How the fundamentalists learned to thrive

by William Martin in the September 23, 1998 issue

By Joel A. Carpenter, Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism. *(Oxford University Press, 335 pp.)*

Colleagues, friends, hopeful Democrats and apprehensive Republicans often ask me if the Religious Right has run out of steam. I tell them that for nearly two decades I have been reading books and articles that purport to describe and explain the "rise and fall" or the "failed crusade" of the Christian Right. Religious conservatives have confounded these assessments by continuing to show up at the polls in large numbers. Moreover, they have grown from 26 percent of the Republican Party's total membership in 1987 to slightly more than a third today. They control the GOP organization in nearly 20 states, and are a strong force in at least a dozen others. Have they lost their clout? Not likely.

Many of us assume that because our own circles include few fundamentalists, the numbers, influence and power of fundamentalists have peaked and are rapidly diminishing. This has been a recurring misperception throughout this century. Indeed, in 1926, following the humiliation of William Jennings Bryan in the Scopes trial and the rejection of the fundamentalist agenda by northern Baptist and Presbyterian denominations, this very journal declared that "anybody should be able to see [that] the whole fundamentalist movement was hollow and artificial" and "wholly lacking in qualities of constructive achievement or survival." Joel Carpenter begins his long-awaited and richly informative book with that quotation, gently noting that while one may question fundamentalism's constructive achievements, "no one can deny that fundamentalism has survived" and "has found ways to influence American public life."

Carpenter's aim is to explain how fundamentalists not only survived the setbacks and embarrassments of the '20s, but spent the '30s and '40s building and elaborating a resilient subculture. This subculture protected them from the storms of

secularity, provided a stable base from which to launch repeated evangelistic offensives, and gave them hope that they might regain a role in shaping U.S. culture. Carpenter acknowledges the value of "fundamentalism" as a generic label for militant religious and cultural conservatism. But he focuses on that particular, identifiable strain of evangelical Christianity that is persistently revivalistic, emphasizes dispensationalist premillennialism and biblical inerrancy, militantly opposes theological modernism and cultural secularity and feels a strong sense of "trusteeship" for American culture.

American fundamentalists indeed retreated into the wilderness by the end of the '20s, keenly aware of their lost influence and their status as outsiders in a culture their forebears had done so much to shape. But instead of disappearing they regrouped, created a new constellation of institutions, and learned to use modern technology effectively. They re-emerged after World War II more dynamic and vital than the mainline denominations that had come to think of them in the past tense.

Others have sketched the outlines of this process, noting the importance of "comeouter" sects and fellowships, Bible institutes and prophetic conferences, independent megachurches and mini-empires led by such warhorses as William Bell Riley and J. Frank Norris, widespread use of radio broadcasting and popular religious publications, and a powerful commitment to foreign missions. No one, however, has filled in the picture with Carpenter's detail, balance and sure hand. Though familiar with this period, I repeatedly found myself saying, "So that's how it happened. Now I understand much better."

Carpenter begins by demonstrating that fundamentalism in the '30s and '40s was not a formless aggregate of disgruntled religious conservatives, but a vigorous, self-conscious and comprehensive movement. Having left or been driven out of mainline denominations, fundamentalists replaced the services and associations they had lost by turning increasingly to an elaborate network of parachurch agencies. Moody Bible Institute, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles and scores of lesser-known schools trained thousands of leaders for work in local churches and on the mission field, organized conferences and revivals, sponsored radio broadcasts, published literature and served as surrogate denominations. Dozens of summer Bible conferences attracted thousands of guests who came to know and trust one another and to have their common beliefs shaped and confirmed by leading preachers. Some of these preachers exerted enormous influence over their regions. For example, Riley, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Minneapolis, presided over a collection of schools that

furnished so many pastors for that region that he was able to engineer a temporary takeover of Minnesota's Baptist organization.

Fundamentalist leaders also were influential as editors and pamphleteers. In addition to producing the *Moody Monthly*, the *Sunday School Times*, the *Fundamentalist* (Norris) and the *Sword of the Lord* (John R. Rice), fundamentalists conveyed their message in the *Essentialist, Conflict, Defender* and *Dynamite*. As these names suggest, some publications were inflammatory and irresponsible. Others were unimaginative, repetitive and dull. Still, they were read, and they formed a habit of reading among their constituents. As a result the best sellers that appear in the New York Times lists are regularly dwarfed by books sold by and to evangelical Christians.

Perhaps even more significant, fundamentalists seized the opportunity offered by radio. When the major networks refused to sell them time, preferring instead to donate it to representatives of mainline denominations and ecumenical organizations, independent broadcasters bought time on local stations, laying the groundwork for what later came to be known as the electronic church. The most successful of these pioneers was Charles E. Fuller, whose Old-Fashioned Revival Hour was heard over 1,000 stations by 1943, at a cost of $1.5 million for airtime alone. Radio ministers not only kept evangelical doctrine before the people; they made it clear that legions still built on the firm foundation and walked on the ancient pathways, and would teach their children to do the same.

