ONE IN HOPE AND DOCTRINE

Origins of Baptist Fundamentalism 1870—1950

KEVIN BAUDER & ROBERT DELNAY

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Contents

The Development of

BAPTIST FUNDAMENTALISM

in North America

GORDON

LASHER

PROTO-FUNDAMENTALISTS: HOVEY

1907
NORTHERN
BAPTIST
CONVENTION

1908 Constitution adopted

1911 Convention execs allowed to vote; Benefit Board formed

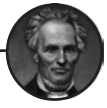
1915 Societies absorbed into convention

1919 Creation of liberal-dominated General Board of Promotion

1824 AMERICAN BAPTIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

1814 AMERICAN BAPTIST FOREIGN MISSION SOCIETY

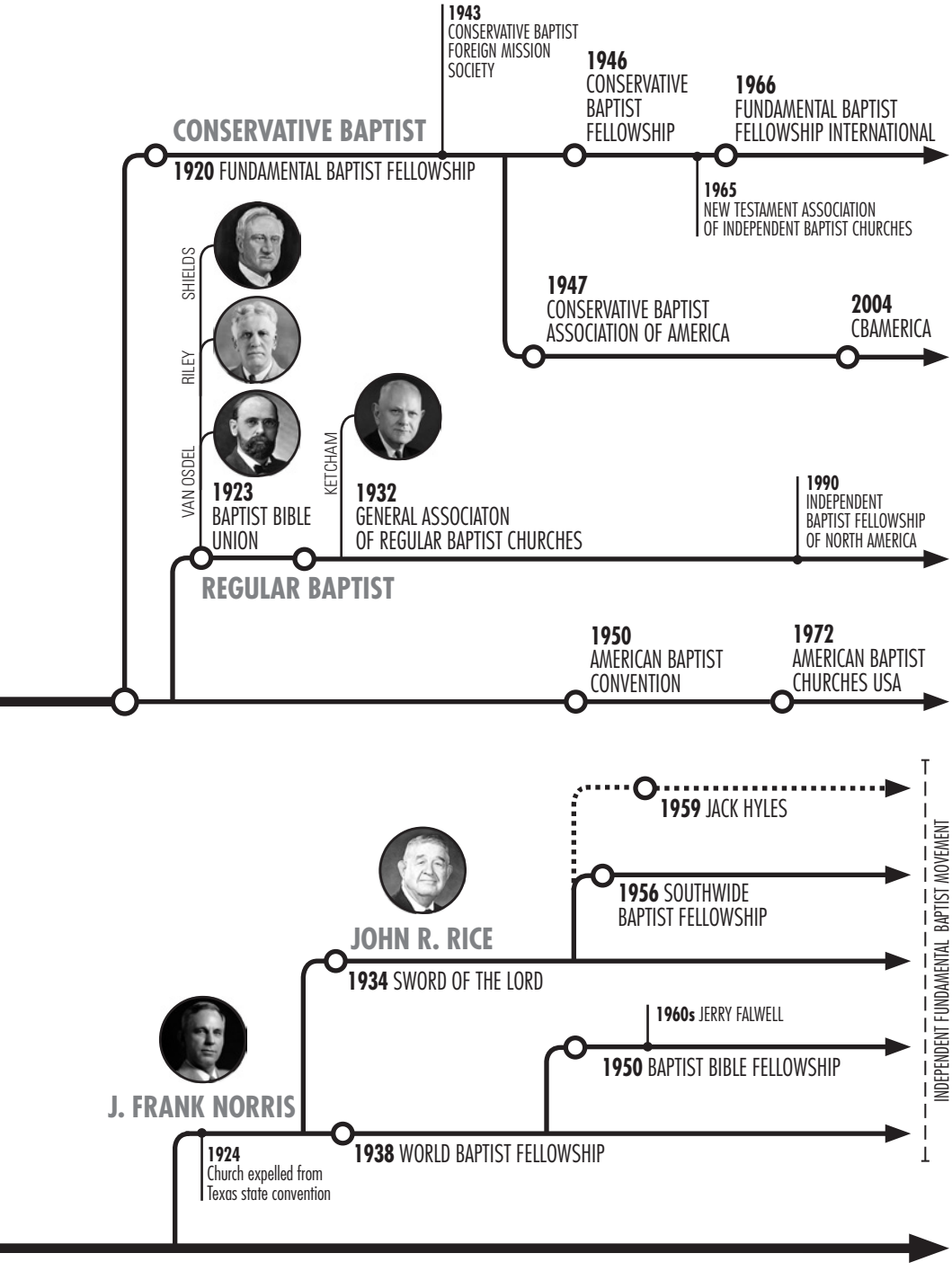
1832 AMERICAN BAPTIST HOME MISSION SOCIETY



JUDSON, PECK
Early leaders

1814
FIRST TRIENNIAL CONVENTION
Period of North/South Unity

1845
SOUTHERN
BAPTIST
CONVENTION


1943
CONSERVATIVE BAPTIST
FOREIGN MISSION
SOCIETY
1946
CONSERVATIVE
BAPTIST
FELLOWSHIP
1966
FUNDAMENTAL BAPTIST
FELLOWSHIP INTERNATIONAL
CONSERVATIVE BAPTIST
1920 FUNDAMENTAL BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP
1965
NEW TESTAMENT ASSOCIATION
OF INDEPENDENT BAPTIST CHURCHES
SHIELDS
RILEY
VAN OSDEL
1947
CONSERVATIVE BAPTIST
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA
2004
CBAMERICA
KETCHAM
1923
BAPTIST BIBLE
UNION
1932
GENERAL ASSOCIATON
OF REGULAR BAPTIST CHURCHES
1990
INDEPENDENT
BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP
OF NORTH AMERICA
REGULAR BAPTIST
1950
AMERICAN BAPTIST
CONVENTION
1972
AMERICAN BAPTIST
CHURCHES USA
1959 JACK HYLES
1956 SOUTHWIDE
BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP
JOHN R. RICE
1934 SWORD OF THE LORD
1960s JERRY FALWELL
1950 BAPTIST BIBLE FELLOWSHIP
J. FRANK NORRIS
1924
Church expelled from
Texas state convention
1938 WORLD BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP
INDEPENDENT FUNDAMENTAL BAPTIST MOVEMENT

Belden Avenue Baptist Church youth group, 1945.

Preface

J. R. R. Tolkien opened *The Lord of the Rings* with the statement, "This tale grew in the telling." That has also been our experience. To understand the story, one must know the story of how it was written. It began when one of us, Robert Delnay, approached Regular Baptist Press with a brief history of the Conservative Baptist movement. The editor was interested, but he thought that the narrative was too focused to attract much attention. He suggested expanding the tale to include the history of the Regular Baptist movement. At that point, the other one of us, Kevin Bauder, was brought into the picture.

Delnay spent decades gathering sources for his Conservative Baptist history. He also did significant research on the Regular Baptist movement, writing his dissertation on the Baptist Bible Union. Bauder wrote a master's thesis on Oliver W. Van Osdel, arguably the founder of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches. He also wrote a short history of the founding of the GARBC, a copy of which is in the offices of the GARBC and Regular Baptist Press. The result was that we were tasked to work together with the goal of producing a history of Northern Baptist fundamentalism.

We both welcomed the collaboration. We have known each other since the early 1980s, when Delnay was a professor and Bauder a student at Denver Baptist Theological Seminary. We have become friends, kept in touch, and sought each other out whenever possible. For us, the opportunity to share this labor came as a Providential gift.

Naturally, each of us carries his experience into the story. Our experience includes being reared in Baptist fundamentalism, though in different generations. Delnay grew up attending Wealthy Street Baptist Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He can still recall the pulpit manners of Oliver W. Van Osdel and Amy Lee Stockton. He was baptized by David Otis Fuller. He graduated from Northern Baptist Theological Seminary and interviewed for ordination in the American (Northern) Baptist Convention. He was later

ordained in a Conservative Baptist congregation. He was an active participant in the battles within the Conservative Baptist movement, a professor in more than one Conservative Baptist school, and has taught in several Regular Baptist institutions. He was the founding dean of Faith Baptist Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa.

A generation younger, Bauder was baptized by a church planter working under the Fellowship of Baptists for Home Missions. He grew up in Regular Baptist churches and attended a Regular Baptist college (Faith Baptist Bible College) and seminary (Denver Baptist Theological Seminary). He was ordained in a Regular Baptist church and later held membership in a church that identified with the Sword movement. He served as president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis, whose roots were firmly in the Conservative Baptist Hard Core. He still serves on the board of the old Minnesota Baptist Convention, now renamed the Minnesota Baptist Association.

Both of us have been seminary professors. Among other courses, we have each taught Baptist history and fundamentalist history. We each bring to this story, not only research and documentation, but a lifetime of the people we have known, the concerns they have shared, and the stories they have told. Mostly we have written about what we can document, but here and there we have told the story as we know it to be, even if we cannot quite prove it.

When we began, we thought we were writing a rather brief and quite popular history. No comprehensive narrative of the development of Baptist fundamentalism has ever been written. The consequence is that much of the history has been forgotten. Most present-day Baptist fundamentalists (of whatever sort) do not really know how their movement began or how it has developed. Our goal was to fill this void, focusing particularly upon Northern Baptist fundamentalism.

We never intended to produce a scholarly history. We wanted to write a book that would be accessible, not only to pastors and students, but to ordinary church members. We wanted to help them understand where they were and how they got there. We wanted to help them discover where they stood in the story of their ecclesiastical and theological tradition.

