and Resourceful

Responding to the missionary calling required sacrifice. In his first year at Three Hills, Maxwell realized that the local farmers could not support him financially. Adopting a simple lifestyle, he boarded with farmers during his first three years in Three Hills. After he and Pearl Plummer married in 1925, the newlyweds lived in the student dormitory. When they did find a house, it was so rustic Pearl had to wear snow-boots in the house during the winter, and she would perch her infants on the kitchen table to keep them warm. Members of the staff and the faculty received campus housing, basic farm produce, and volunteer medical care; they divided equally any gifts that were designated for staff.

Sacrificial living was embraced by the school’s early supporters and staff alike. To help finance early construction, Fergus Kirk at various times sold his car, some of his farmland, and lumber he had bought to build a respectable house. As a boy Kirk had seen his parents—and their children—forgo Christmas presents and butter for two years so the family could fulfill a pledge offering in faith that God would somehow help them find the money. As the school grew, the buildings themselves were stark reminders of a simple lifestyle—basic tarpaper and clapboard "boxes" with no frills. Going into debt, however, was out of the question. If there was no money for a keg of nails, the volunteer builders-cum-farmers halted operations until money came in.

This lifestyle was in accord with the struggles of prairie farmers. Occasionally there were good years, but whenever drought blew away the fertile topsoil, the settlers had to move on to find virgin land. When the American stock market collapsed in 1929, farmers on the Canadian prairies felt the repercussions. The price of wheat, Alberta’s staple export, collapsed. Hunger and unemployment hit many communities. But because the little school in Three Hills owed nothing, it carried on. Farmers trucked in loads of potatoes and sides of beef. Students handled daily maintenance assignments. Decades later, when some semi-naries and Bible schools faced huge debts because of changing demographics and economics, PBI was able to continue its ministry unabated, though it did have to tighten its belt.

PBI graduates took this simple lifestyle and no-debt policy overseas. From subtle love of softening things,
From easy choices, weakenings,

From all that dims thy Calvary,
O Lamb of God, deliver me.

At PBI, Carmichael’s spirituality fit in with the rustic campus, the strict social regulations, and the challenge to "endure hardship as a soldier of Christ." Olford notes, "I have met graduates from this school all over the world. They are usually known for two distinctive Christian qualities—spirituality and stickability."
Commitment, simple lifestyle, and discipline were the outward expressions of Maxwell’s core message expressed in his book Born Crucified. This work stressed that every follower of Christ is spiritually reborn only as he or she accepts Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross. By identifying with Christ, every believer is “born crucified.” That identification extends to Christ’s resurrection. In dying to sin, disciples are made “alive unto God.” That meant taking up one’s cross daily and following Jesus into new life. Whenever believers live for themselves, they deny Christ in those areas of their life. They have not yet picked up their cross and denied themselves. Maxwell saw that condition as an utter contradiction of the believer’s position of being “born crucified.”

Missionary statesman Ian M. Hay, general director emeritus of the Sudan Interior Mission (now SIM, or Serving in Mission), sees Maxwell’s born-crucified message as the major reason for the missionary effectiveness of PBI graduates. With special reference to those facing the strains of serving in cross-cultural contexts, Olford observes, “Without the moment-by-moment application of the Cross to the self-life, relationships are strained and resentments are stirred to explosive proportions. This in turn, can lead to alarming defections from the mission field.”

James Hudson Taylor III comments, “The mark of the people [Maxwell] mentored was their commitment to Christ, love for the Word, heart for the world, and servant spirit.”

Finding Theological Balance

Some misunderstood Maxwell’s strong emphasis on the crucified life, hearing only the “dying-to-self” refrain and not listening long enough to hear the balancing principle of “rising-to-life.” Hyper-Calvinist camps accused PBI graduates of being unsure of their eternal security, and some Holiness camps accused them of being too Calvinistic.

Maxwell’s theology reflected a rich background of Presbyterian ancestry, Methodist evangelism and emphasis on the work of the Spirit, and Baptist doctrine. He had no doubt about God’s sovereignty, but he also understood the role of human will. Early in his ministry he had read The Twofoldness of Divine Truth, a book that bridged the opposing poles of hyper-Calvinism and Holiness. The author avowed that the Scriptures sometimes state different positions in order to display the full truth and prevent a one-sided interpretation. In his ministry Maxwell melded the best from both theological camps, presenting a balanced, nonsectarian stand in the midst of strong sectarian factionalism on the Canadian prairies. His approach to the tension between law and grace, he confessed, did not follow the beaten track.

This openness to seeing value in differing views on secondary issues equipped PBI graduates for global missions. The author avowed that the Scriptures sometimes state different positions in order to display the full truth and prevent a one-sided interpretation. In his ministry Maxwell melded the best from both theological camps, presenting a balanced, nonsectarian stand in the midst of strong sectarian factionalism on the Canadian prairies. His approach to the tension between law and grace, he confessed, did not follow the beaten track.

