CHURCH HISTORY
Week Ten: Modern American Evangelicalism (1910–present)

Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversies

Protestant Modernism reached its apex during the first third of the twentieth century. Classical liberals denied the exclusivity of Christ, downplayed most biblical miracles, and rejected the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture. Social Gospel advocates minimized the importance of personal conversion in favor of mobilizing churches as instruments of social transformation. Progressives combined Social Darwinism with an optimistic postmillennialism, in many cases arguing that American culture was gradually becoming more Christian and in turn would take the lead in ushering in Christ’s kingdom on earth. Missions reflected this theme and became primarily about social uplift. The University of Chicago, the Ivy League divinity schools, and Union Theological Seminary (NY) emerged as intellectual strongholds for modernist views.

By 1920, most of the mainline Protestant denominations were led by theological progressives, especially in the North. Traditionalist evangelicals began fighting against modernist hegemony. The traditionalists came to be known as fundamentalists, so-called because they claimed to be defending the fundamentals of the faith against the progressive revisionists. Fundamentalists united around several key doctrines, including the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, the blood atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the importance of personal evangelism. Most fundamentalists also preferred premillennialism over postmillennialism, in part reacting to modernist versions of the latter. Because most seminaries and other denominational ministries were led by progressives (or their moderate sympathizers), fundamentalists tended to work primarily through independent schools, parachurch ministries, and Bible conferences.

During the 1920s and 1930s, most every major denomination experienced tensions between modernists and fundamentalists. The Northern Presbyterians and Northern Baptists endured acrimonious denominational schisms; in both cases, the modernists won and the fundamentalists withdrew. In the broader culture, fundamentalists suffered a setback over the 1925 Scopes “Monkey” Trial—a legal win, but a public relations disaster. Some fundamentalists formed new denominations such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARB), but many others formed nondenominational or independent churches (especially among Baptists). Leading fundamentalists included Baptists such as W.B. Riley, J. Frank Norris, and John R. Rice; Presbyterians such as J. Gresham Machen, Clarence McCartney, and Carl McIntire; Methodists such as Bob Jones Sr. and “Fighting Bob” Shuler.

New Evangelicalism vs. Separatist Fundamentalism

Following the denominational wars and the Scopes Trial, fundamentalists focused on building their own ministries and networks for the next quarter century. Older schools flourished. For example, Moody Bible Institute expanded into a full Bible college and Wheaton College was the fastest-growing college in America during the 1930s. New schools proliferated, most notably Dallas Seminary (1924), Bob Jones College (1927), Westminster Seminary (1929), and Fuller Seminary (1947). New parachurch ministries included the Navigators (1933), Sword of the Lord (1934), National Association of Evangelicals (1942), Wycliffe Bible Translators (1942), World
Vision (1950), Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (1950), and Campus Crusade for Christ (1951). Generally speaking, the terms “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” were used as synonyms to refer to theologically conservative, evangelistic Protestants. That began to change as a younger generation came of age after World War II. These younger fundamentalists hadn’t personally gone through the controversies of the previous generation.

In the postwar years, younger leaders began claiming that evangelicals were a less argumentative and reductionist, though equally orthodox and evangelistic alternative to the older fundamentalists. These “new evangelicals” (or “neo-evangelicals”) included Boston pastor Harold John Ockenga, Fuller Seminary theologian Carl F.H. Henry, and evangelist Billy Graham. The new evangelicals rallied around Fuller Seminary and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), while the older fundamentalists rallied around Bob Jones College and regional Bible and evangelism conferences. Neo-evangelicals gained influence over Dallas Seminary and Wheaton College, while fundamentalists opened new Bible colleges all over the country. New evangelicals founded the periodical *Christianity Today* (1954), while fundamentalists preferred the *Sword of the Lord*. Most of the newer parachurch ministries became more closely identified with neo-evangelicalism than fundamentalism.