As we set about the task of organizing, researching, and writing, however, we found that the story needed to be longer and more detailed than we had originally envisioned. As we attempted to tell the story chronologically, geographical concerns became less important. We found that the story of Northern Baptist fundamentalism was incomplete without a large part of the story of Southern Baptist fundamentalism. Eventually enough of the Southern story came into the narrative that we could no longer designate the work simply as a history of Northern fundamentalism—though, as will be evident, that is still where the emphasis lies.

As the story lengthened and gained detail, we had to divide it into two volumes. The natural division was at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s. The Conservative Baptist movement had just taken shape, rejecting attempts at merger by the Regular Baptists. John R. Rice was producing his polemics against Lewis Sperry Chafer, coloring a whole branch of Baptist fundamentalism. J. Frank Norris's movement was on the verge of splintering, after which Norris himself would die. The mid-1950s would bring new concerns and new battles, providing the ideal opening for the second volume.

In the process of writing, our commitment to document the story also rose. In a few places we have retained some of our original unsupported observations; in those places the tale will read more like a memoir. We have also used secondary sources to a greater degree than is usual in a strictly scholarly publication. Nevertheless, the greatest part of the story can now be substantiated by interested readers, and researchers will find more than enough to launch them into new discoveries. We have carefully transcribed the primary sources cited in this history. The reader will notice that some quotations use unconventional spellings and variant grammar, which we have reproduced exactly from the original document. But if a source gives an incorrect fact that could cause significant confusion, we have judiciously added *sic* to alert the reader.

The goal of a purely popular history was abandoned long ago, but we have still tried to avoid writing an academic tome. While we have sought to avoid both informality and sentimentality, we have attempted to tell a story that is as readable as it is worth reading. Those who wish for either a casual yarn or a rigorously scholarly narrative are likely to be equally disappointed. Our hope is that they will be in the minority.

A word should be said about the perspective from which this tale is told. The earlier part of the story is viewed primarily through the eyes of Oliver W. Van Osdel. The latter part is examined mostly through the thick lenses of Robert T. Ketcham. The continuity between these two figures as the primary leaders of the Regular Baptist movement will become evident in the narrative. We thought it particularly important to emphasize Van Osdel. While not as public as some other fundamentalists, his influence would be difficult to overstate. He was undoubtedly the single most important figure in the Regular Baptist movement until 1934, when the leadership went to Ketcham. Furthermore, his story has not been told in any published history of fundamentalism. This is unfortunate, because good documentation is (or was) available.

Which brings us to sources. Sixty years ago, Delnay was permitted to examine T. T. Shields's papers in the vault at Jarvis Street Baptist Church in Toronto. Forty years ago he had access to Chester Tulga's papers in the offices of the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship (sadly, these papers were ransacked

repeatedly during the ensuing years). Notes and copies made during this period form part of the documentation for our story.

Thirty years ago, Van Osdel's papers filled a couple of boxes on the second floor of the administrative wing in the old Wealthy Street Baptist Church building. Bauder was allowed free access and permission to photocopy whatever he liked. Those copies are still in his possession. The church has subsequently moved (it is now Wealthy Park Baptist Church in Grand Rapids), and the church's archives have been donated to the University of Michigan.

Wealthy Street had a few back issues of Van Osdel's paper, the *Baptist Temple News*. More of these were found in the archives of Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary. While a complete run probably does not exist, photocopies of both collections are kept by Bauder, who hopes to edit and publish Van Osdel's writings for the use of historical researchers.

Walnut Street Baptist Church in Waterloo, Iowa, has moved and changed its name to Walnut Ridge Baptist Church. The church graciously permitted Bauder to spend a couple of days going through its old files, including books of the minutes of both church and deacons. This reading closed some of the gaps in the story. Pastor Joel Dunlap was especially helpful in locating materials. He also took Bauder to visit the grave of the Rev. P. B. Chenault.

The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches has also granted full access to its archives, including files of correspondence and minutes of both associational and council meetings. The association has also been digitizing early copies of the *Baptist Bulletin* and posting them for the use of researchers. One interesting custom of early GARBC leaders was to mimeograph important correspondence for circulation. These mimeo copies were produced with such a high degree of accuracy that we have felt comfortable citing the circulation copies instead of original drafts in some cases.

The Brimson Grow Library at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary gave gracious access to materials pertaining to Amy Lee Stockton and John Marvin Dean. Theirs are two stories that need to be told at length. Both will be fascinating to read when they are written.

The Norris papers have been microfilmed by the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. Copies of the microfilm can be found at the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College and in the Earl K. Oldham Library at Arlington Baptist College. Arlington is the continuation of the school that Norris founded, but the originals of his papers do not appear to be on campus. Thanks are due to professor Greg Adams and librarian Vickie Bryant for providing access to the microfilms.

Not surprisingly, the library of the Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis has been a trove for information on the Conservative Baptist movement. In addition to the papers of Richard V. Clearwaters, it includes

much else related to fundamentalist history and to Minnesota Baptist history in particular. Furthermore, much of the documentation that we have accumulated in preparing this volume will be archived there for the use of future researchers.

Certain other acknowledgements are in order. Debra Bauder not only offered inspiration at important moments, but proofread the entire text. Chris Ames rendered valuable assistance in preparing the text and bringing the notes into conformity with the latest edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Kevin Mungons offered counsel and encouragement from the offices of Regular Baptist Press, exhibiting astonishing patience as the task developed and changed. Jonita Barram offered her editorial expertise and kept us out of trouble more than once.

The story of how liberalism took over the Northern Baptist institutions (the first chapter of this book) could not have been told without the assistance of our colleague Jeff Straub. His doctoral dissertation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary dealt with exactly this area.[1] He was selfless with his research and helpful with his advice. We hope that by the time this book appears, his dissertation will be well along the road to publication.

The administration of Central Baptist Theological Seminary has gone out of its way to liberate Bauder to work on this project, and certain donors have gone out of their way to support his writing efforts. In a small seminary, every professor wears multiple hats. President Sam Horn and vice presidents Jonathan Pratt and Brent Belford have from the beginning committed themselves to relieving Bauder of as much extraneous responsibility as possible.

Several individuals have read all or parts of the text and have offered helpful criticism. Jeff Straub was one of the most important. So were Ralph Warren and Fred Moritz. Through the years both George Houghton and Myron Houghton have shaped this book, though neither was necessarily aware of it. Needless to say, no one mentioned here bears any responsibility for the errors that remain in the book.

One more word. The authors are committed to the notion that the only person who cannot become disillusioned is the one who holds no illusions to begin with. For that reason, we have not attempted to whitewash or sugarcoat any aspect of the history of Baptist fundamentalism. We affirm the doctrine of total depravity, and we recognize that even the redeemed will be sinners until they see Jesus. We are old enough to know that depravity works its way out even in Christian service. Fundamentalists are not exempt from this dynamic, and their history features fools, predators, toadies, hypocrites,

1. Jeffrey P. Straub, "The Making of a Battle Royal: The Rise of Religious Liberalism in Northern Baptist Life, 1870–1920" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004).

power grabbers, and character assassins as well as humble servants, insightful leaders, and heroic warriors. We fundamentalists struggle with *akrasia* and *hamartia*, just as other Christians.

Our goal in this book is to tell the truth, in the proportions as well as in the details. Doubtless we have sometimes failed to do so, perhaps not by getting the facts wrong, but by presenting them in some disproportionate manner. Nevertheless, we do not feel called upon to cover up the mistakes and sins of fundamentalism past. Those, too, are part of the story—indeed, they were sometimes the main forces in shaping it.

We believe that fundamentalism is a good idea. It is a great idea. It is, in fact, a biblical idea. The idea, however, has been implemented by flawed and sinful people. One can find plenty in the fundamentalist movement of which to disapprove, but we are convinced that the liabilities of the movement can be attributed to sources other than the idea. Even with its liabilities the fundamentalist movement was better than any alternative during the period of which we are writing.

This tale has grown in the telling, but it is still a tale. More than anything, we wanted to tell a story that has never before been heard. It is at some points an astonishing story, but it is a true one. We hope that it is one you will enjoy reading.

Northern Baptist Leaders, 1922.

1 Liberalism and the Northern Baptist Convention

Bracing himself against the February cold, a tall, graying gentleman stepped from the train and into the winter of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He wore spectacles and a broad-brimmed hat. Puffs of his breath condensed on his moustache in the chilly air. The year was 1909, the man was Oliver W. Van Osdel, and he was returning to Grand Rapids to shepherd the Wealthy Street Baptist Church.

Van Osdel had briefly pastored the small congregation nearly fifteen years before. He had discovered that the church could not grow without a new building, but the church refused to build and Van Osdel left for another ministry. Now the old facility had been condemned and construction was imperative. The church called Van Osdel to return, and he agreed.

Only days after Van Osdel's arrival, two men appeared at his front door. They introduced themselves as a minister and a deacon from Calvary Baptist Church. They asked to visit with the new pastor. Van Osdel welcomed them into his home, and they began to unfold their story.

As in many cities, the Baptist churches of Grand Rapids had organized an association to assist their work together. For many years the association had provided a venue for church planting and other projects. Recently, however, controversy had erupted. The disagreement centered on Fountain Street Baptist Church. Fountain Street had been organized in 1846 as the First Baptist Church of Grand Rapids, settling on its current name in 1877. It had once been known for gospel preaching and for planting new churches. In fact, Wealthy Street Baptist Church had been started by Fountain Street.

