

Fundamentalism and Cultural Engagement: The Historical Context

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For Protestant Christians, history is not a doctrinal authority. The Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* includes the concept that the only source of revelation binding on the consciences of believers is found in the Scriptures. Revelation deals with certainties; history, by contrast, can deal only with likelihoods. The skeptic Edward Gibbon wrote, “The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted in long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings.”¹ Gibbon’s cynicism aside, he highlighted the fact that history can be only descriptive of a question whereas Scripture is prescriptive of the answer.

History, however, does serve as a guide in the study and interpretation of scriptural revelation. For one thing, it provides perspective and guards against reinventing the wheel when weighing scriptural options. History provides a sort of laboratory where one can observe how others have tried different approaches with varying degrees of success. In considering how Fundamentalists should engage their culture, a look at history reveals how Christians in the past have approached this question. In fact, there is even precedent for reviewing strategies proposed by Fundamentalists in particular. In his pioneering book, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, George Marsden surveyed “Four Views Circa 1910,” a spectrum of approaches from the developing Fundamentalist movement.² Beyond the views that Marsden reviewed, an additional

¹ Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chap. 15
<http://www.ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/volume1/chap15.htm>.

² George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 124-38.

controversy has shaped Fundamentalist attitudes, the disagreement over the position of the New Evangelical initiative toward cultural engagement, discussed here in relation to Carl F. H. Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947). Weighing Marsden's taxonomy and the impact of Henry's book provides some historical basis for evaluating the Fundamentalist approach to engaging culture.

Marsden's Spectrum of Fundamentalist Views

Marsden identified four tendencies among Fundamentalists, each associated with representative spokesmen: preserving Christian civilization (represented by William Jennings Bryan), transforming culture (J. Gresham Machen), premillennial withdrawal (I. M. Haldeman), and what Marsden labeled "the central tension" felt between premillennial expectations of nearing judgment and the earlier evangelical reformist impulse, what in this paper is called "Christ and culture in tension" (illustrated variously by Marsden through W. B. Riley, Moody Bible Institute, and Billy Sunday).³

Preserving Christian Civilization

Essentially, this approach assumed not only that the construction of a Christian civilization was possible but that America had traveled farther on this path than other nations and represented the best embodiment of the principles of God's kingdom on earth. Marsden's overall presentation of Fundamentalism returned often to this theme. The illustration on the cover of his book is a drawing from Biola's magazine *The King's Business* showing a Samson-like giant "Modernism" pulling down the pillars of "church" and "school" that uphold "Christian civilization."

This approach represents in part a continuation of what has been called the "Protestant hegemony" over American culture in the nineteenth century.⁴ Although the United States had no

³ I do not discuss these views in the order Marsden gave but in a manner, I hope, more helpful to developing the central purpose of this paper.

⁴ A standard discussion of the Protestant "establishment" in nineteenth-century America is Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press), 1970.

established church, an interdenominational evangelical Protestant consensus sought to conform the country to Christian ideals and appeared to make considerable headway toward that goal. An expression of this Protestant establishment was “the benevolence empire,” a network of interdenominational evangelical movements and organizations that sought to transform American life.⁵ Reform movements, such as the temperance and prohibition movements and efforts to abolish slavery, drew energy from united Protestant efforts to raise the moral and spiritual level of the nation.

Marsden specifically associated this view with William Jennings Bryan, Christian statesman, three-time presidential candidate, secretary of state under Wilson, and fervent crusader against evolution.⁶ A political Progressive and reformer, Bryan unhesitatingly mixed his political cause with his broadly evangelical religious views. He urgently exhorted American Christians to “go out and help redeem the world,”⁷ by which he did not mean simply evangelism. Bryan contrasted the beneficent Christian influence on civilization with the anti-Christian threat against civilization represented by Darwinian evolution. “If we accept the theory that man has reached his present eminence by the cruel law under which the strong kill off the weak, then, ... we must turn backward toward the brute if we dare to substitute the law of love for the law of hate. As Christianity is built upon the doctrine of love and has for its object the establishing a universal

⁵The phrase is credited to Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Anti-slavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York: American Historical Association, 1933). See also the discussion in Charles I. Foster, *An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front 1790-1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), and especially Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abingdon, 1957).

