

GEORGE WILLIAM LASHER—BAPTIST PROTO-FUNDAMENTALIST¹

by
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The history of fundamentalism as a self-identified movement typically begins in the 1920s with the series of debates that took place in American Protestantism, most notably among the Presbyterians and the Northern Baptists. It is generally agreed that Curtis Lee Laws gave these people their name when he proposed that they do “battle royal” for the fundamentals and be called “fundamentalists.”³ Histories of fundamentalism date the origin of the movement anywhere from fifty to one hundred years before the outbreak of controversy.⁴ Given that the title *fundamentalist* was not self-applied to individuals before 1920, it seems inappropriate to call anyone before 1920 by that designation, despite the fact that their life and ministry were characterized by the *esprit de corps* of post-1920 fundamentalism. How then should one characterize these stalwarts? *Evangelical* does not say enough, especially among twenty-first century *evangelicalism* that has come to include a wide assortment of theological constructs. The term *proto-fundamentalist* seems to be a most apropos title.⁵ It is impossible to know for certain whether any particular individual who lived and contended for the faith before 1920 would have joined in the conflicts of that tumultuous decade; however, one can, by examining the life and

¹The substance of this article was originally written for *The Faces of Fundamentalism*, ed. Dwain Waldrep and Jim Lutzweiler, forthcoming.

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³Curtis Lee Laws, “Convention Side Lights,” *Watchman-Examiner*, 1 July 1920, p. 834.

⁴See, for example, George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), who dates the movement’s inception to the 1870s. Fundamentalist historian David Beale moves the date even earlier to the 1850s. See David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville: Unusual Publications, 1986).

⁵*Proto-fundamentalism* as a term to describe this phenomenon has been cropping up in the literature of fundamentalism since at least 1978. See David A. Rausch, “Proto-fundamentalism’s Attitude toward Zionism, 1878–1918” (Ph.D. dissertation, Kent State University, 1978).

writings of particular people, get some sense of where that individual might have stood had he lived to see their own denomination torn asunder by theological conflict. Some men were especially vocal in their opposition to the theological liberalism that began to pervade the denominations, and repeatedly so. One such example was George William Lasher (1831–1920), editor of the Cincinnati-based Baptist weekly, the *Journal and Messenger*.

Few men served American Baptists in the days leading up to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy as did George Lasher. As the long-time editor of the *Journal*, one of the country's leading Baptist papers, Lasher advocated historic Baptist theology in the face of the growing trend away from an authoritative Bible. In doing so, he addressed, directly or indirectly, prominent progressives⁶ in the denomination's seminaries. His paper carried reports of early liberals who were forced to leave their institutions on account of their progressive theology. Lasher followed the views of others who remained within the seminaries and promoted the progressive theology, precipitating the shift away from orthodoxy among the denomination's schools. Among those targeted for criticism were early Baptist liberals, Crawford Howell Toy of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Ezra Palmer Gould of the Newton Theological Institution. Later progressives included Social Gospel advocate Walter Rauschenbusch and liberal theologian George Cross of the Rochester Theological Seminary; William Rainey Harper, George Burman Foster, Shirley Jackson Case, and others of the University of Chicago; Nathaniel Schmidt and William Newton Clarke of the Colgate Theological Seminary; and Henry Clay Vedder and Milton Evans of the Crozer Theological Seminary. The

⁶This essay will denote individuals who wished to revise theological constructs according to modern rationalistic ideas as variously *progressives* and *liberals*—titles that were widely used within the movement itself without a pejorative connotation. No attempt to classify these individuals according to more descriptive terms has been made. For more nuanced approaches to proponents of theological liberalism, see Frank Hugh Foster, *The Modern Movement in American Theology: Sketches in the History of American Protestant Thought from the Civil War to the World War* (New York: Revell, 1939; reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969); Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962); Lloyd J. Averill, *American Theology in the Liberal Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967); William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805–1900* (Louisville: John Knox, 2001); idem, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism and Modernity, 1900–1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Henry Eugene Ernst, Jr., “American Protestant Liberalism as Exemplified in the Life and Thought of Harry Emerson Fosdick” (Ph.D. dissertation, St. Mary's Seminary and University, 1988); Bradford A. Mullen, “The Centrality of Jesus Christ for American Protestant Liberalism, 1884–1934” (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1990); and Jeffrey P. Straub, “The Making of a Battle Royal: The Rise of Religious Liberalism in Northern Baptist Life, 1870–1920” (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004).

problem of liberal theology had become so serious by 1917 that Lasher lamented,

In answer to the question, “Whither are we drifting,” it may be said that while our Baptist schools were late in getting into line with the so-called “new” (but really old) theology, some of them are fast overtaking the front rank of the “progressives.” We still have a few reliable men in our theological schools, though not enough to overcome the drift of the rationalists. In our judgment, the boards of control of our seminaries ought to be giving more heed to what is going on in them than seems to be the case at the present time.⁷

Lasher died (1920) on the eve of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that would rend his beloved denomination asunder. There is little question on which side of the conflict he would have stood. Just one month before passing on to his reward, Lasher, as the editor of the *Journal and Messenger*, ran an article by Rev. H. B. Emsberger that lamented the trend to ordain men unsound in the faith. Doubtless echoing Lasher’s own concerns, Emsberger mourned the “sad thing that, in these times of apostasy, our denominations are being honey-combed with this evil which is robbing our pulpits of their power and the pews of the people.” He called “all who are true to God to raise [their] voice of protest against the apostasy sweeping over [the] schools, the ministry and churches, and to ‘earnestly contend for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints.’”⁸ “Contending for the faith” indeed was the spirit with which George Lasher edited one of the most important Baptist weeklies for forty-five years. It is little wonder he was invited to submit an article in the early twentieth-century defense of historic orthodoxy—*The Fundamentals*.

