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20th Century American Conservative Evangelical Christianity and Its Understanding of Faith

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*20th Century American Conservative Evangelical Christianity
and Its Understanding of Faith*

Thesis submitted to the
Theology Department for the
Master of Arts Degree in Theology

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M.A. in Theology
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Table of Contents

<i>Introduction: My experience of conservative evangelical Christianity and the questions is raised</i>	1
Chapter 1: The Historical Roots of American Christian Fundamentalism	6
a. American Christianity from Independence until the end of the 19 th century	6
b. The early 20 th century and the hardening of lines	13
c. The development of fundamentalism in 20 th century American Christianity	26
d. Conclusion	39
Chapter 2: Four Authors and their six critiques of Fundamentalism	43
a. Mark Noll	43
b. James Barr	49
c. Eugene LaVerdiere	55
d. Thomas O'Meara	58
e. Summary and Synthesis: Four authors and six critiques of Fundamentalism	61
<i>Concluding Reflection: My synthesis of the six critiques and a question addressed both to conservative evangelicals and to myself</i>	65
Bibliography	75

Introduction: My experience of conservative evangelical Christianity and the questions is raised

This thesis emerges from my experience with conservative evangelical Christianity. I come from a conservative evangelical Christian background, raised in a Baptist church that dropped the word Baptist from its name, preferring instead to be known as a non-denominational church. It was there that I observed that a church's success is measured, in large part, by the number of new converts it brings to Christianity. I became disillusioned by the superficiality in the worship services. For example, I heard from a church employee that one music director was hired because, in addition to having a Master's Degree in music, he just looked really good when he was conducting the choir.

Within my tradition, I have observed a great respect for the symbols and traditions of Christian faith – the cross, the Bible, and certain sacraments, including the Eucharist and baptism. However, despite the solemnity associated with the Eucharist, or communion, as it is called in the evangelical church, I do not recall learning anything about its significance. We simply participated in the ritual because those were the same actions that Jesus and his disciples did 2000 years ago. While distributing the bread and wine, the pastor said “Jesus said to his disciples ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’” Nothing more was said about the meaning of this ritual. Only time will tell if this practice can survive when its meaning is not understood by its participants. More than all of these, I have been taught the importance of having faith. Unfortunately, I have learned very little about what having faith means in practical terms, and about what the symbols of faith tell people about how they are to live their lives.

The most extreme evidence of this approach to faith came in the form of a sermon that I heard from a prominent conservative evangelical Christian pastor. He began the sermon with the following statement:

Why is it important to believe that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was born? I'll tell you why – because the Bible says she was, and if that turned out not to be true, then nothing else in the Bible can be trusted, and you might as well take all the Bibles home from this church and burn them in your fireplace.

I have been thinking about this statement for several years now. This is a man who has significant portions of Scripture memorized and has earned several graduate degrees in a wide range of academic subjects. I considered his belief quite disturbing. I also heard many Christians who spoke about a profound spiritual experience that they were unable to describe in words. All they could say was that they were safe in the arms of Jesus and were looking forward to spending eternity with God. I tried to feel it too, but it never happened. Unfortunately, I lacked the theological knowledge to provide a coherent answer to why I found these beliefs – the pastor’s statement and the individual experiences described above – so strange.

As I consider how my own faith has matured by studying the history of Christianity, I have had to tear down the old foundation of my faith, which was somewhat like that of the pastor described above, and to rebuild it with a more solid foundation that takes into consideration insights from a wide variety of sources. I have realized that this conservative evangelical faith relies in part on its believers knowing little about the history of their faith or of the diversity of other interpretations of that faith tradition. When creating a foundation for one’s faith, it appears that one can go to either of two directions: learning as much as possible about challenges to the faith and other viewpoints, or learning nothing about those alternative viewpoints so that one will not have to confront such challenges. Many conservative evangelicals in the U.S. have, either consciously or not, chosen the second approach.

One of the areas in which my faith has matured is a reduced need for certainty and inerrant reading of the Bible. As an undergraduate student, I took a class in Old Testament literature. I remember thinking about the book of Job, and whether or not the events occurred exactly as they are described. If they didn’t happen exactly as the book said, its lessons seemed to me to be worth far less than if it described actual events. Even if the story originated in the Israelite community and had a meaningful influence on the Jewish perception of God and human suffering, I had a tendency to divide all writings

into two mutually exclusive categories: fiction and non-fiction, with fiction providing no truth, and non-fiction providing a factual unbiased account of an event.

This belief ignores the demonstrated power of fiction to communicate truth in a powerful way. Consider an analogy from novelists Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Each wrote fiction describing events that technically never happened. Their writings became very influential only when combined with the imaginative powers of their readers to realize how their fiction communicates a message of timeless truth. A realization of the full power of the Bible's message requires a similarly active imagination.

The purpose of many biblical stories is not to convey factual information to the reader, but to promote a meaningful discussion about profound theological questions that cannot be answered definitively. If one reads the Bible as a storehouse of facts, the resulting tendency is to pursue the one 'correct' meaning of Scripture instead of accepting multiple possibilities. I remember one particular conservative evangelical pastor, speaking to a group of teenagers during the presidential administration of Bill Clinton, referring to Psalm 139 "You [God] formed my inward parts; you covered me in my mother's womb." He told us that even though Clinton claims to be a Christian, he, the pastor, did not consider that possible because of Clinton's support for abortion rights. It's as if that passage in the Psalms doesn't mean anything to Clinton, he told us.

Again, this thesis emerged from my background. I don't want to jump to an opposite certainty, that God does not exist. Perhaps some former evangelicals have done this because they have been turned off by the superficiality and lack of depth of conservative evangelicalism. In order to narrow the scope of this thesis to something manageable, I have decided to focus on a historical study of the meaning of faith in early 20th century Christian American fundamentalism and its successor, conservative evangelicalism. I have read both primary sources and analyses by contemporary historians and theologians.

A summary of the history of faith in conservative evangelicalism and their fundamentalist predecessors is the subject of the first chapter of this thesis. It contextualizes that examination by briefly treating some of the prior history of American Christianity, especially in the 19th century. In regard to the 20th century, it considers the writing of *The Fundamentals*, a series of pamphlets published in 1910-1915, to be a pivotal moment in Christianity in the United States. From there it traces the shifting (but never essentially changing) understanding of faith in 20th century fundamentalism and conservative evangelicalism. Chapter One describes how evangelical Christianity has historically emphasized two basic tenets - a reliance on Scripture as our source of knowledge of God, and the need for a direct personal experience of God in one's life.

Within this group there are liberals who emphasize social justice, and there are conservatives who believe that this focus would take attention away from their main goal of winning converts to Christianity. However, both groups rely on the Bible to determine what they should believe. This first tenet developed out of the Protestant Reformation which did not trust the traditions and hierarchy of the Catholic Church as a reliable way of maintaining an authentic faith. The second tenet, the need for a personal experience of God, is evident in the evangelical emphasis on having a "born-again" experience necessary to become a Christian. This is deeply rooted in the American revivalist tradition and also developed from the Protestant belief that the institutional church is not an adequate means through which the Christian faith can be taught or divine grace experienced. At some point in time, these two basic tenets merged into one, as the Bible became the means through which evangelicals experienced God and were able to discern a message of divine truth. The chapter ends with an examination of an evangelical voting guide for the 2000 national election.

The second chapter gives a summary of four theological critiques of fundamentalism's understanding of faith. In the concluding reflection, I include my own observations about faith in conservative evangelicalism and an alternative meaning of faith that is consistent with the Christian

tradition. The concluding reflection ends with my own questions for further research about the future of conservative evangelical Christianity in the U.S.

The appropriate terminology to describe this group of believers is not always clear. The terms conservative, fundamentalist, and evangelical can all be applied to various groups of Christians described in this thesis. As chapter one shows, the term ‘fundamentalism’ has evolved into a meaning that does not include the diverse groups of Christians described here. The term ‘evangelical’ is used here to describe Christians who emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus, who believe that the Bible is historically reliable and is the best authority for people’s lives and relationship with God, and, since they believe that their faith saves them from eternal damnation, feel obliged to encourage others to put their faith in Jesus as well.¹ I have settled on the phrase “conservative evangelicalism” because it is this group of evangelicals who demonstrate a strong desire to conserve what they consider the best elements of their faith tradition, which often involves an elimination of liberal and secular influences. At times its adherents, in contrast to liberal evangelicals, have also shown an inability to adapt to changes in religion and society, and so they often yearn for the way they believe their faith has been practiced before it and the rest of society were corrupted by destructive liberal influences. Its religious beliefs are also often aligned with conservative politics as well.

This desire to preserve the faith tradition as they believe it has been practiced in earlier periods of history and the certainty about God, humanity, and salvation that is provided to its believers have led me to examine in greater detail how the conservative evangelical understanding of faith compares with my own beliefs and with those of other Christian theologians.

¹ Wendy Murray. *The Beliefnet Guide to Evangelical Christianity* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2005), 5.

Chapter 1: The Historical Roots of American Christian Fundamentalism

Part I. American Christianity from Independence until the end of the 19th century

Here in chapter one of my thesis I will describe the history of conservative Protestant Christianity in the United States, with an emphasis on the development of the group that today can best be described as conservative evangelicals. This demographic group does not have a specific denomination, although it came primarily out of the Baptist denomination, and partly from Methodism and Presbyterianism. Their history began as outsiders of America's dominant religious establishment in the 18th century. Gradually they gained greater respect in mainstream society, reaching their peak in the early 1920s. As a result of the Scopes trial involving the teaching of evolution in public schools in 1925, the fundamentalists lost the respect of mainstream society. The next generation of fundamentalists, as they were then known, were religious outsiders once again. About twenty years later, they reemerged into mainstream society with a friendlier demeanor, willing to engage in dialogue with mainline liberal Christians once again. Within a decade or two at the most, this new generation of Christians, calling themselves evangelicals instead of fundamentalists, enjoyed their status and respect within mainstream society. Quite remarkably, they accomplished this feat without any significant compromise of their doctrine from before their withdrawal

from society just thirty to forty years earlier. This chapter provides the theological foundation of their beliefs and their history, particularly the history of their relations with those who have not agreed with their theology.

Many characteristics of evangelical Christianity in the U.S. can be traced back to the 17th century Pietistic movement in Europe. This led to a decline in ecclesiastical formalism in favor of spiritual renewal, which begins with a change in one's heart. John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of Methodism and John Newton (1725-1807), a former slave trader who repented of his sin and became an Anglican priest, provide two dramatic accounts of their spiritual experiences. According to Wesley, he was listening to a reading of Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans, and "...while he [the speaker] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation; and an assurance was given *me* that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved me from the law of sin and death."²

Newton set to music his own experience of sin and conversion in the hymn "Amazing Grace" – "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see...how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed." These examples, combined with regular readings of the apostle Paul's dramatic conversion experience recorded in the book of Acts, have influenced the type of conversion experience that many evangelicals have come to consider as normal. The decline in ritualistic worship and increase in the desire for a more authentic religious experience were brought to the New World, where there was an opportunity for Christians to break away from religious practices that had restricted their heartfelt expressions of faith.

Despite the colonists' coming to America to gain more religious freedom, they clearly did not make a complete break from their religious practices in Europe. For example, the two most powerful denominations in the colonies relied on their status as official colony religions – the Episcopalians in New

² Mark A. Noll. *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2001), 11.

York, Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas; and the Congregationalists in New England. Although powerful at the time, neither denomination had a level of support as strong as some people today might believe. Many of the colonists, as a group, were not as religious as historians like to portray them. In 1776, approximately one fifth of New Englanders had a religious affiliation. Finke and Stark also claim that “no more than 10 to 20 percent of the population belonged to a church.” There were some people, including Roger Williams of Rhode Island, who wanted no official state religion in order to prevent the corrupting influence of the state upon the church.³ Despite the large number of people unaffiliated with a church, there were a few prominent preachers in the colonies, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) among them. Edwards was a brilliant intellectual and the dominant theologian of the period. Influenced by his Calvinist beliefs, Edwards taught his followers that the revival was a gracious work of God and there was nothing that Edwards had done to prompt or deserve such divine visitation.⁴

Into this situation stepped several itinerant preachers, the most popular being George Whitefield (1715-1770). Often perceived as a threat to the established churches, he was refused the opportunity to preach in many local churches. So he preached in the open fields or anyplace where a crowd would gather to hear him. Just as Edwards provided the theological support for the revivalism, Whitefield’s preaching motivated his listeners with his extraordinary power, even driving his crowds into madness.⁵ This period came to be known as the First Great Awakening in American Christianity in 1739-1740. He regularly drew crowds of 25,000 people to hear him preach, and his work resulted in significant gains for the Methodist Church in colonial America, often at the expense of well-established Episcopalian and Congregationalist denominations.⁶

³ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 24.

⁴ Randall H. Balmer. *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics, and Beyond*. (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2010), 19.

⁵ Finke and Stark, 51.

⁶ Finke and Stark, 88-89.

There had been an unwritten agreement among different churches that “Ministers do not invade the Province of others,” in the words of the Congregational clergy⁷, an attitude perhaps influenced by the history of official state churches and regulated markets of Europe. As a result, when Whitefield would come to a new town, he was often perceived as a threat to the local clergy and was prohibited from preaching in their churches. In America, however, traditions were not always honored, status not always respected, and every established church had to deal with competition from those who were new to the profession. The egalitarian and market-driven values in the religious environment closely resembled the values that dominated other sectors of life in 18th century America.

The religious excitement intensified as a result of the first amendment to the Constitution, which stated that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This amendment, by prohibiting the establishment of a state religion and by preserving the independence of religious establishments from state influence, created a religious marketplace, which forced a diverse group of established denominations and upstart sects to compete for the loyalty and money of America’s colonists. Writing in 1837 about the difference between American and European religious practices, Francis Grund wrote that religious “establishment makes the clergy ‘indolent and lazy,’ because ‘a person provided for cannot, by the rules of common sense, be supposed to work as hard as one who has to exert himself for a living...Not only have Americans a greater number of clergymen than, in proportion to the population, can be found either on the Continent or in England; but they have not one idler amongst them, all of them being obliged to exert themselves for the spiritual welfare of their respective congregations.”⁸

In addition to the newly established ‘religious marketplace’, the established denominations had a more difficult time adapting to the westward expansion than the upstart sects did. With the exception of the Congregationalists, most of the Europe-based denominations depended on clergy coming from

⁷ Ibid., 62

⁸ Finke and Stark, 19.

Europe. As a result, they were usually desperate for clergy, and those who did come were often incompetent, lacking energy, morals, or even authentic credentials. Because they were far from home and from anyone who knew them, there was less pressure on them to maintain acceptable moral behavior. Some were known for their drunkenness, fighting, venality, and forcing their attention on the married women among them.⁹ Because the upstart sects' clergy came from the community they served, there was less difficulty leading all the churches. They were also more accountable to the congregation and less likely to adopt a 'what happens in America stays in America' approach to life.

Like the upstart sects, the established denominations sought a greater presence on the western frontier. In 1798 the General Association of Connecticut actively began "to Christianize the Heathen in North America, and to support and promote Christian knowledge in the new settlements" in the frontier West. Then in 1826 the Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian denominations cooperated to create the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS) to promote Christianity on the frontier, based on the belief that the unsettled West had no Christian presence. This claim was false – the Baptist and Methodist denominations, then operating more as upstart sects than as established denominations, both had a strong presence there. The AHMS required subsidies from their east coast congregations, mainly because they had well-paid and well-educated clergy.¹⁰

The Baptists and Methodists were far more successful on the frontier, in part because they operated more like upstart sects than as established denominations. Their pastors were common people from the same communities as their church members. Many of them, like the congregants they served, had only a grade school education. The established denominations and the upstart sects operated in mutual disdain for the other, and for the same reason: different educational requirements for the clergy. Timothy Dwight (1752-1817) of Andover Seminary, made the following observation of the Methodists

⁹ Ibid., 35-36.