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signed to send students searching through passages and cross-references in order to develop their own exegesis, which they were expected to defend in class by appeal to Scripture.

The system attracted a wide range of students. One was a quiet-spoken engineering graduate, Ralph Winter, who spent a semester at PBI before taking postgraduate studies in anthropology and linguistics at Cornell University. “I’d heard of the school’s inductive system,” he explained to the author, “and wanted to see firsthand how it worked.” Winter went on to serve as a missionary in Central America. He eventually helped initiate Theological Education by Extension and programmed instruction, both becoming valuable systems in Bible teaching programs worldwide.26 He employed a similar question-and-answer method in his widely used missions course, Perspectives on the World Christian Movement.

The inductive method put into students’ hands a valuable tool they would use long after graduation, a tool that lent itself to adaptation in other languages and, according to Goertz, prepared missionaries for isolated ministry.29 Thus, in new Christian communities overseas no less than in the missionaries’ sending countries, the Bible was central in study and teaching. It was especially revolutionary in cultures that traditionally taught by rote learning. Inductive learning helped develop indigenous leadership.

“Many Prairie graduates have been involved in Bible school teaching, using the inductive method they learned in Three Hills,” states George M. Foxall, a member of the International Council of Evangelical Theological Education. “And that made a great impact on church growth. Once Bible schools (most of them vernacular) were established, graduates aided the rapid growth of churches.”30

Gus Kayser, a 1945 PBI graduate who in 1949 went to Ethiopia with his wife, Lois, is one example. In the Kambatta village of Durami they used an inductive Bible study method, translating study questions into Amharic, the country’s lingua franca. This material was recycled and contextualized for more than twenty other Kambatta district schools. According to Paul and Lila Balisky, “Dozens of Kayser’s students became strong leaders in the national church.”31

The inductive material was further adapted and updated by other missionaries and became a key factor in the survival of these churches during Ethiopia’s Marxist regime (1974–89). During this period of intense persecution, the churches went underground but were able to continue teaching in secret. Instead of dwindling, evangelical churches actually increased numerically.

Complementing the inductive method used in study was Maxwell’s declarative preaching style. He taught and preached for results in the lives of students. He declared the scriptural message, seeking to follow the example of the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 2:1). Graduates went into church pulpits and missionary service with the same passion to apply the Scriptures to the lives of their hearers. It was part of Maxwell’s legacy, taken around the world.

Prairie Populism: Sociopolitical Influence

Perhaps Maxwell’s most surprising legacy was one he would never have intended—the impact of his message on the political landscape of the prairie provinces. Goertz, in his study of the social and religious interaction in Alberta between 1925 and 1938, finds that Maxwell led the religious consensus on the Canadian prairies at the time.32 Although a politician-preacher named William Aberhart has often been seen as the main figure in what became “the Bible belt” of southern Alberta, Goertz documents the fact that Maxwell was the principal arbiter of the Bible belt and the primary organizer and theologian of the religious revival of the 1930s. As Goertz points out, this was an era of fragmenting sects and emphasis on the social aspects of the Gospel.33 Maxwell stayed clear of both minefields. Although Maxwell and Kirk had Presbyterian backgrounds, they kept the Three Hills school nonsectarian, exemplifying a kind of evangelical ecumenicity based on spiritual unity. Also, concerned though he was about the hardships of the Great Depression, Maxwell protected the institution from political entanglements.

As some denominational leaders emphasized political solutions in place of spiritual regeneration, Maxwell’s unwavering biblical teaching resonated with a large segment of the population. Through his school, radio broadcasts, and frequent visitation all across the prairies, he widened his “parish” and influenced the formation of a prairie populism still evident today.34

Maxwell’s Family: Living Out the Legacy

Leslie and Pearl had five girls and two boys—“our five loaves and two fish,” Maxwell often called them. Leslie’s legacy played out in the family, as all seven children took up some form of Christian service, serving in missions or churches in Africa, Japan, Philippines, South America, and North America. But the children’s personal pilgrimage did not always follow the parents’ expectations. Living in the “goldfish bowl” of campus life, the children faced pressures felt by children of public figures. The first five heeded the strict but loving discipline of their parents, but the latter two, Paul and Miriam, chafed under the family’s regimen and also the expectations of faculty and other students. They seemed determined to show they could live their own lives.

In Paul and Miriam’s childhood years, the campus had grown substantially, and the demands on father Leslie’s time had greatly increased. While the older children were young, he

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had faithfully set aside Saturday mornings to be with them. He failed to follow this pattern with the two youngest, though, for which he later blamed himself. As Paul and Miriam persisted in rebelliousness, their parents did much soul-searching. “Oh God, what can we do!” Pearl exclaimed in despair. “Trust me with joy,” the reply seemed to come from God.35 And she did find joy as Paul, after returning to his spiritual heritage, followed in his father’s footsteps, ultimately becoming president of the school.

Because of constant campus pressures, Miriam, an exceptionally gifted child, resented being labeled a Maxwell. “We always knew our parents loved us,” she said, “but when I married and changed my last name, it was such a relief!”36 However, as she and her husband served in churches and personal witness, she too came to value her heritage.

