

“COME APART AND REST A WHILE”: THE ORIGIN OF THE BIBLE CONFERENCE MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

by
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Dating the beginning of the Protestant fundamentalist movement in the United States is a tricky business. As good a case as any could be made, perhaps, for May 25 to June 1, 1919. On those dates there met in Philadelphia a “World Bible Conference” that became the foundation of the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA), what David Beale described as “the birth of organized, interdenominational Fundamentalism.”² Starting from scratch, the organizers sought to assemble a structure to perpetuate their organization and its goal of defending the fundamentals of Christian doctrine from the assaults of liberalism. One method they hit upon was to organize a “Committee on Correlation of Bible Conferences,” chaired by Minnesota Baptist W. B. Riley. In undertaking his task, the chairman praised the Bible conference movement as “one of the greatest movements of modern times, a movement that is indisputably from God.” He continued:

Thoughtful observers must also be profoundly impressed with the timeliness of the conference conception. Just when modernism was lifting its head in Germany, God moved upon certain of His servants in England and America to originate a method of Bible study that was destined to prove not only an antidote to the poison of modernism, but a medium of sanctification of saints and salvation of sinners.³

Riley saw the conferences as a natural weapon for the WCFA to adopt in its fight for the faith: “By means of the Bible conferences we can enormously aid all those people who are making a fight for evangelical religion in their varied denominations and kindred organizations.”⁴

As Riley’s comments indicate, Bible conferences served both to form and to further the fundamentalist movement. Twenty-first-century Protestant fundamentalism has many roots—a variety of

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²David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1986), p. 99.

³*God Hath Spoken* (Philadelphia: Bible Conference Committee, 1919), p. 22.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

institutions, theological movements, and social forces. These roots include a growing interest in premillennialism and the conservative scholarship of Princeton Seminary, the challenges to America's "Christian" civilization made by Darwinian evolution, and the development of Bible institutes and Bible colleges. Bible conferences take a prominent place in this list. Yet, although observers acknowledge the debt of fundamentalism to these conferences, the precise nature of that contribution remains hazy. How exactly did the Bible conference movement contribute to the rise of fundamentalism?⁵

The term "Bible conference" would have meant nothing to Americans before the Civil War, but there were several established conferences by World War I. Technically, a Bible conference was nothing more than a meeting of Christians for Bible study apart from the regular sacramental ministry of a church. It bore some resemblance to Pietist study cells (*collegia pietatis*, sometimes called the *ecclesia in ecclesiola*, "little churches within the church") inside the state churches of Germany or the class meetings of Wesleyan Methodism. However, "the Bible conference movement" in American church history refers to a number of large, usually annual interdenominational conferences that were organized beginning in the late nineteenth century. These conferences, meeting at comfortable locations, brought to their platforms the leading evangelical ministers, Bible teachers, and missionaries of the day. Bible conferences combined the relaxation of a vacation with the discipline of a Bible study and so offered not only teaching and exhortation but also youth camps and recreational activities such as swimming, boating, and concerts.

Bible conferences contributed profoundly to the development of fundamentalism. C. I. Scofield first discussed his idea for his famous study Bible, one of the most influential formative influences on fundamentalism, with A. C. Gaebelein while attending the Sea Cliff Bible Conference. A financial supporter of Sea Cliff helped underwrite the Bible's publication. Scofield's list of associate editors reads like a list of Bible conference speakers, including men such as Gaebelein, William J. Erdman, A. T. Pierson, and W. G. Moorehead. Even in content, an observer notes, the Scofield Bible "was filled with expositional and theological annotations which put a 'Bible conference' into the hands

⁵The impetus for the study of Bible conferences as a formative influence on fundamentalism comes from Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism, British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (1970 reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978). Other useful sources on the Bible conference movement are George Dollar, *A History of Fundamentalism in America* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1973); Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity*; Mark Sidwell, "Bible Conferences," *Encyclopedia of Fundamentalism*, ed. Brenda E. Brasher (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 56-57; Kenneth O. Brown, *Holy Ground Too: The Camp Meeting Family Tree* (Hazelton, PA: Holiness Archives, 1997), especially for its invaluable and extensive bibliography and its comprehensive listings; and Arthur T. Pierson, *Forward Movements of the Last Half Century* (1905 reprint ed.; New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), pp. 151-65. The selection by Pierson originally appeared in D. L. Moody's periodical *Northfield Echoes*.

of thousands of evangelical Christians.”⁶ Likewise, the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association originated with a prophetic conference held in Philadelphia in 1918. Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary and one of fundamentalism’s most significant theologians, was drawn into evangelism and Bible teaching through his association with the Northfield Bible Conference. The Southfield Bible Conference in Florida, which Chafer later helped establish, stimulated interdenominational fundamentalism in the South.⁷

After fundamentalism had emerged, Bible conferences nourished it. W. B. Riley not only oversaw the WCFA’s committee on Bible conferences but also held his own annual Bible conference—the Northwestern Bible Conference at Medicine Lake in Minnesota—as part of what William Trollinger has called Riley’s religious empire in the upper Midwest.⁸ Leonard Broughton’s Tabernacle Bible Conference in Atlanta supplemented Chafer’s Southfield Conference in introducing fundamentalism to the South.⁹ Bible conferences became a visible component of the network of institutions that fundamentalists erected in their struggle against Modernism.

THE SETTING

Bible conferences emerged during a period of cultural and religious change in post-Civil War America. Increasing prosperity, improved education, and a revolution in transportation made the conferences possible. The Protestant dominance of culture—threatened but still strong—provided the backdrop. A concern on the part of many ministers and Christian laity that the church was neglecting important theological truth conveyed a sense of urgency to the conferences.

Expressions of Middle Class Prosperity and Mobility

Because of an increase in literacy and a taste for popular literature, a growing public sparked a surge in the publication of periodicals and books in the nineteenth century. Economies of production and cheaper acid-wood pulp paper lowered costs while middle-class income rose. Naturally these changes had a religious dimension. Cheaper

⁶Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 11. They also describe Scofield’s editorial committee as “a board of Bible conference teachers” (p. 10).

⁷B. Dwain Waldrep, “Lewis Sperry Chafer and the Development of Interdenominational Fundamentalism in the South” (Ph.D. diss., Auburn University, 2001), pp. 54–59.

⁸William Vance Trollinger, *God’s Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), pp. 117–19.

⁹William R. Glass, “The Ministry of Leonard G. Broughton at Tabernacle Baptist Church, 1898–1912: A Source of Southern Fundamentalism,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 4 (March 1985): 35–60.

methods of producing Bibles and other devotional literature combined with a public eager to read them resulted in levels of lay Bible study that reached heights probably unknown in history.¹⁰

Coupled with this growth in literacy was a transportation revolution. A trip that would have taken days in 1800 could be accomplished in hours by 1900. The idea of the middle class vacationing at a remote location, unheard of in the eighteenth century, became popular in the nineteenth.¹¹ For the religiously inclined, improved transportation and the steady rise of the standard of living in the United States through the Industrial Revolution put a “spiritual vacation” within the budget of most clergy and middle-class laity. But there were limitations to technological development. There was no radio, television, or other such forms of mass communication. If someone wished to see Billy Sunday in these pre-television days, for example, he or she had to go see him in person.

