

WEEK 6

Evangelicals in the Political Arena Before the 1970s

Evangelicals have had a voice in politics throughout American history. These next two weeks will trace this history from the 1800s to the present. These weeks have been divided into two periods: before and after the 1970s.

DEFINITIONS: Throughout the 1800s, an **evangelical** was a Protestant Christian. Whether conservative or liberal, all Protestants were evangelicals.

By early 1900s, a **fundamentalist** was a theologically conservative evangelical, one ready to do “battle royal” for the fundamentals.

Evangelicals and fundamentalists divided in the 1940s. Fundamentalists urged doctrinal purity and separation from the world, while the **New Evangelicals** urged evangelistic outreach and engagement with the world.

QUESTION: During class as you fill in the detailed outline, consider the effects of theology. How did bad theology contribute to the actions taken by evangelicals at different periods? What stood out to you most?

QUESTION: The mission of the church is to “make disciples” (Matt 28:18-20). Does this mean Christians shouldn’t care about social problems such as extreme poverty or child abuse? Please explain.

DETAILED OUTLINE

I. Making America Great (1800-1865)

As revivalism swept America, evangelicals set their sights on perfecting society.

A. Revivalism and Christian Perfection

The Second Great Awakening (1800-1830) was a period of religious enthusiasm and surging church membership. Converts believed the “awakening” was the dawn of the millennial age where Christ would soon return. They needed only to pursue personal holiness and the perfection of America.

Charles Finney is viewed as the father of high-pressure revivalism. Finney believed he could use any means possible to save sinners and complete the work of the gospel in his lifetime. Finney’s unbounded optimism fit well with the American spirit. His emphasis upon personal choice squared with democracy and personal liberty. The emotionalism of his revivals aligned with Romanticism.

As opposed to man’s inability (Calvinism), the Second Great Awakening stressed man’s ability (Arminianism).

B. A Righteous Empire

Energized by the Second Great Awakening, evangelicals set their sights on perfecting American society. Advances were made against drinking, Sabbath-breaking, prostitution, Catholicism, and Freemasonry. Evangelicals also supported orphanages, homeless shelters, and the fight for women’s suffrage. Many even viewed the Civil War as an apocalyptic battle necessary to establish Christ’s kingdom.

Evangelicals formed countless organizations to fight social problems, and they had varying degrees of involvement in the political arena. Political activism, however, was not central to the movement nor was activism nationally organized.

II. Cracks in the Evangelical Foundation (1865-1915)

Evangelicalism began to split apart as massive changes swept through America and challenged the movement in ways it was unprepared to respond.

A. Social Changes

More than ½ million immigrants per year came to America throughout these years. Most immigrants came from Europe, fleeing persecution or famine. They were eager for work, and the Industrial Revolution provided the jobs. Urbanization exploded during this time as factories drew millions towards the cities.

Poverty, however, increased as never before. Slums developed, sanitation declined, and worker strikes became common. The moral and religious consensus of the nation

was shifting as well. How would evangelicals respond? Conservative evangelicals, such as D. L. Moody, said the gospel could address all of America's problems. Liberal evangelicals emphasized social action and political reform.

B. Theological Changes

Higher criticism, as applied to the Bible, crept into America. Seminaries began to view Scripture with skepticism until few conservative seminaries remained. At the mainstream level, few noticed or even read *The Fundamentals*. Evangelical churches were growing and sending out more missionaries than ever before. The serious social and theological changes, however seemed peripheral.

III. Reclaiming Christian America (1915-1925)

The horrors of WWI created a panic among evangelicals to preserve Christian civilization. Evangelicals mobilized to engage the political arena as never before.

A. Sound the Alarm!

WWI (1914-1917) awoke evangelicals. Patriotism surged against the backdrop of anti-German fury. Fear gripped evangelical leaders, such as Billy Sunday and William Jennings Bryan, that America could descend to the barbary of Germany. The evangelical fight soon became one "for the very survival of Christian civilization." Within evangelicalism arose a more militant wing known as fundamentalists.

B. Humiliation and Defeat

Evangelicals, namely fundamentalists, fought for the moral and religious purity of America. They supported strict immigration laws, even ballooning clan membership in the fight for racial purity. Evangelicals condemned the spread of Communism, ensured that women could vote, and joined with liberals in the fight for Prohibition.

The focus of evangelical fury, however, was biological evolution. Dozens of anti-evolution organizations formed and fought politically to eradicate every hint of evolutionary teaching in the public schools. This fight reached its zenith in the Scopes Trial (1925). Though evangelicals won the battle, they lost the war. The movement pulled away from politics and went into isolation.

IV. A Great Reversal (1925-1940)

The Scopes Trial may have been the most unexpected watershed in evangelical history. Literally overnight, evangelical activism halted, and the movement went into isolation.

A. Aliens and Strangers

Conservative evangelicals realized that they no longer represented American Christianity or even American Protestantism. Fundamentalists hoped the Scopes Trial would show the overwhelming authority of the Bible against evolution. Yet, William Jennings Bryan failed spectacularly in this battle and humiliated them.

Evangelical anti-Catholic leagues declined as it seemed a lost cause, and euphoria over Prohibition evaporated. Conservative evangelicals quickly became the only remaining supporters of the 18th Amendment.

Anti-evolution, anti-Catholic, and anti-alcohol battles all failed to change the nation as fundamentalists had hoped. These fights only heightened the distinction between fundamentalists and the average American. Since public sentiment had turned against conservative evangelicals, they now made few attempts to influence public policy.

B. An Anti-Social Gospel

Evangelicals in the 1800s had emphasized either social work or the gospel. By the 1920s, the divide had become as black and white. Liberal Christians would continue to emphasize social work and benevolence, while fundamentalists would continue to preach the gospel. This division had become so sharp that fundamentalists viewed social ministry with suspicion.

V. Reforming Fundamentalism (1940-1970)

Many old-school fundamentalists emerged from WWII with an evangelistic zeal. These new evangelicals wanted to engage the world, though increasingly at the expense of doctrine.

A. Diverging Paths

The new evangelicals were fundamentalist leaders and intellectuals such as Carl F. H. Henry and Harold Ockenga. They founded Fuller Seminary (1947) to promote solid theology and to encourage world outreach. Numerous evangelical outreaches sprang up: InterVarsity Fellowship (1941), Campus Crusade (1948), and Fellowship of Christian Athletes (1954). Fundamentalists such as Bob Jones, John Rice, and John Norris emphasized doctrinal purity instead. The ministry of Billy Graham led to the clear break between these groups.

The two paths of evangelicalism shared the same doctrine in the 1940s. Both groups condemned the spread of Communism as an existential threat, and both believed that national prosperity rested upon a national revival. One group, however, was more optimistic than the other. Furthermore, neither the old fundamentalists nor the new evangelicals emphasized political activism.

B. The Times They are A Changin’

The moral decline of America in the 50s and 60s was alarming. The sexual revolution challenged conservative morality, and removing prayer from public schools didn’t help (1962). The New Evangelicals discovered agreement with non-fundamentalists and even some theological liberals on moral issues. Thus, theological distinctions diminished. The moral issues became urgent. Evangelicals needed only the right leaders to mobilize them into a political force to take back America.