

Fundamentalism: Whence? Where? Whither?

Part 11: The Social Shift, Continued

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The Fundamentalist movement emerged from a broader, “proto-Fundamentalist” evangelicalism in about 1920. It was the result of a combination of influences, some social, some philosophical, and some theological. For the most part, Fundamentalism drew on a version of Christianity that was firmly committed to the popular culture of late Victorianism.

Fundamentalism arose on the cusp of a significant cultural shift. America was moving out of Victorianism and into the Jazz Age. For a while, Fundamentalist leaders like Billy Sunday were able to use this transition to their advantage. Many Americans faced the new direction with anxiety. By mixing their religious appeal with nostalgia for the fading values and fashions of Victorianism, Fundamentalists were able to tap into this anxiety and to rally the dispossessed. Unfortunately for Fundamentalism, this tactic could succeed only as long as there were Victorians to rally. By the 1930s, however, the Jazz Age had lost some of its rough edges, and its values were quickly being adopted by the nation. Even Fundamentalist churches were beginning to feel the pressure of new perspectives.

The rapid transition was due partly to the dominance of three new technologies: the phonograph, the radio, and the motion picture. Popular culture is commercial culture, and these media made it possible to market the product more widely and effectively than ever before. Entertainment was fast becoming an industry, and the industry sold its mores with its culture. The new media were especially influential among the young, generating an entire youth movement within American culture. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the teenager was an invention of the Jazz Age. Fundamentalism was committed to popular culture, but the social shift was rapidly making Fundamentalist culture obsolete. Victorianism was no longer culturally relevant: Fundamentalists might as well have been singing Gregorian chants as Rodeheaver songs. In fact, they might have done better, for Gregorian chants could still be taken seriously, while Rodeheaver and his kind seemed increasingly quaint (perhaps even eccentric) to everyone except Fundamentalists. If it was to survive, Fundamentalism needed to adapt to the new culture. The trick for Fundamentalists was to make this change while not appearing to abandon their older commitments. Their answer was to create a kind of replacement culture within Fundamentalism, a culture that would parallel the secular popular trends but that would eliminate their most obnoxious features.

One of the earliest manifestations of change within Fundamentalism was the invention of the Singspiration. A Chicago Tribune headline from 1941 announced, "Church Folks Blend Voices in Pep Choruses: Singspirations Strike a Popular Chord." The article went on to say that the new kind of choruses were to church what boogie woogie was to swing.

The analogy is telling. This was the era during which crowds were flocking to the Savoy Ballroom and the Cotton Club. It was the era of big bands, when broadcasts and recordings of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Bennie Goodman, the Andrews Sisters, the Dorseys, and especially Glenn Miller were played in nearly every household. The music was pure energy: raucous, defiant, often flirtatious, and always full of life. By the end of the 1930s it had become mainstream and extremely popular: every high school had its own swing band.

This was also the golden age of Hollywood movies. With the ascendance of the talking motion picture, a new kind of celebrity was invented: the movie star. Film music also provided another musical idiom that inundated American culture. The music of the movies contrasted with the jazz of the clubs. It was lush, typically orchestral, emotionally overwhelming, and rather operatic. Along with jazz, this was music to which American young people were widely and frequently exposed.

The Singspiration took the place of movies and dances for Fundamentalist teenagers. It gave them music that was peppy and current enough to be cool, or lush enough to be dreamy, while packing less of a hormonal charge than the secular equivalents. It was an alternative to jazz clubs and theaters, and it was so much fun that teenagers could take a date or even invite an unsaved friend.

Quickly the Sinspiration became institutionalized. Two students at Wheaton College, Al Smith and Billy Graham, collaborated to start a ministry that would publish Singspiration-style music. They named the ministry after the phenomenon.

At almost the same moment, a young trombonist who had once led a dance band was emerging as a Fundamentalist leader. Jack Wyrzten was more-or-less the Fundamentalist answer to Glenn Miller. His organization, Word of Life, became a major front for the growing evangelical youth movement.

In their attempt to reach teenagers, Fundamentalists went popular culture one better. Wyrzten developed the idea of conducting "youth campaigns." The idea was picked up by Al Smith and Billy Graham, who were joined by George Beverly Shea. Together they started a series of youth rallies in Chicago under the sponsorship of Torrey Johnson. As the idea spread, the nationwide "Youth for Christ" organization was established.

There was no secular equivalent to the Youth for Christ campaigns. These campaigns built on the success of the Singspiration idea, but size of the crowd was multiplied exponentially. They were like a Christian variety show, to which was added the rapid-fire pulpit delivery of some very dynamic young preachers.

