THE URBAN PULPIT: EVANGELICALS AND THE CITY IN NEW YORK, 1880-1930

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the rise of liberal and fundamentalist factions of American evangelicalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – a dispute usually assumed to be basically theological - appeared from the perspective of the ministers and congregations of New York City’s Protestant churches. I argue that conflict should be understood not as a theological clash but as an exhibition of the resilience of American evangelical culture in the modern age. The rise of liberalism and fundamentalism cannot be understood apart from their interaction with the social and cultural forces of the changing modern city. I investigate the ways evangelicals explained and sought to master a city transforming first into an industrial powerhouse dominated by immigrants and eventually into the hub of a commercial consumer society. The dissertation makes two interwoven arguments.

First, the division of religion in New York City’s congregations was the result of varying pastoral strategies. Problems of poverty, industrialization and commercialization were not merely worrying for social or economic reasons; they hampered the ritual acts of evangelical piety centered upon the act of preaching and its relationship to the conversion experience. Both liberals and fundamentalists offered ways to preserve the power of evangelical religious practice, and their disagreements were based on these varying solutions. This is a useful corrective to arguments that the pressures of social reform led liberal evangelicals toward secularization.

The second argument is that the closer one gets to the lived experience of American evangelicals, the blurrier definitions become. Though the terms “fundamentalist” and “liberal”
had distinct meanings, evangelicals were equally aware that both lay claim to a way of understanding what it was to be religious derived from their common heritage in American evangelicalism’s language and history and methods. Today, despite the popular historiographical perspective that conservatives beat a retreat in the 1920s, many Americans associate the label “evangelical” with a politically threatening subculture premised upon a rather humorless orthodoxy. The dispute over what constitutes “evangelicalism” is a persistent one, both in and outside the academy. Taking practice seriously is a first step toward restoring the movement’s rich heritage.
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Introduction

On a cold Sunday in February, 1931, the Baptist Harry Emerson Fosdick, minister of the Riverside Church on the upper west side of Manhattan, delivered a meditative sermon on the passing of what he called the “old-fashioned Christianity” dominant when his own career had begun thirty years earlier. “They did not join so many committees as we do, but they understood better the meaning of prayer,” he said. “Sometimes, in consequence, there emerged a personal, spiritual power that puts us to shame.” Throughout the sermon, Fosdick used the phrases “old-fashioned,” “old time Christians,” and “fundamentalist” as synonyms, assuming a dichotomy with his own version of faith, which he called “modernism.” He insisted that despite his elegiac tone, modern Christianity was essential: it met the needs of his congregation, it ensured the preservation of faith in a bustling urban and scientific world, while the version of Christianity he declared past clung to “old theologies and outworn sectarianisms” of the Puritans, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. And indeed, that Fosdick was willing to preach a sermon that approached “old-fashioned Christianity” with longing and nostalgia indicated how confident he was that it had faded into irrelevancy. Only ten years before, after all, he had thrown down a gauntlet in his combative 1922 sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”

But despite – or perhaps because of - the easy triumphalism implicit in his past tense, Fosdick did not hesitate to admit that there might be continuities between “old-fashioned Christianity” and his own version of Christianity that went far deeper than the intellectual and doctrinal disputes that tore them apart. He hungered for a certain type of spirituality, religious experience, devotional life, and he suspected, if only unconsciously, that it lived more vitally in the faith he came to praise and bury than in his own. He insisted, “We, of course, stand stoutly

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here for the gains of modernism. We do not . . . identify our Christian convictions with obsolete doctrines.”² But the desire to recover what had been lost that lingered throughout the very sermon that espoused such clarity belied the force of the distinction. Fosdick protested too much.

Fosdick’s sermon reveals the anxiety that lay at the heart of the turbulent experiences of American evangelicals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a matter of decades American Protestants faced a sudden concentration of challenges to their worldview and accustomed way of life. New research into biology and geology seemed to challenge assumptions about the creation story of Genesis, and Biblical scholarship common assumptions about the authorship and source of the Bible. And American Protestantism fractured. This period is often called the “fundamentalist-modernist controversy,” a title which evokes images of competing camps with clear intellectual proclivity toward either conservation or innovation waging a war over Christian doctrine.

And there is some truth to this: some evangelicals synthesized concentrated versions of traditional Reformation theology, most particularly addressing the Bible. Theologians at Princeton drew upon Reformation ideas about inspiration to maintain that the original Biblical manuscripts were without error, that God regularly intervened into human history, and that Biblical miracles were historical. Some evangelicals, inspired by the work of a United Brethren preacher named John Nelson Darby, fashioned a dispensational interpretation of human history that divided the Bible into a set of divine epochs and offered an apocalyptic road map of the human future. All of these positions offered an aggressive defense of the supernatural presence of God in the world. By World War I, many Protestants who subscribed to one or both of these

² Fosdick, “A Fundamentalist Sermon by a Modernist Preacher,” 309.
ideas had begun calling themselves fundamentalists, and aggressively challenging those who seemed to be watering down Christianity.³

Those evangelicals, fundamentalism’s antagonists, Fosdick’s modernists, or, as they often called themselves, liberal evangelicals or liberal Protestants, had since the 1880s sought to deal with the problem of scholarship by assimilating it, arguing that, contra dispensationalism or direct divine intervention, God revealed his will through the progressive developments of human history and the broadening of human knowledge and ability to influence the world. Contra inerrantism, they often dealt with historically implausible or problematic areas of scripture by labeling them myth describing deeper realities about God or the human condition. They maintained that religion had to adapt itself to the intellectual languages of the age, and collapsed supernaturalism into a broadly optimistic view of human potential.⁴

By the early 1920s, these two camps were in open rivalry. Fosdick’s confrontational sermon was echoed in the rhetoric of many other liberals, and the fundamentalists returned the favor by attempting to cast the liberals from the great evangelical denominations, particularly the Northern Baptist and Presbyterian churches. Their clashes were often mediated by centralist groups sometimes called “traditionalists,” or “denominational loyalists,” who sought to preserve the integrity of denominational bodies, and hence tended to reject fundamentalist calls to expel those they deemed heretics however distasteful their theology might be. By the late 1920s, defeated in denominational maneuverings and humiliated by the spectacle of the Scopes trial,


many fundamentalists abandoned the denominations and public advocacy, retreating to the safety of their own institution building.5

This story is intellectual and procedural, and I do not disagree with it. It coincides with much literature that emphasizes that fundamentalism was preeminently a theological movement interested in the enforcement of particular religious ideas. But Fosdick’s concerns make a purely intellectual telling of the story seem sterile and incomplete. That story describes this turbulent period largely from the perspective of theologians and other intellectual elites, who hardly represent the great mass of American Christians. It also lends support to the problematic tradition of telling American religious history solely in terms of the development of theology.

Fortunately, as historians have become better acquainted with religious studies, this view has seemed increasingly inadequate. To be religious is a profoundly embodied state; beliefs and behaviors flow into and out of each other in ways impossible to untangle, and theology is, more or less, the attempt to explain the gritty reality of living in a world that so frequently seems counter to what the believer feels God must have intended. And similarly, the ritualized practices and formal behaviors religions invoke illustrate both how theology is translated into everyday behavior and how religious behavior can alter one’s theology. As historians have paid more attention to the stuff of cultural history – material culture, popular culture, family life – the

5 For examples, see for the “three party” thesis, which posits the existence of a moderate middle ground between fundamentalists and their modernist antagonists, Bradley Longfield, The Presbyterian Controversy: fundamentalists, modernists, and moderates (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, Fundamentalism in the City: conflict and division in Boston’s churches, 1885-1950 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 4-6 who however applies Marsden’s interpretation on a local level, arguing that the fundamentalists in Boston coalesced primarily around political issues; for subgroups, see D. G. Hart’s identification of “confessional Presbyterianism” in Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the crisis of conservative Protestantism in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), and Kenneth Cauthen’s distinction between “modernity” and “liberal Protestantism” in The Impact of American Religious Liberalism. The classic “two party” interpretation can be found in Martin Marty, Righteous Empire: the Protestant experience in America (New York: Harper, 1970). J. Michael Utzinger and others have argued for a traditionalist evangelical middle, mediating between two extremes. Utzinger, Yet saints their watch are keeping: fundamentalists, moderates, and the development of evangelical ecclesiology, 1887-1937 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2006). See also Douglas Jacobsen and William Trollinger, eds., Reforming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the present (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
multiple ways religion manifests itself has become increasingly obvious. Attention to this intersection between belief and practice is what Richard Wightman Fox calls the “culturalist turn” in religious history, or what other scholars have called “lived religion,” and it forces us to reassess earlier conclusions about the role and very nature of religion in American history.⁶

Both liberal and fundamentalist evangelicalism suffer at the hands of a narrative that presents the conflict as intellectual history. Such a narrative’s failures make fundamentalism rather one dimensional; historians have offered remarkably comprehensive accounts of the ways the complicated and detailed fundamentalist worldview cohered, but a sense of why that worldview mattered or appealed to those for whom religion was essential to coping in the world often goes missing. Likewise, though recent work has complicated the presupposition, much historiography has taken it for granted that fundamentalists were the paladins of a benighted and doomed rural America, resisters of progress and defenders of an earlier way of life. Similarly, accounts of Protestant liberalism often tend toward narratives of secularization (a accusation, ironically, its contemporary antagonists flung at it); words and metaphors like “accommodation” and “adaptation” which historians use to describe what liberal Protestants were trying to do seem to imply that liberalism indeed sacrificed a certain spiritual vigor – and in so doing, became, more or less, modern Americans, whose religious values coincide neatly with the secular values of twentieth century American life. They embraced cultural and social pluralism, accepted the authority of science and empiricism in the public square, and joined in celebration of twentieth

century American consumer capitalism and democracy. If fundamentalism seems a mindless defense of the past, liberalism seems a forerunner of a secular future.

That fundamentalism was so strong in urban centers, like New York City or Boston, can be taken merely as evidence that it emerged to combat its antagonists at their very source. But the city was more than merely a ring in which the combatants squared off; rather, both fundamentalism and liberalism were the products of American evangelicalism’s engagement with the place in which they appeared. This study focuses on evangelicals in New York City from 1880 to 1930 as a way to explore how evangelicals of all varieties shaped the raw material of their faith in ways that made sense of the onrushing modernity that confronted them. It argues that fundamentalism and liberalism were pastoral responses to the demands of the city, and thus it was no mistake that New York City was in many ways the locus of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy: the New York Presbytery was the battleground of the Presbyterians’ schisms, site of heresy trials and accusations that received national attention. Baptists like Isaac Haldeman and Harry Emerson Fosdick were nationally recognized leaders of factions in their denomination; their writings were bestsellers and studied by thousands. What happened in New York set the tone for the divisions within evangelicalism across the nation.

The dissertation also seeks to redeem the spirituality of liberal evangelicals and the pragmatism of fundamentalists. Continuities in evangelical piety were as important as distinctions in evangelical theology; that though the period saw the emergence of multiple

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8 For historians that take this perspective, see for instance Bendroth, Fundamentalism in the City and George Marsden’s account of the career of John Roach Stratton, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 161-163.
competing evangelicalisms they emerged less due to theological argument than to the divergent attempts of ministers and laypeople to mobilize the traditional language and pietistic practices which had propelled evangelicalism to stunning success in America over the previous hundred years. Evangelicals fought so bitterly not merely because they disagreed on points of theology, but because they disagreed on how evangelism could best be implemented. Thus, they were divergent iterations of a robust evangelical piety; they pursued the embodiment of similar theological ideas in differing practices, and as such, those differences caused conflict as much as did doctrine. The fissure in the Protestant consensus ran deeper than intellectual or ideological disputes; it ran directly through the ways evangelicals believed they should live their lives.9

Bringing this sort of religious practice into the picture suggests two arguments. First, the closer one gets to the trenches New York’s evangelical ministers labored in, the blurrier definitions become. Though the terms “fundamentalist” and “modernist” had distinct and divergent meanings for Fosdick, he was equally aware that both camps as he defined them laid equal claim to a certain form of piety, a way of understanding what it was to live religiously that “fundamentalists” had and “superficial modernism” hungered for: a “personal, spiritual power,” the ability to “transcend the world.”10 This way of understanding what religion should produce was derived from the heritage of the American evangelical movement as it had matured across the previous hundred and fifty years; an undercurrent of piety centered upon a transformative spiritual experience gained through a personal encounter with the divine. And thus, it is perhaps useful to approach the various factions of Protestantism as not doctrinal controversies but, simply, variants of evangelical piety emerging in response to cultural change, similar in concept and aim but increasingly different in method. Their conflict, then, should be interpreted as a

10 “A Fundamentalist Sermon by a Modernist Preacher,” 313, 311.
devotional crisis within evangelicalism, divergent attempts to reclaim the devotional piety of the First and Second Great Awakenings. This is social and cultural history as well as simply theological history; it brings historians closer to how these Christians actually lived.

Secondly, the transformation of religion in New York City’s congregations was not simply an intellectual adaptation to modernity or a desire for comprehensive theory, but rather a pastoral strategy designed to deal with radical transformations of culture, community, and space.11 Theological developments in both modernist and fundamentalist directions were the product of shifting ministerial tactics, which in turn were inspired of the strenuous demands leveled on the city’s pulpits beginning in the late nineteenth century.

This process was particularly evident in the city. As the noted minister Josiah Strong wrote, “The problem of the city . . .more urgently demands solution than any other peculiar to our own times.”12 The sense that a looming threat to a particular way of life – the strong community of the small town, the control of one’s own economic efficacy, the firm moral order born of cultural homogeneity - lay between the rising skyscrapers of the city was common in the late nineteenth century and historians have frequently taken note of it.13 This has sometimes been vague: Margaret Lamberts Bendroth has noted that most historians of the period’s religion “invoke problems around urbanization and immigration without delving into them.”14 But in

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14 Bendroth, *Fundamentalism in the City*, 4.
New York the challenge to an evangelical way of life was very particular: the economic, spatial, and cultural transformations of the city were at their base threats to old ways of preaching the Word. The congregations that once dotted downtown and checked the rise of capitalism by their very presence withered in the shadows of New York’s skyscrapers, and swallowed up by the rise of commercialism and fading numbers of residences many had to flee north. The rise of mass media and entertainment – the stage, the screen, even newspapers - drowned out the once dominant voice of the preacher in the public square. The growth of a poor underclass, frequently Catholic or even not religious meant that fewer and fewer New Yorkers treated the Sabbath as evangelicals did, fewer and fewer responded to the revivalists who traveled through town, and more and more of New York’s evangelical children found friends not of the faith. These things cracked the union between the city’s cultural and physical landscapes with evangelical piety that had flourished in the century since Whitefield had preached in New York.

The problems were therefore not primarily worrying because they threatened some sort of nebulous Protestant hegemony, but rather because they hampered the basic processes of evangelical religion which pastors were devoted to furthering: the liturgical acts of piety which gained one a divine relationship, and hence access to spiritual power. Thus, solving the problem of the city was important for particularly religious reasons, and because of that, it seemed that it might have particularly religious solutions. And both fundamentalists and modernists offered particular strategies that mixed practice, piety, and theology. This insight brings the divided historiography of Progressive-era American Protestantism – which is frequently split between analysis of the “social gospel” movement, that itself is generally approached via institutional and
organizational interpretations rather than treated as a profoundly religious effort, and analysis of
the fundamentalist-modernist controversy – back together.\textsuperscript{15}

If we understand the story of changing evangelical religion in New York City to be about
that piety, of behavior and context as well as of theology, the crumbling of American
Protestantism in early twentieth century New York City looks dramatically different. It seems
less a narrative of fragmentation than resilience; and the conflict that erupted within it emerges
against a context of adaptation. Protestant evangelicalism did not decline; religion in the city
did not grow weaker, despite incessant metaphors of warfare. Rather, evangelicalism multiplied,
and the basic patterns of its piety took on a variety of forms. The clash between evangelicalisms
should be understood not as a theological conflict between divergent Christian faiths, but rather
as a demonstration of the resilience of American evangelical culture in the face of urban
modernity. The varieties of Protestantism that emerged in New York City were the work of
evangelical pastors and believers who reshaped the rituals and ideas of their faith to cope with
the changing landscape of the city’s demographics, urban culture, and even geography

The argument that liberalism and fundamentalism were two divergent methods of laying
stake to a common evangelical heritage takes as a predicate that evangelicalism itself is better
understood as a style of being religious, a set of expectations and therefore practices about what
being religious was, than as a coherent theological proposition.\textsuperscript{16} The evangelical piety that

\textsuperscript{15} On the social gospel, see Sidney Mead’s famous line that it was “substituting sociology for theology,” and C.
Howard Hopkins’s appraisal that it “coalesced more around action than belief.” Sidney Mead, \textit{The Lively
Protestant Churches and Industrial America} (New York: Harper and Row, 1949); Aaron Abell, \textit{The Urban Impact
on American Protestantism} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943); Paul Carter, \textit{The Spiritual Crisis of the
Gilded Age} (DeKalb: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1971).
\textsuperscript{16} The most popular definition of evangelicalism is that proposed by David Bebbington and known as the
“Bebbington quadrilateral:” evangelicals are Protestant Christians who are Bible-centric, conversion-centric,
evangelical ministers active in New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century inherited emerged from an eighteenth century blend of British Puritanism and German pietism, and emphasized that salvation derived from a spiritual and personal experience with God. They called this particular variety of religious experience conversion, and believed it would bring both heaven in the hereafter as well as sanctification, the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit, in the present. It began with conviction, both an intellectual and an emotional state; it was to be awakened from the blind numbness of human depravity and to become aware of God’s sovereignty over the universe and that without divine intervention one was a sinner by nature and thus irrevocably damned. Conviction could be a frightening experience, but it was also the first step toward the divine communion that would revitalize the life of the believer. Once a sinner accepted his or her need for God, conviction was followed by justification, a confirmation of crucicentric, and mission-centric. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin & Hyman, 1989), 2-17. This definition has the virtues of breadth but also seems vague; what Christians are not “Bible-centric” or “crucicentric” (that is, placing emphasis on Christ’s cross)? Other interpreters, like Timothy Weber and Gary Dorrien, break down evangelicalism into several sub-groups, including the “pietistic” evangelicals of the First and Second Great Awakenings and fundamentalist evangelicalism, each of whom offer a take on the traditional Reformed doctrine of salvation by grace alone. Timothy Weber, “Premillennialism and the branches of American evangelicalism,” in Donald Dayton and Robert Johnson, eds., *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991) 12-4; Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998) 3-4. George Marsden offers a more theological definition, stating that evangelicals are “Christians traditional enough to affirm the basic beliefs of the old nineteenth-century consensus,” including such commonly accepted notions as the authority of the Bible and salvation based on “the redemptive work of Christ,” but also perhaps more contentious issues like the “real historical character of God’s saving work as recorded in Scripture.” Marsden’s definition lends itself to the interests of theologically conservative evangelicals, as implicitly illustrated in the title of his book *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 4-5; I maintain that liberal evangelicals did not accept some of these doctrines yet still considered themselves evangelical due to a subscription to Marsden’s last point: the reality of a transformative spiritual experience with God. Both Donald Dayton, “The search for Historical Evangelicalism: George Marsden’s History of Fuller Seminary as a case study” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 23:1 (September 1993) 12-33 and D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing evangelicalism: conservative Protestantism in the age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) have also taken issue with Marsden’s definition; for Hart the term is so vague as to be meaningless beyond the agenda of any group which claims it; for Dayton, Marsden’s privileging of doctrine leaves out more radical (socially and supernaturally) groups like early Methodists and the Holiness movement.

salvation. Finally, God granted sanctification, the infusion of one’s life with the Holy Spirit and the consequent cultivation of divine virtues.  

This was the expectation. But evangelical experience from its very beginning was bound up in a variety of practices that changed over time, and which sought to regulate, predict, and direct the ways conversion happened, and as practices forked and diverged, so did the evangelical river itself. Despite the protests of many evangelicals themselves that their faith was not “ritualistic,” and though the Reformation doctrine from which it sprang sternly instructed the believer that it was God’s prerogative and God’s alone when such a thing might occur, evangelicalism’s anxious inheritors on the American continent never quite believed it. Though early American evangelicals like Jonathan Edwards insisted that conversion could not be forced or earned, even he sought to regularize and codify the what its process was, to understand how one came to that saving interaction with God, and as the eighteenth century turned to the nineteenth evangelicals sought more and more control over the process through regularized devotional practices and ways of worship.

Much of what evangelicals tried to do in the fifty years or so overlapping 1900 in New York City orbited around what they called “proclaiming the Word.” The notion of the encounter with the Word of God was foundational to the Protestant Reformation, and thus also to evangelicalism, a particular form of Protestantism. The Word was a verbal sacrament, in Martin

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Luther’s term; the Reformation had elevated hearing to the most important of the senses, and the centrality of music and sermons emphasized the importance of sound in evangelical worship.\textsuperscript{19} The eighteenth century Directory of Worship for American Presbyterians stated that preaching was “an institution of God for the salvation of men,” but also a "didactic exercise" for "holding for some principle of religion, inculcating some duty, or reproving some sin.”\textsuperscript{20} For evangelicals, God’s interactions with his creation were most basically verbal. In Genesis, God created the world through speaking it into existence. He had given mankind his will in verbal form, in the commandments on Mount Sinai and in the rest of the Bible itself. And, ultimately, of course, the Gospel of John named Jesus the Word of God made flesh.

The speech of God, then, was transformative. It communicated his wishes in the form of knowledge to humanity, but it also exerted power: for God to speak something was to bring it into existence. There was no difference in God’s language between sign and signified; his speech created reality; indeed, in some sense, it was reality. As the philosopher of language Walter Ong has noted, the Word in the Christian context was indicative of immediate and real presence: Jesus could be the Word of God because he was God in a form tangible and apprehensible, and thus, for evangelicals, the language of God the presence of God himself.\textsuperscript{21}


This was why hearing the Word of God preached or encountering it in scripture could bring about conversion: the encounter with God would radically revise how one understood the world. Evangelicals frequently pointed to Romans 10:17, which declared in the King James Version of the Bible that “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

Thus, for evangelicals, the language of God was fundamentally different from other language in two important ways. First, God’s word was important simply as an object, a talisman, or, to use Christian idiom, a sacrament, something earthly which channels something divine. This is often referred to in Biblical theology as the “causative authority” of the Word; its ability to exert divine power in the world. It was this causative authority which inflicted conviction, conversion, and sanctification upon the sinner. But secondly, language was important for its content, its claims about the world. This form of authority, particularly identified with the Bible, describes the world as God, not humanity, understands it. For instance, evangelical conversion derives not merely from hearing words spoken, but from being drawn into the world which these words describe. It begins, after all, after being told that one is a sinner, given an identity one has not had before, and the reorientation of the world – which conversion in large measure is - proceeds from this. This is what Biblical theologians call “normative authority;” the Word’s reliability in describing how the church should function, humans should behave, and so on. It is this authority invoked when evangelicals call the Bible “the only rule of faith and practice.” While causative authority worked upon the soul of the sinner, the normative authority of the sermon or the Bible taught her to understand the world in terms of sinfulness and righteousness. The two thus worked in tandem.22

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22 See the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) 1.6; Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) 1.2. These doctrines of authority went back to the Protestant scholastics of the seventeenth century. For a contemporary discussion of the
The encounter with the Word, through instruction and experience, brought the sacred cycles of the cosmos – fall and sin, atonement and redemption - into contact with the mundane rhythms of everyday life. The minister in the pulpit translated the abstractions of theology and the supernatural power of grace into relevancy, applying them to the real experiences of people in the pews. They looked to it for moral guidance and for inspiration, for counsel and a visible image of the sacred. Preaching could transform an individual but also morally galvanize the worldview of a population; the pulpits of America in the nineteenth century thus became the engines of moral crusades, based upon the refining power of God’s grace that rippled from them like a trumpet blast.  

Preaching provided evangelicals with a lexicon for understanding the world around them. It described not merely the world as it was, but as God intended it to be. It recast the secular world in sacred terms: what it named as miracles were invested with holiness, what it named as sins were to be reviled.

The experience of Leighton Williams, who in 1887 succeeded his father as the minister of the Amity Baptist Church on New York’s West Side, illustrated how evangelical piety

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worked. Before he could take the pulpit, Williams had to recount to New York’s Baptist Ministers’ Association his own conversion experience, and his faith history indicated a life steeped in the Word. “I was early taught the stories of the Bible,” he said, “and, almost as soon as I had learned to read I was trained in the habit of daily reading and committing to memory portions of it.” And he strove through his youth to live according to its precepts – what he called “intellectual acceptance of Christianity.” But at the same time, his “heart and life were as yet but slightly touched.”

Williams continued to fear for his soul. And he turned to the study of the Bible. “The 53rd chapter of Isaiah became with me a favorite portion of Scripture, and I went frequently to ponder over it,” he recalled. “I endeavoured to cast the work of reformation in which I had failed on Christ.” Describing reading the chapter one time in particular, Williams said, “I saw revealed in that chapter as the Saviour suffering for me. I remember on one occasion committing myself to Him with . . . earnestness, and a clearer conviction than at other times that in Him was my only Hope.”

The transition between the written word of the Bible and a personal relationship with Jesus was seamless, and it illustrated not only the causative authority of an experience with Jesus, but also the normative authority of particular knowledge about him, the two forms intimately interconnected and interdependent. Williams’s experience illustrated the way religious experience and knowledge were related, according to the eminent Presbyterian minister and theologian Charles Hodge: “The feelings come from spiritual apprehension of the truth, and not the knowledge of truth by feelings.”

That is, God’s Word was the gateway to the saving experience of God himself.

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26 Williams, “Statement to the Ordaining Council,” 3-4.
27 Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology (New York: Scribner’s, 1873) 1:178.
By the mid-nineteenth century in New York City, as elsewhere, evangelicals had built a religious culture of a constellation of pietistic behaviors which sought interaction with God, and taught that this interaction could radically transform individuals, communities, and the nature of human society itself. More than anything else, evangelical devotion was focused upon the twin verbalizations of preaching and Scripture reading. As Jonathan Edwards, father of American evangelicalism, wrote, “The main benefit that is obtained by preaching is by impression made upon the mind at the time of it, and not by the effect that arises afterwards by a remembrance of what was delivered.” Preaching was the basic catalyst of conversion. John Broadus, a Baptist minister and author of the most renowned textbook of preaching of the nineteenth century, declared “The great appointed means of spreading the good tidings of salvation through Christ is preaching – words spoken, whether to the individual or to the assembly. And this, nothing can supersede.”

But though the sermon was the ordained tool for spreading conversion, it was not the pastor’s own voice, but his repetition of the Bible. Alexander believed that even preachers themselves needed “constant perusal and reperusal of the scriptures,” which immersed their own pastoral work in God’s grace. As Shedd argued, “The theologian and preacher, by his patient

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study of the written revelation, must gain that by reading which he would have gained by reverently listening to the discourses of the prophets.”

The sense of immediate encounter Ong describes is very present here: reading the Bible was more like hearing than it was like perusing text; because it was God’s Word it could provide proximate encounter with divinity. As Alexander mourned, “The great reason why we have so little good preaching is that we have so little piety.” It was the preacher’s duty to embody Scripture in as potent a form as possible. The ideal preacher was, Shedd wrote, the “man whose whole soul is intensely Biblical, the man into whose intellectual and moral texture the substance of revelation has been woven, the man in whom the written Word has become incarnate.” This immediacy was central to evangelical devotional use of the Bible; evangelicals strove not merely to understand the Bible, but to integrate it into their lives, to find in it patterns by which they could interpret and understand the world and remake themselves. The belief that it was so intensely applicable was a mark of their optimism, and confidence that they were capable of rightly understanding God and his intentions.

However, centering worship upon spoken language did not mean that evangelicalism’s devotions became entirely abstract or cognitive, the inverse of the sacred drama of the Catholic Mass. God’s Word echoing from the pulpit replaced the sacrifice of the Mass at the altar; the sermon hefted the weight of the scrapped liturgy of Catholicism, but this was less repudiation than reorganizations of sacred space and sacred ritual. There was still a particular time and

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36 Shedd, *Homiletics*, 70.
37 For contemporary interpretations of evangelical Biblicism along these lines, see Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: an anthropological study of evangelical Biblicism* (Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2004); Nancy Ammerman, *Bible Believers: fundamentalists in the modern world* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 51-56.
38 On this process see Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: a social history of Calvinism*
place to encounter saving grace; even in the defiantly low church atmosphere of nineteenth
century evangelicalism, these sacred places were to be respected. The manual of New York’s
Central Presbyterian Church, for instance, instructed congregants never to miss a church meeting
or other opportunity to visit the church house, for “The prosperity of Religion and your own
growth in grace is intimately connected with them.” Though evangelicals believed intensely
in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform their souls, they were not merely abstracted minds
and spirits; conversion was shaped by the physical and material.

The church house, its pulpit and pews, wielded spiritual authority, and the proper use of
these spaces in the rituals of worship were integral to the creation of new Christians and the
continuing sanctification of the existing faithful. These rites of worship were a ritual marker of
the expanding Kingdom of God, but also tools that could facilitate the initiation of individuals
into that metaphysical place. For Christians, sacred space is fundamentally a place of salvific
transformation, the site where a meeting between God and human beings through the mediation
of Jesus Christ’s life and death occurs. It replicates the places of transition in the life of Christ –
the font as the grave; the altar the stone from which he rose from the dead – and appropriate
space is fundamental to the actions of worship performed there. It thus required respect,
becoming a material locus around which evangelicals could organize their spiritual lives, particularly their practices of worship, and therefore allow the reach of God from the spiritual into the physical realm of their lives. Even New York’s Brick Church, which became a center of liberal theology in the early twentieth century, refused to allow groups such as the Anti-Saloon League use of their pulpit; upon an appeal from the League that their speakers be allowed to address an audience from the pulpit, the church’s Session announced, simply, “it is not customary for us to allow special appeals from the pulpit.” These ASL’s speaker would have to address his audience from the floor.43

In these ways, then, the theology of the Word which emerged from the Reformation took particular form in the practice of evangelical religion, and those practices were themselves molded by the religious behaviors and religious spaces that evangelicals expected to use to integrate the Word into their individual lives. The fusion of these vectors indicates that it is more useful to think of evangelicalism as a style of religious practice – the inseparable combination of ideas and behavior – than as an ideology or theology. On his first trip to New York City, the great evangelist George Whitefield preached in the open air because he was denied use of the pulpits of the city.44 By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, evangelicalism’s conviction that the power of the Word would bring conversion had become the reigning ideology of those pulpits, because evangelicals had begun to do the work of translating their particular religious impulse into the regular methods of practicing Protestantism.

43 Brick Presbyterian Church, Session Minutes, May 3, 1905; May 26, 1905. Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.
Nineteenth century evangelicals made a practical distinction between the “ontological” Word and the “functional” Word. That is, the Word of God itself was eternal, pristine, and divine; but in the world, as one historian puts it, “evangelicals became increasingly optimistic that the Holy Spirit could reveal the pure Word through a wide range of linguistic styles.”

The distinction reflects the experience of evangelicals in New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Liberals and fundamentalists developed different functional ways of channeling the ontological Word of God, ways both influenced by and designed to affect the changing culture they saw around them. Significant here was not only the city itself, but a growing distrust of the ability of the verbal Word to encapsulate truth. While fundamentalists sought to amplify the verbal Word to overwhelm the competing words of the stage, movies, and print culture and the bustling noise of the city, liberal evangelicals sought increasingly ways to embody the Word of God in things tangible, and particularly in the rituals of social service.

Chapter 1 of the dissertation presents New York City as the center of a mid-nineteenth century American evangelical consensus, a religion which had transformed New York City from an eighteenth century center of Dutch and Anglican Christianity to the capitol of a nineteenth century American evangelical empire, ceaselessly expanding through proclamation of the Word in voice and the spreading of scripture. It also examines the sense of crisis evangelicals felt when suddenly, in the late nineteenth century, the power of these strategies seemed to cease. Chapter 2 discusses one early attempt to confront the challenge of the city: the Revised Version of the Bible, of which Testaments appeared in 1881 and 1885. The translators of the Revised Version still trusted in the power of the Word of God and felt that a more accessible translation

45 These categories are Brown’s, who particularly applies them to the distinction between the Bible and other written material evangelicals produced. *The Word in the World*, 4-5.
would reignite evangelism in the city. However, by providing an alternative to the King James Version they also, inadvertently, separated the words of any given text from the concept of the Word of God. Chapter 3 further explores that notion by examining the growing sense among New York’s evangelicals in the 1880s that the changing landscapes, both geographical and cultural, of New York City were becoming hostile to evangelical religion, and explores some early attempts to confront these changes with newly sacralized spaces: or, as one minister put it, sermons in stone. In illustrating an early effort to translate the power of preaching into a non-verbal form, the chapter points out divergences in liberal and conservative approaches as early as the early 1880s, when both the Brick Presbyterian Church and the Calvary Baptist church dedicated new edifices. Chapter 4 examines the moment in which these divergent practices came to seem a problem in and of themselves to many evangelicals; in examining the thought and trial for heresy of the Presbyterian minister Charles Briggs, it demonstrates the ways a group calling themselves “liberal evangelicals” became self aware in the early 1890s, self-consciously pursuing the power of the Word in non-verbal ways.

Chapter 5 further explores this particularly distinctive liberal evangelical spirituality, emerging from the aesthetics of the early nineteenth century Romantic movement and the pulpit theology of pastors like Horace Bushnell and Henry Ward Beecher. It first examines the rise of a liberal theology of preaching, and connects this new style of homiletics to the institutional church movement, which appeared in the 1890s to aid the poor of the city, and expressed not merely an impulse toward charity and social service, but also an emerging liturgical style that embodied the converting Word of God in the behavior and personality of believing Christians.

Chapters 6 and 7 examine a conservative backlash. Chapter 6 particularly investigates conservative attempts to defend the Bible as a text from apparent liberal unfaithfulness to the
printed Word. It particularly examines the 1904 devotional manual *How to Study the Bible*, written by Isaac Haldeman, Baptist dispensationalist and pastor of the First Baptist Church on 79th and Broadway, examining some particular innovations in the ways the emerging fundamentalist movement practiced the devotional act of Bible reading. It concludes with the Congregationalist Wilbert Webster White’s founding of the Biblical Seminary of New York, and his attempts to chart a moderate course between emerging liberal and conservative points of view in a system of Bible study which recalled the rapidly fading evangelical consensus. Chapter 7 examines the Billy Sunday revival in New York City in the spring of 1917, pointing out some of the ways in which Sunday based his efforts on a particularly aggressive assertion of the spoken Word. It also notes the changing perception evangelicals had of the city: from a poverty-stricken, immigrant filled industrial wasteland to, increasingly, the center of a growing American commercial culture that promoted leisure and consumption and celebrated cultural diversity.

Chapter 8 examines another way in which evangelicals dealt with this new city. It treats the Union School of Religion at Union Theological Seminary, an experimental Sunday school run by the Methodist George A. Coe in the 1910s and 1920s. The Union School represents the far boundaries of the liberal evangelical movement, for while it adopted many liberal evangelical ideas about the converting power of behavior, social service, and ritual, it also drifted from the Christocentric emphasis that self-identified liberal evangelicals like Henry Sloane Coffin, president of the Seminary, insisted upon. The Union School increasingly came to celebrate the city’s diversity for its own sake, adopting a self-consciously pluralist attitude and defining Christianity in those terms. Coffin’s decision to shut down the school illustrates both the clear boundaries, but also the ultimately tenuous nature, of liberal evangelicalism.
Chapters 9 and 10 present fundamentalism and liberal evangelicalism in full flower, in the respective ministries of John Roach Straton and Harry Emerson Fosdick in 1920s New York City. Chapter 9 argues that Straton embraced the term “fundamentalist” primarily as a description for his pastoral style, centered around an aggressive assertion of the sacramental nature of the preached word – a traditional evangelical doctrine Straton found threatened in the increasingly loud commercial culture of New York City, in the lewdness of its stage, which he judged to be a perverted Christian liturgy working on New Yorker’s souls infernally as true liturgy did sacredly, and in the propensity of liberal evangelicals to seek alternative means of gaining God’s grace. It was his responsibility not merely to confront these things, but to preserve the power of the Word against them. Fundamentalism for Straton, then, was as much a way of practicing Christianity as it was a theology.

Chapter 10 evaluates the tumultuous 1920s career of Harry Emerson Fosdick, another Baptist who began the decade in the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church and ended it at Riverside Church, a self-consciously interdenominational edifice built for Fosdick by John D. Rockefeller. In tracing Fosdick’s eviction from the First Church and his partially successful quest to make Riverside an open membership church affiliated with a Baptist convention that insisted upon immersion, Fosdick’s trials demonstrate his stubborn insistence both that the word “evangelical” applied to him and that the liberal evangelical practices he established at Riverside were indeed measures that promoted traditional evangelical goals of conversion and sanctification. That Fosdick’s interlocutors equally aggressively insisted that Fosdick was not an evangelical illustrates how deep – but also, in other ways, how shallow – the cleavages in evangelicalism in the early twentieth century were.
When he confronted the committee assembled to investigate his orthodoxy, Fosdick claimed “If I did not consider myself an evangelical Christian, I certainly should not be preaching in an evangelical pulpit.” Looking back from eighty years, an observer might imagine that Fosdick’s plea failed; that despite the popular historiographical perspective that conservatives beat a retreat in the 1920s, and the protests of small but vocal modern groups who argue that popular conceptions misconstrue the breadth of the evangelical heritage, many Americans associate the label “evangelical” with a perceived politically threatening subculture premised upon a rather humorless orthodoxy. The dispute over what particularly constitutes “evangelicalism” is a tenacious one, both in and outside the academy, and, quite frequently, the heritage of liberal Protestantism’s spirituality is neglected, arresting the development of American evangelical piety in the mid-nineteenth century, and ignoring the continuing transformations in what it meant to be evangelical in at the turn of the century. Closer attention to the practice, rather than the theology, of American Protestants rather reveals that that defining “evangelical” and thereby claiming two centuries of a lived Christian tradition was at the heart of what has been called “the fundamentalist crisis” of the early twentieth century.


Chapter 1

The Word in the City

As the year 1882 came to a close, the congregation of the Brick Presbyterian Church in Murray Hill, just southeast of Central Park, was in trouble. Most pressing was the need for a new minister to replace the departing Welshman Llewelyn Bevan, who had recently announced his intention to return to the British Isles. But this was not their only challenge. The rolls of the Church were packed with unfamiliar and forgotten names, attendance had been dropping, and programs were floundering. Bevan, hoping to fill half-empty pews, had spent a fruitless several months sparring with his congregation over the timing of the second Sunday service, urging upon them a move from afternoon to the evening in order to attract those who worked during the day. Henry van Dyke, the young pastor who replaced Bevan in the pulpit remembered in a sermon ten years later, “If report speaks truly, you were somewhat discouraged. You had a nominal membership of one thousand, and an actual membership of less than three hundred; a congregation which half-filled the church . . . a floating debt and declining revenue.”¹ On top of all of this, in February 1883, only weeks after van Dyke took the pulpit, the congregation’s leading layman and trustee, former New York governor Edwin Morgan, died suddenly.²

These problems were all the more humbling because the Brick Church was such a venerable institution. The Brick Church had rested from its organization in 1809 until 1856 on Beekman Street just off of Park Row, on the borders of City Hall Park, among the homes of the

¹ Henry van Dyke, “An Historic Church,” in Henry van Dyke, Historic Presbyterianism: three sermons for the times (New York Randolph, 1893) 26. On declining attendance, particularly in the Sunday evening meetings, see Bevan’s letter to the congregation, reprinted in Shepherd Knapp, A History of the Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York (New York: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1909) 370-1. Van Dyke likely exaggerates the debt problem; Bevan and the trustees had dealt with most of it in the late 1870s, as per Knapp, 366-69. Similarly, Knapp argues van Dyke failed to include attendance at Brick’s satellite chapel in his totals, but concedes at least a third of the names on the church rolls did not attend.
wealthy and near the centers of civil and cultural power. Murray Hill in the middle nineteenth
century was considered uptown, a fashionable, if slightly old-fashioned neighborhood of
brownstone row houses, home of the wealthy financier JP Morgan. The Brick congregation,
moving to at Fifth Avenue and 37th Street, expected that they would find rest there from the
increasingly bustling and commercial City Hall Park three miles south. And again, the Brick
Church became the center of Manhattan’s well-to-do culture, and also of the Presbyterian faith in
New York City. The church hosted concerts and denominational meetings; its congregation
included civic leaders and the wealthy. But by the 1880s, the commercial storefronts on Fifth
Avenue that had overtaken Madison Square, ten blocks south, were beginning to penetrate
Murray Hill; the wealthy were moving further uptown toward the new Central Park, and Brick
was losing congregants.3

Like many other evangelical churchgoers in New York City, the congregants of Brick
Church in the late nineteenth century were heirs to a particular set of beliefs about their own
past: through acts of evangelical ministry, New York had been made over from a babel of
competing Christianities in the seventeenth century to by the middle of the nineteenth, the hub of
the American evangelical empire, the home of the nation’s great pulpits, the seedbed of
American revivalism, the center of such institutions as the Mission and Tract Society and the
American Bible Society, the beating heart of evangelicalism in America. In part, this story
reflected evangelicals’ voluminous capacity for organization, but it also reflected the ways their
faith told them the world worked; that is, preaching the gospel would inevitably lead to its

3 For this brief overview of Brick Church history, see James MacCullough Farr, A Short History of the Brick
Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 1768-1943 (New York City: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1943) 3-6.
For Murray Hill, see Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, Gotham: a History of New York City to 1898 (New
spread, and its spread would lead to evangelical civilization. As Lewis Jackson, secretary of the Union Meeting of City Missions in the 1860s put it, crediting both, “The religious history of New York City from the beginning bears witness to the Christian zeal and enterprise of the Protestant churches, and particularly from the commencement of the present century.”

That evangelicals told and believed the story was a triumph of the imagination. New York, of course, remained a profoundly diverse city throughout the nineteenth century. Like most other American cities, despite the efforts of some elite to impose order through political legislation, technocratic planning, and cultural reform, the history of New York in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is one of disorder and cultural fragmentation, in which multiple ethnic, religious, and social groups sought to create, preserve, and extend, their identities against a churning landscape of political, economic and cultural change. New York absorbed millions of immigrants, Italian Catholics and Eastern European Jews who flooded the Lower East Side, Germans but also African Americans migrating to the Tenderloin district and later to Harlem, as well as thousands of unchurched old-stock Americans looking for work.

Like many other groups evangelicals struggled to resolve the city’s disorder and confusion, to

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marshal imaginative and cultural resources to make it over in their own image. Thus, evangelicals believed their successes in New York were the result of a particular style of being religious; the spread of evangelical faith and practice was in fact the spiritual conversion of the city, due to their success in making God’s Word heard. As Joseph Thompson, minister in the Broadway Tabernacle near City Hall said in 1857, the Tabernacle was “a central point for the preaching of the gospel to the mixed multitude of the city,” and hence, “a place for great moral and religious convocations, acting upon the country and the world.”

But precisely because of this confidence, the problems facing the Brick Church, and many other congregations in the city in the waning decades of the nineteenth century did not merely represent logistical challenges. Rather, they challenged evangelicals’ success at constructing a coherent worldview, a way of understanding life in New York City that had always assured them success. To evangelicals, withering attendance, declining church revenues, a disappearing constituency, were not problems that could be blamed on demographic change, or economic trends, or immigration. Rather, they spoke to the fading ability of the Word of God to make itself heard on the city streets. This was a crisis of confidence, identity, and purpose, and it forced evangelicals to reconsider the triumphal narrative of their past, and to formulate new ways of thinking about their place in New York City.

The end of the nineteenth century saw a flood of histories of evangelical congregations in New York that proceeded along similar lines, elevating the narratives that Jackson and Thompson presented and presenting a particularly evangelical history of New York. It described an insurgent evangelical movement that, wielding the Word, broke the back of formal, ritualistic religion in the city. The eighteenth century city had been characterized by a diversity of Protestantisms, and was dominated by the magisterial Protestant Anglican and Dutch Reformed

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denominations, which had at various times received state support and occasionally colluded to maintain their own cultural and institutional authority. The Anglican Church remained the official church of New York until the American Revolution.9 Brick’s roots, on the other hand, rested in the Presbyterian congregation of James Anderson, the first of the faith in New York, a small ragged group of believers who had begun meeting in homes in the first decade of the eighteenth century. They managed to build a church house on Wall Street in 1717, calling it the First Presbyterian Church, later known as “Old First.” Soon after, the Baptists of the city, numbering less than twenty in the first half of the eighteenth century, found ministry under a traveling pastor named Benjamin Miller and in the home of Jeremiah Dodge, a layman who began to host meetings in his home in 1745.10 Anderson reported in the second decade of the seventeenth century that New York was, despite being “a place of considerable moment, and very populous, consisting, as I am informed, of about three thousand families,” not a fruitful place for Presbyterians. The city then possessed “two ministers of the Church of England, two Dutch ministers, one French minister, a Lutheran minister, an Anabaptist, and also a Quaker meeting.” Anderson mourned that his denomination struggled to survive in this confusion.11

Despite the efforts of Anderson and Dodge, the late nineteenth century descendants of these earliest evangelical worshipers looked not to these men but to the heroic figures of the First Great Awakening when they told their own creation myths. While Anderson and Dodge huddled in the margins of the city’s social order, struggled to erect a physical presence, and mourned the dominance of the institutional faiths, the evangelicals of the Great Awakening defied the


demarcated boundaries of convention, of space, and order with the power of the preached Word, and in so doing remade the face of New York City.

The young Anglican preacher George Whitefield, for instance, visited New York in November of 1739. He dutifully attended the “English Church,” but the Anglicans of New York closed their pulpits to him, in what Whitefield described as tones of “anger and resentment” at his charismatic, emotional preaching. Whitefield declared that if the institutional channels of religion would be closed to him “I would preach in the fields, for all places were alike to me.” He was offered the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church and preached there and out of doors twice a day for four days, to, he recalled, audiences as large as two thousand. One observer noted that “The people’s eyes and ears hung upon his lips. They greedily devoured every word.”

Later evangelicals lionized Whitefield, presenting his defiance as the workings of the Holy Spirit, and profoundly effective at converting New Yorkers. A historian of the First Presbyterian Church, remembering Whitefield’s visit and presenting it as the true birth of evangelical religion in the city called the evangelist, “blest of God to the salvation of such countless souls, who” found the “City Churches were closed against him, except the First Church. His preaching in that building crowded the structure to its capacity. A glorious revival of religion followed his ministrations. It because necessary to rebuild the church edifice. Capacious galleries were added.” The dramatic architectural commentary offered a pointed counterpoint to Whitefield’s own exclusion from the older churches of the city, and inaugurated the narrative later evangelicals would embrace; the arrival of the converting Word of God in

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13 Bell Notes of the “Old First” Presbyterian Church (December 1899) 6.
New York began evangelical ascendency, the conversion of the city to Christ in numbers, in institutions, in landscape.

As Whitefield became the progenitor of evangelicalism in the city in the memories of his heirs, later narratives presented the Baptist John Gano and the Presbyterian John Rodgers, who was sometimes called “the Father of New York Presbyterianism” as the true founders of their particular denominations in the city. A century later the evangelical Baptist and Presbyterian churches of the city imagined themselves as a great family, all tracing their lineage to the ministry to one man or the other. 14 Rodgers held the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church from 1756 till his death in 1809; Gano served the First Baptist Church from 1762 until he resigned in 1787 to become a missionary in the Kentucky frontier. 15 Roger Lyon, a historian and member of First Baptist’s congregation, declared in 1891 that under Gano “The Church at one entered upon a career of great prosperity . . . enjoying an almost continuous revival; and numbered when he resigned two hundred and thirty-seven” – up from only a bare two dozen when he took the pulpit. 16 Similarly, Knapp remembered that after Rodgers took the pulpit “Not many months had passed after his installation when a decided revival of religious interest became apparent.” The key word “revival” reflected Knapp’s preferred explanation for the church’s expansion from a few dozen to 391 in the first few years of Rodger’s pastorate. It was

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14 Moses King, King’s handbook of New York City (Boston: King, 1893) 365. See for instance, Knapp, A history of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 101-102, and History and Manual of the Fifth Presbyterian Church, 6-7, and Bell Notes of the “Old First” Presbyterian Church (December 1899) 6-7, all of which claim Rodgers as the founding power of their church; and John Gano, Biographical Memoirs of the late John Gano of Frankfort, Kentucky, formerly of the City of New York (New York: Tiebout, 1806) 90, in which Gano claims founding of at least two of the city’s Baptist churches, including its First and Second, the dual founding occurring when the congregation split over whether it was proper to sing hymns other than psalms
16 Roger Lyon, “Memorial Address at the laying of the Corner Stone of the First Baptist Church in the City of New York, September 25th, 1891,” in First Baptist Church in New York City Scrapbook, New-York Historical Society, New York City.
the influence of the Holy Spirit, and Rodgers’s skill in facilitating it through his preaching, that made it necessary after only a few years to divide the First Presbyterian Church.17

A century after both men’s ministry, when Brick and other churches had begun foundering, New York’s evangelical pastors emphasized Gano and Rodgers’s faithfulness to scripture and skill as pulpit preachers, painting them in the image of Whitefield, and more signaling that it was these skills which would lead to the growth of evangelicalism in the city, and perhaps also to their own resuscitation. Isaac Haldeman, a conservative who took the pulpit at First Baptist in 1884 and who later became an intellectual leader of New York fundamentalism, explained that Gano was successful because he was “a preacher of remarkable eloquence” who made the church “under able administration of the Word, continue to grow in strength and numbers.”18 Shepherd Knapp, an assistant pastor at the Brick Church under van Dyke described Rodgers’s own reputation as a powerful preacher; Knapp noted that Rodgers claimed to have been converted while a teenager, when holding a lantern above the head of George Whitefield while the great evangelist preached on Market Street in Philadelphia, and spoke with wonder about Rodgers’s tendency to be slain by the spirit fainting in the pulpit. That was the sort of present spirit that the Brick Church needed.19

This was the inheritance of practice and piety that the descendents of Rodgers and Gano in the Brick Church and other congregations wielded as they sought to make New York City evangelical. The emphasis that Lyon and Knapp and Haldeman placed upon their forebears’ ability to preach the Word and the links they forged between it and the growth of the church, signaled something essential about the processes and techniques of the religion Rodgers and

17 Knapp, A history of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 16.
18 Haldeman, History, 3.
Gano established in New York. Words like “evangelism,” “revival,” and “awakening” connoted not only, or even mostly, doctrine, but rather a particular experience of God’s grace mediated through certain pietistic and devotional practices. And for much of the nineteenth century, they credited the patterns laid down by Whitefield and his associates for success. It was preaching the Word and spreading the Bible across the city that drove evangelical expansion. Rodgers, upon entering the First Presbyterian Church, immediately did away, to the consternation of some of his flock, with the congregation’s traditional forms of worship, which demanded certain parts of the service be led from different areas of the church and used only traditional psalms for music. Rodgers judged that this “savored of conformity to the Church of England.” He reoriented the entire service around the pulpit and introduced the revivalist’s Isaac Watts’s gospel hymns, in true evangelical fashion, and noted with satisfaction that his ministry triggered what he called a revival. His congregation began to grow rapidly, which he, naturally, credited to his effective presentation of the Word.20

Thus began the construction of an empire of the Word that rose from the city’s streets, built on the back of the preaching of the Word. Rodgers’s revivals quickly expanded the First Church to the point where division was required; a new building, at Beekman and Nassau Streets, was erected in 1768, near where City Hall would stand. At the time, Rodgers noted, the new church, made of red brick, was built on the northern outskirts of the city, near fields where many New Yorkers kept livestock.21 But the city quickly grew, and the new Brick Church was soon joined by other Presbyterian churches, many of them colonies from Rodgers’s original congregation. Late in Rodgers’s pastorate, a faction dissatisfied with the two older

21 Rodgers to The Mayor, Aldermen, and Commonalty of the City of New York, February 19, 1766; reprinted in Knapp, A history of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 17-18.
congregations’ use of gospel songs rebelled and built their own church building on Cedar Street, a few blocks southwest of the Brick Church and west of the Old First. This would eventually become the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, and these three congregations the jewels of New York Presbyterianism. Similarly, though New York’s Baptist population grew more slowly, the hundred years after Gano took the pulpit at First saw the emergence of a dozen more Baptist churches in the city, many seedlings from First Baptist’s own congregation.

The multiplication of churches in the city was perhaps only the most visible sign of the construction of a larger empire of the Word rising from New York’s streets to grip the entire nation. As one evangelical proclaimed of the city’s masses, “Until churches are built and more ministers of the right spirit employed the best we can do for them is to furnish them with . . . instruction, Bibles and suitable Tracts.” They set about relieving the famine with the water of the Word as best they could. In 1816, for instance, a group of ministers from a variety of evangelical denominations in New York and neighboring states gathered in the Reformed Dutch Church on William Street and organized the American Bible Society. Among them were Gardiner Spring, who had replaced Rodgers in the Brick Church, and John Romeyn, of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church; indeed, Presbyterians and Congregationalists were the most powerful denominations involved. Though they represented a number of the states of the Union, the ministers’ concerns about Americans would have sounded particularly telling to the New Yorkers: “The increase of their population which is gaining every day upon their moral

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22 History and Manual of the Fifth Presbyterian Church, 6-7
cultivation . . . may for a long time employ and engross the cares of this Society,” the ministers proclaimed.\textsuperscript{25} Spreading the Word was bound to the progress of civilization itself.

The American Bible Society was only one evangelical organization determined to spread the gospel through spreading the Word. In 1827, the Scottish lay preacher Archibald Maclay, Spring, and several other pastors gathered to organize what would eventually be called the New York City Mission and Tract Society, which increased the flood of print descending upon New York’s unchurched, and opened city missions and other centers to bring the gospel to the streets.\textsuperscript{26} These organizations pressed the cause of evangelical religion forward in New York, replacing the older Dutch and Anglican, and even old school Presbyterian cultural establishments. Episcopalianism in New York, for instance, fragmented in the face of the Bible Society, for while high church Episcopalians, led by John Henry Hobart, bishop of New York, spurned evangelical interdenominational cooperation, a group of low church ministers defied their own hierarchy to pursue the religion of the Word evangelicals preached.\textsuperscript{27} And other denominations followed; in 1841, for instance, Spencer Cone, pastor of the First Baptist Church, organized a short lived American Bible Union to promote a version of the King James Bible emphasizing that Christ was baptized by immersion. In 1834, the Presbyterians established their Board of Foreign Missions in the city, chaired by WW Phillips, then pastor of the First Church.\textsuperscript{28}


\textsuperscript{28} For the Bible Union, see Roger Lyon, “Memorial Address,” 19; Thomas Armitage, A History of the Baptists; Traced by their Vital Principles and Practices (New York: Bryan, Taylor, & Co., 1887) 893-890; Edward Cone, The
The frenzy of organization and multiplication of churches indicated the paradoxes of evangelical growth. Though the evangelical impulse was transdenominational, the movement itself took on a variety of slightly different forms in particular denominations or even particular congregations.

Soon, mission workers in the city were celebrating the spread of preaching and scripture as the primary tools for the conversion of the city. In 1836 one minister reported that he had organized a series of preaching services targeted at the unconverted of the city, and that “It pleased the Lord wonderfully to manifest his power at that season in saving souls by the preaching of the word. Not less than four hundred souls were converted to God.”

Evangelicals celebrated the seemingly irresistible power of the preached Word. Charles Finney, one of the most powerful preachers of the day, provided a vivid example; as a New York pastor, celebrating Finney’s arrival in New York City to open a chapel there reported, “A proud rich man from a neighboring village, hearing that sister of his then in Rochester had hopefully converted under Mr Finney, was so enraged that he said would kill the rascal. He took pistols, went to Rochester heard a lecture - was hopefully converted – home, visited from house to house - a revival followed.”

Many evangelical congregations in New York grew from the work of independent preachers and enthusiastic laypeople who preached on streetcorners, organized prayer and Bible study groups, and gradually gained enough followers to raise funds to erect a church building of their own and hire a preacher. Madison Square Presbyterian Church was founded in 1822 as the Central Presbyterian Church on Broome Street, roughly a mile north of Brick and the First

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29 Dr. E.F. Hetfield of the Seventh Presbyterian Church; reported in Louis Jackson, *Gospel Work in New York City: a memorial of fifty years in city missions* (New York: New York Mission Society, 1878) 76.

Presbyterian. It was the child of the energetic preacher William Patton, who from his own pocket paid to rent a Mulberry Street schoolhouse in the evenings and preached for free until, after a year, he had enough followers to organize a congregation. Many Baptist churches appeared throughout this city in this fashion. The Calvary Baptist Church, for instance, was organized by 107 people on Sunday, May 2, 1847 in the Broadway Academy, only a few blocks from the Broome Street church where First Baptist was meeting at that time. Calvary’s congregation had coalesced around David Bellamy, a popular minister who had resigned the year previous from the Stanton Street Baptist Church. Bellamy began to preach on his own in the Broadway Academy, and soon attracted a strong nucleus of followers, enough to establish a new congregation. Similarly, the Stanton Street Church itself grew from the seed of a few dissenting congregants from the Mulberry Street Baptist Church, who in 1809 became enamored with the lay preaching of Maclay. When it became clear that Maclay’s followers wished to organize a church of their own, the Scotsman, not a member of any denomination sought baptism from one of New York’s Baptist ministers before he embarked upon his own formal ministry.

For evangelicals, preaching from a text went hand in hand with text’s ability to embody the Word of God in print. For the Tract Society, this extended even to the printed tracts they produced, which contained, generally, brief exhortations, scriptures, and instructions on how to ask God for forgiveness of sin. Evangelicals believed that these texts could, insofar as they embodied preaching and relied upon scripture, convert; the Society emphasized its aim to

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33 Hansell, Reminiscences, 13-14.
“supply with Tracts the thousands of our fellow citizens who are destitute of other means of grace. Mr. Vermilyea remarked on the certainty from the Word of God and from what had actually occurred that such labors would not be in vain.” But evangelicals also believed that the tracts frequently redirected the attention of those who found them to the Word itself; as one member of the New York Tract Society emphasized, “Infidels, Universalists, Unitarians &c, and find themselves boldly confronted and called upon to sustain their sentiments, they will soon feel the necessity of searching the Scriptures to see whether these things are so.”35 Another missionary made the connection even more explicit, standing that that “I hope for good from the Tract distribution only as one means of preaching Christ, of bringing the Christian man to act directly on his fellow man.” Driving home that the Word’s value was in the immediate encounter with God that speech implied, he emphasized that “preaching implies the presence of the living, breathing, feeling man,” and that the words of the tract were indistinguishable from the spiritual presence of the one passing it.36

The most powerful of texts, of course, was the Bible. Evangelicals were confident that reading the Bible would bring the reader into the presence of God, and hence into conversion. One minister reported of “sixty eight families found destitute of the Bible and supplied; and twenty two reported as hopefully born again.”37 Thus, they devoted a great deal of energy to persuading others to read the book, and they reported rapturously of the results. The New York Prison Discipline Society devoted itself to teaching prisoners to read using the Bible, for literacy did not merely mean the possibility of social betterment, but also the salvation of one’s soul; as

their reports put it, they were not only “Teaching vagrants a useful trade by which they may obtain an honest livelihood.” They were “teaching the most ignorant and the most degraded of the human family in a short time to read the word of God.” Missionaries began with the very first page, pointing at the “In” of Genesis’s “In the beginning,” and encouraging the prisoner to locate these two letters everywhere in the first chapter, and then moving on to the next word; this was “a mode of teaching by which two convicts at least have been taught to read the Bible in less than six weeks,” a speed which the Society insisted was a sign of divine favor.38

The Society insisted that the very process of learning to read the Bible transformed the prisoners’ character; one missionary reported on an inmate in Sing Sing, a few miles north of New York City, who “repeated to me the 88th Psalm which he had learned by heart.” The missionary was convinced that such careful study marked a real shift in the souls of inmates; he described another who asked him where to find Jesus’s promise that seeking would lead to finding: “When I found the place for him his eyes sparkled with joy. He read a few words and said this is the place, thanked me and very carefully turned down a corner of the leaf.” More than such illustrations of the hunger for the Word, however, the missionary was convinced that inmates had enjoyed conversion when he heard them speak the Word themselves, for he experienced the power of God in the mere recitation. As he said of the man who recited the psalm, “sure I am that the bare listening to him while he repeated it has done more to open to my view the heart of the Psalmist . . . than all the aid for this purpose which the piety and learning of commentators have afforded.”39

The middle nineteenth century found an evangelical movement in New York flush with its own successes; the age was the heyday of evangelicalism in the city, and its organizational triumphs meant in part that there was room for adaptation. In the middle decades of the century, the piety of the Word in evangelical New York took on a number of different forms, in response to different social and economic demands that the mid-nineteenth century city leveled. The malleability of evangelical practice in this period lay the groundwork for the later desperate experimentation van Dyke and his fellows would pursue.

For instance, in 1831 the famous evangelist Charles Finney arrived in the city and opened the Chatham Street Chapel on Park Row, in the poor Five Points district north of City Hall and the Brick Church. The Chatham Chapel targeted explicitly the renewal of the unchurched; it quickly became a leading congregation of the free church movement, which eliminated the pew rents that supported churches financially but also turned them into microcosms of New York’s class stratifications. As such, the chapel was an ideal home for an egalitarian, expressive version of evangelical piety. Chatham Street Chapel was more than simply a Sunday meeting house, but also a revival hall, where Finney implemented his new measures – what he called “protracted meetings,” the anxious seat, organizing his already converted to befriend and encourage experience in new attendees, and other such tools designed to wear down the resistance of sinners and bring them to emotional reunion with Christ. According to Finney, evangelicalism was not a celebration of the uncommanded grace of God working to convert sinners; rather, it was a collection of techniques that would inflict such distress on sinners that their longings for salvation would overwhelm their complacency in sin.40

Chatham Street’s raucousness, its status as a free church, and Finney’s own celebrity meant that the church attracted massive crowds; some two thousand at every service in the spring and summer of 1832, when it opened. Finney announced that “I did not want to fill up the house with Christians from other churches, as my object was to gather from the world.” He recalled going door to door among the poor residents of the Five Points neighborhood, inviting them to attend, and reported great success at attracting “the middle and lower classes of the neighborhood,” the unchurched. Chatham Street was famous for its late night meetings and rowdy crowds, and later for anti-slavery riots that drew upon the chapel’s spiritual fervor to spark the city’s abolition movement. Finney himself was distressed at this turn toward social activism rather than personal conversion, and left Chatham Street to open the Broadway Tabernacle a few blocks west, a place of worship free of the denominational ties that raised theological objections to his practices.

In contrast, only a mile away, Gardiner Spring’s Brick Church on Beekman Street sat only two miles away, but in a virtually different city. Spring showed that evangelicalism could appeal also to the respectable and monied elite of the city. Spring’s church was also holding a revival in the early 1830s, but of a very different kind. Spring readily admitted he had never had the sort of emotional rebirth that Finney preached. While a student at Yale he said he “wrestled with God as I have never wrestled before,” but despaired when his “religious hopes and impressions all vanished as a morning cloud, and as the early dew.” However, he became convinced that he was a Christian when he had a remarkably visceral response to the commencement sermon offered to his graduating class. The school’s president, Timothy

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Dwight, exhorted his students to preach the gospel to the poor; Spring took this as a personal call, and thus eventually joined the ministry as an evangelical Presbyterian of the Old School. Conversion could not be forced, he was convinced, only granted through the uncompelled grace of God, and it would more likely take the form of a renewed and sober interest in the work of the Church than it would an emotional catharsis.

On New Year’s Eve 1815 he pled with his congregation to seek “a general outpouring of the Holy Spirit,” directing them to “repent as a church, sincerely to desire a revival.” Spring was a Presbyterian, and entirely characteristically of both his denomination and his Calvinist heritage, he stressed the community of the church as a field for religious experience. For him revival came as a collective outpouring of grace, experienced through solemn rites of communal worship and manifest in greater commitment to one’s membership in the community. And it did come to Brick Church, persisting for nearly two decades. Spring then channeled this spiritual energy into benevolent organizations, making Brick Church among the first churches in the city to establish systematic aid to the poor and community outreach. Thus, when Finney arrived in New York, Spring was horrified at the revivalist’s new measures. He took to his pulpit in protest, declaring that Finney’s conversions were merely emotional crises, and that the traditional tools of the reformation, prayer, scripture, and preaching, were the means God had ordained for the bestowal of converting grace.43

The differing experiences of Finney and Spring indicate not that evangelicalism was fracturing in New York, but rather that by the mid-nineteenth century it was flourishing. Both men drew upon the language and cultural heritage of evangelicalism to target the increasingly diversifying city, and though their techniques were different, it is not implausible that both men claimed to be preaching the Word; their faith and methods heavily overlapped despite their

43 Knapp, History of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 186, 187, 240.
suspicious glances at each other. Finney famously abandoned the Presbyterian denomination when he learned that the Westminster Confession of Faith, the foundation of the denomination’s orthodoxy, seemed incompatible with his own methods. He was not unusual. The evangelical experience has through its history been driven by circumstance, by the pastoral concerns of ministers eager to promote a religious experience in their congregations, and by a laity hungry for it.44

And while New Yorkers seemed to be hungry, it was particularly the middle class of Northern European descent that drove the expansion of Baptist, Presbyterian, and evangelical Episcopal churches in New York, and their social prominence that made New York a center for all these denominations.45 In 1869 Gardiner Spring presided from the new Brick pulpit over a conference that led to the formal reunification of his denomination, which had fractured over the revivalism of the early evangelical movement; one side embraced the charismatic upheavals of Charles Finney, the other the social consciousness of Gardiner Spring.46 Unification was possible because over the previous two decades these evangelicalisms that had shaped Spring’s generation in the city had solidified into a cultural consensus. In September of 1857, at a traditionally Calvinist Dutch Reformed church in New York’s financial district, a man named Jeremiah Lampier began hosting midday prayer meetings for local businessmen. These daily devotions soon blossomed into a full-fledged revival, which in the pulpits of New York was

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presented not as an effusion of charismatic experience or a call for social outreach. Rather it was a decorous renewal of individual piety, manifesting in Methodist and Baptist churches as a new emphasis on personal holiness, and in Presbyterian and Episcopalian denominations as the sort of churchly revitalization Gardiner Spring pursued. The revival was experienced as a private, and frequently familial spiritual renewal, consonant not with the egalitarian outreach of Charles Finney’s free church, but rather with the respectable social values of a newly prosperous middle class.47 This new private piety spoke to both sides of the Presbyterian divide, and allowed Spring to end his pastorate triumphantly. It also indicated that evangelicalism in New York City, after a century of scrabbling for public prominence, had settled into a comfortable cultural dominance.

Thirty years later, evangelicalism was well entrenched among the governing classes of New York City. In certain neighborhoods of Manhattan, particularly the fashionable areas around Central Park, evangelical Protestantism clearly established itself as the dominant faith; affiliation with an evangelical church hovered at around a third of the population in the upper class residential areas of Fifth Avenue in midtown. These were the neighborhoods of the Brick Church, of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, of the Calvary Baptist Church, and other well-respected congregations.48 And indeed, if those who professed Protestantism but did not affiliate with a congregation were included, Protestants made up nearly 40% of New Yorkers at

the turn of the century, nearly matching the city’s flock of Roman Catholicism.\textsuperscript{49} Indeed, the late nineteenth century seemed to be a heyday for religion in general in the city; between the 1850s and the first decade of the twentieth century, affiliation with a church among New Yorkers nearly doubled, from 21\% to 40\%, and the number of Protestants affiliated with a church in the city paced the growth of the New York’s population itself, despite a massive influx of Catholic and Jewish immigration, to remain at just under ten percent of the city’s population. By 1902, the \textit{New York Times} reported that the strongest Protestant denominations in Manhattan were the Episcopalians, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, and the Baptists, each of who claimed between forty and fifty congregations. The Episcopalian churches, then riven by rival evangelical and anti-evangelical factions, claimed some 56,000 official members. The Baptists and the Presbyterians, both of whom owed their growth nearly exclusively to evangelicalism, claimed some 25,000 each, and the Methodists far behind, at approximately 14,000.\textsuperscript{50}

But despite this apparent success, both cultural and numerical, by the 1880s evangelicals were suffering not merely from problems like those afflicting the Brick Church, but more deeply from what Paul Boyer has called a “profound uneasiness,” a crisis of identity rooted in, but ultimately much larger than, the reality of the city’s situation.\textsuperscript{51} It was true that the numbers were daunting. First generation Irish Catholic immigrants, though their numbers were in decline, remained 12\% of the city’s population in 1890, at 275,156; including their children raised the percentage to 25\%. Their numbers were concentrated on the Lower East Side, slightly north of


\textsuperscript{50}“Ups and Downs of City Life as Seen by a Mission Worker,” \textit{New York Times} (November 24, 1902) 25.

\textsuperscript{51} Paul Boyer, \textit{Urban Masses and Moral Order}, 125-128.
the neighborhood around Grand and Canal Streets where nearly 200,000 Eastern European Jews settled in the 1880s. This was the same neighborhood where the Brick Church Gardiner Spring came to in 1811 sat. But no ethnic group made the impact of New York’s Italians, whose numbers rose from twenty thousand to 250,000 in the twenty years between 1880 and 1900. They settled first west of the Bowery, southwest of the Jewish section of the city, but also rapidly spread into Greenwich Village and the Tenderloin district which ran northeast of City Hall up to the Forties. The numbers seemed endless, and they caused a distinct tremor in evangelical New Yorkers’ confidence. As one guidebook noted, claiming that there were 350,000 people, “nearly all of whom are foreign born” living on the Lower East side, “These people are taxing New York’s capacity for assimilation to the utmost. Many of the present generation will remain unaffected by it but their children feel it.”

Evangelicals sensed that the numbers hid deeper challenges. Walter Laidlaw’s odd analysis is a case in point. Trying to gauge the extent to which their city had transformed, New York’s Federation of Churches and Christian Workers hired the Presbyterian Laidlaw to survey the religious affiliation of New Yorkers. Laidlaw, a Canadian who had received a PhD in philosophy from New York University in 1896, mounted a massive and thorough effort to track and chart the presence of religion in New York’s various wards. Upon concluding his study, Laidlaw claimed to have reached 100,000 New York families with an exhaustive, forty to fifty question survey. Though his surveys – and others conducted around the same time, like the 1906 federal census of religious affiliation, several state surveys, and a survey conducted for the New York Times in 1902 – had flaws, Laidlaw’s in particular was groundbreaking compared to what had gone before. He documented the staggering rise of Catholicism in the fifty years previous,

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but also the success of New York’s Protestants in holding the line, particularly in the city’s well-to-do areas. But though he seemed to confirm the extent to which evangelical Protestantism had become the religion of establishment New York City, just as its own triumphant histories claimed, he presented his results with an air of crisis; holding the line was simply not enough. The numbers did not accurately reflect the challenge which evangelicals perceived.

Many Americans in the late nineteenth century embraced the concept of “moral environmentalism,” which taught that individual virtue and vice was profoundly affected by one’s surroundings. This lay at the root of evangelical fears. When they looked around them, evangelicals saw not merely economic change and ethnic diversity; they saw a distinct and structural threat to the systems of dispersing the converting Word that evangelicals had so painstakingly erected over the previous century. They had expended a great deal of effort building up churches which worked in certain ways and flourished for certain reasons, they had devoted vast resources to the distribution of Bibles and tracts, and these systems seemed to have brought success. Charismatic preachers of the Word had brought in converts to their churches. Though evangelicals in New York in particular remained culturally powerful, they were also haunted by the suspicion that the humming machinery of the city they had made into a dynamo of their faith was beginning to sputter. The minister Samuel Loomis offered an apt distillation of the trials the city offered Christianity. In 1880, said Loomis, there were a hundred and fifty-three saloons and 4,400 people for each of the seven Protestant churches in New York’s First Ward. Such conditions “do not give the Gospel a half a fair chance,” mourned Loomis. “What a forlorn hope is a struggle against such odds.” Patronage at a saloon, Loomis worried, precluded the

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54 This observation is Butler’s, in “Protestant Success in the New American City,” 304-307.
possibility of commitment to a church. The problem was not merely drunkenness; it was the systemic decline of evangelical religion in the city.\textsuperscript{56}

The multiplication of saloons and the spread of Catholic churches meant the spaces of the city were becoming hostile to evangelical lifestyles; the bustle of the city’s crowds and streetscapes drowned out the voice of the preacher and altered the city’s landscapes, increasingly dominated by stores and commercial capital; the silence of church sanctuaries was interrupted by the flow of commerce in an increasingly commercialized downtown; the Bible was buried in a flood of printing. No single vector bore responsibility for all these changes; the city lay at an intersection of immigration, economic transformation, new technologies, and increasing population density.\textsuperscript{57} The struggle was not merely about the totals Walter Laidlaw scratched into his tables, and he knew it – rather, it was about culture, the rhythms of life and the daily practices of New Yorkers that seemed increasingly to be slipping away from evangelical Protestantism. Two threats in particular loomed before evangelicals; the first, the problem of poverty, the second, the problem of wealth; the problem of unchurched or Catholic immigrants and the problem of the wealthy who became increasingly bored with religion. In the 1880s and 1890s, the first seemed a greater threat; by the turn of the century, the second had matched it.

Protestants saw lurking in Catholic culture the specter of paganism which threatened the rituals of the Word evangelicals closely associated with their own religious experience. There was a distinct, if generic, link between foreignness and cultural degradation; foreignness and the decay of evangelical morality, which held up the society evangelicals knew. For instance, the

\textsuperscript{56} Samuel Loomis, \textit{Modern Cities and their Religious Problems} (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1886) 8.
Methodist minister Daniel Dorchester warned in 1881 that Catholics and other immigrants in New York City were making the city inhospitable to proper Sabbath observance. “More than one half of the population of New York city [sic].” he wrote, “were either foreign-born or their immediate offspring, and with European ideas of the Sabbath.” After suspiciously examining the Sunday habits of Catholics and Jews, pointing out that they held public events on Sundays and sometimes kept businesses open that day, he concluded that “Foreign immigration exerted an influence almost incalculable in promoting Sabbath desecration.” Their practices were making the persistence of evangelical culture in New York City, and hence its ability to convert, more difficult.

Sometimes the struggle ignited. In July of 1870 and 1871, for instance, violent clashes between Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics over parades commemorating the introduction of Protestantism into Ireland stoked fears that the Catholics of the city were un-American, and some Protestants drew the conclusion that the Catholic violence was inspired by their authoritarian religion. Corruption in city government, particularly the Democratic political ring known as Tammany Hall, whose power rested largely in its ability to mobilize the Catholic vote, pointed both to baleful Roman influence on both the city’s infrastructure and democratic government, but also to the venality of too many nominally Protestant New Yorkers. A New York state senator, linking Tammany’s influence over city government reported balefully on the dispersal of the riots of 1871: “in this case, it was a Catholic mob using the city authority to strike down Protestantism.”

James Hoadley, a Presbyterian minister in New York City, concurred in the *Homiletic Review*, arguing that American “institutions and ideas are antagonistic to the Roman Catholic idea of the church.” Hoadley dismissed forms of worship distinct from his own, maintaining that “substitutes which have been offered for Evangelical Christianity in this country have thus far proved failures.” He pointed to the public worship of Catholics in particular, arguing that it was destined to keep Catholicism on the cultural margins of American life. Rather, Hoadley commended an evangelical movement that “believes in the power of the gospel that it preaches.” The Presbyterian specifically commended public preaching and oratory, claiming that the gospel preached by the Word would drive the influence of Catholic ritual out of public life. He linked evangelical practices with the health of democracy in the city and the vitality of its public life, warning that evangelicals “should meet these immigrants with a pure Gospel,” and insisting of Catholicism, “that Church can never make very rapid progress in a land where free thought and free speech prevails.”

For Hoadley, the verbal orientation of evangelical faith also served as the backbone of a healthy American public life; the threat of Catholic ritualism was also a threat to American community.

As Hoadley’s arguments illustrated, Catholicism was in the end most threatening to evangelicals because they believed it sought to obliterate evangelical emphasis upon the Word. The sharpest contrast between Catholic and evangelical worship evangelicals drew was over the role of the verbal Word in the service. Catholicism appealed to sight, while true conversion came through hearing. One convert from Catholicism reported to a missionary that “He had

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been in Rome and had been in St Peter’s and had seen the Pope and had seen all the glitter and tinsel and show of church pageantry. But as he expressed it all this show only reached my eye, my poor heart was still left empty.” When he visited an evangelical service, however, or, as the missionary put it, when he was “first brought under the sound of the gospel in a Protestant place of worship it was as if a new world had opened before him . . . There was nothing to attract the eye but there was that which the heart craved.”⁶³ Evangelicals consistently stressed that Catholics would convert when brought within reach of the sound of preaching, and indeed, that their present religion denied them such worship; as another missionary said, “Some who have been brought up in the Roman catholic Church have heard the simple gospel in the mission chapel and have accepted the truth as it is in Jesus.”⁶⁴

But despite these successes, Catholicism remained a potent threat. This was most particularly apparent in evangelicals’ utter conviction that Catholics were determined to end popular Bible reading. Since the 1850s, an intermittent war had been raging over the nation’s public schools; Catholics who strove to either remove the King James Version from the classroom or, alternatively, gained funding for their own parochial schools were suspect both for heresy and disloyalty to the nation. When in the early 1870s Tammany briefly secured funds for parochial schools, the ire of the city’s Protestants again flared, resulting in protests and state action to specifically endorse use of the King James Version of the Bible, that preferred by Protestants, in New York’s public schools.⁶⁵ One evangelical proclaimed that the King James Bible had to be protected in the schools because it brought the students moral influence which

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could be gained no other way: “Will it be serving God to remove from seven or eight millions of our youth the moral light and instructions of his Holy Word?” asked Rufus Clark.⁶⁶ A Methodist sneered at the Catholics for wanting to use their own Douay Bible in parochial schools, because “their peculiar doctrines could not be derived from the Douay version itself without commentary, which always accompanies it.”⁶⁷ The struggle indicated the ways in which the sacred and the secular were interchangeable to the evangelical worldview; the King James Bible had to be kept in schools because it was a vital part of how evangelicals engaged with the world in total. The threat was not simply to scripture in abstract, but to the lifestyle and patterns of living that evangelicals believed brought them the blessings of God.

Other stories evangelicals told about Catholics and the Bible confirmed these fears. One missionary reported in 1871 on a visit he made to a woman who had requested a Bible on the street; “I called on her and found that she had once had a Bible, but a Roman catholic priest had taken it from her, saying that she should go to the church and do what the priest told her. But the poor woman had been once enlightened. She knew that the Bible was God's word for her and to her.” Another told of a “Roman catholic woman who had received a copy of the Bible [and] hid it through the day” so her priest would not find it.⁶⁸ The distinction was clear, and it was the same which James Hoadley and Protestants terrified by the Orange Riots made – Catholicism promoted tyranny, both religious and political. For evangelicals, this tyranny found its roots in Catholic rejection of the Word, which they associated with the dynamic, organic religious experience that direct encounter with God brought. On the other hand, Roman Catholic rites of worship, from the Mass to confession, seemed particularly designed to deaden this experience;

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⁶⁶ Rufus Clark, *The question of the hour: the Bible and the school fund* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1870) 97.
one missionary told of a young woman who read an evangelical tract and, being convicted of her sins, expressed fear of damnation to her mother, who “sent her to the priest to confess her sins, particularly the sin of reading the Tract. The priest required her to do penance.” According to the editor of the Society’s annual report, such reading was punishable because Catholics did not believe in “reading the Bible for [oneself]” instead replacing the Word with “superstitious and idolatrous ceremonies.”

Evangelical Protestants felt a particular distinction between their own devotional ways and those of the immigrant population, and the growing visibility of Catholic piety made them apprehensive about the health of the spiritual community they had created; the sense of tension was increasingly palpable. One home missionary in New York reported that the Italian Catholic festas were spreading superstitions, among them that entering Protestant churches would strike a Catholic blind and that Protestants required converts to fire pistols at images of the saints, beliefs which led one festa to transform into a small riot against a Protestant mission in Harlem.

Foreign religions were not merely the resting places of potential converts; foreign religions disrupted the unfolding of the evangelical empire.

But middle class evangelicals themselves were not blameless for the transformation of life in the city; the competition did not merely come from foreign religions, but the transformation of the American economy. In addition to the increasingly apparent presence of a foreign religious culture, the beginnings of New York commercialism threatened to overshadow the Word, and brought the material and spiritual success of evangelicals in the city into

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confrontation. This was perhaps most obvious in the renovation of the city’s built landscapes, which seemed increasingly to structure the lives of New Yorkers around commercial rather than spiritual aims. In 1888 the newspaperman Joseph Pulitzer bought the venerable French’s Hotel on Park Row near City Hall and tore the place down to erect what became upon its completion the tallest building in the world to house his employees. The Pulitzer building marked the transformation of what had been an area of small industry and residences into a booming financial and commercial center – and driving the middle class who worked there further and further north, into residential areas in the northern fringe of the city, neighborhoods from which they commuted south to work. After the recession of the 1870s, the building craze took hold in the 1880s, and though New York’s true skyscrapers were still a decade or two into the future, there were clusters of “tall buildings” appearing on Wall Street and around City Hall, and Broadway in particular was filling up with large department buildings. While Trinity Church, at Broadway and Wall Street, and St. Paul’s Episcopal on Broadway and Fulton had once dominated the skyline, by 1890, both were crowded out by buildings like Pulitzer’s. The state legislature in 1885 passed a law limiting the size of apartment buildings, citing fears of disease, fire, and the stifling impact the isolation of living among and in such mammoth structures caused. The city’s evangelicals did not wish to worship among office buildings and stock exchanges; indeed, many New Yorkers complained that the exploding number of towering buildings drowned out light and air, choking off traffic and turning downtown into a place of anomie and isolation.⁷²

Further, by the 1860s and 1870s, New York’s retailers were beginning to penetrate the formerly residential areas around, and north of, City Hall. In 1846, Alexander Stewart had opened a department store at Chambers Street and Broadway, just north of City Hall near the Five Points; after the Civil War, other merchants were scrambling to follow, and by the 1870s, Broadway below 23rd Street was labeled “Ladies’ Mile,” for its fashionable shopping. The famous minister Josiah Strong warned, “Is it not the prevailing tendency of modern material civilization to stimulate luxury and inflame avarice? The nineteenth century city is materialistic; that is, in its growth the intellectual and moral have not kept pace with the physical.”

