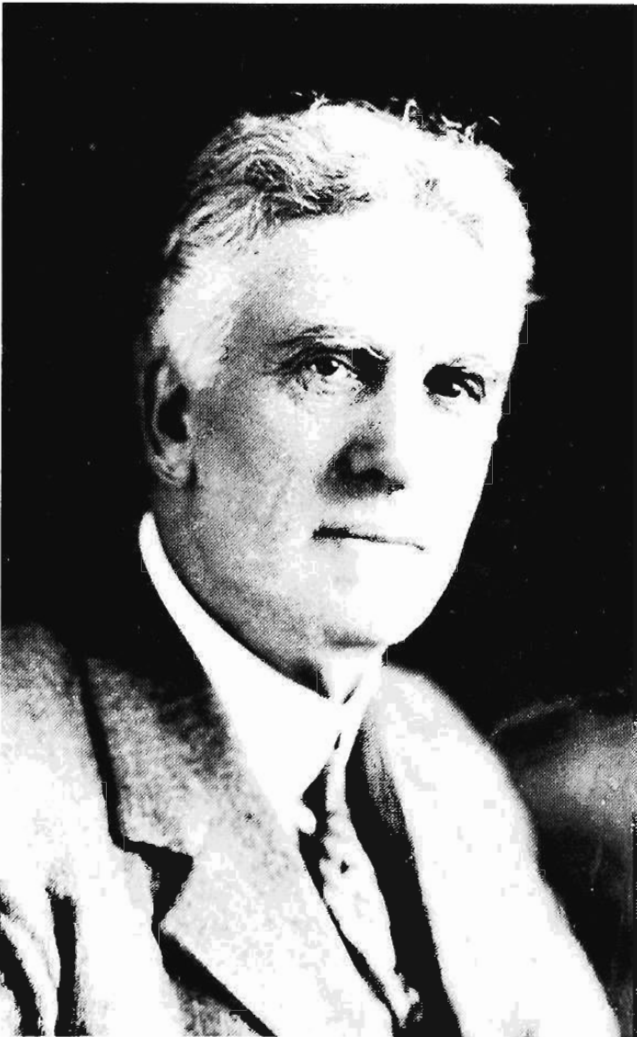


William Bell Riley

Architect of Fundamentalism

C. Allyn Russell



W. B. RILEY in 1923 at the peak of his career

THREE YEARS AGO *Minnesota History* published a prize-winning article by Ferenc M. Szasz on "William B. Riley and the Fight Against Teaching of Evolution in Minnesota." It dealt almost exclusively with a special controversial phase of the stormy career of the fundamentalist preacher from Minneapolis. Now the quarterly returns to the Riley theme for a contrasting overview of the man whom more and more scholars are discovering to be one of the great leaders of the fundamentalist movement. — Ed.

ON A HOT, uncomfortable afternoon in August, 1947, in Minneapolis, an ailing, eighty-six-year-old religious warrior summoned an energetic, twenty-eight-year-old evangelist to his bed of illness. The aged man was the retired minister of the First Baptist Church in Minneapolis, the president of three educational institutions known as Northwestern Schools, and the doughty champion of militant fundamentalism over several decades. The young man, without a theological education, was pastor of a church of less than a hundred members, but he was also prominent in youth evangelism as the vice-president of Youth for Christ International. The veteran defender of the faith turned to a dog-eared Bible, his source of authority, and read the account of Samuel anointing David king. While thunder rattled all around and lightning streaked through the premature darkness, William Bell Riley pointed a bony finger at Billy Graham and said, "Be-

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loved, as Samuel appointed David King of Israel, so I appoint you head of these schools. I'll meet you at the judgment seat of Christ with them."¹

Overawed by the determination of the dying man, and doubtless against his better judgment, Graham agreed to serve as interim president in the event of Riley's imminent death. (Riley had asked Graham earlier to assume the presidency of Northwestern Schools—they had first met when Graham appeared at a Youth for Christ rally in Minneapolis in 1944—but Graham had either declined the invitation or had postponed an answer while awaiting "divine guidance.") When Riley died in December, 1947, Graham kept his promise, eventually serving as head of the schools for three and a half years while simultaneously continuing his commitments to evangelism. But Graham realized the dual arrangement was not a good one, and he resigned in June, 1951, to devote full time to his rapidly developing crusades. What has become of Graham since is well known. Less familiar today are the life and thought of Riley, the crafty, stalwart old Baptist clergyman who sought unsuccessfully to

lay his mantle on younger shoulders. That failure may have been a portent of the inability of anyone really to succeed Riley, the independent, strong-willed, fundamentalist war horse whom William Jennings Bryan once called "the greatest statesman in the American pulpit."²

Riley's significance for both Minnesota and the rest of the nation is being increasingly recognized as scholars gain perspective upon the development of religion in America, especially that phase of it known as the modernist-fundamentalist conflict. His labors as preacher, pastor-evangelist, administrator, debater, author, evangelical educator, civil leader, and social critic led some academicians to hail him as "the ablest leader of orthodox reaction during the early part of the twentieth century," "the ablest executive that fundamentalism produced," and the founder of "the only inclusive fellowship of fundamentalists in America." (The latter referred to the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, the organization that retained Bryan for the famous Scopes trial in Tennessee in 1925.) Riley's friends went beyond even these accolades to acclaim him as "the country's foremost and ablest controversialist," "the second Martin Luther of Protestantism," and worthy of being compared with evangelical leader Charles H. Spurgeon, "in the largeness of his work."³

Others, however, viewed him in less flattering terms as an irritating, rigid interpreter of Christianity whose overclaims for the Bible contributed to the religious polarization of American culture. Nevertheless, both friend and foe could agree with the tribute of Harry A. Ironside, pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, at the time of Riley's death: "We need to remember that God never repeats Himself. . . . He will raise up others to carry on, but there will never be a second man of Dr. Riley's stamp."⁴ Riley's disciples lamented this fact; his enemies rejoiced that it was true. A review of Riley's life and thought may assist readers in making their own evaluations of this gifted, ultraconservative leader.

WILLIAM BELL RILEY was born in Green County, Indiana, March 22, 1861, less than a month before the outbreak of the Civil War. Shortly after hostilities began, his father, Branson Radish Riley, a Democrat of Scotch-Irish descent and a proponent of slavery, moved his family to Kentucky where he felt there would be greater sympathy for his political position. (The ancestors of Riley's mother, Ruth Anna Jackson, were English and Dutch Quakers of some prominence in the early history of Pennsylvania.)⁵

The young Riley spent his first eighteen years in Kentucky. To earn money for his education, he raised

¹For accounts of this confrontation, see: John Pollack, *Billy Graham: An Authorized Biography*, 42-43 (New York, 1966); Stanley High, *Billy Graham: The Personal Story of the Man, His Message, and His Mission*, 144-145 (New York, 1956); Curtis Mitchell, *The Making of a Crusader*, 232-233 (Philadelphia, 1966); *The [Northwestern] Scroll*, 1952, p. 18. Pollack has Riley using the Biblical passage where the mantle of Elijah drops on Elisha.

²Mitchell, *Crusader*, 231.

³Robert Sheldon McBirmie, "Basic Issues in the Fundamentalism of W. B. Riley," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1952, 132 ("ablest leader" and "inclusive fellowship" quotes) (Northwestern College has a copy); Stewart G. Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism*, 325 ("ablest executive" quote) (Hamden, Connecticut, 1963, first published in 1931); Richard V. Clearwaters, "The Passing of Dr. W. B. Riley," in *Watchman-Examiner*, 36:10 ("Martin Luther" quote) (January 1, 1948); John R. Rice, "Dr. W. B. Riley, Evangelist," in *Northwestern Pilot*, 28:120 (Spurgeon reference) (January, 1948).

⁴Harry A. Ironside, "Dr. W. B. Riley, Defender of the Faith," in *Northwestern Pilot*, 28:119 (January, 1948).

⁵Marie Acomb Riley, *The Dynamic of a Dream: The Life Story of Dr. William B. Riley*, 20 (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1938). This biography by Riley's second wife is basically adulatory. Furthermore, Riley himself wrote the preface and first chapter and probably revised other portions.