The growing rift between neo-evangelicals and fundamentalists became an outright schism in the years after 1957. That year, Billy Graham conducted an evangelistic crusade in Madison Square Garden. Though nurtured as a fundamentalist under the patronage of Jones and especially Rice, Graham broke with fundamentalist practice by inviting modernists and Catholics to participate in crusade planning and leadership. The fundamentalists saw this as a compromise of the faith. Graham argued that he didn’t care who sponsored him—he always preached the same gospel. Though neo-evangelicals and fundamentalists were in substantial theological agreement, they differed sharply over cooperation and strategy. Throughout the 1960s, you could tell which folks were in which camp based largely off how they felt about Graham and his ministry.

Over a generation or so, fundamentalists and evangelicals moved further apart. Most “separatist” fundamentalists refused to cooperate in any meaningful way with Graham and his colleagues. Many fundamentalists also came to believe that it was wrong to cooperate with anyone (even other fundamentalists) who did cooperate with Graham or other evangelicals. Still others argued that true fundamentalists were independents who were compromising the gospel if they cooperated with theological conservatives in mainstream denominations. The most militant fundamentalists were also hardening their theological views by the late 1960s. In particular, they mandated the pre-tribulational rapture as a test of orthodoxy and claimed that the King James Bible was the only appropriate English translation of Scripture. These tensions led to an acrimonious split in the early 1970s between Bob Jones Jr. and John R. Rice; the former was the key leader in the militant camp, while the latter was a more centrist fundamentalist. Centrist fundamentalists like Rice were ensconced in schools such as Liberty Baptist College and Tennessee Temple College and in denominations such as the GARB.

For their part, evangelicals became increasingly theologically diverse during the 1960s. Graham, Henry, and Ockenga remained the key leaders of the more conservative wing, which also produced apologists such as Francis Schaeffer and Norman Geisler, theologians such as John Murray and Roger Nicole, and pastors such as J. Vernon McGee and James Montgomery Boice. The more progressive wing was influenced by the counterculture of the 1960s and drifted
leftward theologically and politically. Fuller Seminary rejected biblical inerrancy in its confessional statement in 1968. Many younger evangelicals protested Vietnam, marched in the Civil Rights Movement, rejected traditional gender roles, and embraced the belief that some people are saved apart from conscious faith in Christ. Key thinkers among the evangelical left included Bernard Ramm, Clark Pinnock, Tony Campolo, and Ronald Sider. In response to the progressive tendencies, conservative evangelicals formed new schools such as Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (1969) and drafted the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978).

**Evangelicals and Politics**

The counterculture also inspired many evangelicals to change their political sentiments. Prior to the 1960s, evangelicals were on the whole far more (vocally) interested in regional politics than national elections. Evangelicals were always willing to show support for Israel and oppose Catholic presidential candidates, but 1968 marked a turning point in the intentionality of evangelical political engagement. Republican candidate Richard Nixon ran a campaign that focused on law and order and traditional values. At the same time, the Democratic Party was fracturing internally due to radical influences, especially from students and other younger activists. Evangelicals in the Deep South, Midwest, and Southern California abandoned their traditional Democratic loyalty and voted for the Republican Party. They did so again in 1972.

Around the same time evangelicals were moving toward the GOP, the Supreme Court was handing down rulings that offended many traditionalist Protestants (and Catholics). Decisions against school prayer and Bible readings were controversial, but the most important ruling was Roe v. Wade in 1973. Although many evangelicals had never given much thought to the morality of abortion, by the late 1970s most had come to believe that abortion on demand was tantamount to legalized murder. Many evangelicals voted Democrat again in 1976 because Jimmy Carter was an outspoken Southern Baptist layman. However, Carter’s ambivalence concerning abortion and his progressive views of gender and sexuality caused many of his erstwhile evangelical supporters to abandon him in 1980. It didn’t help Carter that his Republican challenger was Ronald Reagan, who had served as governor of California from 1966–1974. Reagan was enormously popular with West Coast evangelicals, who helped to introduce him to their southern and East Coast counterparts.