Outposts of the Benevolence Empire

Although these social and technological factors made the Bible conference movement possible, specific theological and cultural concerns led to its actual formation. Bible conferences embodied accepted cultural and religious forces of the day but added a concern for almost “countercultural” theological issues. On the one hand, the Bible conference movement emerged during an era of what has been commonly called the “Protestant hegemony” over American culture.¹² Evangelical Protestantism played a large role in American life. Constitutionally, the United States had no established church, but an interdenominational Protestant consensus sought to conform the country to Christian ideals. Institutions of higher education, for example, were overwhelmingly church related, with clergy normally serving as college presidents. America’s public school system was ostensibly secular, yet Catholic perception of Protestant influence in the nation’s classrooms hastened the development of a system of Catholic parochial schools.

Helping spread this Protestant establishment while entrenching it more firmly was what has been labeled “the benevolence empire.”¹³ In

¹⁰See Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹¹See Cindy S. Aron, *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹²A standard discussion of the Protestant “establishment” in nineteenth-century America is Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press), 1970.

¹³The phrase is credited to Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Anti-slavery Impulse, 1830–1844* (New York: American Historical Association, 1933). See also the discussion in Charles I. Foster, *An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front 1790–1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), and especially Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abingdon, 1957).

addition to the activities of Protestant churches and denominations, a network of interdenominational evangelical movements and organizations sought to transform American life—to thoroughly Christianize the nation. Mission boards, publishing houses (especially for the publication of the Bible), and evangelistic efforts united Protestants in promoting Christian piety and morality. Reform movements, such as the temperance and prohibition movements and efforts for the abolition of slavery, drew strength from united Protestant efforts to raise the moral and spiritual level of the nation. Bible conferences—interdenominational efforts supported by a wide array of Protestant clergy and laity—were yet another outpost of the benevolence empire that sought to regenerate America.

Guardians of Neglected Truth

While “mainstream” in many ways, Bible conferences often promoted doctrinal innovations (or at least emphases) not universally accepted by the evangelical Protestant establishment. Leaders of the Bible conferences believed part of their mission was protecting and promoting truths allegedly being ignored by the church at large, what George Needham called “neglected truth.”¹⁴ Conferences promoted two emphases in particular: Bible prophecy and holiness teaching.

Historians have paid much attention to the more colorful aspects of the nineteenth-century prophecy movement, such as the predictions of William Miller that Christ would return in the 1840s and the subsequent disillusionment of his followers. Ultimately, more significant was the quiet shift among American Protestants from postmillennialism to a more subdued form of premillennialism. Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century most American Protestants were postmillennial, believing that the kingdom of God would come to earth through the preaching of the gospel, and Christ would return after the kingdom was established. Contravening this prophetic scheme was a new surge of premillennialism. The premillennialists held that God’s judgment would fall on the earth (a period commonly called the “tribulation”) after which Christ would establish a thousand-year reign on the earth before the final judgment and the beginning of the eternal state. The dispensationalist version of premillennial teaching, popularized through the *Scofield Reference Bible*, became the dominant form of premillennialism.¹⁵

As Ernest Sandeen noted, belief in the premillennial return of

¹⁴*Prophetic Studies of the International Prophetic Conference (Chicago, November, 1886)* (Chicago: Revell, 1886), p. 1. Needham was referring specifically to premillennial prophetic teaching.

¹⁵On the premillennial movement in America, and millennialism in general, see Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875–1982* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Richard Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1998).

Christ was a central factor in the development of fundamentalism. To some degree prophetic interest created the Bible conference movement, and the conferences in turn spread premillennial teaching. Likewise, interest in specific kinds of biblical “holiness” led to the founding of the Keswick conferences in both Britain and America, and the Methodist form of holiness teaching revitalized the camp meeting movement. Even conferences with no particular theme, such as D. L. Moody’s Northfield Conference in Massachusetts and the Winona Lake Bible Conference in Indiana, gave a large place to prophetic teaching, holiness teaching, or both.

Such a concern for neglected truth represented a fear of declining orthodoxy in the church. Advocates of premillennial or holiness teaching believed deeply in these causes and saw the rejection of these doctrines by other Protestants as a sign of doctrinal weakness. Such resistance to neglected truths paralleled slippage on major received truths, such as the inspiration of the Bible and the deity of Christ. In part, the motive behind the conferences was similar to that behind the founding of Bible colleges and institutes. Hostility to premillennial or holiness teachings became evidence of increasing departure from orthodoxy of the schools, seminaries, and congregations of the large Protestant denominations. Many evangelicals thought it therefore necessary to confirm Christians in orthodox doctrine and to raise up a generation of pastors and laymen who would be firmly indoctrinated in the truth of Scripture.¹⁶ Eventually, this emphasis on orthodox Bible study and interpretation helped Bible conferences become vehicles for the founding and promotion of fundamentalism in the face of theological liberalism.

THE SOURCES OF THE BIBLE CONFERENCE MOVEMENT

Generally speaking, the Bible conference movement was the product of American precedents (the camp meetings and the Chautauqua) and British progenitors (private prophetic conferences, the “believer’s meetings” associated with the ’59 Revival, the Mildmay Conference, and the Keswick conferences).

The Camp Meetings

One American institution that bears a strong resemblance to the

¹⁶George L. Ford, an executive of the Winona Lake Bible Conference in the 1960s, wrote, “This concern for Bible study [in the Bible conferences] came out of the realization that churches were not doing an adequate job of indoctrinating the people in the deep things of the Lord. This was also largely responsible for the formation of Bible schools or institutes at about the same time” (“Has Time Run Out for the Bible Conference?” *United Evangelical Action*, May 1964, p. 23). An excellent study of the nature of Bible colleges and institutes, including their structure and motives, is Virginia Brereton, *Training God’s Army: The American Bible School, 1880–1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

Bible conference is the camp meeting.¹⁷ Born on the frontier during the Second Great Awakening, camp meetings were extensions of the “sacramental meetings” of Scottish Presbyterianism, special seasons in which Presbyterians gathered to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Traditionally, the American camp meeting originated in a sacramental meeting held by Presbyterian James McGready in Logan County, Kentucky, in 1800. The following year at Cane Ridge, near Lexington, Kentucky, an astonishingly large crowd of ten to twenty thousand people gathered for what became the Mount Everest of camp meetings.¹⁸ By this time, the nature of the meetings had changed from small sacramental meetings to large-scale assemblies aimed at both the evangelization of non-Christians and the exhortation of believers to holiness and obedience. The meetings also became major social events along the frontier. Along with Methodist circuit-riding, the camp meeting became one of the chief institutions for spreading the Second Great Awakening in the West.

After the Civil War, camp meetings also became major vehicles of promoting Methodist holiness teaching.¹⁹ Even before the war, the camp meetings became more organized in ways that began to resemble the Bible conferences that followed later. The promoters of camp meetings built cottages and halls on the old camp meeting grounds and established regular schedules. Some became virtually religious resorts. Perhaps the most obvious example was the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting in New Jersey, founded in 1869. What Cane Ridge was to early camp meetings, Ocean Grove became for later ones. Ocean Grove not only had attractive, well-maintained grounds and a regular schedule but actually incorporated as a city and operated as a church-run community until the courts ruled the connection a violation of

¹⁷The standard history of the camp meetings is Charles A. Smith, *The Frontier Camp Meeting: Religion’s Harvest Time* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955). An invaluable source on the study of camp meetings is Kenneth O. Brown, *Holy Ground: A Study of the American Camp Meetings* (New York: Garland, 1992), which provides an essay on the origins of the camp meeting, an extensive bibliography, and a major listing of camp meetings and meeting grounds; Brown discusses the relationship between camp meetings and Bible conferences (pp. 36–38).