Only a few works of an academic nature have been written on Riley's life. These include three unpublished doctoral dissertations: McBirmie's (footnote 3); Lloyd B. Hull, "A Rhetorical Study of the Preaching of William Bell Riley," Wayne State University, 1960; and Ferenc M. Szasz, "Three Fundamentalist Leaders: The Roles of William Bell Riley, John Roach Straton, and William Jennings Bryan in the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy," University of

tobacco on a farm rented from his father and also secured a loan from a friend. After attending Valparaiso (Indiana) Normal School for a year, he transferred to Hanover College in Indiana, Presbyterian in origin and one of the oldest educational institutions west of the Ohio River. He received his A.B. degree at Hanover in 1885, ranking fourth in his class and, significantly, first in debate. Converted to Christianity with little outward show of emotion at the age of seventeen, Riley originally planned a legal career. But a persistent call to the ministry hounded him until one day, on his knees in the black loam between two rows of ripening tobacco, he "surrendered" and thereafter devoted his life to religious service. In 1888 Riley was graduated from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, although he had been ordained while in college. In fact, he had preached his own ordination sermon, thereby demonstrating a self-assertiveness that characterized him throughout his long and stormy life.⁶

Several brief pastorates in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois followed. (During one of them Riley married Lillian Howard, a Methodist graduate of Purdue University. Six weeks after the wedding, he baptized his young bride into the ranks of the Baptists. Six children were born of this union. His first wife died August 10, 1931, and some two years later Riley married Marie R. Acomb, dean of women at the Bible and Missionary Training School he founded in Minneapolis.) From 1893 to 1897 Riley served as minister of the Calvary Baptist Church in Chicago and then was called to the First Baptist Church in Minneapolis, where he remained for some forty-five years (1897-1942). Under his persuasive leadership this congregation grew from 585 to more than 3,550 members in an area that was a stronghold for Lutherans on the one hand and for Roman Catholics on the other. Also an educator, Riley founded the three schools he entrusted to Graham's direction: the Northwestern Bible and Missionary Training School (1902) to provide pastoral leadership for neglected small-town and rural churches, the Northwestern Evangelical Seminary (1938) to meet the needs of urban congregations seeking orthodox leadership, and Northwestern College (1944) to provide a liberal arts education under evangelical auspices. Upon retirement from an active pastorate, Riley spent the last years of his life promoting these institutions.

A tall, strikingly handsome man with a commanding presence, a resonant voice, and a sense of humor, Riley was known not only in Minnesota but also throughout the nation as an evangelist, speaker at Bible conferences, and tireless leader of fundamentalist forces. He also wrote more than sixty books and

countless articles and published his own religious magazines under such titles as the *Baptist Beacon*, *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church*, the *Christian Fundamentalist*, and the *Northwestern Pilot*. Near the end of his life, as president of the Minnesota Baptist Convention, Riley led that body in a virtual break from the parent denomination. In his last year, he was still fighting as he endeavored to sever all personal association with the Northern Baptist Convention, the denominational body to which his church belonged and in which he had been such a contentious figure.

Riley died at his Golden Valley home in suburban Minneapolis December 5, 1947, bequeathing a heritage that probably made him the most important fundamentalist clergyman of his generation. This claim is supported not only by his theological position but also by his role as pastor-evangelist, social critic, and ecclesiastical politician.

RILEY'S COMMITMENT to orthodoxy emerged early in life. The pietistic faith of his parents, the revivalistic tradition of Kentucky, the religious atmosphere of the schools he attended (he claimed, for instance, that every member of the Hanover faculty was "a fundamental believer"), and the forceful impact of frequent exposure to the witness of famed evangelist Dwight L. Moody all coalesced to provide a strong conservative foundation upon which the future archi-

Rochester, 1969. Mr. Szasz used some of the material in his dissertation for his article, "William B. Riley and the Fight Against Teaching of Evolution in Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 41:201-216 (Spring, 1969).

The author of this article was disappointed to learn that little of Riley's extensive correspondence is available. It has either been destroyed, lost, or withheld for strategic purposes. Thus the author has relied on newspapers and religious periodicals, Riley's books and pamphlets, and the following materials in the Northwestern College Library: boxes of Riley's sermons, memorabilia, and some seventy personal scrapbooks. The author also attended several services at Riley's former church, First Baptist of Minneapolis, in June, 1971, and interviewed the present minister, Reverend Curtis B. Akenson; a long-time member, Mrs. Evalyn Camp; George M. Wilson, vice-president of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association; William Berntsen, president of Northwestern College; the late Marie Acomb Riley; and Reverend Alton G. Snyder, minister of First Baptist Church of St. Paul.

⁶ W. B. Riley, "My Conversion to Christ," in *Watchman-Examiner*, 31:432 (May 6, 1943); "Death of Dr. W. B. Riley," in *Watchman-Examiner*, 35:1259 (December 18, 1947). Riley's father had felt the call to preach at the age of thirty-two but resisted because of a large family and lack of education. He thereafter had a feeling of being "out of God's will." Psychologically, this factor probably had a strong influence upon his son's choice of a profession.

fect of the fundamentalist movement would build. This orthodoxy as well as his polemical spirit was evident in his senior year in seminary when he delivered an address to the graduating class castigating those who deviated from traditional Christian belief as "freaks of faith" who had little appreciation for the historical triumphs of orthodoxy.⁷ Under the further stimulation of personal contact with liberal leaders, supplemented by his own intense study of the Scriptures, Riley crystallized his personal understanding of the "fundamentals" of the faith. Of these, two were especially crucial to his thinking—a belief in the verbal inerrancy of the Scriptures in their original writings and the imminent, personal, premillennial return of Jesus.

To Riley the Scriptures were an explicit revelation of God to man, without historical, ethical, or moral error. Their purpose was to reveal the nature of God, to provide man a knowledge of himself, and to indicate the way of peace and love between the two. Riley accepted these writings as inspired upon the basis of internal evidence and external "proofs." By the former he meant what he believed to be the Bible's matchless code of morals, its supernatural revelations, its unity of teaching and purpose. He also felt that the Bible began in Genesis on such a lofty plane that only inspiration and not evolution could account for its height. By external proofs he had in mind the experiences of men which verified Biblical promises, the fulfillment in history of Scriptural prophecies, and the support of archaeological discovery. The latter led

⁷ Riley, *Dynamic of a Dream*, 58. Riley was impressed by Moody's forceful prayers and the simplicity and directness of his speech, as well as his remarkable faith. Ironically, Moody's broad and tolerant spirit did not appear to make a corresponding impact on Riley.

⁸ William B. Riley, *Ten Burning Questions*, 42 (New York, 1932); W. B. Riley, *Ten Sermons on the Greater Doctrines of Scripture*, 4, 14–17 (Bloomington, Illinois, 1901); W. B. Riley, *Inspiration or Evolution*, 22 (Cleveland, 1926); McBirnie, *Basic Issues*, 57 (last quote).

⁹ Riley, *Inspiration or Evolution*, 18.

¹⁰ W. B. Riley, "Seminaries and a Statement of Faith," in *Watchman-Examiner*, 7:11 (January 2, 1919); W. B. Riley, "Fundamentalism and the Faith of Baptists," in *Watchman-Examiner*, 9:1087–1088 (August 25, 1921); "The Faith of the Fundamentalist," in *Literary Digest*, June 25, 1927, p. 30. Of course, these beliefs and interpretations were not new with Riley. He had been influenced in part by the New Hampshire Confession of Faith which provided the doctrinal background for the statement of faith adopted by his seminary professors. Riley followed the outline of the confession in *Greater Doctrines of Scripture*. For an able discussion of fundamentalism's beginnings and the background for many of the beliefs important to Riley, see Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago, 1970).

him to see an absolute agreement between science and the Scriptures. He came to believe not only in inspiration but in the verbal inerrancy of the Old and New Testaments. To Riley, verbal inspiration was important because "the record of the Saviour must be completely trustworthy if the Saviour is to be trusted, because the latter faith is based on the former record."⁸

Holding such a rigid posture, Riley differed sharply with liberals who advocated alternate approaches to the understanding of the Scriptures. To those who reasoned that the meaning of much of the Scriptures depended upon the interpretation of the individual, he responded that when men depart from the plain Biblical text they have nothing to interpret. He felt that contemporary translations of the Bible distorted its meaning, and he criticized liberal scholars who, building on the research of Biblical critic Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), postulated a multiple-authorship of the early books of the Old Testament. When the authors were referred to by the letters, "J," "E," "D," and "P," Riley summoned some of the clever scorn that became one of his trademarks:

"When, 4,000 years from now, the living critics exhume the First Baptist Church of Minneapolis and find my library, they will take my books and prove that they are composites. Wherever I speak of God, they will find one author and name him 'G'; wherever I speak of the Heavenly Father, they will find another author and call him 'H.F.'; wherever I call him Lord, they will find a third author and name him 'L'; and wherever I speak of Christ, they will name a fourth author 'C'; and they will have the exact same basis to prove that my books were produced by four men that they have applied to the composite theory of the Pentateuch."⁹

Riley's other convictions followed quite naturally from his start with an infallible book as his standard of religious authority. Using the proof-text approach, he came to regard as absolutely essential Christian truths such ideas as the trinitarian concept of God, the deity of Jesus, the sinfulness of man, the vicarious atonement, the bodily resurrection and the personal return of Jesus, justification by faith, and the bodily resurrection of all men.¹⁰ Later in his career, Riley guided the World's Christian Fundamentals Association toward incorporating these beliefs into its doctrinal statement.