George William Lasher was born at Duanesburg, New York, near Schenectady, 24 June 1831, into the home of a farmer, George Jr. and Adelia D. *nee* Frost. Little is known of his childhood.⁹ He entered Hamilton Literary Institute¹⁰ in Hamilton, New York, graduating in

⁷Unsigned and untitled editorial, *Journal and Messenger (JM)*, 31 May 1917, p. 6. [N.B. Articles from the *JM* will simply be footnoted by the date unless the article referred to is an untitled editorial, in which case the page number will be included for ease of reference.]

⁸H. B. Emsberger, “The Ordination of Men Unsound in the Fundamentals,” *JM*, 19 January 1920.

⁹No formal biography of Lasher exists beyond brief references to him found in such places as William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia* (reprint of 1881 ed.; Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 1988), pp. 671–72; *Who Was Who in America* (Chicago: A. N. Marquis, 1942), s.v. “Lasher, George William”; *Colgate University, A General Catalogue, 1819–1919* (Hamilton, NY: Colgate University, 1919), pp. 76, 322; *The New York Baptist Annual 1921* (n.p.: 1921); and *The Ministerial Directory of Baptist Churches*, ed. George W. Lasher (Cincinnati: Ministerial Directory Co., 1899), p. 430.

¹⁰Hamilton Literary Institute of Hamilton, New York, was founded in May 1820

1857 with the A. B. degree. Apparently he was a good student, excelling especially in the classics. He remained at Hamilton and enrolled in the theological seminary, where he came under the influence of George W. Eaton (1804–1872), its esteemed president.¹¹ Eaton's theological outlook was typically Calvinistic and reflected the older orthodox theology, then still very much a part of the doctrinal landscape of American Baptists. His personal influence over Lasher would continue as Lasher married Eaton's daughter Lizzie, 23 August 1860. Moreover, when Lasher was ordained, it was G. W. Eaton who preached the ordination sermon.¹²

Before assuming his life's work as editor of the *Journal and Messenger*, George Lasher spent more than fifteen years in pastoral life. While still a student, he was licensed to preach by the Baptist church at Hamilton in 1858, the year before his seminary graduation. His first charge was at the First Baptist Church of Norwalk, Connecticut, where he was ordained on 30 September 1859. Lasher remained at Norwalk until civic duty called. He served as chaplain to the 5th Connecticut Regiment in 1861 in the War between the States. He resigned his commission after six months in 1862 to move to Newberg, New York, to serve as pastor of the Baptist church of that city. Two years later he transferred to the Portland Street Church of Haverhill, Massachusetts, remaining until 1868. His final regular pastorate was at the First Baptist Church of Trenton, New Jersey. In 1872, he returned to the state of New York to assume the duties of the secretary of the Baptist Education Society, a post he held for three years.

by Daniel Hascall and Nathaniel Kendrick. Hascall, Kendrick, and several other brethren had met three years earlier to form the Baptist Education Society for the State of New York in the home of Samuel Payne to "consider the propriety and importance of affording assistance to young men, in obtaining a competent education, who are called of God to preach" (*American Baptist Magazine* [November 1817], p. 238, quoted in Howard D. Williams, *A History of Colgate University, 1819–1969* [New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1969], p. 7). In 1846 a state charter was obtained and the institution's name was changed to Madison University after the county in which it was located. The institution's name changed again in 1890 to Colgate University (its current name) after its patron family, the Colgates of the Colgate Peet Soap Company.

¹¹On Eaton, see Cathcart, *BE*, pp. 356–57; Williams, *Colgate University*, pp. 60–62; William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), p. 300; G. W. Lasher, *George W. Eaton, D.D., L.L.D.: A Memorial* (Hamilton, NY: Colgate University, 1913).

¹²See George W. Eaton, *What is Preaching: A Sermon, Preached on the Occasion of the Ordination of Geo. W. Lasher, A.M., As Pastor of the Baptist Church in Norwalk, Conn., September 30, 1859* (New York: T. Holman, 1860). Lasher wrote a brief biographical sketch of Eaton and published several of his sermons. See Lasher, *George W. Eaton*.

OUTSPOKEN CRITIC OF “NEW” THEOLOGY¹³

In 1876, Lasher made a move that would mark a significant transition in his life and set the stage for what would ultimately become his life work. He relocated to Cincinnati, Ohio from New York to assume the principal editorship of the *Journal and Messenger*, having purchased the stock and the all the interest in the paper from John R. Baumes, a fellow Hamiltonian.