¹⁸See Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). Paul Conkin’s *Cane Ridge: America’s Pentecost* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) is notable for not only a history of the Cane Ridge meeting but also its excellent study of the origins of the camp meetings. On James McGready, see John Thomas Scott, “James McGready: Son of Thunder, Father of the Great Revival” (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1991). Brown in *Holy Ground* contends that too much emphasis is put on the Scottish roots without sufficient reference to native Methodist precedents.

¹⁹On the holiness movement and its revitalization of the camp meeting, see Charles Edwin Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion: The Holiness Movement and American Methodism, 1867–1936* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1974); Melvin Easterday Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980); and Smith, *Frontier Camp Meeting*, pp. 242–53.

church and state in 1974.²⁰ Unquestionably these revived camp meetings resembled the Bible conferences.²¹

Yet, despite the similarities, camp meetings did not directly inspire or even contribute to the growth of the Bible conference movement. Whereas camp meetings were almost exclusively Methodist, the leadership of Bible conferences was largely Reformed: Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Baptist. One might almost say that Methodists held camp meetings while Presbyterians organized Bible conferences. Furthermore camp meetings generally stoked revivalistic fervor while Bible conferences preferred a more sedate atmosphere. Bible conferences and camp meetings seem to have been different expressions of a common interest. However, the countercultural emphasis of camp meetings was more pronounced, as holiness Christians sought to influence a Methodist hierarchy often unsympathetic to their concerns.

The Chautauqua

The Chautauqua has a more visible tie to the Bible conference movement.²² The original Chautauqua grew out of a suggestion by businessman Lewis Miller to Methodist minister (later Bishop) John H. Vincent that someone should hold a “Sunday school camp meeting” to train teachers. Miller and Vincent then organized such a convention in 1874 at the Fair Point Camp Meeting grounds on Lake Chautauqua, New York. At the initial assembly a handful of sermons combined with numerous lectures attempted to make participants more accomplished Sunday school teachers. Success encouraged the founders to hold annual meetings, and in a few years the Chautauqua Assembly appropriated the camp meeting grounds for itself.²³

²⁰See the interesting, if impressionistic, study of Ocean Grove, Troy Messenger, *Holy Leisure: Recreation and Religion in God's Square Mile* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

²¹See, e.g., Steven Barabas, *So Great Salvation: The History and Message of the Keswick Convention* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1952), p. 30.

²²See John H. Vincent, *The Chautauqua Movement* (1885 reprint ed.; Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971); Joseph E. Gould, *The Chautauqua Movement: An Episode in the Continuing American Revolution* (New York: State University of New York, 1961); Theodore Morrison, *Chautauqua: A Center for Education, Religion, and the Arts in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974). Morrison's account is by far the most interesting to read. An interpretive study of the Chautauqua movement is Burke O. Long, “Lakeside at Chautauqua's Holy Land,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 92 (March 2001): 29–53. See also Aron, *Working at Play*, pp. 11–26.

²³Vincent was not fond of camp meetings and made every effort to distinguish his work from the standard Methodist camp meeting. Vincent quashed every effort by participants to hold revival services, and he permitted no service to be held on the grounds without his permission. When he, Miller, and two teachers first discussed the Chautauqua idea, they were attending a camp meeting in Ohio, but “they sat at some distance from the crowd, since none of them had a taste for revivalism” (Morrison, *Chautauqua*, p. 31; see also p. 33).

The Chautauqua Assembly soon became an educational and cultural center that provided quasi-religious self-improvement. The assembly even organized as a university for a time and afterwards continued its educational outreach through correspondence courses known as “home reading circles” or, more properly, the “Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle.” Thousands of “students” followed the prescribed course of readings in science, literature, and other fields for four years in return for a certificate upon completion of the program. In addition to the reading circles, Chautauqua invited to its platform notable lecturers, performers, and statesmen, including presidents. Although overtly religious, the Chautauqua sought to establish Christian civilization in America through education and cultural uplift rather than the evangelism of camp meetings.

Chautauqua’s success mushroomed into a “Chautauqua movement” that was visible in two forms. First, “independent Chautauquas,” imitating the original with varying degrees of success, sprang up around the country. These independents scheduled series of lectures and concerts and organized their own home reading circles—without necessarily the supervision or approval of the mother assembly in New York. The Winona Lake organization founded such an independent Chautauqua, and for many years it rivaled the Bible conference in popularity.²⁴ The second manifestation of the movement was the “circuit or tent Chautauquas which carried packaged programs to organized chains of towns.”²⁵ The Chautauqua movement peaked around the time of World War I and then faded during the 1920s, although the Chautauqua Assembly in New York has continued to the present. Bible conferences consciously imitated Chautauqua at places such as Winona Lake, and a few figures, such as William Jennings Bryan, held forth on the platforms of both institutions.

Private Prophetic Conferences

The British prophetic and holiness conferences of the nineteenth century, more than simply influences on the American Bible conference movement, were direct contributors. Two early British premillennial conferences set both precedent and pattern for the Niagara Bible Conference and its offshoots: the Albury Conferences (1826–28) and the Powerscourt Conferences (1831–36).²⁶ These conferences were

²⁴See Solomon C. Dickey, “Winona Assembly and Summer School,” *Chautauquan*, September 1900, pp. 635–38.

²⁵Morrison, *Chautauqua*, p. 161. Morrison discusses both the independent and circuit Chautauquas, pp. 161–92.

²⁶See Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, pp. 18–22, 34–38. See also Harold H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren, 1825–1850* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1967), pp. 86–99. A firsthand account of the Second Powerscourt Conference is found in *Letters of J[ohn] N[elson] D[arby]* (Kingston-on-Thames: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, n.d.), 1:4–7. Sandeen discusses only the first three conferences. Lady Powerscourt, promoter of the conferences, later joined the Plymouth Brethren and

part of a growing movement that emphasized prophetic teaching and, in particular, the doctrine of the premillennial Second Coming of Christ. Nevertheless, they differed from later Bible conferences. Not only were they held for a selected rather than a general audience, but they also concentrated almost entirely on prophetic Bible study to the exclusion of recreation. They were more joint Bible studies than lectures or sermons.

The dominant figure at Powerscourt was John Nelson Darby (1800–82), controversial leader of the Plymouth Brethren and one of the initial promoters of dispensationalist premillennial theology. Powerscourt had a twofold significance for Niagara: it influenced Irish revivals which in turn directly affected the Niagara Conference, and it first united dispensationalism with the Bible conference movement. In fact, dispensationalism eventually became the dominant system of interpretation at most American Bible conferences.

“Believers’ Meetings”

The Irish revivals of 1859–61 even more directly affected the Bible conference movement. The Irish revivals, themselves an offshoot of the American Prayer Meeting revivals of 1857–58,²⁷ stirred Protestants in Ulster and southern Ireland in what became known as the ‘59 Revival. A key characteristic of the revival in Ireland was small lay-dominated prayer meetings, which also emphasized intensive Bible study. Small gatherings grew into larger meetings, called “Believers’ Meetings,” held all over the island,²⁸ and directly influenced the creation of the Niagara Bible Conference.