The changing cultural geography of the city, the bending of its landscapes toward the industrial, the economic success of the evangelical middle classes, all of these things threatened the once-dominant evangelical life. Shortly after the Civil War, the social critic Matthew Hale Smith observed that “On Sunday morning almost all the churches are well attended.” But at the same time, he also warned New York preachers that this seeming success might beneath the surface be hollow: “Fashion,” he said, “has a great deal to do with ministerial success.” And only a few years later ministers feared that their pulpits were becoming irrelevant to the people of New York who had once embraced them. As Charles Jefferson, minister of the Broadway Tabernacle, mourned, “The world does not like preaching . . . I do not know of any minister, no matter how learned, or eloquent, or pious, in any large city in this country today, who is able to fill his church twice on Sunday with people who are residents of the city in which he preaches.” Jefferson noted that the city’s prosperity seemed to lay a curse on the preachers of the city; they

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75 Matthew Hale Smith, *Sunshine and shadow in New York* (New York: JB Burr, 1869) 490, 492. See also James McCabe, *The Secrets of the Great City* (Philadelphia: Jones Brothers, 1868) 176: “In the morning the various churches are well filled for New Yorkers consider it a matter of principle to attend morning service.”
increasingly attracted tourists rather than sincere seekers. “As a rule,” he said, “when men
become wealthy they do not care to hear preachers preach.” When a minister asked what could
be done, “the first thing he hears is ‘Make your sermon shorter.’” And so a minister would
make his sermon shorter, and then the people would say, give us “illustrations; give us
anecdotes, that will catch the attention and thrill the mind; give us pictures they have the living
pictures in the theatre and colored pictures in the Sunday newspapers.” The Word had been
cheapened to a mere show. It had to compete with the stage, with newspapers, with any number
of distractions that the city offered.76

Downtown was no longer a hospitable place for worship, for psychic as well as practical
reasons; the canyons of the streets drove the heavens further away, the crowds brought anomie
and isolation rather than the familial sense congregations sought, and the oceans of immigrants
brought with them a God that seemed foreign to Americans whose Reformed Protestantism was
a cultural style as much as a faith. Increasingly, in the 1870s and 1880s, writers who mused
about New York City began to emphasize that it was a city of contrasts, bifurcations, splintering;
a city of light and dark, civilization and decay, the best and worst of humanity packed onto the
island of Manhattan. As Matthew Hale Smith’s aptly named Sunshine and Shadow in New York
put it, "Great cities must ever be centres of light and darkness; the repositories of piety and
wickedness; the home of the best and the worst of our race.” Therefore, “whoever writes of
New York truly will do so in lines of light and gloom,” he said, drawing a connection between
the physical transformations of the city and the burgeoning tensions and growing chasms in its

culture. Increasingly, evangelicals found themselves ceding downtown Manhattan to entertainment, to industry, and to the immigrants who did not share their faith. The city was becoming a mass of distinct and, in Boyer’s phrase, “mutually uncomprehending” groups, thwarting the evangelical dream of a society unified through the spiritual experience of conversion.

For almost a generation, evangelicals who faced these problems were not sure what to do. The evangelical piety they had invested such confidence in seemed more suited for the way of life of a town or village, where the pulpit’s authority remained unquestioned due to lack of competition as much as to any other reason. And so at first they simply retreated from the tumult, fleeing northward, selling their buildings, abandoning the lower portion of the city, and following their well-to-do congregations to the quieter, more village-like residential neighborhoods around the new Central Park, opened just before the Civil War to be a haven for the middle class from the city’s bustle halfway up Manhattan. By the middle of the century, then, the Brick Church found itself struggling. The church suffered from a set of problems – unstable membership, struggling programs, intermittent cash flow, and difficulty appealing to the rapidly changing population on the streets around it – entirely typical of churches in the downtowns of American cities in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Gardiner Spring’s response, like so many others, was to abandon the original church house. The church’s move from the building Rodgers had erected on Beekman and Nassau Streets to Murray Hill was, so

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Henry van Dyke claimed, “a necessity forced upon it . . . the tide of population had ebbed away from the neighborhood of the City Hall, and left the Brick Church stranded. The Sunday School was dead, the prayer-meeting defunct; it was difficult to maintain even a single service on Sunday.”

But despite the seeming inexorability of the situation, such solutions were not embraced without guilt. The Baptist pastor Frank Goodchild told an 1899 meeting of the city’s Baptist ministers, helplessly, “No one who loves the cause of Jesus Christ, or who has any anxiety for the well-being of our city, can view without profound emotion the flight of evangelical churches from the lower part of the city Harlemward. And yet I should be very slow to pronounce harsh judgment on the churches that move. It is hardly a matter of choice with them. They are pressed by necessity. It is move or die.” And the Brick Church was representative. By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, some fifty Protestant churches located in the southern neighborhoods came to believe they had no choice but to follow or lose their congregations. By the end of the century, the Southern New York State Baptist Association counted only seven Baptist churches below 42nd Street in Manhattan, compared to sixteen above, numbers the reverse of population demographics. Goodchild warned the Southern New York Baptist Association that both immigrants and the burgeoning middle class presented a barricade to the

84 “Reports,” in The Thirtieth Anniversary of the Southern New York Baptist Association (New York: Scott, 1900) 19. This was one of Laidlaw’s surveys, funded on behalf of the Federation of Churches and Christian Workers in New York City.
Word. In both cases, “we are working against a vast amount of indifference,” he said. “The man who preaches to them year in and year out must be a man of first rate powers.”

This was the situation Henry van Dyke met when he inherited the pulpit of the Brick Church in Murray Hill in 1883. And soon the problems were catching up to even the fleeing congregations. In 1848, for instance, St. George’s Episcopal Church moved north from Beekman Street downtown to Stuyvesant Square, on 16th Street near 2nd Avenue. But in 1881, Walter Williams resigned his post as rector of St. George’s Church because his congregation was hesitant about moving north again. As he told his congregation, St. George’s even despite its move barely thirty years before, again faced a number of challenges that seemed a litany of the familiar: “its locality on the East Side, the change in the character of the population in this vicinity in the last ten years, the constant removal of families from us, the diminished resources which this produces.” All this, Williams wrote to his congregation, “convinced me long ago that the removal of St. George’s to some other locality was an imperative necessity.” The situation was severe enough that in the face of his congregation’s reluctance, Williams believed he had no other option than resignation. St. George’s, the Brick Presbyterian, and innumerable other congregation had all fled north once, but the drought had followed.

But many other pastors read the plight of St. George’s and other congregations who found themselves forced north again as a signal: the transformed landscape of the city, its dampening power over religion, was not temporary, but rather something that the churches had to turn and confront, and if necessary adapt to. They could not flee forever, for the crisis would always follow. And more, its continuing advance forced the pastors of New York to sharpen

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85 Frank Goodchild, “Church Endowments: their need and danger,” 38, 40.
86 Walter Williams to the trustees of St. George’s, April 14, 1881; reprinted in Henry Anstice, History of St. George’s Church in the City of New York (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1911) 282.
their understanding of the problem; it was not merely the nuisance of foreign language, the
dirtiness of the slums, or the impersonal commerce of the commercial area that posed practical
challenges to the churches’ finances or congregation sizes. Rather, they gradually began toecome aware that the city was suffering from a transformed spiritual landscape. The new
populations and the changing nature of downtown New York thwarted the very practice of
evangelical piety there, and thus disrupted the metaphysical economy of salvation. The threat
was not technical, but existential. Gradually, crises like those Williams confronted inspired the
ministers of New York, and in the last decades of the nineteenth century they began to
understand the tumult of their city as a religious problem, and to, haltingly, find ways to translate
its threat into the language of evangelicalism.

Dwight Moody, the great knight of Gilded Age evangelicalism and the most prominent
revivalist of his generation, brought a wave of hope to New York City when he visited in 1875
and again in 1881. Moody was of the revival generation, a child of the mid-century evangelical
consensus, converted in the revival of 1858. And he was convinced that the traditional piety of
that revival would be able to re-Christianize a city that in the two decades since had been
wracked with all manner of problems. As he said in his first sermon in the city, emphasizing the
sufficiency of traditional evangelicalism, “I have been told by so many New York is a hard city;
you won’t succeed here.” But, he declared, “Is not the God of our fathers enough for New York
city? Cannot our God take this city and shake it as you would a little child?”

Moody was
firmly convinced, and his supporters believed, that he came to the city to stand against and turn
back a wave of Catholicism, spiritual decay, corruption, and venality. Ross Stevenson, later
pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, remembered in 1908 that “Brooklyn and New
York were profoundly stirred by the meetings conducted by Dwight L Moody. I can remember

as a lad how my father, a minister, was impressed and encouraged by the accounts of those gatherings.”

Moody trumpeted his experiences in New York as a great success, and many of his fellow evangelicals followed suit. He noted with pleasure that some thirty thousand New Yorkers pledged themselves to Christ during his crusade. But, digging deeper into his revivals revealed that Moody was, fundamentally, a representative of the sort of evangelicalism that seemed to be failing in the city, and realizing that calls into question the success that his numbers represented. Moody emphasized the strategies of earlier evangelicalism, presenting a piety of respectable middle-class devotional styles and traditionalist preaching that backed from the overt intensity of Charles Finney’s revivals. Once, when a man kept interrupting Moody’s sermons with shouts of “Amen,” the reviver stopped his preaching to silence him, saying “Never mind, friend, I can do all the hollering.” Congregants persistent in noisemaking would be escorted quietly from the pews, while the rest sang a hymn. Moody rejected the notion that evangelical religion should engage in a direct way with the particular challenges of the urban context; rather, he stressed traditional patterns of worship. As he once described his ideal Sunday meetings, “I wouldn’t have a temperance meeting on Sunday night. I would hold Sunday evening sacred to the preaching the Gospel of the Son of God.”

This was not to say that Moody did not believe that the faith was not fundamentally transformative. But he understood conversion as essentially a comfortable, sentimental process, one that had as much to do with moral uplift and self-discipline as it did with radical spiritual

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88 In Henry Jessup, ed., History of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church (New York: Church Centennial Committee, 1908) 176.
89 William Moody, The Life of Dwight L Moody (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1900), 459
90 McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, 245.
91 Quoted in Moody, Dwight L. Moody, 449, 490. For context, see Bruce Evensen, God’s Man for the Gilded Age: DL Moody and the rise of mass evangelism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 100-104, 120.
experience. He had no desire to ignite enthusiastic fervor or to direct the awakenings he inspired toward activism, expressive spirituality, or the sort of dramatic break from the everyday that Charles Finney had advocated. Rather, he emphasized that conversion would bring greater satisfaction to the daily life of the middle class New Yorker as it already stood. The salvation he preached brought peace, contentment, and confidence in the world and in God, which would, not coincidentally, bring the saved social capital. “It is a wonderful fact that men and women saved by the blood of Jesus rarely remain subjects of charity,” he said, “but rise at once to comfort and respectability.”

Indeed, he remarked upon arriving in New York that “I know there is great misery and suffering in this great city, but what is the cause of most of it? Why the sufferers have been lost from the Shepherd’s care. When they are close to Him, under His protection, they are always provided for.” The Holy Spirit was sometimes present, but just as frequently Moody spoke of conversions as, simply, a resolution to do better. He sought not to transform the world but to gain success within it. He was not a revolutionary, nor even a reformer.

The modulation of evangelical fervor with middle-class complacency extended to the ways Moody wielded the Word. He held to traditional notions of the reticent preacher, emphasizing that it “is a great mistake . . . to tell your own experiences,” and even disliked the term “preaching,” believing it too provocative. Rather, he said “if I can only get people to think I am talking with them and not preaching, it is so much easier to hold their attention.” But he adapted such bare-bones concepts to his own style of spirituality. He complained frequently that preaching had grown too abstruse, too dry, and too bogged into doctrine to affect the heart, and

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93 New York Times (February 19, 1876) 8.
94 McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, 248-250. For an example of Moody’s deeply cultural notion of conversion, see his sermon “The Conversion of Valentine Burke,” in P.D. Moody, A shorter life of D. L. Moody (Chicago: Bible Institute/Colportage Association, 1900) 110-113, which describes Burke’s conversion as more or less the reformation of a criminal.
95 Moody, The Life of Dwight L Moody, 490.
thus, he insisted upon telling stories rather than preaching theology. As with other evangeli
cal, he believed the Bible was the best tool to inspire the event, but he drew not from scripture’s
doctrines of sin and redemption, but from its stories, saying “The story of the Prodigal Son will
melt any man’s heart. So will the story of the Good Samaritan. . . . just open the heart of Christ
to the people and draw the multitude around him.” Rather than preaching hell and salvation,
Moody exhorted his audience to accept the proffered friendship of Christ, to mourn the severing
of family ties that an unredeemed child inflicted upon his mother, to weep softly for joy of God’s
love. The hymns his songmaster Ira Sankey led congregations in were sentimental narratives of
dying children and weeping mothers, mixed with simple celebrations of Jesus’s tender care and
the peace found in salvation. His reimagining of the conversion event in terms that respectable
New York Protestants raised in a sentimental culture could embrace was wildly popular in
Gilded Age America.96

But when Moody left New York in 1876, the New York Tribune skeptically questioned
Moody’s spiritual methods, wondering if his revival was merely a “spectacle,” more reminiscent
of the Hippodrome circuses the building usually housed than of a spiritual revival.97 His
sentimental use of Bible narratives, for instance, increasingly struck New York’s journalists as
naïve, more showmanship than a serious engagement with the way scripture related to piety, and
ineffective for dealing with the challenges of the late nineteenth century. His sermons, one
journalist who covered his 1875 revival said, were “little more” than “a dramatic rendering of a
Bible story” that superficially pleased his audiences.98 Toward the end of the century the Times
skeptically reported on a sermon on the Bible Moody preached in the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian

96Moody, Dwight L. Moody, 464. On Victorian sentimentality and religion, see Ann Douglas, The Feminization of
American Culture (New York: Knopf, 1978); for Moody’s hymns, see Sandra Sizer, Gospel Hymns and Social
97Evensen, God’s Man, 93, 121.
98Moody, Dwight L. Moody, 278.
Church. The evangelist declared that “the higher criticism had not been able to contradict its teachings at a single point.” The newspaper took this with some cynicism, noting that while Moody worked valiantly “attempting to establish this claim,” he spoke as though scholarship “had never assailed” the book. He seemed disconnected from the demands of the world he preached to.  

But more seriously, the New York Times complained that despite his conversions and vast crowds and organizational innovations, Moody did not accomplish what he had set out to do. He did not redeem New York from its challenges; he did not restore Protestant evangelicalism to the untroubled throne it once claimed with satisfaction. And that because the ways Moody wielded the Word no longer addressed the needs of a sinful world. His preaching was too narrow, the Times argued, blind to vast swaths of moral issues that his targeted focus on individual conversion did not address. The “unwashed masses,” said the Christian Advocate, were “not touched by the morning meetings.” The crowd “was not an assembly derived from the poor and ignorant class.” His preaching did not appeal to the city’s poor or its immigrants; it failed to attract many New Yorkers who were not already committed churchgoers, and the Times even questioned its ability to truly convert those who did attend. Many of the thirty thousand souls he claimed were lukewarm church members or their family members. Moody himself was frustrated that the majority of his audience in New York City was made up of middle-class churchgoers who sought not the power of the Word Moody bore but the affective entertainment of the show he put on and the social cache that attendance brought with it.  

This failure to bring evangelical experience to the poor reflected a larger sense that Moody’s piety was too shallow to face the challenge of the city. This was not to say that the

100 “The Revival Meetings,” New York Times (March 14, 1876) 10; Moody, Dwight L. Moody, 280; Christian Advocate (November 11, 1875) 354; New York Times (October 25, 1875) 4.
evangelicals a generation younger than the great evangelist thought his aims were incorrect, nor was it to say they did not think he was a hero of the faith; rather, they believed both, and one remarkable thing about the conflicts that rent their ranks in that generation was the respect and admiration both sides paid Moody. But it was to say that, whether they acknowledged it or not, the evangelicals who followed Moody – those who shared his inclinations toward traditional theology and those who did not - were increasingly convinced that the complex challenges of the city demanded a different approach.

Thus, the bitter confrontations among Protestants who found themselves in disputes over Biblical inerrancy or the reality of miracle at the turn of the century were felt all the more urgently because these problems were not merely abstractions. They were conflicts over the structures of religion that evangelicals might use to access divine power, and they arose because the traditional channels of the Word that dominated the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had become difficult to access in the urbanizing city. The problem emerged in part from theology, but also emerged from the pastoral situation that New York’s ministers found themselves confronting. They weighed on the minister every time he stepped to the pulpit. How could the Word be preached to a city that did not wish to hear it?

The first step was to diagnose the problem. The New York City Mission and Tract Society offered an analogy that summarized the fears of many evangelicals: “New York is unevangelized,” announced the Society’s annual report of 1882, soon after Moody’s second visit to the city. “If an English-speaking population so large were found in any distant quarter of the

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globe, the churches that support our society would be aroused.”  This analogy, describing the urban city as an unusual and exotic locale, a jungle unfamiliar and heathen to Western eyes, was a common one in the late nineteenth century. It was used by urban reformers and sensationalist journalists alike, a conceit that transformed the dreariness of poverty and overpopulation into something mysterious and appealing, something that demanded exploration and perhaps transformation. For instance, the essential unfamiliarity of southern Manhattan struck Basil March, the protagonist of William Dean Howells’s 1895 novel A Hazard of Good Fortune and a resident of Greenwich Village, one day as he was out walking: “The new apartment-houses, breaking the old sky-line with their towering stories, implied a life as alien to the American manner as anything in continental Europe . . . foreign faces and foreign tongues prevailed.” March marveled at the strangeness around him, extending from language, clothing, and the decoration of homes down to such mundane things as facial hair and food.  

The metaphor also reflected the spatial aspect of moral environmentalists, indicating that certain spaces of the city suffered precisely because they were distant and alien to the better off populations. Indeed, the appearance of “Little Italy” and “Chinatown” signaled dramatically the transformation of New York’s own streets into distant and dangerous places, lacking the virtues of evangelical civilization. Thus, for the preachers in New York’s evangelical pulpits, to call the city an alien and perhaps hostile landscape was not merely metaphor; rather, it was in

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deadly earnest. The city beyond the double doors of the churches was spiritually different than the space within in distinct ways; cities were, as Charles Parkhurst, who became minister of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church in 1880, maintained, “artificial,” and thus by their very nature spiritually unwholesome. “The atmosphere that the city boy breathes is filtered,” he claimed, because “human interference with nature spoils it, considered as a revelation from God, just as human commentaries vitiate the Bible.”106

The analogy was telling, for evangelicals believed that human beings were capable of gaining individual and accurate knowledge of God; the prospect rested at the center of their religious experience and the prospect of having that access violated was terrifying. This was true for their reading of the Bible; it was why they suspected the Catholic Douay Bible, which they believed was studded with commentary. But it was also true for their experience in the world. Both commentaries and cities were flawed human approximations that obscured more than they taught; commentaries were faint replicas of actual scripture, cities disrupted the sociality that evangelical religion flourished in. It was simply harder to find God in a city, and indeed, were it to happen, the place must be transformed into something else. In the hands of Parkhurst and his allies, to call the city foreign land was not merely a descriptive trope, but a theological proposition that presented his audience simultaneously with a metaphysical definition of the problem and, perhaps, a solution. Just as the text of the Bible had to be rescued from foreign interpretation and purified, so did the flawed city require redemption from the infection of secular space. Upon his installation as minister, van Dyke noted grimly that even midtown

106 Charles Henry Parkhurst, My Forty Years in New York (New York: Macmillan, 1923) 13. Thekla Joiner, Sin in the City: Chicago and Revivalism, 1880-1920 (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2007) ix-xi, argues that evangelicals tended to “label alternative or conflicting viewpoints as sin,” and thus used religious language to address what were really social or political problems in apocalyptic terms; Parkhurst here, and my argument more generally, demonstrate that Joiner has it backward; these problems were indeed perceived as religious threats first. Their responses are far more complicated than merely labeling the city as “sinful.”
New York City in 1882 seemed to him “like a desert.” But he prayed that the gospel he preached would prove “a perennial spring of living water” – an analogy which combined the exploration motif of the Mission and Tract Society with the Christological metaphors of the New Testament.\textsuperscript{107}

By the 1880s, New York’s evangelical congregations were welcoming a new generation of pastors – men like Henry van Dyke, Calvary Baptist’s Robert MacArthur, Charles Parkhurst, and William Rainsford, who replaced the hand-wringing Walter Williams at St. George’s. They begun to reimagine the place of the church in the city, and their aspirations were far more expansive than the indoors, regularly scheduled worship of their ancestors. The churches would no longer wait passively at the mercy of the city or decamp to suburbia as many denominations urged.\textsuperscript{108} An 1882 article in the \textit{Homiletic Monthly} declared that it was unacceptable for New York’s churches to say as the magazine reported hearing from some pastors, “‘If the poor in New York do not hear the gospel it is because they do not want to hear it’ – as if that were a sufficient answer!” The \textit{Monthly} published a map of Protestant churches in Manhattan that showed a city inadvertantly divided; as well-to-do congregations moved north, they left “frightful spiritual destitution in the lower half of New York City.”\textsuperscript{109} Increasingly, New York’s evangelicals determined to confront the problem, not avoid it. But this required not merely new tactics, but a new strategy. Williams and the churches that fled north saw only a challenge in the city; they reacted to proximate circumstance. The new generation of ministers, on the other hand, began to develop new theologies of evangelicalism which spoke to the condition of the city itself.

\textsuperscript{107} “Dr. Bevan’s Successor,” \textit{New York Times} (November 13, 1882) 8. For the New Testament reference, see John 4:13-14: “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

\textsuperscript{108} Kilde, \textit{When Church became Theatre}, 86 notes that by the final third of the nineteenth century, many denominational publications were advising congregations to avoid urban and commercial areas in favor of suburbia.

They began with protest. At the very moment men like Walter Williams were fleeing north, those of New York’s churches that had refused to uproot themselves had begun to cultivate a palpable sense of defiance against what seemed monumental odds, arguing that those churches that fled downtown were sacrificing true religion in exchange for transitory comfort. In 1881 Alfred Moment, pastor of the downtown Spring Street Presbyterian Church, declared, “On the Sabbath we have no carriages waiting at our doors and the wealth and fashion of the Presbyterian Church of this City are to be seen in other congregations, but not in those south of Houston Street.” And yet, he said, meeting attendance was not down, “and today we can thank God that the spirit of prayer is still with us.” Moment condemned the New York Presbytery for allotting too much attention to the “showy edifices” uptown. Those churches did not know what success in New York City required. The downtown churches, on the other hand, had discovered the secret: “the hand to hand and house to house ministrations of the Gospel. The ministers who are doing the most of this sort of work are the ones who are preaching on the Sabbath in the largest congregations.” Moment commended a neighbor congregation, the Allen Street Presbyterian Church, for being “full of self denial and missionary zeal, thoroughly Presbyterian, faithful to her pastors and loyal to Jesus Christ.”

To survive in a modern city, he declared, required a revitalized conception of the church; no longer could it expect people to come to it, depending upon impressive material affectations and cultural prominence to attract worshipers: rather, the church had to vigorously integrate itself into its neighborhood and work to draw people to the pews.

The notion that the city’s challenge offered a paradoxical opportunity at the same time as it presented a dire threat began to seem plausible to Protestant leaders across the country. The

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110 Alfred H. Moment, “The Down Town Presbyterian Churches” (New York: The Spring Street Presbyterian Church, 1881) 5, 20, 22, 3. For a similar complaint about the complacent upper classes of the fleeing congregations, see Matthew Hale Smith, Sunshine and Shadow in New York, 492-494.
preacher Samuel Loomis warned that the cities killed Christianity, and civilization with it. But this did not mean that the places should be abandoned; rather there was thus “special need for evangelizing the city, because the city is exposed to special perils.” Dwight Moody put it pithily: “Water runs down, and the highest hills in America are the great cities.”\footnote{Loomis, Modern Cities and their Religious Problems, 79-82, quotation from 6; William Moody, The life of Dwight L. Moody 263. On this problem, see also Butler, “Protestant Success in the new American City, 1870-1930,” 301-306.} After Christianity subdued the cities, the rest of the country would come easily. The urgency of these declarations was catching, and their assumptions – that the challenge was not merely evangelizing, but evangelizing in a particular way adapted to a particular place – gradually became common wisdom. The city needed a rededication to the faith, and that task required more than merely a replication of the evangelization that had failed there so far. One of Henry van Dyke’s early sermons declared that “a Gospel which transformed the city of Rome could surely do the same for New York,” and enunciated what van Dyke believed was “a divine command that Christians should organize . . . to plant their churches and missions in the dark spots and reach out their hands to the outcasts.”\footnote{“The New-York City Mission,” New York Times (December 17, 1883) 8.}

Van Dyke’s talk of reaching the hand of the church to places where it was rarely seen, his emphasis on urban missions and aiding the outcasts could easily be read as an argument that the salvation of evangelicalism rested in aid to the poor. But it also hints at a new way of understanding what it meant to be religious to New York’s evangelicals. The geographical struggles facing van Dyke’s, Parkhurst’s, and Rainsford’s congregations were not merely temporal or material or financial; rather the seeming failures of evangelical Christianity in the city forced them to reimagine the set of relationships that produced the faith – between the individual and God, between the minister and the congregation, between the individual and the
congregation, and between the congregation and the city itself. And that in turn fostered a revisioning of the relationship between the sacred and the secular in the urban city. As they struggled to keep evangelical Christianity alive in the city, it should not be a surprise that the language evangelicals developed to talk about and solve problems of faith mingled the secular and the sacred in new ways; talk of sin, divine intervention, and consequent transformation was intertwined with discussions of the theatre, print culture, medical care for the poor, and other manifestations of urban life. The difficulties the city posed meant that the pastoral impulse was bound into a sharp sense of the ways the Word could be made flesh in a particular time and place. The rituals of evangelical faith – preaching, scripture, the rites of the revival – would be reimagined in ways that made their power real to a new generation of urban evangelicals, but which also provoked contention that reached beyond theological dispute to the practice on the city streets that evangelicals fought for.

As it had before, when Spring and Finney fired tirades across the blocks of lower Manhattan, evangelical piety splintered as different ministers hunted for different tools to save the Word. It was out of this scramble, the attempts to implement, to redefine, and to make evangelical theology persuasive in the city, from which clefts in the mid-nineteenth century evangelical consensus emerged. Some evangelicals strove to find the Word in new places, more congenial to the culture of the city; others insisted that the Word should stand defiant and that ministers should simply raise their voices to be heard over the din. The faces that the struggle against the city took on presaged the conflict between liberalism and the insurgent fundamentalist movement that enveloped American Protestantism in the early twentieth century. It is also an indication that the doctrinal conflicts Protestants faced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were not merely an internal struggle over theology. Rather, these
disputes struck to the heart of what it meant to become an evangelical Christian, converted by the Word of God, as America approached a century that seemed unfamiliar, and a city which seemed a foreign land.
Chapter 2

The Revised Version

In May 1881, New York City book distributors Thomas Nelson and Sons issued a Revised Version of the New Testament, and the response in the streets was electrifying. Before dawn, there were customers lined up at the bookstores; newsboys hawked cheap versions of the Scriptures on the street, and Nelson estimated he sold more than a quarter million copies on the first day the Revised Testament was available alone.¹ A slightly muted version of the scene was repeated four years later, in July 1885, when the Committee on Revision issued its Old Testament. Upon completion of the Revised Version, Philip Schaff, professor at the Union Theological Seminary and chairman of the committee on revision declared that “competent judges” had declared that it “brings the English reader far nearer to the spirit and words of Christ and his apostles than any other version.”²

This was not only a claim to accuracy; it was, to an evangelical culture that relied upon the Word of God as the paramount engine of its piety, a profoundly metaphysical statement. Schaff and his fellows were confident in their ability to access ultimate spiritual meanings and therefore pure encounters with the divine through the text of the Bible itself; they needed no other religious mediator because they did not understand the Bible itself to be a mediator.³ As the Jesuit philosopher of language Walter Ong has observed, the Bible as a religious artifact dwells in indeterminacy between text and spoken word; if the power of speech is in the immediate and proximate relationship it creates between the speaker and the hearer, evangelicals

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have traditionally understood the written text of scripture to be functionally the same as hearing the holy voice of God. It transcended the gaps of time and space and provided an immediate, timeless encounter between the things of earth and the divine.  

Charles Hodge, enunciating the practical effects of Common Sense theology, the unknowing creed of millions of American evangelicals, insisted that “the words of the prophet were the words of God, or he could not be God’s spokesman and mouth.” Common Sense taught the plain sense of the words of Scripture gave direct and unmediated access to God’s message there; no interpretation was required. Historicity of the Bible’s narratives was assumed by the vast majority of nineteenth century evangelicals, but the Bible was at the same time more than a history lesson. To encounter the Word was to experience the history it described immediately; it was to realize that one lived in the universe the Bible itself described, and to experience God the same way Scripture’s characters did. This was consistent with how early Christians understood writing; in an oral culture, reading and hearing blended into one another, and word and speech blurred together.

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And this was not simply an accident, because was in the apprehension of that message that religious conversion came. Such immediacy was why evangelicals spoke of conversion as personal relationship with deity. As WGT Shedd, a colleague of Schaff’s at Union Seminary who occasionally occupied the pulpit at the Brick Presbyterian Church stated, “The theologian and preacher, by his patient study of the written revelation, must gain that by reading which he would have gained by reverently listening to the discourses of the prophets.”

Schaff, like many other evangelicals, assumed that the power of scripture rested in the correspondence between the text and reality itself; the premise behind the Revised Version was that a more accurate Bible was a more spiritually powerful Bible. More, it was their answer to the crisis of the Word; perhaps the last, best blow that traditional evangelical piety had to give. Upon the publication of the Revised New Testament, Schaff wrote with satisfaction that “The eagerness of the public to secure the Revision, and the rapidity and extent of its sale, exceed all expectations . . . in the year 30 of our era the Great Teacher addressed twelve disciples . . . in the year 1881, He addressed the same words of truth and life in a fresh version to millions of readers.”

Schaff agreed to lead the American committee on translation because he was characteristic of that great number of mid nineteenth century evangelicals who believed that a better translation of Biblical sources could make the spiritual encounter with God scripture offered more sharp, vital, and prevalent. He believed that the particular language of the Bible was of paramount spiritual importance, because he, like other evangelicals, saw a correspondence between accurately reproducing the words of its authors and accurately reproducing their religious experience. For instance, Shedd declared that the preacher’s task

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8 W.G.T Shedd, Homiletics and pastoral theology (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1864), 17, 80-1.
was not “creative but exegetical,” for “That mass of truth which is contained in the Christian Scriptures is also an object, positive, fixed, and independent of the individual mind that contemplates it.” The truth revealed in Scripture was both spiritually powerful and reflected in the particular choices of words, for it was “not only filled with a distinctive spirit, but it is also dictated by an Eternal Spirit.” 10 It was the preacher’s job not to synthesize new ideas, but rather to reproduce what he found in scripture.

Therefore the Revision was not merely an academic, but an evangelical, task. Ever more accurate renderings of the Biblical text wore thin the veil between the readers of the Bible and the pure power of the Word. “The revision is to give in idiomatic English the nearest possible equivalent for the original Word of God as it came from the inspired organs of the Holy Spirit,” he said.11 In 1871 and 1872, he sent hopeful letters to prominent scholars and church leaders all over the country, pleading with them to join what he called “this great work.”12 Finally, on October 4, 1872, the American committee assembled and began their work at Number 42, Bible House, off Nassau Street in downtown Manhattan. They met periodically on Fridays and Saturdays, in both New York and New Haven, Connecticut on the campus of Yale University, for the next several years, comparing work, discussing translations, and hammering out consensus.13

10 Shedd, Homiletics, 4-5, 35.
11 Philip Schaff, “Introductory Statement,” Schaff, ed., The Anglo-American Bible Revision (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1879) 16. See 15 as well; Schaff declares his purpose to “adapt King James’s version to the present state of the English language, without changing the idiom and vocabulary.” Thueson, In Discordance with the Scriptures, 48-50, argues that Schaff and the revisers were motivated by both evangelical and epistemological reasons, arguing that the revisers hoped both that a new translation would facilitate more accurate knowledge of God’s will and that it would also pique the interest of readers, leading to greater reading of the Bible. I maintain that the revisers hoped the revised Bible would do more than merely spark curiosity, but also better facilitate spiritual encounter with God.
But at the same time, ironically, the publication of the Revised Version triggered a very public debate that ultimately undermined that confidence. The preachers of New York City fought over the Revised Version from their pulpits, and their congregants followed with intense interest. Its advocates insisted that it would better enable them to lead revivals; that the inhabitants of the contemporary city, numb to the old ornate language of King James, could be awakened only with the sharp precision of the new translation. Its opponents maintained that the King James Version had the virtues of tradition and familiarity; that in the alien landscape of the city a Bible that the people were familiar with provided comfort. Thus, the production of the Revised Version changed how evangelicals read their scriptures in their homes and understood it in the sermons they heard. Its mere existence shattered a devotional world in which, functionally, the King James Version of scripture was the Bible and thus the pure incarnation of the language of God. The Revised Version’s simple presence indicated that the Word was not necessarily unitary, and sparked a crisis which began to decouple the Word with the word; the spiritual power from God from the text of scripture. The collapse of scripture as a source of access to the Word ultimately sent evangelicals hunting for a new source, and the boundless demands of the city provided ready tools.

“All language is in some measure prophetic,” Philip Schaff advised readers interested in a guide to aid them through the Revised Version of the New Testament, “and the first and lower meaning of words often points to a higher spiritual meaning.” This buoyant confidence in the spiritual power of inspired language was characteristic of the Revisers of the Bible, and Schaff was eager to parse out how it worked. The creation of the Word out of mere words occurred when God inspired writers; his spirit invested their language with particular power. For instance, certain Greek or Hebrew words that had existed before Christ, he said, words like faith (πίστις)
and charity (*agape*) were “clothed with a deeper spiritual significance, transplanted from a lower
to a high sphere” when spoken by Christ and written by his apostles. “The purifying,
spiritualizing and elevating influence of the genius of Christianity was through the Greek and
Latin sent upon all other languages into which the gospel is translated,” Schaff maintained.\(^{14}\)
All such statements reveal his confidence that language itself could transmit the pure presence of
the divine.

Thus, the Revisers understood the search for the original manuscripts to be also a search
for purer access to God’s Spirit. The revised Bible was the culmination of fifteen years of
painstaking labor by more than a hundred scholars on two continents. In 1870, the Church of
England had appointed a committee to update the King James Version, making full use of the
impressive advances the “lower,” textual, criticism had made over the previous hundred years.
Differentiated from the “higher,” historical criticism, which sought to pass judgment on the
factuality of the events recorded in the Bible using the tools of archaeology, history, and close
analysis of the sources of scripture, textual criticism rather strove to reconstruct, so far as
possible, the original Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible. Though in theory all acknowledged
that perfect reconstitution was impossible, the achievements of the previous century years
inspired ebullient optimism in many scholars.\(^{15}\) Thus, when the British translators invited
Schaff to assemble an American committee, he leaped at the chance. For him, new Biblical
research enhanced, rather than damaged, the special status of scripture.

\(^{15}\) For the advances in textual criticism, see Thueson, *In Discordance with the Scriptures*, 46-47; Bruce Metzger, *The
Text of the New Testament: its transmission, corruption, and restoration*, 2\(^{nd}\) ed (New York, Oxford University
But despite their hunger for accuracy, Schaff and his committee were in no sense sympathetic to notions of Biblical inerrancy, a particularly rigorous systematization of traditional Protestant beliefs about Scripture. Princeton theologians who had studied under Charles Hodge in the 1860s and 1870s began synthesizing the notion in the 1880s, and maintained the authors of the Bible’s original manuscripts were merely the pens of God, transcribing the exact language intended by God. Though this inspiration reached maximum force only in the original manuscripts, and not later translations, those first autographs were exactly the words God had delivered to the authors. Archibald A. Hodge, son of Charles, and Benjamin Warfield, the two primary advocates of inerrancy argued in 1881 that Protestant orthodoxy affirmed that “The Scriptures not only contain, but are, the Word of God, and hence that all their elements and all their affirmations are absolutely errorless and binding the faith and obedience of men.”

Schaff sneered at this theology, calling inerrancy “a mechanical theory of inspiration.” But this was not because advocates of inerrancy necessarily opposed textual criticism; indeed, Warfield cautiously endorsed textual criticism in the interest of approaching the ever-elusive inerrant and original manuscripts. Rather, it seemed to many mid-century evangelicals that inerrancy overemphasized epistemology – the way in which the Bible communicated propositional knowledge - at the expense of the primary concern of evangelical Biblicism: the

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spiritual experience, causative authority, conversion.\textsuperscript{19} John Broadus, author of the nineteenth century’s most influential manual of Protestant preaching, for instance taught that maintaining the divine power of the Word required respect for the narrative and context of passages, and denounced the practice of prooftexting, extracting particular passages of scripture from their context: “If we take the passage in a sense entirely foreign to what the sacred writer designed, as indicated by his connection, then, as we use it, the phrase is no longer a passage of scripture at all. It is merely words of scripture, used without authority to convey a different meaning.”\textsuperscript{20}

Thus, Schaff’s Bible was not a textbook but a catalyst for religious experience. Schaff was more than merely a scholar; he was an evangelical, and thus for him the Bible was “not a book simply . . . it is the voice of the living God, it is the message of Christ whose divine human nature it reflects; it is the chief agency of the Holy Spirit in illuminating, converting, warning and cheering.”\textsuperscript{21} It was not a collection of words but an experience. This confidence went back to the English Reformation, when the Reformer Thomas Cramner proclaimed that the laity should be exposed to constant Bible reading, for “Yt is as necessary for the lyfe of mans soule, as for the body to breath.” Cramner’s prayerbook for the Anglican church directed that the reading of the lectionary in each congregation should cover the entire Bible in a year, because hearing the words of Scripture would make the congregation “stirred up to godliness themselfes, and be more able also to exhort other by wholesome doctrine.”\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} Broadus, Treatise, 52.
\textsuperscript{21} Schaff, A Companion to the Greek Testament, 306.
\textsuperscript{22} Cramner cited in Horton Davies, Worship and Theology in England from Cramner to Baxter and Fox (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 13.
In part, Schaff’s desire to produce a new revision was due to his belief that the Bible uplifted the culture of the society that hung to it; he believed that Anglo-American evangelical culture, such as that he saw around him in New York City, was under threat, and needed a spiritual recharge. An English Bible was the ideal source; it had been among the chief progenitors of Anglo-American civilization. Theodore Woolsey, one of the New Testament Revisers, described the history of Bible translations from the church fathers Jerome and Origen, presenting the culmination of the story in the Puritan agitation for the King James Bible and declared that “These illustrations show that as the Christian religion gains firmer hold in a nation there is a desire felt for a more accurate translation than has been handed down.”

No language or nation, Woolsey maintained, had such a noble history with the Bible than did the Anglo-American speakers of English, and that because of the powerful language of King James’s translator, in which the concepts of Christianity were communicated with unprecedented vigor and clarity that other translations could not approach. Charles Krauth, another Reviser, exclaimed of the King James that “Its words are nearer to men than their own, and it gives articulation to groanings which but for it could not be uttered. It has lifted the living word to the solemn fixedness of those old heavenly thoughts and feelings.”

The King James translation, Krauth believed made the language particularly suited to help human beings grasp the things of God. As Schaff claimed, simply, because of the King James Version, “The English language is now the chief organ for the spread of the Word of God.” This lay particular responsibility upon those who spoke it.

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But this did not mean the King James could not be improved. The King James version, as worthwhile as it had been, was too much a product of the past to provide the spiritual jolt that American civilization needed. Schaff emphasized that the Revision was merely a “conservative revision” of the King James Version, because he knew his audience had deep affection, and even spiritual connections, with its archaic language and profound style. The Revisers emphasized that the power of the King James Version rested primarily in two things: first, as Talbot Chambers argued, “The character of the authors had much to do with the perfection of their work. They were men of learning, judgment and piety.” For Schaff, “the best versions of the Bible are from men who most heartily believed in the Bible.” Their cultivation of personal faith allowed them both to understand the religion that the Bible taught, and ensured that the Holy Spirit would guide their work. But secondly, as Schaff added, “they showed their superior learning and judgment,” by relying upon the best scholarship they could find.

The King James translators thus exemplified the combination of religious experience and verbal accuracy that Schaff, and other evangelicals of his generation, believed were inevitably connected. “The new Bible is to read like the old,” he said, “and the sacred associations connected with it are not to be disturbed.” Rather, the Revisers’ purpose was “to adapt King James’s version to the present state of the English language, without changing the idiom and vocabulary . . . to limit as far as possible the expression of such alterations to the language of the authorized or earlier versions.”

But nineteenth century advances in Bible study meant that the problems in the King James translation were becoming evident, and the connection between accuracy and spirituality meant these problems were not merely scholarly, but pastoral. Howard Crosby, pastor of New York’s Fourth Avenue Presbyterian Church, member of the New Testament Revision Committee and one of the translation’s most vociferous advocates, stated “The truth is what we desire . . . We seek a perfect translation of the Hebrew and Greek. The idea is of first importance.”30 But the Revisers were not merely academics with a merely pedantic insistence upon accuracy; they were also, many of them, pastors, evangelicals who desired to spread the Word and hence foster faith. Correcting defects in the King James Version might also spark a new revival of religious experience; approximating the language of the original writers as closely as possible would reproduce the archetypes of Biblical spiritual experience. Schaff celebrated: “We hear in our Bible Moses and the prophets, Christ and the apostles, speaking to us in our own mother-tongue.”31 Schaff’s language echoed the homiletic theology of the evangelical preacher WGT Shedd, who claimed that the inspired preacher would reproduce the experience of “reverently listening to the discourses of the prophets.”32 His claim to accuracy, then, was not simply a reference to precision or accuracy in language, but rather, was a metaphysical statement about the spiritual power that such precision would bring.

Accurate translation brought the idiom of the English Bible closer to the resonance and vividness that divine inspiration had given the original language; the poetry of the King James was to be appreciated, but not if it obscured that of the original. Beauty was not enough. Matthew Riddle pronounced himself therefore baffled by those who insisted that “The Revised Version is very useful for purposes of study but the Authorized Version should be retained for

32 Shedd, Homiletics, 17, 80-1.
devotional purposes;” to him, this was misreading the very achievement of the Revision. Rather “knowledge of the exact sense of the Scripture must in the end be most conducive to an intelligent devotion.” 33 As Crosby said, assailing those who praised the archaic language of the King James Version, “We greatly desire to preserve the antique style. But was the Gospel of Matthew or the Epistle of Paul to the Romans written in an antique style? Did the early Church read the New Testament as an antiquated book? Certainly not.” Rather, Crosby insisted, if “the Bible of God was given to the people in the people’s own language, jots and tittles included it would more readily touch the heart and renew the life than it can when its movements are fettered by the stiff uncouthness of a Tudor style.” 34

Schaff concurred. Style was particularly important, but only as it applied to the different voices of the Biblical authors, wiping the dust of generations of retranslation from their words. The Bible presented various “styles of apostolic writing to suit different tastes, objects, and classes of readers,” Schaff said. He praised “rationalism” for its “keen eye for all the diversities of thought and style of the apostles and evangelists,” but maintained that because higher criticism was determined to downplay supernaturalism, it was “blind to the underlying unity and harmony” that these seemingly different styles would reveal – the unity derived of inspiration, not human thought, the spiritual power that exalted the language and styles of the writers of the Bible in the same way that Christ exalted the human body. This divinized humanity of the Bible, the proximate experience of Jesus, was what an accurate translation could bring, and it would bring the reader to Christ. Schaff insisted: “What is true of the personal Word may be applied to the written word: Jesus, divinest when Thou most art man.” 35 To this end, Crosby proclaimed that the Revised Version saved the Bible from irrelevance and returned it to a central position in

34 Crosby, “Coming Revision,” 449-50.
the life of the believer. It revitalized the text’s spiritual power. The Bible was “not an ancient, but a modern book,” he said. It was not to be worshiped and fetishized in any particular form, but rather experienced. “Let us not then make an antique of the Bible and so remove it from our daily lives,” he urged those who wondered about the value of a new translation. And many of New York’s ministers felt that the Revised Version was not simply more accurate than the King James Version, but also more accessible and useful. It would not simply generate interest, but promote conversion. It would change New York.

William Taylor, pastor of New York’s Broadway Tabernacle, demonstrated how the Revised Version could work. He came to his pulpit to pray before his congregation one Sunday morning, and “gave thanks for the great revival in Bible reading that it [the Revised Version] has produced,” praising the “great Scriptural knowledge of the Nineteenth Century” for making possible such great interest in scripture that he saw appearing among the members of his congregation. Charles Robinson, minister to the city’s Presbyterian Memorial Church, had a similar experience, and echoed Taylor’s key term “revival,” in other language significant to evangelical Protestants. As Robinson read the Revised New Testament, he told his parishioners, “the tears rolled down his face . . . a great load was lifted from his heart.” His own encounter with the Revised Version facilitated spiritual experience, and “showed clearly how sincerely, how devotedly, how prayerfully the revisers had done their work.” Again, the quest for accuracy and the quest for the spiritual new birth were wed, and New York’s pastors celebrated the new tool which Schaff had given them.

Robert MacArthur, pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church, made the connection between the Revised Version and successful practice of piety even more explicit. He proclaimed in the

36 Crosby, “Coming Revision,” 450
days shortly before the revision came out that “We are today witnessing the sublimest sight ever seen beneath the skies since Christ trod this earth. The whole world is waiting on bended knees and with bated breath for the Revised New Testament.” For MacArthur, the revision itself was an act of worship, a means of participation in the power of the Word, the accuracy of the translation itself even secondary to the ritual act of it. He lauded the dutiful and careful study that he imagined the Committee to hold, wedded, naturally, to much prayer and contemplation. The devotion of the translators proved to him that “the highest point of human greatness men ever reach is when they bow at the feet of Jesus Christ and take Him for their Lord.”

Because of this effort, MacArthur said, though “newer scholarship, it will readily be admitted, has disturbed the faith of some Bible students but it is absolutely certain that it has given the Bible a fresh interest and an increased value . . . . the Bible was never so new and so attractive.”

But at the same time, other pastors were skeptical, many for the same reasons which Robinson, Taylor, and MacArthur offered in support of the revision. They doubted the Revised Version because they believed the King James to be better equipped for devotional purposes. And in so doing, they shattered the relationship between accurate language and pure spiritual experience which Schaff had assumed. TD Witherspoon of the Homiletic Review said he could not quite recommend “substitution of the Revised Version in the place of that which has so long been the standard of reference and quotation,” and his reasons signaled the beginnings of a breakdown of evangelical reading patterns. There had, of course, been a great deal of noisy opposition to the Revised Version for precisely Witherspoon’s reason: people were simply used

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to King James. The protestations of the Committee for deference and regard for the King James Version were not enough to thwart the wrath of the Brooklyn pastor De Witt Talmage, nationally known for his oratory and published sermons, and a vociferous defender of the traditional Bible. When the Revised New Testament was published, Talmage proclaimed that “Nine hundred and ninety nine out of every thousand regret in the depths of their souls that the revision has been attempted, and look upon it as a desecration and a profanation and a mutilation and a religious outrage.” He castigated Schaff’s “fifty men,” professing horror that they believed their degrees and education qualified them for “ten years tinkering with the Word of God,” and muttered darkly about the “bossism” that the educated elite of the Revision Committee had apparently embraced.41

Witherspoon found the “sledge hammer blows of Dr. Talmage” disconcerting, and worried that “When he hugged King James Version to his heart in the full strength of his dramatic power . . . he appealed to an unintelligent instinct of the people, powerful as a superstition.”42 But Witherspoon nonetheless found himself on Talmage’s side. Their concerns were not merely mindless traditionalism. Witherspoon insisted that until there was “general consent” among the churches, the King James “should occupy its place of honor and reverence as the version to be solemnly read and expounded in the public services of the house of God.”43 That is, the defenders of King James were worried about more than conservatism for conservatism’s sake; they were concerned about what such a drastic switch might do to the spiritual power of Christian worship. As Talmage said, the Revised Version “assails the magnificent liturgy of the Episcopal Church and makes all her Prayer Books vast inaccuracies . .

. If this new version succeed for the next few years you will have to watch your children offering of the Lord's Prayer and jerk them up short before they run over into an uninspired doxology.”

These concerns reveal not opposition to the very concept of a new translation, but, rather, the concern of a pastor for the solemn procedures of worship; the familiarity of patterns of spirituality. And Talmage was not alone. William Morgan, the rector of New York’s St. Thomas Episcopal Church, had similar worries; the King James, he said, “ought not to be lightly cast aside. It had become so engrained upon the religious life as the Word of God, and as able to save souls, and every heart was so familiar with its rugged but beautiful Saxon that it might be said to be engraven even upon the lintels and door posts of our dwellings.”

Witherspoon, Talmage and Morgan, pastors all, believed that it was not merely the independent virtues of the King James Version that recommended it for preservation. Its promise had little to do with the skill of its translation or even the poetry of its language, rather, it had for three centuries been that Bible evangelical Christians had worshipped with, and its liturgical power was thus to be respected. Its Jacobean language was bound into traditional evangelical processes of religious life in a way that made it difficult to extract. And their consequent resistance to a new translation signaled a breakdown between the word and the Word. The old relationship between Biblical accuracy and causative spiritual authority, an assumption Schaff and other mid-century evangelicals never questioned, suddenly seemed tenuous. Talmage’s skepticism revealed that the populism that Common Sense theology had fused to Christianity in the Second Great Awakening was bound more to familiarity than to accuracy, while Witherspoon and Morgan’s fondness for the King James Bible revealed that

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44 “Refuge of Superstition,” 610.
45 “The Revised Testament,” Frank Leslie’s Sunday Magazine 10 (1881)226.
perhaps the text’s causative authority was not strictly related to the particularities of its language, but perhaps more to the experience the reader had while reading.

None of these men seemed aware that their nostalgia had its logical conclusion in a radically revised way of understanding how the Bible worked, one that began to divorce the spiritual experience of the Word from engagement with the precise words of a particular text. The emergence of the Revised Version of the Bible did not lay the foundations of the crisis of scripture that had slowly been seeping into American Protestantism throughout the nineteenth century; the higher criticism that even Schaff was wary of had shaken the ground beneath the Bible, and many ministers began to enter the pulpit with uncertainty. Geological and biological research challenged Biblical claims about the origins of the world, and archaeology and new advances in ancient history threatened many evangelicals’ assumption that the events of the book could be taken as accurate depictions of the ancient Near East. These concerns reached to the pews of New York City in the early 1880s.

In late 1883 and early 1884, for instance, Richard Heber Newton, preacher at All Souls’ Protestant Episcopal Church delivered a sermon series on “The Right and Wrong Uses of the Bible,” and thereby sparked a minor controversy. Newton began his preaching with a report on conditions in his own congregation, warning that “the Bible is certainly not read as of old,” either in time devoted or by common practice. He blamed this both on the “distractions” of modern life, but more fundamentally on Christians’ inability to reconcile the challenges of scholarship

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with Schaff-like notions about the authority of scripture. Newton argued that the best recourse was to treat the Bible as great literature able to work on the human mind and emotions rather than struggling to reconcile the Word of God embodied in a text full of errors. And he drew hot criticism. “A Presbyter,” lay officer in a Presbyterian congregation, declared that Newton needed to hear that “The sacred writers of Holy Scripture, being divinely inspired, were necessarily exempted from error.” Newton also reported engaging with critics on the street, weathered an accusatory sermon delivered by B. F. de Costa, another Episcopal priest, and met several times with Henry Cadmon Potter, Episcopal bishop of New York City, before Potter decided to let the matter rest. But it did not rest; in 1889, the New York Times reported that some two hundred “ladies and gentlemen” attended a debate between Howard Crosby and George Moore, of Andover Theological Seminary, over the so-called “higher criticism.” The battle over the Revised Version sharpened in New Yorkers’ minds the notion that the words of the Bible were not eternal and pristine windows into God’s mind, but rather, perhaps, malleable based on context and contingency.

These challenges shattered evangelical New Yorkers’ spiritual senses, their ability to perceive the divine, and forced them to remake themselves as a person gone blind resorts to hearing to perceive the world. The eighteenth century Enlightenment had forced God’s personal voice heard in supernatural interventions like visions and voices from heaven out of a world in which sound was increasingly controlled, mechanized, and rationalized. Just so, the earthquake under the word of scripture and the tumultuous sound of the city streets seemed to

break the remaining power that the verbal Word had; if Genesis were not actually written by Moses while in communion with God on Mount Sinai, as many evangelicals believed, but was rather assembled over centuries from various oral traditions, how could the spiritual proximity which evangelicals believed the Bible as God’s Word could reproduce be attainable? But they were not willing to surrender. The arguments of Schaff and the Princeton school were attempts to recover that immediacy. For many evangelicals, like Talmage, to defend the King James translation was, essentially, to insist that the Bible was relevant, central to the evangelical life. Warfield and Talmage shared a fear: that the text of scripture was becoming battered to the point of disuse.

Fears that Bible reading was in decline spread throughout New York in this period; indeed, Henry Ward Beecher had a few years before the Revised New Testament came out sparked a public debate with an editorial in the New York Tribune calling for the abolition of compulsory Bible reading, which he claimed was rote and mechanical, in the city’s schools. In 1904, the Methodist Magazine, citing the Saturday Evening Post, mourned the “decline of the custom of reading the Bible at family prayers,” and noted that “The Bible is not brought in touch with the lives of the children.” Talmage concurred, painting a bleak picture of life in the Bible-less home. He worried about New York homes in which the poor sat before “a cheerless firegrate, kneading hunger in an empty bread tray. The damp air shivering with curses. No Bible on the shelf.” He commiserated with wives with un-Christian husbands, drawing equation between moral depredation and lack of respect for scripture: “But you say he belongs to a

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52 On proximity, see Ong, Presence of the Word, 182-189; on Moses and Genesis, see for instance Robert MacArthur’s opinion in Bible Difficulties, 20.


54 “How to Make the Bible More Real,” Methodist Magazine 60 (October 1904) 328. See also Colleen McDanell, The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900 (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986) 77-84.
worldly club, or he does not believe a word of the Bible, or he is an inebriate and very loose in
his habits?” To those husbands he said, “Go home today and take the Bible on your lap, and
gather all your family yet living around you.” He urged them to “take a Bible and read a few
verses in the evening-time.” As many evangelicals did, Talmage believed the simple act of
reading mattered more than comprehending any particular thing about the text. His aggressive
fulminations against the Revised Version, and the high view of its text which he adopted in the
process, reflected this fear that the Bible was losing prestige in a city preoccupied with poverty
and wealth.

But the Bible was slipping through Talmage’s grasp. Though evangelicals with good
intentions, like Schaff, seemed unwitting of the consequences, they all were aware of the
firestorm of Biblical criticism and the growing number of households in the city who were
Biblically illiterate. Other New York evangelicals turned to the romantic movement, which
emerged in Germany and Great Britain and began to permeate American Protestantism in the
middle decades of the nineteenth century. It offered new ways of thinking about what scripture
might be. Romanticism emphasized sentiment, feeling, and emotion; it argued that truth was
grasped most fully through intuition rather than through logical proposition, and therefore, it
denied what Schaff had taken for granted: that language was essential to the transmission of
meaning. Indeed, what many romantics called the “sublime,” the sense of the ultimate, of the
absolute, was ineffable, indescribable, and could only be grasped through immediate experience,
rather than described in words. That knowledge about the world might be grasped through

56 On romanticism and evangelicalism, see David Bebbington, The Dominance of Evangelicalism: the age of
Spurgeon and Moody (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 2005)1148-153 and Walter Conser, God and the Natural World:
religion and science in antebellum America (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) 37-47; for
romanticism and religion more generally, see the essays in Gavin Hopps and Jane Stabler, eds., Romanticism and
Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006) particularly Richard Cronin’s
“Words and the Word: the diction of Don Juan,” 137-155
subjective experience was not a concept unfamiliar to evangelicals, who had long asserted that the conversion experience conveyed knowledge of God through subjective means, and the romantic movement proved increasingly useful to many who were struggling to preserve the power of the Word. Though it would prove most influential among those who eventually produced the liberal tradition, its ideas were useful first to pastors; they were not limited to one theological tradition or another.

Romanticism gave evangelical preachers a language to articulate theologically a new way of thinking about God’s Word, and to assimilate the crisis in language that higher criticism and the Revised Version had brought to evangelicalism. Early in the nineteenth century, theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher and preachers like William Ellery Channing began to argue that intuition and experiential knowledge were surer roads to truth than the cramped and limited paths of language.\(^57\) It followed, then, that the words of the Bible could not be the true wellspring of its value. The noted romantic literary critic Matthew Arnold wrote, “To understand that the language of the Bible is fluid, passing, and literary, not rigid, fixed and scientific, is the first step towards a right understanding of the Bible.”\(^58\) Schleiermacher warned that the Protestant ministry too often tended to build a saving relationship with Christ on the shaky edifice of a book written in human language. He insisted instead that “Scripture cannot be the foundation of faith in Christ; rather must the latter be presupposed before a peculiar authority can be granted to Holy Scripture.” The German worried that a Catholic and a Protestant might read the same verses and come to different conclusions; this meant that God’s truth was not self evident, and that Scripture


\(^{58}\) Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma* (1870; NY: Unger, 1970) 2, 10; see also 9-12, 159.
was not a perfect lens to the divine. Instead, he argued that a preexisting religious experience invested the words of Scripture with divine power, not, as Schaff and Warfield and so many other evangelicals maintained, the other way around.

Schleiermacher was eventually praised as the father of Protestant liberalism, but his argument that the Bible’s text should be understood as the product of ineffable divine encounter, rather than the actual location of that encounter, reflected the impulses of many other Protestant romantics of the period. J.G. Herder, a German contemporary of Schleiermacher, argued that the Bible should be understood itself as the unfinished, constantly expanding, poetic expression of believers’ encounter with God; the poetic and cultural record of a larger aesthetic religious experience. That is, the Bible was historical evidence of what an encounter with God was like as much as it was the divine half of that encounter. The British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in whose writings many nineteenth century Americans first encountered German ideas, summarized the sense, saying, “Whatever may be thought of the genuineness and authority of any part of the book of Daniel, it makes no difference to my belief in Christianity; for Christianity is within a man.”

The arguments of these romantics seemed to reverse the traditional processes of evangelicalism, which placed religious experience as the result of an encounter with the spoken or textual word, rather than the other way around. But romanticism’s emphasis upon sentiment, the subjective nature of spiritual experience, spoke to many evangelicals who were desperate to

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preserve something resembling that traditional pattern, even if it required reconfiguration of how
the text looked and what it meant to encounter it. Thus, while many evangelicals were
suspicious of the airy and insubstantial, and even perhaps pantheist, theology they accused the
romantics of spinning, at the same time many were attracted to romanticism’s emphasis upon
spiritual experience, and its conviction that God could be known through sentiment. 62 Here,
perhaps, was a possible way to preserve the Word seemingly broken on language.

By the middle of the century Protestant ministers like Horace Bushnell, sometimes called
the founder of American religious liberalism, and the Brooklyn pastor Henry Ward Beecher, the
most famous preacher of this time, began translating the romantic impulse into evangelical
language. They claimed that the precise words of the Bible were less important than less
important than the overall emotional effect of scripture; its ability to cultivate sentiment and
affective influence. Bushnell’s remarkable “Preliminary Dissertation on Language,” which
prefaced his work on the Trinity God in Christ argued that language was in fact not capable of
bearing the religious weight that evangelicals had placed upon it. “We have misconceived, it
seems to me, both its nature and its capacities,” he worried. “I see not how any one who rightly
conceives its nature can hope any longer to produce in it a real and proper system of dogmatic
truth.”63 Therefore, precise claims that the Bible might make – which the higher criticism might
cast doubt upon – or the particular configuration of any set of words – which new translations
might alter – were less important than the impact of the text as a whole, and indeed, the text as
Herder’s poetry, a work of art. As Bushnell stated, the virtue of the New Testament was in its
presentation of Christ as the “Chief Character” in the “highest and most moving tragedy ever
acted,” one which presented the “divine feeling, moved in tragic earnest.” In short, for Bushnell

63 Horace Bushnell, God in Christ: 3 discourses, with a preliminary dissertation on language (Hartford: Brown and
Parsons, 1849) 4.
the Bible presented God as a fully rounded personality to be encountered emotionally, rather than in language.64

This reinterpretation of Christianity as an encounter between personalities rather than between humans and divine language indicated a way in which evangelicals could preserve a relationship with God that transcended their fears that the Bible was not what they once thought. Beecher warned his Brooklyn congregation, not, if “you are dissatisfied, [to] take the Bible expecting that now you are converted it will shine out at you like a house whose windows are illuminated. Christ will not reveal himself to you in that way.” Rather, the minister said, “Christian graces are not in the Bible. The Bible tells us what they are; but it is in the struggle of life that we are to find them.”65 Rather than approaching the Bible deductively, beginning with the presupposition that it perfectly reflected the mind of God, evangelicals began to approach it inductively, deriving their convictions about scripture based upon their encounters with it.66 This new approach reflected greater confidence in human ability, but it also left open how precisely the Word worked if not through text; how closely it was bound to the words of human language, and most of all, how it might inspire conversion.

Bushnell and Beecher’s refashioned notion of the Word were not intended to be resolutions to abstract scholastic conundrums, but rather to broaden pastoral possibilities, particularly to the aid of ministers who, doubting the Bible, were not sure what to preach. Many ministers afraid that the supernal authority of the Bible had been undermined, uncertain what to preach from if neither the King James nor the Revised Versions could be trusted, worried about how to foster conversion experience if the Word no longer stood, flocked to their romantic

64 Horace Bushnell, God in Christ, 204-205.
66 On inductive and deductive, see Trembath, Evangelical Theories of Biblical Inspiration, 8-11, 48; Abraham, Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture, 11-12.
reinterpretations of the way the Word worked. Bushnell argued that the transformative power of the Word that was manifest more truly in behavior, in the way a believer used what the words of Scripture taught in their lives, than in the language of Scripture itself, for that text was merely a limited manifestation of a deeper, tangible reality that crossed the multiple dimensions of life. He therefore distinguished “between the idea of a Christian minister and that of a Christian preacher,” arguing that the pastor’s true role was the former. A minister would preach, true, but not merely that. Bushnell taught that “the best of all directions that I know for the preaching of Christ . . . is to live in him.” Bushnell’s minister was not merely a transparent channel for the divine; he suddenly became manifest as a visible model before the congregation, an embodiment of what the Word was. His “insight, character, and love . . . forms the true equipment of an earnest, powerful preacher.”

The process of conversion, therefore, was not necessarily bound to the verbal proclamation of the Word; it could happen gradually, through sustained interaction with the sanctified character of the minister; a process of nurturing upon the virtues of the Word rather than the sudden and audible experience of preaching.

Beecher drew from Bushnell’s deemphasis upon the cleanly propositional nature of the Word, and added to it a sense of drama and affective emotion. In his 1868 novel Norwood, the minister Reuben Wentworth becomes a much more fervent preacher after his wife dies; his sorrow makes his sermons increasingly personal and less doctrinal, reflective of his own character instead of expositions on doctrine, and his congregation size increases. This, Beecher claimed, was a true revival, a spiritual outpouring that depended upon the establishment of human connections between preachers and congregations rather than the repetition of the Word alone. Like Bushnell, Beecher emphasized the personal nature of preaching, but he believed it

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worked best through evoking emotion. He sought to make preaching a variety of romantic poetry capable of touching the hearts of his hearers in an aesthetic way. For Beecher, the aesthetic, the emotional, and the spiritual converged and became almost interchangeable. The proclamation of the Word, therefore, became expressive rather than proclamative, modeled rather than preached, sensitive to the cultural inclinations of its audience, and tailored at triggering personalized affective responses rather than transparently channeling the mind of God.

It is important to recognize that both Beecher and Bushnell considered themselves evangelical Christians; both believed in the transformative powers of conversion to the faith and in the responsibility of Christians to inspire it in others. Indeed, their concerns were particularly pastoral; that is, they wanted to change lives, and saw theology as a tool to that end. Bushnell, minister to a Connecticut congregation, derived his theology from his worry that that dogmatic insistence that what he called the “instrument” of language was “infallible” or even “sufficient” turned his congregants into stunted, emotional dogmatics rather than true followers of Christ. He warned pastors against “over preaching or preaching out,” arguing that established congregations, populated already by converted Christians, needed ministry in charity, worship, and education. The preached Word, he said, was sometimes necessary and never sufficient, and worked best in limited application, such as in revivals. Like Bushnell, Beecher strove to mediate intellectual and cultural issues for a congregation, and his aesthetic reinterpretation of religious experience was an attempt to make sense of them in the evangelical experience of his

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congregants. For him, becoming a converted Christian was about feeling and expressing powerful emotion, and preaching was a way to evoke such sentiments in his congregation.\textsuperscript{72}

The retooling of Reformation preaching that Bushnell and Beecher exemplified – and the innovations of those who followed them - should be understood in this context. The transformation of the Word from verbal proclamation into the sort of affective embodiment that Bushnell and Beecher offered a way to reconcile evangelical piety with late nineteenth century disaffection with language. The changes were not a sign that Victorian tropes like “scientism” or “respectability” or “sentimentality” were somehow secularizing the faith; rather, it is a demonstration of the pastoral flexibility possible within the broad parameters of evangelical theology.\textsuperscript{73} Liberal evangelical ministers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century declared jubilantly that their preaching was as effective as those of their predecessors, and contemporaries seemed to agree; Beecher was often spoken of in the same breath as Moody as an evangelist. The transformations in the Word that he and Bushnell worked were fundamentally of method and practice rather than theological from the first; Bushnell’s ideas were never systematic enough to compare to Schleiermacher’s, and seemed mainly targeted at relieving the anxiety of his fellows in the ministry. Thus, many evangelicals who came to believe in the limits of verbal communication began to follow Beecher and Bushnell, looking to the Word as something that could be embodied and encountered in the world, rather than simply through the preached words of scripture. Two places in particular seemed promising: the embodiment of the Word in the personality of the preacher, and the channeling of the Word through the environment in which the recipient lived.

\textsuperscript{72} McLoughlin, \textit{The meaning of Henry Ward Beecher}, 74-78; Fox, \textit{Trials of Intimacy}.
\textsuperscript{73} For these sorts of arguments, see, for example, David Marshall, \textit{Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) and Ann Douglas, \textit{The feminization of American culture} (New York: Knopf, 1978).
The heroic human personality was a central preoccupation of romanticism, and many evangelicals in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, eager to find an effective means of proclamation, turned to the pastor as a vehicle for converting grace. Indeed, contemporaries labeled the late nineteenth century as the age of the “pulpit giants” like Beecher, Brooklyn’s Talmage, or Boston’s Phillips Brooks. Many evangelicals steeped in romanticism but not necessarily inclined toward Bushnell’s liberalism found his emphasis upon a minister’s character appealing. They read the great ministers as “heroic” in the sense described by English historian Thomas Carlyle, who was frequently invoked in American pulpits and seminaries; according to Carlyle, the hero channeled “force” sufficient to influence the course of the age. While W.G.T. Shedd of Union Theological Seminary dismissed Carlyle’s heroics as “wholly subjective and therefore spasmodic” when compared to the unerring force of the Word, later evangelicals, less bound to the Word’s strictly verbal nature, found the romantic hero spiritually compelling. By the late 1870s, the last decade of Beecher’s heyday and Bushnell’s death, many American preachers of all theological persuasion were ready for the dictum of the Episcopalian Phillips Brooks: “Preaching is the bringing of truth through personality,” a phrase repeated incessantly for the next fifty years.

Even the theologically conservative John F. Carson, who replaced DeWitt Talmage at the Brooklyn Tabernacle and who would later serve in a variety of fundamentalist organizations, emphasized to a graduating class of McCormick Seminary that there is “another note that must

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be struck in the ministry that will impress the age – the heroic note. The age demands men of heroic mold, men of courage.” He approvingly quoted Carlyle to defend the importance of a preaching minister, then sought to wove together his adherence to the importance of the verbal Word with romanticism’s emphasis upon the heroic personality. “At bottom, whom have we to compare to the speaking man?” Carson asked. He framed the question in a way which emphasized the man speaking as much as the word spoken, and insisted that “The best asset that a preacher possesses is his personality,” emphasizing that the minister should encourage conversion through charisma as well as through the Word.\textsuperscript{77}

Carson never questioned the transcendence of the verbal Word itself, but he also saw no conflict between it and the visible personality of the minister. However, for other evangelicals, once the notion of personality confined the Word into a particular context, it was a short step from celebrating the charismatic force of the preaching minister as a vessel of the Word to reconceiving the experience of converting grace in terms of this-worldly interaction among things tangible. A new generation of evangelicals in the 1880s, affected by romanticism, begun to argue that if the Bible were itself the product of particular encounters with God in particular times and places, the same might be true for all religious experience. That is, the encounter with God’s Word did not occur in discreet and immediate moments, the events of divine intervention into mundane time, the immediate encounter of voice and hearing that speech provided Rather, it could occur in the world usually understood to be secular, and in ways less dramatic but no less effective.

\textsuperscript{77} John F. Carson, “The ministry for our age,” (Chicago: McCormick Theological Seminary, 1907) 10, 1, 3. This sort of preaching was also, of course, generally understood to be masculine, which meant vigorous, powerful, and affective. See Roxanne Mountford, \textit{The Gendered Pulpit} (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003) 1-56.
The 1880 eulogy that Charles Parkhurst, minister of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church, delivered for William Adams, his predecessor in the pulpit, showed a minister translating romantic ideas into the work of the pulpit in the city. Parkhurst saw two possibilities: the Word preached through pastoral service and the Word preached through the physical presence of the church in the city. First Parkhurst described Adams, and in the description showed the Word made flesh: “Such a person is in himself an Evangelist,” Parkhurst said, “quite apart from what he does or says . . . the words of the Gospel have ever been potent, only as they have been illustrated by the splendid personal products of Christianity.” This was no mere rhetoric: Parkhurst meant passionately that, indeed, the old power to convert that the preached Word and the written Word once had did not require verbalization at all, but could be communicated through the vehicles of romanticism: dynamic action, vivid personality, the visual and the tangible. Parkhurst went on to demonstrate how this new form of preaching was every bit as potent as the old. “By faith we are saved,” he claimed, echoing the classic motto of Protestant Christianity. The production of faith, of course, was a desired result of the preached sermon. However, for Parkhurst, “Faith is not believing what a man says, it is believing the man who says it.” Ultimately, of course, this meant believing in Jesus Christ, but in ways less propositional than personal; it was less important to believe in statements about Jesus Christ than it was to cultivate confidence in his personality and a relationship with him. Salvation, said Parkhurst, was not a metaphysical and juridical state of condemnation or grace; it was a set of living relationships with God cultivated through finding the divine image in fellow human beings.

78 Charles Henry Parkhurst, “Madison Square Presbyterian Church: To its first pastor, the Rev. William Adams, DD, LLD, a tribute” (New York: Printed for the Congregation, 1880) 16-17, 13.
Secondly, and perhaps more boldly, Parkhurst extended this conception of grace to the physical landscape surrounding his congregation. In a bit of metonymy, Parkhurst declared that the body of the Church, building and congregation, Adams left behind him were themselves “a eulogy in stone” to the minister. Parkhurst brushed aside suggestions that the church be renamed the Adams Memorial Presbyterian Church; rather, he insisted that the words were unnecessary, because the man was already inscribed there, that building itself evoked the power of the old man’s sermons, which were more powerful than his name alone. This may have been simple rhetoric on Parkhurst’s part, but it was a critical move. It reflected romanticism’s fascination with landscape, its sense that the vast and overpowering vistas of nature could express some spiritual truth about humanity’s relationship with the cosmos. In the city, the sense of the relationship between a people’s spiritual state and their environmental state was, as the tides of immigrants flowed in and the tenements, Catholic churches, and factories went up, sharpened. Parkhurst’s linguistic flourish, then, was the first salvo in a war for the city, and it showed that evangelical creativity was robust. These ministers would fashion the Word into a variety of weapons.

Parkhurst’s sensitivity to context, his concern with particularity of individual personality and specific place preferred to a Word timeless and universally applicable was a particular feature of what came to be called liberal evangelicalism. It derived from the reasons van Dyke and Talmage gave for rejection of the Revised Version; the belief that spiritual experience was best gained in ways tailored to the individual. This was not mere sentiment; it was, in a sense, a sacramentalization of evangelical Protestantism. The decline of evangelicalism’s old abstracts – confidence that the Word of scripture was timeless and universally applicable, that conversion

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80 Hutchison, Impulse, 98-99.
experiences were always and immediately replicable, that God’s grace was the transcendent
penetrating the present – meant that the Word for liberal evangelicals was increasingly made a
sacrament, the grace of God manifest in particulars tangible and present. As Henry van Dyke
argued in the late 1880s, “The strongest element of human consciousness is the sense of
personality. Whatever you know or think or feel, you know and think and feel as yourself . . .
God has a personal knowledge of each and care for every one of His children – we may conceive
of His relation to the world in the abstract, but in reality it is concrete and every individual has a
place in it.” 81 Old evangelical notions of a personal relationship with God are here, but van
Dyke reoriented them, emphasizing that divine encounter came through the particular experience
of the individual. No longer were humans simply channels for the Word, but could also be
refractors of it, making its meaning manifest and comprehensible in a way that newly fragile
language could not. 82

The ideas that Bushnell, Beecher, and Parkhurst proposed marked the emergence of
liberal evangelicalism, which particularly in Parkhurst was a way of pursing the goals of
evangelicalism in the face of the intellectual, cultural, social, and spatial challenges of New York
City. Protestant liberalism’s critics often skewered it for using immanence to water God down
into nothing; if God is everywhere in the world, so the argument went, than he might as well be
nowhere, the sacred indistinguishable from the secular. But Parkhurst’s sermon reveals a sense
that the divine was particularly revealed in vital relationships; that the Word, if it could no longer
be univocal, a monologue directly revealed from heaven to earth, could still be caught through
manifestations of the physical. The supernal capabilities of the Word – its ability to convert, to

81 Henry van Dyke, “The Personal Relation of God to the Soul,” Henry van Dyke Papers, Box 1, Folder 12,
82 On personality, see also Richard Wightman Fox, “The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism, 1875-1925,”
uplift, to edify and sanctify were still present; they were merely translated into the experience of interaction with the particular rather than expressed with the abstract. The Word could take any number of forms. This evangelical impulse, the confidence that spreading the faith could remake the world with divine power, remained central. The next two chapters explore Parkhurst’s two motifs; the struggle over the sacred space of the city in the 1880s, and, beginning in the 1890s, the fusion of that effort with the institutional church movement, an attempt to provide service to the poor in a way which would communicate to them the sacramental power of the Word.
Chapter 3  

The Word Made Stone: Churchbuilding in 1880s New York

In December 1888, as New York’s ministers grew increasingly anxious about the urban challenges they faced, and worried about where they might locate the power and will of God to confront them, Charles Parkhurst delivered a sermon to the congregation in his Madison Square Presbyterian Church on the Israelite conquest of Canaan. This was a difficult text. How should late nineteenth century Americans, civilized into particular sensibilities and distaste for the violence of the Old Testament, understand the aggressive violence of the books of Joshua and the Judges? Parkhurst shared the hesitancy: “In the local and transient features of the story,” he said, “we certainly have no instant concern.” But this was not to say he dismissed the claims of Scripture. “When the transient and the problematic have all been eliminated,” he told his congregation, “there still remains in the story an undissolved residuum of permanent principle.”

Parkhurst’s hermeneutic exemplified the emerging romantic way of reading scripture: It was not that the story should be read literally, as a crude commandment for modern readers, but nor was it simply allegory; it had some claim over its readers. Rather, on some deep level, Parkhurst was telling his audience that the historical events of the conquest of Israel exhibited something about the way reality worked; it was God showing the way he chose to interact with the world and with his faithful. That is, the story was typology, a sacred principle, illustrative of God’s sovereignty over history that worked over and over again in the unfolding of human events. This confidence in the divine power of scripture indicated that Parkhurst’s deep roots in evangelical tradition remained firm.

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What could the invasion of Canaan teach these middle-class New York Presbyterians?

Palestine might be the city, Parkhurst reasoned, or any dark and foreign land, for all of them were “made over to the Christian church for conquest and occupancy.” The challenge, however, was daunting. He reeled off statistics of the particular case at hand; ten thousand saloons against 555 Protestant churches; forty-seven thousand immigrants in the Tenth Ward against two Protestant congregations. For New York to become Christian, these ratios had to change. It seemed an intimidating task. Nevertheless, Parkhurst took the arc of Biblical narrative at its word: “I deny in the light of history,” he declared, “that there is anything extravagant in the ambition thoroughly to convert New York to the cross of Jesus Christ.”

The Israelites had succeeded against similar odds, as had the Christians of Rome; God’s purposes would not be thwarted. The motif was echoed elsewhere in the city; the Presbyterian Walter Buchanan, the conservative pastor of the Thirteen Street Presbyterian Church, rallied his congregation toward a merger with the uptown Fourth Avenue Presbyterian Church with a sermon based upon Deuteronomy 2:3, in which God informed the Israelites, “Ye have compassed this mountain long enough; turn ye northward.” The union, Buchanan assured his reluctant people, would allow the “erecting a suitable church edifice adapted to the needs of down-town work.” It would be a church “so strong that it can write over its doors and proclaim to all the people round about,

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Robert Alter, *The art of Biblical narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) 47-63. See also Robert Orsi, “Crossing the City Line,” in Orsi, ed., *Gods of the City: religion and the American urban landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1999) 5-6 on the various mental “constructions” of the city in the nineteenth century. On Parkhurst’s own theology, see his “Uzza’s Oxen and the Biblical Critics” (New York: The Church, 1904) and “Orthodoxy Versus Heresy, or the Indwelling Christ” (New York: S.B. Leverich, 1893). In both, Parkhurst lambasts both higher criticism for lacking a sense of devotional spirituality and conservatives who fail to accept Biblical scholarship for fearfully hiding behind belligerent ignorance; he thus somewhat abdicates the question, but serenely declares himself concerned less for the historical accuracy of scripture than for the ways the text illustrates God.

‘This is the Church of the living God, welcome rich and poor;’ that is, a church equipped to preach the gospel and conquer the city.⁴

Reading the city through the Old Testament’s fixation on land and territory provided New York’s evangelicals a way to grasp their increasingly precarious situation in the city: that is, they were at war. And the metaphor was not merely metaphor; it transformed how they understood the metaphysical ramifications of their own behavior. If the land of the city itself could be owned by righteousness or wickedness, then seemingly mundane behaviors like buying real estate or opening the church doors to let music out and sunlight in suddenly became ritualized acts, influencing how the city interacted with God. In churchbuilding, in organizing relationships between congregations, in developing revival strategies that took the population layout of the city into account, evangelicals sought to master the space they believed should belong ultimately to God.

By the 1880s, evangelicals’ fear that secular forces were dominating the city’s space became pressing. Churches registered concern as merchants purchased ever large tracts of land downtown and in midtown, converting what had been residential and public land into commercial property, but the development continued apace.⁵ But the changes were not merely functional, but symbolic; not only the ways the city worked, but the ways it understood itself, were changing. By the late nineteenth century, photographers like Alfred Steiglitz and Jacob Riis were celebrating the city’s monumental – and decidedly commercial – skyline and venturing into its poverty stricken slums, reimagining New York as not the evangelical city created in the Second Great Awakening and revival of 1858, but a city at once the beating heart of American

industry and a foreign land, unfamiliar to the once-dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestants who were steadily moving north.\textsuperscript{6}

In 1885, Major Frank Smith of the Salvation Army – a British denomination which understood the problem as well as any other Protestant organization – led an occupying army of Salvation workers across downtown New York in the first of many public attempts his denomination made to reclaim the space of the city that evangelicals feared they had lost.\textsuperscript{7} This was among the first indications of a shift in tactics of the city’s evangelicals: increasingly, they came to see themselves as a military force seeking to subdue New York. William Rainsford, who replaced the anxious Walter Williams (who in a panic at declining attendance and growing industry around his church had attempted to sell the edifice to the Catholics before resigning) at St. George’s Episcopal Church, wrote later that “I did not think that Doctor Williams understood New York . . . to give up the teeming neighborhood where the church stood and move uptown would be an unwarranted retreat in the face of the enemy.”\textsuperscript{8} For Rainsford, Parkhurst, and the rest this talk of engagement and retreats was quite literal; New York was contested ground. What Williams failed to understand about New York City was the extent to which the city’s physical and spiritual landscapes were one. The flight of Protestant congregations and the selling of their buildings to the Catholics was in a real sense a retreat of Christianity, a weakening of faith and a craven attempt to reverse the inexorable progress of God’s sacred history.


\textsuperscript{8} William S. Rainsford, \textit{The story of a varied life} (New York: Doubleday, 1922) 198.
These ministers’ conflation of the progress of Christianity with control of territory – be that territory in Hell’s Kitchen or in Africa – was typical of the confident, robust, American evangelicalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. At home in a nation on the ascendant, they found in the progress of American civilization ideals of self-determination, voluntarism, and Victorian respectability and the presumably attendant prosperity and peace that seemed, in the 1880s, to accompany these things. These were, evangelicals were convinced, the blessings of a favorable God; as one preacher put it, “the effect of Christianity.”

The growing imperial power of the United States (and, some evangelicals were eager to point out, the good Protestant states of Germany and the United Kingdom as well), then, was essentially the progress and spread of Christian principles. The march of the Protestant flag was expected to be, more or less, a peaceful one. Subduing paganism would proceed by virtue of sheer strength of culture, and force of arms was incidental. For many evangelicals, particularly those sympathetic to rising liberal theology that emphasized the immanence of God in human culture, the difference between the spread of Western civilization and the spread of Christianity was vanishingly small.

The streets of New York City, however, presented some complicating challenges. The simple compactness of the island of Manhattan muddled the contrast between the provinces of the saved and those of the unsaved; the mix was paradoxical, and to many evangelicals with great faith in the Christian nature of the United States, troubling. It raised questions about how to witness of Christianity in the bewildering tumult of city life. The progression of the faith was

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10 For instance, Josiah Strong, president of the Evangelical Alliance, in Our Country 2nd ed (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1890) 208-209.
not triumphantly unfolding in the Bowery; it was under stress, and showed signs of cracking. Indeed, there were multiple agendas at work in the city, because many Americans were becoming confident that the environment mattered. As the Episcopal bishop of New York, Henry Cadmon Potter, observed in 1900, “Modern investigation is demonstrating more and more clearly to how great an extent the faith as well as the history of every people is determined by their environment.”

Shopkeepers and retailers like John Wanamaker had begun to design department stores to shape the desire and habits of their consumers. Urban reformers embraced the philosophy of moral environmentalism, hoping to promote virtues among New York’s citizenry through the design of healthful landscapes: parks, public spaces, and the elimination of tenement houses, which they believed were morally as well as physically destructive. This concern with space after the Civil War eventually, inevitably extended to the churches, and the citizens of America’s cities increasingly identified the power of a faith in the city with the prominence of its architecture there.

Evangelicals faced a great deal of competition in the struggle to dominate New York’s landscapes. In 1879 the archbishop John McCloskey presided over the dedication of St. Patrick’s on 50th Street and 5th Avenue, a Catholic cathedral that immediately became the largest ecclesiastical edifice in New York City, the seat of a network of two hundred churches that served the forty percent of Manhattanites who professed Catholicism.

On the other end of the spectrum, in 1901 and 1903 the Christian Scientists of New York completed two monumental

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churches on Central Park West, buildings that were, as the *Christian Science Journal* put it, both a “blessing” and a rebuke” to the city.\(^{16}\) While the Catholics claimed a plurality of New York’s Christians, the Christian Scientists proved among the city’s most effective missionaries from the 1880s through World War I, and in New York City they sought to project an image of success through discipline and self-mastery, encouraging worshipers to dress well and attend church in style, expecting to be seen. The *Congregationalist* called the First Church on 96\(^{th}\) Street and Central Park West “the greatest thing of its kind in the metropolis – a vast pile of granite, marble, plate and stained glass,” while noting wryly that the church, perhaps appropriately, “suggested a heathen temple.”\(^{17}\) The Second Church erected down Central Park West at 68\(^{th}\) Street self-consciously echoed the austere neo-classical style of the early republic.