⁶ Marsden, 132-35. Marsden draws particularly from an address Bryan delivered at the Winona Lake Bible Conference in Indiana titled “The Old-Time Religion.” There are numerous studies of the life of William Jennings Bryan. Biographies that deal in detail with Bryan’s religious activities are Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, 3 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), particularly volume three; Lawrence Levin, *Defender of Faith William Jennings Bryan: The Last Decade, 1915-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); and Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

⁷ William Jennings Bryan, “Opening Address of Winona Bible Conference,” *Winona Echoes 1919* (N.p.: Winona Publishing Society, 1919), 21.

brotherhood, the Darwinian theory can have no claim upon the mind or conscience of a follower of the Nazarene.”⁸

One might argue that perhaps Bryan was atypical of Fundamentalists on this point and that he better reflected Progressive politics and postmillennial theology. After all, most Fundamentalists today are unlikely to argue, as Bryan did, for government ownership of telephone and railroad companies or to consider the great reforms of that era to include the income tax.⁹ However, other conservative preachers of the era used similar language. In an address he gave on the Chautauqua circuit evangelist Bob Jones Sr. said, “The Modernistic leaders are . . . destroying the foundations under all our Protestant civilization.”¹⁰ Likewise, Southern Baptist R. G. Lee asked an audience, “Who, knowing the facts of our history, can doubt that the United States of America has been a thought in the mind of God from all eternity? Not in arrogance, but in deep humility, and not without a measure of fear and trembling, we believe that the United States of America is the chosen nation of the later dispensation.”¹¹ Such comments reflect a version of American exceptionalism in which the United States represented the model of both democratic and Christian ideals, an approach that views democracy and Christianity as complementary virtues. In this context, the duty of cultural engagement and reform is more or less assumed.

⁸ William Jennings Bryan, “Belief in God,” *Winona Echoes* 1918 (N.p.: Winona Publishing Society, 1918), 33. One assumes that there must be an error in the transcription of the address or in Bryan’s delivery and that Bryan meant to say that “we must turn backward toward the brute if we dare to substitute the law of hate for the law of love.” See also William Jennings Bryan, “Tampering with the Main Spring,” *Winona Echoes* 1922 (N.p.: Winona Publishing Society, 1922), 45-56.

⁹ William Jennings Bryan, “Opening Address of the Bible Conference,” *Winona Echoes* 1919 (N.p.: Winona Publishing Society, 1919), 16-18, 24. These views, however, would not have necessarily been controversial among evangelical audiences of Bryan’s day.

¹⁰ Bob Jones, *The Perils of America or Where Are We Headed?* Sermon Delivered at the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle March 5, 1934, 29.

¹¹ R. G. Lee, “God in History,” *Winona Echoes* 1930 (N.p.: Winona Lake Institutions, 1930), 112.

Transforming the Culture

At first consideration, this second classification sounds similar to Bryan's idea of preserving Christian civilization, and there is indeed some overlap. However, in this case there is a deeper theological foundation than the blend of American populism with general evangelical Protestantism. The central idea of this approach is that Christians seek to change the expressions of human culture to conform to Christian teaching, in other words, to Christianize the culture. This idea has become familiar through the work of H. Richard Niebuhr. In *Christ and Culture* Niebuhr identified a spectrum of different Christian attitudes toward human culture, and in Chapter 6 he described "Christ the Transformer of Culture."¹² Identifying this approach with the Augustinian and Reformed traditions, Niebuhr argued that according to this view the disparity between Christ and human culture is not resolved by withdrawal (a view Niebuhr called "Christ against culture") or accommodating the church to the culture (which is "the Christ of culture") but by changing the culture to conform to Christ.¹³

Niebuhr's classification of transformation as essentially *the* Reformed view of culture has become almost a truism. Supporting evidence for Niebuhr's category is found in various schools of Reformed theology, such as that of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), formulator of the Dutch Neo-Calvinist school. We see the transformation aspect in Kuyper's idea of a fundamental antithesis between Christian and humanist thought, his call for believers to formulate a Christian

¹² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 190-229.