The paper started July 22, 1831, as the *Baptist Weekly Journal of the Mississippi Valley*, under the editorship of John Stevens. In 1834 it absorbed *The Cross* of Kentucky and became *The Cross and Baptist Journal of the Mississippi Valley*. Seven years later the editor of the paper moved it to Columbus, Ohio, where it came under the editorship of George Cole, D. A. Randall, and James Batchelder. Again the name was changed, this time to the *Western Christian Journal*. A final name change came in 1850 when the paper absorbed *The Christian Messenger* of Indiana and moved once again, this time to Cincinnati. When Baumes bought the paper (1872), it was deeply in debt and declining among the Baptists. Baumes succeeded in turning the fortunes of the paper around. Lasher's purchase in 1876 continued the paper's prosperity, and he saw the *Journal* become one of the most widely read Baptist weeklies during his forty-four year editorship. By the 1880s the *Journal* was ranked fourth among Baptist periodicals nationwide.¹⁴

As the editor of a prominent Midwest Baptist paper, Lasher had the ear of a significant part of his denomination. He considered it his duty to keep his brethren informed of denominational news far and wide, while maintaining a staunchly orthodox view of Baptist doctrine. Throughout the forty-five years that he guided the paper, the *Journal* often alerted the denomination to theological trends that opposed historic Baptist belief. The paper also gave Lasher visibility among his

¹³One of the early descriptive titles for theological liberalism in vogue during its ascendancy was “the new theology.” It was “new” when juxtaposed with the older orthodoxy. It was also “new” in that it sought to be relevant and current, keeping abreast with developments especially in the field of science. Numerous defenses of the “new” theology can be found in the religious literature of the day. Philip Moxom, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Cleveland, OH, offered a typical Baptist defense of the new theology. See Philip S. Moxom, “A New Theology,” *The Standard*, 23 August 1883. This article was subsequently printed in pamphlet form by Samuel Loag of Philadelphia, undated. Moxom, who afterward became pastor of the prominent First Baptist Church of Boston, 1885–1893, eventually left the denomination for theologically freer pastures, becoming pastor of South Congregational Church of Springfield, MA. However, he was regularly a defender of the new theology throughout the remainder of his Baptist days. Cf. Philip S. Moxom, “Symposium on the ‘New Theology’: What Are Its Essential Features? Is It Better Than the Old?” *Homiletic Review*, March 1886, pp. 201–7.

¹⁴On the history of the *Journal and Messenger*, see “Journal and Messenger,” *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, p. 625; and “Baumes, John R.,” *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, p. 88.

fellows and, as a result, he occasionally addressed prominent Baptist audiences. Such was the case in 1879, when his colleague J. R. Baumes, who by this time had begun publishing *The Baptist Review*, a quarterly academic journal, printed a pair of articles by Lasher on the doctrine of inspiration. In these articles, Lasher manifested a comprehensive awareness of the literature of his day that opposed the historic Baptist view of the Bible. Yet he did not merely resort to proof-texting to defend the Scriptures. He briefly, but carefully, examined key arguments against the traditional view and noted the critics of the Bible by name, including J. S. Semler, F. Schleiermacher, and S. T. Coleridge. He concluded the second article with a defense of verbal inspiration.¹⁵ This kind of engagement with the international proponents of the new theology was indicative of the way George Lasher would spar with his own Baptist brethren closer to home.

The rising tide of theological liberalism often found itself laid bare under the withering indictment of George Lasher's pen. Shortly after he assumed the editorship, Crawford Howell Toy, Old Testament professor at the Southern Baptist Seminary of Louisville, Kentucky, ran afoul of the denomination after certain remarks he made concerning the book of Isaiah were subsequently published in *The Sunday School Times*. Lasher expressed regret at having to call attention to an otherwise helpful periodical. Additionally, he regretted opposing a fellow Baptist. However, he felt that loyalty to the truth was more important than "human loyalty."¹⁶

Moreover, when the views of professor Ezra Palmer Gould of the Newton Theological Institution, Newton Centre, Massachusetts, were called into question, Lasher took the orthodox side. He heard rumors Gould was teaching the new theology from a former student as early as 1880. When Newton president Alvah Hovey finally forced Gould to leave the institution, Lasher felt the action warranted. "Either the Professor must go, or Newton would lose its hold upon Baptists as a source of sound doctrine."¹⁷

¹⁵See G. W. Lasher, "Inspiration," *The Baptist Review* (January–March 1879): 100–118 and idem, "Inspiration," *The Baptist Review* (April–June 1879): 246–60. Lasher maintained a high view of Scripture for the rest of his life. See also "Inspiration—Verbal or Plenary?" *JM*, 14 September 1881. Lasher conceded that if one granted the Scriptures to be verbally inspired, then the added term *plenary* was unnecessary.

¹⁶"Prof. Toy on Isaiah," *JM*, 30 April 1879. Also "Professor C. H. Toy," *JM*, 15 October 1879. For more on this controversy, see Straub, "The Making of a Battle Royal," pp. 72–92. Ironically, writing three years after the Toy incident and still committed to his original position regarding Toy's censure, Lasher still did not feel that liberalism had yet reached the point of a crisis among the churches. See "Is It a Crisis?" *JM*, 21 June 1882. It would only be a matter of months before another professor of liberalism, E. P. Gould, would be forced to depart from his post.