Christian Science trumpeted the values of self-reliance and individual effort, preaching salvation through the spiritual power unleashed through personal study, discipline, and commitment – virtues which the middle-class evangelicals since Moody had claimed for themselves.\(^{18}\) By the first decade of the twentieth century the evangelical churches perceived Christian Science as a threat both for control of the city and for individual souls. As early as the 1890s the Brick Presbyterian session noted that they had lost members to Christian Science, and by the early twentieth century the faiths were at war. In 1907, the pastor William Richards refused to grant one of his members the usual courtesy of a letter of dismissal when she joined the Scientists.\(^{19}\) Similarly, the First Presbyterian Church’s rolls noted tersely that John Gilbert’s

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\(^{17}\) “In and Around New York,” *Congregationalist* (September 12, 1903) 365.


\(^{19}\) January 2, 1897, February 5, 1899 and October 30, 1907, Session Minutes of the Brick Presbyterian Church, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.
name was “erased from the rolls” when he became a Christian Scientist in 1904. In 1924, John Kelman, minister of the normally cosmopolitan Fifth Avenue Presbyterian church said disapprovingly that “Christian Science teachings” took to “extremes” the “habit of idealizing yourself and thinking more highly of yourself than you ought to think.” Isaac Haldeman, pastor of the First Baptist Church, blasted the Christian Scientists in a 1909 volume, stating that a “warning is necessary. The average Christian is ignorant concerning [Christian Science].” But at the turn of the century, the pastor H. D. Jenkins had warned that the threat was the natural result of the evangelical surrender of the city; while the city’s evangelical churches continually sought greener pastures elsewhere, the people left behind whom Jenkins himself sought to preach to told him, “We see [Christian Science’s] beautiful edifices and hear its marvelous claims.”

And beyond the twin threats of Christian Science and Catholicism rested the unchurched. As Parkhurst complained, “To live in the midst of ten hundred thousand souls, that have not succumbed to the power of the crucified and risen Christ, and to live in their contact and vicinage willingly and acquiescently, is to confess that we do not ourselves know Christ in his subduing power.” The city was fundamentally disordered, divided, fragmented. Its constant, unceasing reformulation and reordering of space, its entirely built landscape, the distinctions and divisions both intentional and not that the urban environment created made anonymity easy, and lent the city a transient and fleeting atmosphere that conflicted with the attempts of evangelicals to create settled, familial congregations, and with their confidence in the lingering persistence of divine

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20 December 28, 1904, Session Minutes of the First Presbyterian Church, New York, Presbyterian Historical Society.
conversion. But that the streets of New York were not hospitable to a shrinking faith meant that the evangelistic imperative only grew stronger, and the rhetoric of conflict sharper. And evangelicals began to find ways to translate the metaphor into tactics, and thence to strategy. Proclaiming that New York had to be conquered for God meant that evangelical religion had to find ways to express itself in terms of space, had to impart sacred meaning to previously mundane activities and places, and, ultimately, come to think about what it meant to be evangelical in new ways.

Evangelical reconceptualization of the city’s sacred landscape took two forms. By the 1880s, evangelicals began to redesign the architecture of their own churches to better express their understanding of what the influence of space on evangelical piety could be. Church buildings were not only sanctuaries, but signs, declaring that the Christian tradition was flourishing. But evangelicals also increasingly hoped to remap the city as a whole, overcoming the challenges of secular space, of Catholicism and other such threats to gain primacy in the city’s cultural space and patterns of interaction and relationships. The success of the faith was not measured merely in individuals but also in territory; the churches, then, functioned together, remapping the larger geography of the city according to religious meaning, changing the focal points of New York’s human landscapes. As Parkhurst thundered, “Every church that picks itself up bodily and runs away from the populations that swarm in the lower parts of the town

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makes Christianity a smaller and cheaper thing.”  

These goals gave them opportunities to reconceive what evangelical piety was, to reconsider how best to bring the Word of God into contact with New Yorkers, and to encourage them to embrace conversion. This encouraged, in many cases, innovation. Metaphors like Parkhurst’s intertwined with the new demographics and culture of urban life, and inspired many evangelical ministers to broaden the channels through which the Word could come. And though the growing variety of approaches signaled the fracturing of the evangelical consensus that had come to dominate the city only a few decades before, it also was a sign that the evangelical movement remained vigorous and uncowed before the challenge the city leveled.

In nineteenth century New York, the church edifice was not, as it had been in colonial New England, merely utilitarian, a simple place of meeting within an already sacralized landscape. Rather evangelicals in the city were becoming increasingly aware that the church house could be evangelical tool with power of its own that lent a materialistic aspect to the tradition’s soteriology. They were a fixed and visible grace that sought to redeem the city as a whole, and a tangible symbol that transcended the changing landscapes around them, linking the city not only to God, but also to the ongoing progress of Christianity in history. In the early 1880s, most evangelicals still emphasized the fundamentally individual nature of salvation. Thus buildings were also intended to witness to those who entered, to exert spiritual power over human beings that aided in winning souls for conversion. The evangelicals seeking to conquer the city felt this imperative especially keenly. Nineteenth century evangelical spirituality consistently emphasized becoming, the power of the Holy Spirit to bring sinners into contact

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27 Parkhurst, “Not Church Extension at All.” *The Congregationalist* (November 3, 1892) 488.

with God; its most basic spiritual experience was change. Thus evangelicals in the late nineteenth century paid close attention to the ways in which the built environment served to facilitate the transformation of souls. William Rainsford complained that St. George’s, when he arrived “while impressive outside . . . was sadly ugly and depressing inside.” Most importantly, the design “made the voice of the preacher rattle from side to side like peas in a shaken bladder.” This was not merely an aesthetic impediment; Rainsford contrasted the “empty ugliness” of his new church house to “the warm hearted crowd” of his previous sanctuary. The very walls and floor of St. George’s hampered the Spirit of God from working within; most particularly, it slowed the verbal worship that evangelicals counted so essential to conversion, and therefore lacked the spiritual community that Rainsford had valued in St. James’s. While they expected that their churches would offer cultural and social betterment to the city’s population, they also believed that it first and foremost was a place that would save souls. “The Church,” Henry van Dyke said, “ought never be a soup kitchen.”

The remaking of church buildings reflected both a common understanding of the challenge of the city and a need to revive the power of the sacred spaces that earlier evangelicals had created, but also the beginnings of divergent patterns of evangelical spirituality that reflected not only theological evolution, but the varying practices of piety that derived from and influenced that change. Comparing van Dyke’s renovation of the Brick Church, completed in 1883, with the reconstruction of the Calvary Baptist Church the same year illustrates the common goal both hewed to: the conversion of New York City, through the cultivation of

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spiritual experience with sacred space and the rituals it allowed. But the two projects also
provided pietistic templates that prefigured the differences of theology and practice that would
eventually rend evangelicalism apart. They illustrate the complex balance between practice,
theology, denominational heritage, and social context that shaped late nineteenth century
evangelicalism in New York.

When van Dyke came to Brick, his first priority was remodel the old church’s interior in
order to make the sanctuary an evangelical space. The building Gardiner Spring had constructed
was classical in style, of the same architectural school that had particular appeal in colonial
America and the young republic, and produced many government buildings in the eighteenth and
early nineteenth century. The style indicated to Americans that the building was a public space,
invoking the rectitude and austere morality of republican ideology. But Spring’s edifice was also
intended to resemble the original church of John Rodgers on Beekman Street, mimicking the
plain design and decoration the stern Scotsman had embraced. This sense of heritage and
respect for the past was characteristic of Presbyterianism, a denomination which stressed the
authority and inheritance of tradition. The walls and ceiling in Spring’s church were simple off-
white plaster, barely decorated, with marble floors and open pews (rather than pew boxes), also
white with mahogany trimming. The organ sat in a loft behind the pulpit, inside an apse framed
with simple marble columns. Over the central door were three empty niches, intended for busts
that did not actually appear for decades.  

But American mores shifted, as did evangelical expectation, and soon after it was
constructed, the church was blasted for its failure to visually proclaim Christianity. By 1883, the
word used more often than any other to describe the building was the faint praise of “dignified.”

32 Knapp, A history of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 284-288. See also Frank Janeway, “The Interior Decoration
of the Brick Church,” in Anniversary Number of the Brick Record (New York City: The Church, 1928) 25, and “The
Interior of the Brick Church,” The Record 1:2 (February 1913) 11-14.
The assistant pastor, Shepherd Knapp, admitted it “could not be called beautiful.” One critic was particularly blunt, illustrating the transformations in the things religious Americans expected from their architecture. “Why is it modeled after a Roman temple, if it be a Presbyterian church?” this writer complained, and then got to the heart of the matter: the Brick Church was “to be looked on from a distance, not entered; therefore the nakedness within, and the boldness and simplicity without.” The Brick Church seemed designed to be admired, not to invite. And in this he was not far wrong; the assessment accurately reflected the aesthetic American Reformed Protestants had inherited from British Separatists and given voice by Jonathan Edwards. The architecture of Reformed buildings emphasized simple symmetry, function, and the harmony of order that Edwards taught could reflect the beauty of God in the creation. This earthly beauty could be perceived affectively, but was distinct from that divine beauty that Edwards taught was experienced not through worldly things, but only through the “spiritual sense” awakened through an encounter with the Holy Spirit. Reformed Protestants in America enacted Edwards’s notions of the structure and balance of worldly beauty, and favored plain, unobtrusive meetinghouses that would signal awareness of God’s virtues, and not draw attention away from the true spiritual beauty of the divine.

But by the post Civil War era, the severe aesthetic of early American churches no longer seemed appealing, and, more importantly, effective. The rising tide of criticism emerged in part from a transformation in American tastes; in an increasingly wealthy New York City austerity and rigor, once signs of a disciplined spirituality, did not hold the appeal they once had, steadily

33 Knapp, A history of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 380; see also Janeway, “The Interior Decoration,” 25.
34 Cited in Kilde, When church became theatre, 72.
losing ground to a new aesthetic that associated fine material things with gentility and sophistication. However, just as importantly, and concurrent with cultural transformation, evangelicalism in Britain and America encountered the romantic movement. For many of the same reasons that romanticism appealed to evangelicals struggling to reconceive the verbal Word, van Dyke found it irresistible as he redesigned his church. Romanticism brought with it new notions of beauty’s relation to God. Like Edwards, van Dyke believed that a particular type of beauty might serve as a mediator between the believer and God; the minister said he wished to “make the church more attractive in the best sense.” But unlike Edwards’s divine beauty, framed in order and perceptible only through the spiritual senses granted by the Spirit, romantics believed the beauty already existing in God’s creation could facilitate an encounter with the divine, and that the human senses and the imagination were capable of perceiving the holiness of the world.

In part because of this association of God with the natural world, when romantics thought about beauty it was not in Edwards’s terms of harmony and balance, the balance that the Puritans had sought. Instead, they associated God with the sublime, an inexpressible awe before beauty that transcended language and was experienced not through mental apperception, but through the mysterious dynamics of feeling and emotion. Romanticism gloried in the imaginative potential of human beings and emphasized their aesthetic sensibility. Its followers looked to a

particular dramatic and nostalgic interpretation of history to find moving examples of human potential. As William Wordsworth wrote on a hill overlooking the inspiring ruins of the medieval Tintern Abbey:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.\textsuperscript{40}

It was the effusive and luxuriant convolutions of nature that appealed to romantic evangelicals; the uncivilized and unordered natural world that hinted at the wonders of the divine and spoke to the emotional experience that they associated with the conversion experience. And, critically, romanticism transformed the way evangelicals thought about the processes of piety, the way they described the conversion experience. The Word traditionally understood was associated with the precision of language, the accuracy of propositional statements about God and humanity. But the divine that romanticism described hewed away from precision. Shortly after he mourned that New York City was a desert, Van Dyke prescribed a typically romantic solution to his congregation, preaching that they should think of God as a “great wide sea” as described in Psalms 36:6. The ocean, he said, was “the emblem of mystery, full of miracles and secrets . . . . Why should we expect that the dealings of the Perfect One shall be comprehensible to beings who are confessedly imperfect?”\textsuperscript{41} The saving knowledge of God was by its nature

\textsuperscript{41} Henry van Dyke, “The Eternal Sea,” preached October 4, 1885, box 1, folder 12, Henry van Dyke Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
mysterious, apprehended not through proposition but through an emotional encounter with the numinous.

W. G. T. Shedd, a professor at New York City’s Union Theological Seminary and a parishioner at the Brick Church, translated these romantic notions of beauty into evangelical theology, and in so doing indicated the ways it altered how evangelicals understood the Word, and more, how human beings could access it. “True Art, fine Art,” he said, “has Nature in it [and] hence it is that we are impressed with the great productions of Fine Art in the same way that we are by the works of Nature.” The creation or association with this sort of beauty created a “mystic union” between humanity and the “eternal Spirit” of God Shedd taught was imminently present in the world; it was one way human beings could gain communion with the divine.42

So, when Henry van Dyke turned his attention to the revitalization of the Brick Church, he began with the conviction that an overhaul of the building’s aesthetic was necessary. He was convinced that the language and imagery of romantic religion was capable of re-spiritualizing the structure, and would inform it with the sort of sacramental power that austerity no longer exerted. As he said, the renovations were designed to “create in the Brick Church such conditions that the Christian message would there be commended to the hearer by every help that art and learning could properly provide.”43 But at the same time, he knew that the Brick Church’s message did not exist in a vacuum; the unredeemed city was as great a challenge as the unredeemed individual. The church, then, must stand firm “in the centre of the city, as a tower of

42 W.G.T. Shedd, Discourses and Essays (Andover: W.F. Draper, 1856) 90-1, 51. Shedd’s discussion of beauty echoes Edwards on many points; he describes, for instance on 78-79 “the crown and completion of all Beauty” as “the ideas of the True and the Good” in God’s holiness, emphasizing the “severity” of that aesthetic. But he also criticizes the Puritans for “dreading” art and praises the “mystic union” between nature and the human soul that transcendent beauty embodies. On Shedd’s romanticism, see also William Censor, God and the Natural World: religion and science in antebellum America (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) 89-92. On the New Theology, see Hutchison, Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism, 76-80.
43 Knapp, A history of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 379.
strength, a landmark – nay, better than that, a lighthouse, a source of saving illumination.”

Van Dyke hired John la Farge, a noted romantic painter particularly acclaimed for his use of color, to direct the redecoration. La Farge proposed to redecorate the building after the medieval Byzantine style, and van Dyke agreed. Most dramatically, la Farge repainted the interior walls, transforming the plain colorless plaster into a “dark Pompeian red” that echoed the new upholstery, installing stained glass, and layering the ceiling in a “weathered gold.” He also lavishly decorated the apse, mingling sacred symbols with naturalistic ornamentation. A large cross of majolica, planted in a stylized bed of vines and grapes and flanked by the chi rho, the stylized first two letters of the name of Christ in Greek anchored the space. The borders of the ceiling were lined with Maltese crosses and Latin and Greek letters referencing Christ, including IHS, which assistant pastor Frank Janeway, following (incorrect) tradition stated meant “Iesu Hominum Salvator – Jesus, Saviour of Man.” Above the organ stood a candelabrum and below it was a shrine depicting the “book of the law.”

Janeway extolled la Farge’s decoration, asking “What congregation should sing with more appropriateness, ‘When I survey the wondrous cross,’ than we who ever look upon it as we

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45 Henry van Dyke, “The Joy of the Christian when he is invited to enter the Lord’s house,” (New York: The Brick Presbyterian Church, 1883) 4
46 On La Farge’s romantic sensibility, see Royal Cortissoz, John la Farge: a memoir and study (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911) 13-16 and John la Farge, Considerations on Painting (New York: MacMillan, 1895) 136-139.
48 Janeway, “The Interior Decoration of the Brick Church,” 29; for la Farge’s designs, see also Knapp, A history of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 287-88 and “The Interior of the Brick Church,” 11-14.
worship, not as a gilded or gory crucifix of imitative realism, but in the ideal beauty of Christian symbolism.” Janeway’s satisfied praise links a traditional reviverist hymn with the sort of elaborate decoration that many earlier evangelicals would have been uncomfortable with. The assistant pastor, however, saw the two in mutual reinforcement, cultivating the sort of spirituality van Dyke prized. Janeway, true to van Dyke’s romantic sensibility, particularly appreciated la Farge’s use of natural imagery to depict the encounter of the human soul with Christ. He turned up his nose at “imitative realism,” instead noting that at the foot of the cross of Majolica rested a communion cup out of which “springs the vine bearing rich clusters of grapes [with] white birds plucking the fruit [which] symbolizes . . . the individual soul in particular, feeding on the fruits and the life of the Saviour.” Surrounding the birds were two lions, representing the strength of Christ, and a dove, indicating, as always, the Holy Spirit. Janeway praised the power of la Farge’s choices in color, and stated that the overall decoration “combined the strength and beauty which the Psalmist declared.” Ultimately, van Dyke judged, the renovations would “light the fire in the hearth” of the individual soul.

Van Dyke was particularly pleased that la Farge represented both the Old and New Testaments in his design, echoing the respect that the overall Byzantine style paid to the full sweep of salvation history, emphasizing the depth of the Christian past and rooting the Brick Church firmly therein. As Wordsworth’s inspiration at the foot of Tintern Abbey witnessed, romantics found the past rich, mysterious, and powerful; van Dyke and his congregation, members of a denomination which historically placed great value upon the traditions of the church, found this particularly congenial. Indeed, many Protestant congregations in the later nineteenth century were turning to medieval design with the hopes of recapturing a sense of

50 Knapp, A history of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 284.
Christian heritage and unity – an imperative that van Dyke, who had great respect for Presbyterian tradition, felt particularly keenly.\footnote{Kilde, When Church Became Theatre, 72-76.} A few years later, for instance, a member of the Old First Presbyterian Church celebrated their own edifice in such terms: “The architecture of the church is not only worshipful in its suggestions but possesses an eloquent significance. The tower is a copy of the Magdalen Tower at Oxford and the body of the building is a replica of the Church of St Savior at Bath. The Old First therefore is a Gospel in Stone, uplifting a signal to the sinful, which beckons them to a holy savior who is waiting to redeem them. The church building is the message of the pulpit made visible.”\footnote{Bell Notes of the “Old First” Presbyterian Church (December 1899) 7.} For both these congregations, the invocation of Christian history deepened the power of their buildings, transcending the chaos of the city by placing them in the tradition of Christian buildings rather than New York, or urban, or city buildings.

This particular version of evangelical spirituality, finding in romanticism’s natural and historical aesthetic the emotive experience of encountering Christ, was particularly adapted to the trials of an urban and Presbyterian church like Brick. Only months earlier, van Dyke had referred to New York City as a spiritual desert. Now, he drew on a rich Christian tradition to present the church as a sanctuary, an oasis within whose walls the weary could find nourishment for their souls.\footnote{Richard Kieckhefer, Theology in Stone, 100-101. In Psalm 132:13-14, sung in several Protestant denominations, God speaks of the Tabernacle as his “place of rest;” see for instance The Book of Common Prayer (New York: Appletan, 1869) 266.} Shepherd Knapp, a protégé of van Dyke and later an assistant pastor to the congregation, claimed that the ‘richness of sombre colors” made it that “a spirit of reverence and worship . . . must be felt by all who entered its doors.”\footnote{Knapp, A history of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 383.} Brick’s romantic sensibilities gave these pastors a symbolic language to share that sentiment with their congregation: the lush
decoration of the building, with its striking and deep colors and organic motifs, presented a rich and soothing spirituality in stark contrast to the wasteland van Dyke saw outside its doors.

When the building reopened, on October 28, 1883, van Dyke took the pulpit to preach on Psalm 82:1: “I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go to the house of the Lord.” The psalm, he said, was sung “in the rocky defiles of the Holy Land as the glad companies of pilgrims wound upward through the lonely mountains toward Jerusalem.”55 It was the song of a wandering soul finally escaping the wilderness and finding rest in God; the revitalized Brick Church, likewise, was newly positioned to provide sanctuary from an endlessly wearying city.

But he also chose the verse because John Rodgers had preached on it ninety-nine years before when the first Brick chapel was reopened after the damages the Revolutionary War had inflicted upon it were repaired. Van Dyke emphasized that the words of the psalm connected his Brick to Rodgers, and through him to the entire Presbyterian heritage, exhibiting the respect for the organization and tradition of their denomination characteristic of Presbyterianism. But he then went a step further, arguing that their own tradition linked the congregation to the spiritual vitality of innumerable Christian gatherings past: “the Christian Church has made [the words of the psalm] her own, and wherever she has spread her conquests, these words have been her song of encouragement, her paean of victory.” This connection to the sacred history of the faith made the church building a sanctified island whose deep anchor allowed it to hold fast against the turbulent waters of the city. “In this crowded city I have rejoiced at the sight of a church,” he said, “because it has told me of men that love God and a God that loves men, even amidst the world’s heaviest throng.” A church was rooted not only in its own spirituality, but in its

55 Henry van Dyke, “The Joy of the Christian when he is invited to enter the Lord’s house,” 4.
connection to the sacred past that reminded worshipers that while “all that is outward is transitory . . . the love of the sanctuary abides.”

Because it transcended the transient and material world of New York City in its art and its history, Van Dyke credited a well-decorated churchhouse with a power unique on the city’s landscape, and argued that it was designed not merely to house a congregation, but to transform the city as a whole: “The building or adornment of a church is not like the building or adornment of a dwelling house. It is not a work of private ostentation, but a work of public beneficence; not a work of selfishness, but a work of charity, just as truly as the building of a hospital.” The invitation of the Scripture, therefore, should make the congregation “desire to make others partakers of the blessings which you enjoy; it means that you should be zealous for the glory of God’s house, and willing to speak freely and affectionately on the subject of religion.” The renovation of the Brick Church was far more than an effort in taste or class aspiration; rather, it signaled the emergence of a new means of evangelism uniquely tailored to the spatial challenges of the city. As van Dyke said, “it is a great mistake to suppose that men and women want from the city church what they can get and do anywhere else in the city . . . They want something very different, and that something is religion.” The Brick Church met the chaos of the city streets with the deep power of divine beauty; the maddening fluidity of urban life with the firm foundation of sacred history. For the Brick congregation, to be saved was to partake in the stable and resonant culture of the church community. Nearly thirty years after the new building was dedicated, Knapp, by then an assistant pastor and historian to the church, gave the keynote address at the congregation’s hundredth anniversary, where he claimed that the Brick Church

56 On the historic sensibility of Gothic churches, see Kilde, When Church Became Theatre, 72-76. Kilde maintains that medieval architectural styles gave congregations a sense of Christian unity. Henry van Dyke, “The Joy of the Christian when he is invited to enter the Lord’s house,” 5, 12, 9
57 Henry van Dyke, “The Joy of the Christian when he is invited to enter the Lord’s house,” 10, 13.
58 Henry van Dyke, “The Church in the City,” in Essays in Application, 173.
“takes a place among the Patriarchs . . . a Noah or Abraham;” its venerable age rooting “us, who claim to be the Church’s children and grandchildren” not only in American history and New York history, but the divine history of Scripture as well.  

Though in many ways it was distinctively Presbyterian, Van Dyke’s particular spirituality exhibited the combination between romanticism and evangelical experience that in the same decade exerted influence upon the work of more formal thinkers like Theodore Munger and other New Theologians. But as an evangelical pastor facing the trials of the city, van Dyke was less interested in detailed theology than he was in facilitating spiritual experience. His experience at Brick was an exercise of practical theology, a combination of Presbyterianism, evangelicalism, and romanticism applied to his congregation and was thus as much a model for other pastors struggling with similar conundrums as it was an intellectual experiment. Van Dyke’s particular iteration of evangelical spirituality proved increasingly influential in New York, but it was not the only model. The experience of Robert MacArthur, pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church, offered another path, one which would soon find itself in conflict with van Dyke.

In the summer of 1883, Robert MacArthur’s congregation at Calvary Baptist Church on 23rd Street was completing construction on a new edifice. The congregation was relatively young, dating its independence to 1846, and its move to its home on 23rd to only ten years after that. But like many other churches, the Calvary congregation was increasingly uncomfortable downtown; the neighborhood around their original building on 23rd Street was rapidly changing. While the respectable Fifth Avenue Hotel had once anchored the neighborhood, by the 1880s a number of cheaper competitors had appeared, and cheap hotels attracted saloons, casinos, dance halls, and brothels. 23rd Street was becoming the southern edge of the infamous Tenderloin.

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59 Hundredth Anniversary of the Brick Presbyterian Church (New York: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1909) 9-10.
entertainment district, and Calvary’s congregation, increasingly based uptown, disliked having to travel so far to such a neighborhood to church. Calvary’s population was booming, with an active membership attracted by MacArthur’s charismatic and relatively conservative leadership. The church had grown steadily since MacArthur had taken its pulpit in 1870; its 1883 size of nearly a thousand quadrupled the number attending thirteen years earlier. His congregation credited the expansion to the “genuinely evangelistic note in his preaching,” noting in a communally written tribute that “Dr. MacArthur has proved that great congregations can be gathered and held in New York by preaching the gospel of pastoral care.” Given both its increasing numbers and its geographic location, the congregation soon desired a new home.

The size of his congregation did not mean that Calvary Baptist could rest on its laurels. Indeed, MacArthur’s sympathies, like many other of New York’s evangelicals, lay with Parkhurst’s militant stance; echoing van Dyke he proclaimed that “God has given us a great field in this city,” and like Parkhurst he worried that “foreign mission work has become to a great degree home mission work,” for “to-day forty languages or dialects are spoken in our streets.” But this presented less a challenge than an opportunity, for MacArthur believed simply that “The Gospel means to conquer the world. It will do it.” And like other ministers, he understood the

62 “The Fortieth Anniversary of Rev. Robert Stuart MacArthur as Pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church” (New York: Library Aid Bureau, 1910) 7-8 celebrates MacArthur’s tenure, as does George Hansell, *Reminiscences of Baptist Churches and Baptist Leaders in New York City* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Society, 1899) 44-45. MacArthur’s traditional theology can be seen, among other places, in his *Biblical Difficulties and their Alleviative Interpretations* (New York: Treat, 1899), which confronts Biblical higher criticism with the assurance that God is the “divine Author” of the Bible, and takes as its thesis with reference to the Bible that “We may be absolutely certain that there was a significance in the words employed by God.” 2, 27. MacArthur’s concern for the precision of words sets him apart from romantics, who tended to understand language in poetic and metaphorical ways. See William Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, 40-44.
new building less in terms of the practicalities of organizing a congregation than for the ways it did or did not serve the evangelical imperative in the city.

Because of its pastor’s declared sympathies, Calvary congregation’s willingness to move uptown caused some raised eyebrows; the transplantation seemed a sign of retreat rather than bold proclamation. Even at the dedication of the cornerstone, another Baptist minister remarked that he judged the decision to move “from such an excellent location” for the sort of evangelical work the city needed an “experiment,” but ultimately “trusted . . . that the God of Abraham had moved the church to pitch her tent there.” But as far as MacArthur was concerned, the move should not be seen as a flight, but an opportunity to create a new building that better embodied his evangelical impulse. Calvary’s new location, on 57th Street and Sixth Avenue, was just south of Central Park, and far uptown as to be considered suburban; the tracts of land across the street that Carnegie Hall would be built on in a handful of years still stood vacant, surrounded by scattered shops, saloons, and a blacksmith shop, but within striking distance of the increasingly fashionable neighborhoods on Fifth Avenue and around the Park. MacArthur surveyed the empty neighborhood and told his congregation, “we are permitted to take possession of this new field for Christ.”

Despite his evangelical metaphors, MacArthur was a staunchly traditionalist Baptist, and his denominational sympathies lent themselves to the sort of piety he imagined his building encompassing. “I am to be faithful to the principles of the Baptist denomination,” he told his audience,” I accept these principles because I believe they are taught in Scripture.” He had

little patience with the artistic bent of romantic theology and mistrusted the close association that other evangelicals like van Dyke drew between art and the cultivation of faith, rejecting the immanence of God in human culture that van Dyke embraced. Rather, he emphasized the plain word of the Bible as the key to encountering God. And he expected his building to embody this plainness. As he told his congregation, “I would rather preach in an open field or a barn with God, then in the most majestic cathedral without his presence.” The Baptist Harwood Patterson, a friend of MacArthur’s who worked with him as co-editors of the Baptist Quarterly Review targeted the “widespread disposition to admire the beautiful,” especially “color in wall and window” and the “adornments” of columns and art. “We become aesthetic overmuch,” he said, maintaining that “religion . . . in many cases is harmed by representation.”

The way to gain God’s presence in worship, MacArthur believed, was not to decorate the church, but rather to emphasize what he, and others, called “the old gospel,” and secondly, to stress the verbal proclamation of it: “The cross is still the mightiest magnet to move men and draw them to God,” he said, “We have no new gospel to preach; no other way of salvation to propose.”

This reliance on preaching and scripture trusted in words because that was the means through which God communicated to man; it was thus confrontational, emphasizing the encounter between the Word and the sinner.

Thus the new Calvary presented the city not with a beautiful sanctuary to transplant the viewer, but with a challenge. The building MacArthur erected stood on 57th Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, and opened in midsummer, on July 8, 1883. Like many other edifices built in the late nineteenth century, it was designed in Gothic revival, with auditorium

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seating to accommodate a large congregation. While many proponents of the Gothic style believed that it promoted the cause of Christian unity through hearkening to the common past of the medieval age of faith, MacArthur invoked rather its spiritual possibilities; not the unity of the Christian tradition, but rather its potential to proclaim, to confront the city with a building that was utterly different from the urban life around it, the same way the Gospel was utterly different from human sin. Ralph Adams Cram, an architect and the great proponent of the Gothic in the United States, maintained that the style first “was wrought in the fashion of heavenly things, a visible type of heaven itself.” This gestured toward the style’s second quality, as Cram described it; a Gothic church in contemporary America was “a place apart, where may be solemnized the sublime mysteries of the Catholic faith.”

MacArthur downplayed the decoration of the church exterior in favor of emphasizing its distinctiveness, describing it as “solid and massive . . . it stands out on the line of the street in bold prominence,” particularly the church’s steeple, which rose two hundred and twenty-nine feet above street level. The façade was “at once attractive, beautiful, and instructive.” Overall, the church “constitutes an ingenious and artistic adaptation of a much admired style of old time architecture to the requirements of the modern form of church life.” MacArthur’s pride in his church was the clarity of its presence in a contemporary urban landscape. He touted the

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70 Kilde, *When Church became Theatre*, 167-170. This style was popular across the evangelical spectrum in the late nineteenth century.


72 Robert MacArthur, *History of Calvary Baptist Church*, 46-47. For further description, see “The Calvary Baptist Church: an edifice that has cost half a million dollars,” *New York Times* (December 24, 1883) 8. The fortress-like solidity MacArthur lauds is reminiscent of the late nineteenth century “spiritual armories” Kilde describes, though Calvary’s Gothic facade was archaic; most other “armories” were Romanesque. *When church became theatre*, 108-111.
formidability of its presence on 57th Street, and the odd word “instructive” give a hint to his motivations.

The first sermon MacArthur preached in his new church explained his vision for the church building. It was titled “Voiceful Stones,” based upon the Biblical story of Joshua erecting stones at the site of Israel’s crossing into the Holy Land. The stones, the preacher declared, “were not simply to be memorial; they were to be declaratory.” Echoing Parkhurst, he likened Joshua’s proclamation of the arrival of God in an unredeemed land to his own church’s construction project. And further, indicating his evangelical piety, he declared that God’s presence announced itself through the Word. The new building they met in, he told his congregation, preached. Its stones “declare our faith in and our duty toward the aggressive, the missionary side of Christ’s gospel.” The very existence of the edifice proclaimed the evangelical Word. But it also facilitated it; its sacred space made it possible for the congregation to exist and invited others to join. As MacArthur said, “these stones declare our faith in our distinctive organic order as a body of Christians.”73 Building the church not only gave Christ another foothold in the city; it also made it possible for Christians to exist there, elevating and justifying the congregation as an urban phenomenon.

But though its Gothic formidability made the new Calvary Baptist distinctive and prominent, the interior hewed to a more severe aesthetic. The spiritual encounter MacArthur preached echoed closely the heritage of the classical Reformation; it was cognitive, triggered with words and reminiscent of the traditional language of Scripture. MacArthur used the word “auditory” to describe the auditorium, in contrast to van Dyke’s term “sanctuary.” The difference was telling; for MacArthur, to worship was to hear the abstract Word; to encounter the invisible God through his proclamation, rather than the imminent God van Dyke believed could

be glimpsed in material beauty. The interior of Calvary existed to direct the attention of the congregation in that way, both functionally and symbolically.\(^74\)

It was furnished in cherry wood, and lit with the light of a magnificent stained glass rose window, with seven smaller stained glass windows illustrating “some of the principal events of the life of Jesus.” Unlike the abstractions of Brick, Calvary’s illustrations told stories, redirecting again and again the audience to the Biblical narrative. Three seals hung above the baptistry, which, MacArthur said in satisfaction, “sets forth the definite doctrine of the Trinity,” representing it in Cross, Crown and Dove as well as, more precisely, in three interlocking circles linked with words: the Latin “est” and “non est” – The Father “is” God, but “is not” the Son, who also “is” God.\(^75\) The Calvary auditory was decorated with symbols indicating Christ, such as the chi rho and the IHS – though MacArthur devoted a page and a half of a twelve page description of the auditory in his *History of Calvary Baptist* to debunking the traditional interpretation of the term which Janeway had embraced, and demonstrating it was actually an abbreviation of the name “Jesus.” The aside was more significant than it might seem; in tandem with the Trinitarian seals, MacArthur’s reading of the new Calvary proclaimed the paradox of a transcendent God encountered through the reliability of the language of his Word.

In both “Voiceful Stones” and his history of Calvary, MacArthur stressed a point made more urgent in punctuation: “This is a *sincere* building!” For him, this meant that the building was truthful in its presentation of itself; it eschewed garish adornment, had no “false pillars, arches, and recesses;” there was no “imitation in any part of the building; no paint, no staining, no imitation.” Despite the church’s Gothic style, to MacArthur’s eye its plainness was its most


\(^75\) MacArthur, *History of Calvary Baptist Church*, 51-2, 58.
essential aspect. “Contradiction between being and seeming is bad always and everywhere,” he said, and he pled with his congregation to respect the truth embodied in the building: “Let us not belie their testimony,” he said. True to his word, the walls, pews, and pulpit of his church lacked paint; they were the plain gray and brown noncolors of their material. Calvary lacked gilding, favoring instead the sober decoration that emerged from its style. The church spire and steeple, for instance, “point heavenward . . . declare in their eloquent silence that there is as life beyond this.”

This interpretation was clear and basic, and more, it inspired MacArthur through the truths it declared, the proclamation of doctrine it made to an unbelieving city. The religious experience for MacArthur was the experience of encountering truth in stark assertion.

The most distinctive adornment in Calvary drove this point home. In large letters above the front entryway, MacArthur emblazoned the words “We Preach Christ Crucified” – a paraphrase of a passage in St Paul’s second epistle to the Corinthians that MacArthur repeatedly dubbed the motto of his church. The words stood facing 57th Street, proclaiming the gospel – indeed, the very word of God - to the city that needed it. For, as MacArthur said, “the Gospel is the harmonizer of all the conflicting interested in human society. It alone can elevate the masses . . . away with the sentimental but Christless philanthropist!”

This did not mean the Calvary Baptists did not believe in church programs or social outreach; it did mean, however that, according to MacArthur, “We believe in aggressive work . . . an anti-mission Church is an anti Christian church.” Preaching conversion and saving souls was the paramount emphasis of Calvary outreach. For MacArthur and his flock, the Gospel meant the saving death of Jesus

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76 Macarthur, History of Calvary Baptist Church, 61; “Voiceful Stones,” 270 places “sincere” in quotations; it’s likely MacArthur used material from the sermon in the History. The second quotation describing the building comes from the History, the rest from the sermon. For an elaboration of this “edifying” in contrast to the Catholic “sanctifying,” aesthetic see Kieckhefer, Theology in Stone, 119-122.

77 MacArthur, “Voiceful Stones,” The Calvary Pulpit, 274, 278. He refers to the phrase as the church’s motto repeatedly in the collection – see pp 221, 230, 248.
Christ on the Cross; salvation meant accepting the fact of Christ as one’s savior. Thus, the inscribed words on 57th Street presented the city in turmoil with a particular solution for its ills – the solution of the converting Word.

In sermons, MacArthur on occasion referred his congregation to other words that appeared on the walls inside the building. In the wall behind the pulpit, for instance, there were embedded stained glass windows representing the life of Christ, and above the galleries windows illustrating Moses holding the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments. All these windows were conspicuously labeled; particular commandments were clearly legible and the acts of Jesus inscribed with the passages from the Gospel that they represented. It was to these windows that MacArthur gestured when he told his congregation that “God has, in many ways both in the Old and New Testaments, commanded us in the words on the wall before you.”

The church itself thus became a text, the Word of God, in a very literal sense, preaching to the city and congregation in the way that MacArthur believed channeled God’s converting grace. The building itself placed the Word in tangible form upon New York’s battlefields, and its daunting and austere physicality, its distinctiveness on the city’s landscapes, amplified the proclamation of the call to repentance. The Gothic Christianity of the Calvary Church was unmistakable and distinctive and the words upon it gave its presence direction and meaning. Its architecture was a powerful manifestation of the aggressive evangelicalism of its theology.

Both van Dyke and MacArthur worried about the relationship between the church and the city, and the paradigms implied in their respective approaches provide a useful frame for approaching the activities of New York’s churches in the decades after their churches opened.

78 MacArthur, “Voiceful Stones,” The Calvary Pulpit, 280; see also Robert MacArthur, “The Pastor’s Leadership of His Church III: The Development of the Church,” in Baptist Quarterly Review 8 (May 1886) 343-345 and de la Plata, Tell it from Calvary, 33-4 on MacArthur’s outreach programs. MacArthur maintained that a church might have sociables, literary societies, and the rest, but that they must “bear emphatic testimony.” 346.
Both buildings spoke of evangelical spirituality, of the importance of conversion and the elevation of spiritual experience; doctrine itself hovered only in the background. Despite their differing emphases, they shared much. But though they had common goals, the two churches demonstrated the wide variety within that common evangelical piety. The impressive exterior of MacArthur’s church proclaimed aggressively to the city. Its massive steeple and imposing façade declared an intention to transform the face of the city itself through a revolution in its spaces. The romantic sensibility of the interior of the Brick church, on the other hand, spoke to the cultivation of a spiritual community, focusing upon the ways that Christian space could reshape the human landscape of the city. Van Dyke sought the creation of an organic unity based upon romantic spirituality that would subvert and replace the disorganized and atomized society of New York with common participation in the kingdom of God. These two approaches, the exterior and the interior – though useful for organizing purposes - were hardly a dichotomy; indeed, the one led to the other. This should indicate how intertwined the assumptions of turn of the century Protestants actually were, but also how different their methods could be.

As they began to think about cities as a coherent place, a whole more than the sum of its parts that could be changed as a system of relations, evangelicals began to expand their desire to renovate sacred space beyond the walls of the churchhouse itself. Sermons like those of Parkhurst and Buchanan warned that the ever-expanding public life of a bustling city threatened to drown out the pulpit in a cacophony of voices that echoed from the stages and the concert halls, from the presses, from the Catholic cathedrals, and, of course, from the tenements and factories. Evangelicals began to consider the spiritual relevance of the built environment; the city itself presented a pastoral problem, it was a sinner writ large that required redemption. They
thus longed to reduce its unfamiliarity to the familiar archetypes and models that they already understood, and turned to the model of transformation they knew best for metaphors that allowed them to talk about the process and intimately relate spiritual transformation with physical renovation.

The notion that evangelicalism, if its advocates desired to succeed, might have to treat the urban city as a whole appeared first in New York in the work of Dwight Moody. When he visited New York in 1876, Moody held meetings in the Brooklyn Tabernacle, founded by his predecessor Charles Finney. Finney intended the name to bear great significance, choosing it for his hall instead of the more common “church” or chapel” to evoke particular religious associations. The word went back to the Bible, to the structure erected by the children of Israel as they wandered in the Sinai wilderness, but in the American context it derived from the early Methodists of eighteenth and nineteenth century camp meetings, who used the word to transform the dirt and stones of the ground on which they worshiped into types of the camps of Israel, space blessed and sacralized by the shekinah, the descending presence of God that dwelled in the Holy of Holies at the center of the Tabernacle of the Book of Leviticus. For camp meeting attendees, the tabernacle therefore transcended denomination, hearkening instead to the universal Christian past and invoking converting presence of the immanent Holy Spirit. In using the name, Finney declared that the same power could be brought to the cities, the streets turned into a massive Methodist camp meeting, and the urbanized land there thus rededicated in the image of the God of the wilderness. He intended the Tabernacle, which was not affiliated with any

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denomination, to invite democratic participation and transforming through evangelical conversion the divided, atomized population of the city into a Christian fellowship.

Though in retrospect he was unable to reverse evangelicals’ sense of siege, Moody’s campaigns began in earnest their attempt to reverse the tide, and his embrace of the tabernacle signaled evangelicals’ first attempts to grasp what their Biblical rhetoric of the city as battleground might look like when put into practice. After his experience in New York, Moody erected a tabernacle in Philadelphia as well, preaching in buildings specially designated for revival rather than regular church services. Moody understood his tabernacles to be a focusing point for the faith of the city; they existed not in a presumed spiritual wilderness, like the revival tents of the frontier, but were intimately related to the preexisting spiritual map of the city’s streets. Moody’s assistant W.H. Daniels described the preacher’s revivals in Brooklyn and Philadelphia as “a Pentecost” which awoke the churches there; Moody himself declared that “there are plenty of sleepy Christians and sleepy churches to be found.”

The tabernacle would recharge and revitalize the city’s faith grid, and then close, turning over to the churches a revitalized population. To that end, Moody advocated close cooperation with existing churches throughout his campaigns; he pled with ministers to participate, to preach, to sit on his stands. For Moody a “tabernacle” was more than any single church intended for regular spiritual service; rather, it was a particular space designed to confront particular challenges. It was a special rupture of the secular, an architectural expression of God’s outpouring of the spirit in revival to transform the mundane, and more, an exhibition of that spirit’s ability to overcome the artificial divisions of the modern age to create a more lasting and transcendent spiritual unity after the

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82 See Moody’s words in “Revival Work,” *New York Times* (February 14, 1876) 8.
model of the children of Israel. Moody was suggesting that the first cure for the sick city was a revitalization of the place’s networks of sacred space.

But he seemed unaware of the prescience of the suggestion. Dwight Moody abandoned his tabernacles by the early 1880s, primarily because he wanted to devote greater time to each city than the temporary halls provided, and he returned to preaching from regular pulpits. His reversal misread the time, and his later revivals were far less successful than the efforts of the late 1870s.\(^\text{83}\) By the time Moody was backing away from the reconceptualization of the city’s space that the Tabernacle had intimated, New York City’s native evangelicals were haunted by place, and had begun struggling to create the sort of community out of the city that they believed evangelicalism required to survive there.

For some evangelicals, the effort to sacralize the streets was a natural outgrowth of the sort of denominational organization and parachurch efforts that had conquered the city in the first place. Several denominations, particularly the Methodists, had a long history of extradenominational organization, and in the face of the city’s challenges, some Methodists decided that the old congregational model of a church was no longer sufficient. An individual congregation might be swallowed up, but an organization of congregations might better both distribute resources and amplify the message of a single pulpit across multiple blocks. The Methodist Extension and Missionary Societies, for instance, established in New York and several other cities federated funding for several downtown churches – all of which were related in membership and finance. More ambitiously, in the same city, the minister S. Parkes Cadman in 1896 transformed the Central Methodist Church on Seventh Avenue and Fourteenth Street into

the Metropolitan Temple, consolidating the resources of multiple Methodist churches in the area into a large single institutional church with property flung over several city blocks.  

The Brick Church was among the first non-Methodist churches to develop a theoretical and practical rationale for similar organization. In what the assistant pastor called a “plan of affiliation,” in 1893 Brick became the parent congregation of two other churches, the Church of the Covenant on East 42nd Street and Christ Church, on West 35th. These churches were not merely mission chapels, auxiliaries dependent upon the main church for funding and staffing that offered evangelizing and social services rather than an entire program of worship. Those were common on the urban landscape, but the Church of the Covenant and Christ Church were fully functioning congregations in, as the Brick assistant pastor Shepherd Knapp put it “union and affiliation” with the Brick Church. They received financial support from the Brick congregation in exchange for some degree of oversight from Brick’s session. Both had once been mission chapels, the first to an older congregation also known as the Church of the Covenant, the second to Brick itself. They achieved their new status when the Brick church united with the original Church of the Covenant in 1893, absorbing its congregation and selling the original property in order to procure a financial endowment for the Brick church itself. 

Though the union required the abandonment of the original building belonging to the Church of the Covenant, both congregations understood the changes to strengthen rather than weaken the geographical prominence of evangelical Presbyterianism in the city. Van Dyke had pled with his congregation earlier that year to raise the money for an endowment, connecting the financial security of Brick’s building to the church’s prominence on the landscape of the city.

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both materially and temporally: “Shall the church in which you have worshipped, which is
endeared to you by a thousand sacred associations, be abandoned and dismantled and
destroyed?” he asked. “Let us provide the future by taking measures at once to secure the
permanence of this historic church where it now stands.” Endowment not only provided an
opportunity to strengthen a congregation’s voice amid the hubbub of the city; it also averted a
threat. As the pastor John McIlvane of the original Church of the Covenant, not far from Brick,
remarked to his congregation on the eve of union, “We have had this whole region canvassed
and we know it well . . . In this whirlpool of change the strongest religious society is sometimes
wrecked.” Like so many other congregations, the Church of the Covenant’s population was
dwindling. To McIlvane, sacrificing its own independence to root Brick firmly in the center of
the city seemed a worthy final act for his congregation. Church union would only make
Christianity stronger. “It has seemed to you,” McIlvane told his congregation, “that in the
reinforcement and endowment of the Brick Church . . . one strong Presbyterian church might be
secure for years to come in the center of this city.”

So, paradoxically, evangelicals expected the abandonment of the original Church of the
Covenant to create a stronger evangelical network in the city, in the same way the Metropolitan
Temple had. With the resources gained from closing the Church of the Covenant, Brick was able
to endow its own building, to transform its old mission chapel into a new affiliated Church of the
Covenant, and to elevate Christ Church on firmer footing. The church yearbook called this
strong network Brick’s “sphere of influence,” the “two hands” of Covenant and Christ Churches
allowing Brick itself to “touch the great masses of people.” The union was made real through a

86 Van Dyke, “An Historic Church,” 36-37. Many churches felt the same need; see Frank Goodchild, “Church
Endowments: their need and danger,” in The Twenty Ninth Anniversary of the Southern New York Baptist
Association (New York: Scott, 1900) 36-40.
88 On this process see Knapp, a history of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 433, 444-445.
transfer of church art; memorials from the old Church of the Covenant were divided among the
Brick Church and the new Covenant chapel, symbolically creating spiritual connection. 89

Closely linking the resources and influence of churches was a force multiplier. As James Farr,
pastor of Christ Church, happily reported when his congregation was able to open a new building
with Brick’s financial help, the dedicatory ceremonies of Christ Church, funded by Brick, were
not merely observed by the congregation, but became a “neighborhood celebration,” attracting
many of the unchurched. 90

This strategy of cooperation seemed effective enough that its ideas were soon replicated
in more explicitly evangelistic strategies. In the 1890s J. Wilbur Chapman, noted revivalist and
pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church sought to revitalize Moody’s sense of the need to
evangelize the city as a whole. The extreme circumstances of urbanization, he believed,
demanded special organization and particular targeting. As Chapman wrote to his chief sponsor,
the wealthy John Converse, “it is the hope and dream of my life that the last years of my
evangelistic experience may be devoted to preaching to the poor . . . [to] enter into a city and
with the cooperation of the pastors, conduct a mission.” 91 In Chapman’s opinion, evangelicals
had failed to address the unique issues of audience and organization in the city with the care they
deserved. The problem struck him acutely enough to make the point explicit with a comparison
to the sainted Moody; the great evangelist’s revivals, he said, were too often a “calvary dash”
rather than a “siege.” This meant that Moody had unduly centralized the religious fervor of the
city both geographically in the temporary tabernacle of his Hippodrome and symbolically in his

89 Brick Church Year Book of Work and Worship 1897-1898 (New York: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1898) 3-4; Knapp, History, 452. See also William Richards, “The Unity of the Faith,” (New York: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1904) 9-11 for praise of the church affiliation system.
90 Brick Church Year Book of Work and Worship 1905-1906 (New York: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1906) 84, 140.
own public persona. In turn, such focus meant the evangelistic power Moody invoked in large measure went to waste, dissipating as soon as the man himself left. Chapman hastened to assure his audience that Moody was not personally to blame; rather Chapman noted that “the problems which confront city pastors as they consider evangelistic campaigns are almost insurmountable.” The issue was one of landscape, not the old revivalist’s ego.

The solution, Chapman said, was to refocus evangelical work into the structure of religion already mapped out across in the city, to decentralize and invest the interest and passion that a revival invoked into already existing churches rather than the temporary and artificial presence of the revivalist. This would treat the city as a city, rather than expecting that strategies for rural revivals, which assumed no already existing infrastructure, would also work in an urban environment. By the end of the decade Chapman was advocating what he called “urban evangelism,” the theory behind the Chapman Simultaneous Evangelistic Campaign, a strategy designed to translate evangelical witnessing to the large crowds and sprawling neighborhoods of the city. While Moody had sought to involve local ministers, Chapman argued that they should be placed front and center. “Each church,” he said, should “hold its individual services . . . as part of a general plan of operation throughout the city.” This would ensure that multiple centers of evangelistic strength would develop. Further, the churches should continue to pursue special services in tandem after the revivalist left the city. This sort of federation and cooperation alone, Chapman believed, was capable of overcoming the “difficulties [that] are only multiplied in the city.” Thus he sought to transcend the material divisions of streets and blocks between them.

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with a larger spiritual unity, drawing attention to, rather than away from, the city’s permanent sacred landscape, and infusing it with the attention, excitement, and presumably sacred energy of the revival. While the tabernacles of Moody and Finney offered a special sacred center, Chapman sought rather to revitalize the lines of spiritual power that were already traced across the city’s streets. He conceived of the city as an organic whole, and the connections that bound the churches therein were its lifeblood. Beginning in 1904, Chapman began to experiment with this technique: first in Pittsburgh and the Midwest, then on a tour through the South, and finally reaching the East Coast in 1909, where he held massive revivals in Philadelphia and Boston before reaching New York on December 28, 1910, in preparation for a Brooklyn revival in February of the next year.

Chapman and his associates also recognized also that the inchoate space of the cities offered opportunities beyond simply churches themselves; like Parkhurst and Rainsford, he believed that the churches should contest the landscapes urban geography, seeking to redirect even the secular space of the city toward the sacred. One way to attract such attention was to extend the Word’s reach through the church doors. The outdoor preaching tradition had long currency in the evangelical movement, from the hillside preachers John Wesley and George Whitefield through the camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening; as WGT Shedd, the theology professor and a member of Brick’s congregation, commented, “If anyone should query whether out-door preaching is called for in modern times, let him consult the annals of the Wesleyan Reformation.” The efforts of groups like the Salvation Army to create public spectacle were directly descended from the eighteenth century tradition. Its usefulness was

93 Chapman, Present Day Evangelism, 213; McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, 377-378.
undisputed, and more, echoed the patterns of great revivals past, and to that end, Chapman recommended what he called “tent” and “open-air” services, held on the streets, or under tents in vacant lots, at midday and in the evenings.

On the weekends Chapman recommended that these meetings should be “conducted at least a half hour before the regular Sunday evening meeting” and as close as possible to the church house. The particular timing and place were key, Chapman argued, because “the crowds attending could easily be drawn in to the church” afterward. The tent meetings, then, served as transitional spaces, channeling the audience from the secular space of the city through the quasi-sacred space of the tent to, ultimately, the transformative holiness of the church pews. Chapman himself organized such meetings during revivalist campaigns in Brooklyn in 1911. Others also followed Chapman’s advice. The traveling preacher Campbell Morgan sponsored a tent revival meeting at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in 1905, and the same year the Brick Church did the same, both coordinating with a larger citywide effort. And during Chapman’s Brooklyn revival, the Brooklyn Times reported that Henry Ostrom, pastor of St. John’s Methodist Episcopal Church, “had the doors opened while the congregation faced the rear of the room and sang one of the songs which have become so popular in the hope of reaching someone on the outside who would otherwise not have thought of entering the church.”

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96 “Brooklyn Ready for Evangelistic Campaign,” Brooklyn Daily Times, February 1, 1911.
97 Warner van Norden, The fatness of thy house: a documentary history of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church (New York: Scribner’s, 1953) 157-158; January 13, 1905, Session Minutes of the Brick Presbyterian Church. See also Evangelistic Committee of Greater New York, Report of summer tent and revival campaign (New York: New York Evangelistic Committee, 1905) on the 1905 revival, and Jessup, ed., History of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, 166, which asserts that Fifth Avenue and Brick were the two congregations at the forefront of the tent movement.
98 “Campaign in Eastern District Almost Over,” Brooklyn Times, February 25, 1911.
Other churches less inclined to catch the evangelistic fervor of the revival still participated in other ways. The Old First Presbyterian Church, historically of the Old School branch of the denomination, was one of these. However, though minister Howard Duffield was less inclined to the charisma of the revivals, he believed in the importance of the preached word, and embraced the notion of an outdoor pulpit, allowing him in the summertimes to preach to crowds on Old First’s lawn, as well as to passersby on the street. These structures had a long history; they had appeared in England in the late Middle Ages, and many survived the Reformation, especially in London, due to the elevation of preaching they provided. In 1916, Duffield reported that “The lawns of the Church have proved such a notably attractive place for Sunday evening services that an outdoor pulpit of stone built against the Church wall ought to be constructed. It would be difficult to imagine . . . a more effective increase to its equipment for work.” The pulpit was erected in 1917, and in the fall of that year Duffield reported with satisfaction to the session that he had preached from it regularly; “it was used during the past summer,” he said, “with much usefulness.” The pulpit extended the church’s reach beyond its doors, and transformed the secular space of lawn and road into ritualized worship space subject to the service of the Word.

In all these ways, then, by the turn of the twentieth Parkhurst’s call had been heard, and evangelicals were striving to reclaim the streets of the city around their church houses, in terms of activity, in terms of ideology, and even physically. The effort was an attempt to do no less than remap the cultural landscape of the city, reorganize the flow of power and people through

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100 Howard Duffield, *A Bird’s eye view of twelve months’ work at the Old First Church: reports of the boards, societies and clubs of the Old First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York* (New York: The First Presbyterian Church, 1916) 11.
101 16 October 1917, Session Minutes of the First Presbyterian Church, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
the streets guided by the new landmarks of its churches. As J. Ross Stevenson, pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, told his congregation in December 1908, celebrating the hundredth anniversary of his church house, “God has placed us in the very heart of the city, near the exact geographic center of Manhattan, and more than this, He has given this church a position of influence, a high place from which she may accomplish wonders for the world’s redemption.” It was the responsibility of Fifth Avenue, Stevenson and other advocates of the church declared, to “cathedralize,” to become as dominant in twentieth century New York as cathedrals had been in medieval Europe, and hence, to make the city itself increasingly Christian. The word “cathedralize” itself was significant; like van Dyke, Stevenson bore a typically Presbyterian enthusiasm for the history and traditions of the church universal; like van Dyke, he held a particularly romantic fascination with the Christianity of the Byzantine and medieval periods, a time when a massive church was the center of a city’s built and human landscape. But also like van Dyke, he believed that this vision could be best attained in the late nineteenth century through rebuilding a church capable of meeting distinctively modern challenges.  

In 1915, William Merrill, then serving in the pulpit of the Brick Church, had a similar optimistic vision of a future medieval in its faith but modern in its methods; as he write in the church’s 1915-1916 yearbook,

What would we see here in the year 2015? . . . the Brick Church of the next century will still stand upon its present site on Murray Hill, but will occupy only the lower part of a great building; the interior as dignified, beautiful, and as churchly as now, but surmounted by many stories in each of which on every day and every night will be gathered a multitude of our ‘neightbors’ of that day who will throng its many rooms, there to

receive the instruction and comfort and counsel which today we are attempting to give to a steadily increasing number, with whom we come directly or indirectly in contact, through our Noon-day Services and in our Neighborhood work.”

To cathedralize meant more than to simply build a magnificent edifice, or to attract a great deal of public attention to the church; it meant an attempt to recover through spatial transformation a sort of spirituality which evangelicals feared had been lost. The outward turn, the sharp awareness of and engagement with the city that evangelicals had developed, which had culminated in the sense that architecture and organization could facilitate religious experience led many evangelicals of van Dyke’s theological sympathies to seek more expansive ways of understanding the rituals of the Word and conversion that defined their faith. If the city itself could be converted to the sacred through reorganization of its patterns and landscape, and the Word of God be manifest in the beauty of a building’s design, many evangelicals wondered if the human encounter with the Word had to be limited to prose. The cathedrals of evangelical New York City were the churches – not merely in their architecture and their decoration, but in their activities, and by the turn of the twentieth century, some evangelicals, who were beginning to call themselves liberal, were finding the power of conversion in the methods they used to reach out to the streets.

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Chapter 4

Charles Briggs and the Rise of Liberal Evangelicalism

The evangelical experimentation in spaces of the 1880s was mostly improvisational, the creative reworking of metaphors, archetypes, and organization from the raw material of evangelicalism’s cultural inheritance. Though differing emphases and manifestations of evangelical piety existed, this had been true for decades, and a sense of internal combat did not really exist. Van Dyke and DeWitt Talmage could criticize the Revised Version for remarkably similar reasons, despite their varying theological tendencies. The efforts of van Dyke, MacArthur, and the revivalists to add a spatial dimension to evangelical spirituality seemed similarly instinctual, expressive but not evaluative of their faith applied to the challenges before them. A precise and public declaration of a new evangelical theology, one that seemed particularly adapted to explain what these evangelicals were trying to do, had to wait until the beginning of the last decade of the nineteenth century, when a single event – Charles Briggs’s 1891 trial for heresy – and a movement – the institutional church, which appeared firmly in New York in 1894, with the founding of the Open and Institutional Church League – brought to consciousness a variant of piety called liberal evangelicalism.

Briggs was a brilliant and cantankerous professor of Hebrew at Union Theological Seminary on the Upper West Side. When he was called before the New York Presbytery on charges of heresy in late 1891, it suddenly seemed possible that the evangelical struggle with the city might become an internecine war as well. Briggs’s work in the late 1880s and early 1890s enunciated perhaps more clearly than anybody else the loosening connection between an evangelical piety based upon a converting encounter with the Word and the actual text of sermon or scripture. His blistering review of the Revised Version of the Old Testament illustrated how
quickly commitment to a purely textual conception of the Word had fallen out of favor with some evangelicals; Briggs gave systemization, a mode of Bible reading, and self-consciousness to the movement. But the divisiveness of Briggs’s language, his conviction that only the form of Biblicism he explained and endorsed might successfully preserve evangelical spirituality in the city, rubbed roughly on the nerves of others who found that their struggle was not only one of adapting the Word to the city; they also had to worry that the experiments of some of their colleagues were not only tactical dead ends, but also, perhaps damaging to the cause. Van Dyke and Talmage, MacArthur and Schaff, men across the theological spectrum, did not feel that their theology necessarily bound them to one or another position on the Revised Version; rather, their concerns were for the practical use of Scripture.

Briggs, however, elevated the stakes. The professor had pastoral concerns but not pastoral instincts; he wanted desperately the save the city, but his style hastened the rise of a civil war. In 1891, Briggs was elevated from his professorship in Hebrew to the Edward Robinson Professorship of Biblical Theology, newly created at the school particularly for him. The professorship was designed to emphasize the practical use of scripture, and Briggs determined to use it to promote how he believed the Bible worked. He did not take long to stir up controversy; upon hearing the opinions of scripture put forward in his inaugural address, conservatives in New York’s Presbyterian churches brought a complaint to the Presbyterian General Assembly, and Briggs was tried for heresy. Ministers like van Dyke and Parkhurst felt the pressures of the trial and resolved to explain what was going on to their congregations; meanwhile, other evangelicals seized upon Briggs’s ideas and began to formulate a second way of embodying the Word: in the redemptive rituals of social service.
Exhibiting his predictable pride in what he believed was the new translation’s finest strength, Schaff had expected Briggs to praise the Revised Version because of its attention to accuracy of translation. This was not an unreasonable expectation; Briggs considered himself, rightfully, at the forefront of American Hebrew scholarship, and Schaff believed the same of his Revisers.¹ And indeed, Briggs noted favorably that the Revised New Testament had “received the applause of scholars for its fidelity to the original text, its conscientious adherence to the best readings.” But it should have been a warning to Schaff that Briggs scorned the Revisers’ dutiful praise for what Briggs considered the woefully translated King James Version; he saw very little spiritual value in the particular words of any particular Bible. “It is no credit to the English people or to British scholarship that the Version of King James has so long retained its pre-eminence,” Briggs said. “It is rather an evidence of a long period of ignorance.”²

Briggs wrote a skeptical review of the Revised Old Testament characteristic of the man: brilliant and blistering, its passion twined with irascibility and a distinct lack of tact. The review hurt Schaff at a personal level, because he had considered Briggs – his junior colleague at Union, whom Schaff had helped recruit – a friend. Briggs quickly apologized for his harsh tone, but also insisted that he could, not, ultimately, endorse the Revised Version as a pastoral project.³ He had some quibbles with the Revisers’ technical methods, the sort of fight any scholar of Briggs’s stature and eccentricities might. But in the end, Briggs’s problem with the new translation was less with their scholarship than their scriptural theology. Like Schaff and so many other evangelicals of the period, Briggs saw little distinction between scholarship and

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faith, Biblical interpretation and pastoral work; he believed that the Bible deserved attention because it was the vehicle by which God interacted with man in ways that brought salvation, and that knowledge of Hebrew and Greek enabled people to better claim that project. But at the same time, he worried that the Revisers’ problematic theology of scripture rendered their version useless, and hence their scholarly efforts moot. His arguments, ultimately, made it powerfully clear how well-developed a distinctively liberal evangelical piety had become.

Briggs’s arguments rested on the romantic conviction that the conviction that the Word of God was essentially verbal was misleading. The quest for a perfect rendering of the original manuscripts, the holy grail of textual criticism, largely missed the point. God “used three human languages [Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic],” Briggs wrote, “with all the varieties of literature that had been developed in the various nations using these languages, in order that He might approach mankind in a more familiar way.” To Briggs this multiplicity of tongues meant God could not have possibly intended the truth of Christianity to be communicated primarily through a single language; indeed, the sheer torrent of divergent words and metaphors each language produced represented the ineffable, ever shifting, and ultimately personal experience of the divine. “The more delicate shades of thought and emotion escape the translator's art,” Briggs insisted, echoing romanticism’s emphasis on sentiment. “It is impossible to produce an exact translation of any writing.”

Thus, preoccupation with the precise words of scripture was one of many “obstructions” that human beings used to prop up the Bible to assure themselves that the book was special. In his pungent prose, he accused Protestants of treating the Bible “as if it were a baby to be

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4 Charles A. Briggs, *Biblical study: its principles, methods, and history* (New York: Scribner’s, 1883) 76.
wrapped in swaddling clothes nursed and carefully guarded lest it should be injured by heretics and skeptics."  

This was a critical point; it indicated the extent to which for Briggs the Bible itself had the potential to obstruct a real and immediate relationship with the divine; to become an idol worshiped for its own properties. Briggs was conscious of the separation between the Bible and God that the evangelicals who struggled over the Revised Version seemed not to be. The same cultural forces which had forced romantics like Beecher and van Dyke to seek experience with God in venues other than the precise text of Scripture had found in Briggs their elucidation. For Briggs the Bible was to be read with what Paul Ricoeur has called “a hermeneutics of suspicion;” that is, a constant awareness that the text was an uncertain channel to God. Sixty years earlier, this concept would have been very difficult for American evangelicals to grasp, but, a pervasive hunger for spiritual experience combined with a suspicion of the material that creates it – actual bound Bibles, and even the words within them – is one feature of a burgeoning liberal religious tradition.  

Briggs was determined not to sacrifice the piety which scripture enabled; rather, he sought new ways to find it.

And thus, Briggs had long been a foe of the Princeton theology of Biblical inerrancy on both scholarly and theological grounds, and because he was prone to irritation with Princeton he believed he glimpsed the idolatry of inerrancy behind the Revisers’ scholarly devotion to precise translation. He was convinced that such laboriousness missed the point of scripture entirely. “It is doubtful whether they have succeeded in making a people’s book,” he wrote of the Revisers’ New Testament. “There seem to be overrefinements of scholarship, an occasional exhibition of pedantry.” This was “the sacrifice of the substance, the essential thought to the external form

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and coloring.” The substance of Briggs’s critique of the Revised Old Testament was less scholastic than it was theological, and even pastoral. Like TD Witherspoon and other evangelicals, Briggs had begun to believe that the Bible’s religious power did not necessarily rest in the precise words of its authors - and more, that slavish attention to the text would hamper what scripture was actually striving to accomplish. He was suspicious of what he called “undue emphasis on the external Word of God over against the internal Word of God;” that is, emphasis upon the particular form that the Word took, in particular words, rather than upon the power which lay behind the form.

Briggs’s great contribution was, rather, to explain exactly why the Bible might be valuable even if its words were not a crystalline lens for the divine presence. In so doing he articulated a new way of thinking about the Word. Briggs advocated what he called “Biblical theology,” which uncoupled causative authority – God’s power to change the world – from language and instead located that power in the Bible’s conception of history. The substance of that revelation was the reality of “theophany,” the self-manifestation of God, the appearance of the divine within history rather than in language: Pentecost, the pillar of flame and cloud in the Sinai desert. This was a historicization of the evangelical conversion experience, an insistence that the encounter with the divine presence occurred in particular times and particular places, rather than in the abstracted and entirely subjective and personal encounter between the soul and the Word that traditional evangelicalism had presumed. As Briggs said, “the Theophany casts the miracle and the prediction into shadow.”

Theophany was the overwhelming of language with presence. It was an event in time, not a text.

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10 Briggs, Biblical study, 409.
11 Briggs, Biblical study, 43-44; see also Charles A Briggs, “Biblical History” (New York: Scribner’s, 1889) 16.
For Briggs, reading the Bible brought the reader into the experience of living in a world in which the divine was present. Sacred history was not necessarily the accurate recording of every detail; rather it was an identification of the great and eternal themes that underlay human experience; the identification of God beneath the surfaces of things.\textsuperscript{12} As Briggs said, exhibiting his characteristic conflation of scholarship with devotion, “Higher Criticism has forced its way into the Bible itself and brought us face to face with the holy contents.”\textsuperscript{13} That is, the higher criticism had made Bible readers conscious of how much of the divine experience the Bible recorded was contingent upon the context of ancient Israel. While many evangelicals took this as a threat to transcendent and timeless power of the Word, Briggs turned such complaints around, arguing that understanding the historical nature of scripture was in fact the source of the Word’s strength. It taught contemporary evangelicals how they should use scripture: that is, the Bible should turn their attention to the presence of God in the world around them rather than draw them into pedantic disputes about the words on the page.

It is important to note that as with Bushnell and Beecher, though Briggs understood how the Word worked in reconstituted ways, he still insisted upon its causative authority to bring about conversion. Briggs said firmly that he believed in “the Word of God as a means of grace. But that grace “is not the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in their entirety but rather the Gospel contained in the Scriptures.”\textsuperscript{14} The words of scripture did not mediate the divine presence; rather the Bible was simply one particular contingent form that the real Gospel of grace took. Though Briggs was a scholar of the Old Testament, he stressed that the only perfect

\textsuperscript{12} Briggs’s “Biblical theology” was related to that of the German scholars he studied with; see Hans Frei, \textit{The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: a study in eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 165-183, especially 173-183.
\textsuperscript{13} Briggs, “Authority of Holy Scripture,” 34.
\textsuperscript{14} Briggs, \textit{Biblical study}, 407: for Briggs’s affirmation of faith in evangelical soteriology, see Charles A. Briggs, \textit{The Defence of Professor Briggs before the Presbytery of New York} (New York: Scribner’s, 1893) 16.
form of that grace was the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Like many other liberal Christians, Briggs’s piety was strongly Christocentric, focused upon the personality of Jesus, his character, rather than upon the events – the crucifixion or miracles – of his life. This reflected the growing romantic sense of the power of personality which Beecher and Bushnell had celebrated; it also, however, pointed the way to Briggs’s beliefs about how scripture should be used.

Like Schaff, Briggs understood scripture to be a creative encounter between the human and the divine; both men understood the Bible’s description of Jesus as the Word as a useful way of thinking about scripture itself. But the nuances in their respective arguments indicated the growing divergences in evangelical scriptural piety. While Schaff argued that it was precisely because of the human influence in Scripture that it was important to get translation right in order to preserve the power of the apostles’ and prophets’ idiosyncratic language, Briggs maintained that Christ’s embodiment of the Word indicated that true religious experience must transcend verbal piety in favor of manifestation in real life. The particular words of Scripture were hardly the tangible encounter with the Bible’s spiritual giants Schaff celebrated; rather, the need to use words was “accommodation to the weakness, ignorance and sinfulness of man.”

Briggs insisted that it was “not the mere reading, the mere study of the Bible that is efficacious . . . It is not the Bible read by the eyes and heard by the ears. It is not the Bible committed to memory and recited word for word . . . All these are but external forms of the Word.”

The internal application of the Word came when “The Word of God, the Gospel of Christ [is] appropriated by the Christian, assimilated to his needs, transformed into his life . . . Hence it is that the Christian becomes a living epistle.” This was a radical argument. Briggs did not

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15 Briggs, Biblical study, 313, 315, 302.
16 Briggs, Biblical study, 417.
believe that words were capable of purely transmitting the meaning and divine authority that evangelicals had traditionally ascribed to them; indeed, he had come to believe that words were a mediator, an obstacle; incapable of facilitating the immediate relationship with the divine which evangelicals craved. Briggs’s praise for Jesus’s claim to be the fulfillment of the law of the Hebrew Scriptures made the distinction clear: “Our Saviour. . . recognizes that the words of scripture are to be interpreted by entering into living communion with the living God. . . and not by roundabout methods of traditional definitions.”

While commitment to verbal piety had united evangelicals as theologically disparate as Warfield and Schaff, Briggs systematized and codified the romantic tendencies of pastors like Bushnell and Beecher into an understanding of the Word as the affective application of scripture in the life of the reader. It was not the experience of reading or listening to a sermon which brought conversion, but the internalization of the claims of these words in action. While evangelicals had long supposed that the power of the Word was in the creation of a new worldview through cognitive assimilation of its claims, Briggs argued that the proclamation of God was not something to be heard; rather, it was something to be enacted.

For Briggs, Biblical “interpretation” was therefore not an effort to glean doctrine or systematic theology from a work never intended to produce it; rather, he argued that “The word of God as written is to be appropriated by man through reading it, meditating upon it, and putting it in practice.” He understood scripture as the handmaiden of lived experience, to the point that he discarded concern for precision of language itself and came to understand the Bible as

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essentially a lived experience only incidentally, but also paradoxically, in the form of a text.  

“The divine authority is not in the style or the words,” he insisted, “but in the concept, and so the divine power of the Bible may be transferred into any language.”  

This not only led to his particular criticisms of the Revised Version; it also laid the groundwork for a new form of evangelical practice in the city; one centered less upon preaching than upon the sort of practical work that evangelicals found pressing in the city. Briggs’s biblical theology was the child of the demands of his circumstances; he needed scripture’s power to remain forceful in the face of challenges. And his theology in turn provided the intellectual base for a new way that evangelicals could understand and live in the world.

Briggs’s Biblical theology shaped his criticism of the Revised Version. Taking care to avoid criticism of particular Committee members, Briggs charged the Committee as a whole with a lack of the spirit of evangelicalism. This was because, in part, because the Committee was so focused upon the dry technicalities of language that overlooked the affective impact that the Bible could have on its readers, but also because the very notion of a committee on revision, summoned both by King James and by Philip Schaff, seemed to Briggs an affront to Briggs’s heroic and individualistic understanding of evangelical piety. For Briggs, the Bible was a microcosm and an archetype of the ongoing interaction between the soul of the believer and the divine spirit, the evangelical conversion experience, and he denied that any translation not generated through such an encounter would fail, no matter its scholarship. Indeed, a proper understanding of Scripture demanded such a conversion. “The Rabbinical scholar cannot understand the Old Testament until he becomes a Christian,” Briggs said. “The Roman Catholic will never understand the New Testament in its higher doctrines until he becomes a Protestant. It

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would in our judgment be destructive to Romanism and to Judaism to use the King James Version or the Revised English Version of the Bible as their Bible.” On the other hand, for Briggs a true translation of scripture modeled evangelical heroism. Luther and Tyndale, he said, “gave to the people of Germany and Great Britain not mere literal translations, but translations animate with the very life and soul of the original texts . . . They are indeed Protestant Bible translations, conceived and produced in the essential Protestant spirit. It is impossible for any body of men however intelligent or pious to do such work as this.”

While Briggs’s writings caused a stir among pastors and theologians, his 1891 indictment for heresy thrust new ideas about the Word into the public eye, and laid the ground work for a new sort of evangelical practice in New York City, one tailored, as Briggs argued, to a particular time and particular circumstance. His case was intensely public, and attracted a great deal of attention. And thus, it offered New York’s pastorate an opportunity to further reframe how their congregations thought about what it meant to be an evangelical in the city. In January of 1891, he delivered his inaugural address in the Robinson Chair to a “large audience” of the assembled faculty of the school and curious visitors among the city’s clergy and laity, and he seized the opportunity to transform how his audience thought about the Bible by making a series of intentionally provocative statements. He acknowledged that the Old Testament did contain errors of fact which did not bear upon religion and stated that reading Bible prophecy in an effort to make “it a sort of history before the time” was futile and improper. Then he blasted as

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22Briggs, “The Revised Version,” 532. Robert Moore-Jumonville describes Briggs’s position as “reverent criticism,” characteristic of “moderate” Biblical scholars: these people are comparable to Noll’s evangelical scholars and my own “liberal evangelicals.” He argues that Briggs is not a liberal; I disagree, as Briggs and his compatriots used the term to describe themselves, and Moore-Jumonville equates ‘liberal’ with ‘modernist.’ Labels aside, Moore-Jumonville is correct in observing that Briggs believed the Bible to be a book of unique spiritual power The hermeneutics of historical distance: mapping the terrain of American Biblical criticism, 1880-1914 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002) 57, 122-124.
“modern dogmaticians,” in a barely veiled allusion, Warfield, Hodge, and the other advocates of Princeton inerrancy, which he dismissed as a “ghost of modern evangelicalism;” something which haunted to detriment the actual spiritual health of the Word.23

Then Briggs set about rebuilding how his audience should interact with the Bible, and presented a method he understood to be a new way of understanding the process of evangelical conversion. As he said, exemplifying the distrust of the verbal word that characterized romantic theology, “We cannot know God; we cannot be certain with regard to ultimate realities.” His audience should not expect that they were directly encountering the divine in the text of scripture; God could not be cleanly embodied in the verbal, and scripture did not presume to present him there. But this did not mean that God was inaccessible – and neither, critically, did it mean that believers had to scramble to fill the gaps. Rather, it meant that the divine was more accessible than ever, for “the Divine authority of the Bible was not in the text or the words, but in the content and the meaning.” Briggs closed with an argument that Scripture alone did not channel the Word, but rather went hand in hand with the believer’s experience in the Church and with reason: it was through all three, which among them encompassed the holistic experience of the believer’s spiritual life.24

Briggs was at this time a Presbyterian minister, and Union affiliated with that denomination. Within three months of his address, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, which met yearly, had received over sixty requests to investigate his orthodoxy, and a Prosecuting Committee was appointed. The General Assembly approved eight charges against Briggs, mostly pertaining to his view of the Bible. The prosecutors maintained Briggs’s statements that the Bible contained factual errors conflicted with the claims of the official

24 Briggs, “Authority of Holy Scripture,” 24; “Dr. Briggs Installed.”
Westminster Confession of Faith that scripture was “immediately inspired” and had been “kept pure in all ages.” But, more critically, the prosecutors cited Briggs’s contention that the sort of experience he advocated might “savingly enlighten” human beings – that is, convict them of sin and instill in them faith, the same causative authority as that traditionally ascribed to the preached and written Word.\textsuperscript{25} As the prosecution argued, to allow this was to “reject the Scriptures as the authoritative proclamation of the will of God, and reject also the way of salvation through the mediation and sacrifice of the Son of God as revealed therein, which is contrary to the essential doctrine of the Holy Scripture and of the Standards of the said Church.”\textsuperscript{26} To weaken the Scriptures was to reject the experience of atonement as these evangelicals understood it: conviction by the Word through Scripture and preaching.

The General Assembly ordered the New York Presbytery to try Briggs, but the Presbytery, upon hearing Briggs speak in self defense, confirmed Henry van Dyke’s motion that changes be dropped. Undeterred, and sympathetic to the prosecuting committee’s outrage, the General Assembly sought to force Union to fire Briggs, whereupon the seminary withdrew its affiliation with the church. The Assembly also ordered, in an overwhelming vote, a retrial for the professor, which occurred in November and December of 1892. In January 1893, a New York Presbytery committee headed by van Dyke pronounced Briggs acquitted. The General Assembly, again piqued, ordered Briggs’s ordination as a minister suspended, and the professor withdrew from the denomination.\textsuperscript{27}

Briggs’s notoriety, and the ideas which undergirded it, drew the attention of New York’s evangelicals. His trial in late 1892 dragged on for nearly two weeks in the Scotch Presbyterian

\textsuperscript{25} The Defense of Professor Briggs before the Presbytery of New York, v, vi, 29.
\textsuperscript{26} The Case Against Professor Briggs, vol 2 (New York: Scribner’s, 1893) 29.
\textsuperscript{27} For the events of Briggs’s various trials and hearings, see Robert T. Handy, A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York City (New York: Columbia, 1987) 70-73.
Church on 14th Street, and the *New York Times* reported that “the church was crowded” whenever the professor himself stood to speak; every seat was filled and spectators lined the walls. While Briggs’s case was under investigation, he lectured frequently throughout the city, accepting invitations from various churches and social groups to speak about the Bible and his case. When he appeared at the Presbyterian Church of the Covenant on Park Avenue and 35th Street in November 1891 to speak on “The Bible and the Church,” “chairs had to be placed in all the aisles in order to accommodate the throng, and many were compelled to stand.” Briggs attracted the curiosity of New York’s churchgoers, it was clear.

But also, as the Presbytery’s failure to convict him indicated, he won support of many of the city’s ministers, who saw in his arguments a theological framework for their pastoral prospects; a systematization of their impulses and desires. Briggs presented a Word embodied in personality and experience rather than in language, and it appealed to the ministers of New York City in two ways. They sought first to place a strong foundation beneath the seemingly besieged Word, and Briggs’s reframing provided that; the Bible remained, though read differently, still relevant. But, at the same time, they faced not merely an intellectual problem. The revised Word had not merely to cohere theologically, but to sound out convincingly on the streets of New York, to inflict conversion and promise transformation. The pressures of poverty, dislocation, and a tide of immigrants made of them an evangelical community whose sense of urban disintegration only whetted their need to build again. Believing that Briggs’s theology spoke to the needs of their pulpits, several of New York’s liberal evangelical preachers stepped up to defend Briggs and illustrate the ways his Biblical theology might be preached in their church houses.

Henry van Dyke greatly enjoyed, and cunningly worked to Briggs’s benefit, the intense media attention for his procedural wizardry on Briggs’s behalf in the New York Presbytery. Toward the end of 1892 he decided to give a sermon to his congregation at the Brick Presbyterian Church explaining precisely what was going on, translating the abstruse theology of inspiration and inerrancy to the practical religion his congregation understood. As van Dyke expected, his sermon drew vast amounts of attention, and indeed, it was delivered not merely to the congregation, but to the larger audience of the city; van Dyke took the opportunity not merely to defend Briggs, but to explain what it meant to be an evangelical in a challenging place and time.  

29 The New York Times reported that not a pew was empty in the Brick Church that Sunday morning in early January, 1893; New York came to hear van Dyke justify Briggs.30

Despite his decision to defend the professor, van Dyke was not entirely sympathetic to Briggs’s theology. This was not necessarily surprising; though van Dyke’s romanticism had drawn him away from a strict reliance upon text and toward appreciation for the possibilities of other catalysts for the Word (as his renovation of the Brick Church illustrated), he was at heart a Victorian, interested in stability and tradition, and did not imagine himself as a theological innovator. When speaking to his congregation, van Dyke specifically and pointedly did not endorse Briggs’s theory that reason, the church, and scripture could be separate sources of converting authority. Further, he had a much more measured attitude than the professor toward the higher criticism. “Many of the conclusions of the Higher Criticism present themselves to such literary judgment as I possess, in the same aspect of inconclusive dogmatism as the theories of those who would persuade us that . . . Francis Bacon was the author of Shakespeare’s plays,”

29 For the public interest in van Dyke’s role, see “Rumor of a Presbyterian Peace Conference Unfounded,” New York Times (December 17, 1892) 2, which reported that rumors had been circulating among the city’s Presbyterians that van Dyke was planning to host in his home a meeting between Briggs and his prosecutors.  
30 See “Attitude of Dr van Dyke,” New York Times (January 23, 1893) 5, which breathlessly – and rather presciently - frames van Dyke’s defense of Briggs as indicative of a coming war in the denomination.
he said, citing in particular Briggs’s arguments that Moses did not write Genesis, and that there was more than one author in the book attributed to Isaiah.\(^{31}\)

At the same time, however, van Dyke also made it clear that he believed theological differences among evangelicals paled beside the fundamental work of preaching and conversion. The very fact that van Dyke’s theological hesitations did not dissuade him from a full-throated defense of the professor signaled that there was more at stake to him and his co-defenders of Briggs than the arcane weighing of higher criticism against inerrancy. For van Dyke, the issue rather went toward the ways the Bible would be used in the pulpit and in the congregations of New York City. Despite Briggs’s theorizing, van Dyke believed that the professor was an advocate of the work of evangelism, and he would support him because of that.

Van Dyke’s opening words staked out a position between Briggs and his persecutors, but also made clear that he ultimately considered such concerns irrelevant to the practice of evangelical religion. He began this sermon with the observation that “The controversies which have agitated the Presbyterian Church for some time past, have been rigorously excluded from this pulpit.” This was because he considered the “theological niceties” under debate – and indeed, precise theological positions in general – largely irrelevant to the work he did as a pastor of his congregation. This is where he, like Briggs, parted ways with Schaff. Their rejection of the clarity of the verbal Word as a prerequisite for spiritual experience marked the transition toward a new way of conceiving evangelicalism. Van Dyke perceived himself to be rising in defense of traditional evangelical piety; he understood himself to be resisting an unhealthy tendency to push evangelicalism into doctrinal disputes, whether it be from Briggs’s persecutors or even the Revisers of the Bible. And so he announced he had decided to speak to his

\(^{31}\) Henry van Dyke, “The Bible as it Is” in Historic Presbyterianism: three sermons for the times (New York: Randolph, 1893) 12, 13.
congregation only because he feared that if Briggs were convicted, and inerrancy made the law of the church, it would wreck his ministry. He mentioned he was disturbed by the extent to which the Briggs controversy had come to dominate conversation among his parishioners, and said this was the only reason he felt it necessary to bring the argument into the pulpit. “For two years our Church life in New-York has been disturbed by an ecclesiastical trial,” he said. “It is impossible to evade it any longer.”  

