

“A NEW PROTESTANTISM HAS COME”

WORLD WAR I, PREMILLENNIAL DISPENSATIONALISM,
AND THE RISE OF FUNDAMENTALISM IN PHILADELPHIA

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ABSTRACT: This article interprets the rise of Protestant fundamentalism through the lens of an influential network of business leaders and theologians based in Philadelphia in the 1910s. This group of business and religious leaders, through institutions such as the Philadelphia School of the Bible and a periodical called *Serving and Waiting*, popularized the apocalyptic theology of premillennial dispensationalism. As the world careened toward war, Philadelphia's premillennial dispensationalist movement grew more influential, reached a global audience, and cemented the theology's place within American Christianity. However, when the war ended without the anticipated Rapture of believers, the money, politics, and organization behind Philadelphia's dispensationalist movement collapsed, creating a vacuum that was filled by a new movement, fundamentalism. This article reveals the human politics behind the fall of dispensationalism, explores the movement's rebranding as fundamentalism, and highlights Philadelphia's central role in the rise of Protestant fundamentalism.

KEYWORDS: Religion, fundamentalism, Philadelphia, theology, apocalypse

On July 12, 1917, Blanche Magnin, along with twenty other members of the Africa Inland Mission, boarded the steamship *City of Athens* in New York and set sail for South Africa. Magnin, twenty-two years old, was a student at the Philadelphia School of the Bible, which had been founded just three years earlier. Seventy-six other missionaries from various Protestant denominations and organizations, including the Mennonites, the YMCA, and the fundamentalist Moody Bible Institute, joined the Africa Inland Mission on board. Though these missionaries shared the same ship, the same destination, and, to some degree, the same faith, they did not share the same mission.

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 84, NO. 3, 2017.
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The Mennonites hoped to spread a testimony of peace in a world at war. The YMCA hoped to build institutions in South Africa through which a gospel of muscular Christianity could take root. But Blanche Magnin did not intend to work for peace or lay the foundation for the propagation of Christianity in Africa. Her concern was much more immediate. To the leaders of the Philadelphia School of the Bible, working toward peace, building churches, and converting lost souls were mere “entanglements” that distracted Christians from their only role in the End Times: proclaiming the gospel to the few remaining nations that had not already heard it.¹

It was not an opportune time for a transatlantic crossing. World War I was at its climax. Peace negotiations had broken down in late 1916. The United States entered the war in April, the political landscape in Europe was changing by the day, and submarine warfare had resumed. Yet the Africa Inland Mission believed they had a key role to play in the End Times.² The *City of Athens* arrived off the coast of Cape Town around noon on August 10, 1917. It had been an uneventful crossing, and the passengers were told that they could expect to disembark within a few hours. Magnin was gathering her belongings when she felt a “slight shock.” Thinking nothing of it, she returned to her work when suddenly the *City of Athens* was rocked by a massive explosion. As it awaited permission to dock, the ship drifted into an underwater mine set by the British Navy in hopes of defending its South African colony from German assault. A few crew members died instantly from the explosion. The rest lowered the seven wooden lifeboats and instructed the women aboard to gather on the deck of the sinking ship. The crew instructed the men to go below deck to fetch life preservers and flare guns. All the passengers survived the explosion and made it safely onto the lifeboats. Despite being only one mile from shore, no one in Cape Town seemed to notice the accident. Magnin, the other passengers, and the crew feverishly bailed out the water from the overcrowded lifeboats and waited for rescue that was not coming.

Afternoon faded into night, and the weather began to worsen. A sudden storm tossed the leaky lifeboats ferociously. Blanche Magnin’s boat was one of the first to capsize. She tried desperately to keep her head above water, but failed. As she sank beneath the churning waves, she looked up to see a South African businessman clinging to the overturned boat with one hand and reaching for her with the other. He managed to grab her hair and pulled her back up. Magnin’s lifeboat capsized three more times before rescue finally arrived. Fourteen passengers and five crew members drowned awaiting

rescue. Missionaries from other organizations died, but every member of the Africa Inland Mission, including Blanche Magnin, survived.³