¹⁷Untitled and unsigned editorial, *JM*, 1 November 1882, p. 4. For more on the

Likewise, after Nathaniel Schmidt was forced to transfer from seminary at Hamilton to Cornell University because of liberal views, Lasher felt the action to remove Schmidt more than justified.

No Baptist theological school can be too heartily attached to “the old Bible” to suit the great body of Baptists.... If a theological teacher among us is disposed to reduce the bulk of the Bible, he had better get out of his place quietly, or expect to be pestered and pounded with criticism until his life is made miserable. Baptists do not think that any professor in their schools does well to act the hypocrite, on the one hand, or to flout his objectionable notions, on the other.... When he can do no better than that, he will do better if he gets out of a Baptist theological seminary.¹⁸

No institution came more under Lasher’s scrutiny than the University of Chicago. The University was formed in 1890 out of the ashes of the old University of Chicago that had started about 1856. The new university, under the guidance of William Rainey Harper and with the significant financial backing of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.,¹⁹ was destined to become a Baptist “super-university.” But from its beginning, the institution was plagued with questions regarding its commitment to orthodoxy. Harper, a prodigious and well-respected Hebraist, was often at the center of controversy over his personal views on the Old Testament. Lasher loudly lamented the views that came to be identified with the scholar.

When Dr. W. R. Harper, of the University of Chicago, began giving special attention to Bible study, and was planning for his summer school, he gave the impression that his object and aim was to establish the confidence of his pupils in the literal truthfulness and reliability of the Old Testament Scriptures. A conversation had with him, at that time, caused us to feel that he was going to do valuable work in the way of confirming the statements of the history, and promoting the value of the Scriptures as an authority in things pertaining to the faith. It has to be said, however, that the expectation of that day has been grievously disappointed.²⁰

Gould affair, see Straub, “The Making of a Battle Royal,” pp. 92–105.

¹⁸Untitled editorial that begins “Commenting on the removal of Professor Schmidt,” *JM*, 29 October 1896, p. 8. [N.B. Editorials of this nature often appeared on the editorial page in paragraph form with but little more than a simple line separating one comment from the next.]

¹⁹Rockefeller’s initial investment was \$600,000 but eventually he and his son John D., Jr. would give \$35,000,000 to the University.

²⁰“President Harper’s Paradoxes,” *JM*, 23 January 1896. The article identified areas where Harper deviated from orthodoxy. Harper considered the Genesis account of creation fiction, and he rejected verbal inspiration of the Bible in favor of “the inspiration of the history of the chosen nation.” Harper held to “divine revelation resting

Harper continued to come under periodic criticism by Lasher in the pages of his paper.²¹

Nor was Dr. Harper alone, among the Chicago men, to come under the condemnation of George Lasher's pen. George Burman Foster came to the University in 1895 to teach Systematic Theology. Foster, who had studied in Germany, soon became an object of criticism in the *Journal and Messenger*. In 1896, Foster spoke before the West Virginia Baptist Education Society, and raised doubts about his view of the Bible.²² Later that year, he delivered a sermon, "The Possibility and Right of Scientific Theology," at the Ohio Baptist anniversaries and again brought criticism against the University in the pages of the *Journal and Messenger*.²³ Foster felt that Lasher and *The Messenger* had been unduly harsh and defended himself before its readers.²⁴ Yet Lasher felt that Foster's denial of the miraculous amounted to a denial of the Gospel itself and Christ himself. "To reject the miracles of Jesus is to reject his divinity; and to reject his divinity is to reject the atonement; and to reject the atonement is to reject the Christ, no matter in what words the statement is couched."²⁵

Theologian William Newton Clarke was a frontrunner among progressives who managed to weather the storms of controversy within the denomination and remain in his academic post despite criticism. Clarke also felt the reproach of the *Journal and Messenger*, this time in a Lasher-sanctioned article under the authorship of George L. Mason.²⁶ The object of the comments was Clarke's recently published

upon history which is not history at all; a record which is not history, but which bears the evidence of purging and purifying by the divine Spirit. We have to confess to amazement and confusion: and we ask, How can these things be joined together so as to reflect credit upon the president of a great university?" *ibid.*

²¹For example, see unsigned and untitled editorial, *JM*, 31 January 1901, p. 9. At one point, Lasher expressed the hope that Harper might actually outgrow his liberal sentiments and be numbered once again among the evangelicals. See unsigned and untitled editorial, *JM*, 16 May 1901, p. 8.

²²See D. D. J., "Chicago Theology in West Virginia," *JM*, 29 October 1896.

²³See Johnston Myers, "A Scientific Theology," *JM*, 5 November 1896.

²⁴George B. Foster to George Lasher, 4 November 1896, quoted in an unsigned editorial, "What He Meant," *JM*, 12 November 1896.

²⁵"The Theology of the Past," *JM*, 17 December 1896.