Fountain Street occupied the most impressive church building in Grand Rapids, and it had the largest membership. Nevertheless, rumors were flying about the theology in its pulpit. As early as the 1890s it had begun to back away from strong preaching about an authoritative Bible or a substitutionary atonement. Its pastor at that time, J. Herman Randall, expressed sympathy

for the popular new theology of liberalism. The arrival of Pastor Alfred W. Wishart, however, was what precipitated the controversy.

Wishart was smallish, perhaps five-and-a-half feet tall, and just over 120 pounds, but his theological stature was gargantuan. Before Fountain Street Church called him in 1906, he had already established a reputation for controversy. In Trenton, New Jersey, he had both pastored the Central Baptist Church and edited the *Trenton Times*. He used these two roles to break up the city's gambling ring, close its red-light district, and expose political corruption.[1]

The year before he came to Grand Rapids, Wishart published his theory of Christianity. He saw religion as the experience of God, common to all humanity, arising from the fact that God puts His own life in the life or soul of humanity. Wishart posited that God "manifests himself to man, immediately in man's soul, and indirectly through nature and history." This universal experience of God is what constitutes religion. At different times and in different places, people have described or expressed their experience in different ways, but their expressions are secondary while their experiences are primary.[2]

According to Wishart, some of these expressions are better than others. He believed that a few remarkable individuals have achieved such clear perception of God, and exhibited so transparently their experience of Him, that they have left a deep and enduring influence upon the religious life of humanity. The best among these extraordinary individuals is Christ. On the divine side, Christ expressed the life of God so fully that God could be said to speak to humanity through Him. On the human side, Christ fully exemplified the religious spirit of a man seeking after God. He was both the "most beautiful expression of the life of God in the soul of man," and the "noblest example of what a truly religious man ought to be."[3]

Christ's mission was to give humans "a true consciousness of themselves and of the God whose life dwells in them." If people wanted to "find rest for our souls in the sweet fellowship with the Eternal Life of the universe," then they needed to emulate Christ. Wishart was clear at this point: "This emulation is our salvation." The imitation of Christ would lead to transformation for the individual and, eventually, for society, because those who were transformed by following Christ would give themselves to serve their fellow humans.[4]

1. A description of Wishart's pastorate can be found in James D. Bratt and Christopher H. Meehan, *Gathered at the River: Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Its People of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Area Council for the Humanities and William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 89–105.

2. Alfred W. Wishart, *Primary Facts in Religious Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1905), 4.

3. Ibid., 90.

4. Ibid., 92, 96–98.

What about the Bible? For Wishart it was not an infallible revelation, but rather a book of religious experience. Its great value lay in "arousing the soul to a sense of its needs and of pointing the way to life." The Bible contained conflicting views and perspectives, and the modern reader had to discriminate "between the true and the false, the good and the bad, in the Bible."[5]

Wishart's system was exactly that version of theology that became known as *liberalism*, or, sometimes, *modernism*. Because it originated in Germany, it was sometimes called *German theology* (usually by its opponents, especially after World War I). Given Wishart's views and his aggressive demeanor, a collision among Grand Rapids Baptists was unavoidable. It came just two years after his arrival, during the 1908 annual meeting of the Grand Rapids Baptist Association. The highlight of the meeting was a sermon, delivered by a venerable minister named Rose, defending the deity of Jesus Christ. Probably with Wishart in mind, someone moved that the sermon should be printed and distributed to all the churches. Immediately Wishart stood and stated that the sermon would offend the Fountain Street church. This blunt denial of the deity of Christ created an uproar that went far beyond the adjournment of the associational meeting.

Now, two representatives of the Grand Rapids Association sat in Van Osdel's home. They claimed that the churches found the situation intolerable. They had determined to act. Since Van Osdel was the new pastor in town, they wanted to know where he stood.

What happened next could be viewed as the beginning of Baptist fundamentalism. Before that story can be told, however, two older stories first need to be repeated. The first is the development of organization among Baptists in America, and especially in the North. The second is the rise of the liberal theology that found expression in Alfred Wishart.

Northern Baptist Organization

Baptists prize the autonomy of the local church. They have always rejected every attempt to subject individual churches to the outside authority of bishops and synods. Nevertheless, this commitment to autonomy should not be understood as a preference for utter independence. Baptist churches have tried to work together for several reasons. First, some tasks have proven too large for most individual churches to accomplish alone. Second, persecution has sometimes forced Baptists to find greater safety in their united numbers. Third, common concerns and issues have often led Baptists to try to speak with a united voice.

5. Ibid., 118–19.

From their earliest days as an identifiable movement, Baptists have organized church fellowship around associations. One of the earliest and most prominent Baptist associations in America was the Philadelphia Association. Originally organized in 1707 by churches in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware, the Philadelphia Association eventually added churches in New York, Connecticut, Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas. Other Baptist associations included the Charleston Association (1751), the Sandy Creek Association (1758), and the Kehukee Association (probably 1769). As groups of churches began to form their own local associations, the Philadelphia Association gradually shrank to serve churches in and around Philadelphia.[6]

By the early nineteenth century, Baptist churches were scattered throughout the United States. Many fellowshipped with some local association, but Baptists had no organization at the national level. That changed when Luther Rice returned from India in 1814.

Rice was a Congregationalist who sailed for India as a missionary in 1812. He and Adoniram Judson, who sailed in a separate ship, intended to labor together for the salvation of souls in south Asia. Arriving in Calcutta, however, Rice discovered that Judson had been studying his Greek New Testament during the voyage and had converted to Baptist principles. Shortly thereafter, Rice himself accepted Baptist views. Both missionaries were immersed, as were their wives. Accompanied by recommendations from William Carey (the famous British missionary to India), Rice was sent back to America to seek missionary support among Baptists.

Rice was received warmly by churches in New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Washington. People responded to his plea to support Judson, but Rice was frustrated by the lack of a national organization to coordinate the effort. He began to meet with Baptist leaders throughout the country, encouraging them to form an agency to promote and coordinate the work of missions.

Baptists held their first national meeting, called the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America, for Foreign Missions, in Philadelphia in 1814. Subsequently, the gathering was held every three years, and it soon became known simply as the Triennial Convention. One of its first acts was to form a permanent missionary society, the American Baptist Missionary Union. The new convention appointed Rice as its missionary and commissioned him to travel through the United States to promote the work of missions.

6. Any standard Baptist history should trace the development of Baptist organization in America. Three of the more important histories are Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907); Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 3rd ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1963); H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987).

Almost immediately a difference arose over the form of organization. Luther Rice, followed by Baptists in the South, wanted to organize Baptist work according to the associational principle. Associations were under the control of messengers appointed by churches. If the missionary work was organized associationally, then it would be accountable to the churches. Baptists in the North, however, were concerned that the chain of accountability could work in the opposite direction. Associations had sometimes displayed a tendency to intrude into the affairs of their fellowshipping churches. Northern Baptists, led by Francis Wayland, perceived a danger that the associational principle could give agencies such as missionary organizations a way to manipulate the churches. Consequently, they wanted the missionary work to be controlled by a society or service organization comprised of individual members. Each society member would also be a member in good standing of a Baptist church, but the service organization itself would be operated independently.

At least initially, those who favored the service-organization model prevailed. The American Baptist Missionary Union was an autonomous agency with individual membership. The Triennial Convention was, at first, simply the gathering of the membership of the society. Soon, however, Baptists began to organize other agencies, and with each new agency the tension between North and South increased. The Northerners were happiest with service organizations. The Southerners wanted associational accountability. The ABMU was a service organization, but its public representative, Luther Rice, favored the associational principle.

Before long, Rice was pushing the ABMU to include home missions in its work. He witnessed the need for Baptist church planting firsthand as he crisscrossed the country on horseback or surrey carriage. In 1815 he met John Mason Peck who, under Rice's influence, committed himself to the task of planting churches in the western United States. Peck was initially sent out by the ABMU, but in 1820 that organization decided to focus more pointedly on foreign missions. Peck resigned from the American Baptist Missionary Union and continued his work under the auspices of a local society in Massachusetts. Eventually (1832), Peck helped to found the American Baptist Home Mission Society.

Another service organization was added in 1824. Impressed with the need for Christian literature, Baptists organized the Baptist General Tract Society, renaming it the American Baptist Publication Society two years later. Then, seeing the need for an educated ministry, the Triennial Convention also authorized Rice to establish an educational institution. The result was Columbian College in Washington, D.C. (later given up by Baptists and renamed George Washington University).

As Baptist work began to grow, so did tensions over the form of organization.

Northerners favored service organizations, while Rice and many Southerners were committed to the associational principle. During the 1820s several factors combined to exacerbate this tension. Part of the problem was centered in education: Rice's promotion of Columbian College was interfering with Francis Wayland's promotion of Brown University, an older and nominally Baptist institution. Wayland presented himself as a champion of service organizations in opposition to Rice's promotion of the associational principle. The tension was further aggravated by Rice's rather loose form of management: though he controlled funds for both missions and education, money that was given to one sometimes found its way into the other.

By 1826 a whispering campaign against Rice was in full operation. Rumor had it that he had misappropriated the funds of the ABMU. At the Triennial Convention, Rice angrily denied the charges and demanded an investigation. He got the investigation and it eventually cleared him, but not before the board dismissed him as its missionary. From that point onward, the Triennial Convention was firmly under the hand of those who took Wayland's view.