¹³ For discussion of "Christ against culture" and "the Christ of culture," see Niebuhr, 45-115. Many writers have used and critiqued Niebuhr's analysis. A thorough reconsideration is found in D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). Significantly in terms of the topic of this paper, Carson reviewed "The Fundamentalist Option," i.e., withdrawal from culture with occasional crusades on particular points by Christians who seem to be trying to bring back the America of the 1950s (209-10). Also of particular interest to a Fundamentalist approach to this subject is Kevin Bauder, "A Prelude to a Christian Theology of Culture," in W. Edward Glenny and William H. Smallman, ed., *Missions in a New Millennium: Change and Challenges in World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 231-44. He summarizes Niebuhr's categories as separatism, accommodation, synthesis, dualism, and conversionism (232). See also Paul Hartog, "Toward a Christian Approach to Culture," *Faith Pulpit*, May-June 2009 (accessed July 24, 2015) <http://www.faith.edu/resources/publications/faith-pulpit/message/toward-a-christian-approach-to-culture/read>.

worldview, and his concept of the cultural mandate—that God commands Christians to subdue creation by bringing every area of legitimate culture in subjection to Christ. The mandate is in some sense bringing the kingdom of God to earth. As Kuyper himself famously declared, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”¹⁴ To this theory Kuyper added real-life application in founding a Christian university and running for political office, climaxing with his service as prime minister of the Netherlands. Not only does Kuyper well represent this Calvinistic model of cultural engagement, but his approach also has won a following in some contemporary evangelical circles. Kuyper’s approach provides a starting point for many modern discussions of Christian cultural engagement.¹⁵

For the Fundamentalist expression of this transformational approach, Marsden cited J. Gresham Machen, professor at Princeton Seminary. His evidence was an address, “Christianity and Culture,” that Machen gave at the opening of Princeton Seminary’s school year in 1912.¹⁶ Machen addressed his contemporary situation in which he said the church experienced tension between the scientific/academic tendency and the practical tendency. Heightening the tension was the division of these tendencies between different spheres of life, where science and knowledge ruled in the academy while piety thrived in the church. Machen saw three potential solutions to easing the tension: the subordination of Christianity to culture, the rejection of culture, or the what he considered the best option of “consecration.” These approaches, in fact, corresponded generally to Niebuhr’s Christ of culture, Christ against culture, and Christ the transformer of culture nearly forty years before Niebuhr published them. Machen said that rejection of culture

¹⁴ Abraham Kuyper, “‘Sphere Sovereignty,’” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488; italics in original.

¹⁵ On this point see Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), as well as his articles “Abraham Kuyper: A Man for This Season,” *Christianity Today*, 26 October 1998, 86-87; and “Culture, Church, and Civil Society: Kuyper for a New Century,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 28 (2007): 48-63.

¹⁶ J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture,” *The Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): 1-15. Found at <http://journals.ptsem.edu/id/BR1913111/dmd002>.

was better than subordination of Christianity to culture, but that such a strategy also involved rejecting the intellectual gifts God had given. “Instead of destroying the arts and sciences or being indifferent to them, let us cultivate them.... Instead of obliterating the distinction between the Kingdom and the world, or on the other hand withdrawing from the world in a sort of modernized intellectual monasticism, let us go forth joyfully, enthusiastically to make the world subject to God.”¹⁷ Christians must bring every human endeavor into its proper relation to the gospel. Christians may challenge every false idea that resists or rejects Christianity. In this discussion Machen would seem to fit well within Niebuhr’s category of transforming culture.