²⁶Lasher's defense of orthodoxy appeared in three ways in the *JM* during his editorship. First, in the unsigned editorials he most likely wrote as the senior editor of the paper. Though all are unsigned, it is safe to assume that even if an associate wrote the occasional entry, all were approved by Lasher, as the paper's owner and editor. Second, Lasher also published articles by a variety of denominational men against liberalism. Finally, unlike other Baptist papers of the day, e.g., *The Standard* of Chicago, which showed either neutrality or even sympathy with the new views, what is noticeably absent from the pages of the *JM* are articles supportive of progressive theology. An occasional letter to the editor supporting a particular progressive view might appear,

treatise, *Outlines of Christian Theology*.²⁷ Mason suggested that the book was a mixture of fine wheat flour and chalk.

This reverie about milling came from reading a friendly review of a recently published book, *Outlines of Christian Theology*. In it our coming pastors and missionaries, now having opportunities in the mill, are fed on a mixture of fine wheat and fine chalk. And worse still, they are learning to mix it for the multitudes. The miller teaches that the Bible is not all wheat, as the book contains errors. If he means errors, other than the unimportant mistakes of copyists, he ought to prove his assertion.²⁸

In 1900, Clarke published *A Study of Christian Missions*. The book was the subject of a long and detailed review by veteran Baptist missionary William Ashmore. Ashmore, originally from Ohio, had graduated from Denison University (1845), and after several years in the pastorate spent the majority of his life as a missionary with the American Baptist Missionary Union, first in Siam, later in Hong Kong, and between 1863 and 1902, in Swatow, China. In his retirement, he returned to Ohio and often contributed to the *Journal and Messenger*, writing from a decidedly orthodox point of view. His review of Clarke's book on missions is unique in that it is one of the longest reviews ever published by Lasher. Typically a book review might amount to a couple of paragraphs but in this case, the Ashmore review consumes more than one four-column page. The length allows Ashmore to examine carefully Clarke's views, which he suggested contained "a thread of implied Universalism." Among Ashmore's criticisms of Clarke were the general absence of the supernatural in his thinking and the paucity of biblical data in the book. Ashmore argued that for Clarke, "the Bible is not of itself an ultimate authority at all. It is not the Bible, but the truth that is in the Bible that appeals to him."²⁹

Several years later, Clarke published another fuller statement concerning his views on the Scripture. *The Use of the Scripture in Theology* appeared in 1905 after he delivered a series of lectures at the Yale Divinity School. In these lectures, Clarke differentiated between the scholarly view of the Bible and the popular view. "The Scriptures are handed to us new by modern scholarship: they are read in the light of linguistic studies, history, archaeology, criticism, analysis, reconstruction, and without reference to the ancient idea of

but Lasher used those occasions to further critique the liberal ideas.

²⁷Originally printed in 1894 for the use of his students, it was published in 1898 by Charles Scribner's Sons of New York.

²⁸George L. Mason, "The Adulterated Flour at the Theological Mill," *JM*, 27 August 1896.

²⁹"William Ashmore, "Dr. W. N. Clarke's 'Study of Christian Missions,'" *JM*, 2 May 1901.

inspiration.”³⁰ Lasher devoted considerable space to critiquing the general tenor of Clarke’s view, both personally and with the help of William Ashmore. Clarke was an “iconoclast” who delighted in “pulling down and destroying.”

He wants to tell the world that it has been always wrong and has been waiting for him to set it right, especially in the matter of religion. He has fallen in with a certain class of neologists and destructionists, especially the noted German Harnach [*sic*] and seems to find great satisfaction in cutting the ground from under those who have fondly believed that they were building upon the Word of God, and that a “thus saith the Lord” is a prevailing argument in the forming of a religious system.³¹

Several weeks later, Lasher noted the praise Clarke’s book received among the Unitarians and Universalists and wondered how the Baptist Education Society of the State of New York would respond to the progressive theology.

Our grief is that the author of such a book should be a teacher of theology in our oldest and hitherto must [*sic*] trusted theological school. It looks very much as though the glory had departed from Hamilton. The days of Kendrick, Eaton and Dodge—are they ever to return? Or is Ichabod to be written on the front of Eaton Hall?³²

Though Lasher published a letter in defense of Clarke and his views,³³ he followed that up with yet another, even stronger criticism of Clarke’s views in which the writer viewed Clarke’s ideas as “bold, blank heresy. It is Unitarianism in its most differential dogma.”³⁴

STALWART DEFENDER OF ORTHODOXY

George Lasher’s contributions to the theological debates of his day were not always in the form of biting criticism. Periodically he would write something that would be a positive defense of his particular views. Often these took the shape of published sermons. Such is the case in 1890 when Lasher spoke at an Episcopal Church of Cincinnati, Ohio. The sermon, “Individualism in Religion,” was meant as a

³⁰William Newton Clarke, *The Use of the Scriptures in Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906), p. 49.

³¹“The Bible in Theology,” *JM*, 21 December 1905. Cf. [William Ashmore], “Dr. Clarke’s Recent Book,” *JM*, 21 December 1905.