¹⁰ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 65-66.

and Baptists: “While they insist, equally with the others, that their property shall be managed by skillful agents, their judicial causes directed by learned advocates, and their children, when sick attended by able physicians; they were satisfied to place their Religion, their souls, and their salvation, under the guidance of quackery.”¹¹ The Baptists and Methodists had a different set of values. The Baptists believed that “God never called an unprepared man to preach” and the Methodists instructed their ministers not to let their studies interfere with the more important work of soul-saving.¹² Peter Cartwright (1785-1872), a Methodist minister, said that the uneducated clergy “preached the gospel with more success and had more seals to their ministry than all the sapient, downy D.D.’s [Doctors of Divinity] in modern times.”¹³

This still very rural society provided a favorable environment for traveling evangelists, most notably Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875). From the early 1800s until the early 1830s, there was a period of religious excitement that came to be known as the Second Great Awakening. Like its predecessor, the Second involved itinerant preachers, revivalist meetings, and numerous souls saved through conversion to Christianity.

There was a significant theological difference between the First and Second Great Awakenings. Whereas Edwards taught that revival was solely the work of God and not of humanity, Finney, by comparison, declared revivalism to be “the work of man.”¹⁴ He already doubted the tenets of Calvinism, preferring instead to teach his listeners that salvation was available to all, and only required a commitment from the individual believer. His theology was more compatible with the people of his day than were Edwards’ Calvinist beliefs. The nation had just recently gained control of its political destiny, and Finney was encouraging the common people to take control of their religious destiny as well. It was a better fit than Edwards’ Calvinism for a nation full of self-determination.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., 78.

¹² Finke and Stark (2005), 78.

¹³ Ibid., 79.

¹⁴ Balmer, 19.

¹⁵ Ibid., 21-22.

The belief that the American people could take control of their own religious destiny influenced the dominant understanding of how God acted in the world. Theologians had always been puzzled over the prophetic passages of the Bible, specifically the millennium, or one thousand years of godly rule, mentioned in Revelation 20:1-6. During the 19th century, two interpretations developed in the U.S.: premillennialism and postmillennialism.

In the late 19th century a split emerged between the premillennialist Christians and the liberal Protestant Christians whose beliefs were shaped by postmillennialism. Premillennialists believed that Jesus' return to Earth was imminent. Postmillennialists believed that Jesus would return to earth after the millennium, the one thousand-year period of righteousness on earth. The difference between these two belief systems had profound consequences for their followers' interactions with the outside world and their interpretation of current events.

Influenced by Finney's theology of self-determination, the postmillennialists sought to create the conditions necessary for Jesus' return to earth, meaning a more righteous population. This meant the elimination of slavery, the beginning of the temperance crusade, support of public education (democracy required that children of different backgrounds learn from each other and learn how to get along with each other), and the promotion of women's rights, including the right to vote and to get an education. In other words, they believed it was within human power, specifically their power, to create those conditions necessary for Jesus to return to earth.

Although postmillennialism and premillennialism both had their devotees throughout the 19th century, postmillennialism had greater influence until the Civil War. This changed toward the end of the century and beginning of the 20th for several reasons: the Civil War resulted in many casualties on both sides; industrialization and resulting urbanization forced the Christians to see firsthand the squalid ghettos and political corruption of the major cities, in contrast to the simpler small town life to which they had grown accustomed. The world was clearly getting worse, not better, and most Christians no

longer believed they were in a position to change that. When the world around them no longer seemed to fit with their eschatology, they read their Bibles to make sense of current events. Faced with a changing environment, they adapted their interpretation of the Bible accordingly.¹⁶ The premillennialists found the theological support they needed from John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), who developed the theology of dispensationalism. Darby divided all human history into six time periods and argued that God interacted differently with humanity in each period. The period of Adam and Eve was distinct from that of Noah, from Abraham, and the people of Israel. The social ills of the present period served as evidence that Jesus' return was imminent. Rather than working to fight social injustice, Christians should separate themselves from nonbelievers to prepare for the return of Christ and the beginning of the one thousand years of Jesus' rule on earth.¹⁷ As a result, the premillennialists shifted their focus away from social reform and caring for the poor in favor of an agenda that emphasized the need to win converts to Christianity. Dwight Moody (1837-1899) succinctly expressed it this way: "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel," Moody famously declared. "God has given me a lifeboat and said, 'Moody, save all you can.'"¹⁸ In the conservative camp, there was a near universal belief in premillennialism, but not in dispensationalism. Not all premillennialists were dispensationalists, but every dispensationalist was a premillennialist.¹⁹ Benjamin B. Warfield, for example, an influential conservative Christian and ardent supporter of scriptural inerrancy, did not support the dispensationalist theology, as he considered its exegesis to be faulty.²⁰

While the conservative premillennialists waited for the imminent return of Jesus, the more liberal Protestants adopted a progressive theology and advocated for social reform. They worked hard to address social problems and recognized that morality was not solely a private, individual matter, but had a social nature as well. They worked to create child labor laws, workers' rights, and challenged urban political

¹⁶ Balmer, 33-34.

¹⁷ Ibid., 33-35.

¹⁸ Ibid., 36.

¹⁹ Ernest Sandeen, "Toward a Historical Interpretation of the Origins of Fundamentalism," *Church History* 36, no.1 (March 1967): 69.

²⁰ David Livingstone and Mark A. Noll. "B.B. Warfield (1851-1921): A Biblical Inerrantist as Evolutionist." *Isis* 91, no.2 (2000): 289.

corruption. While the “evangelicals were retreating into their otherworldly reverie, looking for the imminent return of Jesus, the more theologically liberal Social Gospel advocates sought to reform the present world to make it more nearly represent a godly society.”^{21 22}

Part II: The early 20th century and the hardening of lines

During the early 20th century, Christians experienced what might be considered a crisis caused by cultural and scientific challenges to the faith, including the works of Darwin and Freud, the world war, and the influence of German biblical criticism. Some religious leaders realized that it was becoming difficult to maintain the religious beliefs that had survived unchallenged for centuries. People whose education and cultural background strengthened their scientific, rationalistic approach to life’s most profound questions were no longer satisfied with the mythical and mystical elements of Christianity. Significant scientific advances and discoveries in biblical criticism had been made that led people to change the way they viewed authority and conducted research. According to Armstrong, “In both the arts and the sciences, there was a desire to go back to the first principles, to irreducible fundamentals, and from this zero base to start again.”²³

This desire to get back to the basics was resisted by conservative Christians who wanted to preserve what they considered the most important elements of their tradition. They criticized the study of philosophy for failing to lead its followers to the only true source of truth, the Bible. One of the targets of their criticism was the philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) who criticized the churches because they

²¹ Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 37.

²² Karen Armstrong argues that conservative Christians were just as committed to social reform as the liberals were during the Progressive Age of 1900-1920. They were just as concerned about low wages, child labor, and the living conditions of the poor. The difference was their rationale – they viewed their social crusades “as a war against Satan or as a spiritual challenge to the prevailing materialism.” Conservatives later adopted a similar attitude to that of Moody, believing that it was pointless to try to save a world that was beyond repair. The differences between Balmer and Armstrong’s versions of the history of this period suggest that the doctrinal differences described by Balmer did not result immediately in the social policy decisions described by Armstrong. (Karen Armstrong, *The Battle For God*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 170.

²³ Karen Armstrong. *The Battle For God*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 168-169.

were “more interested in defending truths already known than in seeking truths yet to be found.”²⁴ To replace the old and outmoded beliefs about God, religious people need to exercise their faith in their dedication to that “one sure road of access to truth—the road of patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record, and controlled reflection.”²⁵

The conservative Christians placed their faith in the Bible as their only source of truth. However, that biblical truth had to be compatible with the world around them, and therefore had to be open to changing interpretations. The shift from postmillennial to premillennial theology, as described earlier, is one example.

The Liberal Response

Both the liberal postmillennialists and the conservative premillennialists had begun to reevaluate the meaning of their faith. Charles Eliot (1834-1926), a liberal Harvard University president for forty years, wrote a seminal essay in 1909 entitled “The Religion of the Future,” in which he taught that the heart of Christianity has only one commandment: the love of God, expressed in the form of love of one’s fellow human beings. This set of beliefs emphasized the idea that one’s devotion to God must be demonstrated through love of one’s fellow human being, which would reduce or eliminate those aspects of Christianity that set it apart from other faiths. Eliot captured the mood of his day, writing that “The religion the future will not be based on authority, either spiritual or temporal. The decline of the reliance upon absolute authority is one of the most significant phenomena of the modern world.²⁶ Instead, if people’s knowledge of God is strengthened through their own self-consciousness – “if it is the human soul through which God is revealed,” then the human race “has come to the knowledge of itself; and the best knowledge of God comes through knowledge of the best of the race.”²⁷

24 Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh E. Schmidt. *The Religious History of America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 300.

25 John Dewey, as cited by Gaustad and Schmidt, 301.

26 Charles O. Eliot. “The Religion of the Future,” *Harvard Theological Review* 2, no.4 (1909): 391.

27 *Ibid.*, 396.

Eliot's predictions regarding the future of the Christian faith were influenced by the same factors as the more conservative groups' predictions were; each group just responded differently. Eliot still believed adamantly in God's existence but, for him, the descriptions of God and of miraculous events in the Bible no longer seemed believable. In order for people of his day to believe in God, God's identity would have to be revised according to modern beliefs.

In the religion of the future, according to Eliot, nothing would be taken for granted. All truth must be subject to acceptance or rejection by the modern mind. Acceptance of religious beliefs by countless past generations will mean nothing if religious seekers of the future require that such beliefs be analyzed with a 20th century mindset. People would no longer blindly accept the words of authority figures. The decline in the reliance upon absolute authority "is to be seen everywhere—in government, in education, in the church, in business, and in the family."²⁸

During the 19th century, many people abandoned the literal interpretation of the Hebrew anthropomorphic representations of God, such as the image of God walking in the garden with Adam and Eve, or as a judge deciding a contest between two human litigants. Eliot believed that "The 19th century has made all these conceptions of deity look archaic and crude."²⁹ However, in the same article he also recognized the need for humanity's view of God to be anthropomorphic, because knowledge of God depends on a deeper knowledge of self. "The finite can study and describe the infinite only through analogy, parallelism, and simile."³⁰

This religion of the future would be guided by an Infinite Spirit, which "pervades the universe, just as the spirit of a man pervades his body, and acts, consciously or unconsciously, in every atom of it."³¹ This new description of God would include both the Christian and Jewish view of God, as well as

²⁸ Eliot, 391.

²⁹ Ibid., 394.

³⁰ Ibid., 397.

³¹ Ibid., 394.

“the physicist’s omnipresent and exhaustless Energy, and the biological conception of a Vital Force.”³²

God’s presence can be found in every living creature, and apparently by the students of numerous academic disciplines.

Although Eliot’s new religion would reject the traditional sacraments of Christian history, it would recognize the potential for its believers to find God’s presence in other human beings: “It will respect and honor all strong and lovely human beings,—seeing in them in finite measure qualities similar to those which they adore in God.”³³ Eliot recognized the limits of humanity’s knowledge of God regarding God’s justice as well, because there is no comparable human experience of justice to be a foundation for an accurate conception of God’s justice.³⁴ He ignored the role of institutionalized religion, and of structured practice of religious beliefs. Consequently, he found no value in the role of traditions and myths in the development of religious identity and in addressing the profound questions of systematic theology.

He believed that religious people’s identity would not be based on what separates them from believers of other faiths, but instead on what common ground they can create among different faiths. Whether in areas of medicine or spirituality, he thought 20th century people would look out across an unexplored religious frontier, and be free to discover new insights in science as well as theology that will improve both their material well-being and their spiritual identities. The American people were given an unprecedented opportunity to take control of their own theology and decide for themselves what was important to sustain their faith. This worship of God could be supported by the improvement of humanity’s material well-being and social institutions, and would not be preoccupied with exalting one religious group above others, or with allowing select groups to proclaim divine approval in its conflicts with others.

³² Ibid., 394.

³³ Ibid., 396.

³⁴ Ibid., 400.

The Fundamentals: the conservative response

Conservative Christians were horrified by Eliot's predictions. His beliefs were completely incompatible with Christianity as they understood it. In response, they set out to determine what the core elements of their religion were. They did not depart from their evangelical Protestant tradition; instead, they elaborated on it. From the Protestant Reformation and the revivalism of the 18th-19th centuries, they had developed an unwavering belief in the authority of the Bible and in a direct personal experience of God.³⁵ Adapting this tradition to the needs of the year 1910, the Presbyterians of Princeton identified the following five essential, or fundamental, elements of Christianity: (1) the inerrancy of Scripture; (2) the Virgin Birth of Christ; (3) Christ's atonement for our sin on the cross; (4) his bodily resurrection; (5) the objective reality of his miracles. None of the five fundamentals were considered original ideas at the time by their supporters, even if they had not been defended by believers before then. The inerrancy of Scripture is the only one of the fundamentals that departed from longstanding tradition. As I will show in chapter two, Christians had always believed in the divine inspiration of the Bible. The belief in inerrancy took that idea one step further, which was necessary, according to the fundamentalist perspective, in order to preserve the Bible's status as the Word of God. The fundamentalist defense of these beliefs could be considered new only because the attacks against them by liberal theologians and by scientists were also unprecedented.

As a result, supporters of these five beliefs came to be known as fundamentalists. Soon thereafter, a set of pamphlets entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*³⁶ was published in defense of

³⁵ Allen Dwight Callahan. *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 3.

³⁶ Funded by oil millionaire Lyman Stewart and his brother Milton, *The Fundamentals* was a set of pamphlets published in twelve volumes from 1910-1915. They are accessible today in book form, with multiple volumes bound together in each book. The Stewarts hired several prominent theologians and laypeople to write essays on various topics in defense of conservative Christianity. They sent free copies to pastors, missionaries, theological professors and students, YMCA and YWCA secretaries, college professors, Sunday school superintendents, and religious editors in the English-speaking world, totaling three million volumes in all (Marsden, 118-119). The sixty-four authors of a total of ninety articles did not agree on everything. As already noted, Warfield did not agree with the majority's belief in dispensationalism. However, in order to provide a persuasive message to the reader, beliefs that did not support the majority were not included. For the same reason, despite the combative mentality of the

traditional Christian beliefs. Copies of *The Fundamentals* were distributed free of charge to theology students, faculty, and pastors around the country. The often-repeated theme throughout these pamphlets was the divine inspiration of the Bible and its complete lack of human error. Evidence throughout the Bible and history is presented to support this claim.³⁷

I will now show how this theme is developed in the text of *The Fundamentals*. Evidence for the divine inspiration of Scripture and for Christianity's unique message of salvation comes from multiple sources and is useful for supporting the faith of all Christians. This evidence can be found in historical and archaeological evidence,³⁸ from the miracles recorded in Scripture,³⁹ Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in the New Testament or later in history,⁴⁰ and from contemporary and biblical examples⁴¹ of individuals whose lives were radically changed by the strength of their faith and religious convictions. All of this evidence points to the conclusion of God's guidance throughout human history, from Adam and Eve's eating the fruit in the Garden of Eden, which resulted in the impassable chasm between humans and God, to Jesus' death on the cross, which provided humanity with the only means of crossing that permanent divide to be with God for eternity. It also points to the reliability of the Bible as coming from God and to the belief that every word in the Bible can be trusted, without reservation, to teach the reader about the nature of God, human beings, sin, and salvation.

Scripture and personal experience reinforce the legitimacy of each other and the core beliefs of fundamentalist Christianity. In the same way, the validity of Scripture is undermined by the teaching of evolution, which contradicts the creation accounts in Genesis, and by the teaching of biblical criticism, which denies the role of individual authors in the writing of Scriptures attributed to them and undermines

fundamentalists, the tone in the pamphlets is quite calm compared to the more fiery criticism leveled by both conservatives and liberals against each other.

³⁷ Armstrong, 171.