The organizational question, however, continued to fester just under the surface. With each meeting of the Triennial Convention, Baptists from the South felt increasingly marginalized. Unfortunately, this was the very time when slavery was also becoming an issue. These two problems together led Southern Baptists to withdraw from the Triennial Convention in 1845 and to organize their own Southern Baptist Convention. From the beginning, the SBC followed the associational principle. The exodus of the Southerners left the Triennial Convention more firmly committed than ever to doing its work through independent service organizations.

After the War Between the States, the Triennial Convention began to meet annually, typically during the week of Pentecost. These meetings became known as the Anniversaries, or sometimes as the May Meetings. The big three societies were the American Baptist Missionary Union (later renamed the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society), the American Baptist Home Mission Society, and the American Baptist Publication Society. These were joined by smaller organizations: the American Baptist Education Society, the Women's Home Society East, the Women's Home Society West, the Foreign Bible Society, and the Young People's Union. All of the organizations met the same week in the same hall, but each maintained its own identity.

Before the turn of the century, Baptists also organized several seminaries throughout the country. The most important of these were Newton, Hamilton (later renamed Colgate), Rochester, Crozer, and the Baptist Union Theological Seminary near Chicago. The last school was part of the old University of Chicago, but it broke away and moved to Morgan Park. In 1892 John D. Rockefeller provided funding for a new University of Chicago under the leadership

of William Rainey Harper, and the Morgan Park seminary was brought on campus as the divinity school of the new university.

In his *Short History of the Baptists*, Henry Clay Vedder closed his presentation of the nineteenth century with some telling observations. After recounting how the Baptists had increased in numbers, wealth, and influence, he went on to note trends that he saw as dangerous to the future of their testimony. One of these was the weakening conviction of the centrality of the Bible in all they tried to do; in other words, he saw the corrosive influence of German theology. Another was a decline of discipline in the churches. Third, he pointed to a change in the character of preaching, resulting in fewer adult conversions and more members coming in through the Sunday School and the young people's societies. Finally, he noticed the enlargement of the denominational societies, leading to a desire to unite the work under a single great convention.[7]

The Rise of Liberal Theology

Probably the leading doctrinal development of the nineteenth century was liberalism or modernism, also known as German higher criticism. A fusion of rationalism, materialism, and pietism (of the kind that placed experience above Scripture), it fed on higher criticism and evolutionism. By 1860 probably all the German universities had accepted it, although Tübingen was considered the citadel. This new theology was rooted in an optimism based on confidence in fundamental human goodness. The modernists employed a Christian vocabulary while radically redefining the supernatural aspects of the Christian faith. Near the end of the century, a few American seminary graduates had the money and resources to finish their education in Germany. They came home convinced of what they had heard. As they entered ministry, they settled in professorships and influential pulpits, giving them the best opportunity to spread their new theology. In 1900, few North American Baptists had any real awareness of the enormity of the defection. By 1920 hardly a denominational college still held to the faith of its founders.[8]

What was liberalism or modernism? The answer to this question is complicated by the fact that it came in different varieties. Later students of the period have even debated how to use the names. Some scholars see *liberalism* and *modernism* as interchangeable terms. Others use the name *liberalism* to denote only some of the variations, while reserving the term *modernism* for others. Nevertheless, all varieties were influenced by the same ideas. The

7. Vedder, *History*, 379–83.

8. An exception was Augustus Hopkins Strong, president of Rochester Divinity School. See his *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1907), ix.

differences arose only from the proportions in which these influences were combined.[9]

All versions of liberalism emphasized the beneficence of God. From the liberal point of view, the primary feature of the divine nature was goodness or kindness. Accordingly, liberals liked to speak of God as the Father, not only of saved people or professing Christians, but of all humanity. The corollary to this universal "fatherhood of God" was (as it was expressed at the time) a universal "brotherhood of man." God was understood to stand in a paternal relationship of intimacy, generosity, tenderness, and compassion toward all people, with the implication that they ought to adopt a similar attitude toward one another.

Liberals differed in the degree to which they saw God as a personal being. Virtually all of them emphasized divine immanence, or nearness, more than they emphasized God's transcendence, or otherness. For many (and this number grew as time went by), God was not really distinguishable from the world process itself. This view stood in marked contrast to traditional Christianity, in which God was thought to be a sovereign ruler who stood outside of and above His creation. Liberalism began to erode the distinction between creature and Creator. As William R. Hutchison notes, for liberals, God was "immanent in human cultural development and revealed through it."[10]

Given this understanding of God, liberals naturally adopted an optimistic view of human nature. If God is universally the father of humans, then humans must universally bear the marks of divinity. They might possess a rough exterior, but they have enough goodness in them to transform the world. Liberalism emphasized this essential uprightness and was naïvely confident in human progress.

The liberal belief in human goodness and progress was reinforced by the then-new theory of Darwinian evolution. Most (not all) conservative Christians were reluctant to accept any theory of evolution, but liberals found that it gave them an explanatory framework for human growth and advancement. The uniqueness of the human race consisted not in its special creation by God, but in the degree to which humans had progressed toward the divine ideal. At any rate, liberals would never have entertained the possibility of contradicting what they saw as the best of modern science.

9. Some of the variations were explored by Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), while the commonalities are developed by William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992). An early, hostile summary and critique of liberal theology was J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923). Machen insisted that liberalism and Christianity were distinct religions. While many differed with this assessment, few questioned the fairness of his summary.

10. Hutchison, *Modernist Impulse*, 2.

Having accepted evolution as a biological theory, liberals were quick to apply it to social and religious development. Religion became a reflection of human mental development. Consequently, the history of Hebrew religion was rewritten to allow for progress from an early polytheism through henotheism to monotheism, with a corresponding development in moral values. The Bible—especially the Old Testament—had to be rearranged in order to accommodate this revised understanding of Israelite theology. The theory of evolution fed directly into liberal criticism of the biblical text.

The liberals' strong emphasis upon human goodness inevitably altered their understanding of sin. Liberals acknowledged that people were still imperfect, but the doctrine of progress told them that these imperfections could be overcome. The unfolding marvels of medicine, technology, and industry seemed to substantiate this hypothesis, as did the recent abolition of slavery in the United States. From the liberal point of view, sin (such as it was) certainly did not call for divine wrath. Humans were too good to be sent to Hell—and on any account God was too good to send them there.

With virtually one voice, liberals denied that a wrathful God could have required propitiation. Consequently, the historic Christian understanding of the atonement had to be revised. From a liberal point of view, Christ certainly did not suffer as the sinner's substitute or receive the condemnation that the sinner deserved. Instead, the atonement was an example and an influence. By dying sacrificially on the cross, Jesus displayed the magnificent love that God bears toward human beings. For the liberal, this display of sacrificial love provided a pattern or example that people should follow in their pursuit of God. More than that, it awakened within them an answering love toward God and toward their fellow humans. Few doctrines were more offensive to liberals than the teaching that Christ had to endure God's wrath on behalf of sinners.

Of course, liberals could not and did not deny that people sometimes behaved in destructive and selfish ways. What they denied was that these destructive and selfish acts constituted an inexcusable offense to God or brought condemnation upon those who committed them. Liberals denied that guilt was the problem, that justice demanded retribution, and that Christ suffered to satisfy God's justice. Even the worst of people had a divine spark within, and this spark could be fanned into a flame. When ministering to people the focus should not be upon their personal guilt or the evil that they had done, but upon the good that was in them and upon which they might build.

To a very large extent, liberals relocated sin from individuals into social structures. While they certainly believed that individuals could and did do wrong things, they were more concerned about the social structures that placed people in impossible situations. Individual acts such as theft, drunkenness, or prostitution were seen more as symptoms, while the causes lay

in social and economic inequality, oppressive industrialism, and predatory enterprises such as the liquor trade. While one might help the individual drunkard or prostitute, the important thing was to challenge the structures that fostered their practices.

In other words, liberals wanted a gospel that was not merely (or even mainly) personal, but social. The older gospel brought an announcement that Christ had acted in space and time to secure the forgiveness of sins. Liberals, however, began to reimagine the gospel as an endeavor to transform society. In the name of the gospel they began to challenge social ills such as poverty, crime, ignorance, child labor, drunkenness, gambling, tenement living, unsanitary conditions, poor hygiene, and the exploitation of labor. Their efforts were bolstered by their commitment to the doctrine of progress and their strong belief in the essential goodness of human nature.

A key component in the social gospel was the liberal understanding of the kingdom of God. Modernists adopted a postmillennial view of the future in which a golden age was the goal of human activity on earth. This golden age would mean the elimination of social ills and the elevation of human dignity, and it is what liberals thought of as the kingdom of God. The joy, peace, and fruitfulness of the kingdom would constitute the full manifestation of God's presence on earth—though without anything like the bodily presence of Jesus. Liberals committed themselves to bringing in such a kingdom.

Who, then, was Jesus? As liberals understood Him, Jesus was the first Christian. He was an example of faith. He served as a model to show how people ought to live for God. Like all humans, Jesus was divine—but He was not uniquely God incarnate. He did reveal God through His teachings, but He also revealed the tremendous potential for good that lies within human nature. He was a sort of prototype of what God wanted all people to become.

