Critical Junctures in American Evangelicalism: III
The Construction of a Subculture

By Randall Balmer

When talking about evangelical attitudes toward society, it is possible, with only modest contrivance, to divide the twentieth century into four equal twenty-five-year periods: 1900 to 1925, 1925 to 1950, 1950 to 1975, and 1975 to 2000. Within each of these quarters, evangelicals approached the broader culture in very different ways, moving from suspicion and separation during the first half of the twentieth century to engagement and something very close to capitulation in the latter half. Just as social and demographic changes in American society profoundly shaped evangelical theology in the nineteenth century, so too the historical circumstances in each of these eras had broad repercussions on evangelicals and evangelicalism in the twentieth century.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, America's evangelicals were profoundly suspicious of the social changes that had buffeted the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Evangelicals' adoption of dispensational premillennialism in the waning decades of the nineteenth century, with its assurance that Jesus would return at any moment, effectively absolved them from the task of social reform. The social needs of the cities, in any case, were overwhelming and seemed to defy redress. Better to hunker down, seek the regeneration of other individuals, and scrutinize your own spiritual affairs in preparation for the rapture.

In an odd and somewhat indirect way, evangelicals' embrace of Charles Finney's Arminian theology during the antebellum period exaggerated this tendency. Whereas Wesleyanism and Arminianism empowered individuals to seize control of the salvation process, the corollary was that salvation thus attained could also be imperiled by the failure to live a godly life. Endless theological discussions about "eternal security" among evangelicals (whether or not one's eternal fate had been irreversibly secured at conversion) would have been, if not impossible, at least somewhat less probable among die-hard Calvinists, who taught the "perseverance of the saints," that those whom God had elected for salvation he would preserve to ultimate glorification. Arminians could claim no such assurance of "eternal security," so the task of examining the state of one's soul and devising various devotional exercises to shore up one's spirituality became at least a minor obsession.

With these characteristics – the emphasis on a personalized, introspective faith combined with a general disregard for social reform – evangelicals entered the twentieth century.

Although no one could have suspected it at the time, nothing reshaped the internal dimensions of evangelicalism in the twentieth century more than the events in Topeka, Kansas, on January 1, 1901, the first day of the new century. Agnes Ozman, a student at Charles Fox Parham's Bethel Bible College, began speaking in tongues after the manner of the early Christians in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. News of this phenomenon spread to other students and, by means of Parham's itinerations, throughout the lower Midwest. William J. Seymour, an

African American hotel waiter, carried this pentecostal gospel with him to Los Angeles early in 1906, and *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues) broke out again on April 9 at a house on Bonnie Brae Street, where Parham was staying. Within a week, the fledgling movement relocated to a former warehouse at 312 Azusa Street and for the next several years the Azusa Street Mission became synonymous with divine healing, pentecostal enthusiasm, and the preparation of missionaries, who fanned out across North America and the world with their pentecostal gospel.

One of the traits of the early years of pentecostalism was its interracial character; Seymour himself was black, and contemporaries noted the absence of racial barriers on Azusa Street. The second notable characteristic was that, like Finney's gatherings in the Second Great Awakening, women were allowed to participate, and some assumed important leadership roles in the early years of pentecostalism. Sadly, those distinctive elements dissipated. As pentecostalism began to organize into institutional forms – the Church of God in Christ, for example, or the Assemblies of God – the denominations were racially homogeneous, even exclusive. Although women were ordained as missionaries and pastors in pentecostal circles in the early decades of pentecostalism, that practice declined over the course of the twentieth century.

Among evangelicals elsewhere, a deepening suspicion began to infect their attitudes toward society. American culture, increasingly urbanized and overrun by immigrants, looked increasingly alien. Billy Sunday, a former baseball player for the Chicago White Stockings, railed against the evils of the cities and taunted his auditors to "hit the sawdust trail" and give their lives to Jesus. Another irritant to evangelicals was their uneasy relationship with mainline Protestant denominations as evidenced by the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. The leaders of Protestantism were departing from Christian orthodoxy, evangelicals charged, by countenancing Charles Darwin's ideas and by compromising on the integrity and the inerrancy of the scriptures. The German discipline of higher criticism, which cast doubts on the authorship of several books of the Bible, had won acceptance in many Protestant seminaries and among too many leaders of mainline Protestant denominations.

Evangelicals issued a full-fledged declaration of war against what they called "modernism" with the publication of a series of pamphlets called *The Fundamentals*. Written by conservative theologians and financed by Lyman and Milton Stewart of Union Oil Company of Californian, these twelve pamphlets published between 1910 and 1915, contained conservative defenses of such issues as the virgin birth of Christ, the authenticity of miracles, the inerrancy of the Bible and the premillennial return of Jesus. Those who subscribed to the doctrines contained therein came to be known as "fundamentalists."