Blanche Magnin, like her fellow students and teachers at the Philadelphia School of the Bible, was a premillennial dispensationalist. For this group of apocalyptically minded Protestants, World War I was the final event in world history: the war of Armageddon heralding the Second Coming of Christ. Premillennial dispensationalism was a technique for mapping prophetic biblical texts onto world historical events. Conceived by British theologian John Nelson Darby in the mid-nineteenth century and further developed in the United States by Bible teachers and evangelists like William E. Blackstone and Cyrus Scofield, premillennial dispensationalism posited that all of biblical history could be subdivided into seven distinct eras called dispensations. The Old Testament described the first five dispensations, beginning and ending with the inauguration of a new covenant between God and Israel. Jesus inaugurated the sixth dispensation when he enacted a new covenant with the Church: the covenant of grace. Darby and theologians he influenced believed that this sixth dispensation would end with an apocalyptic event called the Rapture, which is often, but not always, imagined as the ascension of living believers into the air to meet Jesus. The Rapture begins the seventh and final dispensation. Those non-Christians left behind will find the final years of human history to be among the worst. This period, called the Tribulation, will be marked by warfare, famine, and political turmoil. This chaos will give rise to a political and religious figure whom premillennial dispensationalists call the Antichrist. This person will “control the military system, the worship, and the commerce of the world.”⁴ He (this figure is invariably imagined as a man) will rule over a demonic world system until he is vanquished by Jesus in a war called Armageddon. Premillennial dispensationalists believe that a cataclysmic battle will take place in which Jesus will lead a holy army against the Antichrist and his minions. After Jesus’s victory, he will establish a Millennial Kingdom and rule the world from his throne in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem.⁵

In the United States, premillennial dispensationalism as a distinct movement reached its zenith during World War I. For this group of Protestants, World War I was Armageddon, the culmination of world history. Convinced of this interpretation of the Last Days, premillennial dispensationalists in the 1910s built an institutional structure largely in and around Philadelphia that was tasked with the goal of warning the world that World War I was the final milestone preceding the Rapture of the true Church. Capturing the broader sense of doom within American society, premillennial dispensationalists

warned that the “great peace palace at the Hague will become a barracks,” and that the world would not again see peace this side of the Rapture.⁶ This interpretation of the events of World War I resonated with millions of Americans who were shocked by the brutality, the mechanical efficiency, and the destruction wrought by the first global modern war. But of course, the world did not end with the Armistice in November 1918. Defeated, premillennial dispensationalism faded as a distinctive movement, though its core ideas became a hallmark of a subsequent theological and political movement: fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism was a political, social, and religious movement that began in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The origin of fundamentalism is often traced to the publication of a series of religious pamphlets titled “The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth,” written by a group of evangelists and published from 1910 to 1915 at the behest of a wealthy oil tycoon named Lyman Stewart. The pamphlets articulated the evangelists’ growing unease with the direction of the Christian faith in the new century. The authors felt that increasing numbers of Americans doubted the veracity of the Bible, especially in the face of the growing influence of critical biblical scholarship and modern scientific theories such as evolution. But the fundamentalist movement began in earnest in 1919 when six thousand Christians gathered in Philadelphia to mark the first meeting of the World Christian Fundamentals Association. The WCFA consolidated fundamentalists’ anxieties into a movement with agreed-upon doctrines, including the virgin birth of Christ, the inerrancy of the Bible, and the physical resurrection of Christ. Perhaps the most significant doctrine embraced by this new fundamentalist movement was a commitment to the importance of premillennial dispensationalism.⁷

While the networks that sustained premillennial dispensationalism collapsed at the end of World War I, its theology became a key feature of the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s and 1930s. One of the first scholars to take this connection seriously was Ernest Sandeen. In his 1970 book *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, Sandeen argued that the fundamentalist movement that arose in the 1920s was the product of two prior theological movements: premillennial dispensationalism as developed by Darby and those who followed his teachings, and a literalist style of reading the Bible that developed at Princeton Theological Seminary in the late nineteenth century. In 1980, George Marsden’s *Fundamentalism and American Culture* supplanted Sandeen’s work as the definitive text on fundamentalism. Marsden agreed with Sandeen that premillennial dispensationalism and Princeton theology influenced the

