# THE EQUIP INSTITUTE Theme: Christian Heritage Topic: 20<sup>th</sup>-Century American Evangelicalism (1900-

2000)

3rd Semester / Fall 2024

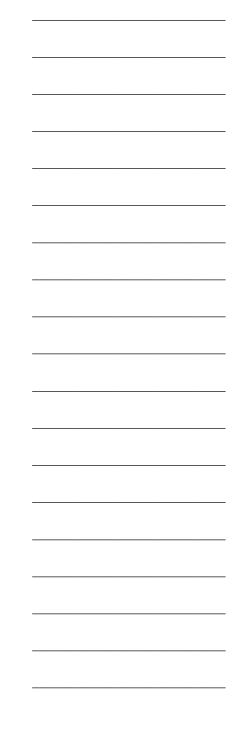
## Introduction

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 20<sup>th</sup>-century American evangelicalism.

## **Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversies**

Protestant modernism reached its apex during the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 lvy 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.





During the 1920s and 1930s, most every major white denomination experienced tensions between modernists and fundamentalists. Presbyterians and Baptists in the North endured significant denominational schisms. In both cases, the modernists won and the fundamentalists either disengaged or withdrew completely. In the broader culture, fundamentalists suffered a setback over the 1925 Scopes Trial, which was 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 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; and Methodists such as Bob Jones Sr. and Robert Shuler.

The African American Protestant experience differed from their white counterparts during this period. These groups tended to be theologically conservative, so they agreed with fundamentalist concerns about modernist theology. Many conservative black Protestants identified as fundamentalists. Theologically conservative African Americans remained on the periphery of the fundamentalist movement for other reasons. Black conservatives were concerned about both liberal theology and racism. It was common for African American fundamentalists to criticize modernists for rejecting the atonement and fundamentalists for remaining silent about Jim Crow or even lynching. These tensions would continue into the Civil Rights era, when a younger generation of black Protestants, some of whom were influenced by modernism and the Social Gospel, would emerge as national leaders.

## New Evangelicalism vs. Separatist Fundamentalism

Following the denominational wars and the Scopes Trial, white fundamentalists focused on building their own ministries and networks for the next quarter century. Many 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 also 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), the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (1950), and Campus Crusade for Christ (1951). 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.

In the postwar years, younger leaders began claiming 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. Neo-evangelical published periodicals such as Christianity Today (1954) and Decision magazine (1960), while fundamentalists preferred the Sword of the Lord. Most of the newer parachuch ministries 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. 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 because 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 on how they felt about Graham.

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 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. 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. Both men cultivated large followings within their respective networks.

For their part, evangelicals became increasingly theologically diverse during the 1960s. Graham, Henry, and Ockenga remained the key leaders of the more conservative wing. But a younger, 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. In response to these 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**

Throughout the 20th century, evangelicals had for the most part been politically conservative, though there were regional and ethnic differences. Northern white evangelicals and most African American evangelicals tended to identify with the Republican Party, while white southern evangelicals identified mostly with the conservative wing of the Democratic Party. Evangelicals almost uniformly opposed the presidential candidacy of Democrat Al Smith in 1928 because of his Catholicism, they remained stridently opposed to communism, especially as the Cold War began, and they were sympathetic to the nation of Israel following its formation in 1948. But the 1960s and 1970s brought changes in evangelical political engagement.

In 1960, many African American evangelicals broke with the Republican Party and voted for John F. Kennedy, despite his Catholicism, because they believed Kennedy


was friendlier to the Civil Rights Movement than Republican candidate Richard Nixon. In 1964, many white evangelicals in both North and South supported Republican candidate Barry Goldwater's failed bid for the presidency. Goldwater's southern supporters rejected the Democratic Party that year because incumbent President Lyndon Johnson supported the Civil Rights Movement. In 1968, Richard Nixon ran a campaign that focused on law and order and traditional family values, which appealed to white evangelicals. Also in 1968, the Democratic Party endured significant internal chaos due to radical influences, especially from progressive students and other younger activists. In 1972, Nixon carried the white evangelical vote again, though African American evangelicals were now firmly aligned with the Democrats.

Around the same time white evangelicals were identifying increasingly with the GOP, the Supreme Court was handing down rulings that offended many traditionalist Protestants (and Catholics). Decisions against school prayer and Bible readings proved controversial, but the most important ruling was Roe v. Wade in 1973. Although many evangelicals had not given much thought to the morality of abortion, by the late 1970s most had come to believe that elective abortion was legalized murder. In 1976, many white evangelicals, especially in the South, voted Democrat again because Jimmy Carter was an outspoken Southern Baptist layman and incumbent Gerald Ford had pardoned Nixon after the latter resigned the presidency following the Watergate scandal. Time and Newsweek ran cover stories that year on the growing influence of American evangelicalism.

In 1980s, Carter lost much of his white evangelical support because his public policies toward abortion, gender roles, and even homosexuality were more progressive than those of most evangelicals. Carter's Republican challenger that year was Ronald Reagan, who had served as governor of California from 1966–1974 and who had nearly won the Republican nomination against Ford in 1976. Reagan was enormously popular with West Coast evangelicals, who helped to introduce him to their southern and East Coast counterparts. Though Reagan was less committed to his faith than Carter, Reagan embraced the pro-life cause in the late-1970s. He was also a committed anti-communist and strong supporter of Israel.

Several evangelical thought leaders promoted the prolife, pro-family, and pro-religious liberty posture that came


to be called social conservatism. The key thinkers included Carl Henry, Charles Colson, and especially Francis Schaeffer. But by far the most influential social conservative was Jerry Falwell, an Independent Baptist pastor and the founder of Liberty University. Falwell was a centrist fundamentalist who was influenced by Schaeffer's views of the decline of Western Culture. Following Schaeffer, but unlike separatist fundamentalists, Falwell became willing to lock arms with non-fundamentalists to advance social conservatism in the public square. This posture proved controversial among fundamentalists, but it led to many conservative evangelicals and centrist fundamentalists moving closer to each other because of their shared concerns about American society.

In 1979, Falwell formed an advocacy group called the Moral Majority. The Moral Majority became the most important early player within the so-called Religious Right, a grassroots network that originally included evangelicals, fundamentalists, Catholics, and Mormons. Many pollsters argued that religious social conservatives played a decisive role in Reagan's election in 1980. The Religious Right became a key part of the Republican Party's constituency and influenced subsequent elections, including Reagan's 1984 reelection, the election of George H. W. Bush in 1988, the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, and the election of George W. Bush in 2000.

Evangelical African Americans remained aligned with the Democratic Party. Though most of them disagreed with the Democratic pro-abortion platform, they resonated with Democratic policies related to racism and poverty. Some white evangelicals were also involved in the Democratic Party, and like their black counterparts, they tended to be socially conservative but hold center-left views on other policies. However, evangelicals of all stripes were a shrinking part of the Democratic coalition by the turn of the twenty-first century. Though Barack Obama was enormously popular among African American evangelicals and received a bump in support among younger white evangelicals during his first run in 2008, around 80% of white evangelicals overall continued to vote for Republican candidates, while black and especially Hispanic evangelicals supported both George W. Bush (2000 and 2004) and Donald Trump (in 2020 and especially 2024) in larger numbers than they ever did Reagan or the elder Bush in the late-twentieth century.