However, is this actually *the* Calvinistic view of culture, and even if so, does Machen actually represent this view? It is interesting that Niebuhr’s leading example of this transformation pattern is not John Calvin but F. D. Maurice.¹⁸ Also, competing with the transformation model in Reformed history is the concept known as “the spirituality of the church.” In essence, this view describes the church as a spiritual body, concerned only with matters in the religious realm and not with political affairs. Some critics of the concept have presented it as the brainchild of Southerners in antebellum America who used it as a convenient way to dodge the slavery issue.¹⁹ Although Southern theologians unquestionably used the idea, it is rooted in Reformed creeds and confessions, notably the Westminster Confession: “Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.”²⁰ The focus of the church according to this view is preaching, administering the sacraments, and promoting spiritual nurture.

¹⁷ Machen, 5.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, 220-29.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Ernest Trice Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961).

²⁰ Westminster Confession 31.5, “Of Synods and Councils.”

D. G. Hart has explored where Machen fit in the discussion of church and culture.²¹ Noting Machen's Southern Presbyterian roots with a heritage of the spirituality of the church, Hart argued cogently that the church was a central motif of Machen's theology. Machen did not deny the transformative aspect, but he subordinated it to ecclesiology, because the kingdom is associated with the church, not the political order. Machen's address of 1912 referred mainly to Christian participation in learning and high culture. Machen was in fact a staunch supporter of separation of church and state, opposing policies such as Prohibition and prayer and Bible reading in public schools. He subordinated the transformation of culture to the corporate witness of the church. Transformation is not the purpose of the church but of individual Christians and institutions such as families and schools. As Hart's analysis of Machen indicates, the ideas of cultural transformation and spirituality of the church are not mutually exclusive. One can still argue for Christianity's cultural impact while saying the church should eschew politics. The two ideas may sometimes militate against each other rather than actually contradict each other.²²

Premillennial Withdrawal

The third classification relies on the common generalization that premillennialism and particularly dispensationalism caused Fundamentalism to withdraw from any sort of cultural engagement. Lefferts A. Loetscher, for example, wrote, "By its heightened supernaturalism, dispensationalism deliberately widened the gulf between Christianity and its environment, thus at once protecting its own faith and reducing the possibility of effective Christian influence on

²¹ Darryl G. Hart, "J. Gresham Machen, the Reformed Tradition, and the Transformation of Culture." *Evangelical Quarterly* 68 (1996): 305-27.

²² Carl Sanders offered an interesting argument in regard to the Reformed doctrine of the spirituality of the church and the dispensationalist concept of the church as God's heavenly people in contrast to the Jews as God's earthly people. Sanders claimed that the two concepts melded and reinforced each other in the theology of the influential early dispensationalist James H. Brookes. The Presbyterian Brookes began as an advocate of the spirituality of the church and over the course of his career shifted more to the ideas of J. N. Darby on the heavenly church. His analysis suggests that the concepts may have much in common. See Carl E. Sanders II, *The Premillennial Faith of James Brookes: Reexamining the Roots of American Dispensationalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 37-64.

thought and society.”²³ More bluntly Timothy Weber said that premillennialism “broke the spirit of social concern which had played such a prominent role in earlier evangelicalism.”²⁴ Marsden cited I. M. Haldeman’s *Signs of the Times* as representing this approach.²⁵ Pressing “the cultural pessimism of premillennialism to its logical extreme,” Marsden said, Haldeman saw nothing but decline in the present age and asserted that the focus of the church was to be “not on this age but one to come.”²⁶ Throughout the book Haldeman traced current events as they fitted into a prophetic scheme that pointed to an imminent return of Christ. Haldeman said, “Neither Christ nor Christianity are in the world to reorganize the society of the natural man, elevate him, or appeal to his own resources.”²⁷ He called it the siren’s song to say the world is getting better or that Christianity is to be identified with civilization.²⁸ The work of the church “will not change the general society of the world in this age of natural man.”²⁹