later fundamentalist movement, but placed a great deal of emphasis on what he calls the fundamentalists' "militant opposition to modernity"—their reactions to the political, cultural, and social developments associated with modernity, including critical biblical scholarship, evolutionary theory, and internationalism. Matthew Avery Sutton's *American Apocalypse* (2014) returns premillennial dispensationalism, and apocalyptically inclined "radical evangelicalism" more generally, to the center of his narrative of the rise of fundamentalism. Sutton argues that fundamentalists inherited the dispensational premillennialism of Scofield and Blackstone and used a belief in the immediacy of the End Times to develop a "politics of apocalypse" that wielded tremendous influence over American politics throughout the twentieth century. Though these three key texts differ in important ways, they agree that the premillennial dispensationalist organizations that flourished in the 1910s were a, if not *the*, precursor to the fundamentalists who wielded such a tremendous influence over American social life throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.⁸

When we approach the relationship between premillennial dispensationalism and fundamentalism from the ground up, however, this narrative becomes more complicated. The premillennial dispensationalist network based in and around Philadelphia viewed their movement as distinct from, and at times in opposition to, the nascent fundamentalist movement. And though many of the key figures of the dispensationalist movement became leading fundamentalists, others—including dispensationalism's key intellectual Cyrus Scofield—wanted little to do with fundamentalism. And there is some evidence that the feeling was mutual. Indeed, *The Fundamentals* themselves had nothing to say about the end of the world. It was not until the World Conference on Christian Fundamentals in 1919 that fundamentalism and premillennial dispensationalism became conjoined. What was the relationship between these two movements before the emergence of fundamentalism as a distinct and self-conscious movement? It is important to disentangle premillennial dispensationalism *as a theology* from premillennial dispensationalism *as a movement*. Of course, many fundamentalists embraced the theology of premillennial dispensationalism. Indeed, Sutton argues that one of the two styles of fundamentalism—that which emerged from the 1919 World Conference on Christian Fundamentals headed by William Bell Riley—held a commitment to premillennial dispensationalism as a litmus test for authentic faith. But the success of premillennial dispensationalism as a set of ideas overshadows the failure of premillennial dispensationalism as a movement.⁹

This article is a study of the transition from premillennial dispensationalism to fundamentalism in Philadelphia. The premillennial dispensationalist network in Philadelphia included many of the key figures of the movement as a whole, including Cyrus Scofield, Charles Huston, and William Pettingill. From Philadelphia, these men built a network of Bible teachers, evangelists, educators, and business leaders committed to the idea that global events should be interpreted through a premillennial dispensationalist lens. This network built institutions, including colleges, Sunday school networks, publishing houses, and conventions through which premillennial dispensationalism became a self-contained and often schismatic religious movement. But there was a key flaw in their plan. So much of the movement they built depended upon World War I being the final chapter in human history. When the war ended in 1918 but the world did not, the premillennial dispensationalist movement in Philadelphia collapsed. William Bell Riley, who had been ambivalent about premillennial dispensationalism throughout the war, took advantage of its collapse and took over the formidable network and institutions his more apocalyptically-minded colleagues had built to bring about the 1919 World Conference on Christian Fundamentals, the beginning of the self-conscious fundamentalist movement.

BUILDING A DISPENSATIONALIST MOVEMENT

Cyrus Scofield, an evangelical Bible teacher and pastor, popularized premillennial dispensationalism in the United States. Scofield was born in 1843 in Tennessee. After the Civil War (he fought for the Confederacy and won a Cross of Honor after the Battle of Antietam), Scofield pursued a career in law and politics in Kansas. He grew up in a Christian household, but was not himself a believing Christian until he was thirty-six years old. While living in St. Louis in the early 1880s, Scofield ingratiated himself in that city's evangelistic community. He was involved in the YMCA, the American Home Missionary Society, and with James H. Brookes, pastor of Walnut Street Presbyterian Church and a prominent early dispensationalist. In 1888, Scofield was ordained as a minister in the Congregationalist denomination. Soon thereafter, he began publishing tracts explaining the doctrine of premillennial dispensationalism, which he had inherited from Brookes.¹⁰

In 1909, Scofield published his own edition of the King James Version, which featured annotations and commentaries that presented a futurist, premillennial interpretation of the End Times. The *Scofield Reference Bible* became wildly popular in the United States and Europe, and he capitalized on this by delivering lectures and organizing Bible conferences in which he expanded upon his interpretations. At one of those conferences, Scofield met William Pettingill, a Philadelphia pastor, and the two men decided Philadelphia needed its own Bible school devoted to training missionaries and pastors in the doctrine of premillennial dispensationalism.¹¹