In 1923, J. Gresham Machen, a theologian at Princeton Theological Seminary, published a book entitled *Christianity and Liberalism*. The two, he argued, are fundamentally different, and liberal – or modernist – Protestants should take the honorable course and withdraw from Protestant seminaries and

denominations, leaving them to conservatives, the rightful heirs of Protestant orthodoxy.

Liberal Protestants refused to heed Machen's directive, of course, and the era of suspicion that marked evangelicalism in the first quarter of the twentieth century gave way to an era characterized by separation. The career of Machen himself illustrates this transition. Machen became increasingly estranged from his colleagues at Princeton, and his agitation against modernism also angered leaders of the Presbyterian Church. A reorganization of the seminary forced his ouster in 1929, and Machen went on to form an independent missions board, Westminster Theological Seminary, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Similar struggles beset other denominations. Although many conservative evangelicals remained affiliated with mainline congregations and denominations, struggling to effect change or a kind of reclamation, many others bolted to form their own congregations, denominations, and affiliated institutions.

Symbolically, at least, the precipitating event was the famous Scopes trial of 1925. After the Tennessee legislature passed the Butler Act, which forbade the teaching of evolution in the state's public schools, Austin Peay, the governor, signed the measure with the explicit understanding that it would not be enforced. The American Civil Liberties Union had other ideas, placing advertisements in Tennessee newspapers in search of someone to test the constitutionality of such a law. Civic boosters in Dayton, Tennessee, saw an opportunity. They summoned John T. Scopes, a teacher in the local high school, to their gathering at Fred Robinson's drug store, plied him with a fountain drink, and secured his cooperation, even though he couldn't recall whether or not he had taught evolution when he filled in for the regular biology teacher.

That technicality mattered little, and by the time the combatants assembled in the second storey of the Rhea County courthouse for the trial itself, the attention of the entire nation was focused on Dayton, Tennessee. The event drew three of the nation's most illustrious men: William Jennings Bryan, the "Great Commoner" and three-time Democratic nominee for president; Clarence Darrow, who had often fought along side of Bryan in various Progressive causes; and H. L. Mencken of the *Baltimore Sun*. Bryan, who assisted in the prosecution of Scopes, had few concerns about Darwinism as a scientific theory; he worried more about the effects of social Darwinism. As the trial unfolded, broadcast live over Chicago radio station WGN, and under the scrutiny of the phalanx of journalists, led by Mencken, Bryan acquitted himself poorly, even though he won his case.

He, and by extension all evangelicals, lost decisively in the larger courtroom of public opinion. Mencken mercilessly lampooned evangelicals and especially Bryan himself, who died suddenly in Dayton five days after the trial. The ignominy surrounding the Scopes trial convinced evangelicals that the larger culture had turned against them. They responded by withdrawing from the culture, which they came to regard as both corrupt and corrupting, to construct an alternative universe, an evangelical subculture.

The building that took place among evangelicals in the second quarter of the twentieth century was truly astonishing. They set about forming their own

congregations, denominations, missionary societies, publishing houses, Bible institutes, Bible colleges, Bible camps, and seminaries – all in an effort to insulate themselves from the larger world. The project was ambitious and Herculean and costly, but evangelicals believed that the integrity of the faith was at stake. In this era of separation, evangelicals sought to remain unsullied by liberalism, by modernism, or by the world. They withdrew from politics and from any culture outside of their own subculture. That was dictated in part by necessity, by the financial and logistical demands of creating a whole new infrastructure, but it also represented a choice to remain pure.

By the end of the second quarter of the twentieth century, evangelicals had burrowed into their own subculture. They socialized almost entirely within that world, and so comprehensive was this alternative universe that it was possible in the middle decades of the twentieth century (as I can attest personally) to function with virtual autonomy from the larger culture and have, in fact, very little commerce with anyone outside of the evangelical subculture.

By mid-century, a few evangelicals thought that the separatist impulse, especially as embodied by such hard-core fundamentalists as Bob Jones and Carl McIntire, had gone too far. Carl F. H. Henry provided a kind of manifesto for the renewed engagement of evangelicals with the larger culture with the publication in 1947 of *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, which argued against the separatism that had become the overriding characteristic of evangelicalism in the second quarter of the twentieth century. The formation of Fuller Theological Seminary the same year that Henry's book appeared provided the so-called neoevangelicals with institutional ballast for their re-engagement, albeit cautious engagement, with American society in the third quarter of the twentieth century.

As evangelicals tentatively began to emerge from the subculture, they also reclaimed one of the elements of their heritage that had served evangelicalism so well throughout American history: the ability to speak the idiom of the culture and to exploit new and emerging communications technologies. No one illustrated this better than Billy Graham, son of a dairy farmer in North Carolina who became America's first religious celebrity.