The cultural disengagement Haldeman exemplified figures into what has been called “the Great Reversal” in evangelical attitudes toward social reform and cultural improvement.³⁰ According to this concept of reversal, in contrast to a notable evangelical social activism in America in the nineteenth century, twentieth-century evangelicalism retreated into political inactivity. A contributing factor in this shift, some analysts maintained, was the influence of

²³ Lefferts A. Loetscher, “Foreword” to C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1958), 7. For a further example, see Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 130-37.

²⁴ Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 183.

²⁵ I. M. Haldeman, *The Signs of the Times* (New York: Charles C. Cook, 1911).

²⁶ Marsden, 125, 127.

²⁷ Haldeman, 299.

²⁸ Haldeman, 302. He actually refers to the “Lorelei song,” a version of the idea of the sirens based on Germanic legend.

²⁹ Haldeman, 304.

³⁰ Timothy L. Smith coined the phrase, and David O. Moberg popularized it as the title of his study of evangelistic attitudes toward social concern: *The Great Reversal: Evangelism Versus Social Concern* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972). Moberg discussed Smith’s origination of the phrase on page 11. The substance of Smith’s approach is found in his *Revivalism and Social Reform*.

dispensationalism.³¹ Marsden discussed the reversal, although not in the context of his survey of the four views. One element in this changed situation, he said, was the shift from a “Calvinistic” idea that good laws will advance the kingdom to a “pietistic” idea that politics served only as a force to restrain evil.³² It is interesting to compare the theological context of the nineteenth-century benevolence empire with that of the burgeoning Fundamentalist movement in the twentieth. Undergirding much of the nineteenth-century impulse was the New England Theology professed by Congregationalists, New School Presbyterians, and some Baptists. Rooted in the writings of Jonathan Edwards with New England Puritanism looming behind it, the New England Theology diversified into several branches including the New Haven Theology of Nathaniel Taylor and the Oberlin Theology of Charles Finney. In some of these expressions of the New England Theology, there was a strong perfectionist tendency that viewed sanctification as “the full use of natural ability.”³³ It is not an enormous leap from the belief in the perfectibility of the individual to the idea of the perfectibility of society. By contrast, the more pessimistic view of human nature found in dispensationalism made hopes for change less sanguine.³⁴

Christ and Culture in Tension

Rounding out this discussion is a compromise view, what Marsden called an “ill-defined middle position.”³⁵ A large portion of “proto-Fundamentalism” adhered to premillennialism but was by no means willing to retreat from the American evangelical heritage of social activism.

³¹ Moberg identified premillennial pessimism as one, but only one, of the factors contributing to this shift (37), and Marsden also saw it as one among several factors (86).

³² Marsden, 85-93.

³³ Douglas A. Sweeney and Allen C. Guelzo, ed. *The New England Theology: From Jonathan Edwards to Edwards Amasa Park* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 221.

³⁴ E.g., nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell argued against the New England emphasis that perfection—“to make our earth a heaven”—was not possible. Undermining his argument for modern readers is that his argument came in the midst of a defense of slavery. James Henley Thornwell, “The Church and Slavery,” in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (1871, 1873; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 4:420-22.

³⁵ Marsden, 128.

Premillennialists held to a system that apparently offered little hope for significant social reform or improvement. Yet, unlike Haldeman and a few others, they did not abandon calls for social and political reform. Perhaps the preeminent example in the early twentieth century was the crusade to prohibit the manufacture and sale of alcohol. Conservatives (a few such as Machen excepted) uniformly viewed Prohibition as the staunching of sinful behavior and a vehicle to a happier, healthier society.