These young preachers abandoned the oratorical preaching style of the older Fundamentalists. To a generation whose ears were tuned to the cadences of radio, the older oratory seemed ponderous. These young firebrands modeled themselves on the speech patterns of radio announcers. The effect was riveting to their audiences. Names like Jack Wyrzten, Charles Templeton, and especially Billy Graham became celebrities within the new Fundamentalist youth culture.

At about the same time, John W. Peterson was writing music that imitated the Hollywood sound. His songs, choruses, and cantatas (a term that he applied rather loosely) took the place of traditional hymns, and even of Victorian gospel songs, in thousands of Fundamentalist churches. Fundamentalism not only had its equivalent to the jazz club, it also had its answer to the Big Show.

Speaking of Hollywood, Fundamentalists did more than copy the music. They also tried to adopt the medium, albeit clumsily. In 1949, Ken Anderson launched Gospel Films. Billy Graham's World Wide Pictures was formed soon afterward, releasing *Mr. Texas* in 1951, followed by *Oiltown U.S.A.* in 1954.

After Billy Graham's 1949 crusade in Los Angeles, Fundamentalism's celebrity status began to spill over into the culture at large. On the one hand, newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst sent out the order to "puff Graham," turning the evangelist into a religious superstar almost overnight. On the other hand, the conversion of Stuart Hamblen during that crusade gave Fundamentalism a new recruit with real celebrity status. Other secular celebrities soon followed suit, and Fundamentalists discovered that these were people who could draw a crowd. By the mid-1950s, Fundamentalism had shown that it could successfully negotiate the modified popular culture. Its tactics had changed, however. Under Victorianism, the popular culture of the society and the popular culture of the churches had been one and the same. With the transition to the Jazz Age, Fundamentalists opted against full participation in the broader culture. Instead, they created a parallel culture within their own movement: a culture that imitated popular trends while eliminating their most obviously offensive aspects.

This cultural adaptation produced several results in the next generation of Christians, the generation that was born after World War II and grew up bathed in the Fundamentalist subculture. First, that generation was highly youth-oriented and expected a Christian answer to every popular trend. Indeed, Christian Baby Boomers came to feel a sense of entitlement to some "Christian alternative" for every activity and pleasure that their world could offer.

Second, the generation of Singspiration and youth rallies became unable to distinguish Christianity from amusement. As the culture of Youth for Christ worked its way into the churches, they became highly entertainment-oriented. To a larger extent than ever before, worship became a product that had to be packaged to appeal to the consumer. Out of this milieu emerged a myriad of ostensibly Christian recording labels, film production companies, and distribution centers.

Third, the Fundamentalism of the Jazz Age and after developed a fascination with celebrity. Secular celebrities who professed conversion (however vaguely defined) were granted almost automatic status as leaders within popular Fundamentalism. Fundamentalists also developed their own celebrities—sometimes preachers or missionaries, but more often musicians, athletes, or actors.

Fourth, while the parallel culture of Fundamentalism was supposed to protect youth from their popular culture, it had almost the opposite effect. In the eyes of teenagers, the fact that churches made so many concessions to the popular culture meant that it was authorizing that culture. After all, if one could watch movies in church on Sunday night, then why not in the movie theater on Saturday night? If one could listen to the White Sisters, then why not the Andrews Sisters? Fundamentalists set out to offer an alternative to what they called “worldly entertainment.” In effect, however, they merely offered less of the same. The result was a generation of young people more attuned to popular culture than any of their forebears. Not only that, Christian teenagers became connoisseurs of popular culture—and at some point they realized that what was done amateurishly in the churches was done skillfully by the world. Once they had developed an appetite for amusement and a sense of entitlement to it, it was difficult to keep them from full participation in the popular culture of the day.

Fundamentalism adapted itself to the culture of youth, jazz, and Hollywood. As that adaptation neared its completion, however, yet another cultural shift was beginning in American society. Jazz culture was no longer new, and in some circles it was simply passé. By the mid-1950s, names like Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and especially Elvis Presley had become the harbingers of an entirely new direction. Soon, Fundamentalism would find itself faced with the same dilemma all over again. Would it adapt to the counter-culture of the 1960s or would it abandon its attachment to popular culture?

The answer is that Fundamentalists refused to do either. Instead of either moving ahead or going back, they attempted to hold themselves suspended in mid-air by a sheer act of will. But that is another story for another time.