³⁸ Kyle, M.G. "The Recent Testimony of Archaeology to the Scriptures." In vol.2 of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (Chicago: Testimony Pub. Co., 1910), 29-49.

³⁹ R.A. Torrey. "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ." In vol.5 of *The Fundamentals*, 82-83.

⁴⁰ Arno C. Gaebelain, "Fulfilled Prophecy: a Potent Argument for the Bible." In vol.11 of *The Fundamentals*, 55-67, 78-86.

⁴¹ Lord Lyttelton, "Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul." In vol.5 of *The Fundamentals*, 106-119.

the historical accuracy of the events recorded in Scripture. The following examples suggest that the main purpose for writing *The Fundamentals: a Testimony to the Truth* was to promote greater confidence in the Bible as God's revelation to humanity and in the core doctrine of salvation through faith in Jesus.

The numerous authors of *The Fundamentals* were confident in the Bible's historical accuracy because of the discoveries of 19th-20th century archaeology. They were convinced that these discoveries support the belief that biblical events happened exactly as they are recorded in Scripture, and that the reality of those events must not be revised according to modern biblical criticism. Such discoveries are consistent with Old Testament descriptions of buildings said to have been built by Israelites for the Pharaoh while they were slaves in Egypt. According to George Frederick Wright in *The Fundamentals*, "Thus have all Egyptian explorations shown that the writer of the Pentateuch had such familiarity with the country, the civilization, and the history of Egypt as could have been obtained only by intimate, personal experience," and such information "could not have been inserted except by a participant in the events, or by direct Divine revelation."⁴²

There is also evidence of God's providence in these discoveries: "That this history should be confirmed in so many cases and in such a remarkable manner by monuments uncovered 3000 years after their erection, can be nothing else than providential. Surely, God has seen to it that the failing faith of these later days should not be left to grope in the darkness." With the reliability of the Bible being questioned, "the very stones have cried out with a voice that only the deaf could fail to hear."⁴³

Archeological evidence serves as an independent witness to the competence and honesty of the historians of the Old Testament. This provides strong evidence that the Bible can be trusted as a source of historical information, and that its stories are not myths and legends made up by later generations long after the events occurred.

⁴² George Frederick Wright. "Monuments to the Truth of the Scriptures." In vol. 2 of *The Fundamentals*, 14.

⁴³ Wright. "Monuments to the Truth of the Scriptures." In vol. 2 of *The Fundamentals*, 28.

The historical accuracy of the Bible is important because the “weight and solemnity” of such stories as the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are lost if they are believed to be only a myth. When Jesus referred to these and other Old Testament narratives, he accepted them as authentic and historically true, and did not suggest a mythical or allegorical interpretation. “[O]n weighing [Jesus’] words it will be seen that they lose much of their force and appropriateness unless the events alluded to had a historical character.”⁴⁴

The divine inspiration of Scripture is also supported by the numerous Old Testament prophecies that are fulfilled in the New Testament, and by New Testament passages predicting Jesus’ death and resurrection. Because “the Old Testament reveals, hundreds of years in advance, what is coming to pass, omniscience must have directed the pen of the writer; i.e., these Scriptures, or at least their predictive parts, must be inspired.”⁴⁵ For example, the rejection of Jesus by his contemporaries is predicted in Psalm 118:22: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” Jesus cites this passage in Matthew 21:42 to help his followers make sense of his upcoming crucifixion and resurrection. In this passage, as in several others, Jesus placed his ministry, death, and resurrection within a context that is framed by the Old Testament. As another example, in Matt. 26:31, Jesus quoted Zech. 13:7 to his disciples: “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’” According to *The Fundamentals*, “The desertion of Jesus by His disciples when He was apprehended fulfills the prediction of Zechariah.”⁴⁶ In John 5:46, Jesus said, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.” After his resurrection, while he was speaking to a crowd, he said that “everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). Referring to Hosea 6:2, Jesus told the crowd “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day” (Luke 24:46)

⁴⁴ William Caven. “Testimony of Christ to the Old Testament.” In vol. 4 of *The Fundamentals*, 50.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁶ Caven. “Testimony of Christ to the Old Testament.” In vol. 4 of *The Fundamentals*, 62.

One of the arguments in favor of Christianity considered to be most persuasive by some authors of *The Fundamentals* can be found in the lives of contemporary and historical individuals whose lives were dramatically changed by their Christian faith. Several pamphlets contain personal testimonies from lay people without a strong background in theology whose personal experience demonstrate the power of their Christian conversion. Each narrative indicates that there was something missing in the life of the author, but upon conversion each author's deepest yearnings were satisfied by his acceptance of God's forgiveness of sins and conversion to Christianity.

According to one layman physician, Howard Kelly, who wrote an article in *The Fundamentals*, the Bible reveals, to those who trust it, "a diagnosis of [one's] spiritual condition. It shows [one] what [one is] by nature—one lost in sin and alienated from the life that is in God."⁴⁷ However, the Bible does more than just identify a problem – it also offers a solution. When a sinner calls on Christ and Christ comes to him or her, "a new force begins to work a new design," and within the new believer's heart there is one "to whom he becomes passionately devoted, whose presence is happiness and whose absence is sorrow..."⁴⁸ A newfound sense of moral power also comes with the Christian experience. The believer becomes a new creature because, according to II Cor. 5:17, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new is come!"

The lives of apostles Peter and Paul also demonstrate the power of conversion to Christianity. Shortly before Jesus' crucifixion, Peter denied even knowing Jesus three times. Afterward, he devoted his life to spreading the message of Jesus to the point of being crucified just as Jesus had been. The apostle Paul, before his conversion, violently persecuted Jesus' followers. After being blinded by a powerful light and hearing the voice of Jesus speaking to him, Paul become a devoted follower of Jesus. As a result of his new faith, he suffered severe beatings and imprisonment. There is no possible explanation for these two men's experience except for the miracle-working power of Christ, the same

⁴⁷ Howard A. Kelly. "A Personal Testimony." In vol.1 of *The Fundamentals*, 124.

⁴⁸ E.Y. Mullins. "Testimony of Christian Experience." In vol.3 of *The Fundamentals*, 82.

power that worked miracles in the lives of the authors of *The Fundamentals* and of many contemporary individuals. Just as Jesus' death and resurrection strengthened their faith, our faith will be stronger as well if we remember that Jesus died for us and if we read the same Scriptures that Jesus, Paul, and Peter relied on for their faith.⁴⁹

The faith of every believer can be strengthened with the knowledge that God's nature is consistent with the laws of science that are discovered by modern research. Because no area of life is outside of God's laws, and God is scientific, it is reasonable to conclude that "the conversion of the human soul—the divinely wrought new birth—lies within the range of scientific investigation."⁵⁰ It is unlikely that God would work by one set of laws in the natural world, which are constantly being discovered, and that God works by different laws, or no laws at all, in the higher spiritual realm. In order for conversion to be successful, it must occur according to the method that God has given us.

The first step in that conversion process is prayer. This results in the giving of the Holy Spirit to the believer. Second is the application of the Word, resulting in the believer's reasoning faculties being aroused and his or her newly awakened soul being turned to the cross. In the third step, "the awakened soul becomes co-operative with the Divine Spirit, and with the Word and with other external means" and then the person's "personal, living faith in the Christ set forth in the Gospels, followed by outward confession, obedience, and Christian service."⁵¹

All of this evidence points to the irrefutable conclusion that the Bible can be trusted to lead in all areas of life and through every challenge. As long as we cling to the Bible as the Word of God, more of God's perfect nature and our sinful nature will be revealed to us. This faith in God is incompatible with believing in our own ability to discern anything about God or about truth apart from the Bible, because all knowledge that results from human wisdom is corrupted by original sin. The true value of human wisdom is revealed in Genesis, where "human achievement is exalted to the highest place, and no limit is

⁴⁹ Lord Lyttleton. "The Conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul." In vol.8 of *The Fundamentals*, 108-110.

⁵⁰ H.M. Sydenstricker. "The Science of Conversion." In vol.8 of *The Fundamentals*, 64-65.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

set to what may be accompanied by human dignity.”⁵² According to the words in Genesis, “Let *us* build *us* a city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven, and let *us* make *us* a name” (emphasis is in *The Fundamentals*). Philosophy, as an academic discipline, follows this method, since all of its results “must be purely the products of *human reason* exercised upon the results of *human investigations*” (emphasis is in *The Fundamentals*).⁵³ Faith in God means allowing ourselves to be led by God’s Word, because it, in contrast to all other words written by the human hand, is meant to show us how to live.

The purpose of Jesus’ life and ministry was to bridge the gap between humanity and God which is caused by human sin, as described in the third chapter of Genesis. As the question is asked in *The Fundamentals*, “How shall we, having sinned, having broken the Holy Law, having violated the will of God, be treated, as to our acceptance before Him, as to our ‘peace with Him’ (Rom. 5:1), as if we had not done so?”⁵⁴ Only those who are justified by their faith can be considered worthy of acceptance into God’s presence, as stated in the full text of Rom. 5:1: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The word ‘faith’ is understood to mean trust, reliance, or an expression of personal confidence in the object of one’s faith. Faith “means a putting of ourselves and our needs, in personal reliance, into His hands.”⁵⁵

Heb. 11:1 is often quoted as a definition of faith – “Now faith is certainty of things hoped for, proof of things not seen.” One author of *The Fundamentals* argues that this is not meant to be a definition of faith, that it is only meant as a description of its power. This is similar to the statement that ‘Knowledge is power,’ which is clearly not a definition of power. The Bible verse is only intended as a description of faith in one of its great effects.⁵⁶

Some who have misunderstood this verse might believe that faith is “a mysterious spiritual sense, a subtle power of touching and feeling the unseen and eternal, a ‘vision and a faculty divine,’ almost a

⁵² Philip Mauro. “Modern Philosophy.” In vol.2 of *The Fundamentals*, 88.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁴ H.C.G. Moule. “Justification By Faith.” In vol.2 of *The Fundamentals*, 110.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

‘second-sight’ in the soul.”⁵⁷ Faith, as it is understood in *The Fundamentals*, is not a faculty in itself with its own latent power, and instead is defined as a reliance on a trustworthy object, that being the person of Jesus Christ. This definition of faith is engaged “with the power and truth of a Promiser.” Christian faith requires a reliance on Jesus as one’s Savior, “our reception of God Himself in His Word.”⁵⁸

When a Christian has a strong faith in Christ and specifically in the divine efficacy of prayer, he or she “shall say to this mountain, ‘Be thou removed;’ or to this sycamore tree, ‘Be thou plucked up by the root’, and it shall obey you.”⁵⁹ Prayer is understood as the only means of accessing the power of God. Just as the Bible is the means for understanding the truth of God, prayer is our means for persuading God to intervene on our behalf.

The object of Christian faith is the perfect and holy God Incarnate, Jesus Christ, who, as Scripture firmly assures us, died as an atonement for our sins and rose again – “The virtue of faith lies in the virtue of its Object.”⁶⁰ In order for this faith to be strong, the Bible must be accepted as the Word of God, and Jesus must be trusted as God’s perfect representative and as the source of nearly everything we can ever know about God.

The primary message of *The Fundamentals* was that the Bible alone comes from God and is capable of leading its readers back to God. Its writings provide overwhelming evidence to support this belief, including biblical prophecies fulfilled in human history, the historical accuracy of the Bible, and the demonstrated effects of conversion to Christianity among specific people. The case was clearly made that the Bible alone could be trusted as the source of all knowledge related to God and that only those people who accept its teachings would realize the truth that God has revealed to humanity. The crisis of uncertainty and the challenges to the Bible’s authority had been resolved through the writing of *The Fundamentals*. These pamphlets had provided certainty in an uncertain world. The Bible had been

⁵⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁹ Arthur T. Pierson. “Divine Efficacy of Prayer.” In vol.9 of *The Fundamentals*, 81.

⁶⁰ Moule, “Justification By Faith.” 115.

returned to its traditional place in history as God's means of communicating to humanity. The result was a faith tradition that gave its adherents an answer to the problems of the world and was consistent with the dominant worldview in American society. Fundamentalism was not considered a problem by its supporters; it was a solution to a serious problem.

Summary of the responses to the crisis

Despite the obvious theological differences between Eliot and the fundamentalist Christians, both groups are clearly a product of the same times. If the fundamentalists can be described as interpreting literally certain biblical events that were not meant to be taken literally, and finding value in such events only if they are understood literally, then Eliot can be described as denying the value of such stories in developing the unity, traditions, and faith of contemporary Christians. Fundamentalists read everything literally – that was the only interpretation they considered to have any meaning. Their proofs of their beliefs relied on a rational approach that gave little credibility to mysticism as a way of understanding God. Eliot, on the other hand, refused to take the texts literally, because his rationalist mentality wouldn't allow it, and he denied the usefulness of these myths to the faith of the future. As an example, Eliot claimed that believers would no longer believe in miracles, because religion, like everything else, must conform to the laws of nature.⁶¹

Both groups understood this as either the acceptance of the literal Bible or the rejection of the Bible altogether. Neither group recognized the value of myths and traditions to the practice of religion. Fundamentalist Christianity teaches a belief in the objective reality of biblical miracles, and that such miracles could not occur today, because the age of miracles has passed. Fundamentalism requires this belief because it supports Jesus' divinity and the inerrancy of the Scriptures. Eliot also rejected a literal reading of the Bible, and therefore the traditional beliefs of Christianity. Both groups recognized that the first century experiences of Jesus' followers could not be replicated in their exact form: Eliot's reason has

⁶¹ Eliot, 397.

already been described, and the fundamentalists simply claimed that the age of miracles had passed. Both groups had adapted their beliefs to the rationalistic mindset of the 20th century, even though they disagreed about how to do so.

III. The development of fundamentalism in 20th century American Christianity

From 1917 until 1923, William Bell Riley, a Baptist pastor in Minneapolis, and his followers became increasingly in conflict with the Baptist denomination. He held conferences across the country and formed the *World's Christian Fundamentals Association* to promote the literal interpretation of scripture. Sometime around 1923, he seceded from the Baptist Assembly to establish the Bible Baptist Union as a fundamentalist alternative to the Baptists.⁶² Using biblical passages to give meaning to current events, and instructions for how to proceed, his followers cited 2 Cor. 6:17: "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord."⁶³ By 1923, the fundamentalist agenda appeared to be in a position to take over even the Methodists and Episcopalians, who until then had been mostly uninvolved in the dispute.⁶⁴

The competition between the fundamentalists and the mainline denominations increased in intensity during the 1920s. The established denominations experienced a decline in numbers, and the upstart, more fundamentalist sects saw a corresponding increase, particularly in rural areas. Again, differences in education levels of the clergy meant that the upstart sects had an easier time promoting their message on the rural frontier. As a result of declining membership among the mainline denominations, many of their churches were forced to consider merging with each other and create non-denominational Protestant churches.⁶⁵

Despite significant resistance among the laity to church mergers, the *Federal Council of Churches* was formed in 1908 in order to promote cooperation among the denominations. This inter-

⁶² Armstrong, 172-178.

⁶³ Gaustad, 294.

⁶⁴ Armstrong, 174.

⁶⁵ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America* (2005), 209.

denominational cooperation was essential in order to ensure their survival. The *Council* consisted of thirty-three Protestant denominations, even though it excluded the Southern Baptist Convention. This move allowed most of Protestantism, excluding the Southern Baptists, to speak with one authoritative voice. It was the Protestants' response to the popularity of fundamentalism.⁶⁶ This move was also a step toward establishing the Southern Baptists' status as religious outsiders in the religious marketplace of American culture.