Like many evangelicals, Graham had been reared in a fundamentalist household, which is to say that he had imbibed the notion that separatism was somehow akin to orthodoxy itself. Graham's one semester at the ultra-fundamentalist Bob Jones University apparently soured him somewhat on fundamentalism; he transferred to a Baptist school in Florida and eventually to Wheaton College in Illinois. Graham's considerable gifts as a preacher began to emerge, and early in his career he made a self-conscious decision to reject fundamentalism in favor of a broader, more inclusive evangelicalism.

The contours of this new understanding of the faith emerged during his revival campaign (which he called a "crusade") in Portland, Oregon, in 1950. In the course of that crusade, Graham made several crucial decisions. First, he decided to incorporate his operation as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, thereby adopting a corporate model, which was all the rage at mid-century, and holding

himself accountable to a board of directors. In so doing, Graham was able to avoid any hint of financial impropriety – or any other kind of impropriety – throughout a career that extended well beyond a half a century. Graham also decided in Portland to start the *Hour of Decision* radio broadcast, thereby using mass media to advance his message.

The rest is history. Graham's "team" exploited new media technologies brilliantly, and his anti-communist rhetoric in the 1950s drew the attention of several important people, including newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst and Richard Nixon. Graham's final break with the fundamentalists occurred during his storied nine-week Madison Square Garden crusade in 1957, in the course of which Graham committed the unpardonable sin of enlisting the cooperation of New York City's ministerial alliance, which included some theologically liberal Protestants. The fundamentalists never forgave him.

Graham's willingness to engage the world outside of evangelicalism and his uncanny ability to speak the language of the larger culture set the tone for the third quarter of the twentieth century. His regular appearances on the *Tonight Show* and the *Dick Cavett Show* coupled with his very public friendships with a succession of U.S. presidents was enormously, if incalculably, important to evangelicals. Among a beleaguered people, who saw themselves as utterly marginal in society, Graham's celebrity allowed them the vicarious satisfaction of feeling somehow less marginal.

Graham's eagerness to engage the culture affected others. Consider the case of a Reformed Church in America pastor from Alton, Iowa, who was pastor of the Ivanhoe Reformed Church in Riverside, Illinois. In 1955 Robert Schuller accepted what was essentially a missionary posting to Orange County, California. Very quickly he discerned that this was an automobile culture, so he rented the Orange Drive-in Theater and distributed leaflets throughout the area inviting the people of southern California to "Come as you are . . . in the family car." Schuller perched him atop the concession stand and preached to the headlights.

Or consider Chuck Smith in nearby Costa Mesa. In 1965 Smith, a pastor in the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, accepted the pulpit of a small congregation of contentious people on the verge of disbanding. He tapped into the hippie culture of Huntington Beach and turned Calvary Chapel into the beachhead of the Jesus Movement of the early 1970s and, in so doing, recast both the music and the worship styles of evangelicalism. On other fronts, several evangelical preachers exploited changes in the regulations of the Federal Communications Commission to launch their own media empires: Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, Jim Bakker's PTL Network, Paul and Jan Crouch's Trinity Broadcasting Network, as well as countless radio and television programs. The stage (quite literally) was set for the further emergence of evangelicals into the broader culture in the final quarter of the twentieth century.

The evangelical strategy of engagement with the larger culture in the third quarter of the twentieth century prepared evangelicals for a fuller engagement beginning in the mid-1970s. By then the so-called evangelical resurgence was well under way, a resurgence that both was both real and illusory. The reemergence of

evangelicalism was illusory in part because of the mainline mirage, the misperception that mainline Protestant denominations were more powerful and influential in the middle decades of the twentieth century than they actually were.

When evangelicals exited mainline denominations beginning in the 1920s, they had formed their own congregations and, to a lesser extent, denominations. Many of the congregations, however, remained independent, unaffiliated with a denomination, a pattern that has been exaggerated with the rise of the megachurches, most of which are not part of any denomination. These circumstances skewed the reporting of membership statistics. Put simply, evangelicals in nondenominational congregations did not show up in aggregate statistics; no denominational agency was reporting their presence. Add to that another peculiarity of theology: Like the Puritans of the seventeenth century, many evangelicals demand a public profession of faith before the entire congregation before admitting that person to church membership, whereas the criterion for membership in many mainline churches is baptism, often done in infancy. In other words, the real challenge in many mainline churches is getting your name off of the membership rolls, while the spiritual standards for evangelical church membership can be intimidating. It's not unusual, then, for a mainline congregation to list a membership of, say, a thousand and have only two hundred show up on a given Sunday, whereas the situation may be exactly the opposite in an evangelical congregation: one thousand on a Sunday, but a membership of only two hundred. (For many years, in fact, Calvary Chapel had no category for membership at all.)