William Pettingill was one of the most influential dispensationalist evangelists in the United States at the time. From 1899 to 1928, he served as the pastor of North Church, a Baptist denomination in Wilmington, Delaware. He was one of several prominent premillennial dispensationalist thinkers listed in the *Scofield Reference Bible* as a consulting editor. In 1911, Pettingill founded a periodical titled *Serving and Waiting*. Under his leadership (he was the periodical's chief editor and primary contributor), *Serving and Waiting* became one of the leading American periodicals devoted to premillennial dispensationalism. It accompanied the International Sunday School Lessons, a uniform teaching plan from the New York Bible Society that was popular with the Sunday school movement and with in-home Bible studies all around the world. In *Serving and Waiting*, Pettingill offered a forum for the growing movement and connected current events to Scofield's interpretation of prophecy. As premillennial dispensationalism grew in popularity, Pettingill saw a need for a Bible school in Philadelphia. The idea held an allure for Scofield as well. By heading the Philadelphia School of the Bible (PSB), Scofield's teaching could reach a broader audience and he could consolidate the growing premillennial dispensationalism movement under his control. Scofield and Pettingill planned to build a massive organizational infrastructure under the banner of the Philadelphia School of the Bible (PSB).¹²

To accomplish this, Scofield and Pettingill needed money. They turned to Charles Huston, vice president of Lukens Steel Company in nearby Coatesville, Pennsylvania. Huston was well known in the premillennial dispensationalist movement as being a generous philanthropist with a seemingly limitless supply of money (Lukens Steel generated revenues at the time in the tens of millions of dollars). Huston was an enthusiastic supporter of PSB and was awarded a seat on its board. Once the school was in place, Scofield consolidated other premillennial dispensationalist organizations into the PSB. *Serving and Waiting* went from an independent publication to the official

periodical of PSB. Scofield bought out a dispensationalist publishing house in New York City and moved its operations to Philadelphia. The publishing wing of PSB gained exclusive rights to Scofield's increasingly influential and lucrative lectures and tracts.¹³ Scofield, Pettingill, and Huston began planning annual premillennial dispensationalist conferences in Philadelphia. Premillennial dispensationalists throughout the country took notice of the rise of Philadelphia as the capital of the new movement. Scofield, Pettingill, and Huston were referred to as the "Philadelphia Committee," and it became understood that the flagship meeting of premillennial dispensationalists would be held every autumn in Philadelphia.¹⁴

By 1917, Scofield, Pettingill, and Huston had consolidated large swaths of the movement under the auspices of the Philadelphia School of the Bible. But all the institution building belies the fact that the premillennial dispensationalist movement kept a close eye on current events, believing that the war in Europe proved that the final events of world history were well underway. According to the teachings emanating from Philadelphia, the events that preceded the Rapture began perhaps as early as the First Balkan War in 1912. This war was the first major European conflict since the 1909 publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, and many premillennial dispensationalists immediately recognized the war as a key milestone in End Times prophecy. The First Balkan War fit neatly into Scofield's biblical commentary. The Ottoman Empire appeared to be crumbling at the hands of Gentiles who, it was assumed, would pave the way for the return of the Jews to Palestine. A group of premillennial dispensationalist missionaries stationed in Cuba wrote to Pettingill expressing excitement that biblical prophecy was coming to fruition right before their eyes: "Oh, Brother, do you see the sign in the East? The falling Turk, the Gentile who is treading toward Jerusalem This war in Turkey may be the definite opening of Palestine for the Jews." The belligerents of the First Balkan War fit neatly into a biblical paradigm. The Ottoman Empire's three insurgent European provinces (the Gentiles) were combating a clearly demonic world power (the Ottomans who possessed Jerusalem) in order to pave the way for God's chosen people to return to the Promised Land.¹⁵

According to Scofield and the PSB, the insurgent European kingdoms of Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro played a key role in triggering Armageddon. In the narrative of the End Times, they were the heroes. By rising against the modern-day Babylon (the Ottoman Empire) that was holding Jerusalem captive, these three kingdoms were fulfilling an End Times prophecy that the "concert of Europe" was unable to fulfill. Europe proper was largely a

bystander in these interpretations of prophecy. The role of the Gentiles, premillennial dispensationalists thought, was to reshape the world and prepare the way for Jews to return to Israel. It was assumed that the great and powerful Christendom—the Church militant and triumphant—would fulfill this role. Much to the premillennial dispensationalists’ surprise, it appeared God had chosen three “vest-pocketed kingdoms,” as Pettingill put it, from within the new Babylon itself.