In a statement published after his death, Riley asserted that premillennialist convictions came to him through independent study a year after his graduation from Southern Baptist Seminary. (Premillennialism is the belief that at the time of the second coming of Christ, He will inaugurate a thousand-year reign upon

the earth in a kingdom of His saints. Postmillennialism is the conviction that the world will grow progressively better over a period of one thousand years, whereupon Jesus will return at the end of this time, rather than at the beginning.) Like other premillennialists, Riley believed society was characterized by decadence rather than by progress. To him, the "putrid condition" of humanity was reflected in "the most banal of all evil sources: the demoralizing effect of college philosophy . . . Darwinism, applied to every branch of learning" plus what he described as the great trinity of iniquities: the saloon, the gambling den, and the brothel.¹¹

Further evidences of the sorry condition of humanity were to be seen in lascivious dancing, the lewdness of the theater, suggestive movies, juvenile delinquency, divorce, suicide, the breakdown of the home, the abbreviated dress of women, and the general opulence of the day. Where admirable traits persisted in contemporary culture they were due, in Riley's judgment, to the influence of Christianity rather than the forces of evolution. To illustrate such influence, Riley cited with approval a missionary friend who had "seen a filthy, almost nude, ignorant Assamese woman, with the juice of the beetle nut running from each corner of her mouth, transformed in five short years into a woman of genuine refinement, with habits of tidiness, clothed as a westerner, worthy to be spoken of as civilized."¹²

The gospel according to Riley did not present a utopia resulting from human endeavor. In this age there were to be only dire judgments upon the mistakes, sins, wars, and world-tragedies that men have brought about. Yet, blessedness remained for the children of God. This was promised in the millennium and the ensuing kingdom of heaven, both of which would be established by God rather than sinful man.¹³ A special characteristic of Riley's version of the millennial rule was its material nature. There was to be a literal King (Jesus), a literal throne, a literal location (Jerusalem), and literal subjects. The millennial kingdom would be inaugurated at the time of Christ's second coming, which Riley felt was imminent. He saw the signs of Jesus' coming in several Biblical paradoxes that purportedly were being fulfilled in modern life: the proclamation of peace and the simultaneous preparation for war, "the search for truth and the acceptance of lies" (like evolution), and the profession of godliness amidst the practice of godlessness. In keeping with this dispensational scheme, a final judgment would follow the millennium, and then the kingdom of God (also with its material aspects) would reach its fullness with the coming of the new heaven and the new earth mentioned in the twenty-first chapter of Revela-

tion. At that time, the adversaries of God and men would be banished forever, the present earth would be regenerated, and the new Jerusalem—literally 1,500 miles (12,000 furlongs) long, wide, and high; every street one-fifth the length of the diameter of the earth; its avenues 8,000,000 in number (all these figures in keeping with the book of Revelation)—would be the inheritance of the saints for all ages. In the meantime, the crucial mission of the church was to be the salvation of men and women, introducing them to the marvels of the kingdom, at least in its embryonic form.¹⁴

One further concept in Riley's fundamentalism should be stressed. He was convinced that correctness

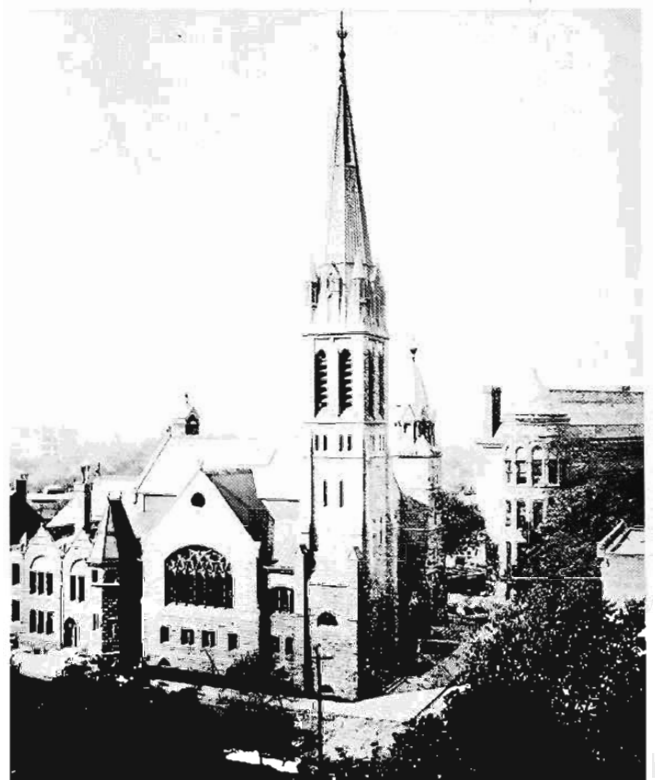
¹¹ W. B. Riley, "The Meditations of an Old Man," in *Northwestern Pilot*, 27:114 (January, 1948); Riley, *Ten Burning Questions*, 108–121 (quotes).

¹² Riley, *Ten Burning Questions*, 112–121; William B. Riley, *The Perennial Revival: A Plea for Evangelism*, 239 (quotes) (Philadelphia, 1933, third edition, revised).

¹³ A kingdom, not a democracy, was the ideal form of government in Riley's mind. He believed that democracy was in the experimental stage and could neither be accepted as a solution for all political problems nor defended as a demonstrated success (the millions of minds represent a low intellectual level). Hope rests, however, in a divine kingdom under the benevolent rule of Jesus, God's king. See Riley, *Ten Burning Questions*, 184–186.

¹⁴ William B. Riley, *The Evolution of the Kingdom*, 11–12, 142–152, 172–178 ("search for truth" quote is on page 175) (New York, 1913); Gospel according to Matthew, 16:3 and 24:6–7.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, long a Minneapolis landmark at Tenth Street and Harmon Place, c. 1920.



of belief alone was not sufficient. Orthodoxy could be too anemic to advance the cause of Christianity and therefore had to be supplemented by aggressive, militant action. A striking exemplar of this "orthodoxy-plus" philosophy was Riley himself, and one role in which he practiced it was as a pastor-evangelist.

RILEY BECAME EMBROILED in controversy early in his Minneapolis pastorate, but in the light of his convictions, forceful personality, and aggressive leadership no one should have been surprised. Initially, he reduced the church roll from 662 to 585 members by eliminating the names of those who were inactive. Then, within a brief span of time, he preached on several polemical issues. He opposed the practice of renting pews, because he believed it created class distinctions and to that extent was unchristian.¹⁵ He advocated tithing as a Biblical method of supporting the church and expressed dissatisfaction over bazaars, suppers, and other forms of raising money employed by many women of his congregation. He condemned such amusements as dancing, card-playing, and theater-going and thus isolated himself from some of the young people and their parents. The new minister also took a hand in the polity of his congregation. He guided the consolidation of the government of the local church by dissolving many of the separate boards and set up a single governing body with powers limited to advising the larger congregation.

As a result of these policies, an anti-Riley faction arose in the socially conservative congregation. Some of the members resented the newcomer's leadership

¹⁵ Riley, *Dynamic of a Dream*, 68; Riley, *Perennial Revival*, third edition, 169-183.

¹⁶ Riley, *Dynamic of a Dream*, 74-77 (prayer quotes), 83, 87. A recent study of the records of Trinity Church by Mark S. Ketcham of the United Theological Seminary, New Brighton, Minnesota, indicates that additional factors, beyond those cited in the Riley biography, may have been at work in the division between Riley and "the minority." These include doctrinal differences and what some felt was a violation of Baptist church polity (the refusal of First Baptist Church to call a mutual council which in turn led to the calling of an *ex parte* council by "the minority"). The doctrinal differences dealt in part with Riley's preaching of the imminency of Jesus' second coming, his belief in divine healing, and his qualified support of J. A. Dowie, founder of a fundamentalist-premillenarian, communal theocracy established at Zion City, Illinois, in 1896. Ketcham minimizes the pew-rental aspect of the controversy, because he could find no evidence of rented pews in the Trinity records, although a pew could be assigned on request. Ketcham's unpublished paper, "An Investigation of the Causes for the Separation of Trinity Baptist Church from First Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1903," was produced for a course in historical theology taught by Ernest R. Sandeen.

and reportedly even went to the extent of putting a detective on Riley's trail for the purpose of discrediting him. The early tensions came to a climax during the Spanish-American War. Several hundred people attended a rally at the Lyceum Theater in Minneapolis to protest the annexation of the Philippines by the United States. Riley, who had expressed concern that war in the Philippines would lead to a conflict with Japan, was asked to offer the invocation. He prayed as follows: "We cannot ask Thee that our soldiers . . . may be victorious, for we do not believe that this is Thy will; but we do ask that their lives may be preserved and that they may return to their homes and friends." At a time when most American people heartily supported the conflict, Riley's words appeared to many, including the Twin Cities press, to be treasonable. His opponents capitalized on this situation to bring additional pressure on their minister. Unsuccessful in forcing Riley's resignation, they called two *ex parte* councils, each of which recommended that the church request the pastor's resignation. The congregation tabled both recommendations. A "solution" to the difficulties was at last reached at a church business meeting in 1903 when Riley demanded the exclusion of forty members who had withdrawn their contributions. The opposition came up with a larger list of about 140 names in this same category and, without further discussion, a motion was passed that they be dismissed to form a new church. The departing members started Trinity Baptist (now Community) Church in Minneapolis.¹⁶