Liberals generally downplayed the role of the miraculous in Jesus' life. They often understood the resurrection to mean that the influence of Jesus lives on in His followers. Since Jesus was not uniquely God, they saw no need for a virgin birth. Since they understood the kingdom of God to be an ethical development within the flow of history, they saw no useful purpose in Jesus' miracles. Indeed, they believed that miracles were an offense to the modern mind. The important thing about Jesus was His ethical teaching. Liberals saw in the message of Jesus the supreme elevation of morality and altruistic service. The goal of the Christian was to live the same kind of ethical life that Jesus lived. Jesus was a guide and pattern for the religious person.

In fact, liberals often insisted upon distinguishing the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. The Jesus of history was the teacher who had actually lived in Judea and Galilee during the first century. The Christ of faith was the supernatural person whom the church had invented by adding generations

worth of legend to the stories of Jesus. From the modernist perspective, the miraculous Christ contributed little to modern Christianity. Rather, liberals were interested in the Jesus of history, and particularly in His ethical teachings. They launched upon a so-called quest for the historical Jesus to discover those teachings by reading between the lines of the Gospels.

The distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith reveals something about how the liberals were using the Bible. They saw the Scripture as neither inerrant nor infallible. They ridiculed the notion of verbal inspiration. Rather than accepting the complete Bible as a revelation of God, they viewed it as a record of religious experience. They believed that the Bible exhibits different religious experiences, some of which are better and some worse. Parts of the Bible (particularly the ethical teachings of Jesus) could still speak to moderns and help to spur human progress. Other parts had to be rejected as expressions of primitive religious perspectives and experiences that had now been superseded.

Liberals fully accepted and employed a higher critical approach to the text of Scripture. Higher criticism is a discipline that asks questions about how texts were composed. It is concerned with issues like authorship, date, and place of composition. Influenced as they were by the theory of social and religious evolution, liberals often used higher critical techniques to challenge traditional understandings of the Bible.

For example, liberals accepted the Documentary Hypothesis, which asserts that the Pentateuch could not have been written by Moses. Rather, original documents were prepared by a Jahwist and an Elohist, supplemented by a Deuteronomist, and combined by a priestly redactor (sometimes this theory was referred to as the JEDP theory). Likewise, liberals believed that the book of Isaiah was the product of at least two authors, the original Isaiah (who wrote chapters 1–39) and a later pseudonymous poet whom they called Deutero-Isaiah (who wrote chapters 40–66). The Synoptic Gospels were not written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but were the product of generations of storytelling in which the repeated tellings added Jesus' miracles and supernatural claims to the stories.

In short, religious liberalism or modernism completely transformed Christian theology. Liberalism held new and different views of God, humanity, sin, judgment, atonement, salvation, the kingdom of God, Christ, and Scripture. Virtually no part of historic Christianity was left unchanged by the liberal approach to religion.

In view of the radical nature of religious liberalism, two further questions must be asked. The first is why the liberals made these changes. Why did they commit themselves to a radical revision of Christianity? The second is how a religion that was so different from historic Christianity could manage to

capture virtually all of the mainline Protestant denominations, and particularly how it could capture Northern Baptists.

The *why* question is easier to answer. As William R. Hutchison notes, modernism was "first and most visibly . . . the conscious, intended adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture."[11] Liberals were not trying to destroy Christianity. In fact, they were trying to save it. They believed that the old supernatural religion of the Bible could not stand up to the challenges of modern science—and the spirit of the age told them that the scientific method was the surest way to certain knowledge. Consequently, Christianity had to be adapted so as to eliminate any conflict with modern science. It had to make room for evolution. It had to make room for the "assured results" of biblical criticism. It had to make room for the optimistic view of human nature that had been proliferated during the Enlightenment. The liberal response was to relocate authority from the written text of Scripture to the inner experience of God. Jesus became the best exemplar of this experience, and Christianity became the process of following Jesus as He served God. Effectively, liberals removed the core of Christianity from the sphere of knowledge and transferred it into the sphere of sentiment.

During the half century from 1870 to 1920, liberalism gained de facto control of nearly all of the mainline Protestant denominations. In particular, by 1920 it held such a tight grip on Northern Baptists that it could not be shaken loose, even by concentrated efforts. How could liberals gain so much power? What factors explain their success? That is a story that needs to be told.

Liberalism among Northern Baptists

American denominations of all sorts experienced controversy during the years leading up to the Civil War. They endured arguments over Calvinism, missions, Freemasonry, Bible translation, organizational structure, and, most of all, slavery. These controversies had produced deep divisions in many denominations, including Baptists.

As they emerged from the war, it seemed as if Baptists and other Christians had adopted Lincoln's spirit of malice toward none and charity toward all. For some decades controversy dropped to a minimum while a new attitude of forbearance and catholicity swept across American Christianity. This new atmosphere of tolerance provided exactly the right environment for the new theology of liberalism to flourish. At the end of the war, hardly a liberal could be found among Baptists anywhere. Half-a-century later, however, a leading Baptist would write, "At the present all the older theological seminaries of the

11. Hutchison, *Modern Impulse*, 2.

North have on their faculties scholars of the modern type who are outspoken in their acceptance of modernistic views of the Bible and of the evolutionistic philosophy, and no one of them, so far as the writer is aware, has among its professors a stalwart and aggressive advocate of the older conservatism."[12]

The progress of liberalism began in the schools. It was first detected in classrooms, publications, and addresses at denominational gatherings like the Baptist Autumnal Conferences and (later) the Baptist Congresses. Eventually it spread to the denominational structure and pulpits of Northern Baptists. Almost invariably the first evidence of liberal theology was its view of the Bible. The abandonment of inerrancy or infallibility (these were not always neatly distinguished) was itself a departure from historic Christianity, and it usually foreshadowed other departures that would soon follow.[13]

One of the first identifiable liberals among Northern Baptists was Thomas Fenner Curtis. An educator, Curtis had for years devoted himself to preparing Baptist ministers at the University of Lewisburg in Pennsylvania. During the mid- to late 1860s his theology began to change. He resigned from the university and moved into the shadow of Harvard. There he wrote *The Human Element in the Inspiration of the Scriptures*. While Curtis professed to believe in the inspiration of the Bible, he insisted that inspiration did not require infallibility. The biblical writers could be mistaken in matters of science, history, and even in their doctrinal teachings.[14] While Curtis's work provoked some controversy, its influence was limited for the moment. What it did accomplish was to open the door for subsequent scholars to teach and publish liberal views.

Before long, Southern Baptists were facing a more serious situation—and it was one that ended up affecting Baptists in the North as well. Crawford Howell Toy was installed as professor of Old Testament at Southern Baptist Seminary in 1869. During his installation address he noted that the conclusions of secular science should be used to interpret the Bible. Within a few years he was beginning to accept critical views on issues like creation and the date of certain biblical books. The president of Southern Baptist Seminary, James P. Boyce, pressured Toy to keep these views to himself, but the professor continued to teach them. In 1878 he began to put his views in print, which

12. Albert Henry Newman, *A History of the Baptist Churches in the United States*, 6th ed. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1915), 518.

13. The most comprehensive discussion of the liberal takeover among Northern Baptists is found in Jeffrey Paul Straub, "The Making of a Battle Royal: The Rise of Religious Liberalism in Northern Baptist Life, 1870–1920" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004). See also Norman H. Maring, "Baptists and Changing Views of the Bible, 1865–1918 (Part I)," *Foundations* 1 (July 1958): 52–75; Maring, "Baptists and Changing Views of the Bible, 1865–1918 (Part II)," *Foundations* 1 (October 1958): 30–61.

14. Thomas Fenner Curtis, *The Human Element in the Inspiration of the Scriptures* (New York: D. Appleton, 1867), 314–32.

brought accusations of heresy. After a year of public controversy, Toy resigned his professorship. He later accepted a teaching post at Harvard, where he drifted into Unitarianism.

Toy's views were spread among Northern Baptists by his students. One of these, David Gordon Lyon, went on to take his PhD from the University of Leipzig. Toy was instrumental in bringing Lyon to Harvard in 1882. Whereas Toy had disassociated himself from Baptists, Lyon went on to propagate a liberal theory of Scripture in his addresses at the Baptist Autumnal Conferences.

These conferences, which later developed into the Baptist Congress, began with an 1882 meeting in Brooklyn, New York. The purpose of the Baptist Autumnal Conferences and the Baptist Congress was to provide a platform for Baptist leaders to address current issues. From the beginning the conference aimed for theological breadth, allowing participants to present papers without fear of recrimination. Organizers such as George Dana Boardman and Norman Fox were at least somewhat sympathetic to liberal views. As the Baptist Congress grew, it became an important venue for the open discussion of liberal theology. It gave liberals a platform to present their views with near impunity.

Within a couple years after Toy's departure from Southern Baptist Seminary, Baptists in the North were facing a comparable situation. Ezra Palmer Gould had graduated from the Newton Theological Institution in 1868. He had been asked to remain as a teacher by President Alvah Hovey, and then was elevated to full professor in 1870. Over the years Gould's teaching became increasingly liberal, resulting in complaints to the board in 1881. As tensions rose, the board appointed a committee of five to investigate the situation and return with a recommendation. In a split decision, the committee recommended that Gould be removed from teaching. In 1882 the trustees acted to dismiss Gould, also in a split decision.