After the founding of the Philadelphia School of the Bible and the consolidation of *Serving and Waiting* into Scofield’s new organization, the First Balkan War evolved into a larger European war. And as the war evolved, so did the premillennial dispensationalists’ interpretations of prophecy. Pettingill wrote in 1914 that, while “no one can be positive that the great European war now in progress marks the beginning of the end of the present dispensation . . . no student of the Word of Prophecy can read the daily war news without a quickening pulse. ‘Armageddon’ is on everybody’s lips.” While the premillennial dispensationalists in Philadelphia were confident that Armageddon had begun, premillennial dispensationalists elsewhere disagreed. James Gray, who had worked with Scofield on the *Scofield Reference Bible* and was serving as president of the Moody Bible Institute, believed that the war of Armageddon could not be fought in Europe, but only in Palestine. Though premillennial dispensationalists throughout the country differed in how they read current events, they shared a commitment that history could be read through the lens of scripture, and that they had a role to play in triggering the End Times.¹⁶

The primary way that premillennial dispensationalists believed they could bring about the Rapture was through international missions. This hinged on the belief that the Rapture would not commence until every nation had heard the gospel. This was only fair, after all. How could God judge a nation for rejecting the gospel if that nation had not received it? Yet premillennial dispensationalists did not believe the Church had the burden of *converting* every nation. On the contrary, they just had to ensure that the gospel had indeed arrived at even the most remote locations in the world. For this reason, the premillennial dispensationalist missions emanating from the Philadelphia School of the Bible took on a different character. They were firmly against missionary efforts that took a long-term approach to nation building, humanitarianism, and church planting. Scofield called such efforts “entanglements.” As the war dragged on, the premillennial dispensationalist network in Philadelphia began to emphasize the importance of international missions. The Philadelphia School of the Bible sponsored like-minded missionaries whom they sent

around the globe and worked with interdenominational organizations—like the Africa Inland Mission—for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel to those distant corners of the globe that had not yet received it.¹⁷

The premillennial dispensationalist tendency to withdraw from and at times object to the missionary efforts of other Protestant Christian organizations was the product of both their theology and their interpretation of the tragedies that beset their missionaries in the field. The Philadelphia School of the Bible also sent missionaries to the Central American Mission, an organization Scofield founded in 1890. Like the Africa Inland Mission, the Central American Mission's goal was to proclaim the gospel to unreached populations in South America. Four months after the sinking of the *City of Athens*, the headquarters of the Philadelphia School of the Bible's Central American Mission suffered another near disaster. The headquarters of the Central American Mission in 1917 was located in Guatemala City, Guatemala. In December of that year, the PSB had three missionary families in the city. The Bishop family was stationed there in part to facilitate the arrival of other missionaries to Central America. Two other families, the Hunters and the Aberles, were in the city that December on their way to other countries.¹⁸

Beginning on Christmas Day 1917, a series of massive earthquakes leveled Guatemala City, resulting in thousands of deaths and widespread destruction. A theater collapsed, killing almost everyone inside. Hospitals, prisons, churches, and government buildings all collapsed. Both the British and American consulate buildings were destroyed. The earthquakes caused a massive humanitarian crisis and left a quarter of a million people homeless. The Philadelphia School of the Bible had just sent the Hunter family, which included three children, to Guatemala City. If their passports had not been delayed, they likely would have already left Guatemala for their final destination of Honduras. Had tragedy again beset Philadelphia's premillennial dispensationalist movement just four months after the PSB's missionaries miraculously escaped the sinking of the *City of Athens*? After several days of anxiety, the leaders of the PSB received a cablegram from the Aberles and Hunters. Both families were in Guatemala City during the earthquakes. They and the Bishop family were left homeless, but all had survived. Again, the PSB's missionaries were spared when others were not.¹⁹

The sinking of the *City of Athens* and the earthquakes in Guatemala reinforced the belief among the premillennial dispensationalists in Philadelphia that the world was indeed in its final days. They believed they were accomplishing their divine duty in those last days by attempting to witness to the

few unreached souls left on earth, but they were met at every turn with adversity of apocalyptic proportions. For premillennial dispensationalists, though, bad news was really good news in disguise. Earthquakes held a special significance within their theology. In the Olivet Discourse, portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus offered apocalyptic signs that would precede the Last Days. These signs included wars, famine, false prophets, and earthquakes. The Guatemala earthquake was, for Philadelphia dispensationalists, further proof that the ongoing war would not end before the Rapture of the Church.