One is tempted to identify this position with Niebuhr's classification of Luther's theology, "Christ and Culture in paradox,"³⁶ except that this category does not seem to be worked out so much theologically as pragmatically. Part of the rationale for this approach may lie in the biblical literalism of conservatives, not their theological system. In some cases the premillennialists did not extrapolate from their theology but simply heeded scriptural mandates such as Christ's command to be salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13-16). Such apparently straightforward applications characterized populists such as Billy Sunday. "Every economic question can be settled by the Golden Rule!" he told one audience in 1915.³⁷ Elsewhere he declared, "The gospel rightly understood and faithfully preached interferes with every form of iniquitous business."³⁸ Sunday provided his formula for the vexing questions of capital and labor: "Do you believe that every working man ought to give honest, square work for the wages he is paid? So does Jesus. Do you believe that capital ought to give labor a square deal? So does Jesus. Do you believe that labor ought to give capital a square deal? So does Jesus."³⁹ Bound up in believing and heeding the Bible was a forthright demand to say or do something about conditions in the world.

³⁶ Niebuhr, 149-89.

³⁷ Billy Sunday, "Feeding the Five Thousand" in *Winona Echoes 1915* (Winona Lake, IN: Winona Publishing Society, 1915), 242.

³⁸ Quoted in William McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 28.

³⁹ Billy Sunday, "The Faultless Christ," in John R. Rice, ed., *The Best of Billy Sunday* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1965), 25. The sermon was originally preached in 1922 in Richmond, Indiana.

The New Evangelicalism and Cultural Engagement

From views *circa* 1910 we move almost fifty years to the post–World War II era. A reform movement arose within Fundamentalism which took the name the New Evangelicalism. The movement recommended several revisions to Fundamentalism’s theology and practice. The significant one for our purposes concerned the call to social involvement. Harold Ockenga, often called the father of the New Evangelicalism, said that the movement contrasted with Fundamentalism “in its willingness to handle the social problems which the Fundamentalists evaded.”⁴⁰ He recognized no inconsistency between the evangelistic mandate and a social/cultural mandate: “There need be no disagreement between the personal gospel and the social gospel. The true Christian faith is a supernatural personal experience of salvation and a social philosophy. Doctrine and social ethics are Christian disciplines.”⁴¹ Developing this theme more fully was a slender volume by another founding father of the New Evangelicalism, Carl F. H. Henry. His *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947) was the first full statement of how the New Evangelical initiative addressed social and cultural issues.⁴²

What challenged Henry was what he called evangelicalism’s “embarrassing divorce from a world social program.”⁴³ He felt embarrassed because he believed not only that Christianity possessed the answer to the world’s problems but also that the Christian message extended to every realm, that “Christianity still affords the supreme dynamic, the supreme world-view, the supreme hope.”⁴⁴ He argued that “the redemptive message has implications for all of life” and

⁴⁰ “Harold J. Ockenga’s Press Release on ‘The New Evangelicalism,’” in Fred Moritz, *Be Ye Holy: The Call to Christian Separation* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1994), 117. Originally released December 8, 1957.

⁴¹ Ockenga, 118.

⁴² Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). All quotations come from this edition, which differs in pagination from the original version.

⁴³ Henry, 76.

⁴⁴ Henry, 62.

that therefore an evangelical world program “involves total opposition to all moral evils, whether societal or personal.”⁴⁵

If Christianity had a comprehensive solution to the world’s problems, why was Henry “uneasy”? Basically, he saw inadequacies resulting from Fundamentalism’s approach to separatism and particularly from the dispensationalist theology that dominated the movement. He expressed concern that separatist movements created a culture of isolation rather than helping form a comprehensive Christian worldview. Henry did not think that ecclesiastical separation necessitated social indifference but that it effectively negated “evangelical ecumenicity,” replacing it with a “fragmentary isolation” that rendered social engagement difficult.⁴⁶ He likened Fundamentalism to the repentant thief on the cross who looked for deliverance through Christ’s kingdom in the future but heard Christ surprisingly say instead, “*Today* shalt thou be with me in paradise.”⁴⁷