The mainline mirage, then, suggested that mainline Protestants were more numerous and influential than they really were. Beginning in the mid-1960s, however, and continuing more or less to the present, the trajectory of mainline membership, attendance, and giving has been in steady decline. At the same time, evangelicalism has been growing – in numbers, certainly, but more important in cultural visibility and influence.

Why did evangelicals emerge so emphatically in the 1970s? The short answer is that the time was ripe. The infrastructure that evangelicals constructed in earnest following the Scopes trial – colleges, seminaries, publishing houses, media concerns – was now sufficiently established so that it could provide a foundation for evangelicals' return to the public square. More important, American society seemed ready to hear evangelical voices once again. After the Watergate scandal, the ignominy of Vietnam, and the implosion of the counterculture, Americans were ready to hear a new message, a message that cloaked itself in a very simple morality, one that appropriated the language of Christian values.

No politician understood this better than a Southern Baptist Sunday-school teacher from Georgia. Jimmy Carter had failed in his first bid for governor, losing to an arch-segregationist, Lester Maddox, in 1966. Carter's defeat prompted a spiritual renewal and then a second gubernatorial run in 1970, this one successful. Almost immediately, Carter began to plot an improbable course that would lead to the Democratic presidential nomination six years later. One of the keynotes of his

successful campaign for the White House was that he would "never knowingly lie to the American people."

On the heels of Carter's political success as well as the popularity of *Born Again*, the memoir of Charles Colson, one of the Watergate felons who converted to evangelical Christianity, *Newsweek* magazine declared 1976 "The Year of the Evangelical." That designation turned out to be four years premature; in 1980 all three of the major candidates for president claimed to be born again Christians: Carter; Ronald Reagan, the Republican nominee; and John B. Anderson, the Republican-turned-independent who was a member of the Evangelical Free Church of America.

By 1980, however, the evangelical landscape had changed entirely. Carter had lured evangelicals, southerners especially, away from their subculture and out of their apolitical torpor. He did so by speaking the language of evangelicalism; although his declaration that he was a born again Christian sent every journalist in New York to his rolodex to figure out what he meant, evangelicals themselves understood perfectly well. He was speaking their language. He was one of them and, more important, unafraid to say so.

One of the greatest ironies of the twentieth century is that the very people who emerged to help elect Carter in 1976 turned against him four years later. The rise of the Religious Right as a political entity is something I will address later, but the effects of this political activism have been seismic. Without question, evangelicals have definitely shed their indifference toward temporal matters, plunging into the political process with a vengeance. The ripple effects have been significant. According to pollster Louis Field, had it not been for the participation of politically conservative evangelicals in 1980, many of whom were voting for the first time, Jimmy Carter would have beat Reagan and Anderson by 1 percent of the popular vote. Since then, in elections from the presidency to the local school board, politically conservative evangelicals have made their presence felt. They have provided for the Republican Party the volunteer efforts that labor unions once supplied for the Democratic Party, thereby altering the American political landscape in the final decades of the twentieth century.

With political success, however, has come compromise, which of course is the way of politics, and this is why I characterize the final quarter of the twentieth century as the era of capitulation on the part of evangelicals to the larger culture. Consider the Reagan years. The televangelist scandals broke in the mid-1980s, and television preachers peddled the so-called prosperity gospel, the notion that the Almighty was itching to bestow the emoluments of middle- and upper-middle-class life on the faithful – so long as the faithful followed the principles of trickle-down prosperity: send checks to the televangelist and the showers of blessings will rain down on the faithful – after the blessings had first cycled through the rain barrel of the televangelist. The "name it and claim it" doctrine had been present in some evangelical circles as early as the 1940s, but this spiritualized Reaganism flourished as never before in the 1980s.

One of the characteristics of evangelicalism in the middle decades of the twentieth century had been a suspicion of "worldliness." The most damning thing

an evangelical could say about a fellow believer was that she was "worldly," and "worldliness" included a strong suspicion of affluence. I heard a lot of sermons in my youth about the perils of wealth and about camels trying to negotiate the eyes of needles. Those sermons all but disappeared in the 1980s as evangelicals became quite comfortable indeed with their niche in the suburbs.

The premillennial rhetoric of decades past persisted, but no longer with the same enthusiasm or conviction, as upwardly mobile evangelicals settled into middle-class comfort. Yes, Jesus come again. But take your time; we're doing just fine.

And indeed they were. Megachurches dotted the suburbs. Christian radio and television flooded the airwaves. Political success had bought access to the councils of power. Evangelicalism during the final quarter of the twentieth century was still a subculture – with its distinctive jargon, mores, and celebrities.

But after 1980 or so it was no longer a counterculture.