Even those premillennial dispensationalists most reticent to admit the apocalyptic significance of the war were forced to acknowledge the fulfillment of prophecy in the events of December 1917. After months of fighting, Ottoman forces surrendered the city of Jerusalem to the British on December 30. With Palestine, and especially Jerusalem, in Christian hands, many premillennial dispensationalists believed there was very little prophecy left to be fulfilled. They had, for decades, suggested that Jews would return to Palestine and convert en masse to Christianity in the Last Days. Scofield, who remained throughout the war more reluctant than many of his colleagues to confirm the prophetic significance of the war, finally admitted after the fall of Jerusalem that its capture represented “at last a real sign!”²⁰ The Battle of Jerusalem also rescued the image of Great Britain in the eyes of the PSB. Before the war and throughout much of the fighting, premillennial dispensationalists criticized Great Britain for the rising agnosticism of its people, its violent methods of imperialism, and for growing too close to Rome. By paving the way for the return of the Jews to Palestine, though, it was clear to the premillennial dispensationalists of Philadelphia that Great Britain was fighting on behalf of God after all.²¹ When *Serving and Waiting* rang in the new year in January 1918, they wondered, now that “the great war is well on towards the end of a full quadrennium,” whether there would be an opportunity to mark another.²²

WILLIAM BELL RILEY AND THE PHILADELPHIA PROPHETIC CONFERENCE OF 1918

Believing the Rapture was imminent, the Philadelphia Committee planned a different kind of Bible conference for May 1918. Instead of the usual Bible conference, Scofield, Huston, and Pettingill made plans for a conference strictly devoted to understanding current events in light of biblical prophecy

of the End Times. The Philadelphia Prophetic Conference, more than any before, was explicitly devoted to studying, predicting, and anticipating the “return of the Lord Jesus,” amidst the “shadow of the tragedy of world-wide war.”²³ The Philadelphia Prophetic Conference commenced on May 28, 1918. Though the Academy of Music building held 3,300 people, it was not large enough to accommodate everyone. Most of the key thinkers in premillennial dispensationalism were slated to speak, including W. W. Rugh, Harris Gregg, Mark Matthews, William Bell Riley, James Gary, A. E. Thompson, and P. W. Philpott. One key figure of the premillennial dispensationalist movement, however, was notably absent. Cyrus Scofield was now seventy years old, and his health was beginning to fail. He sent a message to the conference wishing them well, “especially in the putting forth of a fearless warning that we are in the awful end of the Times of the Gentiles, with no hope for humanity except in the personal return of the Lord.” Most of the speeches at the conference shared a common theme: the prophecies concerning the End Times in the Bible have almost all come to pass and, accordingly, the Rapture could take place at any moment. One speaker pointed out that the gathering of the Jews into Palestine, which according to the premillennial dispensationalist reading of the Bible was one of those key prophecies, has “been largely fulfilled.” To him, “even if nothing else were to come of the people of Israel than what has already been fulfilled, what seems like a human impossibility has already been accomplished.”²⁴