In 1920, William Jennings Bryan began his mission of speaking out against the teaching of evolution, which, to him and other fundamentalists, clearly contradicted the biblical account of creation and therefore undermined the doctrine of original sin. He was also concerned about the doctrine of social Darwinism, because he believed that the idea that only the strong should survive was responsible for German aggression in World War I. The subject came to a head in 1925 with the Scopes trial, which resulted in high school biology teacher John Scopes' conviction for teaching evolutionary theory in the public schools. Scopes was fined \$100, which the ACLU paid on his behalf.⁶⁷

The fundamentalists may have won that battle, but their public image suffered greatly as a result. Bryan and other evolution-denying Christians were mocked mercilessly by nationally-known *Baltimore Sun* columnist H.L. Mencken, who covered the trial live from Tennessee. The trial exposed the enormous divisions in American culture between rural and urban, fundamentalist and modernist, and, from the view of liberals, between science and education on the one hand and an outdated set of religious beliefs that stifled advances in modern science. Toward the end of the 1920s, many critics of fundamentalism associated it with the unsophisticated, simple country residents of rural America, and assumed that when those areas developed a more modern educational system, fundamentalism would lose its appeal.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America* (2005), 215-218.

⁶⁷ Armstrong, 175.

⁶⁸ George Marsden. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 60-61.

This did not happen. Instead of fundamentalism losing its public appeal, Christianity in the U.S. experienced a variation of the sect-church process. According to the sect-church theory, when religious groups are operating in conformity to the mainstream values and seeking approval from the outside world, a small group of devout believers may want to practice their faith as it was before being corrupted by worldly influences. So they break away from the church and start their own sect. If this movement is successful, it may be transformed into a respectable church. Future generations within the new church are likely to become too worldly as well, and the group will eventually lose its tension with the rest of society. The cycle then may repeat itself. The main difference between a church and a sect, therefore, is that sects operate with a higher degree of tension with their surrounding environments than churches do.⁶⁹

The fundamentalists became less aggressive in promoting their beliefs outside of the communities where they were already accepted, and instead they retreated from much of the mainstream culture in order to maintain their doctrinal purity. The loss of public respect for the fundamentalists convinced them that society was against them, and so they created their own fundamentalist subculture. Their publishing houses, Bible colleges, and Bible camps enabled them to protect themselves from the influence of the outside world, which they came to see as Satan's domain, a view that was supported by their premillennialism. They were so isolated from the rest of the world that many could live without requiring any meaningful interaction with non-fundamentalists.⁷⁰ The difference in this case, as opposed to other sect formations, was not so much that the rest of the Christians had become too worldly in matters of money and material possessions, but that they had allowed their theology to be influenced by science and had compromised on the literal reading of Genesis. As noted earlier, the fundamentalists did not oppose new scientific knowledge; they just subordinated it to the authority of Scripture.

In the 1920s, when the *Federal Communications Commission* began regulating radio stations, it determined that all religious programming would be treated as public service broadcasting. Radio

⁶⁹ Finke and Stark. *The Churching of America, 1776-1990* (1992), 40-41.

⁷⁰ Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 49-50.

stations could fulfill their public service requirements by broadcasting the shows of religious groups. Seeking guidance to decide which religious groups would receive this free air time, they consulted with the *Federal Council of Churches*, which recommended giving all of the time slots to its member churches, excluding non-member denominations. The conservative Protestants, who were less isolationist than the fundamentalists, but more conservative theologically than the liberals, were forced to buy time if they wanted to promote their beliefs. Several groups did just that. However, in 1931 the council also persuaded all but one of the radio networks, the *Mutual Broadcasting System*, not to sell any air time to non-member churches, in order to save the country from the influence of the conservative Christians.⁷¹ The conservatives produced remarkable results with the little opportunity given them: During the 1940s, Charles E. Fuller's "Old-Fashioned Revival Hour," the *Missouri Synod Lutherans'* "The Lutheran Hour," and the *Seventh-day Adventists'* "Voice of Prophecy" were some of the most popular shows on the radio. The conservative Protestants had a long tradition of communicating in the language of the common people and were skilled at competing in the religious marketplace of the American frontier. Despite the West being firmly settled, the early days of radio provided a new 'frontier' to be conquered by competing religious groups.⁷²

This renewed engagement with the outside world by Fuller and others was the result of a new generation of conservative Christians that had come of age since 1925 and were making their presence known in the 1940s. Some decided that their separatism had become too extreme and were working to improve the public image of their faith. Carl F. H. Henry (1913-2003), for example, writing in *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, in 1947, encouraged a renewed engagement with mainstream culture. Liberal Christians had already established the *Federal Council of Churches* (which would later become the *National Council of Churches* in 1950) to coordinate the promotion of their message, and Henry understood the need for Protestant evangelicals, as they preferred to be called, to develop greater unity among themselves and speak with one voice to the outside world. He accomplished

⁷¹ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America* (2005), 218-219.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 218-219.

this with the creation of the *National Association of Evangelicals* (NAE) in 1942. Two decisions in 1953 by the NAE leadership greatly influenced how it related to those outside its membership: first, when a liberal National Council Methodist bishop was charged with being a Communist sympathizer and testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee, the NAE annual convention passed a resolution supporting government investigations of ideologically suspect religious leaders; however, and second, unlike the fundamentalist *American Council of Churches* founded by Carl McIntire, the NAE did not require its members to completely separate from the liberal National Council of Churches (NCC), only that they repudiate and denounce such apostasy.⁷³ There were other liberal church leaders during the 1950s who were criticized for supposedly being Communists or Communist sympathizers. J.B. Matthews, chief investigator for the House of Representatives committee that investigated activities considered un-American, asked if the “pro-Communist clergymen have allowed their zeal for social justice to run away with their better judgment and patriotism?”⁷⁴ Members of this congressional committee repeatedly suggested that several specific liberal Protestant leaders were Communist sympathizers whose stance on social justice issues indicated a lack of patriotism.

A young preacher from a dairy farm in North Carolina, Billy Graham (b.1918), emerged as the primary spokesperson for this evangelical faith, which was seen as an alternative to fundamentalism and liberal Christianity. Graham, like Carl F.H. Henry before him, preferred to be called an evangelical rather than a fundamentalist, since the moniker ‘fundamentalist’ was associated with Christians who advocated for the separation from the rest of society, while Henry and Graham were both promoting a more active engagement with the outside world. Christianity was beginning to gain greater respect in mainstream American culture again, in part due to Graham’s cooperation with non-fundamentalists. The decisions by Henry, Graham, and the NAE all suggest that their generation of evangelicals was still theologically

⁷³ Mark Silk. “The Rise of the ‘New Evangelicalism’: Shock and Adjustment,” in *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960*, ed. William R. Hutchison (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 281-282.

⁷⁴ J.B. Matthews, as cited by Gaustad and Schmidt, 339.

conservative. The primary changes were not in what they believed, but instead how they interacted with those outside their belief system and how they promoted their beliefs. In his 1957 crusade in New York, for example, he accepted the sponsorship of New York City's liberal Protestant Council of Churches. The fundamentalists never forgave him, and this was the last of several incidents that led to the separation of the evangelicals and the fundamentalists.⁷⁵

From here on, the focus of my thesis will be on conservative evangelicals instead of the isolationist fundamentalists. Whereas the fundamentalists' entire identity was shaped by their separatism from Christians they considered too liberal and doctrinally impure, the evangelicals recognized by the 1940s that if the voice of fundamentalism could be tempered slightly, evangelical Christianity could regain its influence in the American religious environment.⁷⁶ Many American Protestants of that period were neither fundamentalists nor liberal modernists, but instead were somewhere in between the two extremes. The polarizing environment sometimes forced them to choose sides. The evangelicals recognized this group for its untapped potential and took advantage of it. This difference between fundamentalists and evangelicals had less to do with doctrine – they both believed in the inerrancy of Scripture, for example – than it had to do with how to interact with those who did not agree with them. The conservative evangelical faith, despite its sophisticated strategies of engagement with the outside world, is, theologically, eerily similar to the faith of the authors of *The Fundamentals*, written just three decades before the reemergence of the evangelicals .

Graham's ministry can be considered a reemergence of the urban mass revivalism tradition in the U.S., which had previously included the careers of George Whitefield in the 18th century, Charles Grandison Finney and Dwight Moody in the 19th, and Billy Sunday in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This tradition had been temporarily suspended after the Scopes Trial. All of these preachers had preached to large public audiences in order to promote the faith of their listeners. Graham's strategy was first to

⁷⁵ Balmer, 52.

⁷⁶ Marsden, 64-65.

change the hearts and minds of individuals, with the goal that society as a whole would be changed as a result. Preferring to align himself with the evangelicals instead of the fundamentalists, he believed that his missionary work required some cooperation with Christians who held different theological beliefs.⁷⁷

The evangelical Christians were better-prepared than the members of the mainline denominations for the FCC decision in 1960 which allowed networks to count paid religious broadcasts as meeting their public service requirement. This FCC decision meant that the networks no longer had to give free air time to the religious denominations – they could sell that time to the evangelicals instead. The evangelicals’ message was already known to be popular with the public, and they had a strong base of church members willing to contribute financially to get their message out.⁷⁸

Both the message of evangelicalism and the method of preaching that message were transformed during this period. In 1955, Robert Schuller, eager to work within the culture of his audience, used the automobile culture to his advantage in his position as minister in Orange County, California. He rented a drive-in theater and encouraged the public to come to the event in the family car. He then preached a sermon in an environment that was entirely familiar to his audience. As another example, Chuck Smith, pastor of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel in Costa Mesa, California, adapted his church services in order to appeal to the hippie culture of the 1960s. These two examples demonstrate how successful Christian evangelism often used the same entrepreneurial spirit that made American industry successful.⁷⁹

This deeper engagement of Christians with the secular culture was also evident in the design of church buildings, for the purpose, as with the earlier examples, of winning more souls for Christ. Otto Spaeth, founder of the Liturgical Arts Society, said that the church attendee “drives a streamlined car to work in an office or factory where everything has been designed for maximum efficiency and comfort,”

⁷⁷ Silk, 282.

⁷⁸ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America* (2005), 219-223.

⁷⁹ Balmer, 52-53.

but in church “is asked to hurl himself back centuries to say his prayers in the pious gloom of a Gothic or Romanesque past.”⁸⁰

Christianity in the U.S. during the 1950s was influenced by an emphasis on what religion could do for the individual believer’s internal attitude. Besides the primary evangelical influences like Graham’s message of internal transformation, there were other Christians promoting message of self-confidence and spiritual tranquility that follows one’s conversion to Christianity. Norman Vincent Peale’s (1898-1993) goal, for example, in his book *The Power of Positive Thinking*, was to “help you believe in yourself and release your inner powers.”⁸¹ Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen (1895-1979), in his popular television programs, encouraged his viewers to develop a stronger faith, as that would result in a peacefulness that “is deepened, not disturbed, by the crosses, checks, and disquietudes of the world, for they are all welcomed as coming from the hands of the loving Father.”⁸² The message of both of these Christian leaders emphasized religion’s provision of spiritual comfort to the individual rather than engaging with the practical problems facing the country and the world.

This new public image of Christianity and its evangelism were not without its critics. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) expressed his concern about the version of the Christian faith promoted by Graham. His main concern was that by “presenting Christianity as a series of simple answers to complex questions” Graham would encourage his followers to dismiss the gospel as irrelevant to contemporary life. Niebuhr’s concern was not shared by his colleague, Henry P. Van Dusen, president of Union Theological Seminary, who had earlier been led to the Christian faith by the 19th century preacher Billy Sunday: “There are many, of whom I am one, who are not ashamed to testify that they would probably never have come within the sound of Dr. Niebuhr’s voice or the influence of his mind if they had not been *first* touched by the message of [Billy Sunday].” He understood Graham’s value in encouraging his

⁸⁰ Otto Spaeth, as cited by Gaustad and Schmidt, 341.

⁸¹ Norman Vincent Peale, as cited by Gaustad and Schmidt, 337.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 338.

followers to start their journey in Christian faith using the “more readily digestible form” of the gospel rather than the “strong meat” that is suitable for a more mature Christian.⁸³

In summary, the time period after the Scopes trial through the 1950s witnessed first the marginalization of conservative Christians and then, for many, their return to mainstream American culture three decades later. Remarkably, they accomplished this without compromising on the beliefs in the inerrancy of Scripture, Jesus’ virgin birth, his death as an atonement for human sin, or the disbelief in evolution. These core elements of fundamentalist theology had not changed significantly since the publication of *The Fundamentals*. This return to popularity in America was assisted by evangelicals’ use of popular media and institutions of higher education to promote their message.

Despite their successful refusal to compromise in areas of Christian doctrine, in many areas of power and influence, conservative Christians were still forced to compromise with non-Christians and liberals. Some people, like the members of the Supreme Court, recognized the United States as a nation without a state religion. Many conservative evangelicals, however, interpreted the nation’s history to mean that the U.S. is a Christian nation. To the impartial observer, by the 1960s it was clear that the U.S. could not follow one single path established by its Christian background and by its emphasis on religious liberty. The country was becoming a nation of religious pluralism to a degree unprecedented in its history. Consequently, there were numerous challenges to practices that certain groups considered either an intrusion on their rights to practice their religion without state interference, or considered an unfair taxpayer subsidy or government endorsement of one religious group. Court cases involving schools have usually involved two general concerns: prayer and Bible reading, and the teaching of creationism and evolution. In one 1962 case involving the required recitation of a prayer in every public school classroom in New York, the Supreme Court ruled that practice unconstitutional. The singing of hymns, reading from the Bible, and recitation of prescribed prayers had been traditional practices in public schools. However, considering the public desire for religious freedom and the need to avoid even the perception of state

⁸³ Henry P. Van Dusen, as cited by Silk, “The Rise of the ‘New Evangelicalism’: Shock and Adjustment.”

support for any religious group, the courts, according to Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black in 1962, “put an end to governmental control of religion and of prayer” without destroying either. Supporters of these religious displays emphasize the long tradition of Christianity with the founders of the United States. Opponents cite the religious freedom and lack of state religion that are also core elements of American history.⁸⁴

Throughout the period from the 1970s – 1980s, women gained greater visibility and authority in numerous aspects of Christianity, including the creation of gender-inclusive liturgy and hymns, the emphasis on both the feminine and masculine aspects of God, and in some denominations including the Episcopal Church, ordination as priests. Southern Baptists followed a different timeline. Women had been ordained as early as 1964, and by the mid-1980s there were more than 400 ordained Southern Baptist women. At its 1984 meeting, however, the Southern Baptist Convention determined that women should no longer have any role of authority over men, based on man’s role as first in creation and woman’s first to sin in the Garden of Eden.⁸⁵

1973 was the year that the Supreme Court decided, in *Roe v. Wade*, to protect a woman’s right to have an abortion. The reaction from many conservative evangelical Christians, which may surprise many contemporary students of the history of this time period, was actually supportive of the decision. W.A. Criswell, a prominent evangelical pastor in Dallas, expressed his approval, as did W. Barry Garrett, writing in the *Baptist Press*, a publication of the Southern Baptist Conference. Evangelical Christians initially did not unite around abortion. Instead, many of them were angry about another Supreme Court case, *Green v. Connally*, involving Bob Jones University. Racial segregation had been outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The IRS determined in the 1970s to use that law to revoke the university’s tax-exempt status because of its refusal to accept unmarried African-Americans, which the school found necessary due to its concern for preventing interracial dating. Balmer believes the evangelicals’ primary

⁸⁴ Hugo Black, as cited by Gaustad and Schmidt, 356.