³²Kendrick, Eaton, and Dodge refer to earlier professors at Hamilton, men decidedly with a more orthodox bent. See the unsigned and untitled editorial, *JM*, 4 January 1906, p. 7.

³³Daniel H. Clare, “A Word for Dr. Clarke,” *JM*, 18 January 1906.

³⁴George Varden, “The Use of the Scriptures in Theology,” *JM*, 1 February 1906.

response to a proposed plan of Christian union. Lasher defends the Baptist's ostensibly sectarian views. The essence of Christian union could only be on account of a shared affirmation of "the principle of individual accountability, which compels each and every one, who is able to believe for himself, to profess the name of Christ for himself, to receive the divine ordinances for himself."³⁵

In 1891 Lasher spoke at the fiftieth anniversary of the Baptist Church of West Union, Ohio. The address was typical of Baptists of his generation—Landmarkist in flavor. It recounts the world's debt to Baptists, by whatever name they might be called. Above all other denominations, they facilitated the preservation of a pure gospel in the face of Roman Catholicism, in particular, which held that Christianity was passed from parent to child through baptism. Baptists, he asserted, led the way in arguing for a Christianity based on "a profession of personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."³⁶

In 1894 Lasher published a short essay on the meaning of the Greek preposition *eis* found in Acts 2:38. The article was originally published in the *Journal* and was meant as a response to the views of the Disciples of Christ, who used that text to teach baptismal regeneration.³⁷ Lasher also published a brief account of the gospel in Cuba, a biography and collection of essays of his father-in-law, and an important ministerial directory.³⁸ In 1906 Lasher produced a series of essays of theology in book form that originally appeared in the *Journal*.³⁹

George Lasher's contribution to *The Fundamentals* came with a concise submission on the subject of conversion, aptly titled, "Regeneration—Conversion—Reformation." Opening with a reference to Harold Begbie's work *Twice Born Men*,⁴⁰ which Lasher felt offered a

³⁵George William Lasher, *Individualism in Religion*, A Sermon preached in the Episcopal Church of Our Savior, Mt. Auburn, Cincinnati, Ohio, 23 March 1890 (n.p.: n.d.), p. 37.

³⁶George William Lasher, *Indebtedness of the World to Baptists for the Maintenance of a Pure Gospel* (Cincinnati: Journal and Messenger, 1891), p. 1. For another Lasher sermon on Baptist history see, George W. Lasher, "Rejoicing in Divine Workmanship," *Ohio History* 3 (1891): 227–33.

³⁷See George William Lasher, *What Did Peter Mean?* (Cincinnati: George E. Stevens, 1894).

³⁸George W. Lasher, *The Gospel in Cuba: The Story of Diaz, A Marvel of Missions* (Cincinnati: George Stevens, 1893), idem, *The Ministerial Directory of Baptist Churches* (Oxford, OH: Press of Oxford News, 1899); idem, *George W. Eaton*.

³⁹George W. Lasher, *Theology for Plain People* (Cincinnati: n.p., 1906). I was not able to examine personally a copy of this work. Both Starr's *Baptist Bibliography* and *The National Union Catalogue* only list a copy of this work in the Library of Congress. The WorldCat database has an entry for this title but shows no extant copy in any library. WorldCat database accessed 29 March 2006.

⁴⁰Harold Begbie, *Twice Born Men, a Clinic in Regeneration; A Footnote in Narrative to Professor William James's The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Revell,

deficient understanding of conversion, he insisted that conversion was more than merely the reforming of one's ways. According to Begbie, conversion was "the means by which a radically bad person can be changed into a radically good person."⁴¹ For Lasher, conversion involved fundamentally the act of regeneration—"a new birth, without which it is impossible to meet Divine requirements."⁴² True conversion implies regeneration but the two ideas do not necessarily mean the same thing. Conversion means "change" but "there may be conversion without regeneration."⁴³

Lasher conceded that though the Greek word *palingenesia* occurs but once in Jesus' teaching (Matt 19:28), its idea could be found elsewhere in his thought. For example, he cited John 1:12, 13 as evidence that regeneration or "a new or second birth...produces children of God."⁴⁴

Lasher used the occasion to refute the common liberal notion, then growing in popularity, that God was a universal father to all humanity. "The declaration of John 3:3 (another reference which teaches regeneration according to Lasher) puts to confusion the very common claim that God is Father of universal humanity, and makes it absurd to talk of 'the Fatherhood of God.'"⁴⁵

1909). Despite the occurrence of *regeneration* in the title of this work, Begbie's emphasis is not upon the classic biblical doctrine but rather a reflection upon the more recent work of William James. Begbie follows James approvingly in the latter's view of conversion—"to be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities" (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [reprint. ed., New York: Random House, 1929], p. 186; quoted in Begbie, *Twice Born Men*, pp. 16–17).

⁴¹Begbie, *Twice Born Men*, p. 17. Begbie saw his work as but a "footnote" to the work of James.

⁴²George W. Lasher, "Regeneration—Conversion—Reformation," *The Fundamentals: A Testimony for Today* (Los Angeles: Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1917; reprint. ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 3:133. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

⁴³Ibid., 3:137.

⁴⁴Ibid., 3:134.