Assessing Maxwell’s Influence

Today on its Three Hills campus, now grown to 130 acres, PBI provides elementary and secondary education, plus schools of Bible, fine arts, and aviation, as well as the Maxwell Intercultural Centre, which offers an M.A. in Intercultural Studies. PBI’s
distance education program links several hundred off-campus students and students in cooperating schools.

“When historians attempt to assess and understand the special character of Canadian prairie Christianity in the mid-twentieth century, they will have to account for the influence of L. E. Maxwell,” writes Maxine Hancock, author, broadcaster, and Regent College (Vancouver, B.C.) professor.37 “God has used Prairie not only around the world but also in home missions, establishing churches,” states PBI chancellor emeritus Ted S. Rendall, citing the role of PBI graduates serving within the Northern Canada Evangelical Mission, the Canadian Sunday School Mission, and Village Missions, among others.38 Canadian church historian John Stackhouse, Jr., in a 1993 publication, declared Maxwell and his Bible institute one of the major influences on Canadian evangelicals over the past century.39

Brian C. Stiller, president of Tyndale College and Seminary, Toronto, has well summarized Maxwell’s legacy: “Our country’s history is marked by risk-taking visionaries who see in their waking hours what most dare not dream in the night. L. E. Maxwell was one of those people. He changed the course of our nation’s church history, and heaven will forever rejoice in his sojourn of faith.”40

Notes

4. After the initial conference in Toronto, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship has held its mission conferences on the Urbana campus of the University of Illinois, generally every three years. Current “Urbanas” attract up to 20,000 students.
7. West Indies Mission was cofounded by Cuban Presbyterian minister B. G. Lavastida and Prairie faculty member Elmer V. Thompson.
8. As a result of incomplete record keeping in the early years of the school, statistics about graduates are necessarily approximate. As Maxwell explained to researcher Aaron Goertz, “In the early years, we were so sure that Christ would return right then, we didn’t think it worth keeping records” (of graduates and their places of ministry). “We possessed only three file cabinets. When the third got full, we threw out the contents of the first and started over again.” See Donald Aaron Goertz, “The Development of a Bible Belt: The Socio-Religious Interaction in Alberta Between 1925 and 1938” (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Alberta, 1976), p. 97; further details in interview with the author.
12. Maxwell’s bookshelves contained many of Carmichael’s thirty books (which included 560 poems), published by Dohnavur Fellowship, London.
15. In spite of this emphasis, Maxwell had no illusions that either the PBI staff or its graduates possessed some kind of superspiritual immunity to failure. With typical frankness, he would often observe, “PBI can so stand for ‘Pretty Bad Inside!’”
16. Fuller, Maxwell’s Passion, p. 68.
17. Olford, “Foreword,” in Fuller, Maxwell’s Passion, p. x.
21. Goertz, “Development of a Bible Belt.” Dogmatic views on the timing of the return of Christ underwent a similar process, as students learned the pros and cons of premillennial, postmillennial, and amillennial positions. “When we served in China, many missionaries thought the Rapture would take place before the Tribulation,” C. T. Paulson, missions professor at Prairie, stated in a class attended by the author at the end of the 1940s. “But as Maoist atrocities increased and we were expelled from China, some weren’t so sure!”
23. Maxwell attributed this idea to James M. Gray (1851–1935), Episcopal minister, scholar, and author, who served as president of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago from 1904 to 1934.
25. Maxwell, Women in Ministry, pp. 45, 105, passim. In support of his views on women in Christian leadership roles, Maxwell appealed to respected evangelical exegetes of earlier decades, such as A. J. Gordon and A. T. Pierson, as well as the example of J. Hudson Taylor of the China Inland Mission, a pioneer in recognizing women as missionaries in their own right. See Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission: The Growth of a Work of God, 13th impression (London: China Inland Mission, 1949), pp. 128, 294, 398.
27. This search-question approach, a form of inductive Bible study, was apparently employed by William. C. Stevens at Nyack, even before he founded Midland Bible Institute. It may have been influenced by the system of inductive Bible study used extensively at Biblical Seminary in New York, founded by John R. Mott’s brother-in-law William White.
33. Ibid., p. 116.
34. Ibid., pp. 113, 114.
35. Callaway, Legacy, p. 128.
36. Miriam Maxwell Carlson to the author, personal communication; see Fuller, Maxwell’s Passion, p. 278.
37. Maxine Hancock to author, October 1, 2001.
38. Fuller, Maxwell’s Passion, pp. 68–69.
40. Brian C. Stiller, quoted in Fuller, Maxwell’s Passion, p. i. Stiller was raised in the prairie province of Saskatchewan and was president of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada for twelve years.
**Selected Bibliography**

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<td>1945</td>
<td><em>Born Crucified</em></td>
<td>Chicago: Moody Press.</td>
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<td>1951</td>
<td><em>Crowded to Christ</em></td>
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