Freed of the "faction," Riley proceeded to build his own kind of congregation, placing considerable emphasis on evangelism. He believed that the normal condition of the church should be a state of perennial revival and set himself and others to the winning of souls. Every Sunday service concluded with an invitation for members to accept Christ. In addition, "protracted meetings" and Bible conferences were held regularly each year, led by prominent evangelical personalities. Numerical results followed. An average of 140 new members a year joined the First Baptist Church during the first decade of Riley's leadership. He claimed that the congregations were the largest in the recent history of the church and attributed this to "the position which we have taken for the authority and integrity of the Word of God and the effort we are making for a church separate from the world." However, one should not overlook the fact that Riley had a flair for publicity and was skilled in the techniques of drawing and handling crowds. At Sunday evening services, for example, he introduced "attractive rather than sensational" sermon subjects, initiated an appealing musical program featuring a choir of

more than 100 voices and a fifteen-piece orchestra, and relied upon the leadership of young people whenever possible. Moreover, Riley kept the church building open seven days a week from 8:00 A.M. to 10:00 P.M., although he was careful to make a distinction between his program and that of the more typical institutional church:

"There is an institutional church that dotes upon ice-cream suppers, full-dress receptions, popular lectures, chess-boards, bowling-alleys, the social settlement, not to speak of the occasional dance and amateur theatricals; and there is the institutional church that expresses itself in the organization of prayer-meetings, mission circles, Bible study classes, evangelistic corps, and multiplied mission stations . . . this latter institution repeats the essential features of apostolic times, and enjoys the essential spirit of the apostolic power."¹⁷

The growth of Riley's congregation was such that Jackson Hall, a four-story educational building with forty-six classrooms and seven offices, was constructed in 1923. A year later the church itself was rebuilt, and Riley preached the rededication sermon. The enlarged sanctuary is still in use, seats more than 2,200 persons, and has a huge balcony whose aisles slant to the front level of the main auditorium. The purpose of this arrangement was to facilitate the "coming forward" of individuals at the time of public invitation.

Riley's expository, Biblical preaching went hand in hand with his constant stress on evangelism. Beginning in July, 1923, he preached his way through the entire Bible—a series of Sunday morning sermons lasting ten years and eventually published in forty volumes under the title, *The Bible of the Expositor and Evangelist*. The combination of Riley's preaching, evangelism, and aggressive leadership accounted in large measure for the addition of some 7,000 members (4,000 by baptism) to his church during his lifetime. At the time of Riley's retirement, one-tenth of the Baptists of Minnesota belonged to his congregation.¹⁸

By arrangement with his church, Riley spent four months of every year as an evangelist in various sections of the country. In his evangelistic role he revealed many of the characteristics of revivalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There was the standard set of sermons (example: "Is Any Sin Unpardonable?"), the special delegations that bolstered attendance, the separate Sunday afternoon meetings for men and women, the castigation of modern amusement, the singing of sentimental hymns written by Fanny Crosby and others, the tender evangelistic appeals, the inevitable "love offering," the published words of appreciation for the evangelist's work,

and the criticism of other religions, especially Unitarianism, the Bahai faith, theosophy, Christian Science, and Mormonism.¹⁹

One way in which Riley's "union meetings" appeared to differ from those of others was in the personal style of the evangelist himself. Riley apparently did not resort to the usual mannerisms and theatrics of the conventional religious barnstormer. A reporter observing his campaign in Seattle, Washington, in 1913, wrote that Riley "upsets all the usual notions of an evangelist. He doesn't look the part and he doesn't act the part. He dresses like a prosperous banker. When he moves about the platform, which is seldom, he does not do so to the accompanying of flapping coat tails. His collar is of the latest style, and his suit of the most modern cut." The reporter continued: "When he steps out on the platform, he looks like a bank director about to address a meeting of the board of directors. And, save for the unusual earnestness of his speech, his tone of voice is that of the same banker. He doesn't rave and he doesn't rant. He doesn't wail and he doesn't weep. He has never wilted a collar in all his years of preaching. He has never torn an ounce of hair from his iron gray pompadour."²⁰

This businesslike approach was in direct contrast to the style of Riley's contemporary evangelist, Billy Sunday. Although he supported Sunday's orthodoxy, Riley was the first to admit that he differed with the flamboyant, tub-thumping Iowan in method and in cultural expression. One scholar has pointed out that Riley's kind of evangelism may have made an impact on Billy Graham, helping him to bypass some of the extravagances that plagued Billy Sunday.²¹

Riley's converts in a particular city during a campaign of three or four weeks normally ran into the hundreds and reportedly exceeded 1,000 on at least two occasions—at Duluth, Minnesota, in 1912, and at Dayton, Ohio, in 1915. During a Riley campaign

¹⁷ W. B. Riley, *Pastoral Problems*, 170 (New York, 1936); Riley pastoral letter to his congregation, March, 1907 ("Word of God" quote), in Riley Papers at Northwestern College; W. B. Riley, "Sunday Night at the Sanctuary or the Picture Show?" in *Baptist World*, February 15, 1917, p. 5 ("attractive" quote); Riley, *Perennial Revival, in toto* but for last quote, p. 117-18 (third edition).

¹⁸ Riley, *Dynamic of a Dream*, 179, 181.

¹⁹ For a full discussion of evangelism in American life, see: William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism, Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York, 1959). In the revivalistic tradition, Riley was especially fond of Reuben Archer Torrey and J. Wilbur Chapman. Riley expanded his remarks about Unitarianism into a book: *The Blight of Unitarianism* (Minneapolis, 1926).

²⁰ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 23, 1913.

²¹ Szasz, "Three Fundamental Leaders," 88.

in Fort Worth, Texas, before the pastorate there of another fundamentalist leader, J. Frank Norris, some 352 individuals were converted, many of them reputed to have been cattlemen who joined the First Baptist Church.²² More important than statistical reports, however, were the contacts Riley made with evangelical leaders throughout the United States during his campaigns. These connections helped Riley in his scheme of creating an interdenominational fundamentalist movement. And his travels enabled him to see the country apart from the provincial confines of the Old Northwest. This led him to speak with greater conviction than ever on the social issues of the day.

ALTHOUGH RILEY believed in social reform, at least by his own definition, in practice his premillennialist philosophy of history and his own ultra-conservative stance on various social issues militated against such reform. To Riley, Jesus was "the social reformer of all ages" whose mission was the most revolutionary the world ever saw. Riley also felt the church had a social mission. Specifically, this was to save the individual from sin, to construct a new society, and to preach and practice social righteousness. One must understand, however, what Riley meant by the construction of a new society. To him, it was the formation of a circle of Christian converts within a circle (the larger world) whose influence for good would make for a better, if not perfect, social order. The church, said Riley, "should form a circle within a circle. The way to correct society is not to begin at the rim, and try to set it all right, from circumference to center, by a single enactment. One must work from within outward. . . . That Jesus meant to build up a society within a society is evident in his speech concerning his own disciples [John 17:9, 14-16]. . . . It is a circle within a circle, a company working from the center to the circumference, a society instituted of God to set things to rights."²³

Reviewing history, Riley believed that the true church had approximated this goal. Through converted individuals it had exerted a civilizing influence; it had contributed to the rising consciousness of a common brotherhood; and it had brought about increased justice among men. The key to continuing this pattern, in his judgment, was a spirit of revival in the church out of which social reform would follow.

In practice, Riley was exceedingly strong on re-

vivalism, and there is little doubt that he created his own "circle within a circle." The social reform of which he spoke was not so evident, owing at least in part to Riley's own conservative posture on social issues. Professor Ferenc M. Szasz has written: "He was a social radical when he arrived in Minneapolis in 1897, on the left, and a social radical when he died in 1947, but on the right. Riley went from radical to radical by standing still. For fifty years he stood on the corner and the parade passed him by."²⁴

It is true that Riley was a social radical on the right when he died, and many would agree that the parade passed him by, but to call Riley a social radical on the left in 1897 seems an overclaim. What Mr. Szasz had in mind, of course, was Riley's democratization of worship in opposing the pew rental system. Riley's position on social issues at the beginning of his ministry in Minneapolis, however, hardly supports Mr. Szasz's unqualified statement. Prior to that time, Riley had gained a reputation for stern opposition to gambling, drinking, and prostitution by such successful actions as securing 250 convictions against gambling in Bloomington, Illinois, and curbing the selling of liquor at illegal hours in Chicago. These emphases alone would not have made Riley a conservative, since the leading figures in the social gospel movement were also opposed to gambling, drinking, and prostitution. And it should be remembered that the progressive movement itself gave strong support to prohibition prior to World War I. However, Riley had other convictions, too. Near the beginning of his Chicago ministry he spoke against the Sunday opening of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. He was unable to prevent the start of the fair on a Sunday but rejoiced that it was not a financial success on that day.²⁵ Further, his firm criticism of dancing, the theater, and divorce reflected nineteenth-century religious viewpoints. His disapproval of these various practices, as well as his opposition to a more liberal observance of Sunday, hardly qualified him, in 1897, as a proponent of the liberal left. His belief in the "open pew" seems to have been a refreshing exception to his otherwise conservative—or, at very best, middle-of-the-road—position.

That Riley continued to be basically conservative in his social attitudes after he arrived in Minneapolis may also be seen in his various declarations. He opposed the legalized saloon, alleging that it had caused greater degradation and more inhuman deaths than had the institution of slavery. He expressed disapproval of the more relaxed sexual practices of the day by referring to free love as the exaltation of animalism that reduced man to the condition of a brute, denied children permanent parenthood, and displayed utter dis-

²² Riley, *Dynamic of a Dream*, 173-177.