Van Dyke’s reaction to the Revised Version revealed the subtleties of his pastoral position. A few years earlier, van Dyke had approached the Revised Version with a sort of enthusiastic skepticism. Like TD Witherspoon of the Homiletic Review, he believed that a more accurate translation, while certainly a useful thing in abstract, was largely unnecessary, and perhaps actually detrimental to congregations who might be unused to it. He called it a “grand and good work,” and acknowledged that “many of the changes made certainly ought to have been made,” but nonetheless warned that “Whether the revision which has now been completed ought to be accepted by the Christian Church or not ought not to be hastily decided.” Indeed, he continued to use the King James Version in his own sermons, because it was unsurpassed in its poetic power. “Leave me the rich and powerful language of King James’s Bible and Shakespeare and the masters of English, still familiar, honored, and useful,” he wrote later.

The sense that Scripture might be valuable not for the accuracy of its reproduction but the beauty of its language was one way van Dyke and other New York ministers adapted romantic ideas to the task of the pulpit. William Merrill, who succeeded van Dyke in the pulpit in 1910, understood the Bible as a devotional tool because of the art of its language rather than the doctrines he taught. He urged fellow preachers to cultivate a “devotional style;” a pulpit manner

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and language that would “take hold of the heart and conscience of the hearer with full power.”
And the best way to do this was through the Bible – but most particularly its language. “Here again emerges the necessity of knowing the Bible,” he wrote, “for there is no other language so fitted for use in prayer as is the language of our English Bible.”\textsuperscript{35} The sermons and prayer of ministers like van Dyke, Merrill, and the Congregationalist John Jowett, who served in Fifth Avenue Presbyterian at the turn of the century grew famously flowery and poetical; Jowett’s frequently invoked natural imagery, using metaphors of fog, forests, pathways. In one sermon, he compared the peace of God to the stillness of “looking out over nature,” praising the “lovely delicate ferns as modesty, humility, meekness, sympathy, forbearance.” Jowett and some other ministers began to adopt Biblical idiom, discarding the plain speaking of Finney and Moody. The former in the same sermon commanded his audience to “Stop thy constant talking and murmuring and begin to look at thy Lord. Be dumb unto Him! Take thine eyes away from the glitter of the wicked man’s success and fix them upon the divine.”\textsuperscript{36} He used the archaic, poetic language as a stressor, at the peak of the sermon, emphasizing the particular power of his command, bringing the emotional power of art into the service of the Word.

Thus, van Dyke dismissed the Princetonian inerrancy that Briggs’s prosecutors wielded for the simple reason that the original manuscripts inerrantists exalted did not exist, and thus could serve no use to the minister. Van Dyke could not show them over the pulpit; his congregation could not develop spiritual relationships with them. Therefore, inerrancy “is not capable of proof. It moves entirely in the region of speculation . . . It has nothing to do with our

\textsuperscript{35} William Merrill, \textit{The Freedom of the Preacher} (New York: Macmillan, 1925) 43, 45.
\textsuperscript{36} Jowett, “Resting in the Lord,” 4. Parkhurst also uses archaic language in “To its first pastor,” as does Jefferson in \textit{Foolishness of Preaching}. Ann Douglas, \textit{The Feminization of American Culture} (New York, Knopf, 1978) describes this sort of literary Christianity as sentimental and superficial, a judgment that lacks the theological depth than these ministers themselves were grappling with.
present rule of faith and practice.”37 And this, surprisingly enough, was the same reason he held to the King James Version. That present was where van Dyke worked; the Bible that was his rule was the one in his study. He discovered and defended what he called “the Bible as it is,” which he called “good enough for me.” This was the Bible, the minister said, lapsing, as he tended to, into the effulgent, “wet with a mother’s tears where she has wept over it, worn by a father’s hands where he has pondered over its mysteries and difficulties.”38 In short, the Bible as it is was the Bible that he and his congregation had come to know; it was the well-used King James Version, read by lay people who had no knowledge nor concern for what the Greek or Hebrew might say. Van Dyke’s language was purple, but his passion demonstrated the extent to which he found the Bible’s causative authority in the sentiment it produced in the reader, not in its precise text. Other Bibles – inerrant autographs, or even the Hebrew Bible Briggs believed in produced by a redactor from the work of various ancient anonymous writers – were foreign to the experience of his parishoners, and therefore irrelevant.

Van Dyke’s fundamental sympathy for Briggs derived therefore not from his abstract acceptance of Briggs’s theology, but from the ways it reflected van Dyke’s pastoral methods. Van Dyke had similar theological inclinations as Briggs; both were heirs to the distrust of language born of mid-nineteenth century theological and cultural transformations. Briggs, the professor of scripture, professed that the higher criticism revealed that the Bible’s incarnate themes were more important than its particular word choice. Van Dyke, the minister, sought in the Bible an object of sentiment that could create the particular type of emotive religious experience he valued. Like Witherspoon and Morgan, he valued not the Bible itself, but the Bible his congregation cultivated a relationship with, the Bible that symbolized the connection

38 Van Dyke, “The Bible as It Is,” 27.
between the divine and the human and was a place where the two might interact, more than he did the Bible as a collection of propositional statements about God.

For van Dyke whether or not the Bible his congregation read was accurately translated from identified sources was at the least less important than the spiritual fulfillment a lay reader might draw out of it, and perhaps irrelevant entirely. But while he framed and understood the issue as entirely a pastoral concern, his ability to interpret it as such was deeply dependent upon his intellectual background. Like Briggs and other nascent liberal evangelicals, he was the child of the mid-nineteenth century crisis in language, but was also, more than most, a Victorian. He dismissed much of the higher criticism; rather, the extent that his approach to scripture was novel was due more to the aesthetics and sentiment of romanticism than to scholarly accommodation. The majestic poetry of the King James Version overwhelmed any inaccuracies that might remain in it, as long as van Dyke’s congregation continued to be moved toward the divine through its language. Van Dyke was ultimately sympathetic to Briggs’s theology, because both men were convinced that the spiritual power that promoted conversion could come through experience more broad than the pedantic concerns of translators. Briggs used theology to separate himself from Schaff’s equation of religious experience with accurate translation; van Dyke did the same pastorally. Briggs had a scholar’s skepticism about the possibility of accuracy; van Dyke had the minister’s indifference. To both, a Word that could be found in the work of the world, in the experience and life that van Dyke praised, was a Word admirably suited to the needs of an urban pulpit.

Charles Parkhurst also came to Briggs’s defense, and he was far more vociferous and combative than the minister of the Brick Church. While van Dyke held liberal tendencies, he was
ultimately a romantic and a Victorian: influenced by an aesthetic sensibility and not given to crusades. Parkhurst, however, had come to be a full-blooded representative of liberal evangelicalism. He saw the possibilities of broadening the Word which romanticism and Briggs’s scriptural theologies offered, and he sought to apply them to the particular situation in New York City. His metaphors were bolder than van Dyke’s, and he self-consciously sought to expand what evangelical piety meant. In his defense of Briggs, he outlined the possibilities he saw; a wedding between Briggs’s scriptural theology and the sort of evangelical activism he believed the city demanded. While van Dyke was irenic, seeking a return to the status quo and the avoidance of conflict on pastoral grounds, Parkhurst was eager to pick up the gauntlet because he believed that only the version of evangelicalism he espoused was capable of healing the woes of the city. His ideological differences with van Dyke illustrate the transition from proto-liberalism influenced by romanticism to a full-fledged liberal evangelicalism.

The Briggs controversy entered the pastor’s life a time of particular importance in the evolution of Parkhurst’s thinking, at the moment when he became convinced that evangelicalism had to marshal its particular weapons against the challenge of the city. In the fall of 1890, only months before Briggs delivered his notorious inaugural address, Parkhurst had joined the Society for Prevention of Crime, an organization dedicated to combat with the city’s gambling halls, brothels, and so forth. Quickly, however, Parkhurst realized that this would necessitate taking on corruption in city government as well, and he mounted a publicity campaign that eventually produced indictments and the election of a reform mayor in 1894.39 A sermon he delivered in 1892 declared the opening of Parkhurst’s campaign; he blasted corrupt city officials, declaring that “while we try to convert criminals they manufacture them.” Phrased this way, the

challenges of crime and corruption were basically challenges to evangelical devotion and piety; indeed, Parkhurst said “Piety is the genius of the entire matter; but piety, when it fronts sin, has got to become grit.” Summoning the same invocations he made about the geographic conquest of the city, "If we are not, as a church, transcending our jurisdiction by attempting to convert Third Avenue prostitutes from their harlotry, then surely we are within the pale of our authority as a church when we antagonize and bear prophetic testimony against an administration the one necessary outcome of whose policy it is to breed prostitutes." Parkhurst believed that to say social reform was part of the work of the church did not merely mean it was a social obligation or a moral imperative that followed from Jesus Christ’s teachings; to say that social reform was part of the work of the church meant that it was bound into the metaphysical work of salvation which churches performed, capable of working conversion as much as the spoken word had been, and to be therefore read in sacred rather than secular ways.

Wedding this conviction to the Biblical hermeneutics Briggs and the romantics had developed, Parkhurst seized upon another traditional evangelical reading style – that of typology. While the evangelical conversion experience as Schaff or other traditional evangelicals imagined it was essentially a timeless event, taking place in a subjective and metaphysical encounter between the soul and God, typological use of scripture was inevitably historical. Evangelicals, like many Protestants, had traditionally read Biblical stories and characters as shadows, prefigurations, primal patterns of events later in scripture or even in the history of the church itself. Typology was not so simple as metaphor; rather, because typological stories and figures were “history-like;” their resemblance to history inspired readers to draw connections between the patterns of cause and effect revealed in Scripture and the historical situation of their own

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40 Parkhurst, Our Fight with Tammany, 17, 19, 23.
Such patterns reflected God’s intentions for human history, his use of history to unfold the work of human salvation, and thus, God power could be gain through the re-enactment of Biblical types. Thus, under Parkhurst’s appropriation of Briggs, the proper way to use the Bible was as a lens through which to read a particular historical situation, identifying the eternal patterns within the seeming chaos of the city. This was, he insisted, less a linguistic than a historical project; concern with language was a sidetrack.

Parkhurst’s call to the Madison Square Presbyterian Church to conceive of its mission as a new Israel subduing the corrupt land of Canaan was a case in point. Parkhurst was not merely inviting his congregation to imagine themselves as metaphorically Israel, but was declaring to them that God’s power to convert could be enacted through the image of conquest. Thus, though Parkhurst vigorously defended Briggs’s version of the higher criticism he saw in it nothing that shook his faith that the that proper application of the Word of God could result in miraculous spiritual feats; he told his congregation to be ready for thousands of baptisms, if they but understood and applied the Word in their lives. As he said of his experience watching Briggs tried, “As I have sat in that Scotch Church in Fourteenth street, and have heard the matter so presented as though the kingdom of Heaven pivoted on the dotting of an I in some hypothesized manuscript, I have thought to myself, what an opening for a revival!”

But revival for Parkhurst was not a miraculous and spontaneous manifestation of divine power entering human time on the channel of language; rather, following his embrace of typology, revival was basically historical. It would happen in particular times and particular

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places, shaped by circumstance, and thus resemble the transformation of human history, the
bending of human behavior along a divine archetype, and the refashioning of the social order
according to Biblical type. He thus wed typological historical events with the causative power
of conversion, rooting the salvation evangelicals offered in particular historical events. He
exhorted his audience to understand that “A belief in the universal conquest of the world to Jesus
Christ is a part of the practical working creed of all them who have completely come under the
baptism of his Spirit,” and mourned that “it has been so long since the Church has done a great
thing, that it has not only almost forgotten how, but has well-nigh ceased to conceive that great
and pronounced exploits form a true part of the object and real life of the Church.”

Thus, unlike van Dyke, whose taste for crusade was muted by his aesthetic impulse,
Parkhurst was eager for confrontation; he believed that the situation of the city was precarious
enough to require counterproduce evangelical strategy to be eliminated. Typology was not the
exclusive property of evangelicals who accepted the higher criticism and had doubts about the
evangelistic value of Schaff’s project; Robert MacArthur and Walter Buchanan, both closer to
van Dyke than to Briggs, used it as well. The difference was that Parkhurst believed that
evangelicalism must move past traditional notions of the Word in sermons or in scripture; this
was for him idolatry of language, and it offered only an abstract and theoretical solution to what
he believed to be a historical problem. In April and May 1891, soon after the General Assembly
ordered an indictment of Briggs, Parkhurst unleashed his first firebrands before crowded
congregations. The newspapers reported he attracted not only his own, but curious onlookers
interested in the Briggs trial. He began with a castigation of Briggs’s persecutors, arguing that
their version of evangelicalism was sterile and useless. “The spirit of Princeton is to make

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43 Charles Henry Parkhurst, “Opportunities and Resources for Christian Work” (New York: William C. Martin,
1888) 8, 14.
theologians just as a machine makes shoe-peg,” he cried from the pulpit, complaining, “This is the monotony of the Sahara Desert, not the unity of a living organism.”

The metaphors were important; the invocation of the desert recalled van Dyke’s own descriptions of the unevangelized city, and the reference to a faith living and breathing revealed the same inclinations toward process and plentitude rather than precision and proposition that characterized van Dyke’s inclination toward romanticism, as well as Parkhurst’s own sense of faith as something basically historical. But to van Dyke’s emotive sensibility Parkhurst added a full-fledged pastoral theology, embracing, and translating into the pulpit, Briggs’s concern for God’s presence in history. Like Briggs and other exponents of Biblical theology, Parkhurst was afflicted with what has been called “historical consciousness,” the awareness that religion, like all other human institutions, develops and changes in interaction with the rest of culture. His interpretation of the Bible reconceived it not as the ahistorical Word of God in eternal encounter with the human soul, but instead as a sort of spiritual roadmap and collection of archetypes, making human beings aware of God’s presence in a rapidly changing human world.

Therefore, Parkhurst believed it the duty of the minister to reveal to his congregation that the Bible was a tool to find God’s presence in the world, not necessarily God’s presence itself, and to guide his congregation through the perhaps painful transition from text into history. “This is a live world and a growing world,” he declared, and “The growth of ideas in the realm of religious truth is bound to produce rupture.” But it was also essential; Parkhurst’s chief charge against Briggs’s persecutors was that they wanted a religion outside of history, which Parkhurst believed was impossible. Change would come, and the crime of Briggs’s indictment was that it stood in the way of moral and spiritual progress, just as Tammany Hall did. Both Tammany and

religious reactionaries were inhibiting the conversion of the city, enabling the spread of

corruption. “We raise vast piles of money to convert a man and get him into the Church,”
Parkhurst worried, but “on the border between the known and the unknown the church has
always behaved as though it were seared.” That moment on the border was the same point
“when there is a prospect of getting a man out of the church,” and behaving in fear was the best
way to do it. Parkhurst then compared the prosecuting committee to the Spanish Inquisition,
protesting that “to tie us to the sixteenth century is an attempt to drive the Presbyterian buggy
with a hitched horse.” This sense of being anchored in time was anathema to Parkhurst’s notion
of true religion.46

Parkhurst’s salvo horrified many. One supporter of Briggs “prominent in the Church”
said “The sermon may have been brilliant, but it was a brilliant blunder.”47 He worried that
Parkhurst had not only aroused the ire of those who already opposed Briggs, but had opened new
aspects of the debate, broadening it not merely from a discussion of the fate of Charles Briggs,
but also the broader question of the role of scripture in the evangelical churches of New York
City. This was a debate that the commentator feared that Parkhurst would lose. Parkhurst,
however, was ready. On New Year’s Day 1893, a moment timed to coincide with van Dyke’s
address, Parkhurst stepped again to the pulpit of Madison Square to begin a series of three
sermons which he entitled in their collectivity “Orthodoxy versus Heresy, Or, The Indwelling
Christ.” In these sermons, Parkhurst sought to enunciate the way of reading scripture he
believed Briggs had intended, and to demonstrate its value in the city. He took as his thesis,
citing I Corinthians 4, the declaration that “The Kingdom of God is not in word but in power.”48

46 Ibid.
1891) 8.
In the sermon series, Parkhurst did more than present ideas; he pushed, as did van Dyke, toward a form of practical piety. He sought to use Briggs’s theology to give religious weight to his social activism, pushing past van Dyke’s aesthetic, contemplative emphases to a robust fusion of traditional evangelical piety of spiritual experience, a revised theology of the Word, and new devotional actions which would extend God’s converting power into the tumultuous city. It was a remaking of evangelicalism to be what Parkhurst needed it to be, because he sincerely believed that evangelical religion offered the only pure solution to the city’s challenges.

It is important to recognize the ways in which Parkhurst’s convictions about scripture were similar to even those of Schaff, not simply Briggs or van Dyke. All of these men believed that scripture bore causative power; that it could facilitate a converting encounter with the divine; but they understood the process by which this occurred – and thus, the ways in which a Christian should use the book – differently.

Evangelicals like Schaff had assumed that the causative power of the Bible lay in the correspondence between text and reality; that is, in the Bible’s ability to make particular claims about the nature of the universe. The power of God was channeled through the Word’s claims about reality – that people were sinners, that Christ was the way to salvation, and so on. These things would force human beings to consider the universe differently, and thus began the process of conversion simply upon the encounter. For Schaff, the more clearly the Bible could state these things the more powerful the claims would be. The Princeton school had denied that there was a difference between the words of the Bible and divinity itself. Parkhurst, on the other hand, sought to save the Word from itself, separating the Word from words, and rooting the causative power of scripture instead, as Briggs had argued, in its interaction with history. As he warned his congregation, “We do not even settle ourselves down in supreme confidence upon
these quoted words [of Jesus] simply because they stand in the Bible. . .They are nothing but boiled rags and printer’s ink till they are focused on the Lord, and then they are apocalypse.”49 Simply encountering the words of scripture was not sufficient; rather, the real power of the Bible was in how pale the real world looked next to the sacred world it imagined.

When Parkhurst described what he understood the Bible to be, he stated he believed that it was the story of human development from the state in which God found humanity toward what God imagined humanity to be: “The era at which the Bible picks up the story of man as being a kind of waystation where the training by which he had been developing into a perfect animal, was replaced by a supplementary training whose function it would be – through an equally protracted period, perhaps – to develop him into a perfect man.”50 Typology, then, was not simply the endless refraction of a single event; rather, it was the unfolding of a particular idea toward the ultimate goal of divine perfection. Parkhurst devoted much of his January sermons to the experience of the apostle Paul, whom he presented as a microcosm of the Christian experience itself as he imagined it. “We know that he had been brought up in the statutes and ritual of the Old Testament,” Parkhurst said, warning that the persecutors of Briggs were likewise clinging to statute and ritual, strangling Christianity’s spiritual dynamism in its cradle. But as to Paul, “Conversion with him was not a change in the manner of his life, but an exchange in the sources of his life.” That is, though Paul left behind a certain form of legalistic religion, that very form had prepared him to recognize and accept higher things. Paul’s own journey was a microcosm of the Bible’s people themselves, and therefore was typological of the Bible’s readers in the present day. As Parkhurst promised, “If you have entered into the deep places of our New Testament Scriptures you have returned from them under the pressure of realities that

no more admit of being phrased and alphabetized than the burden of a symphony can be told into
English."51 The Bible for Parkhurst was not a collected series of words spoken by God; it was
not a set of propositions that enumerated divine truth; rather, it was a story to be lived and
relived.

Parkhurst’s sermons frequently lapsed into a litany of reversals, in which the minister
dismissed some insufficient claim about the Bible which seemed to reduce it merely to language
and then embraced the opposite, which presented the scripture as a verbal reflection of a
historical action. The Bible was “Words which we have selected not as a yoke to harness
ourselves under but as a broad, green Gospel pasture to browse around in.”52 In another sermon
delivered while Briggs stood for trial Parkhurst declared, “Words are the accident of the matter.

. . The written pages from Matthew to Revelation did not make Christianity; Christianity made
the written pages from Matthew to Revelation."53 Indeed, for Parkhurst as for other liberals, the
Bible’s causative authority would rest in its value as a collection of narratives by which they
could interpret the rapidly changing world around them in sacred terms; a pattern by which the
chaos of the modern world around them might be interpreted, and thus, appropriate action taken.
The Word of God was not something encountered, but something enacted.

Many of Parkhurst’s accusers were worried about precisely where this left the Bible, the
collection of words printed on paper itself. Parkhurst’s enthusiasm for his typological method of
scripture reading seemed a convenient justification for the sort of social reform he was leading
the Madison Square Church into rather than a reason to spend more time studying the Bible.

51 Parkhurst, “Orthodoxy versus Heresy,” 26, 44. This notion of “progressive revelation” was shared by other
liberal pastors in the period, such as Henry Ward Beecher; see Thomas Olbricht, “The Rhetoric of Henry Ward
the nineteenth century (Danvers, MA: Brill, 2010) 115-139.
52 Dedicatory Services of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church (New York: The Church, 1906) 18.
And indeed, in 1891 the Sunday schools of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church stopped spending half a year on each Testament, because Parkhurst did not want his students believing “that no matter where in the Bible a thing occurs, no matter when a thing was written or who wrote it, it is all of it equally relevant to the matter of Christian character and life.” Parkhurst acknowledged his critics in 1891, and responded with a new sermon, “Three Gates on a Side,” which presented in a nutshell his theory of scripture. God, he said, had “given us a Bible, for the purposes of making the divine a practical working factor inside each man’s own individual life,” he said. But his congregation should not understand the “divine in the sense of a philosophical tenet, a theological credo, or an ethical model; but taking the divine in its very presence, power, personality, and pressure so that by virtue of it we become organs of God.” This meant that the Bible itself was not necessarily divine power in the form of language, but rather, a means for transplanting that power into the lives of its readers. And such power could only be worked out through action, not thought through in belief. For indeed, “the Old Testament is inspired narrative of the world’s first steps in holiness, and some of those steps exceedingly short and shambling.”

This did not mollify Parkhurst’s critics. The conservative *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* noted of Parkhurst’s sermons that “none of them are constructed on the ordinary homiletic pattern,” particularly pointing out that “the text is often a mere hint” of what the sermon would address. This was essentially an accusation that Parkhurst’s sermons were not Biblical enough, and though the *Review* praised Parkhurst’s eloquence, it concluded with a backhanded compliment, musing that “There does not seem to be any reason why the Madison Square pulpit should not have a richer infusion of doctrine.”

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55 Review of *Three Gates on a Side*, *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3 (1892) 185.
But what Parkhurst understood himself to be doing was precisely the opposite of simply preaching doctrine. As he and Briggs and Parkhurst began to perceive God acting through history, they also began to interpret the Bible as the archetypical and repeatable image of that truth, in illustrative rather than declarative fashion. This did not mean that they embraced or dismissed, necessarily, the factuality of the Bible’s claims. Though unlike van Dyke, most liberal evangelicals of Briggs’s or Parkhurst’s persuasion accepted particular findings of the higher criticism that seemed to cast doubt upon the historicity of Scripture, the issue seemed to them largely to be missing the point. Though there was for them a distance from the history presented in the text that evangelicals like Charles Hodge or Schaff did not feel, at the same time, as Briggs had taught, the accuracy of its asserted facts were less important than the sort of history it revealed – that is, one in which God was at active work in the world. Scripture thus still claimed causative authority, but its effect new transformed the ways its readers understood their place in the world. As William Merrill, who replaced van Dyke in the pulpit of the Brick Church put it, “This old Bible, even its oldest parts, has a way of traveling with us as we advance, with a vital meaning and message for every changing age.”

Parkhurst would later tell his congregation when they moved to a new church building that they should imagine themselves as the Jews who returned from the Babylonian exile and saw the ruins of Solomon’s temple, and understood themselves to have taken a spiritual step beyond that particular sanctuary: “a sanctuary, whether in the older or in the later time, means not only the place where we worship God in the offering of prayer and sacrifice,” he said, “It is not what things are that signifies, but what they denote, what they spell out to the hearts of the people, what they have gathered into themselves by the slow process of the years, and what they have overlaid themselves with.” This typological reading of these New Yorkers’ religious

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56 William Merrill, “Be Sure your Sin Will Find You Out,” Brück Church Record 9:2 (November 1920) 2.
experience was not a simplistic mechanical historical correspondence, but rather an organic unfolding of the processes of religious experience, understood in the enactment of holy behaviors of worship and sacrifice, not through easily interpreted correspondence of sign and signifier. As Parkhurst said, the Jewish experiences with the temple “indicate that in whatever respects the religion of Jesus is an advance upon the religion of Moses the two religions are radically one” – a claim which could be made because of similarities of the worship of each faith.57 Merrill again expanded on Parkhurst’s implication in the Brick pulpit, noting that “A striking fact about the Bible is its mirror-like quality. It shows us ourselves. It is a story-book, a picture gallery. We come to it as Hamlet’s mother and uncle came to the play, to be directed and interested, only to find the secrets of our own hearts laid bare, and every story talking of us, as we are, or as we might be . . . Nor is this only true of the individual. Each varying age finds itself here in the Bible. Some part of the infinite variety of the Word of God takes hold on each special period as if made to fit it.”58

Parkhurst’s concern for what he called the “life” of the Bible, the awareness of its historicity that Briggs had fostered, and his use of typology fostered a reorientation in evangelical piety from word to action. This was not a reorientation of goals; both Parkhurst and Schaff believed that their use of scripture promoted the immediate apprehension of divinity which lay at the heart of the evangelical conversion experience. But it was a transformation in practice and in emphasis. While Schaff prized scripture for its referential aspects, its ability to accurately describe the world, Briggs, Parkhurst, and Merrill, no longer confident in the Bible’s accuracy, instead steadily moved toward the Bible’s performative aspects; its ability to be enacted, to create itself in the activities of Christians in the world. As Merrill said, the Bible was

57 Dedicatory Services of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church, 59-60.
58 William Merrill, “The Christian Spirit for the Age,” Brick Church Record 10:3 (December 1921) 1.
a mirror, in which each person might see themselves – but not as they were. The Bible showed him what he imagined William Merrill, a Christian, would be. This idea was foundational to what liberal evangelicals began to do in New York City in the late nineteenth century: as the Word of God became performative, the process of conversion it inspired followed suit. Becoming a Christian was less about hearing than it was about enacting. The foundations for a new form of evangelical piety rose from the tumult of Briggs’s trials.
Chapter 5

Liberal Piety and the Institutional Church

The clash over the Revised Version and the imbroglio of Charles Briggs’s heresy trial undermined the Word in a way New York’s evangelicals found painfully public, and also dangerous. The daunting challenges of industrialization were agonizing for ministers who felt keenly the responsibility of spreading the Word; but at the same time they needed its power more than ever, they found could rely on it less. Biblical scholarship of the sort Briggs fought for made pastors unsteady; as TD Witherspoon, of the *Homiletic Review*, worried “Our congregations have been very much at the mercy of young and half fledged exegetes in the pulpit, who challenge for their crude and unscholarly renderings of Scripture the sanction of modern scholarship.”¹ But at the same time, the pressures of a pastorate in the city meant that ministers could not meticulously study Scripture as their predecessors could. The Baptist minister Frank Goodchild declared to an 1898 gathering of New York’s Baptists that the preacher in the city must find his inspiration more outside the library than in. The minister to the poor “must be much with the people in their homes. He must often turn his back on his study when he would gladly stay. He must learn to do deep thinking while his heels are going as he runs on some errand of mercy.”²

This flew in the face of centuries of Protestant tradition, in which the minister was expected to constantly rely upon the Bible and channel its spirit to the exclusion of all other pursuits. As James Alexander, pastor of New York’s Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in the 1850s, insisted, “To be a true preacher a man must be nothing else.”³ Further, evangelical

³ James Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching* (New York: Scribner’s, 1861) 15. This reflected Protestant doctrine to the Reformation; as Calvin said The position reflected basic doctrine since the Reformation; John Calvin had taught of the Apostle Paul that he “does not say that ‘Moses was an excellent man;’ he does not say ‘Isaiah possessed a
tradition asserted that truly effective preaching bore nothing of context or personality; indeed, to acknowledge such things would weaken it. W.G.T. Shedd, Brick parishioner in the mid-nineteenth century and professor at Union Theological Seminary declared, “The preacher is a herald, and his function is proclamation . . . He simply suffers divine truth, which is never feeble and never fails, to pass through his mind as a medium of communication.”

This sort of unselfconscious confidence would have not been unfamiliar to Philip Schaff, but to those who had seen Briggs stand in the dock of the Scotch Presbyterian Church, it was impossible. The callow preachers Witherspoon fretted over lacked confidence enough in the Word to hurl it defiantly into the jaws of the whirling city, and who could blame them? If they were too busy feeding the poor, visiting the sick, and rushing through the streets in search of their parishioners, who could expect them to steep themselves in a Scripture whose provenance was growing more dubious by the day? And what was lost – but, of course, for the converting grace of God itself?

Briggs’s theory and Parkhurst’s rhetoric, however, offered evangelicals a way to have everything; to transpose the Word through ritual, to find Scripture in the reenactment rather than the reading of it, to decouple the Word from language and find it instead in precisely the sort of activities that the city demanded of them. If faith had come by hearing for generations of evangelicals to the Reformation, in New York City by the turn of the century, faith would now come by doing: the Word no longer embodied in speech, but in behavior. New York’s evangelical Christians, then, understood their efforts to relieve the suffering of the poor, to aid in

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the integration of immigrants, to fight prostitution and drunkenness and child delinquency, not merely in terms of social reform or cultural uplift, but as liturgy: rituals of conversion which would draw both the reformer and the reformed into the orbit of the Word enacted, and bring conversion to their souls no less than preaching might. The social gospel, the institutional church were thus variants on the old evangelical imperative, and should be understood in terms of evangelical religious behavior.

Many evangelicals who experimented with these things took upon themselves the term coined by Henry Sloane Coffin, who was raised in Manhattan and took the pulpit at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in 1905: “liberal evangelicalism.” To its advocates, liberal evangelicalism was less a philosophical position than it was a pragmatic one; liberal evangelicals were those who sought to preserve the power of the Word through improvisational pastoral techniques; who believed that fighting for its textual provenance would be less worthwhile than finding other vehicles which could bear it. As van Dyke wearily commented during Briggs’s trial, though he himself was not entirely sympathetic to the higher criticism, “It is our duty to turn from the paths of fruitless controversy and devote our energies to the work of plain religion.” For him, the term “liberal” when applied to evangelicalism meant a desire to emphasize the common experiential element of evangelical religion, the importance of seeking the conversion experience through appeals to the sentiment evoked in tradition, scripture, and

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experience, rather than devoting valuable Sunday time to doctrinal exegesis.\(^6\) Coffin, a half generation younger than van Dyke and writing twenty years later, stated more precisely that “we are liberals on behalf of our evangelicalism . . . We wish to state the Gospel of Christ convincingly to the thinking men and women of our generation,” and for that, he believed the church needed to adapt its methods, though not its goals.\(^7\) He insisted on both words in the phrase. “Note which word in our title stands merely in the qualifying position of the adjective and which occupies the position of eminence as the noun,” he stated. “We own ourselves redeemed by and we worship God in Jesus Christ.”\(^8\)

In the twenty years between van Dyke’s dismay at the prosecution of Charles Briggs and Coffin’s manifesto on the eve of American intervention in the First World War liberal evangelicals cultivated the discontent with old ways of reading scripture and enthusiasm for experience which Parkhurst and Briggs had advocated, and transformed them into new pastoral strategies.\(^9\) Key to grasping how this worked is an understanding of how evangelicals understood liturgy: the set of behaviors in the act of worship. Christians have traditionally understood the liturgy to be a ritual recapitulation of the history of salvation, a narrative told through action that teaches Christians of the ways in which God offers salvation; fundamentally the story of the life and salvific death of Jesus.\(^10\) For decades, the key acts in evangelical liturgy were oriented around the verbal: the sermon, the public reading of scripture, the sinner’s

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\(^6\) Henry van Dyke, “The Bible as it Is,” in *Historic Presbyterianism: three sermons for the times* (New York: Randolph, 1893) 30; on 24 van Dyke makes clear his own position on higher criticism, noting that he accepted the historicity of many passages of scripture Briggs disputed.

\(^7\) Coffin, “Practical Aims,” 1, 3.

\(^8\) Henry Sloane Coffin, “Practical Aims,” 1.


confession of their need for the grace of Christ, all of which drew legitimacy from their presence in Biblical text.\textsuperscript{11}

But the power of liturgical ritual did not work simply through cognition, understanding and agreeing with what a minister might be saying – for indeed, many sinners might listen with initial skepticism only to find themselves overcome. Preaching and hearing the Word was not an effort at instruction, in the manner of a schoolhouse, but rather a way to guide participants toward internalization of the meanings that the rituals embodied. The very participation in certain behaviors shaped one’s identity, self-conception and desires in ways the ritual taught. To be baptized was to die and rise again into the resurrected Christ; to stand at the anxious bench was to become someone in need of salvation; to listen the minister preach was to hear yourself convicted as a sinner; to walk down the aisle and say the words that confessed Christ was to be reborn and sanctified. And to participate in any of these was to become a person who would participate; to shift one’s identity. And that, in short, was conversion.\textsuperscript{12}

The great insight of liberal evangelicals was that the boundaries of worship did not necessarily be confined to these traditional rites. Evangelicals had long experimented with the forms of worship as ways to encourage conversion; Charles Finney had invented the anxious bench; evangelicals like Dwight Moody had pioneered the altar call, calling sinners to walk


down the aisle. Just so, liberal evangelicals used the language of liturgy and worship to describe their efforts at welfare, social relief, and the various services they offered the poor of New York City and infuse such practical actions with the spiritual power of evangelical worship.

The roots of this argument lay in romanticism’s influence on evangelical life and their growing distrust of the Word. Fascination with the human personality led them to emphasize the potential of personal influence to sway a sinner toward conversion, and to transform the minister from a translucent channel to an opaque incarnation of the Word of God. The emphasis here upon embodiment twined with romanticism’s correlation between spiritual and aesthetic experience to draw liberal evangelicals toward a new interest in the solemnity of ritual, the importance of environment, of movement, and of behavior. And the ways in which Briggs and Parkhurst read scripture gave liberal evangelicals theological justification; just as baptism or the Lord’s Supper were sacraments because they were in imitation of Christ, so could liberal evangelicals claim such justification for their efforts to feed the poor, visit the sick, and clothe the naked. Thus, their new devotional tendencies offered liberal evangelicals a way to read evangelical liturgy onto a city that seemed to defy its processes.

Henry van Dyke was perhaps the greatest exponent of romantic evangelicalism in Gilded Age New York, and as he had experimented with the spiritual power of the sublime in the Brick Church’s renovation, so did he experiment with its potential in evangelical worship. He was an amateur poet and author as well as a minister, and frequently would bypass a sermon entirely.

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during Christmas services in favor of reading a Nativity novel to his congregation.\textsuperscript{14} This was not frivolous or sentimental; rather, van Dyke believed that literature was capable of bearing divine power. “Literature,” he wrote, “is not an elegant amusement. It is hard work and it demands patient and arduous labor to keep it in touch with life.”\textsuperscript{15} Staying in touch with life, Van Dyke believed, meant staying in touch with the divine; the transcendent attained through finding the truth and vitality of the particular.

Art was valuable to this end both because it was capable of stirring the emotions of the observer, but also because it presented the heroic figure of the artist as a model to be followed; in the case of evangelical ministers, the artist was themselves. The aesthetic power of art could also be seen in romanticism’s fascination with the human personality. Henry Ward Beecher’s homiletics, which emphasized that the sermon evoked emotion through dramatic presentation and poetic style as much as through their scriptural content, were a striking example. Beecher spoke of religious sentiment in artistic terms, generated through an almost artistic sensibility.\textsuperscript{16} Encounters with the divine, he taught, emerged from a sense of the “beauty of holiness,” which itself was born of the imagination. The preacher’s task was to fire those faculties, and an effective preacher was a lion in the pulpit. “The man that preaches with power is an artist,” Beecher instructed.\textsuperscript{17}

Pastoral searches revealed that congregations depended upon their pastors to be warm personally, not merely skillful preachers of the Word. H. Edwards Rowland, member of the Session of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, dismissed another candidate for the pulpit in

\textsuperscript{14} James Macullough Farr, \textit{A Short History of the Brick Presbyterian Church in the city of New York} (New York: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1943) 7-8. One of Van Dyke’s particular favorites was his own \textit{The Other Wise Man} (New York: Harper and Sons, 1895).
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Brick Church Year Book} 1899-1900, 7
\textsuperscript{17} Beecher, \textit{Lectures}, 159-60, 109-110, 15-17, 16.
1899, declaring “He is not strong enough, in personality, and in his intellectuality, to lead and feed our Church people, although he draws great crowds.” A decade and a half later, George Urquhart, a member of the congregation at the Fifth Avenue Church recommended one candidate, who, he wrote, “impresses me as a spiritual man who is practical and with the sympathy and understanding of practical life which go toward a good pastor.” This was not merely an exhibition of sentimental Christian ethics, but potent in its own right, a vehicle for the divine grace of God.

When Charles Parkhurst dedicated a new church building, he explained the ways in which personality had come to transcend mere spoken words in the preaching of the Gospel. Parkhurst looked out upon his congregation and read Hebrews 1:12, which declared that God spoke “by his Son.” This passage, he stated, taught that “occasions are the best orators,” that the events of church work and a holy life were able to “intensify consciousness, stimulate the mind and create heat in those chambers of the soul,” as sermons once had, for in Christ the Word became human. Doing was a more powerful teacher than mere words, for religion was “not a style of behavior, not . . . a form of philosophy, but a mode of life, vital impulse imported from foreign ground.” This was a new sort of preaching for many evangelicals, one which depended not upon words to communicate meaning, but which imposed its power upon the body through action; the Word becoming the flesh of its practitioners. And locating the Word in the noble actions of human life made possible the transformation of service into converting ritual.

Thus, when van Dyke left the Brick pulpit in 1903 a member of his congregation wrote that it was “not . . . the earnest eloquence of the pulpit that will linger longest in our memory,”

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19 Dedicatory Services of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church (New York: The Church, 1906) 17, 20.
but rather van Dyke’s pastoral care, his “personal friendship that did not halt at the vestry door.” After all, the writer claimed, “personal influence is surely a very important kind of preaching, and is often more potent for lasting good than the most earnest sermon, preached to a great aggregation of humanity.”\textsuperscript{20} When he left the church in favor of teaching it at Princeton, van Dyke claimed it was “in no sense a call to leave the ministry of Christ, but rather to go into it still deeper.” He claimed that “there is no place in which the preaching of plain and practical Christianity is more necessary than in our colleges.”\textsuperscript{21} Van Dyke believed he was abandoning a pulpit in order to preach the gospel; sermonizing was no longer the most effective way to do so. As he wrote to his congregation “There is no way in which a man who wants to speak in behalf of faith . . . can find a wider audience than through the printed page.”\textsuperscript{22} As an observer described van Dyke, a teacher of “Carlyle and Arnold,” in the classroom:

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By giving an example, by particularizing instead of soaring into the grand, though meaningless realms of the general, he presents a complete picture . . .

Nor does the force of his personality in the class-room lie only in his words and the thoughts he expresses. It goes deeper, to the man himself. Morals are not tacked on. They are far more effectively, though not the less clearly, shown by Dr. Van Dyke in his descriptions of the noblest deeds and sentiments of Christian manhood as exemplified in the lives and teachings of the greatest literary men in the world. By presenting the best in life, he stimulates to emulation.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{20} Brick Church Year Book of Work and Worship 1899-1900 (New York: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1900) 5
\textsuperscript{21} Brick Church Year Book 1899-1900, 7; see also Session Minutes, Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City, NY, January 26, 1899. Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.
\textsuperscript{22} Brick Church Year Book 1899-1900, 7.
\textsuperscript{23} Louis Froelick, “Dr. Van Dyke in the Classroom,” Book News: an illustrated magazine of literature and books 24:285 (May 1906) 611.
\end{flushright}
The homiletics of Horace Bushnell, who advocated the preacher visible in behavior as the best incarnation of the Word, as well as romanticism’s lionization of the heroic pastor, echo in the word “emulation.” But this romanticism gradually drifted toward blurriness; speaking of language as an art made it an art among other arts, and as it became possible to talk of the words of Scripture as artistic, the sacramental power of preaching, similarly, was spread to other forms of worship in the church. By the 1920s William Merrill, who took the pulpit at Brick in 1910, could claim that writing sermons was like “the production of any work of art.” Merrill found music particularly powerful: “vital, symbolic, communal and catholic,” it spoke to immediate experience. As “a medium that goes beyond logic and definition,” it overcame the artificial divides that creeds and other systematic, linguistic theologies created and rather produced the emotional experience that Merrill and other liberal evangelicals recognized as the grace of God.  

The nearest analogue to the great preacher, he insisted, were composers like Beethoven and “Tchaikowsky.”

Merrill was at the forefront of an early twentieth liturgical revival among liberal evangelical Protestants. He found it easy to draw a connection between a romantic spirituality and a renewed attention to ritual and action in worship, between the preacher as a performer and the still vital transmission of the Word of God. He emphasized that the sermon was best experienced not as the culmination or most powerful aspect of a worship service, but rather as a piece of a greater context: “We may and should make way for a great development of the symbolic, for a far larger recognition of the emotions in our public worship, for more music.

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24 Merrill, Freedom of the Preacher, 50-3.
25 Merrill, Freedom of the Preacher, 30-31
26 Further discussion of this can be found in Melton, Presbyterian Worship, 114-119; Diana Butler, Standing Against the Whirlwind: evangelical Episcopalians in nineteenth century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 118-124; Jeanne Halgren Kilde, When Church Became Theatre: the transformation of evangelical architecture and worship in nineteenth century America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2002) 132-140.
greater use of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and a richer liturgy.” The thing to recognize was that “the sermon does not stand or fall alone.” The conclusion evangelicals like Merrill were drifting toward was that worship converted by, in some sense, encouraging imitation of Jesus in participation in the sacraments, and fusing that behavior to a congregation’s spiritual response to the aesthetics of the worship service.

By the turn of the twentieth century these convictions about the importance of personality and sentiment in worship had become so powerful that many evangelicals in New York had believed that congregations had to become more involved in worship themselves if they were to gain the full benefit of the spirituality it offered. More, they had begun to draw explicit connections between the form of worship congregations practiced and their spiritual health in the context of the city. In 1903, Henry van Dyke chaired a special Committee on the Forms of Service commissioned by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA to produce an optional liturgical manual. The commission itself was controversial, as many evangelicals, accustomed to the low church tradition, were suspicious of anything that smacked of “ritualism.” But Van Dyke was convinced that “The manner in which the services of religion are conducted has an immense, unconscious, and continual influence upon the vital elements of belief in the hearts of the worshipers;” therefore it was essential that Presbyterians pay detailed attention to every aspect of worship, and encourage congregations to participate in

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27 Merrill, Freedom of the Preacher, 84, 39.
beneficial ways.  
Too many evangelical churches stressed the worship of the minister alone, making the preachers into actors merely watched by their flocks.

Van Dyke took the chair of the committee convinced that his church needed a liturgy capable of attracting, involving, and ultimately converting the inhabitants of the city. It was most urgent, he wrote, that worship speak to “all people.” Conscious of the demands of the urban environment, van Dyke measured his natural sympathy for aesthetic worship and worried about the relevance of high church forms – the vestments, choirs, chanting, and so forth - to the people on the streets. Such practice “does not in our judgment promote the end of Presbyterian worship,” van Dyke wrote. Rather, “The general consideration of the subject of methods and forms of public worship in the Presbyterian Church must include, first, a historical study, and second, a careful investigation of present conditions and needs.”

The first goal of the new liturgy, then, was to attract and involve worshipers. The committee was particularly critical of worship that turned the audience into mere spectators, demanding that effective worship require participation, both verbal and physical, from worshipers. “How can we hope to keep alive the interest and faith of the people who follow the Presbyterian order in these sealing ordinances, unless we use a service in which the faith of our church is embodied?” the Committee asked.

The liturgical forms – baptism, prayers, orders of worship - *the Book of Common Worship* the committee produced “sought to bring them into closer harmony with the living faith and the practical needs of our churches,” such as “the spirit of missions, the evangelistic impulse, the interest in civic and social welfare and temperance, the desire for the triumph of the kingdom

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30 “General Assembly of the PCUSA: Reports of Special Committees” (Buffalo, New York: 1904) 81, 82.

31 “General Assembly of the PCUSA: Reports of Special Committees,” 81.
of Christ.”

It sought to instruct congregations in these things through involving them more deeply in worship, which meant physical and verbal participation. This was not something many worshipers were used to. “It is evidently difficult for the stranger within the gates of one of these Presbyterian churches to know when to rise up and when to sit down,” the Committee observed; the ways in which the actions of the liturgy embodied meanings required greater clarity. To that end, the Committee’s forms sought to create both clear distinctions among the elements of worship and to provide a wide variety of specifically themed forms for use in each portion of the service. “It is most desirable that the people should have, first, a more general agreement in regard to the parts of the service, and their order,” van Dyke wrote, “and second, as much freedom of choice as possible in regard to the material of the different parts.”

The Committee wanted to avoid the imposition of forms upon the denomination in order to preserve the flexibility of each congregation as it dealt with its own challenges and context.

The Book of Worship attracted praise for precisely these reasons. One minister wrote to van Dyke’s co-chairman, Louis Benson of Philadelphia, to commend the first edition, stating “Most of all I approve the fact that the worshiper is himself in action throughout. He is not passive. There is more than a spectacle. He himself moves. This is psychologically correct.”

Van Dyke agreed, saying that that “the voluntary idea is not only emphasized on the title page, but is carried out throughout the volume.” The notion of “voluntarism” had long been central in American evangelicalism. Its roots lay in evangelical theology of conversion, which centered on the individual’s response to God and elevated the notion of right choice and behavior. Thus,

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32 “General Assembly of the PCUSA: Reports of Special Committees II” (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1905) 10. Records of the Committee on Forms of Service, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.
33 “General Assembly of the PCUSA: Reports of Special Committees,” 82.
worship which emphasized the transforming effect of right and active participation was
spiritually powerful. In the early nineteenth century evangelical reformers like Lyman Beecher
refined the language of voluntarism, redirecting it toward efforts at social and cultural reform
and emphasizing the importance of moral rectitude and social activism.\textsuperscript{36} Van Dyke and the
Committee reemphasized the liturgical and theological importance of voluntarism, implicitly
closing the circle that Beecher’s cohort had opened and regaining the power of the principle of
choice for worship. They did not, however, completely discard the importance of moral action
that their antebellum predecessors had stressed. Rather, they sought to fuse the two – to locate
the possibility of worship in the campaigns and challenges of the public city.

Though liberal evangelicals had renewed their worship within the walls of their own
churches, they were acutely aware, as van Dyke’s concerns expressed, that they needed also for
their converting liturgies to reach into the streets of the city. And, drawing on the romantic
tradition, participation in events that drew the spiritually hungry into personal interaction with
the spiritually strong became increasingly important. Traditional revivalists like Moody and J.
Wilbur Chapman had long recognized something like this, for them, the aftermeeting, where the
revivalist and his aides met privately with those touched enough by the sermon to seek Christ,
was as important as the sermon. Chapman called it “Personal Evangelism,” and spent a great
deal of energy emphasizing the importance of Christians seeking opportunities to personally
interact with potential converts.\textsuperscript{37} He argued that personal evangelism was particularly essential
for the city; “Let no man delude himself with the thought that because his own Church may be a

\textsuperscript{36} See Boyer, \textit{Urban Masses}, 12-14; George Marsden, \textit{The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian

\textsuperscript{37} J. Wilbur Chapman, \textit{Present Day Evangelism} (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1903) 139-143; William Moody, \textit{The
success and his obligations to his own people have been met that therefore he has no responsibility for the lost of the city,” he said, warning that because the anonymity of the city, too many Christians “feel a sense of freedom” from “the problem of reaching the great masses of people.”

Personal evangelism, the responsibility of Christians to meet others face to face, and hand in hand, to testify one on one, was a solution to the anomie of urban life, and while for Chapman it still meant verbal testifying, the model for more expansive forms of evangelism was there.

For example, efforts on a smaller scale than a revival, and more informal than the organized liturgies of one of Chapman’s services, seemed worthwhile as well. John Hall, for instance, minister in the pulpit of the Fifth Avenue Church in the 1880s, resolved in 1892 to visit each of his congregants once a year, a task that meant devoting some hours to the task every day in a congregation of several hundred like his own. These visitations were common enough practice in Protestant congregations of the nineteenth century, though a commitment like Hall’s was rather remarkable, particularly when his flock was scattered up and down Manhattan. But to Hall, influenced by the broadened notions of the Word that liberal evangelicals were embracing, they were not mere courtesy. “This is not a social matter,” Hall wrote. Rather, its aim was “to make united our approach at the throne of grace.”

Hall reflected the liberal evangelical shift toward increasingly understanding grace to be channeled through personality and the virtuous actions of the Christian; to he and his congregation, such public outreach, demonstrated benevolence and concern for the well-being of all within the borders of the congregation was a

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39 Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church Yearbook (New York: Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, 1892) 6-7.
powerful way to maintain the bonds of belief which drew a congregation together across the confusing ocean of the city streets.

By 1903, William Richards, Van Dyke’s second successor at the Brick Church, could draw all of these threads together – the notion of personal evangelism, the sense that ritual behavior could be a form of worship, and confidence in the ability of human personality to mediate spiritual power – and tell his congregation that their very lives could be what sermons once were.

What may not a faithful Church here do in the way of commending the religion of Jesus to an immense population? What might not an unfaithful Church do in the way of discrediting that religion? There may be sermons in bricks as well as ‘sermons in stones,’ and our prayer is that the sermon preached here, by our own lives, and by every material particle of this structure, may always be the true evangel, so that, of the endless procession moving past our doors, many, when they look upon this house of prayer, may get some clearer sense of the divine goodness and some stronger impulse toward holiness and service; and, as the days pass, may more and more of them be drawn into worship with us.

For Richards here, the purpose of the sermon is still that of Calvin or Shedd or Alexander: to summon humans to worship, to make them aware of the role of divinity in their lives, to participate in the community of God; to convert. But its form is almost unrecognizably different; the sermon is the enactment of Biblical themes which van Dyke or John Hall or Coffin

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41 *Brick Church Year Book of Work and Worship 1902-1903* (New York: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1903) 7.
drew upon. Preaching is not here the provenance of the preacher alone; rather, its responsibility and authority are rooted in the lives of the congregation and through them imposed onto its community. Evangelism had become democratized. The transformative power of the Word was borne not merely through sermons but also through personal interaction, the power of example, and the benevolent force of service. As a congregant said of Maltbie Babcock, who briefly occupied the Brick between van Dyke and Richards, “To hear one of his sermons is to bear a great responsibility.”

Richards’s gaze went down the aisle and out the door of his church into the downtown surrounding the Brick Church where it sat in Murray Hill on Fifth Avenue and 37th Street. For liberal evangelicals, ministry to the city had just begun.

By the turn of the century, then, liberal evangelicals surely felt the sense that the work of the church must somehow acknowledge and even incorporate the urban environment, but they were equally concerned that this be done on religious rather than secular terms. The language and ritual of worship might provide a way. Only a few years after Richards’s sermon, the leaders of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church began to talk about “cathedralizing.” Implicit in the term was the sense that changing the city’s spiritual landscape was not merely structural, achieved through altering the streets and skylines, but also connected in some way to the rhythms of human action; it bound the looming architectural presence of the city to the power of the traditional rites of Christianity. Henry Jessup, an elder of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, maintained that to cathedralize a church was an active process, not a static presence; the effect of “the review of the past and the clarion call to wider service in the future, [that] must combine to strengthen our church life and avert any disposition to reactionary indolence.” While the word itself implied an architectural and geographic achievement, the challenge facing the

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42 Brick Church Year Book of Work and Worship 1900-1901 (New York: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1903) 4.
cathedralizers and other advocates of urban evangelism was deeper. They sought to integrate the architecture increasingly dominating the streets and the shifting ebb and flows of the city’s human organizations and relationships with the transformative rituals of personal and evangelical religion. As Jessup said, “The aim is religious; the method institutional.”  

And indeed, by the 1890s, the phrase “institutional church,” was a popular one. Historians have generally understood the concept to be the central motif of evangelical Protestantism’s response to the city. One of its primary advocates, Edward Judson of New York’s Judson Memorial Baptist Church, described the institutional church as “an organized body of Christian believers, who finding themselves in a hard and un congenial social environment, supplement the ordinary methods of the Gospel . . . by a system of organized kindness, a congeries of institutions,” that sought to address “people on physical, social, and intellectual” planes as well as the simply spiritual. The institutional church organized community outreach programs like job training, welfare, and rehabilitation efforts; it mobilized the resources of congregations into charity work, cultural enrichment courses, and youth activities. Their buildings had libraries and classrooms, recreation halls and sleeping spaces. Under William Rainsford, St. George’s Episcopal Church, for instance, opened a gymnasium, and organized cooking, dancing, and sewing classes as well as a literary and dramatic society, and offered food and clothing distribution to the poor of the city. As the 1890s progressed, other churches followed suit. At Brick, Van Dyke organized a Pastor’s Aid Society to help the

43 Henry Jessup, History of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church (New York: Church Centennial Committee, 1908), 136, 114.
indigent, an Employment Society hired poor young women to make clothing, and a Boys and Girls Club provided local children with supervised activities.\textsuperscript{46}

Their efforts have often been described as an invigoration of “practical Christianity;” a transformation of recruiting strategies from preached religion into social outreach. Thus, the movement to reinvigorate the city church has rarely been looked to for theological innovation.\textsuperscript{47} However, the changes in the urban churches in turn of the century cities should be understood as not merely a reformation in church strategy or a reorientation of practical methods, but rather, a transformation in cosmology, a shift in the ways evangelicals understood the universe to work born of the collision between the theological improvisations van Dyke, Merrill and the rest pioneered and the bruising circumstances of the city. Advocates of the institutional church took two steps: first, they sought to redefine their efforts in the language of worship, liturgy, and sacrament, investing social work with spiritual power to convert. Secondly, they articulated a way in which these rites would save the city: the conversion they promised would bring not only individual salvation, but order and unity to the divided community.

This was not to say that there was not skepticism. Many theologically conservative churches engaged in social services; MacArthur’s Calvary Baptist, for instance, organized a

\textsuperscript{46} Brick Church Year Book of Work and Worship 1891-1892 (New York City: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1892) 11, 31, 37.

Benevolent Society and social organizations for local children. But for some critics, all the talk about brotherhood and uplift that surrounded the institutional church could seem somewhat vague; as Charles Thompson, the pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church acknowledged; some argued “that in the extension of what is called secular the sacred will suffer.” New York’s own Isaac Haldeman lashed out at the institutional church, blasting it for a “spirituality [that] never gets beyond refined ethics . . . It is humanitarian, and not divine.” Judson himself had warned that “there is constant danger of secularization” to the institutional church, but recommended to counter such tendencies that the social services of the church be closely associated with formal worship; hymns, preaching, and the Lord’s Supper. But increasingly, some advocates of the institutional church pushed Judson’s theology further, seeking to reconcile the liberal piety that embodied the Word with the efforts of the institutional church, and began to argue that it was a mistake to understand social work and worship of God to be different at all.

In March 1894, a group of liberal evangelical ministers met at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York to create the Open and Institutional Church League, which over the next two decades moved the institutional church into national prominence. As the name implied, the League – through conventions and its journal, the Open Church – promoted

48 Robert MacArthur, History of Calvary Baptist Church, New York (New York: Scott, 1890), 107-112. Another prominent example is Russell Conwell’s Grace Baptist Church in Philadelphia; Conwell embraced the notion of the “institutional church” specifically, and his congregation’s organizational capacity was daunting. See Agnes Burr, Russell H. Conwell and his Work (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1917) 209-227.
51 Judson, The Institutional Church, 31.
the methods of the institutional church, and encouraged ecumenical cooperation and dialogue over its aims, definition, and methods.\textsuperscript{52} But the OICL was not merely an organizational effort, but an evangelical ministry, dedicated to propagating evangelical religion in the form of social reform. Its platform described five particular “methods” which the OICL called upon all churches with sufficient resources to adopt, among which were “educational, reformatory, and philanthropic channels.” These were not merely welfare practices, but a spiritual manifesto; the “methods” the platform described not simply techniques for service but sacraments which the OICL described as transmitting the forces of grace.

The language the OICL used to interpret these methods indicated that its members understood their work to be primarily a form of worship. Rather than justifying their mission with sociology, politics, or appeals to charity the platform claimed that the goal behind the OICL’s organization of welfare practices was to more fully develop the “spirit of ministration” that Jesus Christ exemplified in New York City; that is, to more effectively render pastoral service. Rather than speaking of the philosophy behind its relief efforts in academic or policy terms, the OICL rooted their arguments in a theology of conversion. For instance, when William Rainsford spoke to a wealthy parishioner about the sort of building he wished for his parish, he said “It should be a teaching house and a dancing house; a reading house and a playing house, and because it was these it should be a preaching house, bidding the neighborhood to look for and strive for a better manhood and a better day.”\textsuperscript{53} In Rainsford’s language we see a twofold way of preaching; the building spoke, as did Calvary Baptist, to the neighborhood itself,

\textsuperscript{52} On the League, see Abell, \textit{Urban Impact on American Protestantism}, 160-163; J. Michael Utzinger, \textit{Yet Saints their Watch are Keeping: fundamentalists, modernists, and the development of evangelical ecclesiology, 1887-1937} (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2006) 40-43. See also \textit{Offices, Constitution, and Platform of the Open and Institutional Church League} (New York: Bible House, nd) 3, calling for “a bond of union and fellowship between churches and individuals who are seeking to advance the principles and work expressed in the platform.”

converting the landscape, but this preaching also transformed the neighborhood’s population. The commonplace activities held there drew New Yorkers into synchronization with the redeemed New York City of Rainsford’s imagination. As one guidebook noted soon after Rainsford arrived: “Dr. W.S. Rainsford. He has recently made a sensation by preaching practically.” A Christian building could make Christian people. Charles Cuthburt Hall, president of Union Theological Seminary, echoed Rainsford’s material theology at an OICL meeting in the First Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, celebrating “the opportunity that comes through the new spirit of lay cooperation,” and praising the “testimony” that such work created. The First Church building, the audience was told, “was the realization of [Hall’s] prayers and leadership while the pastor.” This meant “his address was made more impressive,” for “the place . . . illustrated the principles for which the league stands.”

Just as baptism or the Lord’s Supper gained their spiritual provenance through imitation of the life of Christ, so did the OICL argue that reenactment of Christ’s life in other ways could marshal similar spiritual powers. The reasoning behind their actions consistently hearkened back to the modeling of scriptural archetype, using the methods that Briggs and Parkhurst had advocated, and more, drawing on the model of the two traditional sacraments. More than anything, the OICL rooted their work in a theology of the Incarnation, arguing that Christ’s behavior in his life revealed God’s will for humanity. Clarence Dickinson, first president of the OICL, claimed the church was the body of Christ, and thus “should furnish the material environment through which his spirit can be expressed to the age in which it exists.” That is, in the contemporary age it was incumbent upon the church to take the form in which Christ’s

54 The Sun’s Guide to New York City (Jersey City: Jersey City Publishing Company, 1892) 19.
55 “Believers in broader methods,” Congregationalist (November 4, 1897) 649.
56 Preliminary Conference, 27; see also Leighton Williams, “The Church in the City,” (American Baptist Publication Society, 1914) 7.
mission would appear the most meaningful and powerful. For Dickinson, the institutional church was that form, and was the result of divine inspiration; its participants would gain Christ’s image through the reenactment of Christ’s life. In a real sense Dickinson argued that the works the institutional church pursued were not simply good deeds, but rather a ritualization of Christ’s actions, and therefore liturgy, and thus behaviors with the power to convert as surely as participation in a revival ever had.

Rainsford’s celebration of the raising of the building he hoped for, St. George’s Memorial House, erected in 1888 made the point more clearly. He told the crowd that he wanted to “speak of what this building means.” Rainsford called the act of construction “the perfect expression of a people’s worship.” As such, he declared, the building was “not a thing to be described, but to be seen . . . this building is alive.” It was more than a building; it was a constant, dynamic act of worship, and – paramount for evangelicals like Rainsford – a vital and continuing proclamation of salvation to the unbelieving city, and a way to erect a new kingdom of God within it. And indeed, Rainsford evoked the nation-building language that Parkhurst had before him. The Memorial House was, he said, a new “Tabernacle of Israel,” because both buildings “represented thousands of gifts, free will offerings all.” As they contributed money, material, and even time to the effort, Rainsford’s congregation made themselves into the children of Israel that Parkhurst had urged New Yorkers to become and that the word “tabernacle” evoked; they became the elect of God triumphantly seizing the wilderness. The erection of the building was thus a liturgical act, carrying believers across the barriers between earth and heaven through ritual reenactment of a sacred narrative, changing the secular into the sacred.57

Thus for many the social service of the institutional church exerted metaphysical power similar to that of the formal liturgy, because the institutional church imitated the patterns Christ laid out in the Bible both in his own life and in the Great Commission given to the apostles to preach the gospel and thus wielded the same converting power that their sermons did. It guided its participants along the same journey from damnation to salvation as did any other ways of encountering the Word. As Edward Judson preached to his congregation at the Judson Memorial Church, “I do not convey the thought of Christ in the deepest sense when I give a man a Bible; but when the truths of that Bible are wrought into the texture of my own life and character, and I then come into contact with him in daily intercourse and in deal, I convey to him the truth that there is in Jesus.”

Thompson declared the OICL’s work was distinct from secular charities because it was “evangelical,” performed in a “spiritual atmosphere,” and thus especially efficacious beyond what simply giving aid to the poor could do. He, like other liberal evangelical advocates of the institutional church, was skeptical of “special evangelistic services” that seemed to unduly draw attention away from the churches themselves. Rather he argued that “such an atmosphere [of revival] should be secured by the character of the workers, by religious exercises connected with the work . . . .” He ascribed this power to the OICL’s efforts because its advocates “have heard the old call, ‘Go out into the world’ . . . the old truths that sent out the Apostles.”

Indeed, many early advocates of institutional church work engaged in a sort of Christian primitivism, arguing that the institutional church fulfilled the promise of the early church and the Biblical patriarchs. This gave them a utopian vision of the community the institutional church

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58 “The Coming of Christ,” sermon preached November 2, 1887, Sermons Folder, Edward Judson Papers, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta, Georgia.
59 Thompson, “The Sacredness of the Secular.”
60 E.B. Sanford, “Convention of the Open and Institutional Church League,” The Independent (26 October 1896) 16.
could found, and that New York City could become. George Whitefield Mead, author of
*Modern Methods in Church Work*, a basic manual for the institutional church, told the fourth
annual meeting of the OICL that “Instead of standing for something new, the League stands for
something old and original as the gospel of Jesus.” In his introduction to Mead’s book, Charles
Thompson argued that the contemporary ministry should be “akin to the noble service of the
Apostolic Church . . . the Acts of the Apostles is our hand book to Christian life,” not merely in
programs, but “in a certain great spirit” which guided their communal effort.61

The Baptist Leighton Williams emphasized the transformative promise of that spirit. The
minister of the Amity Baptist Church on 54st Street and later friend of the great theologian of the
social gospel Walter Rauschenbusch, Williams called institutional work “the primitive ideal,”
and said “at many periods of the subsequent history of the church this fellowship has been
manifested in a very high degree,” praising the eighteenth century Moravian communities as well
as the contemporary impulse toward social work. This impulse, for Williams, explained the
success in conversions the Moravians enjoyed; as he said, “many splendid exhibitions of the
workings of divine grace have been given to the world” through such efforts.62 Their
primitivism sought not only the parameters of a communal lifestyle, but for the outpouring of
God’s spirit which the apostles claimed. Rauschenbusch acknowledged, “it is futile to attempt to
reform modern society along Biblical models,” but, at the same time “The spirit pervading the
Hebrew laws . . . is so tender and noble that it puts us to shame.”63 As Williams claimed, the

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61 George Whitefield Mead, “The Open Church League,” *New York Evangelist* (November 11, 1897) 10; Charles
62 Williams, “The Church in the City,” 25, 12.
63 Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907) 345. See also Matthew
Culture* 17:1 (Winter 2007) 95-126.
model the New Testament offered was “a new redeemed and purified society, possible only through new redemptive forces” found “in the church of Christ.”

The institutional church under this reading was the gospel; the embodied proclamation of the good news as much as was any other sacrament. To participate in it was to become part of the church. The fundamental mission of the OICL, then, was to evangelize, and through evangelization, to create a spiritual community out of the broken streets of the city. Its works were “redemptive forces” capable of sanctifying New York, person by person and neighborhood by neighborhood. As a member of the Brick congregation put it, “At least two hundred of the men and women who worship here on Sunday morning should be ready to go out every week to work in the Sunday School, the Boys Club, the Girls Club, the Sewing school and the many other kinds of helpful labor.”

This were not simply good works; John Scudder, a New York Congregationalist minister maintained that the problem with church work to date was that “a great many people today believe the church is nothing more than a congregation of individuals who believe in doing good.” This, Scudder said, was “infidelity.”

The symbiosis between regular worship and the sacred acts of service went both ways. Shepherd Knapp reported that the woman’s Bible study group he supervised was quite successful to this end; “A number of women,” he noted, “who had been attending our Church Services with more or less regularity, were first able to make themselves known by name and come into personal contact with others of the congregation through the opportunity of the Bible Class.” These gatherings were not merely about sociality; they were means to an evangelical end.

When the woman’s, men’s, and children’s class held a mutual social, the pastor William

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64 Williams, “The Church in the City,” 6-7.
65 *Brick Church Year Book of Work and Worship 1897-1898* (New York: The Brick Presbyterian Church, 1898) 4.
66 John Scudder, “Address,” in *The Open or Institutional Church League preliminary conference held in the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City* (Boston: Everett Press, 1894), 15.
Richards noted with approval that “The annual fall receptions, held on the afternoons of December 10, 1904, and November 18, 1905, are remembered with especial pleasure . . . informal social hour together greatly increased our interest in one another and the ends which we are trying to attain.”  

He reported that four of the young scholars had confessed Christ.

The experience of a homeless teenage girl named Daisy Lopez in the Spring Street Presbyterian Church, pastored by the young Herbert Bates, exemplified how work became worship. Upon his arrival in Spring Street, Bates established a “Neighborhood House,” with a nursery, apartments for the poor, gymnasium, dispensary, dramatics society, and boys’ and girls’ clubs, among other things. He sought not merely to serve the poor, but also to strengthen the church, for “he realized that if the Church was to live and grow, it would be necessary to broaden its work.” For evangelicals, a living church was a growing church; the impulse to conversion and expansion rested at the bottom of the evangelical identity. Bates embraced the institutional church idea, and believed that broadening its work was the same as spreading the Gospel, because it drew those whom it helped into the word going forward. 

The public works of the churches were not, then, merely service. As Henry Sloane Coffin later argued, “A preacher has to teach both the Christian ideal of social righteousness and the Christian method of its attainment. The way to establish the Kingdom is the way of Bethlehem and Calvary.” The way to achieve true social reform was to understand that it was a form of evangelicalism.

Daisy came to the Neighborhood House in rags and hunger and without God. She was put to work in the young woman’s sewing class, and enrolled in the school. And within a matter of days, “Mr. Bates not only gave her his own friendship but open up to her other friendships to

68 William Sloane Coffin, Herbert Roswell Bates and Spring Street: a solution to the problem of the downtown church (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1900), 8
69 Henry Sloane Coffin, What to Preach (New York: George A. Doran, 1926) 114.
make paths of beauty through the desert of her soul. It was her conversion.” She bathed, dressed in clean clothes, and began serving others herself; she became a Christian by joining the Christian community, and converted herself through serving others in the school. Bates’s biographer William Sloane Coffin left Daisy with this scene:

She sat at the old table under the dim light of an oil lamp, working away til midnight, in order to prepare her lessons for the next day. She was doing this that she might prepare herself for greater efficiency in the service of others, for by that time she had come into the fellowship of the Church and caught its vision. 

Daisy here is a true evangelical; an itinerant preacher, an exhorter, one hundred years after the great age of them; one converted by the embodied worship of the work, and who became devoted to spreading it.

When he died an untimely death, William Sloane Coffin, Henry’s uncle and a member of the Brick congregation, wrote an extended eulogy praising Bates’s sermons as “truth embodied in a tale,” and his pastorate as a successful translation of the preached Word into the actions of social service. Bates’s pastoral obligations “made it impossible for him to write out sermons in his study with the help of a library.” Rather, Coffin said with approval, “They were thought out in the whole of humanity, and hence consisted very largely of little incidents of daily life, told with dramatic power to force home a great spiritual truth. In this too did he not copy his master?” 

The reference to Christ is telling; for Coffin and others sympathetic to liberal theology, Christ was no longer the embodied Word, not foremost a speaker, but a doer, a model of activity and action to be imitated by those who sought his power.

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Even by the 1920s, after the great age of institutional churches like Spring Street had passed, Henry Sloane Coffin continued to follow in his uncle’s footsteps, insisting that there was close connection between effective evangelical work and social service; he instructed ministers that if they felt “preached out,” to “spend an afternoon . . . in going about from family to family and asking himself, “What is the spiritual need here?’” He turned Alexander on his head, maintaining that expository preaching of the sort beloved by Alexander was essential but dangerous, for while rooting a sermon in the Bible was essential, the preacher did not want to appear “to be dealing with the past rather than the present life of God in the world. Preachers are apt to start with the situation in the passage of Scripture. It is better to begin with something contemporary.” Coffin believed that “the prophetic office of the Christian preacher has been greatly exaggerated;” for none the great prophets of the Old Testament had to worry about a “congregation.” And besides, one “greater than they was usually simply called ‘Teacher.’”

The salvation liberal evangelicalism offered was not merely the secular deliverance offered by homeless shelters and rescue houses. Rather, Coffin’s life of Bates showed how liberal evangelicals had found a way to meld such this-worldly concerns with the spiritual and transformative message of evangelical Christianity.

Daisy Lopez embodied the sort of conversion which liberal evangelicals imagined. It was wrought by the Spirit, but it also transformed her relationships within the city; she went from outcast and foreign to member and participant. One publication of the OICL announced that “the problem of city evangelization demands our special attention;” and declared that their strategies were particularly suited to answering its challenges through forging “closer organic

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relation” between the church and the city.\textsuperscript{74} Liberal evangelicals dreamed that the conversion wrought by the institutional church would bring order and unity out of disorder and chaos; that the regularity created within their churches and neighborhood houses could spread out onto the streets, and the organization and habits taught inside could shape also the populations outside. The OICL’s platform strenuously denied that it was mechanistic or artificial; instead it claimed that a church was an “organism,” not an “organization.” and endorsed an “organic spirit rather than a set of methods.”\textsuperscript{75} The influence of romanticism can be seen here, particularly in the language, the rhetorical equation of the organic with the spiritual; but just as significant is the OICL’s hunger to bring the sort of unity evangelicalism imagined in its past to New York again. The sacraments of service, then, would convert not merely the people, but the city.

In the beginnings of the institutional movement, liberal evangelicals invoked the sturdy old metaphors of the city as a forbidding and foreign place, and equated the institutional church with the work of foreign missions. Edward Judson, an early advocate of institutionalism was at work in the city from 1881, and pastor of the Judson Memorial Baptist Church on Washington Square after 1890. He understood the institutional church to exist in the same spiritual world as the jungles and villages that foreign missions observed. The challenge was the same; “the difficulty,” he said, “is to bring men within reach of the Gospel.”\textsuperscript{76} Ministers could preach every Sunday, but the poor were not listening. Judson was son of Adoniram, a famed Baptist minister, understood such social efforts to be a specialized form of mission work, which had more in common with evangelicals’ efforts on other, poorer, continents than most missions in the United States. In the late nineteenth century, many Protestant missionaries, particularly those

\textsuperscript{74} The Open and Institutional Church League: Our Work (New York: Open and Institutional Church League, nd) 2.  
\textsuperscript{75} “Platform,” in Preliminary Conference, 14.  
sympathetic to one or more of the coalescing elements of liberal theology, believed that civilization had to be brought to indigenous peoples before they could be properly given the gospel.77

Judson argued something similar about the institutional church. As he wrote, “The mission fields are not all in Asia and Africa;” indeed, he drew upon the lessons of those territories to warn the pastors of New York against “a Christianity which is deaf to the cries of the heathen.” In short, the suffering of the poor had to be alleviated before they could possibly be ready to hear and appreciate Christ.78 Judson’s own church was erected with such a paradigm in mind. Dedicated in 1893 on Washington Square in Greenwich Village, it was designed with a home for indigent children and a separate house for young men, including a gymnasium and meeting hall.79 It was named for Judson’s father Adoniram, missionary to Burma. At the building’s dedication, the minister George Dana Boardman proclaimed it appropriate that the building bear Adoniram’s name, because it carried on his legacy of outreach to the unchurched. The edifice was “perfectly adapted to Christian work,” Boardman said, and it was “providential that it be located in lower New York, where foreign nationalities may benefit by it.”80 The son thus was a missionary in the same way his father was; the building itself read the surrounding city as a foreign land.

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77 For more on this, see William Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant thought and foreign missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993), 95-102.
80 “In Adoniram Judson’s Memory,” *New York Times* (July 1, 1890) 8. For more on Adoniram, see Edward Judson’s *The Life of Adoniram Judson* (New York: Randolph & Co, 1883). Even Adoniram, who, unlike his successors, “did not believe that Christianity should follow in the wake of civilization,” established schools and mission houses to care for the sick and attract potential converts. 82-3, 382.
Bolstered by their new ways of thinking about the relationship between the work of the church and the city around it, liberal evangelicals were not hesitant in their efforts to extend their reach. The OICL proposed a profound reorganization of the sacred space of the city, using the various tools of the institutional church to exert influence upon the crowds of the unsaved who rushed by its buildings. Following the confident evangelism of Chapman, the platform extended the reach of the church beyond its doors, calling for a new sense of religious space that spilled over into New York’s streets, for the first plank called for “open churches, every day and all the day.” Simply, this meant that the doors of the church would be left unlocked, allowing whomever on the street who wished to enter. The open church movement reflected an increasing conviction among New York’s evangelicals that closing the churches was tantamount to ceding the streets, and conversely, that to open them was to demolish the barriers that kept them from influencing the cultural landscape of the city. As Howard Duffield, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, popularly called the “Old First,” argued, “The perpetually closed doors of the church and the never shut door of the saloon utter a message which the masses in a great city interpret with uttering accuracy.” An editorial in the New York Observer called locked churches “a waste of plant and power,” arguing that constantly available space for worship was necessary to root the “reading rooms and lecture halls and kindergartens” of the institutional program in the meanings of Christianity.

The open church thus had deep roots in both the institutional church’s theology and practical circumstance. For several years in New York many churches of varying theological leanings had been growing uncomfortable with the practice of closing for the summer, which

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82 Howard Duffield, A Bird’s eye view of twelve months’ work at the Old First Church: reports of the boards, societies and clubs of the Old First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York (New York: The First Presbyterian Church, 1916), 51.
83 “Open the Church Doors,” New York Observer 78:7 (February 15, 1900) 193.
many congregations in sweltering New York had adopted. At the Brick Church as early as 1885, van Dyke had “stated his desire that the church be kept open during the approaching summer,” and agreed to fill the pulpit for part of that time himself while finding a replacement (perhaps the erstwhile Llewelyn Bevan) to substitute during his own vacation. In later years, the conservative Walter Buchanan likewise announced that he would himself preach through the summer at Broadway Presbyterian, foregoing a vacation to keep the church functioning. The open church movement was the logical conclusion of this impulse. Many evangelicals read the program, which imitated standard policy in many Catholic churches of the city, as more than merely a passive elimination of restrictions upon the sacred space of the church interior, but as a positive outreach, a way to make the building a sleepless and constant voice of witness that could be heard easily through open doors.

The attempt to open the churches was another way to attempt to seize control of New York City’s space. Evangelical congregations wanted their spaces to be integrated into the community. Driven by Duffield’s conviction, a fundraising drive in 1900 raised enough money from Old First’s congregation to “to defray the expense of keeping the Door of the Church open three hundred and sixty five days every year, ‘for rest, meditation and prayer.’” The main auditorium of the Old First was opened to wandering worshipers eight hours a day and the chapel in evenings. The Brick Church, among others, soon followed. The congregation of Old First expected the policy would “make the life of the neighborhood larger and nobler,” and believed the streets of New York needed no less. A wide open city is a calamity,” Duffield announced,

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84 3 April 1885, Session Minutes of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 1877-1894. Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.
and in such a situation, “a shut up church is an inconsistency.” This was perfectly consistent with the ways evangelicals imagined the city; their churches existed not just to service the saved but also to reclaim the lost, and more, to remake the city streets itself. Opening the doors would not harm the sacred space of the churches; rather it would alter the landscape outside, creating in the churches new centers of gravity which would exert pressure upon the cultural landscapes and transform them along evangelical lines. As one guidebook applauded institutional church efforts in a particularly bad section of town: “The cutting of Worth St through the Five Points opened the district to a current of purer air and made a thoroughfare for decent people whose example modified the manners of the savages. The Five Points Mission and the House of Industry here located have also been potent factors of regeneration.”

As the Methodist James Day argued, to open the church would be “to make it possible to have the people who come up in the streets and the avenues – the thousands and tens of thousands in this great metropolis – to get them to look up to the church as they pass and say, “There, that is my shelter, that is friendly to me, that stands for me.” Similarly, William Richards, who took the Brick pulpit in 1901, lauded his own congregation’s open church policy, hoping “that those who pass may be reminded often of the Lord’s welcome, and that whosoever will may come in to rest or think or pray.” It was geographically important for Brick to be open, Richards said, echoing Stevenson, because their edifice was “set on a hill and beside a main thoroughfare of the city,” where passersby could be expected to look in - a strategic position for the evangelical war to claim the city.

86 Duffield, *Bird’s Eye View*, 52. For Brick, see also *Brick Church Year Book of Work and Worship, 1903-1904* (New York: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1904) 5-6.
88 *Preliminary Conference*, 31.
89 *Brick Church Year Book, 1903-1904*, 5.
Closely bound to the notion of the open church was an assault on the old tradition of pew rents, a system of financing the church that had roots in early modern Anglicanism and had entered the American evangelical denominations in the early nineteenth century. In the turn of the century city, however, they rarely provided the support they once had; indeed, the rents in many churches declined as their neighborhoods grew increasingly poor. But in addition to their increasing impracticality, many evangelicals began to develop ideological arguments against pew rents. They were often on a sliding scale, thus importing social classes into the body of the congregation, and for this many city evangelicals assailed it. Van Dyke pled with his congregation to raise funds for an endowment in order to dispose of rents, similarly, Charles Dickinson of the OICL insisted that pew rents were “an ally to the prejudices that exist between rich and poor,” and that the institutional church, “with open doors and free pews” could overcome such divisions.

More provocatively, the minister Albert McGarrah argued that the pew rent was a corruption of the sacred space of the church; it “implies that men can own property as against God, and can therefore even rent or own a pew in God’s house.” Rather, “every member should recognize that his seat is of grace,” that the church building is not like other structures. George Mead insisted that it was a defining aspect of the primitive church, tracing pew rents to the unwelcome influence of British nobility on the Anglican church in the sixteenth century. For

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91 Walter Buchanan, “What Would Jesus Have Us Do,” (New York: Styles and Cash, 1899) 11, noted that in the past “few years” rent income had fallen by a third, from $4400 to barely $3000 a year; a stronger urban church like First Presbyterian, by contrast, brought in $13,872 in 1886. Manual of the First Presbyterian Church (New York: First Presbyterian Church, 1906) 33.


him, such rents were the sign of the collapse of the spiritual community that the church represented; the system “alienates certain classes from the house of God.”

But Brick, like many other congregations, proved unable to abandon rents, and had to compromise by strenuous announcements that, as van Dyke said, “if anyone honestly cannot afford to give anything, he is welcome, freely and heartily, without money and without price.” Similarly, the Fourth Presbyterian Church’s yearbook announced the best available seat will always await those who can not pay pew rent.” Both sought to make their church space inclusive despite these exigencies of finance.

To unlock the churches was a beginning; the trick became then to use the unleashed sacred space they created. While the buildings themselves increased the spiritual vitality of New York’s landscapes, ministers remained deeply conscious that human involvement in the rites of the church was essential, and they began to seek spatial strategies that would make worship increasingly visible and accessible. Many of these strategies built on the open and free church, seeking to use the increased availability of the church to promote worship. Richards of the Brick Church, for instance, said in 1904 that the Brick Church’s goal was “so often as any of the people may be ready to gather for the public worship of God, they may find the opportunity awaiting them in this place.” He began holding twilight services on Fridays, and multiplied the regular Sunday services. “Some of our friends, in view of the well-known difficulty of gathering a second Sunday congregation, treated the proposal of a third as somewhat audacious,” he wrote, but he believed that the opportunity would create the demand, and indeed he pointed to attendance to declare himself correct. Of that third Sunday service, he said, “reaching those

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94 Mead, Modern Methods, 308.
95 Van Dyke, “An Historic Church,” 35; Year Book of the Fourth Presbyterian Church, 1900 (New York: Fourth Presbyterian Church, 1900) 4.
who might not otherwise hear the Gospel message at all, this evening service seems to offer the best opportunity of the whole day.”

He also began semi-regular choir services, hoping that like the Sunday evening services they would attract those who might not otherwise enter the church. The two groups targeted here overlapped, but were not necessarily identical. Brick’s choirmaster predicted “that the Church should influence a larger circle than ever before, through these evening services,” and applauded Richards for furthering van Dyke’s renovation in order to facilitate musical worship: “The old ‘servant’s gallery’ . . . walled up and disused for many years, has at last been cleared of its primitive old pews, and converted” into a room for the choir. The relief with which the choirmaster celebrated the removal of pews – a deeply traditional and symbolic piece of Protestant architecture, the symbol of the Protestant worshiper’s role as hearer and student – in favor of music indicates the evolution of the way the Brick Church thought about sacred space and the nature of the evangelical experience. Against charges that these choir services were merely music stripped of religious meaning, the choirmaster maintained that his antiphonal performances “are founded entirely on unaltered sentences from the Scriptures, and aim to throw new light, bring out new beauties, and stimulate new interest in many well-known and much loved Bible passages.”

The music itself was a version of the service of the Word, capable of producing spiritual experience.

One of William Merrill’s first acts when he became the pastor of the Brick Church was the organization of a “Noon Day Service,” which began in February 1912. From the beginning, as Merrill described them, they were “brief services of prayer and praise” held on weekdays during lunch hours. The phrase “prayer and praise” derived from one of Merrill’s favorite

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96 Brick Church Year Book, 1903-1904, 5-6. See also 12 October 1903, in Session Minutes of the Brick Presbyterian Church.
97 Brick Church Year Book, 1903-1904, 13.
passages in the Presbyterian Confession of Faith, which urged pastors not to neglect “prayer and praise” in favor of the sermon. These services, Merrill said, were intended not for the benefit of the congregation, but for “men and women employed in the houses of trade in our neighborhood;” he hoped workingmen would visit the church during their lunch hour to listen. He sent letters to all the surrounding businesses, asking managers and shop owners to allow their unchurched workers to attend. The services were thus intended as evangelistic services, revivals in music, to attract the urban poor and unchurched to religion. They were not the first such services in New York; the First Presbyterian Church had been holding recitals since the 1890s, distributing church programs to the audience in the hopes that some musiclovers might be curious enough to return on Sunday morning. But the Noonday Services targeted the working class in both time and content, and were remarkably successful.