These often overlapping activities and associations--Carpenter uses the image of overlaid map transparencies--connected individuals and congregations to one another, enhancing their sense of purpose and giving them reason to hope for success. They also showed that it was possible to succeed without assistance from denominational structures, thus easing the separation of fundamentalists from parent bodies they felt had been corrupted by modernism.

Separation, of course, is a defining characteristic of fundamentalism, and Carpenter devotes three chapters to its various manifestations. By withdrawing from those deemed less doctrinally pure, fundamentalists drew (and draw) lines of demarcation between friends and enemies, the faithful and the backsliders, the saved and the lost. In part, this stance was defensive and self-protective. Because they were not well equipped to deal with the intellectual challenges posed by modernism, fundamentalists withdrew from mainstream seminaries and secular universities,

frequently adopting an anti-intellectual, populist stance that, to use Carpenter's phrase, "often took the form of railing against one's enemies before an audience of one's friends." More positively, as fundamentalists have seen the nation become more secular they have felt a responsibility to be "an exemplary, called-out people," pure in word, deed, thought and appearance. They have felt obligated to win others to Christ and rescue them from a lost and dying world. Unfortunately, this passion for purity has often impelled them to withdraw not only from those clearly in "the world" or in modernist churches, but also from folk who differ with them on matters that seem quite trivial to those outside their camp.

Separatism was bolstered by the fact that a dispensationalist reading of scripture led them to expect the secular and modernist world's rejection of fundamentalists and their beliefs. Whereas challenges to biblical faith, world war, the decline of conventional morality, economic depression, and growing expectation of another great war undermined liberal optimism, that scenario made the dispensationalist interpretation of scripture, with its predictions of a downward spiral preceding the second coming of Christ, increasingly plausible. Fundamentalists who subscribed to these teachings not only felt they were getting the news in advance, but took delight in the prospect of being able to say, "See, I told you we were right," as they floated upward on the rapturing cloud.

As has often been noted, premillennialism discouraged efforts at social amelioration by fundamentalists, but it did not quash them. On the contrary, fundamentalists believed they had been assigned to a lifeboat and exhorted to "save all you can." Historian Perry Miller characterized revival as "the engine of the Republic," a phenomenon that played a central role in transforming a somewhat loose constitutional federation into a republican union. Fundamentalists have never lost their conviction that what revival has done before, it can do again.

Heartened by their increasing vigor, they began to hope, expect and work for widespread revival. Already skilled at using radio to reach large audiences, they became adept at incorporating contemporary modes of popular entertainment into their evangelistic efforts. Nowhere was this clearer than in Youth for Christ, a movement that began as an effort to provide Christian young people with a blend of wholesome entertainment and high-powered, upbeat evangelism. It soon became the largest and most effective youth organization in America, with extensive outreach in England and on the Continent.

Beyond affecting hundreds of thousands of young people directly, Youth for Christ played a crucial role in helping the less separatist segment of fundamentalism reintegrate into mainstream American life. As its first full-time representative, Billy Graham traveled throughout America and Europe, speaking at rallies and teaching pastors and youth leaders how to develop evangelism programs for young people. In the process, he developed and cultivated an extensive network of evangelical leaders and Christian businessmen who would sponsor and support his evangelistic crusades and who would cooperate with each other in myriad similar ventures.

Carpenter emphasizes fundamentalists' commitment to foreign missions, noting that as mainline denominations retrenched or withdrew from mission work, the number of fundamentalist missionaries multiplied. This process received a tremendous boost after World War II, as veterans, hoping to save the souls of the people they had liberated or defeated, returned to the fields where they had once fought. Today, fundamentalists and evangelicals (including Pentecostals) constitute approximately 90 percent of all Protestant missionaries working in foreign lands.

In the concluding chapter, Carpenter points to the contemporary results of the history he has described. Evangelicalism, much of it still staunchly fundamentalist in doctrine, now includes approximately one-fourth of all American adults. Fundamentalists and their more progressive evangelical descendants have repeatedly adapted successfully to the conditions and opportunities of modern life. In an era in which confidence in traditional institutions is low, evangelicals have spawned a diverse collection of nontraditional ministries that are generally more efficient and effective than denominational bureaucracies. While decrying the pervasiveness of secularity, they have harnessed the tools and attitudes of popular entertainment and a market economy to create churches, messages and programs that are able "to win a hearing, a following, and, eventually, a measure of respectability." And, while not abandoning their trust in a soon-returning Lord, they have turned once again to the this-worldly project of reinfusing society with Christian mores and ideals.

Though Carpenter no longer considers himself a fundamentalist, fundamentalism is the stock from which he sprang. He wants to make sure we understand its strengths as well as its weaknesses. It is not, he correctly insists, a religion that appeals primarily to the socially dysfunctional, the psychologically wounded or the politically and economically disinherited. On the contrary, "fundamentalism has offered ordinary people of conservative instincts an alternative to liberal faith in human

progress, a way of making sense out of the world, exerting some control over their lives, and creating a way of life they can believe in." Carpenter makes the case for this modest but important assertion as well as anyone who has written about fundamentalism in recent years.