²³ Riley, *Perennial Revival* (third edition), 233 ("reformer" quote), 236-237 ("circle" quote).

²⁴ Szasz, "Three Fundamental Leaders," 92.

²⁵ Riley, *Dynamic of a Dream*, 60-61.

regard for God, His laws, and the highest sentiment of home life.²⁶ He favored the requirement of a strict loyalty oath for citizenship and spoke on behalf of the wisdom of capital punishment, reasoning that the death penalty was not half as inhuman as the work of a murderer. In the struggle between capital and labor, Riley declared that greed was common to both sides as "sinful, self-seeking, idol-worshipping" men were found in each. Riley also had simple answers for other complex problems. With a firmness matched only by naïveté, Riley proclaimed during the depression years of the 1930s that repentance and renewed spiritual faith would bring about financial recovery.²⁷

These opinions and his unremitting stands against socialism and communism kept him on the conservative side of most issues. His basic answer to the social needs of the day was individual conversion "through the cross of Christ." The extent of Riley's particular contributions to social reform appears to have been limited largely to his provision of food in Chicago for some eighty needy families (the breadbasket approach) during the winter of 1895-96, his support of prohibition, and his backing of reform mayoral candidates in Minneapolis. Having differed in part with Professor Szasz on one point, the author of this article finds himself in hearty agreement with him in the following assessment: "The whole impetus of Riley's social message seems to have been based on his own personal experience. Hardworking and poor, he had . . . made it to the very top of his profession. He could not understand why his pattern could not be universalized."²⁸

This stress upon the individual was never more evident than when Riley discussed the possibility of unemployment insurance and old-age benefits. He taught that he could find nothing in Scripture "suggesting that a healthy man is justified in living at government expense." Rather, to the surprise of few and the applause of many, he preferred the Biblical injunction: "In the sweat of thy face, shalt thou eat bread." Financial aid from Washington, he feared, would be welcomed by intemperate men who would "retire to a continuous round of guzzling and sleep."²⁹ Riley's literal interpretation of his religious source of authority, linked to his own energetic example of personal initiative, was the root from which he derived his philosophy of social reform, such as it was. In the meantime, souls had to be won, the millennial kingdom of God had to be anticipated, and the continuing struggle against liberalism had to be waged.

OF THE VARIOUS emphases in the life of Riley, the one which seemingly occupied him the most, both on a local and national scale, was his firm opposition to theological liberalism. This resistance perme-

ated his ministry and called forth his qualities as a religious politician. His struggle against the teaching of evolution and his endeavor to gain a victory for fundamentalist Christianity within and without his own denomination must be seen in this context.

Liberalism, so much feared by conservatives, was especially prominent in American religious life following the Civil War. In adjusting to culture, it endeavored to harmonize beliefs with science while at the same time keeping the core of religious truth. Moderate liberals viewed the Bible not as an infallible book direct from God but as a historical record of a people's religious development. They favored Biblical criticism, convinced as they were that the most reverent attitude toward the Scriptures was to take them for what the critical and scientific study of the text and history indicated them to be. Their source of authority was self-authenticating experience. These liberals placed heavy emphasis on reason, did not believe in miracles, and held that all events were controlled by natural processes. They championed the social gospel, proclaimed freedom from theological domination by creeds, councils, or members of a religious hierarchy, and asserted that theirs was the religion of Jesus, not the religion about Jesus. When religious influence of this type began to infiltrate the colleges and seminaries of America, to make its impact upon the thinking of denominational officials, and to take root in some of the mission fields, fundamentalism arose as a responding force. There were many differences between liberals and fundamentalists, but, as the latter saw it,

²⁶ Riley, *Ten Burning Questions*, 127-128, 145-157; Roy L. Smith, *The Minneapolis Pulpit*, 72 (New York, 1929). In this collection of sermons by Minneapolis ministers, the one preached by Riley dealt with illegitimacy. He drew the attention of his audience with the bluntness of one of his opening statements: "What greater blow can strike the life of a lad than to begin it as a bastard?"

²⁷ *Minneapolis Journal*, January 11, 1926, p. 17; *The Baptist*, 13:177-178 (February 6, 1932); W. B. Riley, *The Philosophies of Father Coughlin*, 22 (quote), 24, 28-40 (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1935); *Watchman-Examiner*, 24:165 (February 13, 1936).

²⁸ Riley, *Dynamic of a Dream*, 61-62; Szasz, "Three Fundamentalists Leaders," 84 (quote), 85. For Riley's convictions on communism, see: *Ten Burning Questions*, 167ff; *Philosophies of Father Coughlin*, 41-58; and *Dynamic of a Dream*, 188-191. He assailed communism, especially in the 1930s, because of its deliberate rejection of God and the Scriptures and its glorification of brute power. He believed there were multitudes of Soviet emissaries in this country, including thousands of professors in the universities and liberal clergymen in the churches. Despite its dangers, Riley saw in communism the "falling away" necessary to the fulfillment of prophecy.

²⁹ Riley, *Philosophies of Father Coughlin*, 32, 33 ("guzzling" quote), 35 (other quotes).

the crucial issue was naturalism versus supernaturalism.

Darwinian evolution was a basic part of the modernist structure and a concrete target of fundamentalists. As Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., has pointed out, "to discredit evolution would destroy the underpinnings of modernism." Riley entered into the fray with typical vigor. His primary grievance with Darwinism was that it represented, in his judgment, an assumption unsupported by facts. He declined "to cackle with every discoverer of dinosaur eggs ten million years old [or] . . . to enthuse over 'science falsely so-called.'" He did not deny development, improvement, or varieties within species but, rather, was arguing against the development of one species from another. Riley also argued that the hypothesis of the evolution of civilization out of barbarism was not borne out by the facts of archaeology. Instead of the progress we should expect, there is retrogression and decay — in individuals, nations, and continents. Where civilization does exist, it is the result of Christian influence. And, of course, Riley believed that the idea of evolution contradicted the Biblical account of man's origins, thereby invalidating the whole basis of the doctrine of sin. "Lacking a sense of sin," he wrote, "man reverted to the brute morality of his monkey ancestors."³⁰

In the 1920s Riley engaged in one of his most spirited controversies over the question of the teaching of the theory of evolution in Minnesota's tax-supported schools. Because the story of that battle has been told in detail in *Minnesota History*, only a brief account of it will be given here. Riley not only preached against evolution to overflow congregations in his own church for ten consecutive Sundays in 1926, but he also personally rented the Kenwood Armory in Minneapolis and told a throng of 5,500 that Minnesotans should insist on "no State atheism" as well as "no State religion." He also was instrumental in bringing in "outside" speakers like William Jennings Bryan,

whom he hailed as "the greatest and most godly layman that America has produced, and a statesman whose name history will link with that of Abraham Lincoln."³¹

The Riley-directed Anti-Evolution League of Minnesota centered much effort upon opposing the teaching of evolution at the University of Minnesota. After some wrangling, Riley finally presented the fundamentalist position in four lectures there late in November, 1926. But the climax of Riley's fight came in March, 1927, when an antievolution bill that he had inspired was defeated in the Minnesota legislature. He blamed the loss upon the legislators who were frightened by the "scholars" of the state. Riley called the latter, "Darwinized . . . Germanized . . . deceived and faithless professors." This was typical of the emotional overtones that surrounded the controversy as well as the tendency of the fundamentalists, in a post-war atmosphere, to place heavy blame upon the country from which many of the professors and higher critics had come.³²

Riley not only labored against the teaching of evolution in Minnesota, but he also traveled to several major cities in other states to debate the subject with a number of scientists. The debates, to which admission was charged, were normally decided by audience vote. Riley, both a skilled debater and a religious politician, freely admitted that he went to considerable effort to pack each house with advocates and friends, so the understandable result was that the crusading fundamentalist won all but one of the engagements.³³

In Riley's battle with liberalism there was a second phase besides his antievolution endeavors which accentuated his qualities as a religious politician. It was his ardent effort to impose religious orthodoxy upon the Northern Baptist Convention. In his judgment, an unbridgeable gulf existed between liberalism and orthodoxy; consequently, Baptists must make a choice between the two. Middle ground was impossible.³⁴

Riley believed that the roots of religious liberalism were to be found in the rationalism and higher criticism of German scholars and included the "poison gas" of evolution which was but one manifestation of this "naturalistic, Bible-rejecting philosophy." According to Riley, liberalism made its impact on Baptists in America through the University of Chicago near the turn of the twentieth century. Largely responsible for this, he said, were industrialist John D. Rockefeller, whose wealth had supported the reorganization of the university in a liberal direction; William Rainey Harper, the school's president who had required no theological tests for its professors; and Professor George Burnham Foster of Chicago's divinity school who had disseminated liberal ideas contrary to traditional Bap-

³⁰ William B. Gatewood, Jr., ed., *Controversy in the Twenties: Fundamentalism, Modernism, and Evolution*, 20 (first quote), 21, 22 (last quote) (Nashville, 1969); Riley, *Inspiration or Evolution*, 10, 51, 76; Riley, *Ten Burning Questions*, 52 ("eggs" quote).