Attendance climbed as the year went on, reaching an average attendance of thirty nine people. Five years later, they drew sixty, and nearly six hundred on Easter. Merrill claimed that “a great deal of the effectiveness has been due to the music, which has contributed to the worship both restfulness and inspiration.” This success only boosted Merrill’s confidence that to rely overmuch on the sermon was a misinterpretation of the potential array of tools evangelicals might wield. The musical performances at the First Presbyterian Church were intended to spark interest among audiences in the church’s regular services, but Merrill quickly embraced more ambitious aims. He was becoming convinced that music was at least as effective an evangelizing tool as sermons; it was capable of the same spiritual effects that the preached Word. Initially, he gave a brief talk at these services, but soon such informal sermonizing vanished, and “the service consisted simply of praise, prayer, and the reading of the Scriptures.” It became the center

98 Session Minutes, First Presbyterian Church of New York City, November 12, 1897. Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.
99 Brick Church Year Book, 1912-1913, 10-11. For 1918 attendance, Brick Church Year Book, 1917-1918, 14.
around which the rest of the service orbited, the focus and culmination of all the invoked power of God, and the moment in which hearts were expected to change. The Brick Church Choir began performing at the Services in 1921, after a decision in 1919 to turn Friday services entirely over to organ recitals. The musicians performed hymns of Merrill’s own selection, but also classical music, Bach and Mendelssohn being particularly popular.  

Merrill began to speak of his musicians in the language historically reserved for preachers of the Word. As he claimed of his Choir, they “are not only servants of art, they are ministers of God . . . those who thus lead us in our worship have the seal of God’s ordination in the power He has given them over our hearts.” The music they performed facilitated communion with God in the same way the Word used to. Dickinson claimed, “Such is the emotional exaltation created by the power of music’s harmony, that, in joining in a hymn, the individual ceases to be purely individual.” The editor of the church’s Year Book concurred, writing that Merrill’s emphasis on the evangelizing power of music had wrought a powerful transformation in the congregation’s notions of worship: “God’s will, so plainly interpreted to us by our Pastor, is now more clearly seen – that without yielding one bit of the dignity of the pulpit or losing one whit of the beauty and orderliness of our service, we can attract and help our neighbors whom we welcome to share in our worship and in our work.” Merrill was proud to report on the effectiveness of his the services; he forwarded to the Brick Church Record a letter he had received from a workingman, who wrote ”It has been so refreshing to have been able to get away from the busy every-day world, and to be able to commune with God. Then these meetings have been so helpful to me especially when doubt and perplexity has had so great a

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100 Brick Church Record 9:4 (January 1921) 19; Brick Church Year Book, 1919-1920, 16, 23.
101 Brick Church Year Book, 1912-1913, 10-11; Brick Church Year Book, 1916-1917, 21.
102 Brick Church Year Book, 1912-1913, 17-18.
103 Brick Church Year Book, 1916-1917, 6.
hold on me.” Other reports told of a Englishwoman who had lost her family in World War I, and claimed that “Those Fridays of music were the first thing that took me out of grief,” and a young actress who “was led into the church, and will associate herself with one in his city, giving personal service there, through the conception of the beauty of service of man she caught at one of the first Noon Hours of Music.”

It was with renewed optimism, then, that in 1913 Merrill noted that “we no longer need to go to remote and unfamiliar districts seeking opportunities for true Christian service; that those who are most needy spiritually are coming closer and closer to us, and our church, which thirty years ago was closed except during the hours of service, is now open all day long to welcome them.” Brick Church had become the hub of its neighborhood; its work included daily noontime services in addition to a number of social, service, and welfare organizations. Merrill added a “Neighborhood Work” section to the Yearbook, which praised the church’s efforts in the surrounding streets and more, the reorientation of strategies that Merrill brought. “God’s will, so plainly interpreted to us by our Pastor,” the Yearbook noted, “is now more clearly seen – that without yielding one bit of the dignity of the pulpit or losing one whit of the beauty and orderliness of our service, we can attract and help our neighbors whom we welcome to share in our worship and in our work.” The two tasks were complementary, not contradictory.

Indeed, by October 1920 Merrill could tell his congregation “I call you to be faithful to Christ and to His Church – to Christ because fellowship with Him is the secret of a growing soul – to the Church because it provides, through its worship and its opportunities for human fellowship and service, the readiest, the best available means of the steady ministry of Christ to

104 Brick Church Year Book, 1913-1914, 11; Brick Church Record 1:5 (May 1913) 11.
105 Brick Church Record 9:5 (February 1921) 12.
106 Brick Church Year Book of Work and Worship 1913-1914 (New York: Brick Presbyterian Church, 1914) 1.
107 Brick Church Year Book, 1913-1914, 6.
your personal life.” The church building was no longer a simple place of worship – the sanctuary that van Dyke hoped or the symbol MacArthur built, and nor was the evangelical experience of liberals like Coffin or Merrill what it had been for Moody, or even Parkhurst. This was not to say that Merrill believed any less in evangelicalism’s basic confidence in the power to transform human beings; just four months later he admonished his congregation that “If the redeemed of the Lord have found by rich experience that He is good, and that His mercy endures and can be trusted, let them say so . . . Nothing can take the place of personal witnessing.” But it was to say that for Merrill and the ministers of the OICL, the war to capture the city was closer to being won. Their new tactics infused them with an optimism that belied the urgency of a few decades before. Merrill, for instance, declared that “Preaching, teaching, and all the other elaborate machinery of organized Christian effort has been . . . powerful only as a public means of exerting private influence.” He called his congregation “witnesses, whose message, variously formed and colored, was always at heart this: `Christ has done this for me; let Him do it for you.’” What Christ had done had become a message to be shown, not told.

Around the time of World War I, Henry Sloane Coffin, minister of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, and soon to become the president of Union Theological Seminary, began reflecting on the successes of liberal evangelical spirituality in healing the wounds of the city. Coffin was something of an aristocrat, scion of a prominent and wealthy New York family. He also identified himself as a “liberal evangelical” and from his first days as a pastor he had found the economic and cultural divisions among his congregation troubling. After a stint as minister of a poor church in the Bronx, in 1905 he accepted the pulpit of Madison Avenue for a salary of

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108 Brick Church Record 9:1 (October 1920) 7.
one dollar per year, provided that the well-to-do congregation accept a reformation in its style of
worship, and in their pastor’s style of ministry. Madison Avenue Church had sat at 73rd Street
and Madison for four years, having fled north like many other churches, following its upper-class
parishioners as they moved to Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue along Central Park. And yet,
the congregation was not flourishing; just over four hundred names filled the roll when Coffin
took the pulpit, and the worshipers who gathered each Sunday to hear a polished professional
quartet sing and the pastor preach did not fill half the pews. One observer described the Sunday
services as “inert.” Coffin’s reformation of Madison Avenue exhibited the institutional
program at its most successful.

As he wrote in a document for the Church’s congregational leadership entitled “Reaching
for Outsiders,” Coffin was convinced that the church’s problems stemmed from its inability to
flourish within the community in which it found itself. Madison Avenue Church, though it sat
between the wealthy homes of Fifth Avenue and Central Park to the west and the poorer areas
populated by Italian immigrants and other working class unchurched east of Park Avenue a block
west, was firmly oriented toward the park both directionally and culturally. The services of the
church were designed to be admired, not participated in; the church charged pew rents; the
congregation did not sing. Coffin himself was convinced that for all these reasons, the
functions of the church overlooked “the working men.” He warned that “we repeatedly faced a
problem in holding firmly the Christian loyalty of young people” who lived in neighborhoods to
the east where religion was not powerful. He ascribed this problem in part to the fact that

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110 Timothy Beach-Verhey, “The Social Gospel and Reconciliation: Henry Sloane Coffin at Madison Avenue
Something Worth Coming For,” Outlook 106 (January 1914) 68-70.
112 Henry Sloane Coffin,” Reaching for Outsiders,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 1A, Henry Sloane
Coffin Papers, box 2, folder 2.20. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
“During most of the past half century the American people were increasing in wealth . . . the swift spread of culture could not fail to affect the forms of public worship.” ¹¹³ For Coffin, evangelical worship itself had to be updated to meet the challenges of this new prosperity, and the poverty that was its underside.

His solution was a reformation in the public worship of his church along the lines of the institutional program. He believed that worship could heal the class divides which plagued his congregation, and sought to formulate a liturgical tradition which not only connected the processes of worship to salvation, something which evangelicals centered on speech tended to resist, but also demonstrated the ways such salvation might be exhibited in reconciliation among the peoples of the city. “Prayer [and] public worship,” he said, were “the highway ten thousand times ten thousand have used and without which they assure us they would never have arrived at their intimacy with God.” ¹¹⁴ Coffin knew many other evangelicals did not share his sympathies; he feared, however, that evangelicals who insisted upon traditional worship were only exacerbating the social divides that the city itself was creating. A sermon-centered worship, the old gospel songs, focused worshipers on their own interior and emotional state: something devastating in a city in which evangelical congregations were withering. As he observed drily, “One can hardly over-emphasize the subjective character of public worship in American Protestantism,” pointing out that most “favorite hymns dwell on the emotions and moods of believers.” ¹¹⁵ This sort of conversion might be necessary, but it was not sufficient for a congregation of evangelical believers to survive in the city.

¹¹⁴ Henry Sloane Coffin, University Sermons (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1914) 236.
For Coffin, the great benefit of public worship was its ability to forge a unified community. Against subjective worship he called for “objective” worship, which rather than measuring worship by its effects on the individual focused on connecting the individual to something greater than themselves. “There is no more socially constructive act than public worship,” he insisted.116 Worship brought the dislocated, lonely individuals of contemporary society together into spiritual communion with each other, and thus with God. As he insisted, “Faith is a social experience . . . if you really want to find God, go where believers are. Faith is an active experience. It must be done again and again.”117

For Coffin, the concept of conversion was therefore also bound up in social interaction and in activity. He said that “Christian worship may be described as an exchange of selves.” Though for evangelicals this was a particularly meaningful point, this was old, old Christian doctrine, going back to the Apostle Paul’s description in the Epistle to the Romans of the baptized that had “clothed yourselves in Christ.” (Rom. 6:4) But Coffin went further: “These selves we offer are not merely our individual wills but the collective personalities of the various groups we represent.” A congregation, then, could be reborn together into a “God [who] is seeking social embodiment.”118 He wove together the transformative spirituality of evangelical worship with the organic communalism of romantic thought and with a long stream of moral environmentalists, those reformers who argued that the poor and degraded suffered because they lacked the stabilizing influence of other, better-off people in their lives. For Coffin, acts of public worship could offer all these things.

116 Henry Sloane Coffin, In a day of social rebuilding: lectures on the ministry of the church (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919)
118 Coffin, In a day of social rebuilding, 76.
Coffin was willing to make expansive claims about the potential that the transformative effects of public worship might have in the city. “The number present at worship on any Sunday is no accurate criterion of the result of the city of holding up publicly the faith and worship of Jesus,” he wrote. “Many a person who never open a Bible . . . are influenced in their thinking, their motives, their ideals by the presence of a flow of Christ’s spirit through their neighborhood.” But this influence was more than merely second hand, through the influence of members of congregations, or simply spiritual; rather Coffin took a final step that made him a foundational theologian of liberal evangelicalism. “In every age the Church must recast its worship and restate its teachings to meet the immediate necessity of man,” he wrote. After he left the pastorate for the presidency of Union Theological Seminary, Coffin mused that “The necessity of making a congregation inclusive may be stressed by one whose work for a quarter of a century and more has been in a city . . . We must make our congregations willing to try new methods, and methods which may not suit their taste, if by any means we may gain these unshepherded people.”

To these ends did Coffin seek to construct the worship of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. First, he observed that the policies and practices of the church encouraged awareness and enforcement of social distinctions; in reversing such policies, Coffin insisted instead that the only identity which mattered in his church was that of “Christian.” He eliminated pew rents and encouraged his congregations to mix their seating habits, so that, as one observer noted, “a regular attendant from Third Avenue . . . shared the pew with a pewholder from Fifth Avenue.” He encouraged congregants to interact, extending the hand of fellowship to each other as the

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120 Coffin, *In a day of social rebuilding*, 20.
service began. Further, drawing on the revivalists’ notion of personal evangelism, he revived the practice of visitation, expanding it so he personally, and other workers in his congregation, visited the homes of the unchurched surrounding the church. They focused particularly on the areas to the east of Park Avenue: Third Avenue and other tenements, where Coffin described climbing to apartments above shops to invite families to services. As he insisted, it was this sort of personal contact which made He made Madison Avenue an open church, unlocking the doors and assuring even those who rejected his invitation that they might find rest there at any point.

Coffin thus began the work of centering the spiritual life of the neighborhood around his church upon the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, making it a landmark even among those who did not attend. As one friend noted, “The ideal of a Christian city was never far from his mind.” Similarly, he noted with disapproval that when he arrived “the clubs and societies in the church were open only to members of the church and the Sunday school;” he changed this policy, particularly inviting neighborhood children to join the Sunday school even if they were not members of any church. He was careful, however, to orient the activities of these societies toward the ultimate purpose of conversion; as he insisted, “The gymnasium and swimming pool and club rooms were not to be used as bait to attract young people to the church;” rather, they were to be used in promotion of the sorts of activities that would shape the souls of the users; “The facilities of the Church House were to help them live well-rounded lives in every aspect of which the Christian spirit would be dominant.” As Coffin said upon the dedication of the Church House, Madison Avenue’s own institutional church facility, the fact that it was larger

124 Noyes, “Parish Minister,” 2.
than the church itself was not to be taken as a symbol: “Its main function is to furnish the community with an adequate stock of convictions and ideals, with life with Christ in God. That life can be imparted in a variety of ways – by preaching and teaching and common prayers, and by the friendly touch of man with man in countless helpful contacts.” 126 If the Church House attracted those not belonging to the church, that was to be welcomed because it brought them into personal contact with Christians, but the work did not end there.

Finally, Coffin revised the worship of the church itself in ways that exemplified the turn toward the formal and solemn that characterized much liberal evangelical worship – though for him this turn would make the church’s worship more inclusive, corporate, and participatory. For instance, he jettisoned the quartet and the older, rousing gospel hymns used before he became minister and produced instead a hymnal whose music stressed themes of inclusivity and unity; further, he organized choirs of parishoners’ children to lead the congregation in singing, mounting also a campaign to encourage his congregants to do so more vigorously. Insisting that hymn singing was to be participated in rather than simply admired, he instructed his congregation that “it is now generally admitted that a chorus leads congregational singing more effectively” than quartets. 127 Incorporating another notion from van Dyke’s liturgical books, Coffin adopted responsive readings into the service, giving it a more structured and formal rhythm, but also involving the congregation in ways that stressed both its collectivity and the importance of active participation in liberal understanding of conversion.

Along similar lines, Coffin redesigned the sanctuary of the church to emphasize a sort of solemn simplicity, focusing the attention of his congregation upon a cross hung above the

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126 Noyes, “Parish Minister,” 5-6.
communion table. Coffin was a great believer in the value of the traditional rites of worship, but that he centered his church upon the communion table emphasized a particular aspect of the Lord’s Supper: the commensality of a ritual meal. “One disciple alone cannot keep the Lord’s Supper,” Coffin declared, for “fellow-communicants are as sacramental as the elements on the Table” – as much a route to God as the ritual bread and wine. He deemed this rite the “climax” of the Christian faith, and its most essential lesson that “their possession of God’s life [is] in the measure of their fellowship with one another.”

The ritual, then, ultimately reminded Christians of the “sacrament of responsibility,” and the “sacrament of memory” that Coffin discussed at Union Theological Seminary when invited to dedicate a new chapel there in 1910. The Lord’s Supper, the meal had with Jesus Christ, emphasized to Christians that they were “no worshippers of an unnamed Deity; they knew Him far too intimately for that.” The great lesson of Christianity was fellowship, and its rites taught both the importance of the responsibility the Christian bore for fellowship and for remembrance, for the building of connections both spatially and temporally. Indeed, so as not to distract from the fellowship, Coffin recommended that the Lord’s Supper be administered without a sermon, which might intrude notions of authority or doctrine into the simple fellowship. As Coffin wrote, “At the Lord’s Table, the communicants themselves become preachers, proclaiming the Lord’s death until He come.”

Coffin’s methods bore fruit. Over his twenty year ministry the congregation grew from just over 400 to more than 2200 worshipers, and Coffin was particularly proud of the diversity of his flock; as a journalist wrote, in Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, “side by side in a Bible

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129 Coffin, In a day of social rebuilding, 91-2.
131 Coffin, What to Preach, 147-149.
class will be a millionaire and a coachman, a man of letters and a day laborer.” 132 Coffin himself credited this success to what he called “the practical aims of a liberal evangelicalism.” As he said, “We are evangelicals. And we are liberals – not liberals in the sense that we cultivate freedom for its own sake, but for the Gospel’s sake.” 133 The ability to improvise, to seek out new channels by which the Holy Spirit might run, to adapt the workings of the Gospel to the city was essential, for, as Coffin said, “without freedom the Spirit of the Lord cannot be vigorous.” Some criticized liberal evangelicals for their willingness to experiment and broaden the boundaries of Christian worship and sacrament, but Coffin insisted that such methods were in fact a strength, for “in every age the Church must recast its worship and restate its teaching to meet the immediate necessities of man.” Were it not so, he warned, faith would take the course of that of the soldiers in the trenches of World War I Coffin described: men who could not imagine how the God they had heard about was relevant to the lives they lived. 134 The city was no less a challenge, and liberal evangelicalism, he insisted, was the only way forward.

133 Coffin, “Practical aims of a liberal evangelicalism,” 1.
134 Coffin, In an age of social rebuilding, 20, 156.
Chapter 6

Isaac Haldeman and the Bible

Charles Parkhurst and Charles Briggs had struggled to formulate a robust sense of scriptural authority that did not depend upon the precise content of its language, but rather upon a new understanding of precisely how the Bible worked in relation to its readers. And by the turn of the twentieth century, this style of reading was common among New York’s liberal evangelical congregations. For them, the importance of the Bible had ceased to be its role as a source of doctrine, a collection of verses assembled in the proclamation of the sort of divine truth that would strike the sinner and impose conversion. As the *Sunday School Journal* had once argued, “The seed of truth germinates. It starts processes of inquiry and investigation in men.” And further, “The Bible is the source of all true doctrine.”¹ But for liberal evangelicals, the Word no longer worked in ways analogous to effective argument. Rather, they instead stressed reading the Bible for narrative, seeking in its characters exemplars of Christian behavior, and emphasizing the importance of archetypes as example, experiences to be imitated to derive converting religious experience. The truth the Bible taught was not that which could be enunciated; rather, it was to be enacted in rituals of conversion.

In 1912, for instance, the adult Sunday school at the Brick Presbyterian Church reported that they engaged in a “systematic study of the Bible, not in a fragmentary way, but chapter after chapter, in their regular order, and with particular reference to the application of the portions which may be under consideration at any session of the Class, to present-day problems.” This

way of reading, the students believed, was predicated upon the theory that “the truths of the Scriptures have an intimate relation and a distinct and continuous bearing upon the questions of everyday life, and that by seeking out the many points of this relationship and bearing, a livelier interest a wider knowledge and appreciation of those truths, will be secured.” They expressed appreciation for “the opportunity thus afforded of studying these living, ethical, and social problems, and the way the followers of Christ should regard them.” The power of the Bible was directly related to its applicability, the examples of spiritual living which it presented, and models which they could seek to apply to their own lives in pursuit of the salvation Christ offered.

But to the annoyance of many other evangelicals in the city, these liberal evangelicals seemed increasingly disassociated from the text itself. The sort of readings the Brick Sunday School did seemed weak and anachronistic, concerned with the present more than with the particular claims of scripture. Their increasing enthusiasm for social reform seemed a distraction; their claims for the converting power of such efforts seemed utterly incomprehensible to evangelicals who read scripture as Schaff or the Princeton school did. For them, the Word, the verbal Word, remained essential, the ordained channel of God’s grace. The theology of inerrancy, with roots in the Princeton school made increasingly popular, was not merely an intellectual epistemological assertion about the Bible’s reliability and provenance; it also denoted a particular reading style, a way of using scripture in one’s daily life as influential on the daily lives of conservative evangelicals as the liberal form of reading was on the lives of liberal congregations. Emerging Protestant fundamentalism was language-centered, possessed

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by the importance of particular words, of the ways in which words and print were used and spoken, and no New York pastor was a better example of this than Isaac Haldeman.

Haldeman, who served for nearly five decades in the pulpit of the First Baptist Church on 79th Street and Broadway until just before his death in 1932, was both a dedicated pastor and a fundamentalist warrior; as befitting both positions, he produced reams of text over his long pastorate: brochures, Biblical commentary, tracts written in a particularly acerbic style designed to gain the attention – and hence, perhaps the soul – of the reader. In his church the Bible’s words became the measure of the human experience; not merely in language, but in their very materiality. The form of the Word itself, the bound Bibles, the printed tracts, the endless pamphlets of Haldeman’s sermons, became objects of devotion, praised for their ability to communicate divine intention and power. The elevation of language in First Baptist prefigured the later emergence of a fundamentalist style of evangelicalism which flourished in New York in the late 1910s and 1920s.

But its origins could be traced earlier, to Haldeman’s own work at First Baptist, and to a two decade long struggle with New York’s other leading Baptist minister: Harry Emerson Fosdick, who took the pulpit at another First Baptist Church: that of Montclair, New Jersey, in 1904. Fosdick also frequently taught classes in preaching at Union Seminary, and joined the faculty there full time in 1915. Soon, he began to preach in the pulpit of Old First Presbyterian Church, and later became minister of the Riverside Church. Fosdick has been commonly called a “popularizer” rather than an original thinker in his own right, and while there is truth to the claim, it tends to valorize and magnify the importance of theological innovation, while minimizing the Baptist’s pastoral vigor, his prowess at translating theological debate into the practical applications demanded by the pulpit. In that, he was Haldeman’s match.
Early in his ministry, Haldeman advised his congregation to “Take up this Book and listen,” 3 a remarkable command that distilled the sort of immediate presence which he felt in the text. The issues of precise description of the numinous which bothered Beecher and the romantics, the issues of precision of translation which haunted Schaff, none of these existed for Haldeman, for whom the Bible not simply a book, but a conversation with God. Late in his career, the old preacher made the point explicit: “We are to recognize that our hearing does not belong to ourselves,” he wrote; “We have no right to listen as it may please us.” Rather, the believer was to listen for Christ: “He claims our ears that they may hear him speak, listen to his words, and give attention to his message.” 4

It is almost possible to say that the Bible mediated divine presence so perfectly as to be absent itself, but the powerful sense of presence which the physical Bible offered made the tangibility of its words and pages a proxy of the highest importance. Thus, Haldeman’s relationship with scripture relied upon language in print or spoken to a hearer; the presence of the other, the divine other, he sensed in the Word necessitated such tangibility. Thus, language was essential to the salvation of humanity, because language itself was the way in which humans could cultivate the divine relationship. A slightly later protege of Haldeman, James Packer, described the stark choice: “Subjection to the authority of Christ involves subjection to the authority of Scripture. Anything short of unconditional submission to the scripture, therefore, is a kind of impenitence; any view that subjects the written word of God to the opinions and pronouncements of men involves unbelief and disloyalty to Christ.” 5 The identification of the person of deity with the written word here is striking; to Haldeman and Packer, it was possible to

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3 Isaac Haldeman, “Can We Preach the Second Coming of Christ Too Much?” sermon preached Sunday, 6 December 1896, Archives, First Baptist Church, New York.
cultivate a saving relationship with God through the medium of the verbal and written word, which was no medium whatsoever.

Haldeman cultivated a living, organic relationship with scripture; thus, it may be less accurate to speak of his scriptural theology than of his rapport with it. Indeed, as James Bielo has said of its function among contemporary conservative evangelicals, inerrancy “does not constitute a hermeneutical method.” That is, in practice, Biblical inerrancy does not present a consistent or coherent theology or set of rules for of interpreting scripture; evangelicals who maintain inerrancy, as Haldeman did, do not in fact always treat the Bible in the ways which a theory of inerrancy might imply. Rather, to assert that one believes in inerrancy is to assert ownership of “a signifier of theological and religious identity.” Defending the Bible as inerrant created for some evangelicals a community and hence, created rituals of reading both individual and communal. These ways of reading orbited first not around treating each line of scripture as propositionally true, but rather around the notion that the Bible is of the highest relevance; that its claims and propositions had immediate bearing upon the life of the reader. Thus, conservative evangelical practices of piety developed distinctive motifs and practices, just as those of liberal evangelicals did.

Only a few years before Fosdick assumed the Jessup chair, Haldeman declared, “The Lord spake his words in Jeremiah. Jeremiah received the Words direct from the Lord, dictated

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them word for word to Baruch, Baruch wrote them as they were pronounced in a book, and when written the words were the written words of God.” He made similar claims for Paul, Peter, and John the Revelator, and ultimately echoed Warfield and Hodge, claiming that, for a variety of reasons, “The Bible is proved to BE the word of God,” not merely contain it. He thus subscribed to the Princeton theology, claiming verbal inspiration, the doctrine that the words of Scripture themselves derived from God, which underlay the sense of divine presence which evangelicals had long depended upon. But to this, the Princeton theologians and conservatives like Haldeman fused plenary inspiration, the doctrine that the entirety of the Bible was equally and uniformly inspired of God, to create something that came to be known as Biblical inerrancy. Haldeman himself used the term as early as 1901, defending the “inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible as the Word of God,” to mean that it was without error in anything it asserted.

In practice, these beliefs about the metaphysical qualities of the Biblical text began a tradition of Biblical veneration among Haldeman and his fellows – some of whom began, early in the twentieth century, to refer to themselves as “fundamentalists,” as did Haldeman. A tradition of piety around the physical presence of scripture began to develop. Clarence Macartney, the conservative Presbyterian of Philadelphia, told his congregation that “I have heard people tell of how it was their custom to open the Bible at random, and of the comfort and

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8 Plenary inspiration had long been a doctrine of much of Protestant Christianity; see, for instance, Warfield asserting its historicity in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* 2nd ed (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co, 1948) 210-212. For Warfield the Bible’s plenary authority was essentially a verbal phenomenon. It also appears in the 1841 manual of the First Baptist Church: *Summary of the Faith and Practice, With the Articles of the Covenant of the First Baptist Church in the City of New-York* (New York: John Gray Publishers, 1841) 5, which states “We receive the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as being all given by inspiration of God.” Emphasis added.
9 Isaac Haldeman, *Friday Night Papers* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1901) 252; later reprinted as *How to Study the Bible* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1904); the word began to gain currency among conservative American evangelicals in the 1880s, following not only the Princeton theologians, but the rise of interest in Biblical prophecy. George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American culture* 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 56-7.
guidance they found in some appropriate verse.”10 The Bible served as a tangible manifestation of the ineffable will of God in the life of the believer, a tool through which God’s mind could be searched out and brought to bear on the particular situations of one’s life. Haldeman’s congregation claimed proudly that “Our Pastor has not only preached a clear Gospel, but has taught the people out of Holy Scripture as the fully inspired Word of God. Consequent blessings has [sic] been vouchsafed us.”11 The more rigorous one’s emphasis upon scripture, the more power God had to intervene in one’s life. As one New York pastor recommended to those who were having doubts, “If ministers or others want to get rid of their doubts, let them stop reading the speculations of men, and start reading the Bible itself. Read it through once, and if it does not rid them of doubts, read it ten times.”12 The meaning of the Bible here is irrelevant – what is important is the centrality of its place in the life of the reader, which was, to fundamentalists like Haldeman, itself the presence of God.

Even the materiality of the Bible, its mere presence in the life of a believer, could be an embodiment of the spiritual power that the Word bore. Haldeman regularly advised his congregation to possess their own copies of the Bible and to bring them regularly to services, so that worshipers could follow the pastor’s own Biblical references. In this way, the preacher signaled his own humility before the Word and his insistence that he repeated only what the Bible said; he dismissed, as he said, “a school of preaching which teaches the Bible is only true in spots.” Rather he insisted that “no man can preach . . . and neglect any doctrine of the

11 Minutes of the First Baptist Church of the City of New York, 7 July 1916, 130-131. Archives, First Baptist Church, New York.
Everett Fowler, a member of Haldeman’s Board of Deacons, reported that he would, while on the morning train, ostentatiously discard the newspaper in favor of a “Greek new testament” in view of fellow riders, in order to bring the Word into their view. Similarly, shortly after his death Haldeman’s own church organized a Missionary Committee, whose first act was to “arrange for placing scripture portions on the table in the vestibule of the Church,” just inside a door customarily left open in the spring and summer. The Committee believed that simply placing this scripture within the view and reach of passersby would exert spiritual force upon them, and within a few weeks reported with satisfaction that all had been claimed. The committee stated that “The seed has been scattered – we look to God to use it according to His Word.” In the frontispiece of a history of the First Baptist Church Haldeman produced in 1904 were bound photos of the Bibles owned by John Gano and William Parkinson, prominent former pastors of the church.

Haldeman’s reverence for the Bible brought him great concern for the ways in which his congregation used, studied, and applied the scripture. To this end, in 1901 he wrote a manual for his congregation called How to Study the Bible, which the congregation used in their weeknight Bible courses and presumably in private study as well. In practice, the inerrant scripture that Haldeman taught his parishioners about was far more complicated than the sort of proof-texting that Briggs inveighed against. Haldeman’s Bible – and that of many others who came to identify

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13 Order of Services and Announcements for the Week beginning 5 May 1901, First Baptist Church in the City of New York scrapbook, New-York Historical Society; Isaac Haldeman, Friday Night Papers, 100; How to Study the Bible, 87.


16 Isaac Haldeman, The First Baptist Church in the City of New York (New York: The Church, 1904) frontispiece.

17 For the book’s use among the people of First Baptist, see Isaac Haldeman, How to Study the Bible, [vi].
as fundamentalists – exhibited a series of somewhat overlapping characteristics. Haldeman instructed that it was to be taken literally, which meant in practice not avoiding all figurative readings entirely, but instead paying attention to both the style and the message of the text, and avoiding the “spiritualizing,” or allegorizing, of passages that could be taken at face value. At the same time, literalism was not identical to historicity – the notion that the text accurately described what had happened in the past – though it was often closely related. Literalism to Haldeman meant understanding the relevance of everything in the text, and properly classifying, categorizing, and understanding precisely what the particular message of a given passage might be. As fundamentalists often said, citing Paul, this was “rightly dividing the word of truth;” as Haldeman described it, “We must inquire of each Scripture to whom it is written and give to each class the portion of truth belonging to it. We have no right to take truth from one class and give it to another.” For many evangelicals, this led to the practice of proof-texting – extracting particular propositions or verses from Scripture and applying them, context free, to one’s daily life. This implied that the Bible’s words were not merely a text written in the past for people in the past; they were the Word of God spoken to evangelicals in the present as well.

Briggs and Parkhurst scorned this close identification of the written word of scripture with the literal presence of God himself. For Briggs, “the dogma. . . that there can be no inspiration without verbal inspiration” was mere pedantry that obscured rather than illuminated. He accused Haldeman of superstition, the equivalent of “Mariolatry . . . the use of images and pictures and other things in worship.” Briggs worried that exalting the Bible in this way would

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19 On the link between literalism as verisimilitude and inerrancy, Kathleen Boone, *For the Bible Tells them So: the discourse of Protestant fundamentalism*, 45-46; Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 16.

20 Haldeman, *How to Study the Bible*, 3. “Rightly dividing the word of truth” is a reference to 2 Timothy 2:15.

lead to idolizing the form or the object rather than the content – which might apply both to the bound paper of the Bible as well as laying too great weight upon its particular choices of language. This made the Bible a proposition rather than a narrative, which undermined how Briggs understood its message. Briggs warned that “The Bible has no magical virtue in it . . . It will not stop a bullet any better than a mass book. It will not keep off evil spirits . . . .As a book it is merely paper, print and binding, nothing more.” He dismissed Bibliomancy, the search “for divine guidance by random opening of the book,” but also Haldeman’s conviction that every word of scripture might be relevant to the contemporary reader if only it was properly understood and contextualized. For Briggs, this arcane parsing was “no less than hydromancy or witchcraft.”

But in practice, Haldeman and his sympathizers did not create the sort of frozen, lifeless, abstract idol of scripture which Briggs accused them of. Inerrancy was an active style of reading more than it was an unchanging doctrine; Haldeman sought to interpret, make relevant, and protect the causative authority of the Bible no less than did liberal evangelicals, and his way of reading was useful to him insofar as it achieved these aims. Haldeman directed his congregation to read with a high degree of expectation, searching for passages relevant to their particular lives. He promised that they would find in the Bible, among other things, “supernatural wisdom . . . which waits patiently for Science to stop its hypotheses,” but also “Your character. By transgression and nature a sinner under the judgment of God; by grace a sinner forgiven,” and even “Your future,” guidance in the decisions of everyday life. Since Haldeman believed the Bible was the Word of God, he expected it to possess unlimited significance. The goal of reading was not necessarily to establish a single meaning of the text,

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23 Haldeman, How to study the Bible, 56-7.
but to establish what Brian Malley has called “transitivity;” that is, application in everyday life for the unquestioned authority of the text. While Briggs and Parkhurst promised their followers that they would find in Scripture models that might be translated from the unfamiliar world of ancient Israel into the experiences of their own lives, Haldeman discarded the necessity for such translation at all. For him the text accurately described the entirety of human history, including the present now of his congregation.24

Transitivity was derived in part from simply applying the Bible’s teachings, commandments, and maxims to present day situations, and the parishioners of First Baptist strove to do that; in 1917, the congregation’s secretary wrote a report to the Association of Southern New York Baptists which declared that First Baptist “has maintained a high standard of Christian living. Any Church will be attractive if its members will translate into practice the principles and teachings of the inspired book.”25 This was simple applicability, and hardly something that other Christians might disagree with. But Haldeman’s Bible worked on deeper levels as well. It was relevant to the lives of believers because it contained within it an all encompassing map of the history of humanity, and therefore, supernaturally produced imperatives and predictions for the human race, from large scale disasters to the minutiae of daily life. Haldeman was a vigorous exponent of dispensationalism, a particular way of reading the Bible that many fundamentalists wed to inerrancy. Dispensationalism had roots in medieval Catholicism, but the version that became popular among many conservative Baptists owed its popularity to the British evangelical John Nelson Darby, who preached his theory in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. It divided up human history into a set of six to eight “dispensations,” each characterized by a particular way in which God related to humanity. All

24 For contemporary parallels, see Ammerman, Bible Believers, 51-53; Malley, How the Bible Works, 81-85, 73.
25 Minutes of the First Baptist Church of the City of New York, 7 July 1916, 130-131. First Baptist Church Archives, New York.
dispensationalists agreed that the world was currently in the dispensation of the Church, or the Holy Ghost, inaugurated on Pentecost and in which the Church was created through the conversion of Gentiles. Most also were premillennialists, who believed that the Church dispensation would come to an end in catastrophe and humanity would be rescued when Christ returned to bind Satan and inaugurate the final dispensation – the paradisiacal millennium.

Dispensationalism gave Haldeman and other fundamentalists a distinct style of Bible reading, emerging both from inerrancy’s emphases on personal application as well as its own intellectual bent. It rooted the fundamentalist encounter with scripture in awareness of historical processes, both past and future. Schaff, Hodge, and other earlier nineteenth century evangelicals who stressed the verbal nature of scripture imagined that encounter as an ahistorical meeting between the soul and the Word of God that could happen at any instant. Haldeman and other dispensationalists, however, shared something of liberalism’s historical consciousness. Both Fosdick and the dispensationalists believed it important to understand the Bible as a progressive journey through humanity’s developing relationship with God. However, while Fosdick used this interpretation to discard what he called the “outmoded ways of thinking” of early Biblical civilizations, and to encourage his hearers to better understand the ways eternal spiritual lessons might be embodied in the historical particulars of any age, dispensationalists understood history to be entirely driven by the divine, and therefore, God’s interaction with humanity to be direct, supernatural, and knowable.

26 Haldeman makes this case in How to Study the Bible, 22-23; on dispensationalism more generally, see Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture (New York, Oxford, 2006) 55-71; Ernest Sandeen, The roots of fundamentalism: British and American millenarianism, 1800-1930 (New York: Baker Book House, 1978)
In 1915 the widow of the wealthy Presbyterian Morris Jessup endowed a chair in practical theology at Union Theological Seminary. Fosdick was appointed. He was to train ministers in general, but most of all in the use of the Bible. With an eye, then, to the ways in which scripture could be used in pastoral work, Fosdick synthesized and popularized the work of scholars like Briggs and preachers like Parkhurst. As he claimed, despite all the higher criticism, despite all the wars over Biblical historicity and translations, “the Bible must somehow be preached,” made relevant to congregations still. Fosdick believed himself to be evangelical, convinced that the Word of God was integral to conversion. Indeed, Fosdick said he accepted the job because “preachers everywhere . . . are being driven into superficial trifling with the mere words and phrases of the Book. . . without real reason in their thinking or vital influence upon their message.” Their preaching lacked the sort of transformative spiritual vitality the Bible should give the preached Word. Harry Sanders, who gave Fosdick his charge, told him, the Bible “still remains the Word of God to us, making the fullest and most final revelation of spiritual truth.” Sanders noted that Fosdick’s chair was founded with the directive to “teach the Bible ‘without reference to criticism,’ as it reads, and ‘in a plain and simple way so as to teach the hearts of the people.’” Fosdick strove to integrate new ways of using the Bible into the practical and substantive work of the ministry.

He first of all echoed Parkhurst’s historical consciousness: “For the first time in the course of Christian preaching we stand face to face with the historic sense of the Scriptures . . . the background of ideas out of which these Scriptures came.” This ruined, he said, the way in which ministers had traditionally used the Bible: its assertions about fact could no longer stand unquestioned; as Fosdick said, “we can see no more . . . prooftexts to support a Christian

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doctrine.” This seemed to be a disaster. Fosdick reported that many ministers had come to him worrying that historical criticism had “deeply affected the Bible’s preachableness.”

But in fact, Fosdick said, historical consciousness applied to scripture was a blessing in disguise, for it had given preachers “The idea of evolution which sees the religion of the Scriptures in process of becoming and not as a completed whole.” Preachers who worried that this sort of academic and scientific applied to scripture were voiding its power in fact simply did not understand what made the Bible powerful. “Our best knowledge of God comes down through this stream of experience and not another,” Fosdick said of scripture. “God’s revelation in Israel, and the early Church, of which the scriptures are the record, is primarily a revelation in life and deed . . . See how the historic sense gives back to the preacher with its right hand more than it ever took away with its left.”

But pivotally, for Fosdick the Bible was not merely a history like any other; “not merely the record of a great historic deed, to be praised in gratitude because we share in the deed’s heritage.” It was in fact a revelation of God, simply in the form of recorded history rather than in divine speech. As Parkhurst and Briggs had argued, the Bible revealed the patterns of life which Christians should attempt to replicate both individually and in their community. Fosdick identified in this very difference the mystery; he confessed that he could not “explain this strange thing, that men who shared so thoroughly the thought of their time could make their trust permanently essential to the spiritual life of man;” that is, that human actions so thoroughly of a particular time and place might embody something of the transcendent. But it was in that paradox that Fosdick came to believe that “God is speaking there.” The transformation “from

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28 Fosdick, Modern Preacher’s Problem, 18.
29 Fosdick, Modern Preacher’s Problem, 19.
30 Fosdick, Modern Preacher’s Problem, 27, 29.
31 Fosdick, Modern Preacher’s Problem, 30.
Semitic whose ideal was consummated in the crude ethic of nomadic life to men who dared welcome the ideals of the Sermon on the Mount” was evidence of divine intervention, and the same road that the contemporary reader of the Bible could travel in his or her own life.  

Fosdick, then found in the higher criticism a version of the very authority that the Princetonians were afraid it would strip from the Bible, and he believed that such scholarship could itself serve a devotional purpose. “Our first need as preachers is not that scholars should be easy on us, obscuring the contrasts of which we have been speaking,” he said later, in a book that expanded his inaugural address. “Our chief need is that scholars should make us so familiar with the contrasts that we shall take them for granted.” Fosdick believed that extracting divine truth from the Bible required wrestling, extraction, paring away the human in search of the divine, which itself was better understood through the experience of history itself than through any particular categories that humans might use. Thus, though he insisted that the language of Scripture was essential, like van Dyke he believed that language was more useful in the performative than in the referential; it brought feeling and inspiration, both more useful than fact. He sought to preserve evangelicalism as an experience, discarding such doctrine that he found impossible to maintain. After Fosdick expanded his inaugural speech into a book, Will Moody, son of the great evangelist, wrote to Fosdick to say he “would thank you for what you have done in that book. “I appreciate in a sense the difficulty which comes in trying to reduce to definite terms some of the great truths which we accept by faith,” he mused, and stated his agreement with Fosdick that “the safest course is to express in Scriptural terms themselves these truths,

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which are certainly general enough.”

Moody recognized Fosdick’s deep roots in evangelical devotional experience.

However, some of Fosdick’s critics bridled at his willingness to subordinate the particular words of Scripture to the historical process therein illustrated. Upon reading the book, Isaac Haldeman blasted Fosdick, declaring the professor “has nothing but my intellectual contempt, not to say spiritual pity” for his denial of what Haldeman called a “whole Bible.” The phrase “a whole Bible” signaled two things which Haldeman believed about Scripture: first, that the Bible was a unitary text, a cross-referenced compendium of truth. But secondly, the Bible was, before it was anything else, a written text, a collection of assertions built out of words whose power, as Schaff had believed, rested in their referential authority.

For instance, Haldeman complained that Fosdick “skillfully substitutes experience for the text itself,” and insisted that Fosdick entirely misconstrued the proper way to understand the experiences of the apostles: “The disciples did not hand out their experimental evidence to the world; they gave direct evidence. They gave historical fact.” Modern readers were not to ponder the experience of a Paul, say, and think about how best to reproduce his experiences in their own lives, as Parkhurst had advised. Rather, they were to understand that Paul gave direct witness to the supernatural realities that governed the forces of the universe. While Fosdick and Parkhurst and Briggs were interested in scriptures as a historical narrative to reenact, Haldeman was interested in the referential authority of scripture: the correspondence of its words to realities that human beings could grasp no other way. For Haldeman, “there is no explanation” other than actual resurrection, factual divine intervention in the world, for the historical success of

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34 Will Moody to Harry Emerson Fosdick, 12 December 1924, Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers, series II, box II, folder 15. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

Christianity. He understood these assertions in Scripture to bear the weight of declarations, Thus, he claimed in a letter, “The Bible needs no proof. It is its own evidence.” Finally, balefully, Haldeman warned that Fosdick “It is this subtle use of orthodox phrases, while in his heart of hearts he does not believe in the facts these phrases express which renders Dr Fosdick so actually dangerous.” His denunciations of Fosdick were not merely truculence at different theology; they grew from a confident belief that Fosdick’s willingness to discard the textual nature of scripture undermined the Bible’s function as a means of saving grace. He asked incredulously of his readers, “Do you wonder when the advanced preacher repudiates the Bible doctrine of the way of salvation through a penally sacrificial, and blood redeeming Christ? . . . Nay, rather, I am bound to listen to the old, far question that comes out of this old, old Bible: If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” Again, Haldeman spoke of his relationship with the Bible in terms of hearing; the Bible spoke to him as Jesus himself might were he in Haldeman’s presence. And for Fosdick, the Bible did not speak at all.

Fosdick himself ascribed the differences to Haldeman’s temperament. As he wrote to Benno Kirschbaum, who sent Fosdick a letter of outraged sympathy denouncing Haldeman’s review, “Dr Haldeman is an extreme reactionary with the most impossible views . . . His attack on me, therefore, is to be expected since his ministry is made up of one attack after another on somebody.” Though Haldeman insisted that his acidity was in fact a manifestation of his religious convictions; the Word of God preached to sinners, Fosdick preferred a more ironical approach, emphasizing the common ground of the evangelical heritage. Both groups, for

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37 Wilcox to Fosdick, 3 June 1926, Fosdick Papers, series II, subsection B, box 2, folder 15. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
39 Haldeman, A review of Harry Emerson Fosdick’s Book, 94.
40 Fosdick to Benno Kirschbaum, 30 April 1925, Fosdick Papers, series II, subsection B, box 2, folder 15. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
instance, could speak in terms of “progressive revelation.” Fosdick talked of reading “through
the whole Scripture the development of its structural ideals,” exploring the growing awareness of
its themes in the humans involved.\footnote{Fosdick, \textit{The modern use of the Bible}, 59, 22.} But Arno Gaebelein, a New York friend of Haldeman’s and
publisher of the prophecy journal \textit{Our Hope} wrote, “prophecy has often been explained as being
history prewritten. And so it is. But it is something deeper than that . . . it is the revelation of the
plan of redemption as planned by our omniscient God, who knows the end from the
beginning.”\footnote{Arno Gaebelein, “The Wonders of Progressive Prophecy,” \textit{Our Hope} 46 (May 1940) 664-5. See also Stallard, \textit{Early Twentieth Century Dispensationalism}, 156-9.} While for Fosdick, human beings were the driving agents of scripture,
responsible for cultivating in themselves a greater awareness of God’s virtues, for Haldeman,
Gaebelein and other fundamentalists, God himself was the absolutely authoritative actor. Human
actions and motivations were a secondary motivating force, subordinated to the divine will, and
it was the responsibility of human beings to discover the patterns God had laid in history – even
in the actions of historical figures, all of which were read as types, symbols pointing not to
secular forces, but to sacred intervention most especially Christ himself. In so doing, the
intentions of God for human history could be reliably known.\footnote{On this understanding of history, see George Marsden’s analysis of J. Gresham Machen, \textit{Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) 189-191.}

This sort of typology drew upon the same deep evangelical impulses that Parkhurst’s use
of typology did. But it differed in significant ways. While Parkhurst and Fosdick spoke of
typology as a lesson given from the past to the present, a lens for interpreting the progress of
humanity in divine ways, Haldeman did not see in scripture evolutionary progression or
development, but rather an eternal and static network of types and antitypes, referents and signals
to God’s eternal and unchanging plan, all of which were revealed, though sometimes obscurely,
in the Bible and required careful parsing. As he said, “the New Testament is the fulfillment of
the Old, and therefore many of its books must be, and are, commentaries on the Old; and further, that each book has its key hung up by the door.” Christians should work through these symbols to locate themselves in conjunction with the will of God, but less to find paths and patterns for personal development than to understand the potential actions of the divine.

While Fosdick acknowledged that the blindness or imperfection of humanity might obscure accurate understanding of divine will, Haldeman maintained that history itself was a clear and even essential manifestation of God’s saving work. “We are definitely told that all things which happened to the Children of Israel happened unto them that they might be as types full of instruction to us,” he wrote. The events of the human past were simultaneously the mundane actions of humanity but at the same time signals that God sent to those believers who could understand them. The salvation of individuals was not only manifested in their own lives, but also in the culmination of human history: Haldeman maintained that the “doctrine of the second coming of Christ is the spinal cord of the truth of the Gospel.” He argued that “Lazarus was not raised until Christ came personally,” and concluded that “Resurrection is the completion of redemption” – both things only ultimately possible at the second coming of Christ. Dispensationalism fused the soteriology of evangelicalism to a progression of sacred history that they strove to locate themselves within. Haldeman’s 1904 history of the First Baptist Church included on its endsheets a large map of sacred history, from Adam to the Second Coming of Christ, with the text describing First Baptist itself in the middle.

In addition to historicizing their study of the Bible, dispensationalism made reading the Bible a much more complicated task than Schaff or other early evangelicals imagined it to be. Though dispensationalist evangelicals continued to assert that the meaning of the Bible was

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44 *How to Study the Bible*, 1.
45 Haldeman, *How to Study the Bible*, 2.
46 Isaac Haldeman, “Can We Preach the Second Coming of Christ Too Much?” 15, 6-7.
available to the average reader, they also believed that readers needed particular tools to understand it. They supplemented the plain meaning that earlier evangelicals had located with dispensational, typological meanings. Much as Fosdick insisted that preachers depended upon scholars to help them understand the development of ancient Hebrew thought, Haldeman maintained that the verses of the Bible had to be read with an awareness of the dispensations which they were written to and they types they might symbolize, with the warning that “To put the truth applicable to one dispensation into another is to risk confusion and not only theological but spiritual death.” 47  Proper classification was essential because it determined how the Christian would apply scripture in their own lives. Haldeman warned, for instance, that the Lord’s “prayer belongs in the closing hours of this dispensation when the church is gone,” because the prayer speaks of a situation when “grace will be gone and law and righteousness will be in vogue.” Therefore, he said, his church would not use it. 48

The methods of dispensational reading – careful classification, parsing; as Haldeman put it, “distinction between things that appear similar” 49 – revived a traditional Reformation doctrine, the “analogy of faith,” which the Westminster Confession enunciated: “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.” This meant that obscure passages in one book of the Bible could be clarified and defined only with reference to other texts. It presumed internal consistency and unifying spirit behind the Bible that inerrancy provided; it made everything in scripture significant, and made reading the Bible more a work of cross-referencing than of following a single narrative. Haldeman demonstrated to his congregation how such reading would work; he referred to a passage from Isaiah commanding that Israel celebrate the

47 Haldeman, How to Study the Bible, 18. On the supplement of the clear meaning with typological, metaphorical dispensational readings, see Stallard, Early Twentieth Century Dispensationalism, 140-143.
48 Haldeman, How to Study the Bible, 21. See also his pamphlet, “The Lord’s Prayer: Should Christians Use It?” (New York: First Baptist Church, nd).
49 Haldeman, How to Study the Bible, 28.
“recompense for missionary zeal;” God’s reward for preaching in many nations. But, referring to Galatians 3, he warned his congregation that since the New Testament letter maintained that in Christ national distinctions vanish, the passage in Isaiah could only refer to “Israel in the last days after the Church has been translated.” He similarly used the Gospel of John to reconcile seeming contradictions between Zechariah and Luke and declared that “Corinthians is a flash light on Judges,” among other correspondences.⁵⁰

Reading through the analogy of faith as applied to dispensationalist theology accomplished three things. First, it provided a powerful method for reinforcing plenary inspiration, flattening, to some extent, distinctions in scripture and evaporating apparent inconsistencies. Nothing in a Bible read this way could be discarded; if a passage seemed obscure or irrelevant, the reader should cross-reference until a framework which made sense of seeming nonsense emerged. Haldeman himself was forever classifying books and verses, drawing comparisons and analogy, using one verse to explain another, or even an entire book. “Each book stands for some definite from of the great revelation” of Christ, he said; “Each book is a necessity to and produces the others . . . It is evident that we may find books acting as divine commentaries.”⁵¹ But it also made the Bible speak with one voice, and proclaim throughout one message. That is, it made scripture a source of propositional knowledge of divine intention rather than Fosdick’s gradually unveiled revelation of God. For Haldeman, the analogy of faith preserved the “whole Bible” – a single unified work that he frequently described as an “organic whole.”⁵² Thus, the Bible Fosdick proposed, which spoke in a multitude of voices and changed its ideas of God over time was to Haldeman a “new Bible – so far as the Old Testament

⁵⁰Haldeman, How to Study the Bible, 19, 20-21, 50. On dispensational use of the analogy of faith, see Stallard, Early Twentieth Century Dispensationalism, 164-5.
⁵¹Haldeman, How to Study the Bible, 49-50.
⁵²Haldeman, How to Study the Bible, 50.
is concerned, a Bible none of the Apostles of Christ knew.” Haldeman’s use of the organic, then, worked at cross purposes from the way in which Parkhurst and Fosdick had understood it. Indeed, Haldeman believed their notion of the development of scripture tore apart the very unity which made the Bible a living whole. He insisted that “each book finds its place therefore by the law of organic growth, each book is a necessity to and thus produces the other, just as each preceding part of a tree is necessary and inspiration to that which follows.” For him, organic meant unified, functioning as a complete whole – a reading which drew not upon Parkhurst’s evolutionary understanding of biology, but from older evangelical notions of nature as itself a revelation of God which worked in perfect harmony. The Bible itself, then, was a perfect whole, each part intended to work with every other.

Both dispensationalist theology and the style of reading the analogy of faith encouraged trained fundamentalists to read their Bibles not as the narratives which Parkhurst and Fosdick exalted, but as reference works. The words of scripture were valuable primarily for their referential meaning, their ability to convey propositional truth. As Haldeman said to his congregation, “A man told me once that he had read the Bible through three times, and he judged I must have read it many times oftener, but I told him I had never read it through once. People do not know how to read the Bible understandingly.” Instead, he instructed his congregation to study the Bible for its propositional meanings rather than its narrative. Making a key distinction, he said that they should “read, and study constantly.” The two were different practices; the second more useful. As he said, “we ought to study Types,” and “we ought to study Topics,” “Key Words,” “the Names of God,” “the names of Persons.” He advised them to.

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54 Haldeman, How to Study the Bible, 49-50.
55 On nature as a revelation of God, see David Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain from the 1730s to the 1980s (London: Unwin Hyman, 1986) 167-168.
56 Westminster Confession, 1:9; Isaac Haldeman, “Can We Preach the Second Coming of Christ Too Much?” 11.
equip themselves with a concordance and a “topical text book,” as well as “a Revised Version for examining readings and phrase constructions,” alongside a King James Version. They should find a version with “a broad margin for marking,” and use different colors to draw together different topics out of the text: “Blue lines for Second Coming . . . Red lines for Blood, Sacrifice, the Cross, and Atonement,” and so on.\textsuperscript{57} Philip Mauro, a fundamentalist New York attorney who published many articles in \textit{The Fundamentals}, a large edited series that gave the movement its name, read his Bible in much the same way. He was converted while an adult by a street preacher; he later wrote, “The habit of daily Bible reading, and morning and evening prayer, was immediately established.” Mauro began his Bible study with a “large quantity of yellow paper” and a concordance; he then “began to write out all the references on a given word or theme to which his attention was directed.” His biographer celebrated “the phenomenal way in which he connects similar words and phrases from widely separated portions of the Bible.”\textsuperscript{58}

The importance of such parsing eventually led the two to clash, when in 1928 Mauro published a book critical of the Congregationalist minister Cyrus Scofield’s Reference Bible, a widely popular edition of the King James Version possessed of extensive footnotes and cross-references that supported dispensationalism. Mauro proclaimed “the Scofield Bible has usurped the place of authority belonging to God’s Bible alone,” declaring that Scofield’s dispensationalism suffered from “the impossibility of reconciling its main positions with the plain statement of the Word.” He denounced dispensationalism as “modernism” that denied the unity of the Scriptures, and cited a vast number of scriptures that announced the fullness of the Gospel was preached in New Testament times – making modern dispensationalism

\textsuperscript{57} Haldeman, \textit{How to Study the Bible}, 52-3, 55.
anachronistic. Haldeman countered with his own collection of references, declaring that Scofield’s Bible provided “a blessed clearness,” and claimed “there is not a wasted word, and yet, the unmodified wholeness of the Bible reaches you.” The men feuded, essentially, over whose reading better preserved an unmodified wholeness in scripture.

Finally, this sort of intensive study, oriented around topic and idea rather than narrative or development guided Haldeman, Mauro, and other fundamentalists as they applied Scripture in their own lives. Dispensationalists, for instance, tended to read the pastoral epistles of Paul as directives to the church dispensation, of which they were a part. Thus, Paul’s prescriptions were considered binding, and Mauro’s wife, upon reading the apostle’s condemnation of gaudy dress in 1 Timothy, surrendered her own jewels. As Mauro reported proudly, “She wanted to live exactly as the Word of God indicated.” Haldeman advised his readers similarly, saying that Bible reading made “the Christian thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” The members of his congregation frequently claimed to judge their actions on whether or not they were “Biblical,” claiming justification through citing one verse or another; the Young People’s Union, for instance, reported that its mission was “endeavoring to fulfill the injunction of the Scripture as found in II Timothy 2:15 ‘Study to show thyself approved unto God.’” And when Haldeman finally passed away in 1933, to be replaced by William Rogers, another fundamentalist church sent a telegram with “heartiest Christian greetings to congregation First Baptist Church New York City and our beloved Pastor Dr Rogers We are praying that a gracious outpouring of divine blessing and salvation may rest upon your ministry together First

59 Philip Mauro, The Gospel of the Kingdom (Boston: Hamilton Brothers, 1928) 5-6.
60 Isaac Haldeman, The Kingdom of God: An Answer to Mr Philip Mauro’s The Gospel of the Kingdom (New York: Francis Emory Fitch, 1928) 126.
61 Cited in Gardiner, Champion of the Kingdom, 34. For the epistles as written to the church age, see Haldeman, How to Study the Bible, 37-8.
62 Haldeman, How to Study the Bible, 57. He is quoting II Timothy 3:17.
63 “Annual Report of the Young People’s Union,” 14 May 1941, Annual Reports of the First Baptist Church in the City of New York, First Baptist Church Archives.
Thessalonians Chapter One Verses Two and Three Second Thessalonians Three Sixteen.” The Bible had penetrated First Baptist to the degree that soon the congregation was calling itself “Bible-believing,” and citing the mandate of II Corinthians 6:14 (“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers”), withdrew from the Southern New York Baptist Association, an “un-Biblical” institution.  

Fosdick and Haldeman embodied the poles that sat on either end of New York’s Bible-reading spectrum by the 1920s. But many more evangelical New Yorkers found themselves somewhere in the middle, with a pastor who was not perhaps possessed of the same brilliance or urgency as one of the great Baptists. In such a situation, many New Yorkers turned not to their own pastor, but to one of the mail-order Bible study programs supplied by Wilbert Webster White’s Biblical Seminary of New York, at 541 Lexington Avenue in Manhattan, between 49th and 50th Streets. In 1922, after 22 years of work, White’s seminary boasted that it had currently 418 students, most destined for missionary work in Africa or Asia, and over four thousand alumni working in the field. By 1925, 285 people – the report noted housewives, businessmen, a social worker, and a farmer, alongside a plurality of missionaries, pastors, and other church workers - had enrolled in one of White’s correspondence courses, which the school had begun ten years earlier. Many of those were, counterintuitively, residents of the city, and most were taking a course on one of the Gospels. Courses could be taken either singly or in small discussion groups; work would be regularly mailed to the Seminary and returned with comment. White’s supervisor of the correspondence courses, Caroline Palmer, exalted the value

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64 Minutes of the First Baptist Church of the City of New York, 30 September 1933, 362; 5 June 1944, 584-5. First Baptist Church Archives.
that White’s programs could have in the city; she worried that religious “leaders seem not to have the ability to get religious ideas and ideals into the minds of the people;” a shame, for the city was “an environment for observation of all forms of work and gives many contacts.” The city was ideal for experimenting with programs like White’s correspondence course.

White and Palmer professed discontent with the feuding between the Haldeman and Fosdick camps, and proposed as a solution a return to the common sense style reading of the previous century. He condemned as “foolish” certain styles of fundamentalist use of scripture: proofexting, “eliminating the human element in its production,” and the “wishful interpretation” that applying outside historical models, like dispensationalism, represented. However, he also held a mixed view of the higher criticism, observing that though it had unlocked many of the Bible’s secrets, “It has no theory of inspiration.” He also noted that “there is a growing disposition (as a rule unintentional) to be unfair to the other side.” His own method was seemingly chameleon-like enough that students wrote to him praising his school’s “emancipation . . . from a cast-iron view of Christianity,” accomplished, so one student claimed, “by placing all study on a rational basis, by a fair consideration of all scriptures, and by a historical perspective.” This student claimed that his time at White’s seminary “have helped me most in dealing with conservative and ultra-conservative people” At the same time Frank Hunger, the conservative minister of New York’s Spring Street Presbyterian Church, who joined an organization calling for the removal of Fosdick as preaching minister of the city’s First Presbyterian Church, praised

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67 Caroline Palmer, “A Proposed Curriculum for an Institution Training Religious Leaders,” MA thesis, New York University, 1925. For the functioning of the correspondence system, see Wilbert Webster White to “Miss Blair,” 7 October 1922, White Papers, series 3B, box 1, folder II. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.


69 Wilbert Webster White, “Concerning Conservatives,” Bible Study 5:6 (March 1917) 123.

70 Cecil Howarth to White, 5 July 1930, White Papers, series 2, box 2, folder 29. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
the school, his own alma mater. Hunger said after his study at the seminary, “I have been more firmly rooted and grounded in the fundamental doctrines of the evangelical faith . . . I attribute this to a sincere searching after truth in the Word.”

    White claimed that his “compositive method” of Bible study had such basic appeal because it rejected any outside methods of interpretation and concentrated merely upon what the text itself claimed. “The idea is to get from the book under consideration just what the author of that particular book intended to give,” he said, “and not to make that book a mere help in constructing a general life of Christ,” or other broader metanarratives. Of course, claiming to merely read what the Bible said was a long tradition, going back to early evangelical common sense theology. Haldeman and to a lesser extent Fosdick claimed it as well, and laying claim to this heritage helped White create an irenic and appealing image. But White laid particular claim to this heritage by returning to the strong emphasis upon the text of the Bible as it was presented. Unlike Haldeman, R.W. Kurz, who helped develop the Biblical Seminary’s correspondence curriculum, taught that “It is very important that the books treated should be given in their canonical order, otherwise the student will feel that the treatment is fragmentary. Skipping about is always more or less unsatisfactory.”

    The compositive method rejected the use of any commentaries, scholarship, or outside analysis in favor of inductive, intense and intensive focus on the text itself. Readers were

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72 Frank Hunger to White, 18 February 1931, White Papers, series 2, box 2, folder 29. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

73 White, “Concerning Conservatives,” 124.


75 R.W. Kurz to White, 6 July 1914, White Papers, Papers, series 3B, box 1, folder II. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
advised to “Read an entire book thoughtfully and continuously with the sole objective that when through reading you will make a note of the effect upon you and of noteworthy results to you.” Then they were to go through the book again, seeking “1) the organizing idea of the book 2) the central or dominating thought of the book 3) the aim of the book 4) the theme or subject of the book.” They took notes on names, places, and dates, and read the book both “from the standpoint of the author,” seeking to understand literary style and metaphors, and then again “from the standpoint of the Bible as a whole,” seeking to understand how it related to other books and its contribution ultimately to “God’s plan of redemption.” All of this was done without recourse to any resource on the Bible other than the reader’s own expectations – something which would have horrified both Fosdick, who believed higher criticism should be mobilized on behalf of faith, and Haldeman, who believed that strict knowledge of dispensationalism was necessary to properly understand Scripture.

White’s emphasis on this detailed, but naïve style of Bible study returned to the principles of what was by now a much older generation – evangelicals like Schaff, who presumed that the text itself needed no lens to fully see its message. And yet, White had absorbed the lessons that the battles between Fosdick and Haldeman had to teach. While he rejected any sort of interpretive apparatus, he did not believe that the text required no interpretation whatsoever. He called his method “compositive” because he recognized that “In the study of the Bible we deal with composition. Composition in written form is the product of mind. Respect for the laws of mind in verbal expression must, therefore, be exercised in the

76 Wilbert Webster White, “Why Read the Bible, How to Read the Bible, What to Read and Why” (New York City: Grant and Dunlop, 1931) 1070-1071. See also “Instruction Sheet 1 – Correspondence Course in the Gospel According to Mark,” White Papers, series 3B, box 1, folder 11. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
process of grasping the thoughts of the writer.”

He advised his students to think about literary style – but not in order to ponder authorial intent, provenance, or questions of that nature. Rather, like van Dyke and Merrill, White understood the reading of the Bible to be a primarily devotional act, and he understood its literary form to be primarily an issue of sentiment rather than of truth. Though the Bible might convey knowledge about God, it would primarily work upon the soul, and White’s study method was designed to enhance and promote spiritual experience. The causative authority of scripture was thus alive and well.

Thus, White’s correspondence lessons on the Gospel of Mark straightforwardly acknowledged that most scholars believed the last seven verses of that book to be a later addition, but the fact was couched in personal experience: “Can you see for yourself any ways in which the so-called appendix, chapter 16:9-16, differs from the rest of the book . . . Do you feel any sort of break between verses 8-9? What does the resurrection of Jesus mean to you personally?”

White emphasized that his method required “Assimilative Bible study – the making one’s own the broad spiritual culture which is inherent in the Book” and “Practical Bible study – the testing of life by the Book, and of the Book by life, the dominant interest being to come to grips with the very issues of life, through searching and vital studies of the enduring problems of humanity.” He insisted that his school had “No tendency toward Bibliolatry;” that “No superficial surveying and no proof-texting are tolerated.”

Rather, the students were required to ponder scripture in light of their own spiritual lives, for indeed, White taught that “A right life [was] an essential factor in understanding the Word of God,” for “moral

and religious truth, unlike mathematical truth, impinges on the affections.”  

As did Schaff, White believed scripture to be an intimate interaction between the divine and the human; the method of inspiration represented on the page was to be reproduced in the encounter between the reader and God. He asked, “Why did the Bible require many centuries in which to be written? Because it had to be lived before it was written . . . It is God in individuals like Abraham and Moses and Samuel and Isaiah – individuals in the church that makes it possible for us to say that the church made the Bible”

This echoed the historicism of Parkhurst and Fosdick, but there was no sense of progression or development for White; rather, he sought the same sort of accurate reproduction of Biblical spiritual experience that Schaff did. Speaking of Isaiah, he claimed, “the truth communicated through the prophet took shape in his own mind at the moment of his greatest desire and effort to find truth on his own part. It follows that there can be no real re-revelation without rediscovery.”

It is possible to view White as a throwback; an idealist who sought to recapture the scriptural hermeneutic of two generations previous, before criticism, lower or higher, before the Briggs trial and the rise of dispensationalism and all the rest. But in fact, just as fundamentalist hermeneutics were themselves a reaction to the historicist readings of liberals like Parkhurst and Fosdick, it was impossible for White to fully recover what had been lost; to pretend as though the thirty years between the publication of the Revised Version and the founding of the Biblical Seminary had not happened. Near the end of his life, White confessed to Henry van Dusen, the president of Union, that “I have never taught the Bible as it should be taught.” He did not elaborate on his distress, but only said of his generation, “How far ahead of the Higher Criticism

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81 Wilbert Webster White, “The Church made the Bible, the Bible made the Church,” speech typescript, White Papers, series 3C, box 2, folder 15. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
of the uneasy eighties!” and offered a prayer to God: “I have come to know Who Thou art by the unveiling of Thyself by Thy Spirit through the study of Thy Word and obedience to the same.”

Like Schaff and Briggs and van Dyke and Haldeman, evangelicals all, White was trying to make the Bible not merely text, but a place where the reader could have a saving encounter with God. He used the same language and concepts of evangelical common sense that Schaff had drawn on – the sense that the Bible’s text alone would be enough, that any reader could, if given an accessible text, unpack what scripture had to offer.

But at the same time, White protested too much to ascribe to him the easy confidence of Schaff, despite his affinities in reading style. The force of his admonitions for strict separation from commentary, the attempt to refocus the reader upon the face value of the text all spoke to White’s anxiety about the place of the Bible in contemporary evangelical religion. And White’s fears were well justified, for though he struggled to reconcile the burgeoning conflict between the Fosdicks and the Haldemans of the city, his attempts to reconcile the drifting poles of evangelical Biblical theology overlooked the ways in which the cultural and social pressures of the city were driving them further apart.

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83 White to van Dusen, 18 November 1942, White Papers, series 2, box 2, folder 1. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
Chapter 7

Billy Sunday and the Revival of the Preached Word

As Haldeman and Fosdick struggled over how best to apply scripture to the life of the city, New York itself was changing. Between the 1880s and World War I, the industrial city once divided into a small economic and mostly Protestant elite and a large immigrant Catholic or unchurched population, saw the emergence of a well to do middle class, largely Protestant but increasingly made up of second generation unchurched immigrants and Catholics as well.\(^1\) And these demographic changes were matched with a cultural transformation: the evolution from an “old New York” to a “new New York;” that pivoted on the hinge of the 1890s.\(^2\) This process was marked by the move of the city’s symbolic center from City Hall to Times Square: the rise of a mass city culture centered upon its commercial economy, its far reaching print media, and a new and technologically sophisticated entertainment industry would prime the city to become the center of a national culture by the middle twentieth century.

These economic and cultural changes radically altered the city evangelicals perceived themselves to live in, and revised the challenges they saw emerging from it. These new challenges were even more difficult than the teeming diversity, poverty, and industry of the 1870s and 1880s. These factors had splintered the city, dividing New Yorkers by race, language, wealth, and religion, and thus evangelicals had imagined their challenge to be one of creating unity, forging consensus and conversion and making the city over as the Kingdom of God. They had developed tools and language to do it, and their successes had cultivated confidence in their

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ability to conquer the city. But in the emerging commercial and consumer culture of the city, evangelineals found not merely further fragmentation, but a competitor. In a commercialized city the values which mattered were not religious or ethnic, but economic; spending habits and the use of leisure time marked the identity and character of New Yorkers as deeply as class, ethnicity or faith.³

At the turn of the twentieth century, these sorts of choices were thrust into their more deeply than ever before: New York’s spaces were transformed into a playground for commercial entertainment: phonograph, kinetoscope, and movie houses opened, department stores, hotels, and more than anything the subway brought New Yorkers together physically, but also culturally.⁴ Evangelicals and other New Yorkers had once divided the city between areas of moral light and foreign darkness, between Little Italy and Murray Hill; but under the pressure of a commercial economy, these distinctions began to break down. In the 1890s, the subway not only connected New York geographically, but blended its riders efficiently; cheap electricity made possible relatively inexpensive theatres, shopping centers, and other gathering places, eliminating the gap between poorly funded, dimly lit saloons and expensive, gaslight opera houses and creating a new middle class culture into the bargain.⁵ Where evangelicals had worked long and fruitlessly to unite New Yorkers in creed and culture, New York’s merchants, impresarios, and transit officials seemed to have effortlessly succeeded.

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Fragmentation remained – and in many ways, merely accelerated; Italian immigration to the city peaked in the years immediately before the First World War, for instance – but at the same time the assimilative power of commercialism continued to gain steam, particularly in the eyes of the city’s middle class, in whose ranks most New York evangelicals stood. While New York’s nightlife had once been feared, by the early twentieth century it was gaining respectability; for instance, one late nineteenth century guidebook blasted the “jugglery, skirt dancing, serpentine and otherwise, and the mimicry, and antics of the variety theatre [which] satisfy the demands of the vast majority,” mourning that “of hundreds of thousands of people who support the theatres in New York very few take the drama seriously.” James McCabe reported in the 1870s that New York had sixteen operating theatres. But by 1900 that number had more than doubled, with the great increase coming in the 1890s, and it had become a hugely profitable industry, benefitting from electrification and easier mass transit, but also, and critically, from the maturation of amusements like vaudeville, whose advocates – led by Oscar Hammerstein of New York’s Olympia Theatre – determined that eliminating profanity, sexual innuendo, and other traditional, if tawdry, aspects of the art would open the box office to vast new audiences. And they were right; the turn of the century was a boom time for the New York stage.

Many New Yorkers welcomed these transformations, and celebrated the new set of virtues that seemed to accompany them. Most profound was the sense among many New Yorkers that their city was becoming someplace important; a model for the rest of the world, a foreshadowing of the particular sort of greatness which America was achieving. Robert

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Shackleton’s best selling 1917 guidebook *The Book of New York* was more than merely a city guide; it was an ideological statement, a celebration and an argument for what the city was becoming, and what those transformations meant. For Shackleton, the key characteristic of New York Shackleton celebrated was its dynamism, its ceaseless sense of change, ambition, and energy: “The thrill, the life, the movement, the strength of the city: how they stand for the most representative Americanism!” he wrote. This was a new type of Americanism; one confident, capitalist, diverse, and urban, distinct from the pious city evangelicals imagined. For Shackleton as for other city boosters, the city not only provided a model which to follow; its very structure encouraged the virtues it embodied.\(^8\) The chugging of its economic engine both derived from and produced the dynamic culture of the city; its strengths likewise rested in its capacity to embrace and celebrate productive change. In 1907, for instance, the city produced the *New York City Improvement Plan*, which offered a coherent vision of the city for the first time since its streets were set in a block grid; followup efforts, like the official Committee on the City Plan, which met in 1914, successfully pursued zoning and urban renovation projects which attempted to transform New York’s downtown from an industrial center to an upscale shopping, entertainment, and promenading space.\(^9\)

For Shackleton the vibrancy of the city rested in its particularities: New York City could primarily be described in terms of the city’s sensory landscape, and particularly the auditory and visual. He described the shopping districts of downtown as places which never fell silent,

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reflecting on the “ceaseless chaffering and dickering and the talk and laughter of the people who crowd each other on the thronged sidewalks and the cries of rival dealers calling attention to their wares,” sounds which “fill the air with discordant interest.” He described restaurants, mass transportation, the sound of music halls and other entertainment venues: “The vibrant clink of glasses, the twanging note of a guitar, the grinding rattle of surface cars. the thunder of the Elevated, the distant clanging of a gong the tolling of a bell such are among the familiar sounds,” and claimed that for New Yorkers in the early twentieth century, such sounds formed their own experiences: “these people come to know the streets and all that pertains to the streets with a loving intimacy.”

The sound which dominated Shackleton’s New York was not the preached word of the evangelical pulpit, but the rising hum of economic interchange; indeed, the musical analogy Shackleton preferred above all others was “medley,” a form which drew beauty through diversity.

This worried evangelicals. Emily Ann Thompson has argued that the “soundscape” of early twentieth century New York – like that of many other American cities – was changing dramatically, shaped by the new technologies Shackleton marveled at, but also by new habits of listening, conditioned by a consumer society. Indeed, Shackleton selected a particular noise event as the best representative of what New York had become: the commemoration of the opening of the subway, which was acknowledged in a “style commensurate with the city's greatness, the mayor suggested that every bell and whistle should sound in unison for one hour; a great and prolonged din being supposedly representative of New York City and most fitting for the celebration of a tremendous achievement.”

While many New Yorkers followed Shackleton and celebrated the buzz of the city as a sign of material progress, they also began to

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enthusiastically pursue the regulation, rationalization, and control of the city’s noise, working to ensure that New Yorkers would hear only the sounds they wished.\textsuperscript{12}

But the bustle and constant rush of the rising commerce also shaped what New Yorkers saw. Shackleton claimed “The dweller in Manhattan forgets what night is. That is to say he forgets the meaning of night and of darkness.” The lights of the city, like its sound, were unceasing; but they also represented the power of New York’s emerging commercialized culture. As Shackleton described Broadway, “The lights flare and sparkle and glow in dazzles of electricity on the fronts of buildings up to the roofs, and even far above the roofs on great frameworks.” They were, “of course, advertisements. . . . streams and lines and circles and squares and cascades and fountains of light.” There were flowers, a “kilted Highlander” fifty feet high, cigars and hotel names and bottles of wine. And for Shackleton, this flood of products represented, again, the best the New York had to offer. They were “bold and striking and wonderful. They are the verve and the individuality of a city that thinks for itself.”\textsuperscript{13}

As Shackleton’s final words indicate, he understood this new city to be a moral force upon its inhabitants; the culture of New York’s commercial culture shaped them as much as evangelicals hoped to. He declared that “The lights of Broadway shine on thronging streets and sidewalks, on the just and on the unjust, on the rich and the poor, the real and the rouged, the happy and the miserable, the ruler and the ruled the fierce light beats.”\textsuperscript{14} The paraphrase of the Sermon on the Mount, when Christ declared that the sun and rain fell upon the just and unjust, the evil and the good, was undeniably intentional, and it perfectly encapsulated the fears of evangelicals. The commercial city presented its own Word; under its light all New Yorkers were


\textsuperscript{13} Shackleton, \textit{The Book of New York}, 222

\textsuperscript{14} Shackleton, \textit{The Book of New York}, 222, 224-5.
initiated into the thriving, bustling, pluralistic world for which Shackleton evangelized; their desires were provoked, salvation of a certain kind offered, and the ideal person they might become presented to them.\textsuperscript{15}

If this new city converted its citizens to some new religion, what virtues did it inculcate in its followers? For Shackleton, the roots of New York’s cosmopolitan success lay in a history of embracing virtues directly counter to those which evangelicals had imagined for the city. He declared that “From the first New York has been cosmopolitanly planned. From the first it has stood for broad tolerance and has welcomed all nationalities and all.” He proudly recapitulated the religious diversity and toleration in the city, beginning with Anne Hutchinson’s flight from the Puritans to Long Island, and had equal praise for the beauty of St Patrick’s Cathedral and Charles Parkhurst’s Madison Square Presbyterian Church. It may indeed have been a commentary on the changes in the city that Shackleton described the latter as “uncompromisingly classic.” and the former as “excellent building, a successful and really a most admirable building.” Shackleton praised the diversity of “million-footed Manahattan,” celebrating “the making of this city into the melting pot of the world.” All of it fueled the bustling economic and culture of the city; a new way of life which celebrated cultural diversity, spent Sundays at the theatre, and elevated values of consumption over the desire to gain conversion. Indeed Shackleton equated the “immense medley of races in this polyglot city” with the success of its rising commercial culture.\textsuperscript{16} Other writers reflected Shackleton’s convictions; the 1922 second edition of Martha Lamb’s seminal \textit{A History of New York} announced proudly


that the city’s changing ecclesiastical landscape reflected its developing values: “One or two examples of church architecture will illustrate the contrast of the present with that of the Colonial period, which is marked as the wonderful increase of church edifices. Nearly every style and combination of style appears in New York.” Symbolically, the 1906 Code of Ordinances passed by the city made it a violation punishable by fine to make any “unusual or improper noise . . . to the annoyance” of others around. To such an end, the Code also restricted any “lay preacher or lay reader from preaching” in New York’s public spaces without a permit. The streets had been subdued not by religion, but rather that territory had been won by the thoroughly unexceptional voice of commerce.

The city’s department store owners built temples of commerce; its entertainers threw their doors wide to all, and, perhaps most dramatically, its emerging intellectual and bohemian culture endorsed Shackleton’s connection between the city’s prosperity and its embrace of cosmopolitan and pluralistic virtues. Writers like Herbert Croly and Randolph Bourne celebrated New York’s potential to become the American metropolis; the organized embodiment of the best American virtues – and particularly those which, in their estimation, made America’s potential particularly great: its commitment to democratic inclusivity, egalitarianism, tolerance, and cooperation. In particular, the bohemians appropriated the evangelicals’ own most powerful tool: the spoken word. Radicals like Emma Goldman and organizations like the Liberal Club, popular in Greenwich Village embraced the polyglot sound of the city, forging a new form of language: a restless bricolage of American English with terms from other tongues,

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like Yiddish, and references to modernist art, culture, and political preoccupation with democracy and human rights. For the bohemians, the essence of American culture was its embrace of freedom and pluralism; they understood human speech - conversation in coffeehouses, public speeches, the chanting at mass rallies – to be the performance of the sort of boisterous, spontaneous, and diverse world they imagined, where all voices had the right to speak and truth was determined through debate: a world very different from the great forces of grace and unity which evangelicals believed language should create.\textsuperscript{20}

The bohemians and intellectuals, just as much as the merchants and builders, all contributed to the emerge of a new “public city,” a culture in which all New Yorkers participated simply by walking the streets, and which brought to them awareness of certain values of leisure, wealth, and entertainment. Indeed, walking the city streets became a form of leisure.\textsuperscript{21}

Attendance at both theatres and movie houses was expanding rapidly as prices dropped and the number and quality of the theatres expanded, and the sheer diversity of the clientele was itself an engine of cultural transformation. While evangelicals had wanted to convert the city, to bring diversity together in allegiance to the converting power of Jesus Christ, New York’s entertainment venues, magazines, and mass culture was bringing them together in its own fashion, making a new culture centered upon commercial development, cultural sophistication, and cosmopolitan pluralism.

This was not the sort of cultural transformation which evangelicals desired; indeed, to many evangelicals, they promoted moral hazard. In March of 1911, Raymond Fosdick, brother


of Harry and the city’s Commissioner of Accounts sent investigators into New York’s movie houses and found them simultaneously bursting at the seams but also in promotion of negative social values: the movie houses encouraged citizens to push and shove, to behave in herdlike fashion, to sit on the floor and laugh uproariously. Indeed, one story which evangelicals shuddered at described a young boy entering a great movie palace and asking, “Momma, does God live here?” The answer might as well have been yes.22

All of this horrified New York’s evangelicals. Evangelicals struggled to find new ways to make the Word heard and stated clearly their concern for the new ways in which New Yorkers heard. Charles Parkhurst noted that the problem with preaching in such a time was that “preaching consists of saying things people do not want to hear,” and he knew too well that in this New York people spent their time seeking out those things they did want to hear. He observed that “The same thing is true in the sanctuary as is true of the majority of attendants at a concert hall who come away from the rendering of a celebrated violinist;” but this was not a good thing. New Yorkers were being trained by their culture to celebrate aesthetically pleasing sound, and were increasingly obscuring the convicting power of the sermon with their finely tuned ears, listening for pleasure rather than for the voice of God. “One great difficulty involved in addressing cultivated listeners lies in the fact that if the discourse be what is called an ably constructed one the enjoyment that they take in feeling their own mental machinery moving responsively they will suppose to be religious enjoyment,” Parkhurst complained. In summing up the problem, he announced that the “pulpit has very much more to compete with than it had

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22 This paragraph draws on Cohen, Making a New Deal, 99-159; Nasaw, Going Out, 44-46, 180-181; for the little boy, 230.
even fifty years ago.” The challenged which faced preaching, then, was how to reassert its influence without compromising its particular authority.23

Parkhurst, for one, found the evangelizing power of New York’s commercial culture terrifying; “That is the kind of life that most people in the material city of New York are living today,” he said. “There is no sky in their experience. There is no sun in their astronomy, and there are no stars in their nights, and no voice but such as they hear physically or by the aid of a metallic ear trumpet.” The city was to him artificial, but its artificiality seemed to present more of a church to New Yorkers than the churches themselves were able to, and he saw the two in direct competition. “The reason offered for non attendance at church by those who upon comparing pulpit deliverance with such presentations of truth as are to be found in books, papers and magazines,” he said, “find that the comparison favors the latter rather than the former, and that literature answers our needs quite as well as preaching.”24

As early as the turn of the century, the Broadway Tabernacle’s Charles Jefferson protested attempts to transplant the authority of the Word into new methods, in favor of a traditional conception of what a sermon was: “If a man is going to write a book he ought not to perpetrate it on a Christian congregation,” he wrote. “A preacher is ordained to be different from every other man in the world.” This was profoundly significant, because it indicated that the expanding definition of the sacred which liberals pursued was in fact a fallacy. The preacher, he claimed, was called simply to “keep repeating the facts of the gospel,” to be a mouthpiece, as mid-century theorist of homiletics like Broadus and Alexander had insisted. It was less important to attract listeners: “A dunce can draw a crowd. Ministers are not ordained to draw a

crowd but to fill men with God.” Jefferson’s complaint implied that new notions of preaching were different from old, that the liberal style of his contemporaries like Van Dyke or Rainsford confused publicity and showmanship with the essential functions that preaching was intended to perform.

During World War I Jefferson’s complaints found a rather unlikely ally. Harry Emerson Fosdick, by 1915 occupied with training new preachers at Union Seminary, was increasingly concerned with the ways in which liberal preaching was related to spirituality. Indeed, in a celebrated 1928 article, “What’s the Matter With Preaching,” Fosdick complained about the “dullness and futility” of blind expository preaching, and praised preaching that strove to be dialogue between preacher and congregation, rather than mere monologue.