Gould's firing sparked considerable controversy among Baptists. Some voices called for toleration, liberty, and diversity—an appeal that would become a liberal staple during the ensuing years. Then a second controversy erupted over a commentary that Gould was supposed to publish with the American Baptist Publication Society. The editor wanted him to take a more orthodox position in certain comments. Gould refused. Eventually he accepted a teaching position in an Episcopalian seminary, later receiving Episcopal ordination.

Although Gould was no longer teaching in a Baptist institution, his influence among Baptists continued through those whose lives he had touched. For example, W. H. P. Faunce (who became president of Brown University) and Albion Small (later president of Colby College and founder of the department of sociology at the new University of Chicago) were among his students,

and both became notorious liberals. He had also started a friendship with a young pastor named William Newton Clarke, and his influence contributed greatly to Clarke's drift into liberalism.

When Clarke came as pastor to Newton Center, Massachusetts (home of Newton Theological Institution), he was already beginning to incline toward liberal theology. Even as a young man he had experienced difficulty accepting some biblical perspectives. As he matured in pastoral ministry, he rejected the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. He also began to accept the new evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, and these forced him to revisit several aspects of his Christian faith. His first published work, a commentary on Mark, aroused significant controversy among Baptists because of its incipient liberalism. Friendship with Ezra Gould was just the catalyst that Clarke needed to propel him into a fully liberal theology.[15]

Clarke was actually a member of the board at Newton when Gould was fired. Shortly after the firing he left Massachusetts for a teaching position at Toronto Baptist College (later McMaster University), where he was assured that his liberal ideas would be tolerated. After five years in Canada he accepted a pastoral position in Hamilton, New York, the home of Hamilton Theological Institution.

Hamilton (later renamed Colgate Theological Seminary) was one of four old Baptist seminaries in the Northeast. The others were Newton (in Newton Center, Massachusetts), Rochester (in Rochester, New York), and Crozer (in Upland, Pennsylvania). A fifth seminary was located in the Midwest under the umbrella of the old University of Chicago. It was the Baptist Union Theological Seminary, which eventually relocated to Morgan Park, Illinois.

The Hamilton seminary was affiliated with Madison University, and both were presided over by Ebenezer Dodge. Dodge also taught theology in the seminary. Theologically, he was a transitional figure. On the one hand, he insisted upon a hearing for newer theological perspectives. On the other hand, he remained committed to the older Baptist orthodoxy. When Dodge suddenly died in early 1890, the school needed to find a replacement quickly for his teaching duties. Since Clarke was already pastoring in Hamilton, and since he already had experience as a professor, he was asked to take over Dodge's classroom responsibilities.

Clarke's influence as a professor at Hamilton (Colgate) was far-reaching.

15. The commentary appeared in unusual form. The cover read *Commentary on Mark and Luke*, the title page showed the title as *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Alvah Hovey, but the volume contained only William Newton Clarke's commentary on the Gospel of Mark (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1881). Clarke later recalled the story of his changing views in William Newton Clarke, *Sixty Years with the Bible: A Record of Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909). The work is a kind of theological autobiography.

To his teaching he brought a warm, pious, irenic spirit that students found nearly irresistible. He gave himself to teaching and writing, and for two decades became a prominent influence toward liberal theology among younger Baptists. His *Outline of Christian Theology* (first published in 1894) became the first great systematization of religious liberalism by an American theologian. His *Use of the Scriptures in Theology* spelled out in detail the liberal approach to the Bible. Clarke became the first liberal to remain permanently in a Baptist seminary.[16]

While Clarke managed to establish himself pretty firmly at Hamilton, a younger liberal, Nathaniel Schmidt, was less successful. Schmidt was from Sweden, but he had received his master's degree from Madison University in Hamilton, New York. For a short time he pastored a Swedish Baptist church in Manhattan, where he befriended Walter Rauschenbusch and Leighton Williams. In 1888 he returned to Hamilton to teach Greek and Semitic languages. He spent time at the University of Berlin in 1890, after which he was given a full professorship at Hamilton.

Even before Schmidt traveled to Berlin, he was being pressured to keep quiet about some of his more liberal views. After he resumed his duties, word spread quickly that he had adopted a critical approach that was unfriendly to Scripture. While Schmidt had an undoubted reputation for brilliance, even some of his peers were uncomfortable with his conclusions. Sylvester Burnham, dean at Hamilton, had started out as one of Schmidt's defenders, but by 1896 Burnham had grown so uncomfortable with Schmidt's views that he threatened to resign.

In the middle of 1896, the Baptist Education Society recommended that Schmidt be dismissed from Hamilton. The board of the school asked for Schmidt's resignation with only one dissenting vote. The decision prompted a letter of protest from Walter Rauschenbusch. At Cornell University, President Jacob Gould Shurman created a teaching position specifically for Schmidt.

Schmidt's forced resignation prompted sufficient controversy that even the secular papers took notice. The public consensus was that Schmidt had been treated shabbily. The trustees, who were not prepared for such negative publicity, quickly adopted a broadened policy on academic freedom. The lesson was not lost on other Baptists who were involved in higher education. Boards and administrations quickly became more tolerant of liberalism. Schmidt was probably the last modernist to be dismissed from one of the old Northern Baptist seminaries for theological reasons.

One liberal who benefitted from this increased latitude was Walter

16. William Newton Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology*, 20th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912); Clarke, *The Use of the Scriptures in Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906).

Rauschenbusch. Years before, fresh out of Rochester Theological Seminary, Rauschenbusch had taken the pastorate of the Second German Baptist Church in Manhattan. This little congregation was located in the heart of New York's infamous Hell's Kitchen, near the equally notorious Tenderloin District. Rauschenbusch found himself ministering to a community that was dominated not only by poverty and inhumane living conditions, but also by drunkenness, gambling, prostitution, and other vices. He became convinced that the mission of Christianity was to address the human suffering that now confronted him every day. In spite of a weak constitution and growing deafness, he threw himself into the task. In addition to his pastoral ministry, he began to edit a worker's paper called *For the Right*.

Pastoring in Hell's Kitchen brought Rauschenbusch into contact with other ministers who shared his burden. That is how he met Nathaniel Schmidt, who at the time was pastor of a Swedish Baptist church. Another important contact was Leighton Williams of Amity Baptist Church on West 54th Avenue. Both geographical proximity and a common interest brought these three together. Their great goal was to decide how Christianity could address the social concerns that were common to all of them.

They had not yet answered this question when Schmidt left to teach at Hamilton in 1888, and then Rauschenbusch was granted a sabbatical to travel to England and Germany in 1891. Before the friends went their separate ways, however, they made the acquaintance of a Pennsylvania pastor, Samuel Batten. He suggested that the answer to their question could be found in a new understanding of the kingdom of God, which, he noted, was the center of Jesus' teaching.

Rauschenbusch pondered this suggestion as he toured Europe, working out the implications of the kingdom of God for the church's mission of social betterment. The construct that he developed was called the "social gospel," and it sought to apply Christian ethics to social problems. Economic inequality, racial tension, child labor, prostitution, drunkenness and comparable evils were to be challenged, not by individual conversions to Christianity, but through measures like education, labor unions, and legislation. Vigorously pursued, these progressive measures could usher in a social golden age, a kind of secularized millennium.

After Rauschenbusch returned from Europe, he and his friends committed themselves to labor for the kingdom through social betterment and to promote a social understanding of the gospel. In 1892 they decided to form a small society to encourage one another in the advancement of the social gospel. They called their fellowship The Brotherhood of the Kingdom, and it held its first meeting the next year.

Each summer the Brotherhood of the Kingdom would meet near

Marlborough-on-the-Hudson, at a country home owned by Williams's family. With the social gospel as their focus, pastors and scholars would gather to argue with each other, encourage each other, and present papers to one another. The meetings of the Brotherhood provided an opportunity for interchange between liberals of different denominations. Over time it became a center for liberal strategy. Its main focus, however, was always the implementation of the kingdom of God on earth.

In 1897 Augustus H. Strong invited Rauschenbusch to join the faculty at Rochester Theological Seminary. Strong was personally committed to Baptist orthodoxy as he understood it, but his understanding of orthodoxy was rather more open than that of some others. For instance, he allowed for the evolution of the human race, and he was willing to entertain the possibility that belief in inerrancy was not essential to biblical authority. Later in life he would speak out against religious liberalism, especially when it was found on the mission field. Nevertheless, Strong's invitation to Rauschenbusch was one of the key events in the advance of liberal influence.

Strong knew that Rauschenbusch was a liberal when he hired him. In fact, he counseled Rauschenbusch to be cautious in expressing his views, and especially in voicing denials of traditionally held doctrines. Rauschenbusch hardly ever followed this counsel. Nevertheless, Strong not only employed Rauschenbusch, but promoted him and kept him on the faculty at Rochester. Rauschenbusch's most important influence came, not while he was a pastor in Hell's Kitchen, but while he was a teacher for A. H. Strong.