³¹ Szasz, in *Minnesota History*, 41:201-216; Riley, *Dynamic of a Dream*, 103-105, 106 (first quotes), 107; W. B. Riley, "Bryan, the Great Commoner and Christian," sermon preached August 2, 1925, shortly after Bryan's death. Copy in Northwestern College Riley Collection.

³² Riley, *Dynamic of a Dream*, 107 ("professors" quote); Szasz, in *Minnesota History*, 41:211-216.

³³ *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church*, October-December, 1925, p. 10; *Minneapolis Star*, November 18, 1925, p. 5.

³⁴ Riley, *Inspiration or Evolution*, 150, 174, 253-272.

tist teaching. Gradually, the theological virus had spread to other ministers, administrative officials, and a number of influential laymen. Riley bitterly resented not only the theology of liberalism but also the "centralization" and "dictatorship" which liberal leaders supposedly brought to the nascent Northern Baptist Convention, organized in 1907.³⁵

As early as 1908, Riley suggested that the only solution to the tension between orthodoxy and liberalism within the Baptist family was separation, which was preferable to constant quarreling. The liberals were the ones who ought to leave, Riley thought, because they were intruding in the historical evangelical heritage. They were free to accept any theological conclusions they wished, but, once having adopted what Riley viewed as un-Baptistic and un-Biblical beliefs, these "Unitarian Baptists," as he characterized the liberals, should depart to found a denomination of their own. The liberals, of course, turned down Riley's invitation. In fact, by 1914, even Riley admitted that they had captured the denominational schools and were threatening to control the convention. Thus, the battle lines were drawn.³⁶

At a preconvention conference on "Fundamentals of the Faith," convened by 150 clergymen and laymen at Buffalo, New York, in 1920, Riley was inordinately critical of liberal teachings in Baptist colleges and seminaries. He stated that three beliefs were endangered in these institutions: an inspired Bible, the deity of Jesus, and the fact of regeneration. Riley's presentation led the conference to request the larger denomination to examine the beliefs of faculty members and trustees in Baptist schools concerning the cardinal doctrines of the faith. A committee appointed by the convention president, however, gave the schools a generally favorable report. It was recommended that, where there were legitimate grievances, complaints be addressed to individual institutions, because the larger denomination could not serve as a heresy court.³⁷

Rebuffed on the school issue, the fundamentalists sought to impose a doctrinal statement upon the denomination. The persistent Riley recommended in 1922 that the New Hampshire Confession of Faith, which he contended was both historical and Biblical, be adopted as an expression of Baptist views. A liberal spokesman, Cornelius Woelfkin of New York, shrewdly introduced a substitute motion affirming that "the New Testament is an all-sufficient ground for Baptist faith and practise and they need no other statement." This motion won a resounding victory over Riley's, 1,264 votes to 637.³⁸ Unhappy with the parliamentary victories of the liberals, and irritated even more by the moderation and lack of a program of such fundamentalist colleagues of his as J. C. Masee and J. Whitcomb

Brougher, Riley gave increased support to the militant Baptist Bible Union -- an international organization which included the United States and Canada -- while still remaining in the denomination to continue his struggles there.

In 1924 Riley suggested unsuccessfully that a vote on denominational matters should be taken away from salaried servants of the Northern Baptist Convention. He also failed in an attempt to impose a tighter doctrinal test on missionaries and to separate the Northern Baptists from the Federal Council of Churches, which they had joined in 1908. In 1926 Riley tried to make baptism by immersion a prerequisite to membership in denominational churches. Again he was defeated. Although Northern Baptists recognized that the Bible teaches baptism of believers by immersion only, they refused to legislate at this point, because they also believed strongly in the freedom of the local congregation.³⁹

As fundamentalist frustration and factional bitterness grew, J. C. Masee, leader of the moderate fundamentalists, proposed observing a six-month truce between liberals and ultraconservatives and placing an emphasis on evangelism during that time. Riley would have no part of it. "This is not a battle," he emphasized. "It is a war from which there is no discharge." Convinced that nine-tenths of the laymen in his denomination were still within the evangelical camp, Riley continued the conflict, although by 1931 the peak of the initial phase had been reached.⁴⁰

DURING THE TIME of the denominational encounter, Riley carried out the most ambitious project of his career. This was an attempt to unite the fundamentalists of the world on a theological rather than a denominational basis to propagate the orthodox

³⁵ Riley, *Inspiration or Evolution*, 164-179, 257; W. B. Riley, "A Document of Decision," in *Northwestern Pilot*, 27:199.

³⁶ *Minneapolis Tribune*, August 4, 1908, p. 10; W. B. Riley, "Shall Northern Baptists Automatically Exclude Ultra-Conservatives?" in *Watchman-Examiner*, 10:589 (May 11, 1922).

³⁷ *Watchman-Examiner*, 8:840 (July 1, 1920), 9:835, 841 (July 7, 1921). Riley wrote in the June 4, 1921, issue of *The Baptist* (2:577) that "the Baptist denomination will be stronger in spirit the day that those who have quit our faith are refused our fellowship also. And if they will not voluntarily quit it, then . . . let us take the sanitary course of self-cleaning and begin by disinfecting our schools."

³⁸ *Watchman-Examiner*, 10:814-816 (June 29, 1922).

³⁹ *Watchman-Examiner*, 12:578 (May 8, 1924); Cole, *History of Fundamentalism*, 74.

⁴⁰ Cole, *History of Fundamentalism*, 80, 81 (quote); Riley, *Inspiration or Evolution*, 257-260.

faith and fight the inroads of liberalism. This grandiose union, which came to be known as the World's Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA), was founded in Philadelphia in 1919 but had its beginnings earlier. In the summer of 1918, Riley and other Biblicists met at Reuben Archer Torrey's home in Montrose, Pennsylvania, to establish a world fellowship of concerned evangelicals.⁴¹ A new organization was formed, but there was no implementation of the original plans in the months that followed. The disappointed Riley, at this juncture, took matters into his own hands.

Working skillfully through the prophetic confer-

⁴¹ Riley, *Dynamic of a Dream; Sandeen, Roots of Fundamentalism*, 243.

⁴² W. B. Riley, "The Great Divide, or Christ and the Present Crisis," in *God Hath Spoken*, 27 (Philadelphia, Bible Conference Committee, 1919). Riley also believed that the first meeting of the WCFA brought within prospect the fulfillment of the Biblical teaching: "Men shall come from the east . . . the west . . . the north . . . the south, and shall sit down in the Kingdom with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Whom he equated with the patriarchs is not clear.

⁴³ Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 243.

IN 1946, about a year before his death, Riley posed with his wife at their Golden Valley home.



ence of 1918 which met in New York City, Riley laid the groundwork for the charter assembly of the WCFA by changing the emphasis of the next scheduled conference from prophecy to the great fundamentals of the faith. Some 6,000 conservatives from the United States, Canada, and eight foreign countries gathered in Philadelphia from May 25 to June 1, 1919, for the meetings that gave birth to organized fundamentalism. They heard the tall, eloquent Riley declare in his convening address: "The importance of this occasion exceeds the understanding of its originators. The future will look back to the World Conference on Christian Fundamentals . . . as an event of more historical moment than the nailing up, at Wittenberg, of Martin Luther's ninety-five theses. The hour has struck for the rise of a new Protestantism."⁴²

A galaxy of other conservative spokesmen preached on major doctrinal subjects, making the conference, in the judgment of one author, sound like "a latter-day version of *The Fundamentals*."⁴³ Several specific decisions were made. The association adopted a nine-point Confession of Faith drafted by the irrepressible Riley and put in its final form by a committee headed by Torrey. The affirmation included a belief in the verbal inerrancy of the Scriptures and the personal, premillennial, imminent return of Jesus, although Riley insisted that no theological "hobby horses" were being ridden. Other points were: one God in three persons, the deity of Jesus, the sinfulness of man, the substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, justification by faith, and the bodily resurrection of the just and the unjust.