But in his inaugural address in 1915 and in later writings, Fosdick worried about the pitfalls of liberal preaching. He emphasized that good preaching was ultimately Biblical, and therefore verbal, and therefore about proclamation of the Word. In his inaugural address as holder of the Jessup Chair he mourned “As one listens to our modern liberal preaching, how lamentably inadequate it is! Its message too often is thinly contemporary.” Though he traced the source of such failures to a root he deemed legitimate – the same new scholarship on the Bible that haunted his predecessors - Fosdick worried that these discoveries “have deeply affected the Bible’s preachableness . . . There creeps at times the paralyzing suspicion that the

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27 Harry Emerson Fosdick, “What’s the Matter With Preaching?” *Harper’s* (July 1928) 134. It is worth noting that in the 1970s, the Disciples of Christ minister Fred Craddock made a similar argument, arguing that in the modern age preaching that relied solely upon the power of the Word would fail, because the authority of language itself had diminished. A new style of preaching, then, would emphasize dialogic aspects of the sermon, not instructing or commanding, but guiding a congregation through the struggles the minister faced as he or she wrestled with the problems of scripture. Craddock, *As one without authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).
Bible is not, as it once was, a preachable book.”

Stymied by Biblical scholarship, Protestant ministers retreated to the lamentable strategy of, as he later put it, “avoiding wide areas of the Scripture altogether,” of preaching only safe prooftexts and filling in the gaps with contemporary references, issues, and ideologies, or relying on rhetorical and performative strategies that lacked the particular power that the Word of God possessed. In “What’s the Matter with Preaching,” he warned against turning “pulpits into platforms,” and “sermons into lectures,” emphasizing that preaching must gesture toward the ways in which the divine transcended the world, rather than merely embodied it.

Ultimately Fosdick’s complaints reflected his sense that preaching should be evangelical. Diluted preaching lacked converting power, and Fosdick considered himself an evangelical preacher. When he was accused of heresy while in the First Presbyterian pulpit, he and his followers defended his name first by emphasizing the evangelical nature of his pulpit preaching, invoking the basic functions of the Word – to convert and to edify. “The ministry of Dr Fosdick during the six years has been not only evangelical and inspiring, but also edifying to the company of the faithful,” claimed the First Presbyterian Church Year Book. He was a liberal in that he believed that such experiences were tied not to particular doctrinal statements, but to “vital dependence upon the personality of Jesus.” This did not mean, however, that preaching could not induce emotional conversion experiences; on the contrary, as he claimed, the “heart” of Biblical preaching was its power to spread the “reproducible experiences” of God described

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30 Fosdick, “What’s the Matter with Preaching?” 137.
31 First Presbyterian Church Year Book, 1924-1925 (New York: The Church, 1925) 13.
therein.\textsuperscript{32} As he stated, the aim of the sermon was simple: “the Scriptures somehow must be preached.”\textsuperscript{33}

He believed that other liberals felt the same; the inadequate preachers he described, he was confident “believed in Jesus Christ as the world’s Savior and wanted to proclaim his Gospel as the power of God unto salvation.” But instead of proclaiming the Word they were no longer certain of, they “quietly fell back on the unquestioned messages of the Book” – bland moralism rather than the provocative challenges of the Old and New Testaments. As Fosdick put it, preachers of the liberal type too often used the Bible “only [as] a sop to tradition, a conventionality without real reason in their thinking or vital influence upon their message.” This sort of sermonizing “has let the church drift before the breezes of inspirational preaching,” settling for sentiment and cheap emotion. The results were devastating. As Fosdick warned “We are paying for it in the loss of our intelligent young people,” impatient with the mere sentimentality that shallow liberalism degenerated into. In short, some liberal preaching was failing to convert.\textsuperscript{34}

Thus, by the time of World War I, evangelicals faced not only a diverse city, but a city which was coming to embrace its diversity; not only the problem of industrialization, but commercialization as well. An entirely new way of life was rising, and it ran counter to what evangelicals themselves had offered; the old channels of the Word no longer worked; to the old problems of poverty they now realized they must add the problem of consumerism. By the years of the war, two new options, new iterations of urban evangelicalism, had appeared, particularly designed to confront New York’s new cosmopolitan culture, and pushing the boundaries of those

\textsuperscript{32} Fosdick, \textit{Modern Use}, 208, 195.
\textsuperscript{33} Fosdick, “A Modern Preacher’s Problem,” 17.
\textsuperscript{34} Fosdick, “A Modern Preacher’s Problem,” 17, 23; \textit{Modern Use}, 60-61.
who claimed the evangelical heritage wider than they had been before: the strident preaching of the revivalist Billy Sunday, who presaged what became a fundamentalist style of piety, and George Albert Coe’s attempt to rationalize the processes of conversion in the Union School of Religion, an experimental Sunday school at Union Theological Seminary. Both inspired ambivalence among New York’s liberal evangelicals; Sunday shared their goal of a Christianized city, but not their methods; Coe, their method of regulated behavior, but not their spiritual goals.

From April to June 1917, the evangelist Billy Sunday held court twice a day in a tabernacle on 168th Street and Broadway, a stop near the end of his great tour of the United States between 1910 and 1919. He claimed that his revivalism was the same religion that Christianity had always been: “My method is in effect the same, my message is the same in substance. The Gospel never changes.” But in actuality, Sunday’s concerns were different from even his predecessors a generation older. He was less concerned with poverty and the unconverted masses than he was with the corruptive effects of New York cosmopolitanism. This required some balancing; Sunday was funded by the wealthy Protestants of America and credited wealth as the result of hard work, but he also scoured wealth when it became luxury and accused wealthy New Yorkers of greed. He struck many observers as a vaudeville entertainer, but he blasted remorselessly the burgeoning entertainment industry of the city, its dance halls, theatres, and most of all, saloons, as the agents of Satan in the city. But despite its seeming ambivalences, Sunday delivered his call to repentance with sledgehammer force; for two months the revivalist commanded unparalleled attention in the city. And his appeal seemed to belie the

35 Billy Sunday, The Sawdust Trail: Billy Sunday in his own words (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2004) 82.
36 For instance, “Billy Sunday asks Bigger Collections,” New York Times (13 May 1917) 14
fears of Parkhurst and other evangelicals; if the Word, and particularly the verbal Word, was weakening its echo in the city’s ear, how could Sunday be so radically successful?

Some commentators have pointed out the ways in which Sunday’s success depended upon assimilation of the very cultural changes he claimed to denounce. And indeed, Sunday presented a form of evangelicalism particularly tailored for the cultural challenges of America’s urban centers, particularly designed to combat the pernicious effects of consumerism. However, Sunday did more than merely assimilate his message; the ways in which he was different from other evangelicals in the period marked his struggle to revitalize older forms of the faith rather than tailoring to the new. If the great challenge of the city was now the innumerable distractions to the Gospel it presented, Sunday crafted a style designed to overwhelm them in pursuit of the elusive spiritual unity evangelical longed for. Where earlier evangelists like J. Wilbur Chapman had decentralized their revivals in an attempt to reach as many as possible and liberal evangelicals had tried to translate the preached Word into social action, Sunday tried to recentralize all attention on himself, to drown out the city with the force of the proclaimed and spoken Word, and to resacralize public language against the forces of stage and newspaper and film which secularized it. In so doing, Sunday laid the foundation for what would become a fundamentalist style of evangelical piety; it took seriously traditional confidence in the converting power of the Word, and asserted its verbal nature aggressively.

Sunday arrived in New York City on April 7, 1917, only days after the United States entered the First World War. He preached at a tabernacle built to hold twenty thousand on 168th

38 David Morgan, “Protestant Visual Culture and the Challenges of Urban America during the Progressive Era,” in John Giggie and Deborah Winston, eds., Faith in the Market: religion and the rise of urban commercial culture (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002) 37-57; see also Giggie and Winston, “Hidden in Plain Sight: religion and urban commercial culture in modern North America,” 1-13, which argues that this sort of assimilation is the essential feature of religion in American cities.
Street and Broadway twice a day, and sometimes more, nearly every day for ten weeks, until June 18. The timing was appropriate. The revivalist was then at the peak of his career, the leading American evangelist since Dwight Moody himself. But unlike Moody or Chapman before him – who regarded New York City as one stop among several – Sunday viewed New York City in apocalyptic, martial language, stridently proclaiming it the great battlefield of his life, the American front of the war for civilization. As Sunday said before the revival, when a reporter asked him if he were “afraid to tackle New York,” “David was a little fellow and he licked Goliath, and New York can be licked, just like Goliath.”

Billy bragged that everybody, the spectrum from his friends to his enemies, “were unanimous against my going to New York. They agreed that I would be a failure.” Both he and Charles Goodell, the minister at Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church, his biggest booster in the city, recited what they claimed to be an old cliché, “New York is the graveyard of evangelists.” And they did not mean the city was a resting place, but a battlefield scattered with soldiers’ corpses, for as Goodell said, “Before there shall be a failure of God’s work in Calvary Church there will be a funeral in Calvary’s parsonage, for I simply cannot live to witness the defeat of the armies of the living God.”

The city as literal battleground was by now an old trope, but it was made particularly resonant during the First World War for two reasons. First, the confrontation with Germany gave the struggle for Christianity special urgency. The invocations of war in the late nineteenth century had generally had as a model the children of Israel, who with the force of divine favor had scattered the Canaanites before them, or the foreign mission movement, which, it was

40 Billy Sunday, The Sawdust Trail, 79-80; Charles Goodell, Personal and Pastoral Evangelism (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1907) 82, 84 rephrases it as “graveyard of ministers,” which his friends had warned him when he accepted the pulpit at Calvary, assuming he would start a revival.
41 Goodell, Personal and Pastoral Evangelism, 83.
presumed, was graciously spreading Christianity to blighted nations hungry for it. The sort of resistance Germany was capable of mounting was nothing like the triumphalism of these past analogies, and evoked a corresponding militarism from New York’s evangelicals, who perceived their struggle to be for the salvation of Christian civilization itself. Sunday declared that the conversion experience was akin to a soldier’s oath of allegiance, declaring that “God has organized all his believers into an army,” and pleading with the crowd to join in the war for the city, and the war against Germany, which were in the end, the same thing. He adapted an old sermon, “God’s Grenadiers,” which was originally a call “for loyalty, earnestness, and enthusiasm on the part of church members,” transforming it into a call against the subversion of Christian society by not necessarily urban masses, but by the organized forces of urban capitalism. For Sunday, the Germans and the liquor industry were not so different; he took on both in his opening sermon in New York, summoning the Christians of the city to war for “the cause of Jesus Christ.”\(^{42}\)

Secondly, Sunday’s sense of his mission was sharpened by observation of the early twentieth century city itself. One Sunday observer noted that the evangelist had special success in “some 10 or 12 of the larger cities of the United States,” which met certain characteristics: “Size seems not to be the only prerequisite, but a certain cosmopolitan character of its population, together with a diversity of business interests and a concentration of commercial activity.” All these factors worked together to produce a certain form of “social relaxation.”\(^{43}\) But while Parkhurst feared emotional and social decay deriving from the psychological effects of unnatural regulation of the human soul, Sunday saw instead idolatry. As he warned, New York

\(^{42}\)“40,000 Cheer for War and Religion Mixed by Sunday,” \textit{New York Times} (9 April 1917) 1
\(^{43}\)Theodore Frankenberg, \textit{Billy Sunday: his tabernacles and sawdust trails} (Columbus: F.J. Heer, 1917), 133.
was overrun with “materialism,” with the “spirit of liberalism and lackadaisical apathy.” This was a problem different from the stifling poverty and alien crowd of immigrants Moody and Chapman had faced. Rather, in the new New York the lives of all, even the pious middle class who had formed the backbone of van Dyke and Parkhurst’s congregation, as well as the unevangelized poor, were intruded upon by film and print and theatre; a barrage of increasingly commercializing culture. Sunday determined to take cosmopolitanism, commercialism, leisure, and luxury head on with the undiluted power of the Word. In his inaugural sermon he warned the city that “You can’t get to heaven because you live in New York. The society woman decked in diamonds till she scintillates like the Milky Way has her troubles just as much . . . All are groping after God.”

Sunday’s revivalism was an attempt to assert a particular style of evangelical piety particularly targeted at this context. He was not the strategist J. Wilbur Chapman had been, though Chapman had been his mentor. Rather than a general who organized forces, Sunday was a champion who delighted in individual combat. Chapman’s 1906 revival had sought to decentralize, to marshal his forces across New York in a series of small scale, local revivals in longstanding churches, what Chapman called a “Simultaneous Evangelistic Campaign” in order to best take on the entire city and invigorate its entire grid of sacred spaces. This would avoid the sort of emotional and practical letdown which had occurred when Dwight Moody had closed up his temporary tabernacle thirty years before; Chapman had hoped it would particularly help to mitigate the problem of people who converted in the revival but did not subsequently join a church. The strategy was reflected in the character of the revivalist himself; his biographer

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45 “40,000 Cheer for War and Religion Mixed by Sunday,” *New York Times* (9 April 1917) 1
and friend Ford Ottman admitted “He was thought by some to be imperious,” a trait which Ottman credited to his “system and regularity,” his “extreme sensitiveness,” and his “grace of humility.” Chapman was frequently called businesslike, professional, and respectable.\footnote{Ford Ottman, \textit{J. Wilbur Chapman: a biography} (Garden City: New York: Doubleday, 1920) 321; for businessman see Conrad, ed., \textit{Boston’s Awakening}, 17.}

Consistent with the traditional patterns of evangelical piety, Chapman sought to direct the attention of his revivals to the system he created rather than to his own personality.

In Sunday, however, New York’s evangelicals saw the first glimmerings of a different style of piety. He followed many of the tactics of earlier revivalists, organizing prayer meetings to usher in his revivals, asking the churches of the city to offer space, volunteers, and organizational capacities, gathering hundreds of workers and volunteers to usher his audience, to guide those who, in Sunday’s phrase, “walked the sawdust trail” to confess Christ at the end of each meeting, to solicit donations to support Sunday’s work. He divided the city into districts and recruited workers to hold prayer meetings in each.\footnote{For example, see \textit{Outline of Plan of Work of the Prayer Meetings Committee} (New York: Billy Sunday Evangelistic Campaign for New York City, 1916); “Billy Sunday Plans Fight,” \textit{New York Times} (22 November 1916) 22; “City Divided into Districts,” \textit{New York Times} (21 January 1917) 10. See also Frankenerg, \textit{Billy Sunday: his tabernacles and sawdust trails}, 87-93.}

But unlike Chapman, who engaged local religious leaders as speakers or organizers and held his meetings at local churches, Sunday refused to cede any attention, declaring that he would not have a career had the churches of New York been doing their job; as he claimed, there would be “no need of revivals . . . if pastors and congregations did their part.”\footnote{“Sunday’s Agents Stir Jersey City,” \textit{New York Times} (17 February 1917) 5.} Clearly, they were not. Like Moody had, he built a tabernacle, placing it on Broadway and 168\textsuperscript{th} Street, the only place where there was a lot big enough to accommodate the 20,000 seats Sunday wished. He refused use of Madison Square Garden,
wanting, like Charles Finney had, God to have a unique and unprofaned home in the city. The ministers who organized the prayer meetings reported back to Sunday’s campaign; Sunday himself was the only speaker at any revival meeting, and he not infrequently traveled through the city, giving three or four sermons a day. He had a reputation as something of a pulpit clown, an attention seeker whose acrobatics and rough colloquialisms contrasted powerfully with the gentlemen of the revival circuit, his predecessors Moody and Chapman. As one New York minister commented midway through Sunday’s revival, the evangelist, who occasionally leapt upon his pulpit and bounded around the stage, “compared to the athletic feats of the Holy Jumpers.”

But in his own way, Sunday was more ambitious than his predecessors. He wanted to concentrate the religious focus and power of the revival in his own person, to re-center the sacred space of a city that Chapman and the liberal evangelicals had tried to decentralize. This centralization reflected Sunday’s understanding of the relationship between religion and modern society: for him, that relationship was basically adversarial, working in a constant dialectic in which the will of God was clear and distinct and identifiable, and had to be enacted upon a sinful world in order to change it. He said that before he came to New York, “‘It was believed that no evangelist was big enough to touch the heart of Greater New York with its seven million people and its diversified interests.’” The city was not only too large, but too diverse, too pluralistic; it could not be brought into the image of Christ. But Sunday believed that “God has not modernized.” This marked Sunday on the conservative spectrum of evangelical piety, but it was an image derived ultimately from traditional evangelical preaching, when the Word was

53 Billy Sunday, The Sawdust Trail, 79. 82.
heard clearly in the Bible and over the pulpit before the verbal power of scripture and minister was diluted. Billy Sunday wanted to centralize the revival on himself because he believed that the power of God manifested in his revivals rested ultimately in his own voice, the weapon of God in a heightened confrontation between good and evil.

Thus, despite his clownishness, Sunday took himself deadly seriously, and indeed, he saw his theatrical style as a way to raise his voice past that of the city’s, to beat it at its own game and to blend performance with preaching. He drew on the romantic influence on evangelical homiletics which had already given the preacher, who had once been an invisible lens for the Word, a personality, and he escalated the pastor’s role into that of a fiery champion of God, channeling his visibility on stage into a fully physical performance of the Word. “People don’t like to hear preaching that goes at them roughly,” he said. “They want sermons of the You-tickle-me-and-I’ll-tickle-you kind.”

His own background as a baseball player gave him a particular understanding of the physical theatricality of performance, and his athleticism taught him the use of the body to maximize the force of a message. He would often act out the Bible stories he told, flinging himself back and forth or climbing on the pulpit to drive home the divine source of his proclamations. Even when he condemned theatre and the dance clubs in New York, reporters noticed that he incorporated the very motions he condemned into his own performance – mincing in exaggerated style across the stage as he castigated attendees at the dance hall, gazing into an invisible mirror as he condemned the preoccupation with appearance many young women exhibited - and they admitted that the audience was held transfixed.

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But Sunday was always careful to subordinate his physical performances to the preached Word they served. Among his first words to an audience in New York were “I want to say to New York right on the kickoff, I believe the Bible is the Word of God from cover to cover.”

But so were his own pronouncements. As he once said in a sermon, “If I am not God’s mouthpiece, come and show me.” Once in late May, halfway through his stint in New York, there were a few empty chairs at the back of the hall, and latecomers milled around in the back, talking quietly. And Sunday “stepped back from the pine board pulpit, snapped his Bible covers together, and announced he would not say another word if he could not receive the undivided attention of his listeners.”

At another occasion, he addressed reports that his audience merely came to watch him as he went “dashing to and fro on the platform,” saying “If I thought for a minute I was doing no more good than to satisfy your curiosity, I would close up and get out.”

His goal was to inflict conversion, to make people understand their lives in the terms which he used to describe them, and consequently to bring about a society made up of individuals transformed by divine power.

Others believed in the power of Sunday’s words too. In Sunday’s authorized biography his assistant Elijah Price declared “Sunday has thorough conversions because he preaches in a way that produces deep conviction.” For Price, it was precisely Sunday’s colorfulness that made him such a powerful preacher, because his sermons presented a compelling vision of the world as Sunday himself saw it: “As a painter of word pictures probably no one ever spoke here before who could equal Sunday,” he said of Sunday’s Iowa revival, and “Sunday could talk about a rail fence and make you see more beauty in its vineclad nooks and corners than another could show.

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58 Cited in McLoughlin, Billy Sunday, 123.
you in a cathedral.” His musical director, Homer Rodeheaver, claimed that Sunday “believed what he preached and had faith that God could and would do the things he promised in his Word . . . It was that certainty of relationship with God that made inevitable the spiritual success of his preaching.”

But though Sunday was eloquent, for Price the man himself was not the focus; “that is incidental and not the thing for which he preaches,” the biographer wrote. Rather, Price depicted Sunday’s manner of preaching as following the classic evangelical conversion pattern:

“Portraying most vividly by word and action the character of the sin he denounces he shoots into the audience volley after volley of gospel hot shot until many before him pale and tremble with conviction . . . when he has finished the worst man has to admit to his own soul that for once he has heard the Bible truth. But after telling the multitudes of their individual sinfulness as no other man can do it, he points the way of deliverance so plainly and convincingly that scores and hundreds at a time crowd forward to accept the great gift that God has offered to all repentant.”

Sunday waded into the comfortable world of sinners and named their sins for what they were, and in so doing, drew sinners into awareness of how God saw them. As he said in his first sermon in New York, refuting the sort of psychological ideas of religion which framed Coe’s rejection of the revival, “I don’t believe in the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man. You’re a creature of God. So is a hog eating out of a trough. You’ve got to become a child of God.” And then he offered redemption, conversion, and his audience surged forward to it.

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62 Homer Rodeheaver, *Twenty Years with Billy Sunday* (Boston: Cokesbury Press, 1936) 24; see also 18-22.
64 “40,000 Cheer for War and Religion Mixed by Sunday,” *New York Times* (9 April 1917) 1; see also McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday*, xix.
Even his adversaries marveled at Sunday’s stylized, theatrical ability with language – and more, his ability to use that language to insert religion into the pulsing life of the city. Sunday preached, the skeptical minister Frederick Betts said, in “a gallop, a clatter, a rattle of words . . . every bullet a word, 200 or more a minute.” Sunday’s voice was “absolutely devoid of the quality of gentleness, softness, sympathy or winsomeness.” And yet, Betts conceded, “He holds you.” In spite of Sunday’s style being “almost devoid of religious or spiritual meaning . . . the Sunday meetings have grown in influence to the end.” For a season, religion was the dominant topic and theme of Syracuse; every citizen was interested in it, and Billy Sunday’s words echoed from the voices of dozens of people from all walks of life. As Betts observed, “At the breakfast table, in the street car, the curb, at the club, the bank, the social gathering, the main topic of conversation is the Sunday meetings, and religion as a whole. We had a season of prayer and praise and condemnation.” This, Sunday would have considered a success, and more, a sign of God’s power acting through him to remake the stuff of Syracuse society, recentering the Word in secular places like banks and clubs where it had been forgotten. He hoped for as much in New York City when he arrived there the next year. From Boston, resting between revivals, Sunday claimed he expected it, saying “New Yorkers just have to be told things. You have to just go at ‘em hammer and tongs fashion. Maybe some people won’t like my vocabulary, but what do I care about that?” As one supporter, George Russell, minister of the Rutgers Presbyterian Church on 73rd and Broadway told a reporter who questioned him about Sunday’s distinctively coarse religious language, “Some of it is capital, and in a few years will be part of

65 Betts, Billy Sunday, 18.
66 Betts, Billy Sunday, 18, 34.
the classics of our common speech. Here is a man with a message. Let’s get the message and use it." 68

And, to this extent, Sunday was successful. His speech preoccupied New York; even before he came to the city some assailed his colloquial vulgarity as improper while others claimed that “99 per cent of the words used by Sunday were to be found in the every day talk of college men.” 69 There was criticism of the sort that Betts leveled, accusing Sunday of slang and rudeness. But regardless, the New York Times frequently reported on his astonishing oratorical feats, his broad and colorful vocabulary, his capacity for “amazing long lists of vituperative epithets” for sinners. Sunday’s voice was legendary; he preached quickly, in a hoarse voice, and expressed emphasis with carefully modulated pitch and volume. He carefully crafted long descriptive riffs for rhythm, assonance and alliteration, hammering out a tirade of adverbs and adjectives to whip his audience into a carefully planned emotional frenzy. The Times followed Sunday’s voice as closely as it did the man, reporting on its health; halfway through the revival, a reporter observed that only on the second night, “Sunday’s voice was rather broken,” and several weeks later observed that “Sunday’s voice is beginning to show some effects of the strain.” Sunday was even asked for comment, and declared that “he would not know what to do if he lost his voice.” 70 His physical energy seemed itself a manifestation of the force of passion behind his words.

There was also imitation; Elijah Brown reported of people on the streets after Sunday’s revivals repeating the sermons to each other, with astonishing results: “Conversions were sometimes brought about by one person repeating to another as much of the sermon as was

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remembered,” he wrote, “and the one who listened would be awakened.” A Methodist bishop complained at a Methodist conference in Atlantic City that the Sunday revival inspired “personally appointed young evangelists who have an astonishing mania for grotesque religion,” and would take to the streets after the revival preaching themselves. “These young men employ the methods of Billy Sunday, imitating him and often using his words,” he reported. These amateur evangelists roamed the streets of the area preaching Sunday’s sermons, and unlike Price, the Methodists feared they were undermining the regular order of religion, denomination, and church meeting, and substituting for it the dramatic emotional tides of Sunday’s revivalism. The power of Sunday’s language, disturbing as it might be, was unquestioned.

Sunday knew it. He believed his language was transformative, and the fury and passion behind it signaled a development in linguistic evangelical piety at least as real and consequential as the drift from the verbal Word of God characteristic of liberal evangelicalism. Despite – or perhaps because of - the skill and flair behind them, Sunday’s preaching reflected a world in which the power of the preached Word was weakened. It was cracking under a flood of words mundane and scholarly, the first which diluted, the second which destabilized the version of reality which evangelicals like Sunday believed must come to pass. Though its theological roots went far deeper, and would later develop with more precision than the revivalist was capable of or interested in, in Billy Sunday what might be called a fundamentalist piety began to manifest itself. For Sunday, the solution was ever more aggressive assertion of the verbal vision of the Word of God, ever more vivid painting of the “word pictures” which depicted the world as seen through evangelical eyes. The targets at which Sunday leveled his formidable oratory, in New York as nowhere else, revealed an instinctive sense of combat the liturgical influence of rising

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71 Price, The Real Billy Sunday, 96.
72 “Billy Sunday Assailed by leaders of Three Denominations,” Current Opinion 77:5 (May 1917) 341.
commercialism and economic transformations, the growing cultural fragmentation of the city. But he also was the epicenter of further fragmentation of the city’s evangelical culture.

Regardless of his religious appeals, many seemed put off by the revivalist’s methods. The conflict was not merely about style and propriety, but also, more deeply, about how religion worked. His critics often called Sunday’s preaching boorish, buffoonish, even vulgar, but they feared more than simply bad taste. Rather, Sunday seemed dangerously naïve, the advocate of a way of being religious that seemed no longer appropriate, and even destructive. Many of New York’s religious leaders eyed his arrival in April 1917 with dread, predicting social breakdown. On March 25, the eve of Sunday’s appearance in the city, the New York rabbi Stephen Wise spoke at Carnegie Hall on Sunday’s methods. Echoing the criticisms of the religious education movement, Wise charged that “Billy Sundayism” represented “a social disorder, a moral failure, and a religious bankruptcy.” He told stories of clergymen forced to leave their pulpits when they criticized Sunday, of the revivalist whipping up crowds and inspiring “vitriolic inquisition” that broke down the good order of the cities Sunday plagued. Joseph McMahan, priest of New York’s Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church, warned similar in speech at Delmonico’s on January 17, stating that Sunday’s “methods were destructive, that he encouraged false conversion, and that his visits left the cities where he carried on his campaigns worse, from a religious standpoint, than they had been before.” The priest worried that Sunday’s fervor made all other forms of Sunday worship seem bland by comparison, and encouraged emotional frenzy rather than “the gentleness of Christianity.” For both men, revivalist evangelicalism was destructive because it created emotional disorder, but also because that emotional disorder

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inhibited and destroyed the religious variety and plurality they valued in the city. Tellingly, Wise proclaimed that Sunday represented “theological standpatism.”  

The reaction of the city’s Protestants was often profoundly ambivalent. Sunday had many staunch supporters, such as Goodell; the revivalist himself claimed that Isaac Haldeman had rejected appeals to “knock these meetings” from the First Baptist pulpit. He represented ideas that evangelicals could heartily endorse, and theoretically his methods were sound. But, still, in practice, the anxiety he caused revealed the growing schisms within evangelical piety. Though in terms of publicity and popularity, Sunday seemed the logical successor to his predecessors of previous generations, Dwight Moody and Chapman, for many evangelicals who had lived through the changes of the previous thirty years there was something different and distasteful about this particular evangelist. Sunday’s belligerent emphasis upon the preached word seemed obtuse and naïve. The minister Frederick Betts said upon witnessing Sunday’s 1916 Syracuse, New York, revival that one of the main impressions he had of the revival was “of the rawness, and even coarseness, of Mr. Sunday . . . many of the things said and done bordered on things prohibited in decent society.” Betts fretted that Sunday’s uncouthness was a serious blot on the revivalist’s stated goal to bring Christianity to the city. He compared Sunday unfavorably to Moody, stating “it is doubtful that he could preach a vital sermon on Mr. Moody’s texts, ‘Love never faileth.’” Moody avoided charisma in favor of gentleness, making sentimental appeals in a bluff, plain style – as one observer called it, using the word Moody preferred to “preaching,” “headlong talking.” He was not the showman Sunday was, nor did he

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75 “40,000 Cheer for War and Religion Mixed by Sunday,” *New York Times* (9 April 1917) 1.
But then, his evangelicalism was a generation removed from Sunday’s, and lacked the younger man’s sense of siege.

Sunday was unsparing of evangelicals whom he believed had sacrificed the power of the preached word in favor of non-verbal, metaphorical, or embodied means of proclaiming the word. Before arriving in New York he declared that he would not have had to do his job had New York’s pastors been “doing their part.” He called the institutional churches “amusement houses;” he lambasted their community houses and missions and rejected their attempts to interpret service in terms of preaching, accusing them of substituting “entertainment” for the Word of God. While in the city itself he attacked such efforts anew, accusing them of a theology of works. “Salvation does not come as a result of merit,” he declared. New York’s pulpits were too infatuated with money and luxury to preach a good sermon: “On the day of Pentecost one sermon converted three thousand. Now it takes three thousand of the sort of sermons most preachers preach to win one sinner. I’ve heard sermons you couldn’t find Jesus Christ in with a search warrant.” Among the New York ministers Sunday accused was the eminent John Jowett, minister to the decidedly respectable Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, who was “most anxious” to see Sunday preach. As was Sunday’s custom, Jowett was given a reserved seat near the front of the tabernacle. But Jowett was surprised when Sunday launched into “a tirade against the lethargy of the churches, [and] faced Dr. Jowett, shaking his forefinger

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78 “Sunday’s Agents Stir Jersey City,” *New York Times* (17 February 1917) 5; McLoughlin, 139
at him, called him a ‘white-livered, black-hearted mug.’ Jowett stood, “with red face,” and “called Billy a ‘rum-un,’” before stalking out of the hall.\(^{81}\)

At the same time, some liberal evangelicals found reason to overlook his improprieties. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who would later underwrite Harry Emerson Fosdick’s Riverside Church, was a major underwriter of Sunday’s campaign as well. He praised the reviver for his assault on the liquor traffic, but more deeply echoed Frederick Betts’s sense that Sunday transformed the language of New York City. Rockefeller delighted that Sunday “made religion a subject of conversation among people who never talked of it before. He made it possible to talk religion to people who would not listen.” He declared that Sunday brought an “appeal to masses and unification of interests;” the spread of the Protestant city which liberal evangelicals dearly hoped for.\(^{82}\) This appeal reached other Protestants less sympathetic to Sunday’s methods as well. Four months before he arrived in New York, in December 1916, a group of the city’s Episcopal priests gathered and agreed to endorse the coming Sunday campaign. This was startling, for New York Episcopalianism was perhaps more divided over the issue of evangelism than any other of the city’s Protestant denominations. Karl Reiland, who had replaced William Rainsford at St. George’s, was Sunday’s most enthusiastic backer, but the evangelist attracted support from John Peters, of St. Michael’s, the largest single Episcopal congregation in the city, and several other ministers. Episcopal congregations in Philadelphia promised that Sunday had increased the sizes of congregations in the city and greatly aided the temperance movement, and that was enough for Dr. Frederick Courtney, the sixty-eight year old rector of St. James’s and the former bishop of Nova Scotia, a man who had rarely shown sympathy toward revivalism.

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\(^{81}\) Warner van Norden, \textit{The fatness of thy house: a documentary history of New York City’s Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, 1807-1924} (New York: Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, 1953) 186.  
Courtney announced that “For a long time I have been on the fence regarding Billy Sunday . . .
[but] I feel it would be a good thing for many of our clergy and members of our churches to go
hear him. We all need a little more enthusiasm for humanity.” Only two ministers opposed
Sunday, one protesting his “evangelical methods,” and the other asking tautly if his fellows
would approve of a Christian Scientist revivalist if that person “could duplicate testimony in
favor of that equal to the beneficial results accorded . . . to the Sunday meetings.” They all
demurred; of course they would not.83

William Merrill, pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church, in denominational fellowship
with the revivalist, was more distant. He never mentioned Sunday from the Brick pulpit and his
name did not appear among those ministers who invited Sunday to visit the city. However, the
women of Brick Church used the building to serve luncheons twice a week to Sunday’s female
volunteers, in five relays from eleven AM to one thirty in the afternoon.84 At the same time,
Brick joined the many evangelical churches which held prayer services in February and March of
1917, in anticipation of Sunday’s arrival. Frank Janeway, an assistant pastor at the Brick
Church, claimed diplomatically that “Some of Mr. Sunday’s reported doings and sayings in his
campaigns in other cities have been stumbling-blocks to not a few Christian people who share
his purpose of saving men unto God in the Kingdom of Heaven in the name of Christ, so that
they feel they cannot conscientiously cooperate in the campaign.”85 Janeway was careful to
assert that, despite Sunday’s rhetorical hostility, the evangelical tent was a large one. And thus,
at the same time, the Brick Church moved to assert the elements of Sunday’s campaign which fit

83“Episcopal Clergy to Aid Billy Sunday,” New York Times (20 December 1916) 9; see also Diana Butler, Standing
Against the Whirlwind: evangelical Episcopalians in nineteenth century America (New York: Oxford University
84 Year Book of the Brick Presbyterian Church, 1917-1918 (New York: The Church, 1918) 17; The Brick Church
Record 5:7 (April 1917) 12.
85 The Brick Church Record 5:5( February1917) 12.
its own evangelical purposes. Of the “neighborhood prayer-meetings” associated with the
Sunday campaign, Janeway claimed “These meetings are a great means of social blessing in
themselves . . . They unite people who are denominationally different and make them feel the
unity of the spirit and their community of faith, hope, and love above and below their individual
forms and fashions of religious exercises . . . in the ministry of intercession. Such a fellowship
of prayer cannot fail to bless the homes represented in it, and the City of New York.”

For Janeway, the great evangelical service of the Sunday revival was not the word of
Billy Sunday himself, as uncouth and strident as it was. Rather, the “ministry of intercession,”
the neighborhood prayers, served for Janeway the same ends that Sunday believed came through
his Word: the goal of unity, of transforming the polyglot and diverse city into a united
evangelical whole. The minister of Christ Church, one of Brick’s affiliated congregations which
served a largely Italian-speaking neighborhood, reported that in the six block radius of his edifice
there were only sixty Protestant families. But, hopefully, “The first prayer meetings were well
attended and very great interest was shown. This is the more encouraging, because our people
have never been accustomed to such meetings and all are taking invitations to deliver to those
whom they know.” For that reason, though Christ Church’s minister admitted that “Those
who did go, and especially those who were in the choir or staff of ushers or on committees, were
much helped . . . We see now that these meetings would have meant far more to our people if we
had tried to organize them wherever our families lived.” The evangelicals of Brick and its
affiliates preferred Chapman’s methods to Sunday’s. Christ Church added no members from
those who hit the trail before Billy Sunday’s pulpit.

86 Ibid.
87 The Brick Church Record 5:5( February1917) 13.
88 “Report of the Minister,” Brick Church Year Book of Work and Worship, 1917-1918 (New York: The Church,
1918) 14.
Billy Sunday preached the same Christianized, Protestant city that New York’s evangelicals had dreamed of for generations, and even the city’s liberals valued him for that. But that they remained more wary of him than they had been of Dwight Moody or Chapman reflected developing tensions of both aim and in method as much as did Coe’s Union School. Sunday was not sparing of those whom he believed polluted the divinely ordained processes of salvation. This was not merely a disagreement of methods of evangelizing, but one more deeply of metaphysics, and Sunday and his supporters defiantly declared their confidence in the efficacy of his language, while at the same time assailing his doubters for rejecting the power of God. Sunday’s confidence in himself was unmatched. His supporter William Ellis declared “That he is God’s tool is the first and last word about Billy Sunday,” and emphasized repeatedly that Sunday was “a scandal to the correct and conventional,” a “prophet” who preached to America’s “blatant worldly wisdom, with its flaunting prosperity, with its fashionable churchliness, with its flood of advanced theology overwhelming the pulpit.”\footnote{William T. Ellis, \textit{Billy Sunday: The man and the message} (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1914) 15.} This sort of aggressiveness, delight in upsetting what Sunday imagined to be the establishment, and embrace of confrontation came increasingly to characterize the homiletics of New York’s conservative evangelicals, and Sunday was indeed their prophet.
Chapter 8

The Union School of Religion and the Limits of Liberal Evangelicalism

Less than two years before Sunday’s crusade, shortly after nine in the morning on a Sunday in October 1915, George Albert Coe, director of the Union School of Religion, an experimental Sunday school, slipped into the back of a classroom in Union Theological Seminary to witness a very different method of conversion from that Billy Sunday would teach. Leaning against the wall, Coe watched a seminary student lead a dozen or so eleven and twelve year old students of the Union School in a lesson on the boyhood of Jesus. Coe’s notes and the report he returned to the teacher reveal he was interested less in the content of the course than he was in the behavior of the students, which he observed with a near pedantic attentiveness.

Class began with a prayer, followed by recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. “The recitation was too slow,” Coe noted, and “the participation of the pupils seemed rather perfunctory . . . One boy at least was looking around the room.” He was concerned about the children’s distraction again during a discussion about John the Baptist, ascribing it, optimistically, less to the students’ level of interest in the subject matter than to the teacher’s heavy hand: “Some of the inattention was due to the fact that, at some points, the teacher was carrying on her own enterprise,” he warned, and recommended an adjustment of space: “the teacher should, in my opinion, place herself closer to the children so as to form a group of a more conversational kind. A distance of even eight feet makes a difference.” But Coe was favorably impressed with the children’s willingness to participate in the lesson. Several presented brief prepared thoughts about Jesus’s youth. “The papers that were presented showed real thought,” he said. “The variation from pupil to pupil proves that the pupils did not merely echo what they had been told.” This led Coe to
pronounce the class, in the end, a success; “Certainly the topic interested the children, and they were led to think of it in terms of their own experience.”

Both his concern and his praise reflected the ways Coe reimagined how conversion would happen, and illustrated the distance that yawned between the Union School and both Sunday’s aggressive proclamation of the Word and the devotionalism of liberal evangelicals like those at Brick. Coe paid such minute attention to the students’ behavior because he saw in it the slow glimmerings of a coming Christian society. Coe was possessed by evangelicalism’s concerns and its impulses, its idealistic drive toward the remaking of humanity and its conviction that religion made this possible; for him, whatever salvation in the afterlife it might lead to was less important than its ability to usher harmony to the tumultuous plurality of the city’s streets.

During the thirteen years that he worked in the Union School, between 1909 and 1922, Coe became not only a leader in American education, but also a key figure in an evangelical debate over the causes and nature of conversion. This was perhaps inevitable; Coe like many others along the evangelical spectrum remained convinced that Christianization was the only hope for urban civilization, and that making Christians of people was the best way to accomplish this. He was participating in the same conversation as Sunday or Merrill. But with a crucial difference: Coe sought not to subvert the newly cosmopolitan city like Merrill, nor overturn it like Sunday; rather, he sought a Christianity which would sanctify it.

George Coe had joined the faculty at Union Seminary in 1909 particularly to open the Union School of Religion, an experimental Sunday school for the youth in the diverse neighborhood around Columbia University. Morningside Heights before the twentieth century had been a largely institutional neighborhood, dominated by Union Seminary, Columbia, St.

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1 George A. Coe, “Observations of the Sixth Grade Class, October 17, 1915,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 1, folder 1.4. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
Luke’s Hospital and other institutions built in the 1890s, interspersed with upper middle class residences. In the early twentieth century, the opening of the subway prompted a wave of construction, both large and well-appointed rowhouses for the well-to-do (like Coe himself, who lived on 606 W 122nd Street), who tended to live on cross streets, and plainer apartments for the lower middle classes on the main thoroughfares of Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue. While many of these were Protestants of British descent, there were a number of Italians and Jews in the neighborhood as well, attracted by ethnic construction companies, and mostly second generation. Most were little interested in Protestant Christianity. The Union School welcomed the children of them all. While a few of the Union School’s pupils were the children of faculty at Columbia or Union, Coe claimed most were unchurched. He said proudly that “Our pupil population is a floating one . . . few parents are active church members; we are made up of heterogeneous elements.”

Like many liberal evangelicals, Coe was uncomfortable with traditional evangelical piety, and frustrated with its methods. And indeed, rhetorically and methodologically, Coe’s Christianity resembled that of the liberal evangelicals who emerged in New York’s pulpits a generation earlier. Coe’s language consciously reached for a place in the evangelical tradition: he used terms like conversion, devotional practices like prayer, and no less than did other evangelicals, he dreamed of a Christian city. He also shared several premises with liberal evangelical piety: he conceived of religion as a matter of practice rather than doctrine, believed that engaging in these practices might make humans Christian through a process of remaking

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habit and character rather than through particular event, and, most dramatically, and held a deep
concern with and desire to remake the chaos of the city into a recognizably Christian order.
Indeed, Coe stipulated what liberals had been saying for decades: “Adults may be able to express
and to deepen their own spiritual life through some specific form of social service,” he claimed
upon taking up his professorship at Union Seminary in 1909, echoing the devotional mantra of a
generation of evangelicals who preceded him.4

But while liberal evangelicals rooted the experience of the Word in ritualized social
service and believed conversion derived from an encounter with God those actions facilitated,
Coe argued that conversion could best be understood in the language of psychology. Like other
students of religion at the turn of the twentieth century, such as William James, Coe observed
that religious experience seemed to work differently for different people, and he believed that
study of such experiences could be used to systematize, understand, and encourage regular and
beneficial conversion to Christianity. As James had noted in his seminal The Varieties of
Religious Experience, he suspected that “what makes the difference between a sudden and
gradual convert is not necessarily the presence of divine miracle in the case of one and
something less divine in that of the other, but rather a simple psychological peculiarity.”5

This was not really secularization any more than the liberal emphasis upon the
institutional church was; rather, it was merely an old impulse in a new idiom. Conversion to
George Coe was the natural end of growth in the human personality, if it developed under ideal
conditions toward its native religious state. It was communicated not through a sudden
encounter with God, but through socialization and training that developed the divine inclinations

4 George A. Coe, Can Religion be Taught? The Inauguration of George Albert Coe (New York: Union Theological
Seminary, 1909) 20.
5 For this shift, see Ann Taves, Fits, Trances and Visions: experiencing religion and explaining experience from
Wesley to James (Princeton: Princeton, 1999) 261-269, and William James’s The Varieties of Religious Experience
already present in the human soul, and deducible through scientific method and taught through reliable and predictable psychological principles. Psychology, then, simply replaced the Word as the means of grace; it was another language in which the religious impulse could be spoken. “To teach religion,” he said, “then implies that religion is natural to man and that no wall of partition separates religious values from other values, religious experience from other experience.” Science, and critically, contemporary theories of education did not destroy but facilitated the process of religion. Charles Cuthbert Hall, the president of Union Seminary until 1908, began efforts to bring Coe to the school. He told a gathering of religious educators in 1903, if it was to be effective “as an instrument of religious education, the Sunday school requires to be brought into closer correspondence with the established principles of psychology and pedagogy.”

While Coe himself ran the Union School, he kept it firmly rooted in the Christocentric language of liberal evangelicalism, but after he left in 1923, the school’s rhetorical positioning drifted out of balance. By the late 1920s, the liberal evangelicals of New York spurned the Union School. In April 1928, Henry Sloane Coffin, the new president of Union Seminary and formerly pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, attended a Sunday service in the Union School of the sort regularly designed and held by teachers and students. He was shocked. The service commemorated Easter, but seemed geared toward a celebration of cultural inclusivity and the discoveries of science rather than of the risen Christ; the sermon, by a teacher of teenage boys named Spear Knebal, lumped the resurrection in with Greek myths about rebirth

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6 Coe, *Can Religion be Taught?* 20, 23. For more on the ways in which psychology became a tool for liberal believers, see Christopher White, *Unsettled Minds: psychology and the search for religious assurance, 1830-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) 7-8, 59-74.
and descriptions of the life cycles of plants. Knebal concluded with, “Will we go on living after we die? No one who has died has ever come back to tell us. Many, many people believe that we will, just as they believe that Jesus went on living . . . at any rate we do not need to be afraid for we can be sure that in some way we will be taken care of.” The next day, Coffin dashed off a letter to Knebal’s supervisor expressing disbelief that this could be considered “an adequate Easter program” in a Christian seminary; a year later, Coffin ordered the school closed for good.  

Its rise and fall illustrated the rhetorical war over the evangelical heritage on a front other than that of the familiar battle with fundamentalism, and revealed the tenuous position of liberal evangelicalism: defending itself on the one hand from the Sundays of the city, while on the other seeking to rein in the excesses of the Sunday school of liberalism’s leading institution, Union Seminary.

Despite this cleft, the basic consonance of the Union School’s evangelical impulse can be seen in a number of places. Coe and his supporters in the religious education movement shared the distinctive fear of the twentieth century city other evangelicals held: the corruptive effects of commercial capitalist culture. While conservative evangelicals, like Isaac Haldeman or Sunday, sought to raise the voice of the Word, to increasingly purify and idealize the power of the verbal proclamation of God’s salvation, they not infrequently accused liberal evangelicals of secularization; Haldeman’s church, for instance, passed a resolution in April of 1920 which declared that those Baptist churches in the city which “turn the churches into community centers, to be interested in all that may interest the community . . . made civilization and not salvation the

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8 For Coffin’s shock, see Harris Parker, “The Union School of Religion: Embers of the Fires of Progressivism,” *Religious Education* 86:4 (Fall 1991) 605-606; the order of services and Knebal’s sermon are in “Easter Services, Union School of Religion, April 8, 1928,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 14, folder 9.12. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
supreme purpose of the Church.” First Baptist recommended instead “evangelical and missionary appeal.”

But liberal evangelicals vehemently insisted they also preached salvation through an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, and that they similarly sought the conversion of the city. They simultaneously doubted the value of the city’s burgeoning cultural pluralism and retained such optimism about the establishment of an evangelical order that the supernatural power in which they put their trust seemed absolutely necessary. The author of the 1912-13 Year Book of the Brick Presbyterian Church, a congregation deeply engaged in the institutional project, mused that “No amount of warning or exhortation seems capable of restraining the rush of this twentieth century.” William Merrill, Brick’s own pastor, warned of the necessity of maintaining a strong spiritual and devotional life, saying that “the presence of the crowd, the rush of business, the grip of the current on our souls, makes it the more necessary that we keep pure and fresh the sources of our own religious life.” The minister of Christ Church, a Brick affiliate congregation in Hell’s Kitchen worried about low attendance, saying “I console myself for this disappointment by the fact that the whole tendency of modern city life in such a neighborhood as this, has been strongly against us.” It was this challenge against which liberal evangelicals moved their tools: they understood the city through Biblical metaphor, its space was mapped around the nodes of the institutional church houses; its people organized through the moral activism of groups like the OICL. They systematically reworked the city into a great grid which channeled the transformative power of God through its streets, and translated the verbal proclamation of the

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9 April 25, 1920, Minutes of the First Baptist Church in the City of New York, 213-214. Archives, First Baptist Church, New York.
11 William Merrill, “The River of Life in the Stream of the City,” Brick Church Record 2.2 (November 1913) 6.
Word into visible manifestation, making the city into a great liturgical sanctuary, an urban echo chamber for the Word. This would in turn bring the order born of unity, for once the city was set right, conversion would flood forth and encompass all its inhabitants, creating both religious and cultural unity. The pastor of the Church of the Covenant, another of Brick’s affiliate congregations, declared that “Americanization of the most lasting kind is one of the things which the Church is constantly doing,” and that the children of the congregation “receive a knowledge of that idealism and spirituality which are part of Americanism at its best.”

Coe, and the religious education movement, shared similar worries, but offered yet another solution. Shortly after his arrival at Union from Northwestern University in 1909, Coe affirmed that his experience in the city had convinced him that “the massing of people in cities is exposing children as never before to the forces of evil.” He blasted “newspaper morality” which taught young people “whatever social standard happens to get his ear” and “the current ideas of what constitutes success,” which Coe described as “buying, selling, bargaining, and employing.”

Hugh Hartshorne, Coe’s lieutenant who served as the principal of the Union School, argued that these problems overwhelmed the development of religious character: “City children are too busy to be religious. . . There is abundant opportunity in the rural districts for wholesome activity, but what can a bunch of boys in the city do? In the country there is still some semblance of normal family life, but what can the family in the city do?”

As Hartshorne observed, in his official report closing the first full year of the Union School, though the School welcomed 148 students from day schools and neighborhoods surrounding Union Seminary in

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16 Hugh Hartshorne, Childhood and Character (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1919) 111-112. For children’s lives in the early twentieth century city, see Paul Nasaw, Children of the City: at work and play (New York: Oxford University Press University Press, 1986), especially 1-17; on their sporadic church attendance, 86, 201.
Morningside Heights. “Our children come in extraordinary measure from families that do not go to church.” In the fall of 1923 one teacher reported that in his second grade class, only one student knew the story of Jesus’ childhood, and two students “said they had not heard of Jesus before.”17 These teachers were working in the urban trenches indeed.

Coe was optimistic that there were solutions, but he did not put his trust in Merrill’s devotionalism, and nor did he believe that the Christian city was one made over in the unifying image of the transcendent Word. Coe surely sought the idealized Christian community, but he believed its virtues were increasingly – and to Coe’s critics, disappointingly – mundane: tolerance, democratic cooperation, and, increasingly, by the second decade of his tenure at the Union School, gracious acceptance of cultural pluralism. Coe promised that his school would instill in children a Christianity that he defined in ethical, relational, and moral terms. He used traditional means of devotion: worship, prayer, Bible study, but he structured them to instill the skills and values of social interaction, ethical decision-making, and moral purpose, rather than to inspire an emotional and spiritual encounter with the divine. Hugh Hartshorne, for instance, elaborated further on the purposes of religious practice in the Union School: “Every service in the Sunday school has or should have two purposes running through it: First, it should afford training in worship—in what has been called the larger social fellowship, including God and the rest of the group—by an actual participation in worship. Second, it should have as its objective the presentation and illumination of some specific social value, whether moral, intellectual or esthetic.”18 This was as idealistic, perhaps, as any evangelical’s desire to convert the city for Christ, but Coe’s goals were in this world rather than the next. His evangelicalism would usher

17 “Principal’s Report, April 24, 1911,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 2, folder 1.17. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York; Elementary Committee Minutes, October 11, 1923, Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 9, folder 6.19. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
18 Hugh Hartshorne, Worship in the Sunday School (New York: Scribner’s, 1913) 44.
in social harmony by transforming the character of its worshipers. “The redemptive mission of
the Christ,” he believed, “is nothing less than that of transforming the social order itself into the
brotherhood or family of God.”19 This was not mere sophistry; despite his seeming
accommodations, Coe used the language of evangelical Christianity here because he retained a
deeply evangelical faith in religion’s power to change both individuals and societies.

Though liberal evangelicals like Rockefeller or Merrill hesitantly embraced Sunday’s
revivalism precisely because they believed it might spread Christianity, revivalism was anathema
to Coe. He sought to make a distinction between evangelicalism in general and what he and his
supporters called “revivalistic” evangelicalism, by which Coe meant a system of piety that
defined conversion as “certain internal, emotional experiences.” Revivalistic evangelicalism, he
said, had co-opted the character-building faith of true evangelicalism and replaced it with crude
functionalism. He claimed, therefore, that “It cannot be said, then, that conversions, in the sense
which the modern revival has given the term, furnish any adequate measure of the church’s
progress.”20 The emotional experiences traditionally associated with evangelicalism were not
true conversions at all. The revival attempted to use external, emotionally straining means to
impose particular spiritual experiences; to the inevitable extent which it failed it caused
disappointment, to the extent that it succeeded, it caused emotional unrest: “confusion,
morbidity, and negative reactions” among a substantial number of its participants.21 He

19 George A. Coe, A social theory of religious education, 6.
20 George A. Coe, The Religion of a Mature Mind (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1902) 262. See more broadly,
the chapter “Are Conversions Going out of Date?” 255-272. Some historians argue that Coe left evangelicalism
behind entirely, repudiating this form of Christianity in favor of a nebulous religious humanism. See, for instance,
Michael J. Anthony, Exploring the History and Philosophy of Christian Education (Grand Rapids: MI: Kugel Press,
attitudes toward the revival more broadly in the Progressive era, see Phyllis Airhart, Serving the Present Age:
confessed to “suspicion, if not a conviction, that what has claimed a particular right to the name ‘evangelical’ both in piety and in mode of propagating the Gospel, has not fully solved its own chosen problems.”

It is hard not to get a glimpse of Coe’s own psyche in such complaints. His spiritual history was marked by frustration with his inability to gain recognizable emotional encounter with the divine; raised the son of an evangelical Methodist minister, he had sought a cathartic conversion experience “by the standard Methodist sense” until he reached college, when he finally and decisively gave the effort up, aggravated by its unpredictability and his inability. But despite, Coe never surrendered the language and concepts of the evangelical Christianity of his youth: he continued to speak of conversion, of prayer, and of the transformation that becoming a Christian would enact upon a person; he continued to crave, and to believe in, the possibility of attaining a Christian society. Coe understood these concepts in basically evangelical ways; becoming Christian, he believed, would instill in people virtues unattainable in any other way. But he had to revise what he understood the achievement to look like. Of himself he declared “I cut the knot by a rational and ethical act. Assuming that my part in the matter was to continue to commit myself to a Christian way of life, and that internal witness or assurance was not my affair, I resolved that I would never again seek it.” And indeed, for the rest of his life Coe recoiled from traditional practices of evangelical piety, seeking what he

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25 George A. Coe, “My Own Little Theatre,” 93.
believed to be a more reliable, consistent, and predictable means to access the benefits he saw in Christianity.

In his inaugural address at Union Seminary Coe illustrated the broader problems that he saw in what he called the “traditional” or “mystical view of religious education.” By this he meant the revival, the conversion event, the crisis experience that had been essential to evangelicalism for two centuries and which had evaded him. He mercilessly drew over the coals those who insisted on the need for divine intervention in the conversion of the young, inquiring with ruthless sarcasm “If the outpouring does not come upon our pupils by the time they reach the age of seventeen, drop out of the Sunday school, lose interest in the church and show little fruitage from our efforts, [are] we are not to hold ourselves responsible?” Coe’s impatience with this sort of conversion rested upon its unpredictable and chaotic nature; the psychological helplessness and lack of answers that seemed the inevitable conclusion for those who insisted upon a conversion event that might for some never come, and instead leave disquiet in its wake.

Thus secondly, and worse, Coe maintained that revivalism fostered not the moral and spiritual unity which Sunday, Rockefeller, and Janeway had all hoped for, but rather, social degradation, breakdown, and chaos. If in individuals, it encouraged overreliance on fleeting emotional experiences, which caused anxiety, passivity, and ultimately emotional instability, revivalism also inflicted these symptoms upon a community writ large. Revivals brought division, encouraged unhealthy competition and social stress, and often fostered mob mentalities. In pointing out this stress, Coe said, “We must ask not only how many persons we reach by the revival, but also how many we fail to reach.” He argued that the destruction a revival wrought took time and effort to undo; as Coe pointed out, “Each revival burns over the ground, so that an

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interval must elapse before another can arise.” Revivals were only good for “occasionalism.” 28 Frank Sanders, a professor at Yale and the first president of the Religious Education Association, noted at a Sunday school convention that the “days of revivals may not be over, but they are far less frequent or dependable than in olden times . . . Such appeals will be temporarily successful but permanently mischievous.” 29

Frederick Davenport worked with Coe while in graduate school at Columbia Teachers College, and in his graduate thesis, Davenport leveled the most comprehensive social complaint against what he called “the revival rupture.” Davenport believed that revivals were mass coping exercises, means by which crowds dealt with social stress by relieving their “primitive” tendencies, and he located their features in the Crusades, the Sioux Ghost Dance and slave religion, as well as in the various Great Awakenings among white American Protestants – all events, Davenport believed, symptomatic of social pathology, a “human proneness towards intermittency.” Revivalism was a “form of impulsive social action,” which “originates among people who have the least inhibitory control.” 30 Fortunately, Davenport claimed, “The days of the emotional stampeding of a town are passing away in religion just as they are in politics.” 31 He called for “a new evangelism,” insisting that “I have taken the reality of the conversion experience for granted” and protested only “crude, crowd coercion.” After the work of the REA, conversion would not seem “a means of escape from the sharks of perdition but rather will appear to be the natural fulfilment of a worthy life.” 32 Davenport thus presented the fears of Coe and others: if real conversion, real transformation of character, was naturally embedded in

the human personality, the sort of social pathology that revivalism represented might actually hinder, rather than aid, its emergence; its frenzies caused fear and unrest, and its emotional straightjacketing inhibited natural moral sense.

It was the crudeness of these techniques which Coe and his supporters saw writ large in the damage the revival did to their vision of a Christian society. He had few kind words to say for Billy Sunday, arguing that the Sunday meetings encouraged “many church people of the present day, both laymen and ministers, to lay aside their ordinary standards of taste, courtesy, reverence, kindliness, and theological consistency.” Coe noted that initially upon arriving in New York City, there was “shock” at “the revivalist’s standards.” However, over time the meetings created “habitual complacency – a crowd fashion.”

33 Contra to Rockefeller or the Episcopalians, Coe believed Sunday did damage to the city; he did not dispute the power of Sunday’s preaching, but rather was distressed at its effects. Sunday taught New York that coarseness was acceptable and that Christianity had to do with yelling and unsavory emotionalism. And to Coe, he could hardly have done otherwise; what Sunday saw as a bold and ritual proclamation of God’s Word was to the psychologist a naïve demolition of all that religion should be.

But Coe’s criticism of revivalism should not be read as a rejection of the evangelical impulse in total. Indeed, Coe and the rest of the religious education movement devoted so many words to the debate precisely in order to drive a wedge between revivalism and evangelical work more generally, so they could reject the former and claim the latter. Davenport’s call for a “new evangelism” was not the only of its kind. Coe and the REA began a rhetorical effort to claim evangelical language for this vision. Frank Sanders declared to a meeting of the REA that

henceforth “evangelism will be predominantly educational in its methods, a course of Christian nurture rather than a spasm of Christian zeal.” Samuel Haslett, a minister and member of the REA made a thorough study of Sunday schools in Massachusetts and concluded that “A revival is in progress, but it is not one of the exciting and shouting kind. It is the kind of revival that will last because foundations are being carefully and systematically laid . . . The salvation of the world is now discovered to depend upon the work of keeping the children from becoming lost, and instructing and training them in accord with their nature and need.”

This desire for connection to the evangelical movement more generally contributed to Coe’s attempt to baptize the progressive education movement, which orbited around figures like John Dewey, in particularly Christian language and imagery of the sort Dewey himself and other progressive educators avoided in favor of more generalized statements about morality.

Progressive educators emphasized classroom participation, cultivation of students’ ability to solve problems and moral dilemmas, and projects which emphasized the relevance of the class material to the students’ day to day lives, all directed to the goal of moral formation, rather than the authoritative impartation of information upon passive students. Coe saw in these aims the working of liberal evangelicalism, and labeled it conversion in another form, seeking to place his own embrace of progressive education in the tradition of liberal evangelicalism, as the descendent of Horace Bushnell. He claimed of his own philosophy of education that “we owe it, in large measure, to Horace Bushnell.” He also gave to Bushnell the epigraph to the anniversary

report, *Ten Years of the Union School of Religion*, which stated similar conviction: “The child should grow up a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise.”

The claim, however, reveals perhaps more about Coe’s genealogical desires for his movement than of his actual philosophy. Coe understood Bushnell’s concept of “Christian nurture” to mean that Christianity could be imparted without the abrupt break of identity that was the conversion experience. He also subscribed to Bushnell’s emphasis upon traditional Christian rites; parents must lay Bible reading and prayer on the foundation of baptism, for, “in giving us this rite on the grounds stated, God promises, in fact, on his part to dispense that spiritual grace which is necessary to the fulfillment of its import.” But Bushnell remained firmly convinced that salvation required the special grace of God granted; his conviction that this grace did not necessarily require the verbal Word as a conduit refocused evangelicals’ attention away from the revival and pulpit toward the home and the schoolhouse. Bushnell strove to keep God in the process, but his optimistic visions of the inherently wholesome American child absorbing the image of Christ along with the alphabet meant that by the end of his century he was being invoked against the necessity of a marked experience of grace upon the child’s fallen soul. However, for Coe, Bushnell remained an important connection to his evangelical heritage.

Consistent with his desire to claim the evangelical heritage, Coe presented himself as a de facto pastor, ministering to the spiritual needs of his students. As he wrote in 1922 to a mother

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37 George A. Coe, *Education in Religion and Morals*, 53-4; *Ten Years of the Union School of Religion* (New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1920), title page.
of a student, worried that Coe’s school did not treat the Bible with appropriate respect, the particular form of education practiced at the Union School “will not interfere with getting the spiritual sense, but promote it. For if we clearly and vividly see what Jesus did, and grasp what he said, it will have its own effect upon us.” It was profoundly important to him that the religious education movement use religious vocabulary and devotional methods, and that it remain rooted in the evangelical tradition. He wanted not to destroy, but to redefine evangelicalism, to connect the conversion experience to new methods, more reliable than those of the revival.

Coe proved such an influential figure in this debate because he worked with young people. Other religious thinkers and psychologists like James Leuba and Edwin Starbuck had begun, in the late nineteenth century, to emphasize that that most conversion experiences could be dated to early adolescence, due, as G. Stanley Hall speculated, to the particular emotional and psychological makeup of young people. The Sunday school thus became the place where many evangelicals leveled their focus and methods, and it became the battleground of a struggle over how evangelicalism itself should work. In 1903, Coe, Henry Cope, William Rainey Harper, the president of the University of Chicago, and several associates formed the Religious Education Association precisely to combat the influence of revivalism and lobby for a new way of thinking about conversion in the Sunday schools. Thus, he complained that Sunday schools were ineffective in producing real conversion. Indeed, he unfavorably compared them to the revivals themselves, saying that they were “little more than a weakened form of preaching. They

40 George A. Coe to Mrs. Walser, January 8, 1922. Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 1, folder 1.1. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
42 For the REA, see Lynn and Wright, The Big Little School, 127-129; Jack Seymour, From Sunday School to Church School (Washington: University Press of America, 1982) 125-129
ignore the necessity of active expression. This is one of the reasons why biblical facts and spiritual truths remain so external to many pupils of the Sunday school."

Coe leveled this assault upon the Sunday school because he believed it was in a state of crisis. It was incapable of dealing with the challenges that the city placed upon American youth. Henry Cope, who served as secretary of the REA from 1906 to 1923, noted in 1913 that “there has developed during the past ten years a wide-spread conviction of the need for moral and religious education.” Cope argued that this conviction was not merely evident from the statements of leaders, but also “through experiments and successes, and through the records of special organizations” – most particularly, the Sunday schools, which Cope said “were in a ferment of dissatisfaction” and “stood sadly in need of improvement.” This dissatisfaction and unease was not merely procedural, but existential; as William Faunce, the president of Brown and an officer in the REA told the organization’s third convention, “This generation has been smitten with a general conviction of educational sin.” The members of the REA believed the original sin lay in the Sunday schools’ emphasis upon rushing masses of students toward a cathartic conversion experience. As Henry Cope pointed out, “Sunday schools may be roughly classed into three groups; First, those having the statistical aim, seeking only to gather great numbers and to be able to report growth in large figures; Second, the so-called evangelistic, seeking only to bring every pupil to some ‘Decision Day’ to commit himself to church membership; third those with the Educational spirit, seeking the full development of the pupil’s

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43 Coe, *Education in Religion and Morals*, 129.
religious life.” Sadly, Cope believed the first two aspects of the Sunday school greatly outweighed the third.⁴⁶

There was some truth to the charge. Sunday schools began to appear in America during the late eighteenth century as a way to impart literacy and some minimal measure of theological knowledge. But their numbers exploded in antebellum America of the Second Great Awakening, when revivalism saturated American culture and the common schools took charge of instruction in literacy, mathematics and the like. The Sunday schools found their purpose in conversion. In 1905, the minister and officer in the International Sunday School Convention Charles Trumbull presented the history of the Sunday school movement as a glorious progression up from three early errors: “the paying of teachers,” “instruction in rudimentary knowledge, such as spelling,” and “the limiting of the Sunday school to the lower classes.” Trumbull claimed that these errors were discarded as the Sunday schools realized the “truth” of “a fundamental difference between the aim of the secular school and the Sunday school.”⁴⁷ Lessons frequently centered on rote memorization of Bible versions, singing of hymns, and the retelling of scripture stories, but all this was directed to the end of encouraging a child to confess conviction of sin and embrace the catharsis of accepting Christ as savior through this encounter with scripture and the fellowship of converted teachers.⁴⁸ As the Sunday School Teachers’ Magazine instructed its readers in 1845, “Immediate conversion of the children: the object of Sunday School teaching.”⁴⁹ The New York minister Daniel Kidder, an officer in the city’s

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⁴⁸ For overviews of the relationship between the nineteenth century Sunday school and conversion, see Ann Boylan, Sunday School: the formation of an American institution, 1790-1880 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 7-17, 55-58, 134-141; Seymour, 29-31; Lynn and Wright, The Big Little School, 75-78.
⁴⁹ Sunday School Teachers’ Magazine (October 1845) 450.
Sunday school organization, advised prospective teachers to “Aim, at all occasions, at the conversion of the children committed to you.”

Some historians have argued that evangelicals’ talk of conversion, particularly in the Sunday schools of the early twentieth century, increasingly tilted toward the educational, toward Coe’s talk of Christian nurture rather than to traditional conversion experience, but a sort of uneasy coexistence punctuated with clashes and mutual denunciations as well as rhetorical blending and compromise better characterizes the situation than does a steady evolution. The struggle over the Decision Day, a particular iteration of the Sunday School which both versions of evangelicalism attempted to claim for their own, reveals this interaction in process, and more, also the heart of Coe’s evangelical piety, his gift for fusing traditional evangelical language and styles of devotion with the psychological principles he believed underlay true religious conversion.

The Decision Day was intended to offer teachers a particular time and space to make particular exhortation for students to declare conversion and confess Christ. But from the very beginning both its purpose and utility came under fire. That it existed at all testified to the ongoing imperative that Sunday school existed to promote conversion. For many evangelicals in the 1880s and 1890s, the Decision Day was the essential focus of the Sunday school curriculum, the reason the institution existed, and it was understood to be simply a version of the revival itself particularly targeted at the young. Many advocates of Decision Day stressed that young people especially needed to be challenged with conversion, brought to a point of emotional crisis, and the growing strength of Bushnellian nurture was hampering the possibility of a

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52 Boylan, Sunday School, 147-50.
conversion event dramatic, pivotal, and immediate. The official guide to the 1911 Uniform Sunday School lessons marked ages 12 to 18 as the “period of decisions,” a time “of mighty impulses great temptations, the battlefield of all the principalities and powers of evil. It is also the time when the soul is most open to all the influences for good,” claimed the lesson writers. Therefore, “revival work and Decision Days, wisely used, are the most effective reinforcements.”

As did the uniform lessons, many closely associated the Decision Day with traditional revivals in both genealogy and technique. H.W. Pope, a disciple of the great Dwight Moody, credited the emergence of the Decision Day to Moody himself, who once visited personally an entire class of Sunday school pupils, and found in his ability to urge each to come to Christ his calling as an evangelist. It was essential, Pope said, “to realize the importance of giving young people a definite opportunity to accept Christ.”

Another advocate, the Sunday school teacher Amos Lee, told of a dream in which Christ asked a teacher for the souls of his students, and grew sadder and sadder as the teacher offered their bodies, seated punctually in their seats, their minds, stuffed with memorized passages of scripture, and their manners, quiet and respectful. None of these things, declared Lee, should be mistaken or substituted for the call to conversion. The students should instead be asked for their souls: “A sermon should be called for – a brave, tender, ardent appeal,” inspiring the students to decide for Christ.

The Decision Day had no greater advocate that J. Wilbur Chapman, urban revivalist, secretary of the Presbyterian General Assembly’s Committee on Evangelism from 1895 to 1905,

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53 F.N. Peloubet and Amos Lee, *Select Notes on the International Lessons* (Boston and Chicago: W.A. Wilde, 1911) 239. This edition and others offered advice on particular dates for decision days, specifying that they should be held after certain lessons – for instance, the lesson on “Jesus, the Savior of the World.” Peloubet and Lee, *Select notes on the International Lessons* (Boston and Chicago: W.A. Wilde, 1908) 53.
and sometime pastor of New York’s Fourth Presbyterian Church (from 1899 to 1902). While he was in New York and on the Committee, Chapman began promoting the Decision Day.

“Young people ought to be brought to the point of a decision,” the revivalist said. For Chapman, the Decision Day was virtually a revival, with the school’s superintendant functioning as a reviverist and teachers as workers; he advised that the superintendant deliver a sermon and organize “devotional services, choosing evangelical hymns.” Each teacher would then be asked to exhort their children personally, distributing decision cards for students to sign, much as in the prayer rooms at one of Chapman or Sunday’s urban revivals. The Presbyterian General Assembly adopted his recommendation that all Presbyterian schools hold a Decision Day on November 9, 1903, and endorsed his methods for doing so.

Chapman believed that the Decision Day was particularly critical in an urban environment, for reasons of logistics but also because of the nature of the children who lived there. First, he warned that “in the Niagara River there is one point called ‘Past Redemption Point,’” and that “we do not know at what age children may pass this point.” In the city, when a Sunday school teacher might have access to a child only for a brief period, it was essential that Christ be presented to them “very early in their lives.” He told the story of a girl in New York who had visited a Sunday school only once, and had been duly impressed by the minister and lessons – “but there being no one to lead her to a decision, she left the school.” The minister later encountered her in Paris, and was distressed to see “a sneer on her face that had once been wet with tears.” Opportunity in the city, Chapman believed, was fleeting.

58 Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1903) 38-9.
But secondly, accomplishing conversion in the city was particularly essential in order to maintain intact the fabric of urban society. Converting a child would often lead to the evangelization of their entire family – most of whom, in the city, were not churchgoers themselves, and thus save one particular block of the urban moral order. “Characters have been transformed and entire homes have been changed by the conversion of children,” Chapman said. For Chapman, this was evidence of the divine intervening to reverse the natural moral decay that cities inflicted. Thus, he scoffed at those like Davenport who insisted that such cathartic conversions were not only mere psychological manifestations, but also destructive to the city’s moral fabric. Rather, they were truly divine, and essential to preserve it. “Prayer, prayer, prayer is the absolute essential for success,” he insisted, and he was quick to concede that the mere presence of a “Decision Day” did not mean conversions might come in other times or places; it was “perfectly natural to expect conversions constantly.” But if the teacher had presented Christ to a student, “you have a perfect right to believe that the Spirit of God will witness to him and make him a power in the life of your scholar, for this is his work.”

In part due to Chapman’s influence, the Decision Day became quite popular in New York City and other urban centers in the first decade of the twentieth century, where pastors were particularly worried about the souls and nature of the children roaming the streets. As Charles Goodell, the Methodist minister who had welcomed Billy Sunday to New York claimed, citing both Coe and Chapman’s emphasis on reaching the young of the city, “Many of our young people are helpless spiritually because they have never known the pulse of a divine life.” He was critical of institutional methods, arguing that “Many churches have adopted so called institutional methods with limited success,” and maintaining that the weakness of institutional

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evangelism was the lack of a personal appeal. “The nexus between the game room and the prayer room is a soulful Christian” with “steady personal solicitude.” For Goodell, the Decision Day was essential because it provided “a clear and forceful sermon on the relation of children to the Christian life.”

In 1902, New York’s General Evangelistic Union, an interdenominational mission organization, published a Chapman pamphlet titled “Decision Day in the Sunday School” for distribution, and the New York Sunday School Association began in the early twentieth century to regularly recommend that all the city’s Sunday schools hold Decision Days on the same date, and Philadelphia began doing the same.

Ten years later, one Baptist Sunday school was regularly holding a Decision Day, marked by special prayers and exhortations, and started using commitment cards like those Chapman had used in his revivals; the school’s superintendent instructed his teachers that as the New York Sunday School Association advised, “each teacher should speak to, and communicate with every member of their class.” At almost the same time, one New York pastor credited Decision Day with changing the “appalling fact” that ten years previous, only a fifth of the students in New York’s Sunday schools confessed Christ.

Coe and his supporters in the religious education movement watched this fusion of the Sunday school and the revival with some apprehension. Frank Sanders tried to split the difference in 1903. He insisted that true conversion would only come through “the constant building of character,” Sunday schools should also “plan to guide to the point of decision the impulse of the well taught and well trained youth” – though never “by fervid appeals to a whole

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64 18 June 1912, 31 December 1912, February 14, 1914, Minutes of the Sunday School, Alexander Avenue Baptist Church Records, 1894-1911, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta, GA.
school. Such appeals will be temporarily successful but permanently mischievous.” Thus, he recommended Decision Days be pursued as an “exercise of judgment rather than emotion; a course of Christian nurture rather than a day of revival; a systematic use of the resources of the Sunday school rather than a hasty preparation for one grand effort.”

Many other members of the REA followed Sanders’s rhetorical strategy. They claimed evangelical legitimacy by endorsing the concept of conversion, and credited Decision Day with the promotion of students claiming active involvement in their spiritual lives. However, they also consistently tried to distance the Decision Day from the hazards revivalism: pandering to fleeting emotionalism, neglecting character formation, and teaching a irrational version of religion. Hugh Hartshorne, Coe’s more radical deputy, was far more skeptical than Sanders, asking skeptically, “In terms of the educational process, what is the precise value of Decision Day? Is there anything about it which deserves to be retained in a thoroughgoing school of religion?”

Coe himself was more temperate, and did a great amount of rhetorical work to claim the Decision Day for religious education, redefining terms until the Decision Day was an acceptable version of the evangelical piety he believed in. He did not like the name “Decision Day,” which he said “implies previous indecision or even opposition.” That is, he disliked the implication that the Decision Day might mark some sort of immediate reversal of mind or sudden conversion. Too many Decision Days, he said, were “abstract or sentimental or bafflingly mysterious. Why ask a child to begin the religious life when he has already taken many steps in it?”

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67 Hugh Hartshorne, Childhood and Character: an introduction to the study of the religious life (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1919) 133.
68 Coe, Education in Religion and Morals, 307.
despite their individual levels of education. Coe, a canny politician as well as a genuine idealist, was careful to indicate his genuine support for the process of religious transformation Decision Day represented. But in so doing he guided it toward his own understanding of the process. Coe proposed that the “Decision Day” be renamed “Fellowship Day,” which would offer students a forum for “deliberately acknowledging allegiance to Christ and his church.” It would not be “a mere spurt of special concern;” it would not be “detached from the work of steady development.” More, no child below eleven would be allowed participation, on the grounds that they were not yet fit to make such a commitment.

Of course, as Coe well knew this way of defining the Decision Day intentionally ignored and inverted the tasks Chapman and Moody and Charles Goodell wanted from it. For Coe the Decision Day best served not as a site for immediate transformation, but rather a forum in which students would publically acknowledge the progress and personal development he believed should be already occurring. It was useful because it placed particular pressure upon the students; it signaled to them that they were expected to take a particular place in their community, to “realization of our fellowship with one another, with Jesus, with the Father in a common purpose of social reconciliation.” These reflected Coe’s conviction that religious conversion was a process of enhancing social cohesion and communal cooperation. He was concerned about “decision-day methods that cause pupils to exaggerate the differences between them,” and recommended that every class of a Sunday school be allowed on Decision Day to celebrate “social reconciliation” in its own way.

This translation of the revivalist impulse behind the original Decision Day reveals a great deal about Coe’s piety: it illustrates his conviction that religion was behavioral rather than

69 Coe, Social theory of religious education, 331.
70 Coe, Education in Religion and morals, 307-8; Social theory of religious education, 331-2.
71 Coe, Social theory of religious education, 332.
linguistic, that conversion was a process rooted in the cultivation of habits rather than particular spiritual experiences, and that religious character was most highly exhibited in healthy social relationships. As the school bulletin issued in 1923 put it, “our aim is to help the pupils achieve a thoroughly Christian character, so that all their experiences throughout the seven days of the week will be met with the Christian motive. This involves the acquirement of knowledge of various sorts and the training in habits of Christian living in connection with all the individuals and all groups.” The particular functions of the Union School, in worship, lessons, and activities, show how the Union School sought to help its students achieve that character.

Despite frequent commentary from both contemporaries and later scholars, who tend to paint Coe as an ethicist foremost, he insisted that devotional practices were essential to the proper formation of the Christian soul. His psychological understanding of religion emphasized the importance of the relationship between the mind and the body, stressing that transformation of character which evangelicalism promised must take both into account. As he said, “We are obliged to look upon the physical life and the mental life as one life. . . . Something like this thought seems to have been in Paul’s mind when, in his discussion of the resurrection, he attributed bodily life to us even in the future world.” As the reference to Paul indicates Coe recognized the close relationship between the mind and the body had profound ramifications for the religious life; that physical movement, behavior, and discipline might cultivate desirable beliefs and desires. This was a psychological version of the liberal evangelical desire to

72 “Union School of Religion Bulletin, 1923,” 3, Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 2, folder 1.18. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
73 Coe Education in Religion and Morals, 100-101.
74 Coe here followed both psychologists in religion like G. Stanley Hall, as well as to some degree the muscular Christianity movement, which also ascribed spiritual benefit to physical activity, though in a somewhat cruder form. See White, Unsettled Minds, 123-129, as well as Clifford Putney, Muscular Christianity: manhood and sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) 38-39. More recently, some evangelical philosophers have returned to Coe’s ideas, stressing the importance of behavior in shaping one’s
sacramentalize social services, but while the liberals argued that sacramental rites provided
spiritual benefits, Coe emphasized their psychological functions. As he said, “Training in ritual
worship is an effective method for producing in children genuine group consciousness, each
child being carried beyond self-regard and self-will by each common act.”

And thus, the faculty of the Union School spent a great deal of time worrying about
prayer and worship. In the opening years of the Union School, Coe and principal Hugh
Hartshorne together worked out a set of plans for organized devotion among their students. This
resulted in the 1915 publication of the Book of Worship of the Union School, which Hartshorne
assembled. He declared as he began writing that “We have reached the highest point yet attained
anywhere in Sunday School practice in respect to worship, and the principles involved here have
been so fully investigated that the preparation of a service book for general use is now
practicable.” Coe explained what this meant: “The school worship is carefully planned and
conducted so as to train the children in the experience of worship, and to cultivate through
worship the fundamental Christian attitudes. These attitudes, such as Gratitude, Goodwill,
Reverence, Faith, and Loyalty are themes around which the services are built. The attitudes are
then in turn built into the school project.” Just as evangelicals as disparate as Sunday and
Coffin understood worship of some variety to be the means of conversion, so did Coe; as Sunday
relentlessly structured his revivals around proclamation of the Word, so did Coe seek to build the

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spiritual desires. James K. A. Smith, Desiring the Kingdom: worship, worldview, and cultural formation (Grand
75 Coe, Social theory of religious education, 322.
76 “Principal’s Report, 1913.” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 2,
folder 1.17. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
77 The Union School of Religion Bulletin of Information (New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1917) 5.
devotions of the Union School around the cultivation of the spiritual virtues already within the child. As Coe put it, “By education the child is helped to live his own life.”

The way to do this, he and his staff believed, was to bind the ritual activities of Christian devotion to those values Coe sought to encourage. Prayer was the foundation of all that followed after it, because Coe believed it was the best way to reorient a child’s natural selfishness. In 1915 Hartshorne reported that “the special problem for investigation and experiment for this year has been that of how to train children to pray.” In early November of that school year, Coe held one in a series of “Parents’ Classes,” targeted at the parents of the students in the Union School. The topic that November night was “Training in Prayer,” and Coe told his audience that prayer was both the beginning of the Christian life and the most accurate measure of its progress. As he said, “We expect them [his students] to grow in prayer.”

Coe insisted that the Lord’s Prayer should be the first prayer given to students, because “As small persons enjoy set forms and as such forms are useful in establishing habits formulated prayers are appropriate.” However, “These forms should be graded to fit the child’s moral and intellectual growth.”

As students moved through the classes of the Union School, it was expected that they would began to pray impromptu, and to compose their own prayers. For Coe, the importance of prayer did not rest in its ability to facilitate actual conversation with God, or even in whatever content might be communicated back or forth.

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78 “Parents’ Meeting: Brief Notes,” November 4, 1914, Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 4, folder 3.7. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
Rather, to pray was to be educated in the transcendent value of relationships, and to use a relationship with God to sanctify one’s relationship with others. Coe insisted that “Prayer in the child’s life does not have its significance in the future only but in the present social living. Prayer is best described as the climax of social living . . . actual fellowship with God.”

It could and should cultivate spiritual experience, but that experience, in the end, should reinforce the sort of Christian character that prayer rightly done would cultivate. As Coe said, “We believe in a life of communion with God, but at the same time we believe that this inner life must also be efficient in the outer life and so we are consciously aiming to train the children so that they will grow up into strong efficient workers cooperating with others who wish to bring in the Kingdom of God.” He noted that “God should be addressed as Our Father because the father idea has meaning for the children, and prayer should be an expression of social attitudes.”

Whether addressing God as “Father” was an accurate depiction of the divine-human relationship was beside the point; rather, Coe wanted his students to associate their relationship with their parents with their relationship with God, and to understand the cosmic importance of their relationships with others.

Worship in the Union School functioned in the same way. The Union School generally met from 9:15 till 10:30 Sunday mornings; the time consisted of a worship service and classes divided by age. When the school opened in 1910, 147 students were registered, and eighty, on average, attended, divided among lower and upper classes; ten years later, 148 were registered, but attendance had been up ten percent for several years; thus, in response, more grades were

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83 “Parents’ Meeting: Brief Notes,” November 4, 1914, Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 4, folder 3.7. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
added and ten to fifteen students were enrolled in each class.\textsuperscript{84} Until 1924, a twenty minute worship service opened the meetings; that year it was moved until 10:10, after class sessions. Once a month, all the classes would meet together in the chapel at Union Theological Seminary for a combined service; the other three weeks of the month, the elementary classes and the high schools would met separately for smaller services.\textsuperscript{85} Just as students were encouraged to write their own prayers, so were they after a certain point encouraged to design their own orders of worship. For instance, in 1923, the faculty’s Elementary Committee described student involvement in their annual Easter service: “The planning of the Christmas service for December 23 was left in the hands of the lower school. The part to be taken by the classes was decided as follows: Beginners and grade 1 – to sing a carol. Grade II; to choose three hymns. Grade III; took the part of shepherds. Grade IV; to make a prayer and sing in the choir. Grade V; to make the call to worship and sing in the choir. Grade VI; to plan a pageant. It was decided that this service should only take 45 minutes.”\textsuperscript{86}

By encouraging this sort of active participation in the devotional lives of students, teachers hoped to cultivate certain values through associating them with the spiritual sensibility which worship was expected to evoke. For instance, in the beginner’s courses, for children younger than six, the children were taught a prayer called “Father of All, in Heaven Above” and the Lord’s Prayer. The teacher noted “I soon discovered that the children almost without exception thought they must pray at night, never any other time in the day... After thinking it over and thinking it over for some time, we found that we may pray at any time and anywhere.”