The Mildmay Conference

Just as the Believers’ Meetings influenced the Niagara Conference, another English conference affected the development of the other prototypical conference, D. L. Moody’s Northfield Bible Conference. The Mildmay Conference, the brainchild of Evangelical Anglican minister William Pennefather (1816–73), was perhaps the first full-fledged Bible conference. In 1856, while rector in Barnet, Hertfordshire, Pennefather began holding annual conferences “to promote personal holiness, brotherly love, and increased interest in the work of the

afterwards the conferences came more exclusively under the auspices of the Brethren. Rowdon points out that information about the later conferences is scanty and therefore the date of 1836 for the final one is uncertain (p. 87).

²⁷See Kathryn Teresa Long, *The Revival of 1857–58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) for a somewhat revisionist study of this revival that responds in particular to Timothy L. Smith’s *Revivalism and Social Reform*.

²⁸Beale discusses these revivals and their interrelationship (*In Pursuit of Purity*, pp. 13–20).

Lord.²⁹ When he moved to Mildmay Park, Islington, in 1864, he continued the conferences, building a commodious new hall in 1870. Among those attracted to Mildmay and impressed by its work was D. L. Moody, who borrowed the concept and imported it to America. In addition, Mildmay's conferences on prophecy gave impetus to the American Bible and Prophetic Conferences that began in 1878, thus enlarging the debt that American Bible conferences owed to Pennefather.³⁰

The Keswick Conferences

Even more evident in its impact on America was the Keswick movement and the series of conventions that it sponsored. Keswick teaching shared roots with Methodist holiness teaching, particularly the influence of holiness teacher Phoebe Palmer.³¹ The main theological difference between the two movements was that Methodist holiness advocates held that by a special work of grace after conversion, the Holy Spirit "eradicated" or "entirely sanctified" the believer by cleansing the taint of original sin. Keswick teaching, on the other hand, held that the Holy Spirit simply suppressed, rather than eradicated, original sin so that Christians could live free from known sin. More practically, the two systems differed in styles of worship, social class, and denominational affiliation. Keswick advocates tended to be more reserved in their worship than the more boisterous Methodist holiness Christians, and they usually came from churches with a Reformed heritage.

"Keswick" was the English site of a major annual holiness convention that first met in 1875.³² Although other holiness conferences preceded it, Keswick became the model for the movement and spawned a number of "Keswick conventions" in Great Britain and North America. To some extent, most Bible conferences bore the imprint of Keswick. D. L. Moody, who had undergone a spiritual experience like those described by Keswick teachers, was warmly sympathetic to the

²⁹Robert Braithwaite, *The Life and Letters of Rev. William Pennefather* (London: John F. Shaw, n.d.), p. 305. The book follows a strict chronological order, and Braithwaite discusses all of the Barnet and Mildmay conferences as they occurred. The story of the beginning of the conferences is found on pp. 297–320 passim. Discussion of Moody's relationship to Mildmay is found on pp. 489–90. The author was apparently unaware of Moody's 1867 visit.

³⁰Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, pp. 145–46.

³¹Palmer exerted a powerful influence on the holiness movement through her "Tuesday Meetings," Bible studies at which she taught her concepts. Among those attending these meetings was William Boardman, later an influential figure in the movement that gave rise to Keswick.

³²On the history of Keswick, see Walter B. Sloan, *These Sixty Years: The Story of the Keswick Convention* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1935); Barabas, *So Great Salvation*; J. C. Pollock, *The Keswick Story* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964); and Charles Price and Ian Randall, *Transforming Keswick: The Keswick Convention Past, Present, and Future* (Carlisle, UK: OM Publishing, 2000).

movement and promoted its teaching at his Northfield Conferences. C. I. Scofield noted in 1897 that Northfield was often called “the American Keswick.”³³

THE PIONEERS: NIAGARA, NORTHFIELD, AND THE AMERICAN BIBLE AND PROPHETIC CONFERENCES

One may glimpse how these varied influences united to produce the American Bible conference movement in the history of the two archetypical conferences: the Niagara Bible Conference and Moody’s Northfield Bible Conference. These two conferences (particularly Niagara) in turn gave rise to the American Bible and Prophetic Conferences, which strengthened the prophetic movement. Niagara and Northfield were the two tributaries that formed the stream of the Bible conference movement.

The Niagara Bible Conference

Since the last third of the twentieth century historians have given close attention to the history of the Niagara Bible Conference. They rightly regarded that conference as having spread premillennial teaching and having helped form the fundamentalist coalition that emerged in the 1920s.³⁴ The origins of Niagara lie in the Believers’ Meetings of the ’59 Revival. Among the participants in the Irish Bible studies was

³³C. I. Scofield, “The Place of Northfield Among Modern Christian Forces,” *Northfield Echoes*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1897, p. 67.

³⁴The impetus for this renewed study is undeniably Sandeen’s ground-breaking work *Roots of Fundamentalism*; note particularly pp. 132–62 and 210–19 on Niagara. Two dissertations are helpful: Larry D. Pettegrew, “The Historical and Theological Contributions of the Niagara Bible Conference to American Fundamentalism” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1976); Walter Unger, “Earnestly Contending for the Faith: The Role of the Niagara Bible Conference in the Emergence of American Fundamentalism, 1875–1900” (Ph.D. diss., Simon Fraser University, 1981). Pettegrew’s is the better narrative and gives a better overall sense of events. Unger writes with less sympathy and follows a topical, analytical approach to Niagara’s history; therefore his work is useful on occasion for its contrast with Pettegrew’s. Pettegrew’s work was also serialized in *Central Bible Quarterly* 19 (Winter 1976), 2–26; 20 (Spring 1977), 3–25; 20 (Summer 1977), 2–40; 20 (Fall 1977), 2–56; 20 (Winter 1977), 3–36. See also Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity*, pp. 13–33.

Niagara is commonly called either a “Bible conference” or a “prophetic conference” interchangeably. However, Pettegrew denies that Niagara should be called a prophetic conference because it was concerned with a wide range of biblical topics (p. 63). The point is well taken but ignores both the public and historical perception of Niagara. Prophecy, in the form of premillennialism, remained the main attraction and certainly proved to be the chief distinguishing characteristic of the conference. Although Niagara may not have been as thoroughly prophetic in nature as some of the prophetic conferences, it certainly appears to be so in contrast to nonprophetic Bible conferences. Furthermore, the premillennial theology of Niagara affected the teaching of all subjects, even nonprophetic ones. Other historians, notably Sandeen, have no hesitation in labeling Niagara a “prophetic conference.”

Irishman George C. Needham (1840–1902).³⁵ Soon after the beginning of the revivals, Needham became an evangelist traveling around Ireland holding evangelistic campaigns and participating in the various Believers' Meetings. He later attended C. H. Spurgeon's pastors' college and eventually came to America in 1868. In that year Needham persuaded Baptist editor James Inglis (1813–72) to hold a Bible study in New York along the pattern of the Believers' Meetings. Needham, Inglis, and several others met again in Philadelphia in 1869; in St. Louis in 1870; in Galt, Canada, in 1871; and in Chicago in 1875. These meetings helped expose more pastors and laymen to premillennial eschatology, but all were still essentially private in nature. Among those joining in later meetings was James H. Brookes, a Presbyterian pastor in St. Louis and major figure in the premillennial movement, who eventually became the president of the Niagara Bible Conference.