His professorship at Rochester gave Rauschenbusch the leisure to write. His first major work, published in 1907, was *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. This work was a kind of personal manifesto on the social gospel. A best seller for its day, this book made Rauschenbusch famous and galvanized the social gospel movement. Two years later (the same year that Van Osdel moved to Grand Rapids), Rauschenbusch published a second volume, *Prayers of the Social Awakening*. His blueprint for change, *Christianizing the Social Order*, appeared in 1912, followed shortly by *Dare We Be Christians?* Rauschenbusch's influence began to wane during the Great War, but he kept publishing. *The Social Principles of Jesus* was meant to popularize the social gospel through group study by young adults. *A Theology of the Social Gospel* still caused a sensation when it appeared after the armistice.[17]

Alfred Wishart, pastor at Fountain Street Church when Van Osdel arrived

17. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1907); Rauschenbusch, *Prayers of the Social Awakening* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1910); this volume was also published under the title *For God and the People*; Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1913); Rauschenbusch, *Dare We Be Christians?* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1914); Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principles of Jesus* (New York: Woman's Press, 1917); Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1918).

in Grand Rapids, had been strongly influenced by Rauschenbusch's theory of the social gospel. Rauschenbusch's ministry in Hell's Kitchen had become Wishart's model in Trenton. Wishart then became a direct pipeline for the social gospel into Grand Rapids. Rauschenbusch was not the only influence upon the young liberal, however, nor was he necessarily the most important. Wishart had also been shaped—profoundly so—by his education at the University of Chicago.

The old University of Chicago had occupied a ten-acre site donated by Stephen Douglas (of the Lincoln-Douglas debates) just off Lake Michigan near Cottage Grove and 35th Avenue. Affiliated with the university were a law school (now the Northwestern University School of Law) and the Baptist Union Theological Seminary. The old university faced financial difficulties almost from its founding in 1857. An offer of free land attracted the seminary, and in 1877 it relocated to Morgan Park (now part of Chicago's Far South Side). When the university failed in 1886, the seminary had already been operating independently for some time.

Oliver Van Osdel attended the Baptist Union Theological Seminary while it was still connected with the old University of Chicago. He left seminary early for several years of pastoral ministry, then returned to complete his training in Morgan Park. The president of the seminary was George W. Northrup, who doubled as professor of systematic theology. Most significantly, the young William Rainey Harper became professor of Hebrew and cognate languages in 1879.

Van Osdel and Harper quickly formed a friendship. Van Osdel was older, a Civil War veteran, and a family man. He had already pastored three churches and faced his first ecclesiastical battles. Harper, while younger, was an undisputed genius. When Harper's dying brother came to live in his home, the Van Osdels shouldered the responsibility for his care. Harper reciprocated with warmth toward Van Osdel's young son, Edgar. Their games took a different twist from those usually played between adults and children—Van Osdel was surprised one day to hear his son recite the entire first chapter of Genesis in Hebrew.

After Van Osdel was graduated, the two friends drifted apart, though they did not quite lose touch. Van Osdel went on to pastor churches in Kansas and Texas. In 1888, two years after the closure of the old University of Chicago, Harper left Morgan Park for Yale. Chicago Baptists were already attempting to gather financing for a new university. Van Osdel accepted the pastorate of First Baptist Church in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1889 just as anticipation was mounting. Within a year, John D. Rockefeller of Standard Oil agreed to donate $600,000 to open the new university, provided other donors could raise another $400,000. He wanted Harper to become the president of the

university, but Harper insisted upon another million dollars for the divinity school. Rockefeller agreed, and the new University of Chicago opened for classes in the fall of 1892.

The Harper who built the new university, however, held rather different convictions from the professor who had taught Van Osdel his Hebrew in Morgan Park. Sometime during the '80s, Harper had passed through an intellectual crisis. During his studies he found himself drawing conclusions that required him to deny the Davidic authorship of one of the psalms that, according to the Gospels, Jesus Himself attributed to David. Hour after hour Harper paced in his study, trying to decide whether to terminate his line of study. In the end, he pressed forward, embracing a critical approach to Scripture.[18]

Once Harper had accepted liberal theology—especially a higher critical approach to the Bible—he became an evangelist for that view. In 1888 he began an interchange on "The Pentateuchal Question" with a Presbyterian scholar, W. H. Green of Princeton Seminary. Green attacked and Harper defended the critical approach to the Pentateuch (Green eventually put his articles into book form).[19] Harper's interest was broader than scholarly debate, however. He wanted to introduce ordinary church members to the liberal view of Scripture. To accomplish this goal he organized summer schools and edited popular publications such as *The Old Testament Student*. When he became the president of the new University of Chicago, he began to use the power of his institution to spread liberalism.

The Morgan Park seminary became the divinity school of the new university. The older professors were not identifiably liberal, but they were at the upper end of their teaching careers. Harper quickly added his own choices to the faculty, then used the retirements of the older professors to add even more. In the long run, the faculty of the divinity school boasted some of the best-known names in American liberalism: Ernest DeWitt Burton, Shailer Mathews, Shirley Jackson Case, George Burman Foster, and Gerald Birney Smith. Under the leadership of these individuals, the divinity school of the new University of Chicago became the single most important force for advancing liberalism among Northern Baptists.

Of the so-called Chicago School, Foster was the most openly radical. So extreme were his pronouncements that he was formally excluded from the Chicago Baptist ministers' conference. Eventually Foster asked to be transferred

18. Shailer Mathews, *New Faith for Old: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 63.

19. The episode is mentioned by Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), 139. See W. H. Green, *The Unity of the Book of Genesis* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895); Green, *The Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895).

from the divinity school to the philosophy department of the university. Harper may have felt relieved, but Foster's influence continued.

Shailer Mathews probably held views that were as radical as Foster's, but he made a point of articulating them more carefully. Originally hired to teach New Testament, Mathews rose to become dean of the divinity school. He was a skilled administrator and a consummate ecclesiastical politician. Mathews also represented the interests of the Chicago school and of liberalism in general during the formation of the Northern Baptist Convention.

The Northern Baptist Convention

By the turn of the century, Northern Baptists had organized a number of important institutions. They operated a foreign mission society, a home mission society, a publication society, an education society, various women's organizations, a young people's union, and an assortment of educational institutions. The larger societies still held their annual meetings together during the week of Pentecost.

Numbers of influential Baptists were growing restless with the Anniversaries and wanted a more powerful, efficient organization for the churches. Some of these were wealthy men who had been giving massive amounts to the two main mission agencies, both of which were running significant deficits. In 1895 the combined shortfall of the foreign and home societies was about $460,000—a princely sum in those days. The general secretaries would try to ease financial emergencies by approaching the rich to make up the deficit. The most notable giver was John D. Rockefeller, but his patience was wearing thin. He would typically offer a matching gift that the secretaries could use to motivate other givers, but by early in the new century he was pressuring Baptists to adopt a more businesslike organization.

Aware of the need for a more central organization, Shailer Mathews saw the possibility of using it as a platform to advance liberalism. Accordingly, at the fall 1906 meeting of the Chicago Baptist Association he had a resolution introduced. It appealed to the secretaries of the big three societies (foreign missions, home missions, and publication) to call a meeting with a view to organizing a Northern Baptist Convention. The resolution also stated that if the three did not act by December, then the secretary of the Chicago Baptist Association would be authorized to call such a meeting.[20]

20. For a well-researched account of the founding, see Robert E. McClernon, "The Formation of the Northern Baptist Convention" (BD thesis, University of Chicago, 1956). See also Mathews, *New Faith for Old*, 63. Additional perspective on the founding and operation of the convention can be found in Paul M. Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition: A Social Case Study of the American Baptist Convention* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959).

The three secretaries conceded, and on December 11, 1906, called for the meeting. At the 1907 Anniversaries in Washington, D.C., Mathews was appointed chairman of the steering committee. He had a draft constitution ready to offer. By the end of the week he had led the organizing of the Northern Baptist Convention. Perhaps not surprisingly, the desk jobs went to modernists, although the elected officers were often conservatives. The first president was New York Governor Charles Evans Hughes. The vice president under him was Harry Pratt Judson of the University of Chicago. The general secretary was William C. Bitting.

Many have said that the convention was once fundamental, but that the liberals later got control of it. The documents say it differently: modernists put the convention together from the very beginning and they never lost control.[21] The general secretaries and the executives were modernists all through the history of the establishment. Within a few years of the founding, that influence would make itself felt.

In 1908 the convention met in Oklahoma City and adopted the constitution. A key question was how the existing societies would be related to the new NBC. At the Portland, Oregon, meeting in 1909 the convention adopted a resolution affirming that each society was independent of any union with the Northern Baptist Convention. Until 1915 that resolve seemed to hold: the societies' reports in the Annual had their own page numbering. From that year on, the Annuals were paginated consecutively. For another ten years the societies conducted their own business meetings. In the Seattle meetings of 1925, at the discussion of the Hinson resolution, the chair for the first time failed to yield the gavel to the society president.[22]

In 1911 the convention altered the bylaws so as to give the salaried executives the right to vote. This turned out to be a powerful liberal device to control any floor vote. Also in 1911 the convention created the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board. Instigated by Rockefeller and initially backed by his money, the M&M Board (as it was known) was a retirement program for the convention's ministers and missionaries. Those who participated in the program would contribute a small percentage of their salaries, which would be matched by contributions from their churches. The board would then manage those funds to secure the best rate of return. In principle, the M&M Board could provide a comfortable retirement for Christian servants who might otherwise be destitute. In practice, this program became a very effective tool

21. Mathews, *New Faith for Old*, 113.

22. Robert Leonard Carlberg, "The Development of Centralizing Tendencies in the Northern Baptist Convention 1907–1946" (ThM thesis, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, 1947), 72.

to prevent pastors from leaving (or worse yet, pulling their churches out of) the convention.