⁸⁵ Gaustad and Schmidt, 393-396.

motivation was not racism, but instead the university's right to protect the sanctity of the evangelical subculture from outside interference.⁸⁶

Shortly thereafter, the nation elected evangelical Christian Jimmy Carter of Georgia to the U.S. presidency. This energized Christians, bringing many out of the apolitical indifference many adopted after the Scopes trial. Televangelist Pat Robertson, for example, was one of Carter's most enthusiastic supporters. After the nation's evangelical leaders were awakened from their lack of interest in politics, several of them participated in a conference call in 1979 to discuss other subjects that they could use to rally their followers. Some evangelical leaders, including Paul Weyrich, had been trying unsuccessfully to persuade Christians to care about other subjects, including school prayer, pornography, and the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, but with no success. Then they decided that abortion could awaken evangelical Christians from their political indifference. That is how, in the late 1970s, in preparation for the 1980 presidential election, evangelical Christian leaders united behind their anti-abortion beliefs, making it a central campaign test for political candidates. The irony of Carter's presidency is that his most supportive voters turned against him four years later, having realized that his beliefs were more liberal than theirs.⁸⁷

Evangelical Christians instead supported Ronald Reagan, despite his being divorced and his signing into law, as governor of California, the legalization of abortion. Despite having grown up in a mainline Disciples of Christ church, he had not attended church regularly before his presidency. As president, however, he spoke often about the role of religion in America. Reagan presided at National Prayer Breakfasts, spoke to gatherings of the National Association of Evangelicals, and spoke openly about the value of the Bible in answering the problems that people face every day. In 1984, on the anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, he declared that day the *National Sanctity of Human Life Day* in support of the abortion opponents who were among his loyal supporters. If the 1976 election is considered

⁸⁶ Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*, 61-66.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 61-66.

the year of evangelicals' reemergence onto the political scene, and 1980 the year they were mobilized to support conservative causes, then 1984 was witness to a yet increasingly tight relationship between evangelical Christians and the Republican Party, with Christian leaders encouraging their followers to support Republican causes that had not traditionally been associated with Christianity, such as Reagan's aggressive foreign policy and loosened gun laws, and other subjects already associated with the Christian right, including opposition to abortion and homosexuality, and support of school prayer.⁸⁸ The political activity of evangelicals during this period led to increased political influence, which, over time, resulted in their theological beliefs becoming more tolerant of certain economic power holders within American society. They were no longer operating on the margins of society, but instead were cooperating with the power brokers in the country's economy and government.

Supporters of the evangelical faith tradition have often defined themselves as much by how they differ from the secular culture and liberal Christians as they have by the core elements of traditional Christianity. While they chose to use abortion and homosexuality as moral issues that defined who they are, they chose to overlook the controversial subject of divorce, perhaps because many of their own, and one of their leaders, President Ronald Reagan, had been divorced. Their response to the feminist movement was similar. The proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution in 1971 generated opposition from evangelical Christians, although not initially. They were strongly opposed to it only during the late 1970s, with women as some of the strongest opponents. Phyllis Schlafly, according to Armstrong, identified feminism as the cause of all the world's ills, a view based on Eve's disobedience and Eve's encouragement of Adam's disobedience in the creation story in Genesis. She and other evangelicals associated feminism with a plot to raise taxes and increase the power of the federal government to exercise greater control of people's lives. Using biblical themes, they believed that the survival of American society depended on women assuming a traditional role in political and family life.

⁸⁸ Armstrong, 311-313.

When the amendment was not successfully ratified by enough states by 1982, it died and failed to become law.⁸⁹

With the power of Jerry Falwell's *Moral Majority* during the 1980s and Pat Robertson's *Christian Coalition* during the 1990s, conservative evangelical Christians have often aligned their most important concerns with the interests of people in power, both in government and in corporate America. They identified the most threatening forms of sin as coming from outside of evangelical Christianity, while ignoring certain sinful beliefs within their own churches, such as indifference towards economic injustice. The *Christian Coalition Voter's Guide*, published during each election year, identifies the issues considered most important to the evangelical Christian faith, usually abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, strong foreign policy, and support for gun ownership, for example.⁹⁰

This formation of evangelicals' identity as Christians has also played a role in their advocacy for other subjects such as the teaching of creationism / intelligent design in public schools, taxpayer vouchers for private Christian schools, and the overall role of government in society. In order for the conservative evangelicals to retain the vitality of their tradition, it was essential to develop certain core elements that would set them apart from the rest of the world. These beliefs included an opposition to abortion, a condemnation of homosexuality, and support of creationism and school vouchers. According to Finke and Stark, "Placing high demands on members and maintaining distinctive boundaries with the surrounding culture are not *sufficient* to explaining the vitality of religious organizations. Yet these are often *necessary conditions for vital religions.*"⁹¹

Conclusion

Fundamentalist, and then conservative evangelical, Christianity in the U.S. would never have developed without the disestablishment of religion and the resulting religious marketplace, the tradition of

⁸⁹ Armstrong, 311-312.

⁹⁰ Larry Sabato. *Toward the Millennium: The Elections of 1996* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 70.

⁹¹ Finke and Stark (2005), 249; italics in original.

revivalism, and the cutthroat competition among denominations. Consistent with the rest of American history, fundamentalism was also influenced by democratic, egalitarian, and anti-establishment values, particularly in the development of an uneducated clergy. The religious beliefs and traditions that were originally held by religious outsiders during the 18th and 19th century, including the Baptists and Methodists, became the beliefs of believers who sought greater respectability among mainstream and upper-class members of society during the first two decades of the 20th century. After the major setback of the Scopes Trial in 1925 and the fundamentalists' need to regroup and define their place in American culture, they returned with a less combative, friendlier demeanor.

Since the Scopes Trial of 1925, fundamentalist Christians have changed from an apolitical isolationist religious group far removed from the power brokers in the U.S. to a highly political religious group with its influence being felt in many parts of American society. They have accomplished this by creating an identity that is very different from mainstream culture regarding social issues, yet have chosen to conform to the culture prevalent in the halls of power regarding subjects involving economics and corporate America. Of course, this set of values also allows them to identify the liberal opponents of their conservative economic agenda as the enemy it needs in order to establish its own identity. Justice Hugo Black issued a prescient warning in response to the 1962 case that outlawed the required recitation of a state government-written prayer in public schools, "A union of government and religion tends to destroy government and degrade religion."⁹²

The difference between an evangelical of the era before becoming politically engaged and a modern evangelical can be summarized by contrasting Jerry Falwell's (1933-2007) beliefs in 1965 with his beliefs in the 1970s: In 1965, he said "Believing the Bible as I do, I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else – including fighting Communism, or participating in civil-rights reform."⁹³ Based on his dispensationalist beliefs, Falwell

⁹² Hugo Black, as cited by Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 89.

⁹³ Jerry Falwell, as cited by Balmer, *Making of Evangelicalism*, 60.

considered Communism and a decline in American power as inevitable signs of the times. By the mid-1970s, he had changed how he related to the rest of the world. As did the fundamentalists in the 1920s, Falwell and his followers still saw themselves at war with secular humanism. The difference in the 1970s was that they were prepared to fight an offensive war instead of merely defending their own territory. As examples, Falwell sought accreditation for Liberty University, which he founded, and his church services were broadcast on 392 television stations and 600 radio stations.⁹⁴ He combined the extreme fear of the corrupt influences from the outside world with the earlier philosophy of Dwight Moody to win as many souls for Christ, or at least protect them from secular humanism.

The challenge for fundamentalists in the 20th century was to adapt to cultural and scientific changes, yet to retain certain core tenets that they believe they are mandated by God to retain. The history of fundamentalists and their liberal adversaries cannot be separated, even as they have moved in opposite directions, since the beliefs of both have influenced the other, and both have been influenced by cultural changes beyond their control. The fundamentalist shift from postmillennialism to premillennialism is one example. By the end of the historical period described above, nearly all conservative evangelicals have become premillennialists. Their beliefs, in contrast to those of past generations, are now considered compatible with being politically active, as long as such activity is used to win more converts to Christianity.

The fundamentalists' understanding of their faith was limited by their anti-intellectual populist background. Their faith served an important purpose by protecting them from the negative influences of the changing world around them. Unknown to them, the meaning of their faith was also changing, to the point that the word 'faith' had come to mean a confident assurance that everything in the Bible is true and can be trusted as coming from God without any human influence.

⁹⁴ Armstrong, 275.

The strength of the fundamentalist, and then the conservative evangelical faith, comes in part from the firm conviction that there is no alternative belief to it. All the evidence available to its followers supports its core beliefs. This may explain the need to show how significant world events are often predicted in the Bible. It also ensures the continued status of the Bible as the only source of all truth for conservative evangelicals. They see their choice as forcing them into one extreme position or its opposite: either the Bible is the perfect and complete message from God to humanity, and is the only such message from God; or the Bible is worthless in the pursuit of divine truth. To maintain this position, evangelicals have refused to open their minds to ideas that don't support their belief. The confidence of their beliefs and their refusal to consider alternative beliefs reinforce each other. The reliance on the Bible as the source of truth has, at times, led to an unwillingness to trust any human intuition as a source of truth. This has led some to fail to make any serious effort to develop the critical thinking skills needed to make sense of the Bible and apply it in their lives. In order to preserve the status of the Bible in their religious tradition, some conservative evangelicals have abandoned their innate ability to know God, and have, as a result, lost a well-balanced theology.

This lack of confidence in human wisdom has resulted in an inaccurate understanding of history and of theology, and has left fundamentalist theology more vulnerable, not less, to the influences in the world around them. This, in turn, has reinforced the suspicion of worldly, or human, wisdom, and made them more confident in, and reliant on, the Bible as the only source of truth about God and sometimes even about humanity and the world. Conservative evangelicals are often unaware of the relationship between the Bible, human history, and their own culture; they have no idea how all three have combined to give a distorted understanding of the other two, and have influenced their beliefs about God.

Chapter 2: Four Authors and Their Six Critiques of Fundamentalism's Understanding of Faith

Having described the historical development of fundamentalist Christianity in the U.S., I will summarize four authors' analyses of the fundamentalist understanding of faith. **I have divided their analyses into six different critiques, with material from multiple authors in each critique.** The first one is Mark Noll, an evangelical Christian historian who shares the same religious heritage as fundamentalists and has taught at a conservative evangelical college. His analysis, therefore, comes from within the same background as the fundamentalist Christians. This is followed by James Barr, a Scottish theologian and Hebrew scholar whose theological background is in the Church of Scotland. The last two critiques are from two American Catholic priests, Eugene LaVerdiere and Thomas O'Meara. Neither of them considers Protestantism in general to be the problem, or Catholicism the solution to fundamentalism. O'Meara in particular is well aware of the fundamentalist tendencies within Catholicism as well as Protestantism.

a. Mark Noll

Mark A. Noll is a professor of history at Notre Dame University. His research is mostly in the history of Christianity in the United States and Canada. He comes from an evangelical Christian background and his critique is not a comparison between Catholic and evangelical theologies. Instead, he makes an important distinction between the founding principles of American evangelical Christianity as developed by Jonathan Edwards in the 18th century and those of the contemporary evangelicals who identify themselves as carrying on Edwards' evangelical tradition today.

Relying exclusively on the Bible for their knowledge of God and for the sustenance of their faith, evangelicals have failed to cultivate an active mind as a source of knowledge about God and about their own humanity. Consequently, their faith has often lacked a living spirituality that is capable of understanding which beliefs of theirs can be attributed to God speaking to them, and which ones do not come from God. As Martin Luther expressed this idea, cultivation of the mind is essential because we

need to understand both the world of Scripture and the nature of the world in which the word would take root.⁹⁵ Although Noll acknowledges the diversity among evangelicals regarding social justice concerns and politics, in the book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* little is written about the diversity among those who consider themselves evangelicals. He focuses primarily on their common lack of intellectual development. For example, this is the opening sentence of *The Scandal*: “The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.”⁹⁶

Noll says that the exclusive reliance on the Bible and the neglect of the mind have resulted in at least four often overlapping qualities that characterize fundamentalist faith today: an unwillingness or inability to deal with changes in science or the humanities, for example, changes that challenge the prevailing beliefs about God; a lack of awareness of how Enlightenment theologians and other post-biblical writers have influenced contemporary interpretation of the Bible; the use of the Bible to understand current events such as war, suggesting that the Bible contains specific prophecies that are being fulfilled only now; and a diminished faith in the human ability to discern any divine truth except what is specifically revealed in the Bible. Within all of these traits lies the need for a completely objective reading of the Bible and the belief that only the Bible can be trusted to teach a message from God, with the result that believers often neglect to use the full capacity of their minds to understand God.

Noll’s first critique is that evangelicals have a poor ability to adapt to changes in the world in which Scripture is interpreted and applied. During times of crisis, the Bible has proven useful in establishing social order out of disorder. Noll argues that American evangelical Christians, since at least the early 20th century, have lacked the intellectual strength to meet the new challenges associated with increased urbanization, world war, and the teaching of evolution and biblical criticism. Until then, they had simply taken for granted that their Christian faith tradition was compatible with the self-evident truths of freedom and optimism on which the U.S. was founded. There had therefore been no need to develop an

⁹⁵ Mark A. Noll. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 37.

⁹⁶ Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 3.

intellectually deeper philosophy. The time and energy of Christians was more effectively put to use in evangelism and moral activism.⁹⁷

Evangelicals still believed that the Bible had the answers to all of life's problems. However, when they turned to the Bible to make sense of the changing world around them, they lacked the intellectual ability to interpret the changing world around them. In response to this crisis, evangelicals maintained basic Christian truths. However, the prominence of what Noll calls "Bible-onlyism"⁹⁸, at the expense of a well-articulated theology, meant that evangelicals lacked the historical depth and the ability to confront, in a meaningful way, the challenges to their faith. They still believed that the Bible had all the answers to life's problems, but the energy they had devoted to evangelism was not matched by an equal commitment to developing a well-rounded theology. Noll quotes Charles Malik to make the point: Evangelical Christians "have no idea of the infinite value of spending years of leisure in conversing with the greatest minds and souls of the past, and thereby ripening and sharpening, and enlarging their powers of thinking."⁹⁹

Noll's second critique is that evangelicals remain unaware of how the Enlightenment understanding of truth has influenced their interpretation of the Bible. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, American evangelical Christians actively pursued studies in both theology and science with the belief that knowledge from each source, the Bible and the natural world, would reinforce knowledge from the other. They also used the same factual, objective approach to their studies of both areas. In both subjects, the student began with provable fact and ended up with general truths.¹⁰⁰ An objective approach to science and theology was exalted as the royal road to truth.