In 1876 the group met at Swampscott, Massachusetts, and for the first time opened its meetings to the public. Although publicity was more or less by word of mouth, people showed such interest that the leaders of the meeting thought that a conference open to the public would be successful. Therefore the Swampscott meeting became the first official public "Believers' Meeting for Bible Study." Over the next few years the conference met at several different locations. Eventually the leadership decided that the meetings would profit from a settled location. In 1883 the Believers' Meeting located at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, where it remained through 1897. Before settling in Niagara, the Believers' Meeting had already taken important steps towards strengthening its organization. In 1878 the conference had chosen an executive committee headed by James H. Brookes and had adopted an ardently premillennial fourteen-point creed—perhaps the first creed of the fundamentalist movement.³⁶

The Niagara conference attracted the leading premillennialists of the day, including Baptist pastor A. J. Gordon of Boston; Presbyterian W. G. Moorehead, one of the editors of the *Scofield Reference Bible*; A. T. Pierson; C. I. Scofield; and J. Wilbur Chapman. Brookes became Niagara's unquestioned leader and spokesman, and his periodical, *The Truth* (1875–97), became the unofficial organ of the conference.³⁷

³⁵Needham remains the preeminent source on the relationship of the Irish meetings to the American Bible conferences. See George C. Needham, *The Spiritual Life* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1895), pp. 17–22, and George C. Needham, Introduction to *Present Truth*, by James Brookes (Springfield, IL: Edwin A. Wilson, 1877), pp. 12–15. *The Spiritual Life* also contains a brief biography of Needham (pp. 9–16).

³⁶The creed is found in both Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, pp. 273–77 and Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity*, pp. 375–79.

³⁷On Brookes, particularly relevant to this discussion, see Carl E. Sanders, *The Premillennial Faith of James Brookes: Reexamining the Roots of American Dispensationalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001). See also David Riddle Williams, *James H. Brookes: A Memoir* (St. Louis: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1897). Pettegrew devotes a chapter to the life and theology of Brookes ("The Histori-

While the preaching followed the pattern of earlier religious gatherings, it was at Niagara-on-the-Lake that the Believers' Meetings took on the trappings of later Bible conferences. Leisure joined study as a goal of the visitors. Tennis, baseball, and other recreational activities filled the hours between the services.

Niagara reached its zenith in the early 1890s but by 1900 was defunct. The death of Brookes in 1897 probably contributed to Niagara's decline, as did the decision to move the conference to Point Chautauqua, New York (1898–99), and finally to Asbury Park, New Jersey (1900). Even before that time, however, attendance had faltered. A major reason for Niagara's collapse seems to have been theological. Although premillennial, Niagara left open the question whether the Second Advent would occur before or after the tribulation period. Disputes between pre- and posttribulationists grew more acrimonious in the 1890s and hastened the end of the conference.³⁸ Nonetheless Niagara influenced nearly every subsequent American prophecy conference. Some conferences claimed direct kinship to Niagara, such as the Sea Cliff Bible Conference in New York (1901–11), founded by pretribulationists from Niagara led by A. C. Gaebelien.³⁹ These conferences and others followed a pattern set by Niagara and extended its influence far beyond the thousands who attended its meetings.

The Northfield Bible Conference

History has reversed the relative prominence of Niagara and D. L. Moody's Northfield Bible Conference. In their mutual heyday, Northfield was the more prestigious, in fact, probably the leading Bible conference of its time.⁴⁰ Part of the reason for Northfield's comparative neglect may be that Niagara's prophetic emphasis and doctrinal steadfastness provide a coherent theme for historians who regard premillennialism as a major source of fundamentalism. Researching Northfield is more like studying the after-dinner speeches at a Rotary Club. Yet Northfield may have contributed as much to the Bible conference

cal and Theological Contributions of the Niagara Bible Conference," pp. 113–61).

³⁸For a discussion of this controversy at Niagara, see Pettegrew, "The Historical and Theological Contributions of the Niagara Bible Conference," pp. 170–83, and his article "The Rapture Debate at the Niagara Bible Conference," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (July–Sept 2000): 331–47. On the whole question of pre- and posttribulationism in the millenarian movement, see Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, pp. 218–24.

³⁹See Pettegrew, "The Historical and Theological Contributions of the Niagara Bible Conference," pp. 197–204.

⁴⁰An example of Northfield's preeminence is found in A. T. Pierson's brief history of the Bible conference movement written at the turn of the century; although he participated in both conferences, Pierson devoted but a single paragraph to Niagara and over eight pages to Northfield. However, one should note that the article originally appeared in Moody's *Northfield Echoes*. See Pierson, *Forward Movements*, pp. 154–65.

movement as Niagara.⁴¹

In November 1879, while preaching a sermon on prayer at a church in Cleveland, the Rev. H. B. Hartzler noticed Dwight L. Moody, who was sitting in the front of the audience, “cast a glance at the platform ‘as tho struck with a bolt.’”⁴² Afterwards Moody came up to Hartzler and invited him to a conference that the evangelist had decided to hold the next summer at his home in Northfield, Massachusetts. Although Moody’s idea appeared to be sudden inspiration, it was more likely the jelling of several ideas in the evangelist’s mind.

Moody first visited William Pennefather’s Mildmay Conference during a visit to England in 1867, and he addressed the conference in 1871. Moody must have impressed Pennefather, for the Englishman invited the evangelist to return to England for a series of campaigns. When Moody returned to Britain in 1873, however, he found that Pennefather had recently died, and so he worked under the auspices of the YMCA instead. This was to be the great British campaign that established Moody as an international figure. He concluded his phenomenally successful campaign by addressing the Mildmay Conference again in July 1875. The evangelist demonstrated his debt to Pennefather when he gave his new conference at Northfield the same title as those at Mildmay: “The Christian Workers’ Conference.”⁴³

⁴¹A satisfactory history of the Northfield Bible Conference is yet to be written. Probably the best one available is Janet Mabie, *The Years Beyond: The Story of Northfield, D. L. Moody and the Schools* (East Northfield, MA: The Northfield Bookstore, 1960). As the title indicates, Mabie’s work is a history of all of the Northfield institutions, including the summer conferences. Her book suffers from its popular and occasionally semi-fictional style. The paucity of footnotes further hampers the would-be researcher. See pp. 72–80 and 165–66 for discussion of the conferences. Also of interest is [T. Shanks], *The Home Work of D. L. Moody* (Chicago: Revell, 1886), a contemporary account limited by its lack of perspective but profiting from the advantage of firsthand experience. Chapter two deals with the summer conferences. See also Pierson, *Forward Movements*, pp. 154–62, and Mark Sidwell, “D. L. Moody and the Northfield Bible Conference,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 33 (Nov 1999): 69–77. The most important primary source is the *Northfield Echoes*, the conference’s regular periodical from 1894 to 1903.

Most biographies of Moody contain a chapter on the Northfield conferences and tend to recount the same facts with monotonous regularity. An exception to this rule and by far the best biography of Moody is James F. Findlay, *Dwight L. Moody: American Evangelist, 1837–1899* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). The author discusses the summer conferences on pp. 339–55 and 404–7. Typical of most other biographies is J. Wilbur Chapman, *The Life and Work of Dwight L. Moody* (Boston: J. A. Haskell, 1900); it was written shortly after Moody’s death and is respectful, uncritical, and of limited value. Chapman’s book is particularly useful to this study, though, because his chapter on the Northfield conferences (pp. 215–28) was written while he was director of the Winona Lake Bible Conference. The chapter relates the usual facts about the conference’s history found in most books, but it also attempts to generalize about the entire Bible conference movement.

⁴²Findlay, *Dwight L. Moody*, p. 339. Findlay is quoting Hartzler.