A third decision in 1911 would also have a significant influence upon the future of the Northern Baptist Convention. In that year the convention voted to merge with the majority of the Northern or Randall Line of Free Will Baptists. Free Will Baptists had always been more open on matters related to church membership, sometimes allowing unimmersed individuals to join their churches. This policy, sometimes called "Open Membership," was typically rejected by more mainstream Baptists. The merger of these two groups brought a number of Open Membership churches into the Northern Baptist Convention, as well as a larger number of churches that did not see Open Membership as an issue. This merger would prove to be a deciding factor in some of the controversies of the 1920s.

That development, however, still lay in the future. When Oliver Van Osdel moved to Grand Rapids in 1909, the Northern Baptist Convention was in its infancy. Conservatives supported the convention because of its organizational and financial advantages. Liberals supported it because it gave them a tool that they could use, first to secure their own position, and then to spread their control into places they would never otherwise have been able to reach. Within a decade many conservatives would begin to realize the magnitude of the blunder that they had made, but they would never be able to recover the lost ground.

Keys to Liberal Success

At the end of the Civil War, liberal theology could hardly have been detected among Baptists of the North. By 1909 a liberal like Wishart could block an entire association from publishing an orthodox defense of the virgin birth of Christ. Furthermore, liberals had formed the Northern Baptist Convention to gain an iron grip upon Baptist organizations—a grasp that would eventually extend to the churches themselves. Another decade would pass before Baptist conservatives would organize to thwart the liberal juggernaut. They would have no way of knowing that they were already beaten.

How could the theological current turn so swiftly against Baptist orthodoxy? What carried liberalism to such swift acceptance? Several considerations help to answer this question.

First and most obviously, the intellectual climate of Western civilization was changing rapidly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The philosophical theories of Kant and Hegel were being imported into America, as were the comparable theological systems of Schleiermacher and Ritschl. Darwin's new theory of evolution had carried the day among the intelligentsia.

The acceptance of biblical criticism paralleled the growth of historical and literary criticism in other disciplines. During this transition, religious liberalism appeared to be dressed in the latest intellectual fashions.

Second, the liberals themselves were bright and even brilliant young men. They had studied in the most prestigious universities (usually German), and they flourished in the new academic climate. They were a generation upon whom respectable schools could be built, and the administrations of those schools viewed them with something akin to awe. Men like Walter Rauschenbusch and William Rainey Harper became religious celebrities. They gained influence rapidly and could not easily be challenged.

Third, once liberals became symbols of academic respectability, the public (including the religious public) was willing to protect them. Academic freedom became more important than orthodoxy. The board at Hamilton learned this lesson the hard way when they fired Nathanial Schmidt. They never forgot the beating that they took in the press—nor did the boards of the other seminaries. From the firing of Schmidt onward, liberals were safe in the schools.

Fourth, educational leaders often failed to realize how radical liberalism really was. One factor that contributed to this failure was the theological imprecision of the generation that came immediately prior to liberalism. While Presbyterians had the Princeton theologians to articulate a careful case for orthodoxy, Baptists had few educational leaders who meticulously engaged theological issues. For example, during the early debate over Thomas Fenner Curtis's book on biblical inspiration. Henry G. Weston wrote to Alvah Hovey of Newton Theological Institution saying, "I am all at sea, except so far as a dogged belief in inspiration goes, without being able to define what 'Inspiration' is, or what its metes and bounds are. . . . I want you to give me what ideas you can conveniently put on two pages of note-paper. I'll fight for them to the death, for I shall heartily believe just what you say."[23] Not long after writing this letter, Weston found himself in the presidency of Crozer Seminary. Such vagueness provided an environment that was conducive to theological innovation.

From their side, the liberals learned to keep a low profile, at least until they had gained public support and captured positions of influence. Compared to the old orthodoxy, even the moderate liberals held radical ideas. Nevertheless, they wrapped their ideas in the language of orthodoxy, especially during their public presentations. As they employed the older terms, however, they gave them new definitions. Liberals in 1909 could still speak of the inspiration

23. Henry G. Weston to Alvah Hovey, 6 December 1867, in *Life and Letters of Alvah Hovey*, ed. George Rice Hovey (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1928), 161.

of Scripture, but their theory of inspiration was miles away from the beliefs (however inchoate) of Baptists before the Civil War.

Liberals also manifested the appearance of godliness and Christian devotion. Men like William Newton Clarke earned reputations as pious, warmhearted teachers. They were irenic and zealous for the kingdom of God. Many Baptists found it difficult to believe that men with whom they had knelt in earnest prayer could actually be undermining or even betraying the faith.

Because they did not appreciate the radical nature of liberalism, older administrators tended to remain unconcerned about the younger professors on their faculties who were adopting more modernistic views. They seem to have viewed liberalism as a phase or a passing theological fad, assuming that their young professors would eventually grow out of it. They believed that these bright young thinkers could eventually be influenced toward orthodoxy. In the meanwhile, the young liberals could be kept under control. Consequently, A. H. Strong hired and kept Walter Rauschenbusch on his faculty at Rochester, even though he could also express great concern over the progress of liberalism.

> Under the influence of Ritschl and his Kantian relativism, many of our teachers and preachers have swung off into a practical denial of Christ's deity and of his atonement. We seem upon the verge of a second Unitarian defection, that will break up churches and compel secessions, in a worse manner than did that of Channing and Ware a century ago. American Christianity recovered from that disaster only by vigorously asserting the authority of Christ and the inspiration of the Scriptures. . . . Without a revival of this faith our churches will become secularized, mission enterprise will die out, and the candlestick will be removed out of its place . . . as it has been with the apostate churches of New England.[24]

Hard words, those, and timely. How ironic that the man who wrote them was at that very moment employing one of the best-known and most influential liberal theologians of his generation. Whatever concerns Strong may have felt about the growth of modernism, he did not allow them to affect decisions about hiring at his own seminary.

In fact, Strong typifies the imprecision of the age. On the one hand, he objected to liberalism. On the other hand, he wished to distance himself from anything like real conservatism. At the end of his life, he was still hoping to stake out a mediating position between liberalism and fundamentalism. In his last book, he wrote,

24. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, ix.

> I desire to recognize whatever of truth there is in the theory of evolution and in the conclusions of the higher criticism. . . . I hold, therefore, middle ground between the higher critics and the so-called fundamentalists, and believe it possible for them both to reconcile their differences by a larger view of the deity and omnipresence of Christ. He is "our Peace," and he holds in his girdle the key to all our problems. It is with hope of doing something to bring about such a reconciliation, that I print this new statement of doctrine.[25]

A fifth way that liberals gained influence was through denominational churchmanship. Northern Baptists had many local associations and state conventions, not to mention service organizations at every level. The multiplication of institutions required a great many employees and volunteers to administer their work. These included not only institutional presidents and convention secretaries, but a variety of middle-level managers, fundraisers, editors, publicists, field directors, and other coordinators. The complexities of Baptist organization had created many wheels to be turned, and the people who turned them performed a valuable task. Liberals willingly accepted these positions, integrating and ingratiating themselves within the denominational structure. Through their hours of denominational service they quietly made themselves indispensible.

Shailer Mathews typified the liberal commitment to churchmanship. As professor and later dean at the Divinity School of the new University of Chicago, he devoted much of his time and attention to Baptist organization. He pushed Baptists to form the Northern Baptist Convention when they were already feeling the need for a unified organization. By inserting himself into leadership, he was able to structure the new convention in ways that were favorable to liberal acceptance and, ultimately, liberal control. He had already served as president of the convention (1915) before the fundamentalist controversy erupted.

Finally, liberalism flourished among Northern Baptists because the liberals built strong networks for mutual support and protection. Among Baptists, liberals were among the most influential planners and participants at the Baptist Autumnal Conferences and the later Baptist Congresses. Liberals also worked across denominational lines through organizations like the Brotherhood of the Kingdom and the Liberal Congress of Religion (also known as the American Congress of Liberal Religious Societies, or simply the Congress of Religion).

The Liberal Congress of Religion grew out of the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893. Also known as the Chicago World's Fair, the exhibition featured

25. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *What Shall I Believe: A Primer of Christian Theology* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1922), 8–9.

a two-week Parliament of the World's Religions (Sept. 11–27), which brought together representatives from both Eastern and Western faiths. Capitalizing on the momentum created by the Parliament, the first of the Liberal Congresses met in Chicago the following May. Meeting over the next decades, the congress provided a forum for religious liberals of different backgrounds to exchange ideas.

All of these venues, as well as others that operated on the state or local level, gave liberals an opportunity to develop and test their theology, to offer mutual encouragement, and to provide mutual assistance when one of them came under ecclesiastical fire. Through the relationships that they developed at these forums, liberals were able to engage, defend, and promote one another. This was a key element in their strategy to influence the denominations, including the Northern Baptists.

Conclusion

Less than a decade into the new century, proponents of modernist theology were firmly entrenched among Northern Baptists. They held key positions in education and publication. Their influence was spreading in the mission agencies. They had begun to occupy important pulpits. Perhaps most importantly, they had been able to engineer the formation of the Northern Baptist Convention in a way that would allow them to influence the churches directly.

When Oliver Van Osdel found himself facing the liberalism of Alfred Wishart, he was confronting a theology that had been given a forty-year head start among Northern Baptists. Organized opposition at the national level was still more than a decade away. In Van Osdel, however, liberalism encountered an intractable foe. While he did not know Wishart, he did know how to respond to error. The story of Baptist fundamentalism really begins with his reply to the two men sitting in his home during the winter of 1909.

Index