The root of this problem to Henry was eschatology. Fundamentalists had a tendency “to take further refuge in a despairing view of world history” in which they “substituted a familiarity with the prophetic teaching of the Bible for an aggressive effort to proclaim Christ as the potent answer to the dissolution of world culture” and thus “trained enlightened spectators rather than empowered ambassadors.”⁴⁸ He cited the “postponement theory” of the kingdom associated with some forms of dispensationalism as creating an other-worldly focus for the church.⁴⁹ He argued more for toleration of viewpoints on eschatology rather than a comprehensive rejection of dispensationalism. He called for Fundamentalists “to restudy eschatological convictions for a proper perspective which will not unnecessarily dissipate evangelical strength in controversy over

⁴⁵ Henry, 65, 75.

⁴⁶ Henry, 81-82.

⁴⁷ Henry, 55. Italics in original.

⁴⁸ Henry, 22, 44-45. He also expressed concern over a Fundamentalist view that “reduces God’s role in history largely to a preparation for future judgment” (62).

⁴⁹ Henry, 47.

secondary positions.”⁵⁰ In the place of this prophetic precision, Henry advocated general principles of eschatology that he hoped would unite evangelicals. He celebrated a move toward a broader premillennialism that focused on the main features on prophecy and did not “concern itself too much with lesser events.”⁵¹ Rather than look only for a future kingdom of God, Henry preferred a realized eschatology of “already/not yet,” saying that Christ implied “both that the kingdom is here, and that it is not here.”⁵²

As he sought to remedy this situation Henry set forth a social ethic grounded in the central importance of redemption and regeneration. He insisted that “the only sufficient formula” for all evil is “the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit” and that “the ability of God to restore the responsive sinner is the adequate key to the door of Fundamentalist world betterment.”⁵³ He denied the possibility of any ultimate peace or social solutions apart from redemption and the vicarious atonement.⁵⁴ As Henry said in his conclusion, “The evangelical task primarily is the preaching of the Gospel, in the interest of individual regeneration by the supernatural grace of God, in such a way that divine redemption can be recognized as the best solution of our problems, individual and social.”⁵⁵ Henry did not equate social activism with evangelism, but he did argue that Christian activity in every sphere of life would enable more successful evangelism: “To the extent that any society is leavened with Christian convictions, it becomes a more hospitable environment for Christian expansion.”⁵⁶

Within Niebuhr’s schema, Henry would definitely tend toward the transformation model, but a restrained transformation with definite limits. “The Christian message has a salting effect

⁵⁰ Henry, 54.

⁵¹ Henry, 45.

⁵² Henry, 48.

⁵³ Henry, 40, 15.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Henry, 20, 40.

⁵⁵ Henry, 88-89.

⁵⁶ Henry, 71.

upon the earth. It aims at a re-created society,” he wrote, but he did not necessarily believe the re-created society would occur.⁵⁷ He said both premillennialists and amillennialists “hold forth no hope for the conversion of the whole world.”⁵⁸ Although he saw a present aspect of the kingdom, he admitted that “an adequate insight both into human nature and into New Testament truth furnishes good ground for doubt that the kingdom can be established without the advent of Christ.”⁵⁹ However, “foredoomed failure” was not an excuse for inactivity: “The futility of trying to win all does not mean that it is futile to try to win some areas of influence and life.”⁶⁰

The perspective of some seventy years reveals the prescience of some of Henry’s vision. For example, he advocated an educational program of writing, teaching, and building schools. Although his hopes for Christian higher education remain basically unfulfilled, Henry foreshadowed the Christian school and later home school movements of the 1960s to the 1980s in his call for Christian education, an effort in which even Fundamentalists were quite active.⁶¹ He also pioneered the concept of evangelical co-belligerence. Alister McGrath described this idea as the notion that “there is no inconsistency in evangelicals’ forming alliances or coalitions with others to address issues on which they can agree” and said that the idea originated with Francis Schaeffer and was expounded by J. I. Packer.⁶² Yet long before Schaeffer or Packer, Henry wrote that “it remains true that the evangelical, in the very proportion that the culture in which he lives is not actually Christian, must unite with non-evangelicals for social betterment.”⁶³

⁵⁷ Henry, 84.