⁴³Mildmay also held prophetic conferences in 1878, 1879, and 1886. The 1878 conference provided part of the inspiration for the American Bible and Prophetic Conference in New York that same year (see Pettegrew, “The Historical and Theological Contributions of the Niagara Bible Conference,” pp. 32–33). George Needham

Moody intended his summer conferences to be one of several ministries in Northfield. In 1879 he began Northfield Seminary (a school for girls), and he later added Mt. Hermon School for Boys. The first Christian Workers' Conference took place during the first ten days of September 1880. It was in some ways a hurried affair, and many of the guests stayed in an unfinished girls' dormitory. Nevertheless, Moody was pleased, and the next year he expanded the conference to fill the whole month of August.⁴⁴ Moody was away in Britain from 1882 to 1884, but he recommenced the conferences in 1885. The years from 1885 to Moody's death in 1899 proved to be the heyday of the Northfield Conference. Leading orthodox preachers from America, Great Britain, and around the world met on Northfield's platform.

Although Northfield bore a distinct Keswick stamp, and Moody gladly supported the growing premillenarian movement by inviting its leaders to speak at Northfield, he did not want any particular theological viewpoint to dominate his ministry. His great success as an evangelist rested in part on his ability to unite Protestants under the umbrella of general evangelical doctrine. Moody desired that the conference "not stand for any distinct form or belief or practice, provided there be a general acquiescence in what is known as Bible truth."⁴⁵

Perhaps it was this irenic tendency that led Moody to resist attempts to impose a doctrinal standard on Northfield. The conference had nothing like the well-defined Niagara creed to guard its platform. The result was, as a supporter of Northfield wrote, that "some men were invited who would not be regarded by all evangelical believers as perfectly safe teachers, and whose presence on the platform created no little opposition."⁴⁶ Alongside the champions of orthodoxy mentioned earlier, Moody brought in liberals such as Josiah Strong and Washington Gladden, both early promoters of the Social Gospel; Baptist liberal William Rainey Harper; and Scottish evangelist Henry Drummond. The latter in particular, with his controversial attempts to reconcile Christianity with Darwinian evolution, created a stir. When Moody scheduled Drummond at the conference in 1893, a group of conservatives urged Moody to drop him. Moody thought the matter over then refused their request, saying that "the Lord had shown him that Drummond was a better man than himself."⁴⁷

claimed that the Mildmay conferences, like Niagara, resulted from Irish revivals (*The Spiritual Life*, p. 19), but Penefather began his conferences in Barnet before the revivals.

⁴⁴Pierson lists among the speakers A. J. Gordon, James Brookes, and George Needham (*Forward Movements*, p. 156).

⁴⁵Pierson, *Forward Movements*, p. 161. Findlay discusses Moody's favorable views on premillennialism, *Dwight L. Moody*, pp. 250–54. Findlay concludes that Moody never became a dispensationalist (*ibid.*, p. 408).

⁴⁶Pierson, *Forward Movements*, p. 161.

⁴⁷See Findlay, *Dwight L. Moody*, pp. 411–12.

The tendency toward tolerance in Moody's lifetime led to tensions for Northfield after he was gone.⁴⁸ The evangelist's sons, William R. and Paul Moody, directed the conferences after their father's death. Both William, who became director of the Northfield schools, and especially Paul, a Yale-educated Congregationalist pastor, continued their father's open policies and became more tolerant as time went on. Many orthodox voices continued to speak at Northfield after 1900, notably English exegete G. Campbell Morgan, who led summer Bible classes there, and R. A. Torrey, head of the Chicago (later Moody) Bible Institute. Over the years, however, Northfield under the younger Moodys became more open to liberalism, disturbing the fundamentalist element. Torrey in particular resisted this drift and he clashed with Paul Moody in print when the latter claimed that his father "was, for [his] days, a liberal."⁴⁹ The dissatisfaction with the Northfield conference probably figured in Torrey's decision to found the Montrose Bible Conference in Pennsylvania in 1908.

American Bible and Prophetic Conferences

A highly visible and much publicized expression of the Bible conference movement was the series of American Bible and Prophetic Conferences held between 1878 and 1914. Although not annual conferences at a fixed location, these meetings had an impact belying their relatively sporadic scheduling. Convened in urban locations—New York (1878); Chicago (1886); Allegheny, Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh area, 1895); Boston (1901); and Chicago (1914)—the conferences caught the attention of the public more than Niagara, Northfield, and the others.⁵⁰ The earlier conferences in particular attracted considerable

⁴⁸Evangelical disfavor took the form more of disgruntlement than of outright opposition to the Northfield Conference. *Moody Monthly* continued to include the conference in its annual listing of summer Bible conferences through 1942. Nevertheless, fundamentalists did not hesitate to criticize it. Baptist W. B. Riley, for example, excoriated Paul Moody for his openness to modernism. See Dollar, *History of Fundamentalism*, p. 119.

⁴⁹R. A. Torrey, "Mr. Paul D. Moody's Gross Calumny of His Honored Father, D. L. Moody," *Moody Monthly*, October 1923, p. 51. For more on Torrey at Northfield see Roger Martin, *R. A. Torrey: Apostle of Certainty* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1976), pp. 116–25. Martin discusses on pp. 123–24 a conflict over liberalism while Moody was still alive.

⁵⁰Published volumes resulted from each of the conferences and provide the best primary sources: Nathaniel West, ed., *Premillennial Essays* (1879 reprint ed.; Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1981); *Prophetic Studies of the International Prophetic Conference* (previously cited); *Addresses on the Second Coming of the Lord* (Pittsburgh: W. W. Waters, n.d.); *Addresses of the International Prophetic Conference* (Boston: Watchword and Truth, n.d.); and *The Coming and Kingdom of Christ* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1914). For further discussion of these conferences, see Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity*, pp. 47–64; Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, pp. 147–61; Dollar, *History of Fundamentalism*, pp. 27–66; and C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1958), pp. 81–98.

newspaper attention. The New York *Tribune*, for example, published an extra edition that reprinted the addresses of the 1878 conference. The denominational range of speakers was impressive—Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopalian (including Reformed Episcopalian and Anglican), Methodist, Congregationalist, and Dutch Reformed. The conferences also displayed an international flavor, especially attracting English premillennial speakers. The conferences demonstrated that the prophecy movement was diverse and widespread.

Behind the calls for these conferences were the leaders of the premillennial movement in America. Among those issuing the call for an initial New York meeting were James Brookes, president of the Niagara Conference, and A. J. Gordon, later deeply involved in Moody's Northfield Conference. Over the course of the conferences, other leading premillennial speakers lent their support, including A. T. Pierson, W. E. Blackstone (author of the popular prophetic volume *Jesus Is Coming*), and Scofield. By the later conferences, men who would take the lead in the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s had become the visible leaders of the effort, men such as James M. Gray of Moody Bible Institute and W. B. Riley. As Kemeny notes, "The list of speakers at these...conferences reads like a Who's Who of the Premillennialist movement."⁵¹ The American Bible and Prophetic Conferences did in a large way what Niagara, Northfield, and the rest did on a smaller scale: they drew together premillennial teachers and interpreters into a more developed network, they publicized and propagated premillennial teaching, and they provided a voice for the emerging prophetic movement.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BIBLE CONFERENCE MOVEMENT

After the turn of the twentieth century, the number of Bible conferences grew prolifically. An indication of the number of conferences is the guide to summer conferences published by *Moody Monthly* until the 1970s. From the 1920s the number never dropped below twenty, and the 1957 guide listed over fifty Bible conferences, excluding summer youth camps.⁵² Although such numbers could foster a sense of competition among the conferences, it also led to cooperation. It is not clear how successful was the effort of the WCFA to "systematize" Bible conferences by creating "circuits" in which speakers could visit several conferences with the greatest efficiency and economy,⁵³ but

⁵¹Paul C. Kemeny, "Princeton and the Premillennialists: The Roots of the *mariage de covenance*," *American Presbyterians* 71 (Spring 1991): 22. Kemeny deals with only the first four of these conferences, but his point is applicable to all.