\textsuperscript{84} Hugh Hartshorne, “A short account of the school,” \textit{Bulletin of the Union Theological Seminary} 3:3 (March 1920) 9.
\textsuperscript{85} This information comes from the Minutes of the Staff, September 1923, and Robert Hume to Student Council, 8 January 1924, proposing the time change. Both sources are in Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 9, folders 6.19 and 6.14, respectively. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
\textsuperscript{86} Elementary Committee Minutes, December 5, 1923, Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 9, folder 6.19. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
She then led the students to compose a prayer of their own, “Heavenly Father, we thank thee for the warmer weather that brings the rain and sunshine, birds and flowers, Amen.” She noted happily that these lessons dovetailed, teaching the students not only the important virtue of gratitude, but also that spirituality was an essential aspect of how a Christian would understand the world. In an older class, the prayer students composed ran, “Our Father, we thank thee for having put us in this beautiful world, we are bringing our money to help other people,” and was said immediately before the class collected donations for the poor. The teacher explained that the prayer was useful in helping the students understand their fellowship with those to whom their offering went. Coe encouraged teachers to allow the students to develop their own voices in prayer, though, frequently, in practice the teachers in fact guided their students in selection of topic, theme, and direction. As he advised one first grade teacher, upon watching her class, “it is to be questioned whether the approach to prayer was not in this case too abrupt. The children were asked what they would like to say, to be sure, but without previous reflection, and in a situation out of which prayer would not naturally spring (as far as they were concerned). They prayer that was finally offered by the teacher came essentially from her.”

Coe emphasized that prayer should ideally reflect the natural religious urges of the students, and that faculty should intervene only to facilitate what children seemed to desire but could not express. Morgan van Valkenburg, a teacher, reported that one of his students, a girl named Grace, had been stifled by her “high Episcopal” church, where “everything bored her.” As Grace said, “When we prayed we had to have our eyes on the cross, knees on the floor, hearts

89 “Comments on Session of the First Grade, October 28, 1917,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 1, folder 1.4. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
in heaven. I asked the teacher suppose you had no cross, then what?” When Grace told van Valkenburg that “I don’t pray often and I don’t believe you should have to go thru all that to pray . . . I believe you can say a prayer to God in your heart any time, anywhere,” he understood this to be her natural spiritual self emerging. As Coe pointed out, “It is a dangerous thing when a child who spontaneously has a desire to connect himself with God’s people is thwarted.”

With the lack of other firm indications by which conversion might be measured, the Union School tracked religious behaviors closely, seeking signs of developing faithful character. Prayer was among the most useful of these signs. This was not always rewarding; several teachers, particularly those of older children, reported as did one teacher of eleven year old boys, that “The opportunity was usually offered the boys to speak any words of prayer which they desired to express at the end of the hour but there was never anyone to volunteer.” However, just as frequently the teachers found correlations between prayer and the growth of characteristics which reflected Christian character. One seventh grade teacher filed a report on “Signs of Spiritual Growth,” celebrating that “Since our lessons on prayer attitude has improved and there has been more real participation in the school prayer and also in the leader’s prayer.”

In 1927, after a particularly grueling Sunday school meeting, in which a young boy named Carl persecuted his classmates unfairly over a missing watch, a teacher happily reported that she “sat next to Carl during the service and noted that he was unusually attentive to the story, and during

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90 Morgan van Valkenburg, “Case of Grace,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 18, folder 11.7. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
91 “Parents’ Meeting: Brief Notes,” November 4, 1914, Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 4, folder 3.7. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
93 “Grade VII, Teachers Report, 1915-16” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 4, folder 3.9. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
the prayer that followed he bowed his head and shut his eyes and kept very still – all of which was quite extraordinary.”

Worship followed similar patterns. Students were encouraged to participate in particular behaviors which were correlated with the psychological development of religious affinity, and their willingness to act was taken as a sign of developing moral and ethical characteristics. The services were often quite typical high Protestant services in form; in the fall of 1923, the staff produced a bare template which indicated they consisted of a processional hymn, a call to worship, the recited Lord’s Prayer, readings from the Old and New Testaments, a hymn, a brief “talk” in place of a sermon, a closing prayer, and a recessional hymn. An order of service from 1916 closely reflects this pattern, with typical Protestant hymns; indeed most hymns and some recited prayers came from Hugh Hartshorne’s *Book of Worship*, composed particularly for the school. Student involvement generally took the form of selecting hymns and scriptures to coincide with a theme (such as “gratitude,” or “honesty”) which the faculty chose. Students also sang in the choir, and older students conducted their own services.

However, soon after its organization the Union School’s services began exhibiting features which differentiated them from traditional Protestant services. Frequently, particularly in the services for the elementary school, the sermon, usually delivered by a teacher, took on different forms. Orders of service sometimes referred to it as a “talk,” or sometimes, even, the “story.” The literary implications of the word were quite accurate; as the Union School continued to evolve, the “talk” frequently proved to be a short didactic narrative, often selected to coincide with the theme of the service in general, which often mirrored the topics taken on in

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95 Minutes of the Staff, September 1923, Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 9, folder 6.19. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York; *The Union School of Religion Bulletin of Information*, 9.
class. In the early years of the Union School these stories were often from scripture, but increasingly, they were mixed and matched with other sources as well, with scriptural narratives adapted to reflect and intertwine with other stories. In January and February of 1923, for instance, a variety of short stories by Leo Tolstoy were told in connection with particular scripture verses: “How Much Land does a Man Need?” with verses from Luke 12, “Little Girls Wiser than Men” with Matthew 18:1-6, and so on. The exception was February 18, when “The Boyhood of George Washington” was retold in connection with Matthew 25:14-17. \(^96\) This paralleled, of course, the traditional Protestant method of preaching from particular scriptural texts, but adapted it to Coe’s conviction, derived from his allegiance to progressive education, that theory was useless: real learning came from real life, and stories were more effective than doctrinal exposition.

Narrative was useful because the students could identify themselves in it, and the Union School faculty designed the stories they presented to encourage this. One series of stories the Union School used in the late 1920s in both worship services and lessons featured “Anyboy” and “Anygirl,” who, as principal Goodwin Watson, who replaced Hartshorne in 1922 reported, had “everyday experiences with having to get up in the morning, having things go wrong all days, going to Sunday school, playing in the street, telling white lies. These stories were “presented in a story form in such a way that the problem was left open for the decision of the hearers. Reports from the parents indicated that the stories carried over into conduct in a remarkable degree.” \(^97\) As time went on the Union School sought more ways to create experiences for the students, rather than simply to give them instruction. Teachers were encouraged to draw on their

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\(^96\) “Stories Used in Chapel from January – May 1923,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 10, folder 7.8. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York; The Union School of Religion Bulletin of Information, 9.

\(^97\) “Annual Report, 1923-4,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 8, folder 6.9. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
students’ own experiences for lessons; as one teacher reported, “The lesson subjects were
suggested by the boys or by the teacher. If by the latter, the boys were always asked to accept or
reject the proposed problem as worthy or unworthy of their acceptance. These problems were
drawn from their everyday school experiences.”

Soon after the Union School was organized, the faculty began experimenting with
another way to create experience among their students: the use of drama in both teaching and
worship. Beginning in the 1910s, students would both compose and act in brief plays
illustrating some moral principle or, occasionally, dramatize and perform a narrative from
scripture. In 1915, one teacher explained the rationale behind the use of drama, saying that “The
children’s favorite stories are those they have dramatized . . . Through acting, feeling has been
aroused and with it a desire to know more about the subject. The timid and disinterested ones
have learned to do what they thought they could not do or cared not to do. Acting has led the
children to appreciate the situation better and to feel the personality of the people who are
meeting the situation.” Drama thus accomplished two things: for all the students, it heightened
interest and feeling for the lessons they were studying. But it also changed character, investing
those students which traditional lessons might fail with the same passion which other students
might have.

Many of the dramatic performances put on at the Union School took place during regular
class time, and were often simple morality tales. For instance, in 1928, the sixth and seventh
graders wrote and put on a play called “Coal, Men, and Money,” responding to the visit of a Mr.
Glovak, a miner’s union leader from Pennsylvania, to the school. When a poor father is forced

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98 “Junior High School Boys Teacher Report, 1923-4,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union
School of Religion, box 8, folder 6.5. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
99 “Grade V Teachers Report, 1914-15,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion,
box 4, folder 3.7. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
to break a strike at a mine and work as a scab in order to support his family, he is killed because of inadequate safety measures; the leader of the union then confronts the mine owner and declares the moral of the tale: “If the people that own this mine only had our job, and could see what we see, things might change.” The students decorated the hall with black crepe paper to simulate a mine – the same hall on the fifth floor which later served as a German forest in a Christmas play called “The Christ Candle,” put on during the Christmas service in 1927.100

The use of drama in religious education derived from the progressive education movement, which had begun experimenting with it in the first decade of the twentieth century. Over the next two decades it erupted in popularity; one minister reported in 1924 that “The development of interest in Religious Drama in this period of ten years is little short of marvelous.”101 And this experimentation reflected a broader concern with the pedagogical possibilities with the theater in American society generally, as the stage became increasingly popular in cities like New York, and educators and other scholars began considering the formative possibilities that acting might have both upon the actors and the audience. As one observer of the New York stage noted, “In discussing the theatre and its morals, it is well to think how many places of amusement we have in the United States . . . if the balance drop in favor of good influence, what a mighty force there is at work for the uplift of mankind.”102 For these reformers, the stage’s ability to imprint the bodies of actors with moral ideals was key. In New York City, particularly, reformers, evangelicals, and others who experimented and theorized about the power of drama were rampant; for instance, in 1903, the progressive reformer Alice

100 Both plays are in Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 14, folder 9.2 and 9.12, respectively. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
Herts established the Children’s Educational Theatre in the Lower East Side to, as she put it, “adopt the highest ideals of life and conduct embodied in the form of plays.”

Coe supported drama for the same reasons as other progressive educators: it intimately linked education of the body and education of the mind; it simulated experiences of daily life which students might not otherwise encounter, or reframed experiences they did have in ways which presented ideal solutions. A play entitled “The Lost Coin,” which one class put on in 1926 was a thinly veiled replication of an actual experience of a girl named Agnes in the class who lost her watch and accused classmates of stealing it, while a play called “A New York Family,” was “a set of positive rules for Sunday were formulated an a four act drama.” In such cases, drama could evoke and reinforce the habits and emotions which the teachers desired their students to cultivate. But for Coe, the religious educator, drama was more than this; it was to him like worship, a sacred ritual which could also evoke the spiritual through regularized action. Plays based on scripture were particularly relevant to that point.

When the Union School was just beginning to use drama, Coe told a journalist that “Few teachers can manage successfully the dramatization of Old Testament stories; unusual insight and care are needed if this method is to be really helpful.” While the Union School did in fact occasionally produce plays based upon scripture, the care with which Coe approached them indicated the respect Coe had for these narratives, and the subtlety necessary to draw out their power. And following the Union School’s lead, many other churches in the city began implementing drama based on scripture as a means of evangelizing children and adults. In the

104 “The Lost Coin,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 14, folder 9.1. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary; “Grade IV – Teachers Reports, 1914-15,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 8, folder 6.1. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
early 1920s, the Sunday school of the Brick Presbyterian Church and its affiliated congregations reported that “The work of children in dramatizing Bible stories is succeeded beyond our expectations. The children live in these old characters and scenes, and they will never forget them.” These dramas, claimed the Children’s Department, inspired spiritual development, and hence, fostered Christian conversion by cultivating the natural, if latent, spiritual capacities of children, just as the Union School’s dramas often sought to foster particular moral impulses; as one teacher said, “We have used the make believe ability of little children in dramatizing situations that demand spiritual responses.”

The Brick Church emphasized the power of such dramas to the extent that they supplanted the preaching of the Word in the pulpit – or, perhaps, they were understood to be the equivalent of preaching, fulfilling through their ability to influence the holistic spiritual experience, both body and soul, of their participants, the religious efficacy the Word had once held. As the minister reported, “They have done so splendidly that some of their plays have been given as part of our regular church services – so that the Scripture lesson has been acted rather than read. One anniversary Sunday, in October, a pageant prepared by Miss Knowles, one of our workers, was given in church. It was entitled “The Message of the Angel to Christ Church.” That December, in the Christmas service, the scripture reading was again “acted rather than read.”

In the summer of 1921, the Vacation Bible School Brick sponsored devoted half an hour a day to dramatizations of scripture, what one teacher called “expressional work.”

A few years later, in the Riverside Church of Harry Emerson Fosdick, an organization called the “Riverside Guild,” again drawing upon the religious power of drama in a slightly

108 Brick Church Record 9.8 (May 1921) 21.
different capacity: emphasizing its ability to draw into the orbit of the church a diverse collection of New Yorkers. By 1935, the Guild had nearly 400 members, about half that of the church itself, though many Guild members were not members of the Church. The Guild regularly put on dramatic presentations, from Shakespeare to scriptural adaptations, both outside the regular meetings of the church and occasionally within it. According to Fosdick, the Guild was “an avenue to Church affiliation.” It was particularly useful to this end, because, as Fosdick claimed, “Diverse temperaments choose various pathways to the presence of God,” and in the Guild, “everybody participates.” The notion of inclusive participation in a variety of roles, from acting to directing to writing to set design, was particularly important to Fosdick, and he argued that insofar as these activities guided people of different temperaments and spiritual gifts to spiritual experience, they could be counted as worship: We can at least hope that each service has been of deep significance to some. Insofar as we are true to our purpose, not only the Sunday evening service but all activities of the Guild are a part of our enterprise of daily worship.”109

While Fosdick continued to emphasize drama’s ability to foster spiritual experience, the Guild began also to emphasize the importance of inclusivity, of acknowledging and celebrating diversity; this ran deeply counter to earlier evangelical assumptions about the relationship between the faith and the city, but would, the Guild’s members had come to believe, only aid the church’s success in New York City. The Riverside Church opened in 1929, but the impulse had emerged even earlier in the Union School. Coe had left the Union School for Columbia Teachers’ College in 1922, and by the late 1920s, a new generation of leaders was in charge: led by Spear Knebal, a teacher of young men, who became the dominant figure in the student worship services, and Sophie Fahs, who had earned degrees at Union under Coe’s instruction and became principal of the Union School in 1928. In 1925, Fahs expressed irritation at the

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structure of services that Coe and Hartshorne had left her, saying that “we have allowed ourselves to be held by the grip of a good tradition in the worship services to a degree that we have not been held in any other feature of the school.” That is, Fahs was impatient at the School’s dedication to traditional aspects of Protestant worship – particularly, “the stories told in the worship services and the hymns sung.” She emphasized that “it seems positively wrong for us to play with unreality in the worship services for our little children,” stating that instead of focus on abstract “ideas and principles,” services should “stimulate worthy thinking on the concrete moral problems of life.”

Fahs’s arguments had a powerful effect on the later years of the Union School. Its traditional methods – emphasis upon active engagement with lessons, connecting the principles of Protestantism to the experiences of students, and so on – remained, but Fahs shifted the aims of the school. While Coe believed that traditional Protestant devotional methods could coincide with the methods of progressive education to produce Christian students, Fahs began to move away from the distinctively Christian elements of the school. Its ties with the progressive education movement grew stronger, and while Coe had always insisted that to create Christians would be to create virtuous citizens, for Fahs, training students for active participation in a culturally and economically diverse society rose to first priority.

For instance, increasingly in worship services hymns were supplemented with secular music and poetry which also reinforced the themes of the lesson. Coe had argued that music was particularly important in the Christian life, and he actively criticized hymns which he believed promoted introspection over activity; in 1903 he blasted a Methodist hymnal in which “only one in ten of the hymns about Christ have to do with his life and character . . . why, then, are his

passive virtues the only ones to be noticed?” Coe disdained popular evangelical hymns which emphasized sentiment and emotion; as he said, in too many, “The battle of faith is looked at solely from the standpoint of the fighter's feelings and not a word is breathed about the aims which Christian warfare seeks to accomplish.”

Thus, the Book of Worship for the Union School emphasized music that called for action: titles like “Awake, Christians” and “O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee,” abounded.

But in the late 1920s, other songs began to appear in the Union School’s services. In January, 1928, for instance, the closing hymn was “When thy Heart With Joy O'erflowing,” not in the Book of Worship, but by Theodore Williams, a minister who supported the social gospel, and which contained lyrics such as “When the harvest sheaves are gathered . . . /To thy God and to thy brother/Give the more.”

Spear Knebal, the teacher conducting the service, announced in his talk that the hymn reflected “the idea that Jesus had,” namely, that “everybody belongs to one family.” He then discussed a coal miner’s strike, and the visit that one “Mr. Glovak,” a miner’s union official from Pennsylvania, paid to the Union School. “It is a very puzzling situation. There are some things that are wrong with it,” Knebal said. “The main trouble, I think, is that some people are selfish.” The service then closed with “The Common Wealth of Love,” a song Knebal credited as an anthem of the International Workers of the World, a radical labor organization, of whom Knebal said, “These men, like Jesus, are thinking of a time when all of us will be brothers and live together.”

Other services featured, instead of hymns, poetry, like Gamaliel Bradford’s “The South Wind is Driving,” a poem that celebrated the beauty of
spring, which was intermixed with Isaiah 49 as a call and response reading at the Easter service of 1928. At the Thanksgiving 1927 service, the hymn was a “Zuni Indian Sunrise Call” which contained the lines “Wake ye, arise, ever watchful be / Mother Life-God she is calling thee.”

By the late 1920s, in short, particularly Christian referents, like scripture or evangelical hymns, had become one source among many for the moral cultivation of the souls of the Union School’s students.

A similar trend was evident in the talks at the services. Fahs stated outright that “religion and morals call for a creative striving and searching. Such a position prevents our going to the Bible or to any historical material to find an authoritative guide.” Rather, Fahs saw the “Bible as once source book among others containing stories of very real human experiences with some of these very vital problems.” Earlier talks had followed this principle, drawing from literary sources as well as scripture, combining stories from Tolstoy or the lives of American presidents with particular Biblical passages to make a point. But by the late 1920s, these stories increasingly celebrated religious and ethnic diversity. In 1923 and 1924, for instance, the Elementary Division featured a sermon series entitled “Heroes of Other Lands.” The principal, Goodwin Watson, explained that “This series of stories was told throughout the fall of 1923 with emphasis laid on the admirable acts of the hero. The fact that the hero was Japanese or German or Chinese or Russian or Negro was quite incidental.” These services concluded with a set prayer, which began “Dear Father of All the Nations, we like all thy other children, Indians and Negroes, and Japanese and Germans and Chinese and French and so many

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114 “Easter Services, Union School of Religion,” and “Thanksgiving Worship Service,” both in Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 14, folder 9.12. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
other countries we don’t know much about – we all want to call thee our Father. Help us not ever
to think that we are wiser or better than the others of Thy children.”\textsuperscript{116} One such talk
particularly emphasized the value of religious diversity and the importance of moral virtue rather
than particular theological beliefs; it instructed the students that the Old Testament figures
“Amos and Micah were prophets because they dared to tell people what they believed to be true
and the right way of living. So Mencius was a Chinese prophet.”\textsuperscript{117}

At the same time, the Union School’s classes began to stress similar convictions. They
made the subtle shift from Coe’s Christian-centric emphasis upon virtue and moral training to a
largely ethical focus with distinct emphasis upon the importance of embracing diversity for
successful life in the city. Watson explained that, beginning in 1923 and 1924, “one definitely
observed consequence was the bringing into the classroom study of more material about other
races and peoples. The individuals seemed to be well aware that international brotherhood is the
ideal of the school.”\textsuperscript{118} For instance, that very year, the ninth grade girl’s class “seemed most
interested in studying the facts and fancies of early religion . . . we talked of the origin of a belief
in God and the gradual development of a social good.” The class spent time studying Greek
mythology and Asian religions, particularly Buddhism, before, as the teacher put it “we turned
our attention to Christianity.”\textsuperscript{119} In 1929, the teacher Mildred Morgan took her students to visit
various houses of worship in the city, and noted the beneficial effects that this experience had on
the young women of the school: “There were many types of experiences participated in by the
different groups. Some of the older groups learned of other forms of worship such as the

\textsuperscript{116} “Heroes of Other Lands,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 9,
folder 6.13. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
\textsuperscript{117} “The Brave Prophet,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 9, folder
6.13. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
\textsuperscript{118} “Annual Report, 1923-4,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 8,
folder 6.9. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
\textsuperscript{119} “Junior High School: Girls,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 8,
folder 6.5. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
Mohammadan call to prayer and the different Jewish forms of worship, thereby giving them an insight into how different people worship . . . this experience had almost the effect of a revival on the school – without the evils of a revival. It did integrate the emotional energies of the school as a whole.”

All of this bemused some of the parents of these children. Several years before Spear Knebal’s Easter service the Union School was receiving inquiries from families confused about the odd directions of this Sunday school. Coe and his successors did a great deal to attempt to cultivate families; they saw unchurched parents as potential converts, and above all else feared what Fahs called “a religious education that is Sabbath only.” She insisted that “If religion is going to enter by a Sunday compartment, it is of extreme importance that the atmosphere of that compartment circulate freely through all the other compartments.” To that end, in addition to Coe’s Parents Night (at which he lectured about prayer, among other topics), he organized a Parent’s Committee, responsible for maintaining warm relationships with the parents of the school’s students. He sent a questionnaire home with his students entitled “Questions for Mothers Regarding Early Religious Experience and Education of their Children,” including inquires about story time, a checklist of emotions which the child expressed (including “beauty, love, joy, wonder, and confidence”), and inquiring in what context the child expressed curiosity about “thoughtful and speculative questions.”

Coe and Hartshorne had begun the practice of sending reports and invitations to performances, socials, and the like home with students as

122 “Questions for Mothers Regarding Early Religious Experience and Education of their Children,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 18, folder 11.7. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
All of these activities were targeted at gathering data about how well the children were integrating their lessons into their day to day lives, as well as recruiting parents to encourage them to do so.

But still, parents were sometimes dissatisfied with the methods of the school. In 1921, Hartshorne had to compose an open letter to parents who believed that “discipline in the Union School of Religion should be stiffened up;” Hartshorne tried to explain the “difficulties that go along with the change to ‘free methods’ in both the home and the school, particularly where such methods are not fully understood.” More particularly, the parents worried about the version of religion their children were receiving. In 1924, several students and their families complained about changes in the chapel worship; as the assistant principal reported, students “wanted the aesthetic side of worship emphasized; they wanted beautiful music and soothing stories. When an attempt was made to point out our responsibility for the suffering of boys and girls in central Europe and for the injustices of our industrial system, they rebelled.” The same year, a Mrs. Leonard, representative of the Parent’s Committee, reported at the staff meeting that “the parents would like to know how much Bible is being taught in the school.” The staff committee then deliberated about “how much the parents should be consulted on the curriculum of the school,” given that they “would like to carry into weekday life what is being taught.”

These, then, were signs that the Union School was pressing the boundaries of the liberal evangelicalism that largely dominated Union Seminary; while evangelicals like Coffin and

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124 Hartshorne to Parents, 30 October 1921, Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 4, folder 3.15. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
125 “Assistant Principal’s Report, May 1924,” Union Theological Seminary Records, Series 19, Union School of Religion, box 8, folder 6.10. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
Fosdick emphasized still the importance of spiritual experience and conversion, the Union School moved toward an emphasis upon social justice. On April 8, 1928, Spear Knebal led the combined Union School in Easter services. In lieu of a scripture reading, Knebal told “The Story of the Attic Festival of the Springtime,” a Greek myth about Attis, a demigod who became a tree instead of dying. Knebal asked, “What was the wish hidden in the story they told about Attis? Perhaps some of you have guessed already. These people wished that they might go on living, even as their bodies died.” After a call and response reading which mixed chapters from Isaiah with the poetry of Gamaliel Bradford and the hymn “Lo, The Earth is Risen Again,” Knebal’s sermon asked “what happens after we die? There are several places where we can look for our answer. First let us see what the scientists have to tell us.” He then discussed the recycling of molecules from dead bodies, the water cycle and death and rebirth of plants, and finally, read Luke 23, which describes the crucifixion, but not the resurrection, of Jesus. In closing, Knebal offered a rather lukewarm commentary on the question of whether “we will go on living after we die.” He said, “Many, many people believe that we will, just as they believe that Jesus went on living. At any rate we do not need to be afraid for we can be sure that in some way we will be taken care of.”

A year later, the Union School was closed.

Henry Sloane Coffin, president of Union for less than a year, moved quickly; he stormed from the service in outrage, sending letters to his subordinates criticizing the insufficient Christianity of the Union School, and after an investigation convinced him that that the school’s philosophy had fundamentally shifted since Coe’s departure five years earlier, he ordered it closed.

Nevertheless, the history of the Union School revealed that the dangers Coffin saw in the Union School were to some extent self-generated by the paradoxes of liberal evangelicalism.

127 “Easter Services, Union School of Religion, April 8, 1928.”
128 For a discussion, see Parker, “Embers of the Fire of Progressivism,” 605-606.
itself. For its advocates, the basic Christocentrism of liberal evangelicalism was essential; as Coffin himself claimed, “We are liberals on behalf of our evangelicalism.”¹²⁹ That is, the methods of liberal piety, its efforts to embody the power of the Word of God in particular behaviors and material, were, they believed, necessary to preserve the ends of evangelicalism itself: conversion and spiritual experience. But that flattening of the Word made possible the Union School’s eventual willingness to number scripture itself as one source of religion among many, as Knebal felt no compunction against substituting poetry for the New Testament; liberalism’s pursuit of the converting power of God in sacramentalized behavior particularly targeted at the challenges of the city made possible Knebal’s use of the stuff of Protestant worship to, ultimately, merely recognize and celebrate similar underlying themes across cultures, rather than, as Coffin had expected, to exalt the particularity of Jesus Christ. Coffin’s reaction demonstrated his defensiveness of what he believed to be the core of evangelicalism, but both the Union School and the rise of a particularly strident form of evangelical piety in the form of Billy Sunday placed he and other liberal evangelicals on the defensive.

Chapter 9

John Roach Straton and the Fundamentalist Style

On October 14, 1927, John Roach Straton, pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church on 57th Street, a preacher known to his detractors as “the fundamentalist Pope,” an ardent crusader against the sins of the city, took the witness stand in the West Side Court of New York City. As part of his ongoing battle against the vices of Manhattan he had brought suit against the American Society for the Advancement of Atheism for harassing his congregation with what Straton called “annoying communications” and “vile literature” – primarily flyers, mailers, and other such ephemera - about “religion, birth control, evolution, and other various moral questions.” After a number of delays, a preliminary hearing was finally being held, and Straton was eager to testify.¹

A vigorous and athletic fifty-two year old, lean and six feet tall, with an ascetic cast and a long face which often inspired confusion with Woodrow Wilson, Straton strode to the witness box.² He took the stand with a Bible in hand, and faced the defense attorney, Leonard Snitkin. Snitkin attempted to paint the Baptist as a grim hypocrite, accusing Straton’s own sermons denouncing the evils of New York of lacking “delicacy.” Straton brushed off these protests, declaring that the Apostle Paul was “much more outspoken,” in the Epistle to the Romans. In the modern age as in Paul’s, Straton declared, sin must be denounced to its face. The president of the ASAA, a man named Charles Smith, on the other hand, was merely a “discredited

²William R. de Plata, Tell it from Calvary (New York: Calvary Baptist Church, 1997) 51-2.
minister,” a craven tool of the corrupting forces of the age. Eyeing Smith from the witness stand, Straton declared, “I will let no man find fault with me or any other prophet of God.”

“Do you really consider yourself a prophet of God?” asked Snitkin.

“Yes,” said Straton, simply.  

What precisely was Straton claiming? That he bore the Bible to the pulpit was significant; like Billy Sunday, for John Roach Straton it was the responsibility of the preacher to confront the city with the Word. And being a prophet was to be, in all the ways that mattered, a particular variety of preacher. The tradition of Biblical prophecy summoned up the image of the traditional Word spoken by Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, the fearless preacher defying a corrupted age. The decline of the classic preached sermon in favor of other means of delivering the Word among Protestant liberals did not go unnoticed by conservatives. Like Billy Sunday, Straton believed that the verbal and spoken Word must remain central to the worship of God if the work of evangelical salvation was to go forward, and he understood his chief role not merely to be a defender of doctrine, but a verbal advocate for it. To Straton and his peers, the social service of a Rainsford, the historicizing of scripture of a Fosdick, the aesthetics of van Dyke, were all attempts to redefine God’s ability to intervene in the world, and were of necessity destroying the means ordained for him to do so.

By the 1920s, echoing the worries of a Charles Jefferson or the concerns of Harry Emerson Fosdick, evangelical preaching faced criticism both from liberal evangelicals and conservatives. Frederick Lynch, editor of the Presbyterian, observed that “preaching is being very much discussed just at this time and is under considerable fire even by the preachers themselves.” He echoed Fosdick’s criticisms, wondering that if the twin challenges of vagueness

and irrelevancy that plagued many liberal preachers were not even “driving people from the church.” However, the solutions that many liberal evangelicals offered of expanded definitions of preaching were not ideal either. Lynch worried that many preachers were busily making themselves irrelevant, not only because they preached in archaic ways, but also because they were minimizing preaching in services. He maintained that neither of these solutions was satisfactory, for they raised “the question of what the Protestant Church has got to offer the people if the pulpit be taken out or preaching even minimized.” To solve the problem, Lynch advocated a revival of the extemporaneous sermon that James Alexander, once pastor at Brick, had championed.\(^4\)

Across the spectrum from Lynch’s endorsement of a renewed sermon, some non-evangelical critics were calling from the elimination of the sermon entirely. In 1920, New York clergymen gathered for a spirited exchange over reports that the Anglican communion might recommend the abandonment of the sermon. The Reformed minister James MacLeod (over strenuous protests from Jefferson), mused that “there are far too many” sermons preached, and recommended that ministers cut back on the time their services devoted to it.\(^5\) By the next decade, Frederick Fleming, rector of New York’s Trinity Church, recommended that the Protestant churches abandon preaching entirely, asking “Why cannot a Christian be permitted to go to church to worship his God without always being assaulted by a barrage from the pulpit?”\(^6\) Rather, Fleming argued, churches should provide opportunities for quiet, contemplative worship based not on instruction but the transcendence of ritual and impressiveness of art. Fleming, an Episcopalian, offered a conception of worship alien to evangelicals who emphasized conversion

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\(^4\) Frederick Lynch, “Extemporaneous Preaching,” *Presbyterian* 114:3 (14 January 1923) 77-78; for Alexander, see *Thoughts on Preaching*, 149-150.


and sanctification, something closer to meditation upon the divine. The next decade, the famed publicist and Congregationalist biographer of Jesus, Bruce Barton, published an article entitled “Must We Have Sermons?” arguing that the sermon’s time had passed; that in early Protestantism people needed the instruction and teaching that sermons offered, but that twentieth century people wanted “something else . . . not logic, not argument – not sermons.” Old notions that preaching should instruct a congregation had become redundant, he was convinced; Christians of his day rather wanted religion to be beautiful and pleasurable, a comforting escape from the routine of everyday life. Barton’s something else was beauty, ritual, art, the aesthetics that Merrill advocated for their affective power entirely replacing the transformative power of the Word that the Brick Church pastor hoped to preserve through it.

Against this pressure from both sides, liberal evangelicals like Coffin or Merrill or Fosdick, felt pressure to stress their evangelical credentials. Coffin argued that “We are liberals on behalf of our evangelicalism,” that he and his allies cultivated new ways of presenting the Gospel “for the Gospel’s sake.” They accepted “without reserve the methods of ascertaining and imparting religious truth which are employed in all other departments of human knowledge.” This meant that contra Jefferson and Lynch, new strategies of disseminating the Word could be discovered, and prove as useful as those of the past. The argument was one over method rather than substance.

Merrill insisted that modern conditions demanded that the preacher “must cheerfully and courageously defend his right and duty to state the Gospel in terms adapted to the modern mind.”

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This meant not only through language, for Merrill clucked his tongue over ““The Protestant propensity to deify talk.” He maintained also that “vigorous thoughtful, passionate preaching [should be] set in a colorful, heart-moving worship;” for the best presentation of the Gospel was “a union of the two elements.” And while he celebrated the Noon Day meetings, he also told his congregation, “There is one subject so vital and immediate in its importance that I do not want to speak of anything else . . . That is our evangelistic work.” He exhorted them to evangelize their friends and neighbors, asking “Will you do some of that personal work yourself?” He complained to Straton that “I am not by any means a representative Modernist. As you use that term I imagine I am not a Modernist as all.” Neither Straton nor his debate partner, the Unitarian Charles Potter, Merrill claimed, “could by any possibility represent the great body of evangelical liberals (to which I and most of the people in my church belong) for they hold loyally to the essential doctrines of the evangelical faith.”

Thus, when John Roach Straton claimed for himself the title of God’s prophet and dismissed his adversary Charles Smith as a discredited minister, it was more than simple self-aggrandizement. Instead, it was a skirmish in an ongoing struggle over the nature of preaching, and hence the nature of grace, that had been raging for half a century. The Baptist had arrived in New York City in 1918 after a lifetime spent mostly in the South – Georgia, Maryland, and most recently Virginia. He looked with hard eye at the aesthetic impulses overtaking pulpits at the Brick Church and elsewhere; in the same year that attendance at the Noon Day Services was peaking he warned that there was “paganism . . . on our altar rails, and on our preachers, and on

our choirs.” He spurned gaudiness in the pulpit, refusing to wear the clerical robes most preachers in the city did; he described the sermon which converted him as “old-fashioned.” Like many other conservative Protestants, Straton was convinced that the extravagancies of the liberal pulpit were the flawed application of flawed theology; the two mistakes were mutually reinforcing and inseparable. His predecessor in the Calvary pulpit, Robert MacArthur, had worried about the “impotency” of contemporary preaching that deemphasized the verbal sermon; modern Christians, he said, had forgotten that “the true minister is not a performer of ecclesiastical rites. He is a preacher of great spiritual truths.”

Straton concurred; when proclaiming the Word simply and verbally slipped from priority, he said, “The result of this rationalism in the pulpit has been the preaching of a thousand foolish fads instead of the glorious gospel of the son of God. The leaders of many modern churches have substituted enthusiasm in behalf of social betterment for the salvation of souls.” This harmed not only preaching, but Christianity itself; “worship increasingly becomes cheap and tawdry,” drifting toward a whole host of other corruptions: “dead ecclesiasticism takes the place of live evangelism; “reform” replaces regeneration, “social service” is substituted from salvation, humanitarianism supplants the worship of God, a priest takes the place of the prophet.”

The last word reveals Straton’s convictions about nature of the preacher, and the theological depth which he applied to Billy Sunday’s less intellectual efforts at the preservation of the spoken word. Sunday attracted particular attention in the pulpit; for Straton, however, the intensification of the preached word was in the service of a particular theological tradition. “I

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have no doubt as to my own infallibility in matters of faith,” Straton told the journalist Charles Driscoll. “I am a prophet. I bear a great burden for the world.”

He used the word frequently to describe himself, and so did others. After his death, the evangelist John Ham wrote to his widow that her late husband “possessed something of the flame of Elijah, and the power to draw an indictment like unto Isaiah, and the courage of a John the Baptist.”

The gift of the Word that Straton the preacher bore into his particular time and place, a New York City infested by sin and modernism, was that of prophecy, the preached Word of God directed particularly at a fallen society; a message which inevitably separated the prophet from society, making him cast out and afflicted, but also a message which offered the only hope of redemption. New York needed “a revival of the right kind of preaching,” Straton said, “that will give God’s message rather than man’s guesses.”

The useful paradigm was not Henry Ward Beecher, but Isaiah; not Horace Bushnell, but Jeremiah. The Word demanded transformation of culture, not fulfillment through it. As the conservative Baptist journal *The Watchman* asked, “What is Gospel preaching?” The answer, a call to believe in Jesus Christ, called the hearer to “a complete change in all his modes of life and habits of thought,” a renunciation of the world as it was. “Preachers should be prophets,” the journal declared. Straton concurred. “The time is ripe for fearless and outspoken utterances concerning all the works of the devil and all other foes of our blessed Master,” he wrote to a friend. “Yes, we surely need the voice of the prophet.”

He had nothing but contempt for “preachers who stand in their pulpit from Sunday to Sunday and satisfy themselves with . . . rhetorical bouquets while the very fires of hell are raging right at

18 John Ham to Georgia Straton, 31 October 1929, John Roach Straton Papers, box 1a, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta.
19 John Roach Straton, “The Sort of Religious Revival that is Needed Today.”
20 For a typology useful here, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951)
22 John Roach Straton to Don Shelton, January 1923. John Roach Straton Papers, box 15, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta.
them in the slums, the palaces, and the amusement centers."\textsuperscript{23} The social conditions that inspired prophecy demanded that evangelism stress the melancholy task of conviction and assailing sin, the first step toward salvation, and Straton was entirely willing to absorb the punishment he expected would be doled out in return.

But despite everything Straton’s world was not the Sinai or Jerusalem but the same New York City Fosdick and Merrill inhabited, and the changes which drove their reforms – of theology, technology, communication – affected him as well. Straton is best known to historians as the crusading moralist of Jazz Age New York City, the pinched Puritan who labeled his city the “modern Babylon”, and who sparred with the Unitarian minister Charles Potter over Biblical inerrancy, evolution, and creation.\textsuperscript{24} Particularly in the early years of his pastorate, he spent vast amounts of energy and time lambasting the city’s pleasures, writing tracts assaulting the dance halls, stoking public debates over the virtues of the theatre, and denouncing the city’s acceptance of heresies like evolution and alcohol.

But this image of the fundamentalist as a prude or a humorless crusader, which George Marsden and other historians have described with greater scholarly rigor as an evangelical dedicated to a stern and righteous crusade against perceived sin – derives not merely from sentiment or attitude, but rather, in Straton’s case, from his understanding of his own role as a vessel of the preached Word. Though he undoubtedly found the licentiousness he saw in the city deeply disturbing and mounted crusades to thwart it, to characterize Straton and his followers as merely prudes is to underestimate the depth and complexity of their religious self-understanding; to see in him only the pendant who took on heretics is to limit his theological

\textsuperscript{23} Cited in de Plata, \textit{Tell it from Calvary}, 56.
self-understanding. Straton was first a minister. He sought not merely to save the morality of New York but its Christianity as well, to preserve the power of the pulpit to save against competitors he believed sought to damn. Straton’s son called his father “a prophet of social righteousness” like the reformers of the social gospel movement, but unlike thinkers like Walter Rauschenbusch, Straton believed that all evil was fundamentally personal, rooted in the individual depravity only conversion could eliminate. Therefore, social righteousness had to come through the salvation of individuals, “the leaven of individual regeneration” penetrating “the entire social lump,” who heard their sins denounced in a way powerful enough to jar them.25 His work revealed that he did not stand in opposition to social reform, but he made clear in his inaugural sermon to Calvary Baptist that “the true aim of social service is to open the way for spiritual service. Mere reform apart from Christ cannot permanently heal the sores of our society.”26 Like Moody before him, Straton believed that the ills of the city could only be cured through the Word preached. But in a New York City drowning in secular spectacle, what sort of preaching could be powerful enough?

Given all this, that Straton invoked the Apostle Paul as a model in the city court no longer seems surprising. He lived in a world in which the clear and supernatural boundaries of the Bible were self evidently real; prophecy existed, and preaching really did have holy power. To seek simply ethical motivations for his behavior is to misunderstand him. Approaching Straton’s war on the New York theatres from this perspective reveals not only moral concern, but a

26 John Roach Straton, “Building the Temple: God’s Call to His Church” (New York: Calvary Baptist Church, 1918).
conviction that the stage had become a metaphysical opponent of the pulpit and the Word, a corrupted mirror image that drowned out God’s message and subverted the performative power that had once been the minister’s domain. This struck Straton as particularly dangerous. John Calvert, who chaired the committee that brought Straton to the Calvary pulpit in 1918, informed the minister that he was called because of “the conviction of our people that Calvary Church should be an evangelistic center.”

Straton was first an evangelist, and his moral crusades resonate with meaning when seen in that light.

His first target was the New York theatre. Several historians have argued that churches at the turn of the century began to adopt theatrical elements – stadium seating and stages, dramatic speaking styles – simply in an attempt to compete with the burgeoning, and presumably secular, leisure industry. But the story is more complicated than that. Historically, theatre had held an uneasy relationship with Christianity, due in part to many Christians’ suspicions that, as St. Augustine said of his own sinful past, that “in those days, in the theatre, I rejoiced with lovers wickedly enjoying each other, imaginary though the situation was on stage.” Following Augustine, many Christians through two millennia suspected the theatre of spreading vice, causing audiences to enjoy sin, and thereby legitimating it. But this fear was linked to an even
deeper suspicion of the theatre, the very one which the Union School recognized: that theatre, in some sense, was an imitation – or, depending on one’s vantage point, a grotesque parody – of reality. For Christians like Straton, this was liturgically offensive, because if viewed in this light the theatre seemed an uncomfortably close parallel of the proper organization of Christian worship, which was, of course, itself a ritual reenactment of the life and death of Jesus. Like many other evangelicals, Straton believed that this parallel was no mistake; it was because both the theatre and the pulpit sprang from the same well. He readily acknowledged that “I have been a student and devotee of the dramatic art all my life,” and indeed, he was known and celebrated for his theatrical pulpit presence, his resonant voice, his calculated aspect and gesture.\footnote{John Roach Straton, \textit{Church Versus Stage} (New York: Calvary Baptist Church, 1920) 5; Hutter, \textit{Witch Doctor of Gotham}, 14-15 and Charles Driscoll, “A Voice Crying in the Wilderness,” 28 describe the precision and cadence of Straton’s sermon delivery.}

Many evangelicals in the early twentieth century insisted that theatre was historically derived from the Christian tradition. Straton stated that it “began under Christian auspices,” and had “Christian heredity.” Its forms and techniques were merely a variant on the functions of the pulpit, carrying the same transformative power. Much like good sermons, the theatre’s content should be steeped in “Biblical themes.” But, Straton complained, the theatre was corrupted by “the influences and ideals of the Greek playhouse, which had its origin in the degraded revels inspired by the God of wine.” Because of this true Christian “dramatic art has just about been destroyed;” the stage had given up on “its higher and nobler ideals” in favor of appeals to the “lower instincts of the race,” a particularly insidious choice given its ability to influence human psychology, emotions, and sentiment.\footnote{Robert MacArthur, Straton’s predecessor in the Calvary nineteenth century arguments, Abe Laufe, \textit{The Wicked Stage: a history of theatre censorship and harassment in the United States} (New York: Frederick W. Ungar, 1978) 20-25.}
pulpit, offered a similar, measured criticism, drawing on the same common historical genealogy of the theatre Straton himself had. McArthur argued that “Things not harmful in themselves in their right use may become harmful in their abuse.” Thus, while the theatre’s “radicals and inspirations are historically and were actually religious . . . Hard, hard it is indeed to hold the drama to this higher, nobler, and diviner ideal.” Contemporary theatre was particularly problematic; “We have theatres which are bad, bad only, and bad continually,” MacArthur proclaimed. But he remained more sanguine than his crusading successor. “The true attitude of the church to the theatre is transformative,” he said, optimistically, to “recognize the divine origin of this instinct and strive if possible to exalt it to its noblest possibilities.”

The power of the theatre to influence human sentiments directly intersected with Straton’s beliefs about the spread of Christianity. He insisted that “it is by the emotions that men grasp and comprehend the simple story of Christ. The brains and the mind are out of it.” This seems uncharacteristic and even somewhat hypocritical when set alongside Straton’s vituperative critiques of the stage; fundamentalists, after all, are supposed to have insisted upon precision of doctrine. But Straton’s emphasis upon cultivating emotion is a reminder that he was firmly in the evangelical tradition, and helps also to explain the pugnacity and vehemence with which he (and other fundamentalists) asserted their positions – they understood their social criticism as a type of sermon, and they desired to evoke emotional response. And Straton’s crusade against the theatre early in his pastorate did; when he published the collection of his writings on the subject, he noted that the letters would “give a setting” in the “reader’s mind” for the sermons on the influence overlay the pure religion of Christ with ritual, ceremony, and paganism. History of Dogma (1886-1889; London: Williams and Norgate, 1899). For other such claims, see Johnson and Savidge, Performing the Sacred, 25-31; Claudia Durst Johnson, Church and stage: the theatre as target of religious condemnation in nineteenth century America (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2008) 6-8.

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33 Robert MacArthur, “The True Attitude of the Church Toward the Theatre,” John Roach Straton Papers, box 14, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta.
34 Straton, Old Gospel, 297.
topic. He said candidly that his pieces were “very outspoken,” characterized by “plain speaking.” He dismissed accusations that he “made this attack in order to gain publicity for myself,” but at the same time insisted that the sermons should be “reproduced just as preached” in order to mirror as closely as possible the experience of the spoken word on the page. All of this, of course, was characteristic of the evangelical preaching tradition – its emotional, provocative style (combined with a reflexive insistence upon ‘plain speaking’ and self-deprecation) its insistence upon the primacy of the transformative power of the preached Word.

This sense that the theatre had fallen from its presumably high origins was particularly pervasive among conservative Protestants in the early twentieth century, and reflected a distinct difference with the theatrical innovators of the Union School. While conservatives like MacArthur and Straton believed that the theatre could theoretically be marshaled to the aims of conversion and Christianization that the Union School pursued, they insisted that they did not see such around them. John Jowett, the Victorian New York Congregationalist, summed up the feelings of many contemporaries when he said to his congregation, “You may go to the theatre, and while you might be entertained, you may never be reproved. And the reason is this: the theatre shows you life as it is and not life as it might be. It portrays realities and not idealities.”

This was a particularly incisive criticism; Jowett argued that the theatre used its pulpit to glorify what was around New Yorkers, rather than calling them to the higher life of conversion and conviction of sin which the preacher was supposed to teach.

Particularly in the New York of the 1910s and 1920s Jowett’s observation seemed exactly on point. Despite some efforts from the Union School and progressives to use theatre to inculcate morality, far more obvious to the casual observer was the commercial stage. The New

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York theatre had become an extraordinarily popular entertainment venue in the later years of the nineteenth century, as more stages opened, prices dropped and theatre managers began to target the growing middle class. In the early twentieth century, the New York stages, influenced by European playwrights like Henrik Ibsen, embraced a more naturalistic genre. These plays, such as the sexually frank *Sappho* and the venereal disease melodrama *Damaged Goods* depicted the contemporary social order, as one historian put it, as “governed by passion and greed;” some used salty language, depicted adultery, fornication, and other adult situations, and offered a generally bleak vision of humanity in the early twentieth century city. And atop all of this, the years of and immediately following the First World War saw a massive upswing in the popularity of burlesque shows in the city; theatre of another type. Many New Yorkers responded with horror; in 1921 a law was passed banning bare legs on the stage and a grand jury was called to investigate the morals of the city’s theatre industry, and several actors, directors, and playwrights were summoned and accused of promoting divorce, immorality, and free love. Citizens’ groups like the Committee of Fourteen, associating (perhaps correctly) the theatre with prostitution, lobbied for stricter laws in protection of public morals, and Straton believed that the stage had to take up the call.37

Thus, it seems unsurprising that in the early 1920s Straton, involved in the Committee’s work, himself began an assault on the New York stage from the Calvary pulpit.38 But his charges went beyond mere complaints about the corruption of morals and instead directly targeted the metaphysical challenge he understood the stage to pose. He said that “The modern theatre has

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38 Straton’s relationship with the Committee of Fourteen is discussed in de la Plata, *Tell it from Calvary*, 50.
so lowered its ideals that any advantage we might secure through it to the . . . aesthetic nature is more than counterbalanced by the harm it does to the spiritual nature.” That is, the theatre faced the same problem as the weakest of modern preaching; it could boast of only the arid contemporary relevance that Fosdick and Jefferson feared. It was unable to transcend the mundane, unable to tap into transformative divine power. And yet, ten years after Jowett’s relatively moderate castigations, Straton declared that the theatre did not suffer merely from the ineffectiveness of irrelevant preaching, nor was it redeemable; rather, it “puts itself into direct and deadly competition with the church.” In 1919, Straton wrote an open letter to the theatre promoter Daniel Frohman to explain his rejection of an invitation to a rally celebrating the efforts of the New York actors’ guild during World War I. After Straton received public criticism for his stand, he began speaking of the theatre as an alternative, infernal religion that nonetheless was capable of exerting the same sorts of influences over human beings as the true church, and that mocked it with alternative, destructive forms of worship. “Conditions have now reached the point,” he said, “where it is a real question as to whether the theatre or the true church of God is to mold and shape the moral ideals of the people.”

In his sermons from 1919, when he took on Frohman, through March 1922, when he participated in a highly publicized debate with the theatre producer William Brady, Straton waged war against New York’s stages, invoking any number of vivid examples to demonstrate his claim that “the theatre is the devil’s church,” a form of corrupt worship competing with God. He began internally, proposing a “fivefold resolution to certain immoral production of the central theatre” at the Baptist Ministers Conference of New York in December of 1919, but

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40 Straton, Church versus Stage, 47, 49.
41 Straton, Church versus Stage, 49.
after delivering the resolution personally to the mayor, he took his crusade public. He fumed at Frohman’s rally for the temerity to be held in a church, at a “Bal Blue” charity dance put on by Protestant leaders of the city, at a licentious play called “Aphrodite” put on by a theatre group who claimed to also run “a so-called moral and religious drama.” All of these things engaged in what Straton called “shuttlecocking of divine services;” they manipulated and mixed elements of true Christian worship with the profane, and hence proved particularly dangerous. “New York,” he said, “is substituting the degraded and silly theatre for the church of the living God.”

In November 1921 he even assailed the Fox Film Corporation for planning to make a “passion film” based on medieval mystery plays about Jesus’s life. The original mystery plays, Straton argued, were characterized by “piety and religious devotion and what they did they did as an act of worship.” On the other hand, Fox’s film was merely a “money making scheme,” and more importantly was produced by those “who have capitalized crime, marital infidelity and the sacrifice of female modesty.” Fox’s hands were not clean, he said; before such people could presume to engage in an act of worship they must repent.

All of these things degraded the power of the pulpit in various ways. Some events, like the “Bal Blue,” inspired church leaders to obligingly move service times to accommodate participants. Straton chided Brady for proposing that their debate be held on a Sunday for the same reason: “I am an old-fashioned believer in the observance of the Sabbath day as laid down in the Bible,” he wrote, “therefore the regular hours of worship at the church must be observed

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42 Records, Baptist Ministers Conference of New York and Vicinity, 1833-1926, 8 December 1919, 77. American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta, Georgia.
43 Straton, “Rationalism in the Pulpit” 16.
44 Straton, Church versus Stage, 49.
45 “Straton Refuses to Aid Passion Film,” New York Times (2 November 1921) 15. See also Church Versus Stage, 42, on repentance. For a defense of passion plays using terminology similar to Straton, see “Veronica’s Veil,” New York Evening Post (7 February 1920) 5, which credits the play with “a deep-rooted motive that is wholly and uncompromisingly spiritual,” and actors who live the life they preach, being selected as much for their natural piety as their ability to act.”
for the purposes of worship.”46 Others events, like a parade that ran shortly after the ball, “caricatured the Christian Sabbath.” All this was not merely blasphemous in and of itself, for because these things parodied and drew upon true religion, they corrupted the very purity of the preaching of the Word, in both form and content. In an odd mixture of amusement and horror, and with what he called “grim humor,” Straton retold the story of Frohman’s rally, held at the Church of the Heavenly Rest, an Episcopalian edifice at Fifth Avenue and 45th Street. While preachers were expected to recite scripted platitudes to the press outside the front doors, actors were given control of the pulpit. Such topsy-turvisness, however, did not go unnoticed by God; Straton noted with glee that upon a rabbi’s declaration that “We are all children of the God of Light!,” “every light in the building went out,” a clear indication of God’s “displeasure at any such mixing up of the corrupt stage of today with His pure and Holy Church.”47 The connection between ruined liturgy and false doctrine was quite clear; Straton claimed that he did not know of one church where “worldly things are indulged in that is not presided over by a radical preacher.”48

According to Straton, this sort of conflation was a new Satanic strategy; that of “substitution” or “absorption,” in which “the devil joined the church,” rather than Satan’s old tactics of outright persecution and elimination that persisted well into the nineteenth century.49 Satan used the stage, rallies like Frohman’s, and other such events to “lead the pulpit to proclaim the message of human betterment in the place of the message of the cross of Christ.”50

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46 John Roach Straton to William Brady, 25 May 1921, John Roach Straton Papers, box 14, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta.
49 Straton, Church versus Stage, 21-23. See also John Roach Straton “Satan’s Substitute for a Spiritual Church,” typescript of sermon preached 6 February 1921, John Roach Straton Papers, box 28, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta.
50 Straton, Church versus Stage, 29.
was particularly concerned with the appearance of Sunday performances in the city’s theatres, arguing that they erected a “pagan Sabbath” that mocked and ultimately wrecked attendance at true worship. As he said, bluntly, “The theatrical and movie proprietors are carrying on a systematic propaganda to break down the Sabbath.”51 He insisted that he did not “intend to fan racial prejudice,” but found it “significant” that many of New York’s theatre operators were Jews, who were “utterly alien to all Christian ideals,” and therefore saw only profit in destroying the Christian Sabbath. In the dark parodies of worship that Sunday shows were, the theatre violated the “ideals of holiness and separation from the world” that made the Church sacrosanct. The word Straton chose to characterize the theatre’s effects upon the church was “undermine.”52

In the early 1920s, Straton became convinced that the solution to the perversion of Protestant services that the theatre presented was that which Sunday had pioneered: and ever-more robust and vigorous presentation of God’s Word, an amplification of the verbal authority of the minister. Straton, like countless evangelicals before him, believed that preaching bore metaphysical strength. He told stories in his sermons of the power of preaching when it directly confronted and denounced sin; young member of Calvary who were “guided” by the Holy Spirit to abandon their regular prayer meeting and instead testify of Christ in a saloon, where they gained the conversion of a repentant drunk, a young unrepentant sinner who was brought to one of Straton’s own sermons by his father and stood up to confess Christ when the pastor had finished.53 What was particularly needed of preaching in New York City was its power to

52 Straton, Church versus Stage, 23. For Straton’s comments about Jews, see “Straton and Brady clash in church over stage morals,” New York Times (13 February 1922) 1, and “Calls the Stage the Church’s Enemy,” New York Times (9 January 1922) 22. Straton also, however, publicly denounced the Ku Klux Klan, denounced racial prejudice, and praised Catholicism; his statements on Judaism here should likely be read in terms of Straton’s concern for evangelical preaching. See Russell, Voices, 64-5, and “Straton Assails Klan in sermon as 1000 pack Calvary,” New York Sun (4 December 1922) 1.
53 Straton, The Old Gospel at the Heart of the Metropolis, 166.
convict sin. Straton refused to engage in the sort of watered down preaching he labeled “cologne water” sprinkled “upon the putrid iniquities of a rebellious race.”\textsuperscript{54} Rather, as the decade went on, he became increasingly convinced that to gain the attention of a distracted audience, his preaching must become ever more commanding.

But while Sunday, an ad hoc performer, seemed to proceed by instinct, Straton methodically plotted the theory behind his proclamations; though they seemed firebrands, they were actually calculated. In January of 1920, just as Straton’s confrontation with the New York stage was beginning to escalate, he complained about preachers who used “the pulpit to . . . discuss the silly fads and isms of the day,” declaring that such pursuit of popular culture in the pulpits of New York was “conclusive proof that many churches are just about dead.” Rather, he mused, “New York needs sensational preaching . . . what the human race needs today, more than anything else, is a revival of the right sort of preaching.”\textsuperscript{55} The next year he announced that the challenges of New York required “a preaching service every night.”\textsuperscript{56} By then he was ready to make a spectacle, for early in 1922, he sent an open letter to the \textit{New York Times} asserting that “the real preacher must be a sensationalist,” and denouncing those even in his own church who found him to be too much. “If the dull, dead routine is broken by a blast of real truth,” he wrote, “some timid souls are ready to flee for cover.” But “this is no time for pulpit pussyfooting,” he was sure. Prophetic, evangelical preaching rightly done was disturbing, because “real religion is the most revolutionary thing on earth.” Straton identified his efforts with the Christ who cleansed the temple of moneychangers with a whip; it was “the same hand” he said, that “lashed

\textsuperscript{55} “Dr Straton on News,” \textit{New York Times} (12 January 1920) 15. Straton was not the only fundamentalist to use the term “sensational” to describe a version of preaching that was aggressive, descriptive, and designed to provoke response. See Margaret Lamberts Bendroth’s discussion of Courtland Myers, a near contemporary of Straton and pastor of the Tremont Temple in Boston from 1909-1921. \textit{Fundamentalists in the City: conflict and division in Boston’s churches, 1885-1950} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 105-107.
\textsuperscript{56} “Straton for Every Night Sermons,” \textit{New York Times} (10 October 1921) 10.
the moneychangers from the temple” that also “for our weal was nailed to the cross.”57 The pain and humiliation that Straton attempted to inflict through his preaching was ultimately also, he believed, the route to redemption.

Straton’s “sensational” method was simply to name the sin to the sinner, a tactic whose Biblical roots found an American antecedent in the jeremiad tradition of the Puritans, and the ruthless self-examination those ministers invoked upon their congregations.58 In his sermons, he brought his congregation face to face with the flagrancies of New York’s corruption, denouncing in particulars the decadence and corruption of New York City. He gained a notorious reputation for sitting unmoving with a grim expression on his face through a performance of “Aphrodite,” for visiting incognito several dance halls on a Saturday night in early 1920, and, most famously, for attending one of Jack Dempsey’s boxing matches in 1921.59 After such affairs, Straton would go back to his pulpit and denounce the rot in vivid detail, naming names and giving places, describing, for instance, “Aphrodite” as “one of the most shocking things ever seen on the modern stage,” and outlining in “lively and picturesque language” particulars.60 He called the play “a nightmare of nude men and women, with bare-legged negro men, in addition to white men, squirming in and out and rubbing against the practically naked white girls. It was an orgy of sensuality and shame.”61 He became famous for publicizing as widely as possible his

castigations; he provided his sermons to the press in advance, engaged an automobile to allow him to preach in the streets, and set up a private radio station for Calvary, all to bring New York’s sinners within reach of the Word.\textsuperscript{62}

It was controversial, but Straton claimed proudly that such “sensational” preaching worked. In September 1921 he announced that since he began “preaching sensation” there had been “an unusual increase in the membership of the Calvary Church.” He was correct; Sunday school attendance had tripled since he had taken the pulpit; attendance at Sunday night services grew from the low hundreds to over a thousand.\textsuperscript{63} To an evangelical, the causal connection here was unmistakable; God’s Word was being heard, and it was still effective. Indeed, Straton went so far as to claim that “we are just in the midst of a revival spirit that is working in all our services and resulting in the conversion of souls.” As far as he was concerned, “sensational” preaching was the true Word recaptured, language that presented a stark and vivid contrast between the kingdom of God and the corruption of the world, and which inevitably drove the hearers from the second to the first, and which hopefully would create a new New York City.\textsuperscript{64}

This was not intended to be self-consciously hyperdramatic or lurid. As he said, “The ancient prophets did not do the startling things, or deliver the dramatic message which characterized their ministry, in order to stir up a sensation or to draw a gaping crowd. They simply gave the message and fulfilled the mission that God laid upon them, but their warfare upon sin was of necessity sensational because it disturbed the existing worldly order.”\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{62} On Straton’s methods in general, see Todd, “New York, the new Babylon?” Also Witch Doctor of Gotham, 14. Many of Straton’s sermons were revised in the form of press releases, which were then forwarded to newspapers.

\textsuperscript{63} “Straton Denounces Foes in Church,” New York Times (26 September 1921) 1. Numbers reported in la Plata, Tell it from Calvary, 53.

\textsuperscript{64} “Straton Sermons Split Congregation,” New York Times (20 September 1921) 1.

\textsuperscript{65} “A Sound Sensationalism versus Pulpit Pussyfooting,” sermon dated to circa 1922, John Roach Straton Papers, box 16, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta.
He had his advocates. His files quickly filled with letters from citizens of New York City and beyond, who signed themselves with titles like “A Heartbroken Mother,” who confided that “I can’t give you my address as my poor husband would kill me,” but thanked Straton for exposing the evils of the entertainment world that had dragged her sons into bankruptcy and vice. A “Christian Actor” confirmed Straton’s suspicions, noting that “the profession has many men in it who are notorious for this degeneracy,” while an “Ex-Actress” simply said “Your right. I have been compelled to come across. To more manage my life . . . I am decently working in an office now.” More prominent praise arrived as well; the city’s Immanuel Congregation Church announced its “sincere and hearty thanks for your brave and successful fight against vice and prevalent evil,” while the president of the State Law Enforcement League congratulated Straton on “the splendid work you have been doing.” But perhaps most telling was the opinion of William Suydam, who called himself “a Billy Sunday type,” and urged Straton to run for mayor.

But, as Straton expected, sensational preaching did not attract praise alone. The more widely known were mainline and liberal Protestants, members of such denominations as the Episcopalians or the Congregationalists, or less evangelical members of New York’s Presbyterian or Baptist churches. They found Straton crass, rather shallow, and ultimately self-marginalizing. The well-known writer Emily Newell Blair identified herself as the descendent of Presbyterians and Episcopalians but not “churchy” and her husband as “backslid” Presbyterian

68 Immanuel Congregational Church to John Roach Straton, 20 April 1920, and Edward Grant to John Roach Straton, April 13, 1920. John Roach Straton Papers, box 15, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta.
69 William Suydam to John Roach Straton, 20 April 1920, box 15, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta.
evangelical; she argued that the two of them represented “the normal attitude . . . of people not obsessed by religion.” Both of them, she reported, were convinced that Straton was concerned primarily with “making faces and calling names,” advocate of dogmatic religious formulas “so thunderously defended by the Sunday Stratons [that] they no longer have a meaning.”

This sort of dismissal of Straton as indecorous and embarrassing was common enough, but many also agreed with Blair’s conclusion: that Straton’s excesses meant that what he was doing in the pulpit was no longer really religion, but rather representative of mob psychology, demagoguery, or, worst of all, the sort of theatrical provocations Straton himself denounced. This infuriated Straton above anything else; for him that some found his methods disturbing and provocative was precisely the point. It meant that he was preaching and not merely performing. Conviction of sin was never pleasant.

He also faced criticism from other evangelicals. In an editorial, the Disciples of Christ journal *Herald of Gospel Liberty* called him a “controversialist” whose radical positions and disturbing sermons made him the “victim of telling ridicule and confusion.” This was nothing new, but the editorial also maintained that Straton was actually damaging the cause of religion in the city; his dramas “will impinge upon the Bible itself in the minds of the great unchurched masses who read the daily papers.”

Such reservations had already appeared in Straton’s own congregation. In September 1921 a furor erupted when Robert MacArthur, no fan of modern preaching himself, resigned his position as pastor emeritus after Straton’s sermon on the Dempsey boxing match. Four months later MacArthur left the congregation altogether. Nearly

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71 See, for example, “A Visit to the Northern Baptist Convention,” *Herald of Gospel Liberty* 115:24 (14 June 1923) 562, whose anonymous author “A Minister,” argues that Straton’s speech was calculated to appeal to “mob psychology” to create a scene. See also Driscoll, “A Voice Crying in the Wilderness,” 34.
73 MacArthur Breaks with Dr. Straton on Pulpit Sensations,” *New York Times* (19 September 1921) 1. On MacArthur’s opinions on preaching, see “Pulpit is Stronger,” *New York Tribune* (24 August 1903) 4, in which
200 of Calvary’s members followed MacArthur from the church, complaining to reporters that Straton’s sermons attracted “floaters,” show-seekers “who say that his sermons are better than vaudeville.”

This was disturbing criticism because it turned Straton’s own accusations back upon him; echoing Blair, it implied that his attempts at prophecy were simply another version of the corrupt pandering to appetite that they castigated. Rather than attracting sinners who sought the conversion the Word offered, Straton’s preaching attracted insincere gawkers. But in a backhanded way, these complaints also struck deeper at the heart of Straton’s own legitimacy. The worries of MacArthur and his followers emerged from places deeper than merely shocked sensibilities; rather, they reflected legitimate conviction about the force that a preacher’s words could wield, conviction that made their apprehension about Straton’s preaching seem genuinely dire. Disgruntled congregants argued that this was because Straton’s “word pictures [were] too lurid,” and thus “sometimes produced stronger effects than the morals which he drew from them.” That is, his sermons failed to convert; they were too bogged down in Straton’s obsession with sin to proceed toward the ultimate goal of conversion.

Unfortunately, this did not mean they were merely ineffectual. In a letter to Straton, MacArthur expressed concern about his successor’s “vivid portrayals of wickedness,” wondering if they “were likely to react more energetically on the imagination than on the moral impulses.” MacArthur feared that Straton’s sermons would have the same corruptive effects that Straton feared from the theatre. The distinction between MacArthur’s conservative, yet non-

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MacArthur denounces Protestants who adopted liturgy at the expense of the sermon in Sunday services, insisting that “The true minister is not a performer of ecclesiastical rites. He is a preacher of great spiritual truths.”


75 “Straton Sermons Split Congregation,” 1.

76 “MacArthur Breaks with Dr. Straton on Pulpit Sensations,” *New York Times* (19 September 1921) 1
confrontational faith and Straton’s pungent stridency may be as useful a place as any to mark the place where fundamentalism began. Their falling out reveals that the practical implications of emerging fundamentalism went beyond theology, for Straton and MacArthur did not differ appreciably in their defense of the theology of traditional preaching. But the pastoral implications of Straton’s fundamentalist style tore the congregation apart, despite (and indeed, even because of) the theological consensus. Fundamentalism added an edge to evangelicalism that many found dangerous.

The complainers in Straton’s congregation, for example, spoke of his “word pictures” and described the minister as “painting” scenes; to dismiss the claim as no deeper than a metaphor overlooks the theological and cultural power that conservative American evangelicals in the early twentieth century still ascribed to the Word in both spoken and written form. Indeed, Straton himself had warned his congregation against modern preachers who had “lost faith in the Bible as the Word of God;” their preaching, he said, was “drugging the minds of their hearers with unbelief.” These false preachers labeled as “babblers” those who still believed in “a supernatural world and a transcendent miracle-working God,” but the “babbler” who trusted in the Bible, Straton assured his audience, “could overturn the world.” Though Straton’s own methods seemed extreme to some, his congregation still trusted in the inspiration of the Bible and hence the power of preaching. While the congregations of Merrill’s Brick Church or Fosdick’s Riverside Church had come to understand sermons as only one of many metaphorical routes to encountering God, for the congregation of Calvary, the minister’s words still bore metaphysical force. It was precisely the fear of what Straton’s preaching might do, not disgust at its impotence or irrelevancy, that drove people from his pews.

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77 See George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American culture*, 4, which marks fundamentalism’s tendency toward militancy as the characteristic which made fundamentalists distinct from other conservative Protestants.
78 Straton, “Rationalism in the Pulpit,” 9, 11.
Straton’s defense of his preaching revealed his own confidence in its spiritual authority. On Sunday, September 25, 1921, less than a week after MacArthur and the dissidents had abandoned Calvary, he devoted his evening sermon – generally less formal than Sunday morning services – to defending himself. That he did so over the pulpit indicates the seriousness with which he took the challenge, and also the context in which he wanted his congregation to understand the dispute: it was not merely a technical disagreement, but a spiritual dilemma. His critics were not merely causing “injury of my good name,” but also “injury of God’s cause.” This was not (merely) arrogance; it was rather indicative of Straton’s convictions about how the world worked and the role of the preacher in it. Of his critics in his congregation, he stated “I do not believe they really wanted a preacher. They should have called a phonograph.” He accused his detractors attempting to control what was said over the pulpit, describing to the applause of his audience their “determined effort” and attempts to “browbeat” the minister, but announced staunchly that after “their pointed intimidations I merely laughed and asked them if it had dawned on them that they were off their beat.”

It was typical of Satan’s church to “try to dominate the preacher and dictate what he shall preach and thus make him a mere tool or mouthpiece.” These accusations were tantamount to a dismissal of the evangelical identity of Straton’s critics; they had failed to accept the authority of God’s Word in the world. Like his liberal critics, they were essentially heretics. Rather than submit, Straton announced, the next week he would preach “the greatest sensation of all.”

The greatest sensation of all turned out to be the corruption of Straton’s accusers. As was typical in fundamentalist thought, Straton collapsed his evils together into a metaphysical, supernatural reality. Thus, he assailed the dissidents of his own congregation in the same

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80. “Satan’s Substitute for a Spiritual Church,” [4].
manner with which he pursued Broadway; with vivid anecdote and pointed detail, a theatrical style with vivid gestures, depicting wickedness in no uncertain terms and insisting that only repentance could lead to righteousness. His critics were “those who have not heard me preach,” a barb aimed at questioning their status as converted Christians. Though they were members of the congregation, they preferred the theatre to Straton’s sermons and often skipped church on Sunday. They were vulnerable to corruption precisely because they had avoided the spiritual surgery that Straton’s preaching would induce, and they assailed Straton for the same reason Herod persecuted John the Baptist: they feared the power of his Word. And that power was undeniable. For proof of the righteousness of Straton’s sermons, critics had only to look at the rolls: “The growth of this church has . . . been strong and wholesome.” Straton echoed the claim over and over again, insisting that God’s favor was manifest in the spiritual health and evangelical success of his congregation, and that, therefore, his sensational and prophetic preaching was truly of the Word. He began his discussion of ‘those misstatements about me which appear in the papers” with a declaration that might serve to characterize his entire New York ministry: “While I am a very patient man,” he said, “the time comes when patience ceases to be a virtue.”

The internal war within Straton’s congregation only intensified as the minister’s convictions about the importance of supernatural preaching escalated, and as he adopted ever more “sensational” and confrontational means of pursuing it. In 1923, when the pastor went on vacation to Florida, some dissidents still in Straton’s congregation rose in revolt, seizing upon his absence to call a congregational meeting in an attempt to oust the pastor. But Leonard Wilson,

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82 “Dr Straton Finds a Biblical Parallel,” New York Sun (3 October 1921) 2. The New York Evening Post described a Straton who “shook his fists . . . defying any effort to put him out of the pulpit.” “Charges Straton has Split Church,” (20 September 1921) 2.
Straton’s secretary, quickly mobilized Straton’s supporters, and jubilantly wrote to the preacher “WE DEFEATED THEM LAST NIGHT BY A VOTE OF 119 TO 46!” When he returned, Straton produced a pamphlet distributed among the pews that revealed his pastoral side; “We are not a quarrelsome, fighting church,” he pled, and confessed to some of the complaints of his critics, with justification. “I have had to oppose some who were formally leaders of the Young People’s work, but who were more regular in attendance at theatres than at the sanctuary,” he said. But he had the best interest of his church in mind.

A few years after the fires of Straton’s war on the theatre died down, in the spring of 1926, Straton met a girl named Uldine Utley at a Bible conference in Florida. Fourteen years old, Utley had been converted at an Aimee Semple McPherson rally in Los Angeles, and had since become a lay evangelist. Straton was impressed with Utley’s power behind the pulpit; he had been expecting that her preaching, like that of most child evangelists in his experience, was mere sentimental cliché, but the Baptist was impressed. “Uldine Utley has been given a wisdom and understanding of God’s Word far beyond her years,” he wrote, comparing her to the child Samuel, also called of God while young. “Her powers are manifestly supernatural and given by God.” As dozens of people confessed Christ before her, Straton became convinced that the girl was a true preacher. Sensing a bonanza of sensational preaching in both her novelty and her words, he brought her to New York City after a heavily publicized summer tour of the East.

84 Leonard Wilson to John Roach Straton, 13 September 1923, John Roach Straton Papers, box 5, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta. See also Wilson to The Congregation of Calvary Baptist Church, 11 September 1923. John Roach Straton Papers, box 5, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta.
In the summer and fall of 1926, she occasionally occupied the pulpit at Calvary and preached in tent revivals Straton organized around the city, culminating in a month long evangelistic campaign in Calvary itself. He glori ed in her successes; 75, he reported, were baptized in her first service, and claimed that her results were “manifestly more wide reaching than campaigns by Billy Sunday, Gypsy Smith, and others who have been used of God here.”

Following his usual procedure for himself, Straton sent her sermons to the newspapers and invited reporters to cover Utley’s message. As with his own sensational preaching, Straton’s harshest critics arose from other conservative evangelicals, disturbed to see a woman in a pulpit. Straton, his critics said, violated the Biblical sanctity of his pulpit for cheap publicity, and dealt, as one evangelical journal put it, “a heavy blow” to those very principles “for which he has fought against the liberals.” Straton protested, but the journal’s editor stood firm. “The things we said . . . represent the serious conviction of the great mass of our Southern Baptist people. Incidentally, they certainly represent my own convictions.”

Closer to home, even Straton’s personal associates seemed wary. LW Barnard, president of the president of American Bible Training School in Brooklyn, confessed that “I enjoyed Miss Utley’s [sic] message, but I question her scriptural authority in addressing mixed groups. Even good women are too often beguiled to be safe public leaders.”

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88 John Roach Straton, “Uldine Utley’s New York City Wide Campaign, September 26 to October 31, 1926.” 1, 2. John Roach Straton Papers, box 32, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta.
90 Victor Masters to John Roach Straton, 1 October 1926, box 14, American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta.
Straton’s defense of Utley amounted, more or less, to a defense of inspired preaching. He conceded that there were in Scripture “scattered and isolated passages which, taken by themselves, would seem to bar women from official activity in the church.” However, he insisted “the teaching of scripture is clear that woman has her rightful place . . . in the proclamation of the saving truths of the Gospel.” He cited Joel 2 and Acts 2, the two passages of the Bible he called “absolutely determinative” on the question, and noted that the first claimed the Holy Ghost would inspire men and women alike to preach and prophesy, and that the second depicted the Apostle Paul declaring the torrent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost Joel’s fulfillment. This was enough for Straton. For him, as for earlier evangelicals, preaching was first and foremost a charismatic act, proceeding from the influence of the Spirit of God. The vessel – himself or Utley or any other preacher – was of little consequence next to the Word they proclaimed. That Utley’s preaching was counter-cultural to even his fellow evangelicals was in a backhanded way a recommendation; the provocation fit Straton’s temperament and his theology. Increasingly, his confrontational style and his confidence in his own prophetic role left him willing and even eager to provoke his critics. As he declared, dismissing Biblically based complaints about Utley, “The Holy Spirit cannot deny Himself.” Utley’s call – as she described it, hearing the voice of Christ commanding her to preach – was not to be resisted. She was, Straton proclaimed, “anointed with God’s oil.”

93 Straton, “Does the Bible Forbid Women to Preach and Pray in Public?” 190, 204, 205. Canipe, “Unlikely Argument,” states that Straton’s defense was based upon Biblical inerrancy. However, though Straton used the language of inerrancy – insisting that the scripture was “clear,” “evident,” and recommending that his detractors study the Bible “not in spots, but as a whole” and so forth – the substance of his argument from scripture was that the Holy Spirit could inspire women to preach. Indeed, Straton’s arguments engaged in the same sort of selective reading as those of his adversaries, as he was forced to explain away several verses from the epistles of Paul.
Utley was welcomed by the crowds at Calvary, converting dozens of churchgoers. Straton was delighted and grew increasingly interested in the girl’s particular style. Utley’s preaching, learned at the foot of the Pentecostal Aimee McPherson and emphasizing conversion by the Holy Spirit and spiritual transformation, appealed to Straton’s own sense of cultural confrontation between the divine and the profane. Gradually, he became interested in the flamboyant gesture and ritual that signaled the presence of God’s spirit in Pentecostal sermons. In 1926, for example, Straton invited her to lay her hands on the head of his son Hillyer as the father ordained the young man a minister, warned him that “the trumpet call of God’s messengers has not been in recent years clear, simple and unequivocal,” and commanded him to join the ranks of “fearless prophets of God” rather than to become one of “the animated question marks in many pulpits.”

Straton’s words to his son were nothing new. But there were also signs that Straton’s hunger for spiritual power would take him further towards the charismatic world of Pentecostal preaching. In December of 1926, for example, Straton announced in a Sunday night sermon that “healing by divine power is as much for us today as it was in the days that are gone;” by the next year he was anointing the sick with oil in private rites. In 1927, Straton’s own wife and son declared that they had “not always [been] baptized in the spirit.” Mrs. Straton declared that it was only upon hearing Utley preach that she was truly converted; Warren Straton, nineteen, “stood in his father’s pulpit” on a Sunday evening in December to proclaim a charismatic experience he had received in which “the Lord took my voice.” This condition persisted until Warren resolved

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97 Kristen Kobes du Mez, “The beauty of the lilies: Femininity, innocence and the sweet gospel of Uldine Utley,” *Religion and American Culture* 15:2 (Summer 2005) 220 reflects upon the appeal of Utley’s public persona, and notes that “she seemed to exert as much influence upon [Straton’s] views as he did upon hers.” See also “Hosanna!” *New Yorker* (23 October 1926) 23 on her style.

98 “Dr. Straton ordains his son to ministry.” *New York Times* (9 August 1926) 18.

that he was “only here to see whether I can’t lead some one to Jesus,” whereupon his tongue was
loosed and he “magnified Him as loudly as I could.” Warren Straton’s experience, his father
said, was “a visitation from God,” comparable to the experience of Paul. The boy no longer
stuttered and demonstrated a “marked change” in his approach to the spiritual. For Straton, it
was a classic conversion experience, and one that made the boy into the preacher he had not been
before. But Warren’s experience was symbolic of a charismatic, supernatural type of
preaching that went beyond the old evangelical conversion process toward mystical and
miraculous gifts of the Spirit. The rigor of preparation, scripture study, and self-examination that
had for so long been deemed essential for even the evangelical preacher was abandoned in favor
of visceral and immediate experience. For Straton, such heightened supernaturalism was “wild
and frenzied,” but rather reflective of his evolving theory of preaching. “Every real preacher
ought to be a sensationalist,” he wrote and what was happening at Calvary represented “the
revival of religion we have hoped and prayed for.”

Despite his apologia, there were whispers that Straton – once the paragon of grim
rectitude and respectability – was drifting toward the decidedly indecorous world of
Pentecostalism. In February 1928 he accepted an invitation to occupy the Los Angeles pulpit
of Utley’s mentor, Aimee Semple McPherson, then undergoing intense media scrutiny for her
flamboyant preaching as well as her seeming indecorous private life, involving rumors of affairs

103 See, for example, “Blatant Straton,” Time (20 August 1928), which maintained that Straton’s Calvary was
overrun by “emotional Pentecostalism instigated in his church by Girl Evangelist Uldine Utley.” On Pentecostal
“Holy Ghost preaching” – one characteristic of which was, of course, female, and child, preachers – see Grant
Wacker, Heaven Below 103-108, 113-116. Many evangelicals and fundamentalists distanced themselves from the
Pentecostal movement, made uneasy by its lack of discipline and doctrinal sloppiness. Straton’s experience,
however, seems to lend weight to Donald Dayton’s contention that historians have been too quick to separate
Pentecostalism from the broader conservative evangelical tradition. Dayton, “The Limits of Evangelicalism: the
Pentecostal Tradition,” in Dayton and Robert Johnston, eds., Varieties of American Evangelicalism (Knoxville:
University of Tennessee, 1991) 36-57.
and secret trysts in Mexico. But Straton came down firmly on McPherson’s side. “The more I learn of the situation out here at first hand and from eye witnesses the more thoroughly convinced I am that she has been sorely persecuted . . . The Lord will bring her back.” He praised McPherson’s work in her Angelus Temple, writing “There are many wonderful conversions . . . miraculous healing and true baptisms in the Holy Spirit. I have learned that Mrs McPherson seems to be thoroughly awake to the danger of ‘false fire,’ certain counterfeits of the true manifestations of the Holy Spirit, etc.” Further, while in Los Angeles, he publically defended divine healing, taking the negative opposite a University of California medical doctor in a public debate over “Resolved: That Man is a Product of Evolution and Consequently That the Teaching of Divine Healing is Detrimental to Medical Science.” He shook his head over McPherson’s antagonists, which he increasingly identified as his own. “We are near to the day of open persecution to those who stand for full rounded, spiritual, apostolic Christianity, as our Baptist forefathers knew,” he wrote to his clerk. “Get the officers and other leaders together there at Calvary and read this letter to them.”

And again there was restiveness in Straton’s congregation. Pentecostalism was not unknown in New York City; several African American Pentecostal congregations had appeared in that decade in Harlem, most notably, the True Church of God, directed by the preacher Mother Susan Lightfoot, which had 200 members meeting in 1920 in its chapel on 134th Street, and other variants of Pentecostalism preached by the charismatic leaders Daddy Grace and Father Divine, whose ministries reached New York in that decade. The novelist James Baldwin vividly

recalled the preaching in The Temple of the Fire Baptized, where the singing caused his protagonist John “to believe in the presence of the Lord” and where worshipers ecstatically spoke in tongues and experienced the Holy Ghost. But this sort of religion was looked at with skepticism by many of New York’s whites, who generally viewed Pentecostalism itself with suspicion and fear. In 1919, for instance, the neighbors of an African American Pentecostal church on 131st Street issued a complaint to the local magistrate about the “fervent and boisterous” worship “every day and every night.”

Such an attitude was manifest in Straton’s own congregation. In late June 1927 five deacons – a third of the board of the church - resigned their memberships, complaining of “emotional services” at Calvary, “manifestations of a nature commonly associated with Pentecostalism.” They spoke of late night services, speaking in tongues, and “hysterical” preaching from various random members of the congregation. They also complained that Straton had implemented a ‘gag rule,’ a procedural rule that allowed him to adjourn any meeting of the congregation as a corporation at a moment’s notice. Straton repeatedly used the rule to silence attempts protest the “manifestations;” thus, the deacons concluded he supported them. Complaints about his ministerial methods were restricted, Straton said, because they represented a threatening theology. “The Modernists all over America have seized upon these false reports,” he wrote to the New York Times, “and they are now spreading it abroad.”

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“firmly on the throttle.”¹¹⁰ The gag rule served a larger purpose, and it revealed that despite Straton’s affinity for the expressive spirituality of Pentecostalism, he remained convinced of the unique authority of the ordained minister. Under the gag rule, Straton’s controls over the public speech at Calvary tightened commiserate with his own rising sense of the vital power of preaching to confront the spiritually dead city surrounding his church.

Straton always resisted the term Pentecostal, and it is unclear to what extent he personally directed the events among his congregation. But it is clear that he valued the tradition’s emphasis upon the power of the supernatural. He lived in a city and a time where the old paths to grace seemed to him corrupted and drowned out, where the voice of the preacher could no longer be heard through the banal patter of the stage. His New York ministry was a crusade not merely to stamp out the immoral, but to regain for God pure control over the spoken word, and renew it as a channel of holy power. His concern for preaching, amplified from traditional Reformation and evangelical theology, made him a rather unique figure; he was willing to break ranks with those who seemed his natural allies – MacArthur, the fundamentalists whom Utley scandalized – in pursuit of the supernatural power that he believed it carried, but his traditional sensibilities about the preeminence of the minister meant that he remained firmly in the evangelical tradition.