Membership in the WCFA was to be open to individuals and organizations alike provided they, or their representatives, signed the doctrinal statement and made an annual gift of one, five, or ten dollars. The one-dollar fee enabled a person to become an associate member; the five-dollar contribution gave voting and office-holding rights; and the ten-dollar sum granted membership to a Bible conference, Bible school, church, or similar organization, with one vote for every 100 members or fraction thereof. Riley was elected president of the newly-organized body, and a board of directors, never to be less than eleven members, was created. Several standing committees were also established to correlate the work of Bible schools, theological seminaries, and colleges, religious magazines and periodicals, missionary societies, and Bible conferences. At the conclusion of the initial meeting, Riley led a group of fourteen speakers and singers on a 7,000-mile, cross-country tour of three-to-six day conferences in eighteen of the major cities of America and Canada. This kind of outreach through Bible conferences, under team leadership, proved to be one of the

major accomplishments of the association. In the first six years of the life of the WCFA, Riley arranged no less than 250 such meetings to propagate the fundamentalist cause and, in so doing, raised some \$200,000 to support the work of the federation.⁴⁴

Within two years after the founding of the association, however, the spirit of optimism that had characterized the earlier days began to decline, and fundamentalism entered into a defensive posture. This was reflected in the new stance of the association. Originally concerned with setting forth the evangelical faith, it became increasingly absorbed with the controversy over evolution. It supported several excursions into the South that were designed to outlaw the teaching of Darwinism in tax-supported schools, with Riley leading the way. He encountered the advocates of evolution in Tennessee, Kentucky, Texas, and Virginia. Between 1921 and 1929, antievolution measures were introduced in twenty state legislatures but were approved only in Oklahoma, Florida, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas. The WCFA devoted much of its annual meeting in Fort Worth in 1923 to a "trial" of three Methodist institutions for teaching evolution and, significantly, appointed William Jennings Bryan as its attorney at the famed Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925. Bryan, like his celebrated opponent, Clarence Darrow, chose to serve without remuneration.⁴⁵

Although the distracting controversy over evolution appeared to monopolize the attention and strength of the WCFA, it was also active in other areas. It formed several state organizations as well as regional headquarters in nine different sections of the United States and Canada to provide a measure of cohesiveness for the loosely-knit assembly. It also printed a series of Sunday school Bible courses, prepared a reading list of "orthodox books" on vital subjects of the Christian faith, and published a list of fifty-one "safe" fundamentalist schools and colleges.⁴⁶ Other WCFA plans failed. These included establishing a system of conservative colleges in every state and Canadian province. In perspective, the most obvious results of the WCFA were the vast number of Riley-directed Bible conferences, the antievolution forays, and the well-publicized annual meetings attended for the most part by the already-convinced.

By 1927, attendance at the annual WCFA gathering had begun to decline, reflecting in part the loss of early enthusiasm as well as a prior loyalty given their own denominations by many conservatives, especially Southern Baptists. Riley resigned the presidency two years later but continued as executive secretary. Thereafter the association went steadily downhill, notwithstanding the fact that it continued to function into the early 1940s. Among the several reasons for this

loss of influence was the general nature of American society in the 1920s. It was marked by disillusionment, the impact of naturalism, and the sort of skepticism represented by H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis. Robert T. Handy has pointed out convincingly that in this decade a serious spiritual depression came to American Protestantism before any shadow of economic depression had been raised. The failure of the WCFA must be interpreted within this context.⁴⁷

In addition, the association itself was beset with particular problems. In the first place, despite attempts to the contrary, the organization never lived up to its promise of being a world movement. Its base of operations and membership was in the United States, with limited assistance from some Canadians like T. T. Shields and his disciples. This was supporting evidence that fundamentalism was essentially an American phenomenon with limited missionary influence in other countries. Secondly, even in this country the federation itself was more of a goal in the mind of founder Riley than a reality that actually bound all fundamentalists together. Some postmillennialists did not join, for example, and during the conflicts of the 1920s a larger number of premillennialist fundamentalists gave their loyalties to conservative groups within their own denominations rather than to the more inclusive but less tangible WCFA.

In the third place, some fundamentalists resented the fact that Baptist leaders came to dominate the organization, although a number of Methodists and Presbyterians played responsible roles. Fourthly, the identification of the WCFA with the evolution controversy tended to damage its long-range effectiveness. When the crisis over Darwin's hypothesis had passed, there appeared to be no unifying cause (although an attempt was made to draw the members together through prayer for a world-wide revival). Furthermore, despite several technical victories, the fundamentalists came out of the struggle over evolution with a tarnished image, partly because of Riley's defeat in the Minnesota legislature.

Fifthly, and most importantly, the excessive individualism of the leaders of the WCFA undermined the

⁴⁴ *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church*, July-September, 1920, p. 374. The gradation of membership and the annual fee proved to be a source of criticism.

⁴⁵ Szasz, "Three Fundamentalist Leaders," 159; Gatewood, *Controversy in the Twenties*, 36.

⁴⁶ For a list of these institutions (most of them Bible schools or Bible institutes), see: *The Christian Fundamentalist*, 4:26-28 (July, 1930).

⁴⁷ Robert T. Handy, "The American Scene," in *Twentieth Century Christianity*, edited by Bishop Stephen Neill, 194 (New York, 1963).

general cause. Strong-willed, independent, stubborn men, masters of their own domains, they frequently found it difficult to co-operate with one another. Even Riley regretted what he called "a guerilla method of warfare" and commented that "men of strong conviction are often men of independent action. Independence leads to leadership, and leadership to division."⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Riley broke with J. Frank Norris, criticized J. C. Masee for his moderation, grew cool toward T. T. Shields, had limited contact with John Roach Straton, and never met J. Gresham Machen. When illness laid him low for seven months in 1924, Riley found it increasingly difficult to exercise control over some of his provincial colleagues. And the death of William Jennings Bryan in 1925 increased the sectional emphasis and division as each of several contenders for his top fundamentalist mantle struggled to champion his own cause. The organization which had aspired to world influence now had trouble securing a united fellowship in one country among its own leaders.⁴⁹

Finally, with the arrival of the depression, new issues arose that diverted the attention of the nation and its people to more immediate needs. What remained when Paul W. Rood of Turlock, California, succeeded Riley as president of the WCFA was a rapidly diminishing mailing list. In 1935, the seventy-four-year-old, once-optimistic Riley drew upon his familiar source of authority to remark wistfully, "I, even I, only am left."⁵⁰

Frustrated by his unsuccessful attempt to pull the Northern Baptist Convention toward fundamentalism,

and unhappy with the ineffectiveness of the WCFA, Riley still continued to struggle for the ultraconservative cause in his later years. He opposed a minimal educational requirement for ordination as set forth by leaders of his denomination. To him this was another threat to the independence of the local church and an attempt to undermine the influence of Bible schools like his own Northwestern.⁵¹ (Riley believed that competence, character, and a call from God were the basic qualifications for ordination. He emphasized repeatedly that Dwight L. Moody was not ordained and that such evangelical leaders as Charles H. Spurgeon, G. Campbell Morgan, and George W. Truett were not highly educated men.)

Riley also advocated bipartisan elections in the Northern Baptist Convention, suggesting that for every office there be a liberal and a conservative candidate. He was persuaded that, by such a procedure, there would be a return to orthodoxy within five years. As late as 1938 Riley wrote that modernism was breaking down and liberal schools existed only because of endowments by orthodox backers of earlier years. But this was whistling in the dark. Five years later Riley capitulated in his attempts to control the denomination, recognizing that his theological opponents had gained control of offices, properties, and publications. Thereafter he concentrated almost exclusively upon his interests in Minnesota.⁵²

Through the influence of the many graduates of Northwestern Schools who held Baptist pastorates in the state, as well as through local application of his bipartisan policy, Riley was elected president of the Minnesota Baptist Convention in 1944 and 1945. Under his direction this body severed its working relation with the Northern Baptist Convention, eventually necessitating the creation of another organization to represent denominational interests in Minnesota.⁵³ Riley threw his weight behind the establishment of the Fellowship of Minnesota Conservative Baptist Churches, supported the work of the Conservative Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, and in 1947 looked with favor upon the creation of the Conservative Baptist Association of America. Although his own church technically remained in the Northern Baptist Convention, in actuality it became an independent congregation, dividing its missionary and denominational gifts in a variety of directions.

Disturbed, however, that he belonged to a church which nominally was a member of the convention, Riley in the last year of his life wrote to its president to relinquish his personal membership in the Northern Baptist Convention. The self-appointed defender of the faith declared that the only alternative to the reformation of an apostate body was separation from

⁴⁸ *The Christian Fundamentalist*, June, 1929, p. 207.

⁴⁹ Szasz, "Three Fundamentalist Leaders," 195; Cole, *History of Fundamentalism*, 311-313. Riley broke with Norris when the latter, in an apparent power grab, changed the name of his paper from *The Searchlight* to *The Fundamentalist*—a move intended to make his publication appear to be the official organ of the WCFA. In 1941, Riley described Norris as "a moral leper and the most inordinate liar living. No crime he has not committed—murder included." See Ralph Lord Roy, *Apostles of Discord: A Study of Organized Bigotry and Disruption on the Fringes of Protestantism*, 354 (Boston, 1953).

⁵⁰ W. B. Riley, "Is Quitting the Sign of Courage?" sermon in Riley Papers at Northwestern College.

⁵¹ Riley, *Pastoral Problems*, 21-23; W. B. Riley, "Baptist Polity Versus Autocracy," in *Watchman-Examiner*, 32:401 (April 27, 1944).

⁵² W. B. Riley, "Northern Baptists, A Bipartisan Convention," in *Watchman-Examiner*, 33:180-182 (February 22, 1945); Riley, *Dynamic of a Dream*, 136; W. B. Riley, "The Foreign Board Controversy," in *Watchman-Examiner*, 31:1131-1132 (November 25, 1943).

⁵³ *Yearbook of the American Baptist Convention*, 1951, 83.

it. He wrote: "I should be ashamed to die in the fellowship that seemed to me un-Biblical, and consequently un-Baptistic. . . . I believe this to be divinely inspired direction."⁵⁴

Having concluded his pastoral labors, and having settled his business with his denomination, Riley spent his last days dreaming of a prosperous future for his schools. It was in such a mood, and again convinced of divine guidance, that Riley called Billy Graham to his side on that hot afternoon in August, 1947.