⁵²"Directory of Bible Conferences and Camps," *Moody Monthly*, May 1957, pp. 60–69. The *Moody Monthly* lists do not claim to be exhaustive, so the number could be higher.

⁵³*God Hath Spoken*, p. 22.

conferences did work out an informal network by cooperating in scheduling to share costs, notably the higher costs of bringing in speakers from abroad. Noting how his father, J. Palmer Muntz, director of the Winona Lake Bible Conference, worked out such details, J. Richard Muntz noted, "So a speaker might be at Sandy Cove in N.J., Montrose in Pa., Ebenezer (near Buffalo), Erieside (Pa.), before getting to Winona, and then go to locales near Chicago, Iowa, and even to the West Coast to places like Mount Hermon."⁵⁴

Such cooperation highlights the fact that the conferences shared many general characteristics. First was the vacation aspect of the conferences, or as attendees might prefer, the "spiritual refreshment." This aspect explains, after all, the most visible characteristic of the conferences, the fact that they met at vacation spots and not in churches. Bible conferences could provide a Christian alternative to vacations with more worldly attractions. While they believed providing a morally safe "Christian resort" was a worthwhile endeavor, conference leaders tried to stress its spiritually edifying aspects and show that it had biblical precedent. G. Campbell Morgan expressed this sentiment at Winona Lake in 1910 when preaching on the text "Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). Morgan said,

That I take it, is the great underlying purpose of this and all similar gatherings. Workers for God from many places and from many and differing circumstances are assembled together for a period of rest in the deepest and truest sense of that very much misunderstood word. We are not here that we would escape from any burden He has given us to bear, from any cross He has called us to carry, from all that love-service which He in great and infinite grace has appointed to us, but we are here in order that we may presently return stronger for the carrying of the burden and the cross, better equipped for all the service His will appoints, and we have gathered together with this as the deepest desire of our hearts that we may find our way into that rest out which all true and prevailing service must proceed.⁵⁵

A second characteristic was the interdenominational character of the conferences. Usually, the conferences remained free of all but token denominational control and were often completely independent. Some, such as Niagara, were independent from the beginning. Others, such as Winona Lake, began with connection to a major denomination—the Presbyterian Church in the USA in Winona's case—but eventually divorced themselves from it. Some, such as Northfield, continued as part of some larger independent organization, in this case, the Northfield schools. Of course, some maintained denominational ties, such as the Southern Presbyterians' Montreat Conference in

⁵⁴J. Richard Muntz to Mark Sidwell, 1 September 1986. Muntz also noted how such scheduling not only saved money but also gave the speakers the greatest possible exposure.

⁵⁵G. Campbell Morgan, "Come unto Me All Ye that Labor and Are Heavy Laden," *Winona Echoes 1910*, p. 5.

North Carolina. Even where the denominational ties remained, however, the platforms of the conferences were strongly interdenominational in character.

This interdenominational quality of the Bible conferences led Ernest Sandeen to suggest that the conferences bore the imprint of Plymouth Brethren ecclesiology. Because the Brethren's dispensationalist scheme predicted the apostasy of the visible church and advocated separation from the allegedly apostate denominations, Sandeen claimed that the conferences "represented J. N. Darby's concept of the church adapted to the American environment." The leaders of the Bible conferences did not go as far in their separatism, he contended, but the conferences became surrogate denominations to which their sympathies and perhaps loyalties actually lay.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the influence of the Plymouth Brethren does not explain the similar attitudes among those in the Keswick and Methodist holiness conferences. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how the practices of those attending the Bible conference differed so radically from the general interdenominational cooperation that characterized evangelical Protestantism in the nineteenth century.

Although interdenominational, conferences were often thematic, that is, centered on a certain theme, a doctrine or emphasis that the conference's leaders considered important or even essential. At Niagara, premillennialism provided the rallying point. At Keswick, holiness teaching took the center stage. Such conferences might not stress their theme in every sermon. The directors of Niagara, for instance, encouraged teaching on topics other than prophecy. Nonetheless, those responsible for thematic conferences required that the speakers either adhere to the central teaching or at least promise to refrain from teaching anything contrary to it. Some Bible conferences, such as Northfield, were more general in character and exerted a conscious effort to keep any one idea from dominating the conference. Yet even these conferences often focused on certain popular themes such as prophecy and even devoted entire seasons to such a theme.⁵⁷

Conference directors who were famous evangelists, ministers, or other "names" were also typical. A well-known Christian leader could attract larger crowds, give the conference an air of legitimacy, and secure the best speakers for the conference through his contacts and reputation. Moody of course directed Northfield. Niagara flourished under the leadership of James Brookes and foundered after his death. At Moody's suggestion, Sol Dickey, the director of the Winona Lake Bible Conference, sought and secured Evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman for the job at Winona. After Chapman left, the position was filled by

⁵⁶Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, pp. 136–37.

⁵⁷A. T. Pierson (*Forward Movements*) notes that the 1886 Northfield Conference focused on "*Dispensational Truth*, especially the Lord's Second Coming" (p. 158) and that the 1891 conference, featuring Keswick speaker F. B. Meyer, centered on holiness (p. 160).

another well-known evangelist, William Biederwolf. R. A. Torrey founded and directed Montrose, and pastor-writer Harry Ironside, pastor of Moody Church, succeeded him. After leaving Winona, Chapman moved to Montreat, where he became involved with the conference there, and at the time of his death in 1918, Chapman had promised to become director of the Stony Brook Bible Conference on Long Island.⁵⁸ Sometimes a conference took advantage of an unofficial link with a famous figure. For example, Billy Sunday supported and publicized Winona Lake, where he made his home, although he rarely held any position within the organization.

Ultimately, the theology of those involved in the Bible conference movement provided the foundation and framework for its teaching. Considering the informal and interdenominational nature of these conferences, determining the exact outlines of “Bible conference theology” presents its own challenge. Most authoritatively, one can look at the doctrinal statements of the conferences, such as Niagara’s creed or Winona Lake’s Doctrinal Platform. These, however, are brief, basic summaries of doctrine. Providing a larger body of material are the sermons given at the conferences, but analyzing these is more difficult. Also one must consider the overall theology of the speakers as found in their other sermons and writings, especially the works of the leaders of the conferences and those who addressed the conferences with the greatest frequency. By sifting through this evidence one may piece together a broad picture of “Bible conference theology.” Previously, writers such as Paul Kemeny and David Saxon have hinted at the idea of a distinct theology espoused in the Bible conferences. Both have contrasted the “Bible conference tradition” with the “Princeton tradition,” the latter of which usually draws the greatest attention when writers discuss the theological development of fundamentalism.⁵⁹ The idea is not so much of a contrast between Princeton and the Bible conferences as a different shading of belief.