This approach to the study of science and human society played a major role in the founding values of the United States, since a major strength of evangelicals had been their ability to unite a

⁹⁷ Noll. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 90.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁹⁹ Charles Malik, as cited by Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 26.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

commitment to democratic authority from the people and intellectual authority from science. During the 19th century, Christian faith and scientific rationality operated with no conflict between them.¹⁰¹ This began to change toward the end of the century with the teaching of evolution and a new scientific approach. The liberal evangelical Christians accepted the hegemony of the new science, which had been transformed from static and mechanistic to developmental and organic. The populist evangelicals, who would later identify as fundamentalists, resisted the developments of the new science and instead sought to preserve the old Enlightenment principles in their old content as well as their form. They longed for the harmony between religion and science, and they refused to reject their “rigidly inductive” method of Bible study which treated the Bible as a storehouse of factual knowledge about God, in favor of the new scientific principles, such as evolution. Instead, they believed that a thorough examination of Scripture would correct what they considered the false presuppositions of these new scientific ideas.¹⁰²

Even before these advances in science caused a rift between science and theology, the Bible played a major role in the establishment of tradition and social order in the U.S. Afterwards, with the Bible’s role in American society being challenged, evangelicals pushed back against these liberal forces by holding on to basic Christian truths, such as the inerrancy of Scripture and the emphasis on evangelism. Unable to understand how their interpretation of the Bible had been influenced by past philosophers and scientists, however, they struggled to reconcile the new truths of the 20th century with the truth of the Bible.¹⁰³

Noll’s third critique is that evangelicals use the Bible as a source of specific predictions of major world events, most notably war. By using the Bible in this way to explain current and future events, evangelicals are showing how they explain change – by providing scriptural evidence to show that all these changes were preordained by God and to show that the future as well as the past is in God’s control. There is an ironic sense of relief in knowing that, centuries earlier, the Bible predicted the dismal state of

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰² Ibid., 103-104.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 107.

the world that dominated the 20th century.¹⁰⁴ Evangelicals inherited from 19th century theologians the tendency to treat “the verses of the Bible as pieces in a jigsaw puzzle that needed only to be sorted and then fit together to possess a finished picture of divine truth; an overwhelming tendency to ‘essentialism,’ or the conviction that a specific formula could capture for all times and places the essence of biblical truth for any specific issue concerning God, the human condition, or the fate of the world.”¹⁰⁵

This tendency to use the Bible as a crystal ball instead of as a guide for sorting out the complex tangles of international morality did not stop with the early 20th century. During the Persian Gulf war of 1991, the books and periodicals published by evangelical Christian organizations paid very little attention to the morality of the war, the role of the United Nations in the wake of the collapse of Communism, the history of Western involvement in the Middle East, or other topics that could be understood through the perspective of the Christian tradition. Instead, evangelicals were fascinated by self-assured, populist explanations of how events in the Persian Gulf were fulfilling biblical prophecies. In response to crises evangelicals usually do one of two things: they “either mount a public crusade, or [they] retreat into an inner pious sanctum. That is, [they] are filled with righteous anger and attempt to recoup [their] losses through political confrontation, or [they] eschew the world of mere material appearances and seek the timeless consolations of the Spirit.”¹⁰⁶ This evangelical tendency elevates the supernatural explanations of world events at the expense of natural explanations involving the uncertainty and unpredictability of human behavior, which “makes it nearly impossible to look upon the political sphere as a realm of creation ordained by God for serious Christian involvement.”¹⁰⁷

Noll’s fourth critique is that evangelicals lack confidence in the human ability to discern any divine truth except what is specifically revealed in the Bible. As a result, the human mind is not trusted as a contributing source for knowledge of God; the mind is useful only to the extent that it is used to read the

¹⁰⁴Noll. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 121.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 140-141.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

Bible. According to Noll, “When we study something, we are of course learning about that thing. But even more, we are learning about the One who made that thing.”¹⁰⁸ This is important for the Christian because the human mind does not exist on its own, apart from God. Because God created our minds, knowledge of God is revealed through the arts and sciences. This lack of confidence in any human wisdom is consistent with the belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, because it suggests that the experience or wisdom of the biblical authors was useless in its writing. The Bible is not treated as the word of God as mediated through the life experiences and cultural settings of its authors, but instead as the word of God, pure and simple.¹⁰⁹ The natural conclusion of this belief is summarized nicely by the early 20th century dispensational theologian Lewis Sperry Chafer, as quoted by Noll: “The natural capacities of the human mind do not function in the realm of spiritual things.”¹¹⁰ The implication is that grace destroys nature, rather than building on it.

All four of Noll’s critiques of the evangelical understanding of faith have in common the core Christian belief that God is revealed to humanity not just in the words of the Bible, but in the depth and complexity of the human mind and in the natural world. Our use of one of these sources of knowledge would be inadequate unless it is balanced by a solid understanding of the others. When, in the early 20th century, some researchers in the sciences and humanities began to understand in greater depth the non-biblical sources of knowledge that could be interpreted to undermine the credibility of the Bible, fundamentalists responded by hardening their absolute confidence in the Bible and giving little or no credibility to any wisdom believed to have come from human sources. The result is that some evangelicals have decided that in order to preserve the credibility of one of God’s books, the Bible, they must close the other one, the human mind.¹¹¹ How unfortunate that, as has already been demonstrated, this approach has had disastrous consequences for the interpretation of Bible. In the area of science, for

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 133.

¹¹⁰ Lewis Sperry Chafer, as cited by Noll, *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 136.

¹¹¹ Noll. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 199.

example, some evangelicals have given the final authority to “temporal, situated, and contextualized interpretations of the Bible that arose from the mania for science of the early nineteenth century.”¹¹²

b. James Barr

Like Noll, James Barr is an ardent critic of fundamentalism, although not as closely associated with it as Noll. Barr’s critique of fundamentalism was published in two books, *Fundamentalism*, in 1977, and *Beyond Fundamentalism*, in 1984. In the first book, he exposes the inconsistencies and flaws in the logical reasoning of fundamentalism and the theological needs that fundamentalist belief fulfills in the lives of its believers. In *Beyond Fundamentalism* he takes a gentler, pastoral approach. This book was written for fundamentalists who may be considering leaving Christianity completely, as it presents an alternative interpretation of the Christian faith.

Barr has four critiques of fundamentalism’s understanding of faith. His first critique is that fundamentalists assume that the divine inspiration of scripture requires its inerrancy as well. This inerrancy is the foundation of fundamentalist faith. His second critique is that fundamentalists fail to consider the role that contemporary culture plays in their interpretation of the Bible. His third critique is that the need for inerrancy and the need to conform to contemporary culture mean that sometimes the Bible must be interpreted literally, sometimes figuratively. His fourth critique is that fundamentalists require a completely objective reading of the Bible and its correspondence to contemporary events, meaning that they expect biblical prophecies to be fulfilled soon.

Barr’s first critique of fundamentalism is for its belief that the inspiration of scripture requires its inerrancy. Historically, the inspiration of scripture had a different meaning. According to the Westminster Confession of 1646, belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible is supported by “the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.”¹¹³ This inspiration of scripture refers to its message of divine truth to humanity and has been held by Protestants since the 17th century. The 20th

¹¹² Ibid., 199.

¹¹³ “Westminster Confession of Faith”, as cited by Barr, 261.

century American fundamentalists took this one step further and determined that if the Bible was inspired by God, then there could not possibly be any error in it. The trustworthiness of the Bible's theology depends on the historical accuracy of the events in the Bible. They could not imagine the possibility that the biblical writers, writing a message directly from God, could write anything less than perfect history and doctrine, or else it could not be from God.¹¹⁴ According to Barr, fundamentalists have only one link between the belief in inspiration and that in inerrancy: "their own opinion."¹¹⁵

Accepting the inerrancy of scripture, it is easy to believe in the reliability of a story like Jonah and the whale in the Old Testament because of references to it in the New Testament. In the absence of the doctrine of infallibility, one could believe that God could speak to the Israelite people through Jonah's experience, regardless of whether it happened literally. However, according to fundamentalist beliefs, when Jesus referred to Jonah spending three days in the belly of a whale, Jesus was placing his authority behind the belief that there was a historical Jonah whose experiences happened exactly as they are described in the Bible.¹¹⁶

Barr observed that the fundamentalist dependence on the inerrancy of the Bible and historical certainty of biblical events contradicts the real meaning of the phrase "justification by faith." A dependence on the perfection of scripture produces spiritual effects similar to those of the 'works of the law' in St. Paul's writing in II Cor. 3:6 (RSV) – "The written code kills, but the Spirit gives life."¹¹⁷ Fundamentalism substitutes a dependence on the objective, factual use of evidence in place of faith to support its beliefs. "It is striking that a religious form which places so much stress on personal faith in Christ is made dependent on a rationalist proof of the inerrancy of the Bible, in which the promises of

¹¹⁴ James Barr. *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 84-85.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹¹⁶ James Barr. *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 73.

¹¹⁷ James Barr. *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 54-55.

God are not considered trustworthy unless they are enshrined in a book all statements of which are infallible and inerrant.”¹¹⁸

A confidence in one’s fundamentalist beliefs results from this belief in infallibility. A confident faith is often perceived as a strong faith. In order for Christian evangelism to be successful, the gospel “must be affirmed without doubt or qualification, since hesitations will be quickly noticed by hearers from a non-Christian background and taken as evidence that the Christians do not know what they are talking about, even in matters of their own religion.”¹¹⁹ Christian literature is also intended to give confidence to believers and must be presented in a way that doesn’t question the core fundamentalist beliefs. For many fundamentalist believers, conservative scholarship often serves the purpose of giving them comfort or security, assuring them that their religious convictions will not be questioned. Such literature is propagandistic in nature, regardless of whether or not its authors intended it to be used that way. Consequently, fundamentalists may be very confident in their faith, even as their faith is based on rational proofs of the Bible’s infallibility and historical accuracy, proofs which are susceptible to challenges based on external evidence.¹²⁰

Barr’s second critique involves the unexamined influence that modern culture plays in fundamentalists’ interpretation of the Bible and its application to contemporary problems. Once a believer accepts the Bible as the inerrant word of God, he or she still has to make sense out of a complex set of passages that can be used to support opposite sides on many subjects. Fundamentalists are not always aware of the influence of this context in which biblical passages are interpreted and applied to contemporary problems. In contrast to the Catholic practice of using their traditions to guide them through contemporary problems, fundamentalists whose roots lie in the American Protestant churches do not trust church traditions as a source of truth. Barr says that evangelical fundamentalism and the Roman Catholic Church both have ways to help themselves create stability and ensure that the Bible will not be

¹¹⁸ James Barr. *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 339-340.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

interpreted to require anything that is not already part of their tradition. In fundamentalism, the evangelical tradition of religion is the accepted framework within which the Bible is interpreted, and no interpretation is carried out in such a way that would question this tradition. “The insistence on biblical inerrancy, infallibility and so on is a shield set up to protect this tradition from criticism.” Catholics are more aware of the role that tradition plays in their faith, but in fundamentalism originating in Protestantism, every doctrine is presented as if it came directly from the Bible.¹²¹

Barr’s third critique is a logical extension of the second: belief in the inerrancy of the Bible requires that fundamentalists sometimes interpret it literally, and sometimes non-literally. The interpretation deemed correct within the fundamentalist communities changes over time. Despite the permanence of the written words of the Bible, the culture and scientific knowledge of its readers have changed, which has led some, mostly liberal Christians, to dethrone the Bible from its status as inerrant word of God, and for fundamentalists to affirm their belief that the Bible is the absolutely perfect message of divine truth to all of humanity. In order to accommodate these changes, the fundamentalist belief in inerrancy must be flexible enough to enable the readers to adapt their beliefs about what they consider the correct meaning of the Bible. A non-literal interpretation allows fundamentalists to maintain the belief in the inerrancy of Scriptures without having to hold certain beliefs that are widely accepted as incompatible with reality.¹²² The belief in inerrancy is maintained by changing the interpretation of Scripture when necessary, such as abandoning the literal interpretation whenever it becomes an embarrassment for believers. If these changes are necessary to avoid embarrassment, they are made possible by the presence of enough believers who have already accepted the alternative version of truth, and whose faith in the Bible is therefore not weakened by the acceptance of those changes.¹²³ Biblical criticism that undermines support for a fundamentalist reading of the Bible is perceived as a threat to the Bible’s status as the

¹²¹ Ibid., 107.

¹²² James Barr. *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 36-37.

¹²³ James Barr. *Fundamentalism*, 46.

absolute and perfect symbol of Christianity. The core elements of that faith tradition must be flexible in order to protect that symbolic status.¹²⁴

The six days of creation in Genesis provide one example of how the inerrant meaning has been influenced by science. A literal interpretation would mean that the world didn't exist before this six-day period, but was fully formed afterward. This belief is supported by the first chapter of Genesis, which states multiple times that each day had a morning and an evening. Most contemporary theologians, however, have accepted the belief that this passage was not meant to be taken literally, that it means that creation was characterized by six clearly defined epochs. The author simply used the terminology of 'day,' 'evening,' and 'morning' because they were the easiest time periods that could be comprehended by the finite human mind, and therefore useful for comprehending the subject. When the literal truth of the Bible is pitted against the scientific truths that are widely accepted within the Christian tradition, a solution must be found that does not require believers to choose between them.¹²⁵

As another example of Barr's, Genesis presents a genealogical history from the time of Adam and Eve until the flood experienced by Noah. During the early 20th century, many fundamentalist Christians who supported the literal reading of the genealogical history used this information to determine what they believed was the precise year of the creation of Earth and the year of the Flood. If scientific evidence provided contradictory evidence, fundamentalists believed the Bible, and therefore rejected the science as faulty. Today, however, Christians have overwhelmingly accepted the reliability of fossils and geological evidence that shows the earth is much older than previously believed. In order to accommodate the scientific evidence, the inerrant interpretation of today does not require the belief that Adam was the actual father of Seth, or Seth of Enosh; it only means that Seth was a descendant of Adam, as Enosh was of Seth.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ James Barr. *Fundamentalism* , 37.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 40-42.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

Fundamentalist theology is influenced by the belief that if liberal biblical critics are given an inch of credibility, they will take a mile. It is a short step from suggesting that Deuteronomy was written long after Moses, who is credited with writing the book, died, to believing that Jesus never said the words attributed to him, and then to believing that Jesus never existed.¹²⁷ Biblical criticism is believed to threaten the status of the Bible as the perfect symbol of the Christian faith. In this area, as in others, “the Bible as a symbol, rather than the Christ who speaks through the Bible, has become the supreme controlling factor.”¹²⁸

Barr’s fourth criticism is that the fundamentalist faith requires a completely objective reading of the Bible. There are two particular beliefs involving the relationship between the truth that is revealed in the Bible and truth as it is experienced by contemporary Christians. First is the belief that truth in fundamentalist Christianity is determined from the exact happening of events and prophecy in the Bible rather than from the spiritual significance of those events.¹²⁹ This biblical truth lies completely beyond the range of human subjectivity. Although written by human hands, the Bible provides “a standard of absolute truth which stands entirely outside of himself and thus lends objectivity to his position as acceptor of this standard.”¹³⁰ This faith requires that the actual event be exactly, or extremely, like its description in the Bible. This critique is similar to the first one, which dealt with the inerrancy of scripture. Unlike the first, this critique applies the objective reading of the Bible to contemporary concerns. Fundamentalists need to believe that the events described in the Bible correspond to external reality as they experience it today.¹³¹

This means that the events and theological instruction in the Bible must conform to the world in which the fundamentalist readers live. Their contemporary environment provides the context in which the

¹²⁷ Ibid., 68.

¹²⁸ James Barr. *Fundamentalism* , 37.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 183.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 311-312.

¹³¹ Ibid., 49.

Bible is interpreted.¹³² When this belief is combined with the need for objectivity in biblical interpretation, the result is an interesting approach to biblical prophecy: the believer's millennial theology, either post- or premillennialist, "is not seeking to understand the human thoughts or theology of the writers of Daniel and Revelation. Rather, he is seeking to project a series of future events, the sequence of which will correspond precisely with the sequence of elements in the texts, details, names, and figures as stated in the texts." Just as the Bible contains Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in the New Testament, the Bible student can be confident that New Testament prophecies should be interpreted literally and will be fulfilled someday.¹³³

All of Barr's critiques of fundamentalism show that as long as fundamentalists are able to maintain a strong, confident faith, they will not have to delve deeper into the meaning of the faith tradition which they claim to continue. These critiques also show a strong desire to determine exactly what the Bible means for the contemporary Christian and to let that divine word lead every aspect of one's life. Evangelicals can rely on their firm conviction that they know exactly how the Bible applies to their lives today, a view that can be maintained only if they are ignorant of the historical variations of how other Christians have interpreted scripture and applied it in their own cultures. There may be some tension between the flexibility of biblical interpretation described in the third critique and the need for an objective reading described in the fourth. As obvious as this may be to anybody analyzing fundamentalism from the outside, one must remember that fundamentalists are not usually interested in the historical variations of biblical interpretation. They don't think about contradictions in their beliefs if they don't have to do so. With the assurance that their beliefs come straight out of the Bible, the most important task for evangelical Christians is to go forth with confidence and persuade others to join the faith.

c. Eugene LaVerdiere

¹³² Ibid., 49.

¹³³ Ibid., 200-201.

Fr. Eugene LaVerdiere is a Catholic priest and the author of the booklet *Fundamentalism: A Pastoral Concern* (2000), first published in 1981 as a journal article, and “The Challenge of Fundamentalism”, an essay in *Emmanuel* magazine in 1988. In contrast to Barr’s experience with fundamentalism, LaVerdiere has had to deal with the fundamentalist influence within the Catholic Church. His writing is more suitable than Barr’s for the average layperson. LaVerdiere’s writing shows how fundamentalism fulfills an essential role in the lives of its believers, even though it does so in a way that limits, rather than promotes, genuine faith. When people are afraid of the changing world around them, they may cling to fundamentalism. As LaVerdiere shows, this belief in fundamentalism demonstrates a lack of faith to respond to life’s problems in a manner consistent with the teachings of Christianity. In contrast to Barr’s main book, LaVerdiere’s is more useful for showing a non-fundamentalist how to respond out of love to the fundamentalist influence.