⁵⁸ Henry, 17.

⁵⁹ Henry, 66. See also 17-18, 42 for his belief that the Bible does not teach the coming of the kingdom before the coming of Christ.

⁶⁰ Henry, 76. Likewise he wrote, “That evangelism may not create a fully Christian civilization does not argue against an effort to win as many areas as possible by the redemptive power of Christ” (67).

⁶¹ See Henry’s discussion, 68-71.

⁶² Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 172.

⁶³ Henry, 80. In an earlier example of such co-belligerence, Abraham Kuyper had to form an alliance with Catholic political parties to build the coalition that made him prime minister of the Netherlands.

In the years since Henry published *The Uneasy Conscience*, one of the contested points between Fundamentalists and most other evangelicals has been the question of cultural and social engagement. Generally, Fundamentalists rejected Henry's position of renewed social activism, although in varying degrees and on the basis of differing arguments.⁶⁴ It is fair to say that the New Evangelical position on cultural engagement and Henry's advocacy of it (both in *The Uneasy Conscience* and elsewhere) helped set the parameters for contemporary Christian debate of the topic.⁶⁵

Conclusion

If history helps form the questions that Scripture answers, what questions does this study raise about the Fundamentalist and cultural engagement? Several stand out. The specific texts mentioned should lead to the identification and scrutiny of passages relating to the issue. More prominent are the broader theological questions. One that runs through this topic is the relationship of the kingdom to the church and how that relationship works out against the backdrop of history. Is there a present aspect of God's kingdom? Depending on the answer, what are the ramifications? Another issue is whether there is a difference in how cultural questions relate to the institutional church as opposed to the individual Christian. Is there a difference

⁶⁴ For a sampling of the range of responses to the New Evangelical social activism, see Robert P. Lightner, *Neoevangelicalism Today* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1978), 137-43; Cornelius R. Stam, *The Present Peril: The New Evangelicalism* (Chicago: Berean Bible Society, 1968), 75-94; Rolland McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled: The Failed Strategy of Modern Evangelicalism* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador International, 2004), 229-74; and Robert Lon Horton, "A Biblical Study of the Christian's Role in Society with a Special Emphasis upon Contemporary New Evangelical Statements" (PhD diss. Bob Jones University 1981). Horton abstracted his work as "The Christian's Role in Society," *Biblical Viewpoint* 15 (1981): 130-37. For the most part these works focus on the New Evangelical argument in general and not specifically on *The Uneasy Conscience*. An exception is McCune, who discusses the book's impact, focusing on the anti-dispensationalist tone he found in Henry (34-37). Fundamentalists certainly opposed the book on the popular level. In a copy of *The Uneasy Conscience* in the Mack Library at Bob Jones University, someone wrote on the flyleaf, "This book is to be read with care and caution. Mr. Henry is editor (1958-59) of *Christianity Today* a paper of doubtful loyalty to historic Christianity."

⁶⁵ A good analysis of the nature and long-term impact of Henry's work from a broad evangelical viewpoint is Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004).

between the cultural activity of the church and what Christians may or should do? If the church's focus is spiritual or heavenly, how much can Christians do as Christians to alleviate social or political problems? Can they change society or simply slow inevitable corruption? Addressing these questions scripturally and theologically provides a starting point for weighing the Fundamentalists' responsibility for cultural engagement.