The Bible conferences—their leaders and speakers—began with the general evangelical Protestantism of the nineteenth century. They held to historic teachings concerning the Trinity, the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, his resurrection and virgin birth, and other doctrines associated with orthodox Christianity. To that they added the heritage of American evangelical theology: the need for conscious conversion, the importance of personal piety as expressed in moral uprightness and personal devotion to religious duties, the importance of evangelism, and the desire for revivals of religion to transform saints,

⁵⁸Ford C. Ottman, *J. Wilbur Chapman* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1920), p. 107.

⁵⁹Kemeny, “Princeton and the Premillennialists,” pp. 17–30; David Saxon, “Fundamentalist Bibliology 1870–1900: An Analysis of the Early Fundamentalist Views of Inspiration, Bible Translations, and Bible Criticism from the Writings of James H. Brookes, A. J. Gordon, and A. T. Pierson” (Ph.D. diss., Bob Jones University, 1998), pp. 18–19.

convert sinners, and improve society. Beyond these points, the Bible conference theology stressed other themes. A primary emphasis was the premillennial return of Jesus Christ, bolstered by belief in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, and supported to a lesser extent by Keswick views of personal holiness.

Although it was the *raison d'être* for many Bible conferences promoting prophetic teaching, the premillennial view of Bible prophecy was part of a larger system. Most (although not all) of the premillennialism of the Bible conferences was of the dispensationalist variety. Without getting into the details of the system, dispensationalism was more than simply a scheme of eschatology; it was a comprehensive approach not only to the Bible and but also to all human history.⁶⁰ Dispensationalists insisted on a literal, or natural, interpretation of the Bible that found knowledge of future events in the inerrant text. The system drew a strong distinction between Israel and the church, with Scripture divided according to whom (Israel or the church) it addressed. Dispensationalism divided human history into epochs, each of which began with the extension of God's grace and ended with human failure and divine judgment. The most famous outline was the seven dispensations laid out by Scofield in his reference Bible. Running through this system was an attitude—called pessimistic by its critics and realistic by its advocates—toward culture and history that saw all human endeavor heading for ultimate failure and judgment. Martin Marty has well observed that dispensationalism was not simply a system of theology but a countermodern philosophy of history.⁶¹ Not all participants in the Bible conference movement were staunch, systematic dispensationalists, and some were not dispensationalist at all. But Bible conference theology bore the imprint of dispensationalist teaching.

The mention of inspiration and inerrancy may seem obvious in connection with Bible conferences, for many commonly assert that it is the central doctrine of fundamentalism.⁶² Indeed, driving the Bible

⁶⁰There are numerous theological and historical works on dispensationalism. Two useful theological works from within the movement are Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) and Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*. Two more historical but critical works are Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America* and Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960).

⁶¹Martin Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 1, *The Irony of It All* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 218–32. Note Marty's whole discussion of the ramifications of dispensationalist teaching.

⁶²Sandeen advanced his thesis that fundamentalism is the result of an alliance between premillennialism and the Princeton view of inspiration in *The Roots of Fundamentalism*. Morris Ashcraft, in trying to trace the outlines of fundamentalist theology, concludes, "It seems to me that fundamentalism is a theology of one point—the inerrancy of the biblical autographs." He sees inerrancy as the one doctrinal tenet characterizing fundamentalists across the board. See his article "The Theology of Fundamentalism," *Review & Expositor* 89 (Winter 1982): 31–43.

conference speakers was the conviction that they were unfolding the teaching of an infallible book to their hearers, that they were proclaiming the revealed word of God. Not so widely recognized, however, is that the fundamentalist view of inspiration was not a monolithic expression of the Princeton position. Kemeny cites examples of leading Bible conference teachers, such as L. W. Munhall, whose views on inspiration show the imprint of other than strictly Princetonian influences.⁶³ Saxon notes a particular exchange between James Brookes and B. B. Warfield of Princeton in which Brookes took exception to Warfield's (and Princeton's) ideas of the place of inspiration in Christian theology and apologetics. Bible conference theology affirmed the central place of the Bible but it represented its own particular take on the doctrine of inspiration.⁶⁴

The third emphasis, Keswick holiness teaching, is most apparent in the early days of the Bible conferences, when conferences proudly advertised Keswick themes. American evangelicalism and fundamentalism nonetheless felt the impact of its teachings long after the "Keswick" label was no longer advertised.⁶⁵ The language of a "victorious" or "deeper life" faded somewhat, but the Keswick emphasis on Christian dedication as a specific act following conversion, often in response to a call for "full surrender" to God's will, remained common. Also reflecting the Keswick view of sanctification was a twofold classification of Christians as "carnal" (not surrendered) and "spiritual" (surrendered); sanctification became more an event than a process. This holiness stress on a "crisis" leading to a higher Christian life marked many segments of fundamentalism and contrasted with the more traditional Protestant view of sanctification as a progressive organic process beginning at conversion and ending with the Christian's glorification at death.⁶⁶ Perhaps most common, as Marsden noted, was the concept of "power for service."⁶⁷ By this was meant not simply a reliance on the

⁶³Kemeny, "Princeton and the Premillennialists," p. 21.

⁶⁴Saxon, "Fundamentalist Bibliology 1870–1900," pp. 31–34. He notes that, on the one hand, the Princetonians believed that inspiration was one of many important basic facts of Christianity, but they considered Christianity to be true apart from inspiration. Brookes, on the other hand, thought the doctrine of inspiration was essential to the existence of Christianity, absolutely foundational to its existence.

⁶⁵The development of holiness teaching and its impact on American fundamentalism is well discussed in George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72–101. Bruce Shelley identifies Keswick as the source of much fundamentalist piety in his "Sources of Pietistic Fundamentalism," *Fides et Historia* 5 (Spring 1973): 68–78. An interesting examination of the practical piety of Keswick teaching is Richard Ostrander, "The Battery and the Windmill: Two Models of Protestant Devotionalism in Early-Twentieth Century America," *Church History* 65 (March 1996): 42–61.

⁶⁶See J. I. Packer, "'Keswick' and the Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification," *Evangelical Quarterly* 27 (July 1955): 153–67.

⁶⁷Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, pp. 79–80.

Holy Spirit for ability to live the Christian life, but rather a special endowment, a blessing that an otherwise powerless believer must seize in order to do God's work. Although perhaps not as universally accepted as inerrancy and premillennialism, Keswick teaching left an imprint on Bible conference theology.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

As is true with any historical movement, one must study the cultural setting of fundamentalism in order to understand the movement properly. Yet to understand American fundamentalism completely, one must unquestionably know its theological framework—the assembly of ideas and teachings that coalesced into what became known as “fundamentalism” in the 1920s. Various writers have demonstrated the importance of premillennialism and dispensationalism, of the Princeton view of Scripture, of Keswick “deeper life” emphasis, of the whole tenor of evangelical Christianity in America as it emerged from the First and Second Great Awakenings. In a sense, the Bible conferences (along with Bible institutes and similar institutions) were part of the cultural setting that propagated those theological ideas. Yet one can credit the conferences with a creative role as well, for as the speakers and theologians met on the platforms—or even across dining room tables—they discussed concepts, exchanged ideas, and cross-fertilized in a manner that not only disseminated but also helped *shape* the theology that contributed to fundamentalism after World War I. The Bible conferences did not just herald fundamentalism; they helped mold it.

⁶⁸Bruce Shelley notes that some of the premillennial teachers objected to the Keswick emphasis at Northfield, but Moody overruled them, and most were won over. Shelley, “Sources of Pietistic Fundamentalism,” p. 73.