⁴⁵Ibid. The subject was commonly discussed among Lasher's fellow Baptists during the latter 19th century. P. S. Henson of First Baptist Church, Chicago, read a paper on the subject before the Baptist Minister's Conference of Chicago. See P. S. Henson, "The Fatherhood of God," *The Standard*, 14 December 1895; or P. S. Henson, "The Fatherhood of God," *JM*, 13 February 1896. A discussion on the subject also took place at Nashville, TN, at the Baptist Congress later that year, with F. H. Rowley of Oak Park, Chicago, IL and George Baldwin, Jr. of Boston, among others, arguing favorably for the idea's acceptance. See "Is God the Father of All Men?" *Proceedings of the Baptist Congress at Nashville, Tenn.* (New York: Baptist Congress

Lasher considered the Apostle Paul to be the “best interpreter” of the teaching of Jesus. Conversion, according to Paul, “is always and everywhere regarded and treated as a spiritual experience wrought by the Spirit of God, the subject of it knowing only, as the healed man said of himself, ‘Whereas I was blind now I see.’”⁴⁶ An examination of the biblical prayers revealed that few if any supplicants asked for regeneration specifically. They were conscious of their sins and condemnation. But in seeking God and his mercy, God effected a change—the individual became a “new creature.”⁴⁷

Lasher was concerned that many would confuse conversion and regeneration, assuming that regeneration had occurred whenever conversion was evident. But such was not necessarily the case.

Conversion may be a mere mental process; the understanding convinced, but the heart unchanged.... Regeneration involves a change of mind; but conversion may be effected while the moral condition remains unchanged. Regeneration can occur but once in the experience of the same soul; but conversion can occur many times.⁴⁸

Lasher warned of the danger of confusing conversion and regeneration. It was one of the most “imminent dangers” of the Christian life.⁴⁹ If one were truly regenerated then reformation would follow, but the converse was not necessarily true. “The most glaring and fatal mistake in the religious world today is the effort to reform men and reform society by making the reformation a substitute for regeneration.”⁵⁰ Lasher concluded his essay by stressing that

Publishing, 1896), pp. 106–36. Lasher was proud of the fact that few papers had opposed this novel idea as strongly as had the *JM*, a view “not only contrary to evangelical truth, but most delusive and destructive” (unsigned editorial, “Again the Divine Fatherhood,” *JM*, 30 August 1900).

⁴⁶Lasher, “Regeneration—Conversion—Reformation,” 3:136.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 3:137.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 3:138.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 3:139. Lasher likely had in mind here the whole social gospel movement. In 1906, Walter Rauschenbusch published his bestseller, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, and became the Baptist spokesman for a movement that viewed salvation not so much as individual but as a societal necessity. While keeping older theological terminology, Rauschenbusch vested it with new meaning. Regeneration, for example, “includes that a man must pass under the domination of the spirit of Christ, so that he will judge life as Christ would judge of it. That means a revaluation of social values” (Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* [New York: MacMillan, 1906], p. 349). After a rather lengthy critique of the book, Lasher denounced the work as “dangerous” for its political oratory. It lacked an emphasis on individual responsibility and suggested that the cure for the ills of society was socialism. See unsigned review of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* by Walter Rauschenbusch, *JM*, 14 November 1907. Curiously, this is, in fact, the second notice of Rauschenbusch’s work to be

“fundamental to the Christian system is a conviction of sin which compels a cry for mercy, responded to by the Holy Spirit, who regenerates the soul, converts it, reforms it, and fits it for the blessedness of heaven.”⁵¹

Lasher maintained his posture toward the new theology throughout the remainder of his life and continued periodically to use the pages of the *Journal* to dispute with its advocates. He heartily recommended a critique of the new theology by William Bates, a Presbyterian minister, who summarized the new theology as the antonym of the “Old Theology.” It was a denial of “everything held dear by the latter.” It was Lasher’s desire that “every Baptist minister in the country could acquire and read this pamphlet.”⁵²

In 1916, Lasher had the occasion of a visit in the offices of the *Journal* from Walter Rauschenbusch. The visit was cordial and Lasher spoke of it to his readers. Rauschenbusch’s first biographer, Dores Sharpe, suggested that Rauschenbusch’s pious demeanor turned Lasher from a foe to a friend. “Never again did Dr. Lasher write an unkind word about him. Thus did Walter Rauschenbusch overcome evil with good.”⁵³ Sharpe’s assessment of the encounter between the two men, however, is skewed. Lasher did continue to dissent from Rauschenbusch to the end of Walter’s days. Even in the reporting of the meeting, Lasher was careful to point out that, while he embraced Walter Rauschenbusch with some personal affection, he freely dissented from many of the liberal Baptist’s theological views.⁵⁴ He took a later occasion to point out to his readers that Rauschenbusch’s ideas were derived from his German heritage and that they were perfectly acceptable to “our Universalist friends.”⁵⁵ His paper was subsequently accused of “religious yellow journalism” for its comments regarding Rauschenbusch’s *A Theology for the Social Gospel*.⁵⁶

published in 1907 in the *JM*. The first notice appeared 12 June 1907, and was a brief but mildly positive statement. One wonders if an editorial assistant did not give the work its original notice before G. W. Lasher had the occasion to peruse its contents and issue a forceful rejection of the work six months later.