VIEWING THE LIFE of William Bell Riley in perspective, one is impressed at first by the self-evident qualities of independence and indefatigability. Here was a man who earned his own education, preached his own ordination sermon, delivered the address at the dedication of his rebuilt church, shaped his congregations in his own image, founded his own schools, fought his denomination, edited his own magazines, chose his own educational successor, and, for all practical purposes, wrote his own biography. Some might equate such independence with self-centeredness. For Riley, however, it were merely fulfilling the goals to which he believed God had called him. This independence in a dominant personality made it difficult for others to work with him—a difficulty not uncommon among leaders of fundamentalism.

Boundless energy was perhaps Riley's most remarkable trait. At one time in the mid-1920s, for example, he was simultaneously minister of a large downtown church which had just completed a half-million-dollar building program, president of a growing Bible school, preacher in cities far removed from Minneapolis, debater on a popular lecture circuit, editor of several religious publications, would-be reformer of his denominational family, vice-president of the Baptist Bible Union of which he was a charter member, and president, executive secretary, and chairman of the conference committee of the WCFA. His unquestioned sincerity and deep belief in conservative causes undoubtedly moved him to such arduous and persistent effort. His psychological motivations, however—like those of most of us—may also have been mixed. For instance, he may have needed to dominate others.

However one may react to his zealous, austere, but also sometimes kindly, personality, Riley did much to point the nature of Protestantism in Minnesota in a conservative direction, especially among the Baptists. His influence as a forceful, perhaps even great, preacher was considerable, but the most tangible conservative impact he made was through the graduates of his schools who came to hold pastorates in the state. By the year of Riley's death there were nearly 2,000 alumni of the three institutions he had founded. No less than

70 per cent of the 125 Baptist churches in Minnesota at the time were served by pastors trained in these schools.⁵⁵ This leadership had enabled Riley to control the state convention. Since he had moved that body away from the larger denomination, emphasizing the independence of the local church and charging the Northern Baptist Convention with centralization and dictatorship, Riley also was largely responsible for the fragmenting of the Baptists that followed. The path of independence led to the division of Minnesota Baptists into six groups: American Baptists; the Fellowship of Minnesota Conservative Baptist Churches; the New Testament Association of Independent Baptist Churches (a split from the previous group), supplementing the previously existing General Association of Regular Baptists; the Baptist General Conference (Swedish Baptists); and the North American Conference (German Baptists). The latter five groups share a common conservative theological denominator but possess varying attitudes toward co-operation with those of differing Christian beliefs.⁵⁶

Ironically, much of the problem of "separation" or "nonseparation" centers in attitudes toward Billy Graham. The ultraconservative New Testament Association of Independent Baptist Churches, for instance, condemns him for his "ecumenical evangelism."⁵⁷ This marked division among Baptists has also contributed to the decline of Riley's schools. An even more important cause, however, was the fading agrarian-rural nature of the Upper Midwest and attendant emphasis on higher quality education. Another major factor was the resignation of Billy Graham. Riley's schools reached their peak enrollment just before Graham's departure. Students in this upsurge represented a broad spectrum of evangelical, Youth-for-Christ types rather than in-

⁵⁴ For the complete text of Riley's letter, see: "Editor-in-Chief Resigns Life Membership in N.B.C.," in *Northwestern Pilot*, 27:275 (June, 1947), and *The Baptist Bulletin*, June, 1947, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Szasz, "Three Fundamentalist Leaders," 78.

⁵⁶ The New Testament Association of Independent Baptist Churches was formed at Indianapolis on June 10, 1966. Today, some fifty churches belong to this body, including the Fourth Baptist Church and the Plymouth Baptist Church of Minneapolis. Its seminary is the Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis of which Richard V. Clearwaters was the founder. This association broke with the Conservative Baptist Association of America, holding that the latter had compromised its stand on the Word of God, supported ecumenical evangelism such as Billy Graham's, and unwisely placed \$1,200,000 on the stock market. See: B. Myron Cedarholm, "Why a New Association of Churches Is Needed," in *Central Testimony*, November-December, 1967.

⁵⁷ Interview with William B. Berntsen, president of Northwestern College, June 4, 1971.



YOUTHFUL Billy Graham sat with the aged Riley about the time he became head of Riley's Northwestern Schools.

dividuals with strong Baptist connections. Literally hundreds wanted to learn to be evangelists like Graham. When he left there was no comparable charismatic figure to draw such young people.

At any rate, the Bible and Missionary Training School and Seminary have ceased to exist, and, since 1965, Northwestern College has been in a state of limbo. Its former property was sold to the state and today houses the Metropolitan State Junior College. Northwestern is now awaiting the development of a new liberal arts-Bible college on ninety acres of land purchased in Roseville, a suburb of St. Paul. Thus, while admittedly Riley did much to move Protestantism in a conservative course in Minnesota, he must also be held largely accountable for the present division and confusion existing among American and various shades of conservative Baptists of the state.

In evaluating Riley's contributions, some would undoubtedly point to areas of influence upon Billy Graham: the religious and social conservatism, depth of conviction, businesslike approach to evangelism (although Graham owed more in this respect to Moody),

and concern for evangelical education. At the same time it must be recognized that Riley and Graham knew each other only three years at the most in the mid-1940s, and their personal contacts during that period were limited. Furthermore, there were differences between the two men, the most notable being Graham's willingness to co-operate with people of various Christian beliefs. Part of this is due to Graham's need to gain a broad base of support for his successful crusades.²⁵ Riley worked with men of other denominations but normally only with those who were theologically fundamentalist. Riley was publicly critical of other religions in ways that Graham has not been. Although Graham liked Riley and was encouraged by him early in his career, the evidence suggests that any influence Riley had on Graham was not significant in reference to Graham's success in or approach to evangelism. Any influence would have to be measured in some other respect. In a recent letter to the author of this article, Graham confirms this evaluation:

"In my judgment Dr. W. B. Riley was a man of great integrity, high principles, and deep religious convictions. He was head and shoulders above many of his contemporaries in the fundamentalist movement. Contrary to what some people may

²⁵ William C. McLoughlin, *Billy Graham, Revivalist in a Secular Age*, 19, 225, 227 (New York, 1959).

think, I did not know him very well. I heard him preach a number of times. I talked to him privately on several occasions. It is true that he chose me to be his successor but I think quite largely on the basis of having heard me preach at various conferences. I do not think that his impact on me was very significant in regards to evangelism. However, I do think that I learned a great deal from some of the mistakes I thought he had made. I learned something from him concerning uncompromising convictions, courage, and above all, personal integrity.”⁵⁹

R. S. McBirmie, writing in 1952, expressed his belief that the most enduring result of Riley’s labors was the conservative nature of the Minnesota Baptist State Convention.⁶⁰ Although this achievement may have been the most tangible product of his life, the most consequential seems to have been his vision of an inclusive fellowship of fundamentalists on a world basis. He was unable to realize his dreams for reasons that have already been considered, but Riley awakened ultraconservatives to the possibility of a united strength upon which others might build. In 1941, when the WCFA had reached a low point, Carl McIntire organized the American Council of Churches (ACC). A year later, Harold J. Ockenga, J. Elwin Wright, and Carl F. H. Henry led in establishing the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). These two organizations agreed doctrinally but were divided in method. The former required members to separate from denominations or churches affiliated with the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America; the latter did not.⁶¹ While these were national rather than world organizations (as the WCFA proved to be in reality), they had caught the vision of a union of conservative forces. Riley had laid the foundation for the work of others.

This contribution, joined with his other influences,

helped make Riley the most important fundamentalist minister of his generation. His impact was more extensive than that of the flamboyant John Roach Straton, whose outreach was primarily limited to the New York City area; he was less vituperative and more respected than the violent J. Frank Norris; he offered a program of administrative leadership that surpassed that of the warmhearted moderate, J. C. Masee; and his popular following and national contacts excelled those of the more scholarly J. Gresham Machen. Only the prominent layman, William Jennings Bryan, eclipsed Riley as the personification of fundamentalism in his day. Indeed, upon the death of Bryan, Riley was widely considered his unofficial successor.

Despite this high standing among fundamentalists, Riley had limitations that hindered his own cause. He possessed an inflexible theology, a censorious spirit, a dominating personality, and misplaced emphases, causing one of his contemporaries to write: “Fundamentalists of the Riley brand are our best infidelity road-builders and guideposts.”⁶² More crucial than such limitations was the fact that Riley was moving against the strong tide of theological and social change. His aims were often vetoed by the choices and decisions of a more liberal society.

⁵⁹ Billy Graham to C. Allyn Russell, August 16, 1971. Letter in author’s possession.

⁶⁰ McBirmie, “Basic Issues,” 134.

⁶¹ Louis Gasper, *The Fundamentalist Movement*, 21–37 (Paris, Mouton and Company, 1963).

⁶² W. J. Lhamon, “A Study of Fundamentalism,” in *The Christian*, November 5, 1926, p. 4.

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