In these writings, he analyzes the theological weaknesses of Christian fundamentalism and explains the reasons why many Christians in the United States are drawn to it. The fundamentalist faith lacks any meaningful depth of intellectual thinking, and tends to simplify the problems facing Christianity. This lack of critical thinking skills means that a subject as profound as the meaning of faith is not understood in great depth by Christians whose religious beliefs could be described as fundamentalist. LaVerdiere’s writings include the following four critiques of fundamentalism: the rigidity of its interpretation of the Bible; its treatment of the Bible as the absolute starting point for developing religious faith; an exaggerated view of the divine influence of the Bible, and a virtual denial of the influence of its human authors on the Bible; and its apocalyptic view of history, resulting in part from a belief that human realities cannot express divine truths apart from the Bible.

LaVerdiere’s first critique is that fundamentalism considers the biblical word as an absolute, and its meaning as clear and unchanging. According to this belief, the Bible does not require any interpretation; instead, fundamentalism denies the need and legitimacy of biblical interpretation. However, fundamentalists do unknowingly allow their personal and cultural experience to influence their

understanding of Scripture. They also equate the biblical word with their interpretation of it, resulting in the belief in there being one correct interpretation for everybody and for all time.¹³⁴

LaVerdiere's second critique is that fundamentalism treats the Bible as the starting point for knowing the truth in faith. For the Israelites of the Bible and for the early Christians, the experience of God did not begin with the writing of Scripture. Instead, the Scriptures came out of the Israelite community's faith and experience of God. For fundamentalist Christians, however, knowledge of the Bible must precede a genuine life of faith: "For the fundamentalist, the biblical word comes first. Life and faith follow."¹³⁵ This approach to faith does not leave open the possibility for revelation of any truths not already developed in one's religious tradition.¹³⁶ Not only is the Bible the starting point for developing one's faith, it also appears to be the end of its development as well.

LaVerdiere's third critique is that "fundamentalism is a docetism of the word."¹³⁷ The original Docetists were an ancient group of people who believed that Jesus was divine in reality but human in appearance only. He could not have been both divine and human, according to this belief. Fundamentalist Christians believe that the Bible is the word of God only, and does not contain any influence of the human authors whose hands wrote its words. By treating the Bible as exclusively a divine word written for all of humanity, they fail to consider adequately the culture and context in which it was written.¹³⁸ A failure to recognize the humanity of the Bible can have negative consequences as some fundamentalists engage in inhuman actions that they believe are supported by God. By emphasizing only the divinity of the Word, fundamentalists can too easily "think of [them]selves as divine, and [their] divine word becomes an inhuman word."¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Eugene LaVerdiere. *Fundamentalism: A Pastoral Concern* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 9.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³⁷ LaVerdiere, "Challenge of Fundamentalism." *Emmanuel* (November 1988): 487.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 487.

¹³⁹ LaVerdiere, *Fundamentalism*, 10.

LaVerdiere's fourth critique is about fundamentalists' emphasis on its apocalyptic view of history. According to this belief, the world is completely corrupted by evil and not redeemable. Fundamentalism consequently focuses much of its attention on the inevitable cataclysmic end of the world as a result of divine judgment. This belief is consistent with the minimizing of the human influence of the Scriptures, since it requires that no good can come from the world; truth can only come from God. This fundamentalist perspective provides an easy escape from the problems of the world and makes it unnecessary for its adherents to transform their environment and contribute to the betterment of others.¹⁴⁰

All four of LaVerdiere's critiques show that fundamentalists place an underserved and unhealthy status on the Bible as the only source of divine truth and human faith. As a result, earthly realities are not seen as vehicles through which divine truths are revealed. Instead, they are either considered obstacles to overcome because they are corrupted by original sin, or they are ignored as having no potential for revealing the nature of God to human beings.

d. Thomas O'Meara

Thomas O'Meara, O.P., a former theology professor at Notre Dame University, is the author of *Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective*, published in 1990. His work relies in part on LaVerdiere's earlier writing. O'Meara's critique of fundamentalism is insightful in its analysis of the needs that fundamentalism fulfills in the lives of its believers. His four critiques are that such believers have a need for certainty in their religion, which leads to a resistance to change and diversity; that they need authority as they practice their religion, which in the end can be unhealthy and stifling; that they lack the ability to adapt to changing conditions in society, and use their religious beliefs to hold on to an idealistic understanding of their own history; and last, underlying the first three, that fundamentalists use their religious beliefs in order to cover their insecurities and avoid, rather than pursue, a deeper understanding of God.

¹⁴⁰ LaVerdeire, *Fundamentalism*, 15.

O'Meara's critiques rely on the fundamentalist belief that the Bible and God never change. The rest of the world may change, but the fundamentalist can be selective in adapting to those changes. God and human history need to be understood in a particular way that enables the fundamentalists to take greater control of their faith tradition. O'Meara's critiques show that this refusal to completely surrender the pursuit of truth to God and to be receptive to non-biblical sources of that truth demonstrates the fundamentalists' need to create an image of God and of humanity that fit their own agenda. Consequently, they refuse to place their faith in God, as they choose not to pursue a fuller understanding of God.

O'Meara's first critique of fundamentalists is that they seem to need certainty in their religious beliefs, and that they resist any ideas suggesting that Christianity is open to different interpretations or to new ideas and practices. This is similar to LaVerdiere's first critique about fundamentalists' treatment of the biblical meaning as clear and unchanging. Their faith has developed in order to serve their own psychological needs, including the need for certitude. This goal is achieved in part by reading only those books that support their views and by ignoring the history of how others have practiced their Christian faith, since that would reveal diversity of viewpoints. Fundamentalists use the symbols of their religious tradition without necessarily learning anything about what those symbols meant in their original context or throughout history.¹⁴¹

O'Meara's second critique is similar to the first: the need for certainty is supported by a need for authority in one's religious tradition, which in the end can be stifling. This idea builds on LaVerdiere's description of fundamentalism as a Docetism of the Word. O'Meara adds to our understanding here by including the fundamentalist tendencies within Catholicism. Catholic fundamentalism relies heavily on an "appeal to a few Vatican documents or to imaginary or imprecise papal stances, an appeal to an abstract and distant authority."¹⁴² In religion, as in other areas of life, strong authority figures can bring peace and stability, but they can also inhibit the freedom of people under their rule. Both Catholic and Protestant

¹⁴¹ Thomas F. O'Meara. *Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 51.

¹⁴² O'Meara. *Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective*, 26.

fundamentalists make the mistake of attributing divine authority to human beings or to human creations. While Catholic fundamentalism has appealed to the authority of the pope, Protestant evangelical fundamentalism in the U.S. appeals to the authority of the Bible.

O'Meara elaborates on LaVerdiere's description of the Bible as fundamentalists' starting point for developing their faith. According to O'Meara, religious things, whether the Bible or the church institution, are not the absolute; the absolute is God's Spirit in men and women. The fundamentalist, according to O'Meara, "imagines and speaks of hierarchy and magisterium as a distant machine set off from life and learning. It is not regard for the truth of revelation and the pastoral service of grace which sustains the compulsion that all church authority is infallible, but a personal need to locate and use this authority."¹⁴³ Fundamentalism teaches that everything except the Bible is evil and the human word is easily corrupted by art, science, life, and history. Hating the world serves an important purpose – it calms anxiety by rejecting a list of forbidden things and people.¹⁴⁴ To the fundamentalists, nothing outside of the Bible, whether a written work or a thought in their minds, can be trusted to reveal the nature of God.

O'Meara's third critique is that the fundamentalist faith lacks the ability to adapt to changing conditions in society. As a result, they hold on to a version of the faith tradition that is often distorted in meaning. The needs for authority and for certainty, described above, mean that fundamentalists have a strong fear of change. The fundamentalist faith attracts people who are tired of social and economic change. Its traditions give meaning, hope, and a certainty of purpose in a world of ambiguity and crisis. These societal changes can leave fundamentalist believers as outsiders in society, for example, "whenever society changes and the kingdom of God expands through the church—in short, whenever Christianity meets a new historical age."¹⁴⁵ As a result, "Ministers who find easy scapegoats are popular with people who are threatened by life."¹⁴⁶ Fundamentalists hold on tightly to their own version of the symbols and

¹⁴³ O'Meara, 32-33.

¹⁴⁴ O'Meara, 81.

¹⁴⁵ O'Meara, 45.

¹⁴⁶ O'Meara, 10.

history of their religious traditions, but in the process they cut themselves off from the way those traditions and symbols have been understood throughout the rest of Christian history.

O'Meara's fourth critique is that fundamentalists use their faith tradition in order to avoid, rather than discover, the true nature of God in their lives. According to O'Meara, Jesus understood that religion can be used as a mask to cover up our fears and insecurities, so that we never have to fully analyze the depth of our own humanity and how it reflects the nature of God. "Religion is where my image of God and my image of being a man or a woman meet. What greater power for good (or for evil) than to invoke this belief or that policy as God's special will."¹⁴⁷ Jesus, according to O'Meara, intended to make people critical of religion's negative uses, as it can be used to substitute religion for faith, and externals for grace. Religious fundamentalism is, in its own way, a search for God and for self-identity. If one believes that God is strict and that humanity is completely corrupted by original sin, then people really are alone in the world. Christian fundamentalism, as it has been described here, is at least partially created in order to serve human needs. As O'Meara asks in the book, "Is every fundamentalism born of an absence of hope? Is it born of a secret fear that God is not there?" Fundamentalism may often arise because of a lack of faith among its supporters.¹⁴⁸

O'Meara's critiques of fundamentalism emphasize the natural human desire to usurp the authority of God and to create an image of God that serves human desires, whether it is the need for certainty, a purpose for their lives that doesn't require any meaningful soul-searching, or a scapegoat for people's problems when all is not well. Christianity, as it is practiced according to this belief system, enables its supporters to become very confident in their religious beliefs without ever considering the depth and complexity of their own humanity and how it reveals the nature of God.

Summary and Synthesis of the Four Critiques

¹⁴⁷ O'Meara, 86.

¹⁴⁸ O'Meara, 63.

There is some overlap among the different critiques, even though each author does have his own unique insight. All of their critiques can be grouped into six general categories: an exaggerated belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible and the authority this gives to their beliefs, all of which comes at the expense of its human influence; a resistance to change and a need for certainty; the need for an objective reading of the Bible; a complete lack of awareness of the influence of historical developments on their interpretation of the Bible and a belief that the human mind is useless in understanding God apart from the Bible; an apocalyptic view of history based on a few select Bible verses; underlying all of these critiques is the observation by O'Meara that fundamentalists use their religion as a mask to cover their insecurities and to avoid a genuine pursuit of God.

Fundamentalists relies on an exaggerated belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible and the authority it gives to their beliefs, all of which come at the expense of the human influence on the Bible. LaVerdiere summarized this argument succinctly with his description of fundamentalism as "a Docetism of the Word" which allows fundamentalists to disregard the human influence on the Bible. O'Meara added to this the insight that they need authority in their religious practice, which in the end can destroy, rather than promote, a genuine spirituality. Fundamentalists consider this divine authority of the Bible to be absolute. Taking this belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture one step further, fundamentalists, as Barr noted, believe that divine inspiration requires its inerrancy as well. If the Bible was inspired by God, according to this logic, and if God is perfect, then the Bible must also be perfect.

This perfection of the Bible supports the fundamentalist need for certainty. O'Meara critiqued fundamentalists for their resistance of new ideas and practices, and for the need for certainty in their religious beliefs. They have difficulty adapting to changing social, cultural, and economic conditions in society. When societal changes mean that religious conservatives go from being prominent members of society to marginalized ones, they may cling to fundamentalism and to an idealized version of their own history to help them through the difficult times. During such times, the Bible can be used to crate social order out of disorder. Believing that the Bible contains the solutions to all of life's problems,

fundamentalists have relied on it instead of on their own intellect or spirituality to understand God and get them through a crisis.

The need for authority and the belief in inerrancy also require an objective reading of the Bible. Biblical stories would have no meaning to contemporary fundamentalist believers unless they describe actual people and events. According to Barr, fundamentalists believe that when Jesus spoke of Old Testament stories, he was demonstrating his belief in their historical accuracy. In theological matters as well as historical, fundamentalists believe that an interpretation of the Bible is unnecessary, since its meaning is clear and unchanging, according to LaVerdiere. In order to accommodate certain cultural and scientific advances that undermine the authority of a literal reading of the Bible, Barr notes that fundamentalists are willing to accept a non-literal interpretation at times. Their willingness to do so is greatest when the literal reading is no longer accepted by Christians, and the only other alternative would be a complete rejection of the relevant passages of the Bible.

All four authors' critiques include a variation of the idea that fundamentalists are unable to determine which of their beliefs are absolute truths, and which ones are influenced more by the culture in which they live. Noll describes how fundamentalists have been influenced by Enlightenment philosophy and science, so that their beliefs rely on a rational approach to knowledge that was unknown when the Bible was written. Barr is more blunt, claiming that in fundamentalism, every doctrine is presented as if it came directly from the Bible, without any examination of its historical basis. LaVerdiere used the example of the Israelite people, writing that for them, life and faith came first before they had a written Scripture to rely on. Fundamentalists do not rely on any innate knowledge of God to interpret the Bible. O'Meara elaborates on this point, claiming that the only absolute is God's Spirit in human beings; the absolute is not found in the Bible or the Church. This vulnerability to external influences is strong because, as Noll wrote, fundamentalists consider the human mind an unreliable source of knowledge about God and truth.

Noll and LaVerdiere show how fundamentalists often use a few select passages from the Bible to develop a strongly apocalyptic view of history. According to Noll, whenever the world is in turmoil they turn to their Bible to make sense of it because they believe that the Bible contains prophecies of events that are being fulfilled today. No matter how bad conditions may be around the world or in the U.S., they find comfort from the belief that God is in complete control of it all because all of these events are fulfilling God's plan. According to LaVerdiere, this fundamentalist perspective enables its believers to avoid thinking about the real problems in the world or to address the material needs of their fellow human beings.

Last, underlying all of these critiques is the insight of O'Meara that fundamentalists use their religious beliefs to cover their insecurities and avoid, rather than pursue, a deeper understanding of God. The fundamentalist belief allows its adherents to create a false image of who God is and who they are. The security that this belief provides is incompatible with an authentic faith in God.

Concluding Reflection: My Response to The Critiques

In this chapter I will provide my own response to each of the six critiques listed in the previous chapter. I am influenced here by books by two Catholic theologians, Richard McBrien (b.1936), *Catholicism*, specifically its second chapter, “Faith, Theology, and Belief,” and by Jean Mouroux (1901-1973), *I Believe: the Personal Structure of Faith*. I discovered this book in the *Suggested Readings* section of McBrien’s book. Mouroux was a French theologian who played a leadership role in the renewal of the Catholic faith during the years shortly before the Second Vatican Council, during the 1950s. McBrien is a Roman Catholic priest and professor of theology at Notre Dame University. *Catholicism* is his best known work. McBrien seems to have been Mouroux’s student in Rome in the 1950s. Mouroux’s book is easy to read yet deeply philosophical, and gives valuable insight into the interpretation of several significant passages of the Bible. McBrien’s chapter on the subject is useful for its description of the meaning of faith according to influential theologians in Christianity’s two thousand year history. Both books helped me develop both my critique of conservative evangelicalism and my own view of faith.