⁵¹Lasher, “Regeneration—Conversion—Reformation,” 3:140.

⁵²Unsigned editorial, “Is There a New Theology?” *JM*, 17 November 1910.

⁵³Dores Sharpe, *Walter Rauschenbusch* (New York: MacMillan, 1942), p. 430.

⁵⁴Unsigned and untitled editorial, *JM*, 14 December 1916, p. 7.

⁵⁵Unsigned and untitled editorial, *JM*, 7 February 1918, p. 7. Lasher had again lamented the “new theology” coming out of Rochester, especially with Rauschenbusch’s new book, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. He suggested that those who would be most delighted in its teaching were the Universalists. See unsigned and untitled editorial, *JM*, 24 January 1918, p. 7.

⁵⁶“Religious Yellow Journalism,” *JM*, 28 March 1918.

CONCLUSION

George William Lasher saw himself as a defender of the old theology. From his earliest days with the *Journal and Messenger* up until the time of his death forty-five years later, he viewed himself as “earnestly contending for the faith.” At times, his adversaries considered that the *Journal* was simply “sticking its nose into other people’s business.” But Lasher was quick to remind his readers that a younger generation of readers needed to be warned about “those who lessen the authority of the Bible, or widen the road that leads to ‘life.’” He saw the obligations laid upon the prophet Ezekiel as his charge also—“the responsibility of the watchman.” Lasher simply “desired to be faithful.”⁵⁷

George Lasher died suddenly of heart failure on the street outside the Cincinnati offices of the *Journal* he loved so well on 21 February 1920. His wife preceded him in death by seven years. He was survived at the time of his death by his three daughters, Helen and Clara, who had remained unmarried, and Mrs. George S. Austin of Painesville, Ohio. The *Journal* was subsequently merged into the newly formed the *Baptist* by Lasher’s colleague and co-editor, G. P. Osborne. It ceased publication with the March 18th issue.

Lasher was remembered as a man “clear of vision, alert of mind, tender of heart.” Curtis Lee Laws, editor of the Baptist paper *Watchman-Examiner*, suggested that few men knew and loved the denomination as had G. W. Lasher.⁵⁸ H. T. Crane and J. F. Herget, fellow members of the board of trustees of Denison University, on whose board Lasher served with distinction for more than four decades, remembered him as “a fluent writer” who “did much to shape the Baptist thought and practice of the whole country.... He was known far and near for his strict adherence to and defense of the fundamental Bible doctrines.” They likened him to Moses—“His eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.’ On slight acquaintance one might think him austere, but those who knew him intimately found him to be a tender, compassionate and helpful friend.”⁵⁹

There can be little doubt as one looks through the pages of the *Journal*, to which Lasher devoted the bulk of his life, where Lasher stood with reference to theology and orthodoxy. He repeatedly raised his voice in the growing chorus of protest which eventually became the fundamentalist response to theological liberalism then striving for hegemony in Northern Baptist life. He never lived to see the movement

⁵⁷Unsigned and untitled editorial, *JM*, 18 October 1917, p. 6.

⁵⁸Cited in *The New York Baptist Annual 1921*, pp. 69–70.

⁵⁹Quoted in Francis W. Shepardson, *Denison University 1831–1931* (Granville, OH: Denison University, 1931), p. 316. Lasher’s interest in journalism continues to be remembered in the Lasher Prize for Distinction in English Composition, awarded annually at Colgate University.

which he helped to birth coalesce into the Fundamentalist Fellowship of the Northern Baptist Convention. He died on the eve of the outbreak of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, his voice and that of his paper forever silenced as it was merged into *The Baptist*,⁶⁰ the official organ of the Northern Baptist Convention, and soon to become a sympathetic voice for the liberal agenda. It seems likely to suppose that if he had lived to the outbreak of conflict, like the American patriot John Hancock whose signature to the *Declaration of Independence* was unusually large so that it might be read “without spectacles,” the name of George William Lasher would have been writ large on any call to return the Northern Baptist Convention to the old orthodox theology.

⁶⁰Lasher was initially contacted several years before 1919 about a proposed plan to create a national Baptist paper under the auspices of the NBC and the Publication Society but was reluctant to participate. Even when the conversation regarding the formation of such a denominational organ became commonplace and seemed a likely prospect, Lasher was still determined to keep his beloved *Journal* in print. Yet, as a firm friend of the denomination, he also wanted to support its agenda. Ironically, just five weeks before his death, the *Journal* ran its first ad for the new paper, and less than one month following his death, Grover P. Osborne, the other editor of the *Journal*, announced the completed merger and subsequent discontinuation of the *Journal* after its final publication 18 March 1920, apparently with the pre-death blessing of George Lasher himself. Cf. “The Proposition for a Northern Baptist Convention Paper,” *JM*, 25 September 1919, and “Concerning the Journal and Messenger,” *JM*, 25 September 1919. Also, “*The Journal and Messenger* to be merged with *The Baptist*,” 18 March 1920.