Although there were many individuals who were dedicated to facilitating evangelical political engagement, the major player during this time was Jerry Falwell, an Independent Baptist pastor and the founder of Liberty University. Falwell was a centrist fundamentalist who was influenced by Francis Schaeffer’s views of the decline of Western Culture. Following Schaeffer, and unlike militant fundamentalists, Falwell became willing to lock arms with evangelicals and even non-believers to advance traditional morality (and other conservative positions) in the public square. In 1979, Falwell formed an advocacy group called the Moral Majority. The Moral Majority was the most important early player within the so-called Religious Right, a grassroots network of evangelicals, fundamentalists, Catholics, and Mormons. Many pollsters argued that religious conservatives played a decisive role in Reagan’s election in 1980. The Religious Right became an important part of the Republican Party’s constituency and influenced subsequent elections. Many left-of-center evangelicals remained active in the Democratic Party, but they were far less influential among Democrats than the Religious Right was among Republicans.
The Miraculous Gifts Movement

On April 14, 1906 an African American preacher named William Seymour spoke in an unknown tongue at a revival meeting at the Asuza Street Mission in Los Angeles. Within weeks hundreds of people were attending the multi-ethnic meetings and speaking in tongues. The tongues movement rapidly spread all over the country and affected numerous congregations. Fairly soon divine healings, prophesying, Spirit-slaying, and a number of other phenomena became part of the movement. Many interpreted the gifts, especially tongues, as evidence that God was pouring out his Spirit in a “Latter-Rain” revival that would usher in the Second Coming. Hundreds of folks moved to the mission field, convinced that the Holy Spirit would give them the spiritual gifts they needed to preach in unknown tongues and miraculously heal diseased foreigners.

There have been three different stages or “waves” in the broader miraculous gifts movement. The Pentecostal stage began with the Asuza Street revival. Early Pentecostals formed new denominations, emphasized a second Holy Spirit baptism experience that was subsequent to conversion, argued that all Christians should experience this second baptism, and claimed that Spirit baptism always results in speaking tongues. In terms of other doctrines and emphases, the Pentecostals were very similar to fundamentalists. Key Pentecostal denominations include the Assemblies of God, the Church of God, the Pentecostal Holiness Church, and the Church of God in Christ. Most of the noteworthy prosperity gospel preachers are Pentecostals.

The Charismatic stage began around 1960 when members of mainline denominations began to practice miraculous gifts and formed Holy Spirit renewal movements within their denominations. Even many Roman Catholics became charismatics, especially in Latin America. Like the older Pentecostals, early charismatics argued for a second Holy Spirit baptism, though many of them claimed that tongues isn’t always part of the experience. As with any other spiritual gift, some Christians have the gift of tongues and others do not. In terms of other doctrines and emphases, the charismatics were very similar to the new evangelicals. Most of the earliest Contemporary Christian Music artists were charismatics who had ties to the Jesus People movement. Many of the earliest praise choruses were written by charismatics.

The so-called Third Wave began around 1980 when several faculty members at Fuller Seminary began practicing the miraculous gifts. The Third Wave movement is nondenominational, tends to focus on multiple fillings of the Spirit instead of a single second Spirit baptism, is often more open to Reformed theology, and distances itself from the “prosperity gospel” that has infected so many Pentecostal and Charismatic groups. Several nondenominational networks of churches identify with the Third Wave, including Vineyard, Hillsong, and Sovereign Grace. Wayne Grudem and C.J. Mahaney are leading contemporary figures in the Third Wave.

The miraculous gifts movement has literally changed the face of global Christianity. In 1910, the average evangelical was a middle class white male in the American Midwest who was a member of a mainline denomination. By 2010, the average evangelical was a poor black woman in Central Africa who speaks in tongues and is a member of a nondenominational church. Most evangelicals in the majority world are at least open to the continuation of the miraculous gifts. On the upside, this has led to great spiritual vibrancy and impassioned evangelism among believers in the Global South. On the downside, it has opened the door for the prosperity gospel teachings to flourish in parts of Latin America and Africa.