John Roach Straton and Henry van Dyke, out of the pulpit at Brick for thirty years but still a dean of New York liberal Presbyterianism from his perch at Princeton, died four years apart. It seems almost appropriate that the restless Straton collapsed with a stroke credited to “a nervous breakdown suffered as a result of overwork” at age 54.¹¹¹ He died of a heart attack a month later, the day of the stock market crash in October, 1929, while resting in a sanitarium in

upstate New York. His funeral, as he might have wished, was a surge of words. Curtis Lee Laws, editor of the Baptist journal *The Watchman-Examiner*, Austin de Blois, president of the Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, two evangelists, and of course Uldine Utley all spoke, one after the other, with no breaks in between. Straton was repeatedly praised for his “convictions,” his “passion,” his “courageous heart and uncompromising battle for the right.” But Utley did more than merely praise Straton; she preached, in the dramatic, sensational fashion her mentor had taught. Utley, dressed all in white with a flowing cape, knelt in prayer upon the podium before she stood at the pulpit, and the *New York Times* noted that “many wept . . . emotion reached its height with the appearance of Uldine.” She thanked God “for the many souls that Dr. Straton has brought into Thy kingdom,” then turned to the congregation and told them “He is with his God . . . someday you may be there.” The young preacher then promised to pick up “the sword of the spirit” that Straton had “left behind.”

When van Dyke died in April 1933 at age 81, after a long and peaceful career at Princeton, his funeral was held at the Old First Presbyterian Church in New Jersey that he, as a Princeton professor, attended. There was no sermon or eulogy. Rather, the funeral followed the liturgical forms drawn from the Book of Common Worship revised by a committee that van Dyke himself had headed. The service was designed around “special music given by the Westminster Choir of Princeton.” The service was praised for its “simplicity,” though a better word might have been “solemn” or “formal.” Van Dyke’s liturgy called for a great deal of solemn ritual; chanting of psalms, formal prayers, call and responses, particularly the Te Deum, which praised God the Creator, Savior, and bestower of mercy.

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The differences between the two burials was not merely one about form or style; rather, they marked larger shifts in the ways evangelicals had come to believe God worked in the world, and hence a transformation in the ways they expected divinity to be manifest in the universe. The heritage of evangelicalism was still visible in each; Laws’s and especially Utley’s performances above Straton’s coffin not only told their audience that Straton’s legacy of “sensational” evangelism lived; it presented the Word to them. The torrent of the Holy Spirit that Straton believed would follow when the flood of preaching touched every aspect of modern life, appropriately, did not leave his funeral untouched. His burial was a turbulent, emotional affair, the audience drawn into the passionate evangelical spirituality that characterized the fundamentalist movement. Van Dyke’s funeral, on the other hand, was simple, calm, and orderly, marked less by passion for salvation than by aesthetic contemplation and the solemn air of ritual. But the Holy Spirit was there also; the hunger for spiritual experience tangible in the sacred music, and the drive to create Christians apparent in the call-and-responses and the rituals of the service, which drew attendees into acting as the Christians van Dyke had wanted them to be. By the time of van Dyke’s death, it was an article of faith among many evangelicals that modern preaching did not match up to that of the age of pulpit giants. But if pulpit oratory no longer commanded the allegiance it once had, it was because the tumults of the age had forced evangelicals to think more deeply about what preaching meant, and to find new ways of discovering what it offered.

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Chapter 10

Harry Emerson Fosdick and Baptism at Riverside

The collapse of the Union School represented in microcosm the crossroads New York evangelicalism had reached by the 1920s. The distinct camps of evangelical piety which had emerged in the city by that decade were both also distinct from the sort of evangelism which had flourished in the early part of the nineteenth century, though they still clung to its dream of the power of God’s grace to remake New York’s pluralistic society into a Christian Zion. But by the 1920s the dream was compromised; each side regarded the other as dangerous, inappropriate, and destructive; a cynical perversion of true evangelical religion. As the liberal evangelical R.H. Nichols, professor at Union Theological Seminary, observed in retrospect, “A main strength of the fundamentalists had been their contention that they alone were evangelicals.” But the tirades of Straton and Sunday seemed baffling, vulgar, and even primitive to liberal evangelicals like William Merrill. And in turn, conservatives eyed the disintegration of the Union School’s professed Christianity as the inevitable fruit of tinkering with the Word of God. It was thus perhaps inevitable that conflict would break out: each side challenging not merely the other’s theology, but the other’s practice. And it did, in the middle 1920s, when Harry Emerson Fosdick, the leading Baptist preacher of the city, sympathetic to the liberal cause, assailed the growing movement of self-proclaimed fundamentalists and inadvertently provoked a war.

The series of trials Fosdick endured from 1922 to 1930 illustrate the struggle between two groups that called themselves, on the one hand, “liberal evangelicals,” and on the other, “fundamentalists.” It is important to recognize that Fosdick and his supporters laid as strong a claim to the word “evangelical” as did fundamentalists. Both wanted the historical, theological,

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and experiential validation that the name represented. The strategies of each side strongly resembled each other: attempts at rhetorical marginalization, claims to legitimate descent from the historic evangelical movement, and declarations about the nature and purpose of religious experience that appealed to classic language about conversion. Though Fosdick and his defenders have often been characterized as advocates of intellectual freedom, tolerance, and ecumenical progress, it is important to recognize they understood themselves to as well be staunch defenders of a particular way of being religious. Indeed, they defined their success at evangelicalism primarily by the results they achieved: the number of converts gained, the number of lives reformed, the number of pews filled. For them, evangelicalism was a method, not a theology, and they recoiled as much at the pastoral style of fundamentalism as at its doctrines. It was this self-understanding that underlay the decisions Fosdick made, and it was revulsion at his methods that fueled his antagonists.

In May of 1922, Fosdick delivered his famous address “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” in his capacity as the preaching minister of the Old First Presbyterian Church; a spark which lit a conflagration. It is well known that in the sermon Fosdick defended the right of Christians to believe (though he carefully avoided stating his own position) that the Virgin Birth was a myth, that Jesus was not literally resurrected, that the original manuscripts of the Bible were not inerrant. But Fosdick did more than that; he specifically declared that it was possible for “evangelical Christians” to believe these things. This position seemed confounding because, of course, these were not beliefs that had commonly been held by evangelicals over the previous two centuries. But Fosdick was not advocating a particular prescription for the content of evangelicalism; rather, he was offering a re-definition of its form. He defined evangelicalism in such a way that deemphasized the proclamation of doctrine by attacking fundamentalist
preaching; indeed, echoing an old, old evangelical critique, blasted preachers who used their pulpits in the “making of themselves a cockpit of controversy.” For Fosdick, certainty of doctrine was increasingly associated with a particular style of evangelizing, and he rejected both.

Fosdick did not merely defend theological liberalism; he defended the practice of liberal evangelicalism; he attacked not only theological dogmatism, but preachers who were “harsh in judgment” and who showed “cantankerousness.” As Fosdick “watches and listens to them,” he said he saw “one of the worst exhibitions of bitter intolerance the world has ever seen.” Fosdick did not merely decry intolerance in theory; he offered a critique of the fundamentalist style Sunday and Straton had developed. As Frederick Lynch, editor of Christian Work and sympathetic to Fosdick, observed of the sermon, Fosdick was “not against the fundamentalist expressing their points of view.” Rather, Fosdick was against the way in which it was done. Lynch made a distinction between theological conservatives and what he called “belligerent conservatives,” and stated that Fosdick’s sermon was a critique of “that spirit and method which characterizes what is known as the fundamentalist movement.” For both Fosdick and Lynch the core of fundamentalism was not theology but a particular pastoral style.

All of this reflected the sort of evangelism which had emerged from the institutional church movement a generation before: evangelicalism which downplayed particular insistence upon doctrine in favor of drawing as wide an audience as possible; evangelicalism which rejected theological sparring in favor of a warm pastoralism. But Fosdick also understood himself to be evangelicalism’s ambassador to a particular new breed of New Yorkers: the youth, educated in the city’s colleges and increasingly moving into its profession. He warned that he preached “thinking primarily about this new generation,” for whom he believed the

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fundamentalist style was ultimately ineffective. They had grown up in the previous two decades in a city surrounded by diversity, academic knowledge, and a consumer society: college students, intellectuals, consumers of muckraking, modernist novels, and journalism. Influenced by the bohemians of turn of the century Greenwich Village, they believed passionately in the art of language and rhetoric, embracing what one historian has called a “cheerful conviction that language, unimpeded by convention or law, could create democratic communities.” They were self consciously cosmopolitan, protective of diversity, and suspicious of absolutes, parochialism, and tradition venerated for its own sake. By the 1920s, the idealistic dream of a city remade into an urban, cosmopolitan utopia that Randolph Bourne and other thinkers had proposed had withered somewhat in the fires of World War I, but New York’s young educated class still pursued its aims, exhibiting fascination with the Harlem Renaissance, with the world-weary modernist literature of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and skepticism of authority of most kinds; they doubted their ability to really know themselves, the possibility of true and deep reform, and instead developed obsession with performance, questioning standards, and exhibition.

Would the “controversial intolerance” of fundamentalism “shut the door of the Christian fellowship” against these potential spiritual seekers, Fosdick asked? It was doing so, even if unintentionally, and the church was losing thousands. Fosdick claimed in his farewell sermon upon resigning from the First Church in March 1925, “I do not see how a minister can serve in New York City and deal, as I have dealt these years past, with hundreds of individuals in the confessional without feeling with ever deepening poignancy the terrible criticalness of the

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decisions which youth makes in the direction of its life.”

Fundamentalism’s strident certainty, its commitment to authority, were driving away young people whose style was much different; who valued boisterous debate and pragmatic results more than dogma. Rather, in order to reclaim generations driven away by what Fosdick called the “harsh” style of Straton or Sunday, Fosdick offered an alternative vision of evangelicalism, which he defined in this way: “that men in their personal lives and social relationships should know Jesus Christ.” Conversion for Fosdick was deeply bound into one’s emotional experience in a community and identified with a burgeoning sense of efficacy in one’s daily life associated with the encounter with Christ. Fosdick spoke of the importance of a warm relationship within a congregation, and of his optimism about social “development,” describing an evangelicalism that spread the spirit of God through the awakening of a sense of responsibility, capability and social engagement rather than through the verbal definition and denunciation of sin.

Though Fosdick was too savvy to be entirely surprised when his antagonists challenged his claim to the label “evangelical,” he asserted his claim to the word vigorously and repeatedly, in public and private. “I am an evangelical Christian, believing in the saving grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and trusting in him for my redemption,” he wrote to the Chicagoan F.D. Burhans, who sent the minister a letter of support soon after the controversies over the sermon broke. The product of a warm and loving home, the child of educators, he had been interested in religion all his life, and grew up with a serene faith. His conviction wavered when he underwent an emotional crisis while in college, but later he insisted that a conversion experience had resulted. He insisted with a note of irritation in to the committee the New York Presbytery

7 Harry Emerson Fosdick, “The Farewell Sermon of Dr Harry Emerson Fosdick to the First Presbyterian Church of New York, Sunday, March 1, 1925” (New York: The Church, 1925) 25-6.
9 Harry Emerson Fosdick to F.D. Burhans, 21 August 1922, Fosdick Papers, series 4E, box 2, folder 3, Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
sent to investigate the preaching at the First Church, “If I did not consider myself an evangelical Christian I surely should not be preaching in an evangelical pulpit”\(^\text{10}\) But though Fosdick forthrightly claimed the title, and though his sermons were widely considered among the finest of his time, his method for attaining the traditional goals of evangelicalism seemed to his antagonists not worthy of the name. This was in part, and most obviously, due to Fosdick’s liberal theology, but at a deeper level, his antagonists sneered as well at his ministerial style.

Fosdick’s reference to pastoral counseling in “Shall the Fundamentalists Win” gestured to the core of his beliefs about evangelicalism in general, and the role of preaching in particular. Though the Baptist was widely acclaimed for his pulpit talent, he relished even more personal conversation, pastoral counseling, the connection between two personalities when one came to the other with a particular and proximate need. The influence of an evangelicalism slowly transitioning from preaching the Word into service is evident here. As he wrote to Thomas Glasgow, a resident of Charlotte, North Carolina, who wrote to him with doubts about “Shall the Fundamentalists Win,” “I wish that it were possible for us to have a personal interview, for I am sure that I could help you at least to see the possibility of a deep and transforming Christian experience combined with a modern intellectual formulation.”\(^\text{11}\)

When he approached the pulpit, therefore, Fosdick rejected traditional forms of preaching – the expository method or the topical method, the first of which bound the preacher closely to a particular Biblical text, or the topical method, in which the preacher brought Scripture to bear on a theme. The first seemed to Fosdick too arcane and the second too bland for an evangelical pulpit.


\(^{\text{11}}\) Harry Emerson Fosdick to Thomas Glasgow, 13 October 1922, Fosdick Papers, series 4E, box 2, folder 3, Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
Rather he embraced what he called the “project method,” in which he structured a sermon around particular issues that his congregation seemed to be wrestling with at the time. This was, in a sense, a preacherly adaptation of the work going on in the institutional churches—an attempt to make the sermons a part of and reflective of the lives of the congregation. Fosdick’s autobiography famously called a sermon “personal counseling on a group scale,” and to a certain extent, he conceived of conversion in terms of motivation; his sermons were designed to not to push his audience to a cathartic emotional experience, but to convince them to live better lives.  

As one observer noted, Fosdick’s preaching was neither “remote” nor “mystical;” the listener did “not think of the orator or the rhetorician.” The minister did not expound theology or impose the traditional cycle of conviction of sin, salvation through Jesus, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit that lay at the heart of traditional reviverist preaching. Fosdick’s sermons were direct, simple, and practical, and designed as he said, he preached “not so much to convict men of their sins, but to convince men of their possibilities.” In his autobiography he wrote that “every sermon should have for its main business the head-on constructive meeting of some problem which was puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives.” In an essay on his methods of sermon preparation, Fosdick directed his readers that every sermon “ought to start, proceed, and end with the needs and problems, the moral perils and social prejudices, of the

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12 For this discussion of Fosdick’s preaching, see his own autobiography The Living of These Days (New York: Harper, 1956) 94-99; for his criticism of bland topical preaching, which he saw most prevalent in liberal pulpits, “What is the Matter with Preaching.” Harper’s (July, 1928) 133-141. For commentary, Robert Moats Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 341-349; Edmund Linn, Preaching as counseling: the unique method of Harry Emerson Fosdick (New York: Judson Press, 1966);
13 Edgar DeWitt Jones, American Preachers of To-day (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1932) 28-29.
14 Quoted in Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 375.
15 Fosdick, The Living of These Days, 94.
listening congregation.” It was only in the “second stage,” after extensive freewriting, that Fosdick said it was time to ask “What does the Bible say about this theme?”

This was far distant from Isaac Haldeman, who declared “The need of the hour is to faithfully preach as God would have us preach . . . that man is not ascending the scale of life, but on the contrary, still traveling the downward path, which revealed its first descending trend when men in Eden listened to the Devil’s lie. . . .The need and obligation upon every faithful minister of Christ is to proclaim in language so plain that the only ground of approach to a holy God is the blood of a holy sacrifice.” Haldeman here expressed a particular blend of traditional evangelical theology with the urgent and strident style that fundamentalists in the city had adopted. Human beings were fallen, as evangelical theology stated, but for Haldeman they were still in decline; the only salvation rested in turning to God. This was unfamiliar to Fosdick, whose liberal tradition had rather found ways to seek evangelical ends through rather than against the world around him. Fosdick did not seek to inspire the sort of extreme emotion that Straton’s sensational preaching imposed upon his audience. Indeed, he blasted a revivalist of the “Old Tent Evangel Committee of New York City” who wrote him complaining that Fosdick’s sermons did not preach what the revivalist claimed was traditional evangelical doctrine, stating bluntly that the revivalist’s method of preaching the fallen nature of man and utter dependence upon the grace of Christ, “I must confess seems to me both false in fact and pernicious in practical result.” To Fosdick, the brimstone preaching of the tent revivalists, the sensationalism of Straton were destructive, invoking chaotic emotionalism and allegiance to

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18 Harry Emerson Fosdick to G.W. McGovern, 17 October 1921, Fosdick Papers, series 4E, box 2, folder 3, Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
division rather than unity. This demanded conversion as much as older evangelicalism had, but it was in a form unrecognizable to conservative evangelicals.

But these evangelicals responded to Fosdick in kind. Mailed to every Presbyterian clergyman in the country without Fosdick’s knowledge or permission by an impressed congregant (and public relations professional who worked for Fosdick’s patron John D. Rockefeller) named Ivy Lee, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win” quickly became the site of battles over what precisely qualified one to be evangelical, with conservative antagonists such as Philadelphia Presbyterian Clarence Macartney and local critics like Walter Buchanan of the Broadway Presbyterian Church and John Roach Straton challenging Fosdick’s right to preach from a Presbyterian pulpit, or, in Straton’s case, to public debates on evolution, the inspiration of Scripture, and the virgin birth, to be carried out “with the proper spirit of courtesy.” Fosdick turned Straton down, illustrating dramatically the distinction between the two men: Straton, the fundamentalist with great confidence in the power of vigorous speech, declared that “Jesus was constantly debating with the Sadducees,” and stated that public airing of positions would “clarify the atmosphere and serve the cause of truth.” On the other hand was Fosdick, who pointedly declared himself “a long sea-mile from a controversialist,” and affirmed that that “of all ways which to discover truth and propagate it, a joint debate is the worse.”

Fosdick found nothing useful in confrontation, and little value in the sort of drastic distinctions between God and humanity, right and wrong, and so forth, that Straton believed the debate would draw.

Straton was annoyed. He accused Fosdick of “denial of the inspiration of God’s Word,” and he and other fundamentalists regarded this as a pastoral as well as a theological failing; to

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Straton Fosdick was but one in another in the series of weak, temporizing, liberal preachers, “question marks in the pulpit” who diluted the Word in their pulpits, not merely preaching empty theology, but not truly preaching at all as they sought to curry the favor of the age, rather than calling it to repentance. Straton’s response to Fosdick, pungently titled “Shall the Funnymonkeyists Win?” declared that Fosdick “has a brilliant mind and could have been a gloriously useful preacher,” but rather became a “product of the skeptical schools and seminaries.” Fosdick did not preach from the Bible, and therefore, Straton declared, “I do not believe Dr. Fosdick has any ethical right to stand in the great historic Christian pulpit” of First Church.” He then renewed his challenge to a debate, proclaiming that he did so “speaking, therefore, as a Baptist from a Baptist pulpit,” a sharp contrast designed to call into question Fosdick’s legitimacy as a preacher. For Straton, Fosdick and other liberal evangelicals’ claim to concern for “young fresh minds” was an inappropriate injection of “personality” into the pulpit; he claimed that it “sooths their vanity and encourages their intellectual pride” to claim the power to appeal to the young.

Others concurred, and deepened their assault on Fosdick’s preaching. As J. Gresham Machen, a Presbyterian and the intellectual engine of the fundamentalist movement declared after hearing Fosdick preach, “He is dreadful! Just the pitiful modern stuff about an undogmatic Christianity;” he denounced Fosdick’s “empty sentimentality” and “meretricious rhetoric,” unbecoming a true Christian minister. Machen pressed further against Fosdick’s sermonizing, mourning the loss of “the Biblical doctrines that the liberal preacher has abandoned in the interest of peace,” castigating the liberal preacher’s avoidance of the responsibility of the pulpit.

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22 Cited in Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 114.
to call for repentance and conversion.\textsuperscript{23} The line was perhaps best drawn by the Philadelphia Presbyterian Clarence Macartney, who rejected the label “fundamentalist” and instead claimed the title “evangelical Christian.”\textsuperscript{24} Fosdick’s insistence that evangelicalism could be a wide doctrinal tent was for these ministers fatally undermined by his seemingly obvious unwillingness to preach in the content and the manner that an evangelical should. Theology was inseparable from form for fundamentalists; the increasing crisis they saw overtaking evangelical Christianity meant that repentance had to be preached with vigor, and Straton and Sunday were setting the parameters for how it was done.

The point was consistently driven home by Fosdick’s antagonists, who sought to discipline not Fosdick himself (who as a Baptist could not be prosecuted in the Presbyterian church), but the First Church, for allowing an inadequate “public proclamation of the Word” in their pulpit. Under Macartney’s instigation, the Presbytery of Philadelphia sent an overture to the General Assembly asking that orders be given to the New York Presbytery to investigate. When the General Assembly of 1923 surprisingly adopted the minority report of the committee convened to consider the overture and ordered the Presbytery of New York to “take such action as will require the preaching and teaching” in the First Church to “conform to the system of doctrine taught in the confession of faith.”\textsuperscript{25} The Assembly also reaffirmed the “five points” first adopted in 1910: the inerrancy of scripture, the Virgin Birth, a sacrificial interpretation of the Atonement, the resurrection, and the reality of Christ’s miracles. William Jennings Bryan

\textsuperscript{23} J. Gresham Machen, \textit{Christianity and Liberalism} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923) 5.
\textsuperscript{24} Clarence Macartney, “Shall Unbelief Win?” \textit{The Presbyterian} (13 July 1922) 8.
\textsuperscript{25} The directive is reprinted in \textit{The Fosdick Case: complaint of Walter D. Buchanan and others to the 136th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA against the Presbytery of New York in its answer to the mandate of the 135th General Assembly} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1924) 5-6.
lauded the vote as a triumph in “this battle for true Evangelical faith.” And he was echoed by Fosdick’s most aggressive local interlocutors, pastors who maintained that Fosdick’s theology was inexorably intertwined with inadequate pastoral work; who, when they accused him of corruption of the pulpit, meant it quite literally.

The First Church itself strongly supported its preacher and the evangelical label which the Committee affixed to his sermons. The pastors and elders who made up the Session of the First Church, in a statement presented to Work, claimed to “deplore the distress thus given to many devout souls who had to judge the preacher by the printed sermon instead of judging the sermon by what they know of the preacher.” This seemed to imply that hearing Fosdick preach from the crowded benches of the First Church was a substantially different experience – perhaps because the Session indicated that the title Ivy Lee gave the sermon when he printed it primed the reader for an overly controversial text. Rather, when heard in the Church, “the sermon in question was exceptional,” and the Session insisted its spirit fell in line with Fosdick’s traditional pastorate: “The preaching in the first church is ordinarily uncontroverisal, but searching, inspiring, and full of the spirit . . . it is devoid of sensationalism and deals almost exclusively with the a great themes of evangelical religion.”

When they pled with Fosdick to remain in the pulpit as he came under siege, the First Church emphasized that theirs was “a district of many different nationalities and religious faiths; a district of changing population, where social classes are comingled. There are few rich, some poor, many young people of very modest means without home ties to bind them . . . Your preaching has attracted to the church great numbers of this composite population who are slowly

being welded into a gracious fellowship.” 28 Indeed, the First Church believed that unlike the “sensational” preaching then at large in the city, Fosdick’s sermons were squarely in the middle of the evangelical tradition, and in such a way that particularly targeted the populations that early twentieth century evangelicals in the city most desired: “The gospel has been proclaimed with pungency and with great power and many educated youth alienated from the church and from Christ have been transformed.” Indeed, “Every sitting in the Church is taken, with a long waiting list.” Finally, the Session pointed as well to “the four mission outposts forming a line across the lower end of the city,” which had been “greatly strengthened and vitalized.” For the Session of the First Church, these conversions were “signal tokens of divine favor.” 29 Though some evangelical critics charged that this was merely a case of celebrity; that Fosdick’s reputation attracted more people than his sermons converted, the same charge could be and were leveled against sensational preachers like Straton and Sunday. 30

The Presbytery of New York was known for its liberal inclinations, and based on a strong defense of the minister from his congregation, its committee, chaired by Edgar Work of the Fourth Presbyterian Church, declared “our study of the preaching and teaching in the First Church convinces us that the doctrines of grace are being proclaimed in the pulpit of that church.” Further, it announced its conviction that “that the preaching is evangelical in meaning,” by which was meant it was “intended to convince men that they cannot live rightly in this world without God and Christ and the Holy Spirit.” And, perhaps in a swipe at Straton who was then on crusade against the city’s theatres, the committee affirmed that Fosdick’s preaching was not

28 “The Church’s Letter to Dr. Fosdick,” The Church Tower 1:12 (November 1924) 11.
30 For such criticism, see Fosdick’s response to G.W. McGovern, who had accused Fosdick of harming genuine evangelical services in the city, October 17, 1921, Fosdick Papers, series 4E, box 2, folder 3. Directed at Straton, see Emily Newell Blair, “A Protest from the Big Congregation,” The Independent 119 (6 August 1927) 135-7.
“sensational,” but rather that it met the needs of the city better than it would if it were: “If his voice should for any reason fall silent, the Committee believes that it would be an incalculable loss and calamity to the church of God in this city, where so many different seas of thought meet in conflict and storm.” As with Straton and Coe, Work and the committee perceived the challenge of the city to be its diversity, but in its endorsement of Fosdick’s ability to speak to people of all educations and situations, the committee hewed closer to the liberal solution than it did to Straton’s.

Other liberal evangelicals strongly supported Fosdick, because in so doing they were also defending their own claim to the word “evangelical” and the spiritual heritage it implied. Meanwhile, they followed Fosdick – and further back, his predecessors like Parkhurst and Briggs, in emphasizing that evangelicalism was primarily an experience of religion worked out in choices and in relationships, and that conversion to Christianity did not depend upon the verbal enunciation of the faith. As Fosdick himself put it, “all down through Christian history the one continuous strand has been Christian experience, but that the intellectual formulations and categories of explanation have been fluid and changeable.”

Willam Sloane Coffin, for instance, was among a group of ministers who drafted in late 1923 the Auburn Affirmation, a plea for tolerance after the General Assembly ordered an investigation of the First Church. The Affirmation affirmed what it called the “facts and doctrines” of evangelical Christianity – that God redeemed the world through the death of Jesus; that Jesus rose from the dead; that the Bible was inspired – but also stated that different believers had different “satisfactory explanations” for these “facts and doctrines.” This distinction was in its own way a definition of evangelicalism,

31 Quoted in First Presbyterian Church of New York and Dr. Fosdick, 22, 23, 24-5.
32 Harry Emerson Fosdick to Delos Sprague, 20 December 1922, Fosdick Papers, series 4E, box 2, folder 3.
one which emphasized a particular way of experiencing the faith, but which separated the experience from particular propositional beliefs.

William Merrill, at the Brick Church, sent Straton an aggrieved letter after Straton attacked Merrill in the New York Post for defending Fosdick at the 1923 General Assembly; the two had also had a public exchange about the value of Straton’s Carnegie Hall debates with the Unitarian Charles Francis Potter, whom Straton assailed as the archetypical liberal Christian, representative of “Modernists . . . in the Protestant denomination who insist on staying inside and tearing down the faith of the church.” Straton said that Potter had done the right thing “when he lost his faith in Baptist and evangelical views of religion . . . left” his denomination. 33 Merrill was angry with the implication that first, Potter, a Unitarian, was an adequate representative of Protestant liberalism, and secondly that liberalism disqualified one for membership in evangelical denominations. He told Straton that “As you use the term I imagine I am not a Modernist at all.” Referring to Straton’s debates with Potter, he insisted that “that neither one of your could by any possibility represent the great body of liberal evangelicals (to which I and most of the people in my church belong) for they hold loyally to the essential doctrines of the evangelical faith.” 34

Merrill and Straton were struggling over a contested center; both sought to define themselves as representative of the evangelical mainstream and paint the other as an extremist. Indeed, while Straton and other fundamentalists sought to tie Potter around the collective necks of Fosdick, Merrill, and New York’s other liberal evangelicals, Merrill, in The Presbyterian warned of both Straton and Potter, saying that “these extremists” each stood “representing only

his point of view.” He then took a step similar to that of the First Church, and emphasized that evangelical bona fides should be defined not in terms of doctrinal litmus tests, but rather in the practical results of one’s ministry. As he said, “I am simply a minister who is honestly trying in his life and preaching and ministry to be as true a Christian as he can, who believes in and loves and delights to preach the Word of God.”

This lived experience of religion, he told his congregation, in a sermon delivered in defense of Fosdick in January 1923, evinced more loyalty to the experiential and emotional heritage of evangelicalism than did the tendency he saw in fundamentalism to see “the Bible as a law book” and God “coming into relation with mankind only on the basis of arbitrary action on God’s part” to judge and dispense judgment. According to Merrill, assertions of doctrine and defense of particular theological point was not the religion that he or his parishioners experienced in their churches; indeed, he observed that “It is not often that those who worship in this church are asked to take an excursion into the theological field.” Rather, Merrill noted archly that generally his “sermon time seems all too brief and too infrequent for dealing with anything but the Gospel of Christ.” Rather, for Merrill the proclamation of that Gospel had been revised for an era in which the language of the Word had become secondary to the manner of its presentation; Merrill claimed “The Church has been built upon personal testimony and influence. Preaching, teaching, and all the other elaborate machinery of organized Christian effort has been secondary in importance or powerful only as a public means of exerting private influence.” This closely echoed Fosdick’s own sentiments; he noted in a letter to the New York Presbytery that “There have been two historic attitudes toward creedal subscription among

36 Merrill to John Roach Straton, 20 December 1923, John Roach Straton Papers, series 1075, box 15.
evangelical Christians. Some have welcomed it . . . [and then] have sought liberty from the literal meanings. . . . Others, equally evangelical, have felt that this practice is perilous to honesty and hampering to the free leadership of the Spirit.”

For Fosdick, both cases demonstrated that any sort of text could not encompass the entirety of religious experience. Merrill sympathized; of Straton’s verbal gymnastics, he said simply that the Baptist’s preaching was simultaneously “extreme and narrow.”

Bolstered by Fosdick’s insistent claim to the evangelical heritage, and the strong support the minister received from his own congregation, the committee of the New York Presbytery elected to acquit the First Church, and declared that “The first necessity of all vital and tenacious hold upon the evangelical verities, and of fruitful ministry of them, is the spirit of the Lord Jesus. It is this spirit and this alone that clarifies the atmosphere, removing the confusing, obscuring medium of suspicion, misunderstanding, and unholy anger and resentment.” In so stating, the committee threw in with Fosdick: disagreement was worse than inaccuracy; the goal to which evangelicals should look was effective ministry; and it was from such ministry, not from precise expressions of doctrine, that conversion would ultimately come.

But in such invocations as that for “the spirit of the Lord Jesus” or undefined “evangelical verities,” the Committee’s report highlighted the aspect of Fosdick’s version of evangelicalism which infuriated his critics the most: imprecision of language, the sense that the preacher as Fosdick imagined the role lacked a certain degree of confidence in the role of the pulpit. Contrary to the assertions of Fosdick and his defenders, fundamentalists had since Billy Sunday been developing the conviction that it was in fact strenuous proclamation of the Gospel

39 Quoted in The First Presbyterian Church of New York and Dr. Fosdick (New York: First Presbyterian Church, 1924) 39.
40 Quoted in “The Fundamentalist Controversy,” 779.
41 Quoted in The Fosdick Case, 16.
that brought about salvation. Fosdick’s dissembling, then, was not merely annoying; it was
metaphysically corruptive. As the editors of the conservative *The Presbyterian* put it,
commenting on the deficiencies of Fosdick, “The Christian minister according to the word of
God and our Standards, is not so much a seeker after truth as a herald of truth.”42 Fosdick’s
pulpit style, with his emphasis on problem-solving and counseling, seemed to these critics to be
mere temporizing. J. Gresham Machen famously claimed that while listening to Fosdick preach
“one has the feeling that traditional language is being strained to become the expression of
totally alien ideas.”43 This was a common complaint, and it got to the heart of what
fundamentalists believed was critical about evangelical ministry and what was inadequate about
liberal evangelicalism.

For fundamentalists, the function of preaching was to revise the world of the hearer, to
strip away the merely visible world around them and present to them the truth of their situation
as fallen beings in need of redemption through Jesus Christ. That is, they expected that language
could convey facts about the world with enough power to impress conviction upon their hearers.
Fundamentalists generally held (as did Haldeman and Machen) to a penal substitution theory of
the atonement (which maintained that Christ’s suffering was the punishment due human beings
for their sins) and taught that the suffering on the Cross, the Virgin Birth, and a literal
resurrection were essential aspects of human redemption because they were true descriptions of
the human condition. Therefore, these things had to be expounded to audiences before
conversion could be gained. Haldeman declared that “if Christ did not rise preaching is in vain.
Deny the bodily resurrection of Christ and you make the preaching of Christ of no more value

than empty sound, of no more value than shifting sand and blowing winds.”

Fosdick, who declared that Jesus was a “living Lord,” and yet who did not believe in a literal resurrection, baffled Haldeman most with his serenity; it seemed inconceivable that he could state both things at once. And thus Haldeman took his fellow Baptist for a hypocrite, one whose preaching had the form but not the content of godliness. And thus, said Haldeman, “It is this subtle use of orthodox phrases, while in his heart of hearts he does not believe in the facts these phrases express which renders Dr Fosdick so actually dangerous.”

He professed to deliver the Word of God but actually gave a shallow counterfeit.

Haldeman had been among the first to raise such warnings, but in the wake of the Presbytery’s acquittal of the First Church, other fundamentalists howled. They began to sharpen Haldeman’s critique and protested that the decision to allow Fosdick or the First Church to go unpunished was to drain the prophetic voice from of what made New York evangelism vital. The power of the evangelical pulpit depended upon the preacher stating certain truths with confidence, confidence both in the veracity of the claim and in the ability of language to embody and accurately describe such truths. Soon after the New York Presbytery’s committee announced its findings, Walter Buchanan, pastor of the Broadway Presbyterian Church, decided to take the matter in hand. Buchanan declared “I will say I am a Fundamentalist,” and insisted “it has been my privilege throughout the years to bear witness to the infallible Word of God.”

He and other New York fundamentalists held a rally in protest, and Buchanan took the pulpit to describe the precise deficiencies in Fosdick’s evangelicalism. He contrasted Fosdick with himself to advocate for an evangelical piety based upon the embrace of sacred language in all its

45 Haldeman, A Review, 59, 86.
forms. Buchanan liked to recall “with reverent delight” that “Sabbath afternoons I was required to commit to memory long passages of scripture;” that he was “brought up on the Westminster Shorter Catechism.” He was distressed that Sunday schools like those at Union Seminary or, eventually, Fosdick’s Riverside Church, were setting aside such catechizing, “I am sorry for the boys and girls of today who have not had like precious privilege.”

The deeper problem with Fosdick, then, than mere lack of belief was the Baptist’s capacity for dissembling, his hazy commitment to clarity, and his ability to wrap his heresies in pious but bland rhetoric. In contrast, to his own firm grounding in the sonorous phrases of the Confession and the Gospels, Buchanan scored Fosdick for “vague language,” for a voice “uncertain and couched in language without any clear declaration of belief,” nebulous, if eloquent, but also noted wryly of the letter the New York Presbytery cited that “There was evidently no desire on the part of Dr Fosdick to use language that could not be misunderstood.” He protested most of all the Presbytery’s seemingly naïve embrace of Fosdick’s own claims; it was with a note of frustration that Buchanan pled that Fosdick “was accepted as evangelical because he called himself evangelical.” To Buchanan, the claim was an inch deep; self-evidently false, and it seemed inconceivable to him that an evangelical panel would allow the claim to pass and loosen the borders of what “evangelical” meant.

To Buchanan, as to several other conservative Presbyterians – most notably Machen - Presbyterianism’s emphasis upon tradition and institution made it a particular bulwark in defense against liberalism. The Westminster Confession functioned as a sort of pseudo-scripture,

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49 This tendency is sometimes called “confessionalism;” its most able advocate is D. G. Hart, particularly his Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the crisis of conservative Protestantism in modern America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994). For Hart, confessionalism is distinct from fundamentalism.
clarifying, explaining, and elaborating on the Bible; he treasured it precisely because it offered
the sort of clear proclamations which sparked evangelical conversion, though he insisted it was
not an interpretation, but merely a consolidation, of the information contained in Scripture. He
declared that Fosdick’s sermon was “judged by many to be contrary not only to the doctrine of
the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church, but also to those of historical and evangelical
Christianity, and thus repudiates the glorious history of Scriptural testimony by the Presbyterian
Church in all its history,” neatly collapsing the Confession, scripture, and the historic experience
of the church into a single authority.\textsuperscript{50} For fundamentalists, there was no such thing as
interpretation of holy texts; merely their repetition. It was precisely this which gave them their
power.

Men like van Dyke and Merrill, on the other hand, turned to Presbyterian traditionalism
to invoke a romantic and aesthetic sensibility that could compensate for their lost of faith in
language; indeed, Merrill delivered a sermon which defended the “spiritual and vital character”
of the Confession, which, he insisted, recognized “the more religious a truth is, the more difficult
it is to state it in precise terms.”\textsuperscript{51} But for Buchanan, Presbyterianism’s official adherence to the
Westminster Confession meant that Presbyterian evangelicalism itself was irreducibly verbal.
Buchanan repeatedly declared of Fosdick’s phrases that “To Presbyterians and Evangelicals this
vague language” would inevitably be objectionable and distasteful. Further allowing Fosdick’s
voice, Buchanan insisted in the end, inevitably “minimizes the historic witnessing of the
Presbyterian Church to the evangelical doctrines of Christianity.”\textsuperscript{52} If the Church could not
witness it could not gain converts; a church that could not witness was no longer evangelical.
Indeed, a few years after the Fosdick controversy Buchanan organized several dozen other

\textsuperscript{50} Buchanan, “The Fosdick Case,” 28.
\textsuperscript{51} Merrill, “Comprehensive Creed of the Presbyterians,” 2, 5.
\textsuperscript{52} Buchanan, “The Fosdick Case,” 39, 11.
Presbyterian ministers in New York and Philadelphia into what he called “The Presbyterian League of Faith,” an organization dedicated to the defense of a number of traditional doctrines and the Presbyterian polity, with the aim of, as the charter put it, “To encourage the vigorous defense and joyous propagation of the Gospel in its fullness as it is set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith on the basis of Holy Scripture.” The proclamation of the gospel was inseparable from the particular verbal forms it took.

Another local minister concurred. Charles Hillman Fountain, a Baptist in nearby Plainfield, New Jersey did not formally subscribe to a creed like the Westminster Confession, but he treated it as did Buchanan with the Confession, or Haldeman with secondary works on Cyrus Scofield’s dispensationalism: as an abstract of the Bible, a systematization rather than a separate document: as he defended the “five points,” for instance, he claimed they “are not an addition to nor an interpretation of the Westminster Confession, as is charged by the modernists. They are all contained in that Confession.” Fountain, then, was like Buchanan and Haldeman an ardent defender of the importance of verbal proclamations of faith. His pamphlet, *The Case Against Dr. Fosdick*, began with a declaration that indicated that it reflected this purpose: “We trust that all who read what is written herein may come to know and to understand – if such is not already the case – Who He was, and for what purpose, and at what price, He redeemed them.” That is, Fountain intended for his polemic to be understood as a sermon in its own right, a proclamation of the Word as effective as Fosdick’s preaching was not. And indeed, Fountain structured it with the rolling cadence and rhythms of the pulpit, using alliteration, repetition, and returning over and over to the charge that “Thus the teaching and preaching of Dr. Fosdick in regard to our Lord’s Atoning Work [or the Second Coming, or the Virgin Birth] does not conform to the

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55 Fountain, *The Case Against Dr. Fosdick*, 2.
Standards of the Presbyterian Church . . . he must either publically repudiate what he has taught in this sermon and preach unequivocally the doctrine and fact . . .

Like Buchanan had, Fountain targeted Fosdick’s claim to be an evangelical, and snorted at Fosdick’s pleas that he had been misrepresented; “Dr Fosdick himself is responsible for the widespread impression that he is a Unitarian under the mask of an evangelical Christian,” Fountain stated. This was not simply because Fosdick preached false doctrine; it was because he used language in ways that did not correspond to evangelicalism as Fountain understood it. The report of the Committee and Fosdick’s letters prepared in his own defense were “a clever piece of camouflage designed to make people believe he teaches the doctrines of grace signified by the wonderful words that describe the Person and Work of our Lord.” But when Fosdick invoked words like “grace” and “incarnation” and “resurrection,” Fountain said he was intentionally misleading his audience: “These words are used in a sense . . . which is the very opposite of the doctrines which have always been signified by them.” Though he gave lip service to the notion that language was “imperfect,” Fountain’s protest here revealed the close identification between the metaphysical reality of the Christian universe and the language used to describe it; the words signified reality, and that was what made them powerful. Therefore, Fountain insisted that “Honesty in the use of language – to say what we mean and to mean what we say – is not least important with regard to religious language (and especially in our approach to Almighty God).” This ran precisely counter to Fosdick’s often-repeated belief that religious experience could be described in different ways at different times, and that the good preacher would – and must - adapt his method of delivery to promote that experience at any given time.

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56 Fountain, The Case Against Dr Fosdick, 11, 14, 17, passim.
57 Fountain, The Case Against Dr Fosdick, 19, 17.
And this got to the heart of it; for Fountain, Fosdick’s preaching was a failure; rather than preaching Christ, Fountain said, Fosdick delivered a “eulogy” for Jesus. Fosdick’s Jesus “lies buried in the dust beneath the Syrian stars” and did not have the power to inflict salvation, because Fosdick’s preaching, Fountain said, did not invite his hearers into the sort of living relationship with the divine that characterized orthodox sermons. Repeatedly, Fountain characterized Fosdick’s position on various points as a matter of trusting Jesus or refusing to do so; “The Saviour taught that he would come again on the clouds of heaven and commanded us to watch for His return,” Fountain wrote. “The professor rejects this teaching and does not obey this command. He does not believe the Lord’s words.” For Fountain, as for other fundamentalists, to read and to preach God’s Word was to engage in an immediate interaction with deity, and that was the defining characteristic of the evangelical experience. On the issue of the Second Coming, for instance, Fountain wrote, “Fundamentalists or evangelicals believe He was trustworthy in this matter. Liberals or modernists say He was not trustworthy; He was mistaken.”58 The relationship with Christ Fosdick offered was a façade.

Fosdick was particularly dangerous, then, because he offered a religion that, as J. Greshem Machen said, was “not Christianity at all.”59 But it was not so merely because Fosdick preached slippery doctrine, but because of the false forms of piety which Fosdick offered: “It is his eulogistic portrayal of the character of Christ, his emphasis on the ethics of Christianity in words of eloquence, and often in words of Scripture, while denying or ignoring the Supernatural, that leads many who are not instructed in the things of God to believe that he is exalting the divine Lord and Saviour of the New Testament.”60 His Christianity was actually the practice of ethics; his preaching was the performance of the stage, and he sent his audiences home thinking

58 Fountain, The Case Against Dr Fosdick, 10-11.
59 Machen, Christianity and Liberalism, 6.
60 Fountain, The Case Against Dr Fosdick, 11.
they had heard the gospel, but in fact, the true salvation that the Word of God offered was void and null in his words completely. But of course, Fosdick would have insisted that these very things could in fact bring conversion.

The struggle over the term “evangelical,” then, was not simply a struggle over belief; it was a pitched battle over who properly was administering salvation. Fosdick was the heir of the expanded sacramentalism of New York liberal Christianity; like other liberal evangelicals, he had come to understand the reach of God’s grace to extend through mediums other than the traditional sermon and scripture. He trusted in the force of his own personality and in the righteous and practical daily lives which his sermons urged upon his congregations; his Christianity found salvation through the application of God’s grace in the routines of daily living.

Fosdick’s convictions about the nature of conversion ensured that the controversies surrounding Fosdick did not end when he voluntarily resigned from the pulpit of the First Church in 1925, having refused the General Assembly’s offer that he become a Presbyterian, an attempt at compromise which outraged fundamentalists and which Fosdick was wary of. As he wrote to Henry Sloane Coffin expressing his discomfort with Presbyterian subscription to the Westminster Confession, “I simply do not talk your language about theological subscription. I read what you say, not so much disagreeing with it as not understanding it . . . . I will not in middle life, with my eyes open, walk into the hands of an extra-congregational authority with power over my liberty.”61 The letter expressed precisely Fosdick’s convictions about evangelicalism: the tenuous connection, if any, he perceived between religious experience and

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61 On this decision, see Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 133-144. Harry Emerson Fosdick to Henry Sloane Coffin, 11 December 1924, Henry Sloane Coffin Papers, Box 1, folder 1.2 Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
written language, and a firm insistence upon the principle of liberty of conscience. Both lay at
the foundation of the new church Fosdick would raise on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

Even while Fosdick was under fire from the Presbyterians, John D. Rockefeller, patron of
liberal Baptists in the city, was pressuring him to accept a call from the Park Avenue Baptist
Church. Fosdick agreed to take the position after his official obligations to the First Church
expired, and when Rockefeller stipulated that he would fund the construction of a new church in
Morningside Heights in northwest Manhattan, to which the Park Avenue congregation would
move. Fosdick announced this church would reject Baptist tradition of baptism by immersion
and instead practice open membership: baptism by immersion, sprinkling, or even no baptism at
all. As Fosdick put it in a letter to Edward Ballard, chair of the Park Avenue Board of Trustees,
“any one joining with us on confession of faith for the first time might be immersed, sprinkled,
or (if Quaker scruples are present) welcomed on verbal confession, as each individually might
choose.” He had already closely paraphrased these sentiments in his farewell sermon to the First
Presbyterian Church, but the declaration that Fosdick intended to apply the policy upon a
congregation of Baptists, for whom baptism of the believer by immersion was a fundamental part
of their self-identification, resulted in outrage. Ivy Lee again published a pamphlet, stating
Fosdick’s position with gusto, and some 15% of Park Avenue’s 700 members resigned, and
again Fosdick came under the fire of his fellow New York City ministers.62

Throughout 1925, Fosdick defended his reasoning. “If I had my way baptism would be
altogether an individual affair,” he had said in his farewell address, and as he began to lay plans
for his new church, to be called the Riverside Church, he expanded upon this idea. Just as
Fosdick believed that the particular descriptions of Jesus’s miracles in the New Testament were

62 Harry Emerson Fosdick to Edward Ballard, 17 April 1925, Fosdick Papers, series 4A, box 1, folder 1. See also
Fosdick, “The Farewell Sermon of Dr Harry Emerson Fosdick,” 19. For numbers, Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick,
164.
attempts to capture ineffable religious experience in what he called “the mental categories of Biblical times,” so did he believed that baptism itself was a particular ritual expressing a timeless religious experience in a form bound by time and history. As he wrote of the early church “baptism had been a Jewish rite” which the earliest Christians adopted to signify their rebirth into the life Jesus offered. He thus saw no reason why it could not be abandoned or modified in a way more meaningful to the lives of present evangelical Christians; as he asked over the pulpit, “Why should things like baptism divide?” Instead, Fosdick emphasized that his church would follow a more meaningful route to define who was in fact an evangelical Christian: he stated that Riverside would offer “A free opening of membership to all disciples of Jesus Christ, “This would mean that any one who accepts Christ as the revelation of God and the ideal of man may come into full and equal membership.”

Such a decision had important ramifications. For centuries, membership in Reformed Protestant churches – which most Baptist churches traditionally were - had not been open to any who simply wanted to join; rather, membership was contingent upon a demonstration that one had undergone a conversion experience and could profess faith. This was why revivalists like Sunday handed out decision cards to be filled out by the converted and passed along to the local churches; it was why most churches required those who wished to enter to make a profession of faith, and to engage in some sort of ritual – frequently baptism – which would be a public declaration of their conversion experience. But this was true also for Fosdick: in his own mind, though he recognized the aesthetic and traditional value of baptism, he wanted to provide

64 Harry Emerson Fosdick, Christianity and Progress (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1922) 161.
65 Fosdick to Ballard, 17 April 1925.
66 For such requirements among the evangelical churches of New York, see The Manual of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church (New York: The Church, 1856) 8-10, which describes the “public manner” in which the confession and baptism are to be administered; Manual of the First Presbyterian Church (New York: The Church, 1904) 59.
the Riverside Church with a way of recognizing, promoting, and celebrating evangelical conversion that seemed more in keeping with the place and time in which his Christians found themselves.

Isaac Haldeman assaulted the proposal not merely in defense of Baptist tradition, but because he believed that tradition was ultimately rooted in the verbal character of God’s Word. He attacked not only Fosdick’s decision to accept other forms of baptism, but rather, Fosdick’s willingness to have an open church with no baptism at all. Haldeman declared that “There is no record in Scripture of an unbaptized church.” This was significant both because it indicated that for Haldeman fidelity to baptism was a means of enacting Scripture in the present, of worshiping in a manner that embodied the Word. And indeed, though he insisted that “Baptism does not save,” it was more than merely a symbol to him. As Haldeman declared, “water, each time that it is mentioned in Scripture in connection with the Spirit, signifies the word of truth energized by the Spirit, and is the declaration that the Word of God is the instrument in regeneration, while the Spirit is the agent.” Baptism, then, was a signifier of the Word, its visible manifestation: Haldeman claimed that “each time the ordinance is performed, it is the declaration that all who have fallen asleep in Christ shall be raised.” This was why it was essential that it be by immersion: to sprinkle or pour the symbol of the sleep of death seemed to him “the climax of all utter meaninglessness, of all repudiation of sequence of doctrine or value of words.” Immersion alone preserved the close correspondence between verbal truth and its reenactment in the world. And though Haldeman’s insistence upon the embodiment of language in behavior here echoed the adaptation of the verbal Word to other forms liberal evangelicals had pursued,

67 Isaac Haldeman, “The question of the order: or baptism in relation to the Lord’s Supper” (New York: First Baptist Church, nd) 6.
68 Isaac Haldeman, “Baptism and Close Communion” (New York: First Baptist Church, nd) 3.
Haldeman was aware of the danger, and emphasized that it was not salvific in and of itself; rather, it was a commandment, “the issue of obedience to confession.” That is, the verbal proclamation of Christ “by the mouth” was linked in the narratives and commandments of Scripture to baptism; enactment was the affirmation and fulfillment of spoken confession.  

Fosdick’s failure to do these things marked him to Haldeman again as a disbeliever in the gospel. As he said, “The gospel order is: Hear, Believe, Be Baptized, and Break Bread.”  

The Riverside Church Fosdick promised violated this order; therefore it was not a gospel church, an evangelical church. For an “unbaptized church,” one which did not engage in believer’s baptism upon confession to “set up the table of the Lord’s Supper” was to “form an assembly on the ground of disorder” rather than the “order thus laid down in the New Testament.” It was to be an “unscriptural” church. Haldeman rejected Fosdick’s appeals for “communion” or pleas for “the unity of the body” as sentimental excuses that did not reflect the true purpose of worship. “Nowhere,” he said, “are we taught in the Word that the church meets around the table to commune with one another.”  

Fosdick, however, was comfortable with the adaptations to evangelical piety which he was making, because he believed that the Riverside Church was actually proclaiming the gospel in a way more effective than Haldeman’s tradition. In one of his last sermons at Old First, Fosdick told the congregation that a key question to ask when one was wondering about their own faith was “Does faith in God make a significantly practical difference to our daily life?” This was nothing so shallow as the accusation voiced by many fundamentalists that liberal Christians believed that the gospel was nothing more than an imperative to do social work; Fosdick in the same sermon invoked the importance of spiritual experience, declaring that “If the

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living God exists, then these deep and transforming experiences tell us the truth.” But he also declared that “Faith in God makes a difference in your capacity to believe in and sacrifice for social ideals on the earth,” and that it was in the enaction of this faith that such experiences might be gained. That is, not only could, as many other liberal evangelicals were teaching, social services promote faith, but willingness to contribute, to serve, could also be a sign of it, as much as baptism might be.

In late 1924, the indefatigable Ivy Lee engaged Fosdick in a long discussion about what the Riverside Church would ultimately look like, and Fosdick elaborated on these convictions. New York, he said, was “the city where the largest opportunities to influence the world abound,” and thus the church must have “daring and bigness of program [to] strike the imagination in a way that it is entirely impossible” for any other church in the city to do – because those other churches were bound by the restrictions of tradition, denomination, and old ways of doing things. New York needed more, and Fosdick, in rejecting baptism as the condition for membership, opened the door to what that more would be: the Riverside Church would be “placing in the foreground the condition of membership in the church, consent to enter the ranks of some one department of the work of the church.” This would illustrate “the validity of Christian faith as illustrated by actions rather than words, by Christian service rather than verbal consent to a creed.”

In short, the Riverside Church would be the practical and formal distillation of that liberal theology which had been gestating since Charles Briggs; a theology which invested the metaphysical force of evangelical devotion, the religious passions and experiences that brought conversion and salvation, into the social efforts of a congregation. As Fosdick described

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74 Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Belief in God,” The Church Tower 1:12 (November 1924) 5, 7, 24.
75 Harry Emerson Fosdick, quoted in Ivy Lee, “The Fosdick Church.” (Fall 1924) 1, 3. Fosdick Papers, Series 4A, box 1, folder 2. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
Riverside’s revolution: “The words of Christ in gathering his disciples – Follow thou me – should be taken in a somewhat more literal sense than the church has taken these words when receiving persons into membership.” 76 To sum up this aim in a scripturally resonant way, Fosdick became fond of the word “discipleship,” and repeatedly used it to describe the mission of the Riverside Church; he once succinctly summarized that mission as: “To win human lives to personal discipleship to Christ.” “Disciple,” he said, “means learner,” and thus to promote discipleship among the congregation of Riverside was to “make real to them Christianity’s intellectual meanings, its spiritual resources, and its ethical applications, and to challenge them to carry out this discipleship as a practical way of individual and social living.” He thus reoriented the mission of the Riverside church pulpit, characteristically downplaying the worth of his own preaching and instead emphasizing that “To this end the ideal of the pulpit is to maintain a teaching ministry.” 77 For Fosdick, as for the Union School, to be made Christian was becoming a process of education, and the process of education was one best done without words.

Since these accomplishments were possible only through enaction Fosdick embraced the chance to absorb the Union School of Religion when Coffin closed it down. He agreed that the Union School needed to be returned to Christocentrism, but he also agreed wholeheartedly with its methods. “Children learn primarily not by verbal indoctrination but by personal imitation and social contagion,” he insisted. Thus, “the church aims to bring children into as extensive contact with the church as is possible,” to have children involved in the activities, service, and celebrations of the church community. 78 But this was not only true for children; Fosdick also, when he announced the church’s official “educational and recreational opportunities for adults,”

76 Ibid.
77 Harry Emerson Fosdick, “The Objectives of the Riverside Church,” 1. Fosdick Papers, Series 4A, box1, folder 2. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
informed his congregation that “Anybody who fails to enter into some human fellowship, who does not become aware of a fuller life, is missing the most fundamental opportunities which the church and its several organizations seek to make available.” The “fuller life,” the deepened spiritual experience which evangelical religion offered, was here identified with the extracurricular work of service and education which the church offered.79

In the end, Fosdick and the Park Avenue Church compromised on baptism, but perhaps only because Fosdick believed the issue not of vast importance, but also because of consistent pressure both locally and nationally. As early as March 1925, before Fosdick had taken the pulpit at Park Avenue, John Roach Straton was raising protests in the New York Baptist Ministers’ Conference, which had voted to send Fosdick a declaration of support.80 And as late as 1927, after ground had been broken on the Riverside Church, Fosdick proposed that the sermon might be usefully supplemented with a Catholic-style confessional. This was hardly new in his conception of evangelical ministry, but Straton’s hackles were raised, and he stated “If it should ever come to a choice whether I would stand with the Catholics or the Fosdick type of Protestant, I would go over to the Catholics, bag and baggage.” At least, Straton believed, the Catholics were forthright about their beliefs; Fosdick professed to be a Baptist, but seemed a crypto-Catholic to fundamentalists, who suspected him of teaching salvation through works.81

Furthermore, there was a great deal of discord in the Northern Baptist Convention in the middle 1920s, though it was never as strong as that in the Presbyterian General Assembly, and eventually, the Park Avenue Church agreed that while they would insist on maintaining open

79 “Educational and Recreational Opportunities for Adults, Fall 1933,” Fosdick Papers, Series 4A, box 2, folder 9. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
membership and welcoming Christians who did not wish to be baptized by immersion, they would not sprinkle. The June 1925 Northern Baptist Convention had rebuffed resolutions submitted by Straton and the Minneapolis fundamentalist William Bell Riley calling for the Convention to exclude churches that practiced open membership, but it had passed a resolution expressing “sorrow” at Fosdick’s proposals. In May 1926 the elders of the church sent a letter to the Northern Baptist Convention, expressing bafflement that a resolution passed in the 1925 convention seemed “under the belief that the Park Avenue Church was planning a campaign of propaganda, with the intention of materially altering the practice of the denomination in respect to baptism.” This, the elders assured the Convention, was not the case, and though the Park Avenue Church still believed that Fosdick’s pastorate was “an opportunity for doing a larger work for the kingdom of God in the city of New York . . . the Park Avenue Church has no intention of practicing sprinkling.”

Fosdick himself spent much of 1925 and 1926 in Europe, and his letters to his contacts in New York and elsewhere reveal that his very conviction that the particular forms of baptism were of less importance than other issues enabled him to compromise. As he wrote to his secretary in May 1926, “alternative forms of baptism are the only reasonable method of handling the situation, but to have carried the Park Ave Church out of the denomination on the issue before I was even in the saddle there would have crippled my work from the start with a badly split congregation and the bitter resentment of liberals and conservatives alike.”

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83 Elders of the Park Avenue Baptist Church to the Northern Baptist Convention, 17 May 1926, Fosdick Papers, series 2A, box 7, folder 17. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
84 Harry Emerson Fosdick to secretary, 25 May 1926, Fosdick Papers, series 4A, box 1, folder 7. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
began his pastorate at Park Avenue Church in October of 1926, and baptized two men in his first service, both by immersion.⁸⁵

His willingness to compromise illustrates a final impulse characteristic of the liberal evangelicalism which he and so many other New York ministers had helped to form: a particular emphasis upon the sacred nature of the unity of the church. Fundamentalists like Haldeman and Straton repeatedly emphasized the Baptist tradition of reliance upon scripture, as Straton did when he informed Fosdick that “You still wear the Baptist name but you have betrayed the Baptist cause by your denial of the inspiration of God’s Word,” or Haldeman when he expressed hope that “the rising generation of Baptist preachers” would embrace “the dignity and the definiteness of the Word.”⁸⁶ But Fosdick and the Park Avenue Church emphasized a counter-tradition, equally rooted in Baptist heritage of “soul liberty,” or what the Church’s elders called “the Baptist principle of individual freedom and responsibility.”⁸⁷ Fosdick declared of “Religious Liberty” that “Such was the genius of the Baptist movement in its origin. Each individual believer was free from creedal subscription to interpret the Gospel for himself.” The firm foundation of the Riverside Church was its effort at “carrying these principles into present-day application.”⁸⁸ Practically, the notion of soul liberty was the root of Fosdick’s determination to embrace open membership, to accept diverse forms of initiation, and, at the same time, uneasily, his desire to remain in communion with the Northern Baptist Convention, “its historic denominational affiliation without in the least sacrificing its autonomy.” This would allow

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⁸⁵ Harry Emerson Fosdick to John D. Rockefeller, 5 October 1926, Fosdick Papers, Series 2A, box 8, folder 20. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.


Riverside to both “maintain its association with the churches of Christ” while at the same time striving toward Fosdick’s vision: “the union of all disciples in one body . . . on the basis not of uniform opinion but of individual liberty.”

Fosdick had been struggling toward this balance his entire career: he sought simultaneously the evangelical dream of a city unified and its achievement through the lines of experience and practice which liberal evangelicalism had laid down, but also, in some measure, to accommodate the cultural pluralism which the Union School of Religion had confronted. As he declared, “a solitary Christianity is practically impossible, the church aims at deepening the sense of unity among its members.” And it sought this through a diversity of Christian practice: “services of worship of many kinds, suited to differing temperaments and needs; congregational gatherings, both with and without sermon and other group meetings in which worship, communal prayer, interaction and discussion have their place . . .” Fosdick rejected the excesses of the Union School and stood staunchly for a sensibility rooted in Christianity, but he also saw liberalism’s emphasis upon practice and devotion as a way to throw the doors of Christianity as wide as possible: to recognize the city’s cultural landscapes not as territory for subjection and conquest, but places in which the seeds of Christianity were already rooted, and needed only nourishment.

Fosdick himself recognized how far he was pushing the Northern Baptist Convention with his proposals for sprinkling, open membership, and so on, and from that perspective, he appeared radical indeed. He expressed his surprise to his secretary upon receiving report from his friend Charles Gilkey that the Convention had not blinked at Riverside’s proposal to accept open membership, noting wryly that “I can understand Gilkey’s surprised delight at getting open

89 Ibid.
membership admitted to respectability by a national convention of American Baptists.\footnote{91} He consistently emphasized his desire to bridge gaps between all types of Christians. For instance, he frequently expressed admiration for Quakers, saying “I feel myself of such close kin to them,” and expressing happiness at the “coming into our membership of a family where the husband has behind him three hundred years of uninterrupted Quaker ministry in his heritage,” and nothing he hoped the man would help introduce Quaker practices to Riverside.\footnote{92} Soon he established a time and place for Quaker meetings at the church.\footnote{93} He pointed to the Riverside Guild, the youth drama club, as a model: “Catholic, Protestant and Jew sit side by side; Liberals and Fundamentalists sing the same hymns; Theists and Humanists join in the same prayers. Naturally it is uncommonly difficult to attain any unity of spiritual experience and to achieve a sense of group communion.”\footnote{94}

But as Fosdick and the Union School, driven by a confidence in practice, were moving toward inclusivity of pluralism, the city’s fundamentalists were moving in the opposite direction. At First Baptist Church, in 1920, the congregation voted to withdraw from the Northern Baptist Convention because it encouraged churches to join the Interchurch World Movement, which “talks more about the Christ who lived on earth than the Christ who died on the Cross” and “seeks to turn the churches into community centers, to be interested in all that may interest the community, while the scripture demands the church shall come out, be separate from the community.” Fifteen years later, as Fosdick was settling into a long pastorate at Riverside in the early 1930s, First Baptist tightened its rolls, dropping nearly half its membership (most of whom had lost contact with the church) and established new laws of membership, requiring

91 Harry Emerson Fosdick to secretary, 25 May 1926.
93 This is described in Fosdick, “Objectives of the Riverside Church,” 4.
“satisfactory evidence of having received the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Saviour,” or letters “only from Churches of like faith and practice.”  

At the same time, John McComb, who had replaced Walter Buchanan at the Broadway Presbyterian Church, discovered that a member who had requested a letter of dismissal – normally a courtesy granted to congregants moving from the area which could be presented to another congregation for admittance – intended to join Riverside, he sent her a terse note: “We do not grant letters of dismission to churches that do not believe that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God, and that deny the infallibility of God’s Word . . . We shall drop your name from our rolls, and pray that God will reveal to you the truth of Ephesians 5:11.” In pencil, to emphasize the point, McComb scrawled a paraphrase of the verse: “And have no fellowship with the unfaithful works of darkness.”

Fosdick, for his part, announced that at the Riverside Church “Letters are accepted from any other Christian church whatever.”

But despite his optimistic declarations of unity and his desire to fuse the aims of liberal evangelicals with New York’s cultural pluralism, Fosdick found himself repeatedly drawing boundaries which would protect his vision. For instance, on a Saturday in February 1936, the African American religious leader Father Divine, who claimed to be an incarnation of God and had a large following in Harlem, appeared at Riverside Church with an entourage. While presumably there to attend a regularly scheduled meeting of a committee of relief workers, as the meeting ended Divine’s followers formed an ad hoc choir and began to sing hymns. Father

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95 Minutes of the First Baptist Church of the City of New York, 25 April 1920, 213-4; 4 October 1935, 423; 10 May 1935, 415. Archives of the First Baptist Church of the City of New York.
96 John McComb to Marjorie Falling, 12 April 1938, Fosdick Papers, series 4A, box 1, folder 1. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
Divine himself began to preach to the bemused onlookers in the church, upon which Fosdick ordered the man to leave. 98

The boundaries of acceptable religious practice in Riverside were not drawn to include Father Divine. Fosdick objected to the man’s interruption of the immediate work of the Riverside Church: namely, the social relief efforts the committee met to discuss. But the particular form of Divine’s interruption was relevant as well: he interfered with the regular practices of the Riverside Church with an appeal to the sort of ecstatic worship common in his Harlem services: extemporaneous preaching, rollicking song. Like the deacons of Calvary Baptist, when confronted with worship reminiscent of African American Pentecostalism, Fosdick reached his limit; he was less tolerant for such charisma than was John Roach Straton. As Fosdick reported to a “Miss Herkimer,” the committee’s chairwoman, the administration of the Riverside Church hoped “that our desire to keep him from speaking in The Riverside Church did not too greatly invade your own program . . . he was concerned primarily with getting the background of The Riverside Church for a personal experience.” 99 That is, Fosdick believed that Divine was a showman and a publicity seeker who sought to use the platform of Riverside for his own aggrandizement.

Though Fosdick shared many of the cultural assumptions about race in his time, he was in the 1930s involved in anti-discrimination efforts and Riverside had, as one historian puts it, “never drawn the color line;” though its initial congregation was primarily professional and white, it employed black members of the choir, its administration administered tongue lashings

99 Fosdick to Herkimer, 3 February 1936; on Riverside’s racial history, see Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 449-463; Curtiss Paul DeYoung and Michael O. Emerson, United By Faith: the multiracial congregation as an answer to the problem of race (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 78-81.
to members who protested those choir members, and Mordecai Johnson, the Africa-American president of Howard University, occasionally served as a substitute in the pulpit. Fosdick was well aware that where Riverside sat in Morningside Heights it was surrounded by the Harlem churches: Father Divine’s Peace Missions, the innumerable storefront Pentecostal churches; when he confessed that “We have very few colored members,” he believed it to be because “We should have thought that an invasion of the membership of the colored churches... our membership [is open] to colored people whose allegiance naturally belongs to us.”100 That is, the lines here were not between race, but between ways of religious practice: those who found worship like Divine’s charisma appealing simply vastly outnumbered in the African American community those who preferred Riverside. And Fosdick was content with the situation, but his equanimity belied the racial limits of his evangelical dream.

A.R. Kepler, a missionary in China, wrote to Fosdick with a query that illustrated the delicate balance the Riverside Church sought to maintain in another field. Kepler was blunt: “I recently had a conversation with a member of your church who informed me that Mohanmedans, Jews, Buddhists, and Unitarians could be members of your Church,” he said.101 That Kepler could plausibly entertain the notion demonstrates the challenges Fosdick was up against as he sought to maintain a liberal evangelical Christianity in his church; he could cry for tolerance, but the very plea seemed to many to imply that he went too far. In his reply he called Kepler’s information “strange news,” and insisted that his church did in fact require new members to confess faith in Jesus Christ. However, he offered caveats: “Our definition of a Christian,

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100 Quoted in Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 463.
101 AR Kepler to Harry Emerson Fosdick, 6 January 1937, Fosdick Papers, series 4A, box 1, folder 2. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
However, is very broad and we should certainly count the Unitarian and Universalist churches Christian churches, just as we count the Roman Catholic church a Christian church.”

This was a broad definition of Christianity indeed, one which included little essential points of doctrine and instead focused almost entirely on conduct. And indeed, Fosdick had said that “Active members should be taken into this church on the basis of their belief in Jesus Christ as guide and master and life, and the declaration of their intention to follow Him as they understand Him into some kind of Christian service.” A Buchanan or particularly a Haldeman would have bristled at the lack of description of Christ as a savior – as they would have at his welcoming of Jews and “Humanists” into the Riverside Guild - and at certain points in his career Fosdick himself would have agreed. He mused at times in the pulpit about the dangers of a church dedicated too much to organization, services, and social work, and his fear that such a church would eventually forget the evangelical heritage of spiritual experience and communion with God. His sermons “A Fundamentalist Sermon by a Modernist Preacher” and the more famous “The Church Must Go Beyond Modernism” revealed him to be something of a prophet, warning that while fundamentalists “did not do so many things as we do, they understood better the uses of solitude. They did not join so many committees as we do, but they understood better the meaning of prayer.” He castigated enthusiastic social reformers who made God “as a kind of chairman of the board of sponsors of our highly successful human enterprise.”

Though he believed that Christian work in the world was the path of discipleship and the best means of forming a relationship with God, and in his successful struggles with the city’s fundamentalists

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102 Fosdick to Kepler, 19 February 1937, Fosdick Papers, series 4A, box 1, folder 2. Burke Library Special Collections, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
had made his version of liberal evangelicalism the dominant faith of the city, he was well aware of how precarious an achievement that was. New York City was already full of doubters, those who believed that liberal evangelicalism was a slippery slope toward secularization. Fosdick, at least, believed that it was a battle to be fought.
Conclusion

Fosdick had expended much energy in defending the basically evangelical nature of his liberal pastoral style, and believed himself to be successful; he maintained that Riverside Church’s establishment of open membership and its ability to attract a large congregation as well as crowds of interested observers every Sunday despite the controversies fundamentalists raised meant that liberal evangelicalism had triumphed in the struggle for the term, and in the broader struggle for American culture. His confidence was strong enough that as the 1930s went on Fosdick positioned himself as a faithful critic within liberalism. In sermons like “The Church Must Go Beyond Modernism,” influenced somewhat by the neo-orthodox movement centered upon Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr of Union Seminary, he sought to establish himself as a prophet to his own tradition, challenging liberal evangelicalism to maintain vigor and a genuine commitment to the spiritual heritage of the evangelical tradition, and warning particularly that “social ethics” and questions of justice that thinkers like Niebuhr were particularly concerned with could not replace liberal evangelicalism’s strong emphasis on the transformation of human personality in the image of God.¹

Fosdick had walked a fine line, and he knew it. His methods were prescient; in the years after his retirement from Riverside, evangelicalism in New York continued to shift. In the summer of 1957, the revivalist Billy Graham followed Billy Sunday and J. Wilbur Chapman; observing the challenge of revival in New York City, he declared himself finally “ready for that” after two years of preparation, and took the city by storm.² Graham’s stern proclamation of the Word seemed to overturn Fosdick’s efforts, and his supporters triumphantly declared that the

evangelist had reasserted the evangelism of Finney and Moody; one observer argued that he “never really seemed to engage New York City . . . the sensibilities out of which he preached were still those of Charlotte.”

The art of liberal evangelicalism, which had reached its culmination in the Riverside Church, was ignored; some 35,000 declared themselves for Christ in the opening weeks; a pastor celebrated that “New Yorkers previously reticent on spiritual matters are now freely discussing religion. This will simplify the task of . . . a citywide program of visitation evangelism.”

Indeed, more evangelical groups followed Billy Graham; Youth for Christ, an evangelical fellowship targeted at young adults, received sponsorship by Calvary Baptist Church and began to organize in New York City in the 1950s as well. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, liberal evangelicals perceived Graham and his supporters as a threat to what they had made of evangelicalism; the *Christian Century*, for instance, echoed Coe and Fosdick’s criticisms of revivalism as an artificial emotional rather than truly spiritual experience, labeling Graham’s work a “fundamentalist revival;” the work not of the Holy Spirit but “canny, experienced engineers of the human condition.”

Episcopal and Congregationalist ministers in New York echoed the protests; Charles Graf of the Church of St. John’s in the Village poked fun at Graham’s “air-conditioned miracles,” while another worried that “he will leave New York more inclined than ever to equate religion not with righteousness but with a magical plan of salvation.”

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By the 1970s, Fosdick’s own heirs at Riverside, sensitive to charges of secularization and determined to reignite their own understanding of evangelicalism increasingly began to adopt the vocabulary and style of prophecy as they worked to reconcile their impulse toward social reform with the spirituality of the evangelical tradition that their ancestors had claimed, but which Graham and his followers appeared to be reclaiming. In January 1973, Earnest Campbell, Fosdick’s successor at Riverside Church preached a sermon he declared was directed at Billy Graham. Campbell brought to the attention of his congregation – and presumably also that of Graham – an open letter the evangelist had received from a pastor in Illinois, who pled with Graham to intercede with his friend Richard Nixon to stop the bombing of North Vietnam. “I beg you to raise your voice as a prophet, like Nathan of old, in protest to the President, imploring him to stop the bombing immediately,” read the telegram. Campbell declared that “The President needs a Micah, not a Zedekiah, a prophet, not a house chaplain.”

Graham’s response abjured prophecy, and sought to distance his own ministry from the concept. “I am convinced that God has called me to be a New Testament evangelist, not an Old Testament prophet!” he declared. The difference Graham saw between the two professions was striking: An evangelist, Graham said, was not “primarily a social reformer or political activist;” an evangelist was “a proclaimer of the message of God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ.”

Graham’s distinction represented the ways the definition of evangelicalism had shifted yet again in the fifty years since Fosdick’s trials. Graham did not only, as had his spiritual ancestors Straton and Billy Sunday before him, reject the sort of social reform efforts that liberal evangelicals had embraced: he also rejected their confrontational, strident style. When he

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reported receiving “grievous criticisms” from fundamentalists unhappy that he did not contend as vigorously for the faith as did they, Graham declared “We are too busy winning souls for Christ and helping build the church to go down and argue.”

For Graham, the combative style of fundamentalism no longer seemed effective: indeed, he blamed the militarism of Straton and Haldeman and the rest with hurting the cause of Christ in the past; he worried that their aggressiveness had turned off rather than appealed to the unsaved. Graham was particularly sensitive to charges that the prophetic style had led to marginalization and hampered the proclamation of the gospel. He was willing to cede the claim of prophecy to Campbell’s efforts at social reform; rather he sought to reclaim the mantle of “evangelical” itself. Further, Graham’s preaching was more reminiscent of the old romantic style than of that of the half-century which followed it: focused upon the powerful but paternal personality of Graham itself, he converted through offering comfort, steadiness, and reliability. As one observer noted, Graham “realizes that the preacher’s attitude toward rebellious sinners should be the compassion of the God who became incarnate in order to deliver them.”

At the same time he repudiated much of the fundamentalist style, Graham successfully managed to redefine evangelicalism in his own image; to equate, as one historian famously noted, being an evangelical with liking Billy Graham himself. And yet, it was more than a quip – it was an acknowledgement of Graham’s surprising success at claiming the term barely a generation after it had inspired such battles, and identifying it so fully not only with his version of evangelical theology, which emphasized that the individual was the fundamental unit of

12 George Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 6.
religious action, and emphasized a free choice for Christ, but also with his own particular style. Graham was as fiery a speaker as was Straton or Sunday, but, critically, his particular repudiation of the notion of prophecy spoke to his abandonment of the notion that New York City – or any other particular place – was an arena worth doing battle over; that the Word of God faced systematic dismantling and destruction. Rather, like Fosdick, Graham promised that embracing evangelical faith would strengthen one’s ability to deal with the trials of day to day life; he spoke of the psychological impact of conversion and cited the work of George Coe’s teacher Edwin Starbuck, and invoked the flaws and corruption of the world around him primarily as a way to speak to the “restlessness” of the souls in his audience. Graham stood as the spokesperson for the neo-evangelical movement, which successfully sought, in the immediate postwar years, to distance itself from fundamentalism and claim again something of the middle ground, emphasizing a moderate tone, renewed focus on an optimistic rather than apocalyptic gospel message, and the well-scrubbed, dynamic, and upbeat character of Graham himself. Graham succeeded because he understood that ministers like Straton had failed because of their abrasiveness; instead, he sought to embrace a robust, personality-oriented pastoralism.

But the prophetic heritage did not completely abandon New York City. Rather, it moved across the aisle. As Graham sought to renew individual piety, Harry Emerson Fosdick’s disciples picked up the mantle of New York’s prophets and focused ever more rigorously on the ability of prophetic language to invoke change in society. William Sloane Coffin had been chaplain at Yale and a civil rights activist before he was called to the pulpit of Riverside in 1977,

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and he rarely used the word “evangelical.” Instead, he routinely invoked prophets, and prophecy, words he applied to contemporaries, particularly Martin Luther King, if rarely, in modesty, to himself. By the term, Coffin meant something strikingly similar to what Straton meant; as he declared, one who proclaimed “morality rooted in the righteous will of God.”

Like Straton, Coffin expected that such proclamation would make him unpopular, but he saw another challenge which the prophetic role laid upon a minister, one that Straton had failed to recognize. Upon his acceptance of Riverside’s call, Coffin said that every minister must serve two roles: “the priestly and the prophetic,” and warned with some prescience that “if one plays a prophetic role, it’s going to mitigate against his priestly role.” The prophetic role involved being “a disturber of the peace” who brought “the congregation and the entire social order under judgment.” The priestly role, on the other hand, had to do with “pastoral duties” like ministerial counseling, spiritual nurture, and soul formation, all activities for which Coffin professed “love,” citing his experience as a chaplain at Yale.

The distinction revealed a particular understanding of where Riverside’s evangelicalism had moved: for Coffin, the matter of imposing divine judgment to a listening congregation had begun to separate itself from the task of ministering to that congregation’s welfare: their spiritual health and the proclamation of righteousness were not necessarily the same thing. While Graham similarly understood the spiritual welfare of the congregation to have emotional and psychological facets, his emphasis upon the power of the gospel upon the individual soul allowed him to bridge the gap between the two. For Coffin, the two might be at odds.

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17 Coffin, Collected Sermons, 151-2, 187-189.
18 Coffin, Collected Sermons, 127.
powerful to him than the individual experience of salvation was the gospel’s ability to invoke the reality of a radically transformed social order and inflict awareness of how far away it was upon his hearers. This was not secularism; Coffin insisted upon that. He dismissed “sensitive atheist” philosophers like Satre and Camus and invoked instead Niebuhr and Tillich as the framers of his own thinking. Indeed, he attacked the “process of secularization which gradually took over everything in the public domain” and made it possible for society to exist “without regard . . . to God.” But though Coffin recognized the pitfalls that Straton had not, he stumbled in them anyway. Coffin’s conception of evangelical piety, though it drew upon the transformative heritage of evangelical culture, was ultimately dissatisfying to his congregation, who felt that his prophetic orientation wandered out of bounds of the duties of a minister. Coffin’s spirituality existed on the grand scale, not in the devotional lives of his parishioners.

When the leaders of Riverside went seeking a minister, confessed the church’s administrator Eugene Laubach, “We were looking for somebody to stand the line of prophetic preachers . . . to stimulate some controversy.” Like the deacons of Calvary Baptist who hired Straton, Laubach had hoped that Coffin would attract new members, and he did; total attendance at Sunday services climbed more than 20,000 from the year before to the year after Coffin took office. Members of the church applauded Coffin’s willingness to “take an upbeat approach to Christian belief in a society that is secularized.” But, just as Straton attracted criticism from within his own congregation, so did Coffin. He attacked the Pentagon for being “just like Jim Jones,” leader of a small Christian sect who led his followers to mass suicide; he strongly

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20 For a contrary interpretation that argues that the “social gospel” after the 1920s was an increasing secularized, technocratic rather than spiritual, version of that of earlier advocates, see Paul Carter, The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel (Ithaca: Cornell, 1957).
21 Coffin, Collected Sermons 438, 82.
advocated nuclear disarmament, calling the nation’s development of nuclear weapons un-Christian and uncivilized. Who, he asked, “should refuse the giant vat of Pentagon poison more than the religious community?” He led rallies, encouraging his parishioners to accompany him; he visited American hostages held in Iran; he organized conferences on poverty and racial justice at Riverside, all the while invoking the legacy of activism which he saw in figures like King, but also Harry Emerson Fosdick. As he said in one sermon, referring to Fosdick’s insistence on constant activity, “I am happy to report, Dr. Fosdick, that this church’s conscience is untroubled by unused space.” As one church official said proudly, tying Coffin’s ministry back to the theology of Fosdick and other liberal evangelicals, “Dr. Coffin had infused in Riverside a Christian philosophy that made words and deeds inseparable. If the church believed war was wrong, then the church must actively seek to disarm the world.”

But at the same time, many of Coffin’s congregants did not share his vision, and feared that his prophetic faith was ceding the evangelical tradition to the likes of Billy Graham. Unlike Fosdick, Coffin rarely spoke of “conversion,” and emphasized when he did that “there can be no personal conversion experience without a change in social attitude.” And for some of his congregants, that was not enough. The Men’s Class at Riverside, a study group dating to the days of the Park Avenue Church, consisted of between ten and twenty congregants who were deeply suspicious of Coffin’s leadership, accusing him “high handed, ad hoc behavior” unbecoming a pastor, of devoting more time to his causes than to what they believed was the appropriate work of the church – preaching the gospel and ministering to his congregation.

24 Coffin, Collected Sermons, 316.
26 Coffin, Collected Sermons, 424.
William Peck, a long time member of the Men’s Class, wrote a series of pamphlets entitled “Let Riverside Be Riverside,” accusing Coffin of trying to turn the church into a left-wing, even communist, political machine.\(^{27}\) Coffin, Peck believed, was not preaching Christianity but in his emphasis upon social activism was leading the church toward atheism. In March 1987 the Men’s Class made their accusations public, sending a call for Coffin’s resignation to newspapers all over the country. Coffin rebuffed these petitions, but when he announced his resignation in July of that year, Bryan Sterling, a member of the Men’s Class, said “We hope we get a theologian now instead of a political activist.”\(^{28}\)

Many of the accusations of the Men’s Class were on target. Harry Emerson Fosdick had worked hard to ensure that both terms in the phrase “liberal evangelicalism” were emphasized; Coffin, on the other hand, seemed less sensitive to the issue. Despite his professed “love” for pastoral work, at a seminar on prophetic preaching Riverside held in 1982, Coffin and other clergy discussed the possibility that “activist preaching might destroy relationships with the members of their churches.”\(^{29}\) And it seemed to. He freely confessed being less interested in the workings of his congregation than in the opportunities offered by its pulpit, saying “I would rather inspire than organize,” and “If I were to be properly pastoral, I couldn’t do the administrative things” that his organizational efforts required.\(^{30}\) In the eyes of the Men’s Class, he failed to hold the two in productive tension.

Just so, for many critics to the present day, William Sloane Coffin exemplifies the impoverished state of what is often called the “mainline” churches, a label often applied today to


\(^{30}\) Briggs, “Coffin and His Liberal Pulpit,” B1.
those congregations which once fought so hard to maintain their connection to the evangelical heritage. These critics argue that the mainline is fast losing membership, that it despite its absorption with political and social issues it is fast becoming socially and politically irrelevant, that it is uncomfortable with the metaphysical and supernatural, and equivocal on the substance of traditional Christian theology. These churches are, in short, having an identity crisis: they have ceded the passion and fervor of the evangelical heritage – the spiritual impulses that drove van Dyke, Parkhurst, Coffin, or Fosdick – to Graham and his spiritual descendants and have embraced the prophetic style shorn of its religious substance, which has left them the form without the power. In its obsession with the social and the ethical and their discomfort with the raw assertions of faith that more conservative evangelicals embrace it seems that the mainline as these critics describe it might well simply be the Red Cross.

But though he had a more difficult time – and, plausibly, less interest – than his predecessor in contending for the evangelical heritage, Coffin’s passion and techniques were rooted deeply in the intertwined evangelical traditions of the city; his fervor and color in the pulpit drew upon the prophetic heritage of fundamentalism; his commitment to social reform upon the ritualized service of liberal evangelicalism. He leaned upon the language of scripture as heavily as his predecessors had; he vociferously insisted that his worldview was at its heart religious. Billy Graham was more successful in claiming the term “evangelical” than was Coffin simply because Graham was more interested in doing so. But Coffin was as much its heir as he was; to deny he, or other Protestant liberals, that heritage is a disservice to the sincerity and depth of their faith.

And indeed, when Coffin insisted that no conversion was complete without a transformation in one’s commitment to social reform, he was saying nothing that earlier liberal evangelicals had not. It was, however, true that he reversed the order: for him, conversion had its logical conclusion in social reform, rather than being generated by it. As with both Straton and the Union School of Religion, Coffin’s commitment to a particular conception of what the city needed - though it was rooted in the evangelical impulse – left him unable to adapt to the changing conditions within his congregation; his spirituality was sincere, but his style was, in the end, unconvincing.
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