The first critique of the theologians summarized in the previous chapter is that conservative evangelicals have an exaggerated belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible and the authority this gives their beliefs. As a result, they tend to deny or downplay the human influence that went into the writing of Scripture. Such evangelicals are well aware that membership in a church does not make a person a Christian. They understand the church to be an imperfect institution, despite its mission to promote faith in Jesus. The Bible, on the other hand, is held up as the perfect representation of God. Its meaning and application for today are believed to require no direct revelation from God or other unique personal experience. Scripture is valued mainly when conservative evangelicals point to specific passages in order to support a particular belief or action, in a strictly objective manner.

This “Docetism of the Word”, to use LaVerdiere’s description, has led some conservative evangelicals to ignore the voice of God which speaks to humanity in other ways and to individuals apart from the Bible.

There are numerous examples in the Bible and in history of God speaking to people through dreams, telling them to do something that would violate their understanding of their faith tradition. This includes the apostle Peter in Acts 10:15, in which God is said to tell him to eat certain animals considered unclean in the Jewish faith. This example and others described in the second chapter of my thesis suggest that a strong well-balanced faith requires that one's understanding of God be open to sources in addition to the Bible, including church history and one's own human intuition.

Conservative evangelicals consider the human mind an unreliable, fickle source of divine revelation. Instead, they rely heavily on the Bible. The insights revealed by history are not resisted as strongly as those of human intuition, but are dismissed without adequate consideration. To the conservative evangelical, the only allowable source of divine wisdom is the Bible. It is easy to understand why people today may recognize only two legitimate beliefs: conservative evangelical Christianity and the certainty it provides to its believers, or a complete rejection of religion altogether. This is similar to the situation one hundred years ago with the fundamentalists and Charles Eliot, in that the presence of one extreme group justifies the need for the other and tends to force people to one extreme or the other. Both of these beliefs are simplistic solutions that have not been helpful to me in my search for God. I see them both as barriers that can prevent a seeker of God from looking beyond the destructive role that religion has played in human history in favor of a more mature spirituality. A healthy faith is the meeting of two persons: the believer and Jesus Christ, and according to Mouroux, "the role of the [Holy] Spirit will be to make this meeting more profound, this union deeper, by making faith more and more master of the soul, by making that soul possess God more and more fully, and by transforming this faith into a power which tends ceaselessly to become more a sight, a contact, and a yearning for God."¹⁴⁹ This experience leads to mystical knowledge, which "plunges further and further into the infinite mystery of the Divine Persons and radically unifies the human person."¹⁵⁰ Relying on mystical knowledge to develop a healthy faith, one may hope that the believer would be less susceptible to the two extreme beliefs described above. When this spirit of Jesus lives inside a believer, one can learn to trust one's intuition as a guide

¹⁴⁹ Jean Mouroux. *I Believe: The Personal Structure of Faith* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959), 78.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

through challenges to faith. To many conservative evangelicals, the force of God in the world is engaged in a battle with every human desire. According to this belief, only when one has accepted Jesus as one's savior can this be overcome. **Mouroux and conservative evangelicalism both agree that God is revealed to humanity through Jesus Christ. There is a crucial difference, however. Mouroux believes that through Christ we can be drawn into the endless mystery of the Holy Spirit, while conservative evangelicalism follows the teachings given in *The Fundamentals*, that the revelation of God through Jesus has put "an end, for all accept it, to all philosophical speculations concerning the relations of humanity to God and to the universe.**¹⁵¹,

The second critique of the theologians summarized in the previous chapter is the conservative evangelical resistance to change and the need for certainty. Faith, as described by Mouroux, necessarily involves a move away from a familiar orientation of one's identity to a still unfamiliar one. The center of the believer's spiritual universe shifts from him or herself to God through faith. The act of faith results in the disintegration of one's self-focused orientation, and the reconstruction of a different orientation, whose center is God.¹⁵² One's conversion requires the willingness to lose oneself in order to save oneself. This description of faith requires openness to change and an acceptance of uncertainty, especially considering the unique elements of individuals' conversion experiences: "[B]ecause assent to truth is a personal and unique process, there are and there always will be signs whose origin lies in the life of the individual; they are sometimes exterior but rationally very weak, and even, at times, 'scandalous' to the outside observer."¹⁵³ Due to the mysterious nature of faith, a healthy faith is incompatible with the certainty at the heart of conservative evangelicalism. "Faith is obscure because it is the revelation of a divine person through human testimony."¹⁵⁴

Faith means nothing less than uniting our whole life to the mystery which is God. Conservative evangelicals rely almost exclusively on the Bible, as it is understood in the life situations in which they live.

¹⁵¹ Philip Mauro. "Modern Philosophy." In vol.2 of *The Fundamentals*, 89.

¹⁵² Mouroux, 47. **Thomas Aquinas has said the same thing about obscurity.**

¹⁵³ Mouroux, 50-51.

¹⁵⁴ Mouroux, 51.

This reliance in the Bible fails to acknowledge that we don't have a clear map anywhere showing us exactly how to live our lives; sometimes we have to determine that as we live, and that means a willingness to interpret the Bible in a new way and to remain open to change.

Faith is necessary in order to allow us to move beyond the traditions, institutions, and words that are parts of our religion. Faith means one must realize that these are imperfect representations of God with only "an inchoate possession of truth, but they lead [the mind] on to a full and complete attainment."¹⁵⁵ Conservative evangelical faith fails to take the next step beyond reading the Bible and to allow itself to be moved by God's spirit, instead holding on to the certainty it finds in the Bible.

The third critique from the theologians of chapter two is that conservative evangelicals need an inerrant reading of the Bible. When conservative evangelicals have felt threatened by the changing world around them, and by changes in how the Christian faith is understood, they retreat to the safety provided by a belief in the inerrancy, and therefore permanence, provided by the Bible. This is consistent with the other critiques that suggest that divine truth cannot originate from the human mind. Divine truth coming from within one's mind presents the obvious risk of diversity of interpretation any time there are two or more people involved.

The writers of the books of the Bible, or the communities from which these narratives originated, demonstrated the ability to use their imagination in formulating their beliefs about God and humanity. The result was several stories that attempt to explain mysteries of great depth such as the creation of humanity and the earth, the origin of sin and humanity's separation from God, the problem of evil, and how we as human beings can once again be reconciled to our Creator. When conservative evangelicals understand the Bible stories as providing the definitive answers to these profound mysteries, they demonstrate an inability to accept the uncertainty and an inability to let God's spirit speak directly to the human spirit. This is similar to the first critique as well, since this belief implies that truth cannot be a product both of God and of human wisdom, but must come from one source or the other.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 16.

The fourth critique is that conservative evangelicals are unaware of the influence of historical developments on their interpretation of the Bible. Very few activities can undermine the conservative evangelical confidence more easily than a solid understanding of the history of Christianity and its varying, even contradictory, interpretations of the Bible. After completing two semesters of graduate study in church history, I discussed this subject with a few classmates. Although we all remain committed to our Christian faith, we agreed that it is not surprising that studying the history of our faith tradition could motivate some Christians to abandon their faith. For me, this realization was the result of reading about the shift from postmillennialism to premillennialism during the late 19th – early 20th century in the U.S. I interpret the existence of strong supporters of either belief to mean that many American Christians of the period failed to appreciate the depth and breadth of the Bible and to take into account the influence of their brief moment in history at their one geographical location on their understanding of it. Both pre- and postmillennialism suggest that the immediate surroundings provided the entire context in which the Bible would be interpreted. Sometimes one can learn as much by examining the reasoning behind one's beliefs as one can from the beliefs themselves. To the extent that the reforms of the 19th century, such as the abolition of slavery and women's suffrage, were based on postmillennial beliefs, that would be a poor grounding for such reforms. Because the social activism was based on an inerrant reading of the apocalyptic passages of the Bible, it was still vulnerable to the shift in the dominant interpretation of the Bible and therefore to the social and cultural norms of the time period.

Consider the following assumptions necessary to base one's premillennial or postmillennial belief solely on one's surroundings and an inerrant Bible. Assuming the world is six thousand years old, as conservatives believed during the 19th and early 20th centuries, and that the Bible is understood as the timeless Word of God, it is incongruous that Christians would change the core elements of their theology based on events in their short period of history and small area of the world. Some Christians might study world history and foreign cultures in order to properly discover the Bible's message and applications to the world. This approach to theology was not accepted by evangelical Christians in the U.S. If one held a belief in postmillennialism, one would have had to ignore all the periods in history when living conditions were far worse than they were during the pastoral rural

19th century U.S., such as the Black Death pandemic during 14th century Europe, when many millions of people died from the plague. The believers of postmillennialism must have ignored the devastating poverty in urban England, as described in the fiction of Charles Dickens. Either these events were unknown to Americans, or more likely, they simply didn't think about them, and therefore did allow their theology to be disrupted by inconvenient historical truths that did not fit with their isolated place in the world.

There are other disturbing historical facts. For example, the Roman Catholic Church was slow to realize that Christianity and democracy are compatible with each other. Anti-Semitism was deeply ingrained in the Christian tradition for most of its 2000 year history. Americans, until the late 19th century, found biblical support for race-based slavery. Considering all these examples, any student of history would be wise to be careful when making bold claims about what Christianity teaches, since the beliefs of Christians have contradicted each other and Christians have routinely confused the teachings of their faith with the unique characteristics of their own culture.

The fifth critique is that conservative evangelicals have an apocalyptic view of history based on a few select Bible verses. Some conservative evangelicals are doing enormous damage to their credibility by using the literal meaning of certain Bible passages to predict the future, a practice which relies on an ignorance of the long history of failed predictions of apocalypse in the past. No doubt they are reassured to believe that, regardless of what is happening in the world, God is in control of it all. **Maybe we can apply the logic of Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), in his argument named Pascal's "wager"¹⁵⁶ to the subject of the apocalyptic predictions based on the Bible. When conservative evangelicals make bold claims about Jesus' return, and they are wrong, they play the same role as those who reject religion in Pascal's wager. Those who accept an open-ended understanding of the apocalyptic passages in the Bible will not be disturbed if those predictions are not fulfilled within a specific time frame. If conservative evangelicals are right and Christ returns any day now, other believers have nothing to lose if they maintain the convictions of their faith. On the other**

¹⁵⁶ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. W.F. Trotter (New York: Modern Library, 1941), 73-82. Pascal's wager on God's existence states that if one believes, or wagers, there is a God, and life after death, one has nothing to lose if this belief is wrong. However, if one believes there is no God, one has much to lose in eternity if this belief is wrong.

hand, if they are wrong in their apocalyptic predictions, are these conservatives prepared for the possibility that they will have to constantly revise their predictions that the End Times are very close, and for the loss of their credibility?

As they do with other subjects addressed in the Bible, conservative evangelicals approach this one with the goal of determining what message God is sending to humanity, treating the Bible's apocalyptic passages as a mystery to be revealed as its predictions are realized. To the conservative evangelical, this is a puzzle with one solution. However, Christians throughout the centuries have disagreed about what the solution is.

A belief in the apocalyptic predictions in the Bible cannot be derived from human experience. This follows from the beliefs stated earlier about the exclusive status of the Bible as God's means of communicating a message of divine truth. Unlike this conservative evangelical faith, a healthy faith can be supported by experience when one's doubts are open to examination and the actions resulting from one's faith are evaluated according to one's actively listening to the voice of God. The conservative evangelical belief in the coming apocalypse relies solely on the belief that the Bible predicts it, or at least that is how it has been interpreted for the last one hundred years or so in the United States.

The sixth and final critique is that fundamentalists use their religion as a mask to cover their insecurities and to avoid a genuine pursuit of God. My experience with conservative evangelicalism suggests that the biggest threat to genuine Christian faith is not atheism, but religion which uses the symbols and language of the Christian tradition for purposes that are incompatible with the true nature of faith. Such an approach allows its adherents to believe that they are continuing in the tradition of influential Christians of the past, without challenging them either to study the history of their faith in detail or to open their minds to any revelation apart from the Bible. The images and symbols of Christianity provide a sort of stopping point for reflection on the part of conservative evangelicals; believers must be willing to ignore the enormous variety of meanings that Christians have associated with baptism, the Eucharist, Jesus' death and resurrection, and faith itself, to list a few examples. Instead of deepening their own faith and immersing themselves in the rich history of two

thousand years of interpretation of the Christian faith, too many conservative evangelicals occupy their time and energy, and perhaps fill a void in their own lives, by encouraging others to adopt their shallow understanding of the Christian faith.

Just as Adam and Eve hid from God in the Garden of Eden after eating the forbidden fruit, each human being has a tendency to hide his or her true self from God. Faith means responding to the call of the Divine Being, which “can penetrate where the human being cannot, because the Absolute Spirit can penetrate to the very core of the created spirit.”¹⁵⁷ Faith means overcoming our fear of God and learning to view ourselves more and more as God sees us. This would require that we be willing to let ourselves be judged by God. Conservative evangelical belief provides its adherents with an unhelpful response to the tension between our desire to hide from God and our need to address the call of the Divine Being described above. Allowing God to occupy one’s soul would require that we expose our faults to be examined by God. Conservative evangelicalism exists, in part, to give its believers the assurances of religion without this one essential requirement.

At the end of this investigation, I understand faith broadly. McBrien defines it as “personal knowledge of God.”¹⁵⁸ Mouroux, as we saw above, defines it as the meeting of two persons, the person and God, with the Spirit “making that soul possess God more and more fully, and by transforming this faith into a power which tends ceaselessly to become more a sight, a contact, and a yearning for God.”¹⁵⁹ If one considers all the ways in which people of faith have created false images of God, it is easy to recognize the need for caution and humility when we attempt to understand God and what God wants from human beings. The surest evidence of God’s existence may not come from the teachings of any established religious institution at all. The fact that this search continues to go on may be the best evidence for God. These false images of God and of humanity do not require any search for God in the most reliable source, the soul of the human being. Conservative evangelicals may not be knowingly hiding from God as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. However, they have embraced a notion of

¹⁵⁷ Mouroux, 19.

¹⁵⁸ Richard P. McBrien. *Catholicism: Volume One* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1980), 25.

¹⁵⁹ Mouroux, 78.

God that is too small. The symbols of Christianity have been used, one might even say corrupted, in order to support an agenda that is incompatible with genuine Christian faith. This idea is summarized nicely by the Latin phrase *Corruptio optimi est pessima*, the corruption of the best is the worst.

What ultimately bothers me about conservative evangelical Christianity's understanding of faith can be summarized with several characteristics. I am disturbed by the unwillingness to understand how an acceptable diversity in describing God is reflected in the diversity of human experiences. Second, a healthy humility in recognizing that we may not have the one perfect meaning for every passage of scripture or answer to a complex problem is replaced by a phony humility that requires absolute submission to certain passages of scripture. This false humility suggests that it would be wrong to argue with the Bible after we determine that it provides definitive answers to complex problems (see the example about abortion and Psalm 139 in the introduction). Third, it may be difficult for believers of any religious tradition to distinguish which elements of their belief can accurately be described as coming from God and are vital to the faith, and which ones are temporal and culturally conditioned. However, conservative evangelicals in particular have done this poorly and, as a result, have latched on to the Bible as the only source of truth in their tradition.

All of my concerns have to do with how conservative evangelicals make sense of a changing world around them and who deserves the blame for negative changes related to the Christian faith. Jesus is quoted in Matthew 10:39 as telling his followers "He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for my sake will find it" (NASB). This verse fits the church as well as the individual. Believers who cling to a narrow meaning of their faith are likely to see it lose its meaning and power, while those who are willing to abandon the security provided by their current religious beliefs may experience a transformation of their faith into something that is beyond one's current imagination.

At the end of this thesis, I am left with two questions about evangelicals, myself, and the future of Christian faith. First, how will the faith adapt to the changing religious environment in the U.S.? Just as I

have used Mouroux, McBrien, and other theologians to help me develop my understanding of faith and guide me through difficult times and to interpret the Bible, which authors, traditions etc. will conservative evangelicals rely on to make sense of a changing world? Second, how can I build on the insights of Mouroux and McBrien to develop my own understanding of faith? The call of Mouroux to enter more deeply into the mystery of faith continues in my life.

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