

THE EQUIP INSTITUTE

Theme: Christian Heritage

Topic: 20th-Century American Evangelicalism (1900-2000)

3rd Semester / Fall 2024

Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. The topic this week is 20th-century American evangelicalism.

Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversies

Protestant modernism reached its apex during the first third of the 20th century. Theological liberals denied the exclusivity of Christ, downplayed most biblical miracles, and rejected or redefined biblical inspiration, authority, and inerrancy. Social Gospel advocates minimized the importance of personal conversion in favor of mobilizing churches as instruments of social transformation. Liberals combined Social Darwinism with postmillennialism, arguing that American culture was gradually becoming more Christian and would take the lead in ushering in Christ's kingdom on earth. Missions became primarily concerned with 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 mainline denominations were led by modernists, especially in the North. Traditionalist evangelicals began fighting against liberal influence in their denominations and the wider culture. The traditionalists came to be known as fundamentalists because they claimed to be defending the fundamentals of the faith against modernist revisionists. Fundamentalists united around several key doctrines, including the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, substitutionary 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 modernists and their allies, fundamentalists tended to work primarily through independent schools, parachurch ministries, and Bible conferences.

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