World War I factored heavily into the speakers’ interpretations of prophecy as well. One of the speakers interpreted a prophecy in the Book of Daniel as saying that the world would see the rise of “four great world-empires” before the Rapture. The first empire to rise and fall was the Babylonian Empire, followed by the Achaemenid or Persian Empire, the Greeks, and the Romans. According to this reading of Daniel’s prophecy, there could be no fifth world empire. This is why Charlemagne, Napoleon, and others have been thwarted in their attempts at uniting much of the world (or at least Europe) under their authority. Many of the speakers at the Philadelphia Prophetic Conference believed that the Kaiser was trying to establish the same foredoomed world empire. But, of course, he could not be successful because, according to one speaker, the “Word says that there shall be no fifth world empire until Jesus shall set up His kingdom.” One speaker, who had been in the Middle East during much of the fighting, saw the hand of God at work in the Battle of Jerusalem. After witnessing the British take Palestine, paving the way, he believed, for the return of the Jews, the speaker declared

that “if the hour of the passing of the Turk from Palestine has come, it means great things to the Promised Land. It means the end of the desolation. . . . The hour of deliverance is at hand!” On the whole, the speakers at the Philadelphia Prophetic Conference were less interested in convincing the audience of the truth of premillennial dispensationalism than in celebrating the nearness of the Rapture. As one speaker put it, “There is nothing in these tempestuous days that gives me so much strength as the knowledge that I may hear the shout of the Lord at any moment.”²⁵

However, not every speaker at the Philadelphia Prophetic Conference was convinced that the world was in its last days. By 1918, William Bell Riley had cemented his reputation as one of the most brilliant minds of the premillennial dispensationalist movement. Riley was born in Indiana in 1861. He converted to Christianity when he was a teenager and entered the ministry at an early age. From 1897 to 1942, Riley served as the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Minneapolis. From his position there, Riley exerted a tremendous influence over conservative Protestantism in the Midwest. He founded and served as the first president of an evangelical college called the Northwestern Bible and Missionary Training School (now Northwestern University St. Paul). Billy Graham succeeded him. In the 1920s, as editor of a periodical titled *The Christian Fundamentalist*, Riley fought against the teaching of evolution in schools and argued passionately against the encroaching theological liberalism in American Christianity.²⁶

Historians know William Bell Riley as one of the movement’s leading figures. Before he was the “Grand Old Man of Fundamentalism,” Riley was an influential figure in premillennial dispensationalism. But Riley was somewhat unique among its leaders. Unlike Scofield, Pettingill, and Huston, Riley was not convinced that World War I was the war of Armageddon that prophecy indicated would herald the Second Coming of Christ. He preferred a slightly more composed approach to the doctrine of the Second Coming. Riley, like all premillennial dispensationalists, believed in the literal, physical Rapture of the Church and the bodily return of Jesus to the Earth. Unlike many of his colleagues, however, Riley did not believe that the Rapture was necessarily imminent. He did not share their confidence that the war in Europe, the political developments in Palestine, and the reports of earthquakes around the world were obvious heralds of the End Times.

Throughout his five keynote addresses during the Philadelphia Prophetic Conference, Riley argued that it was folly for the premillennial dispensationalist movement to look so closely at current events for signs of imminent

apocalypse. In a very subtle and nuanced exposition of I Thessalonians, Riley laid out his case that the Second Coming might not be as imminent. He began by arguing against a theologically liberal interpretation of the Second Coming. Riley believed, like all premillennial dispensationalists, that the Second Coming was not strictly figurative, calling such an argument only a “little less sacrilegious” than denying that God had inspired the Bible. However, he reminded his colleagues that Christ’s Second Coming had been imminent for two thousand years. He urged them to understand the timing of the Second Coming as “indefinite.” After all, Riley argued, Christ himself had warned that “no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father” knew the time of the Second Coming. If Christ did not know when he would return, Riley wondered, why were premillennial dispensationalists so preoccupied with reading prophecy through the lens of historical events?²⁷

Because Riley was not convinced that the Second Coming was impending, he developed a more long-term approach to the premillennial dispensationalism. Riley did not share Cyrus Scofield’s fear of institutionalization and centralization. Though Philadelphia premillennial dispensationalists shied away from the “entanglements” of church planting, interdenominational missions, and social work, Riley saw these kinds of activities as central to the future of the movement. Riley argued that “if we are to impress the world with the value of the ‘second coming’ propaganda, we will only do so by a diviner practice.” The premillennial dispensationalists, Riley believed, had to be *more* committed to social causes—those “entanglements”—than any other Christian group if their teachings were to have any influence. He exhorted the conference attendees not to fulfill the stereotype of being “lazy lookers for a catastrophic end to the present order and an easy introduction of the Utopian dream,” but to live a life of “sacrificial service.” Riley urged his audiences to invest more heavily in foreign missions, to commit themselves to “the establishment of desirable Christian institutions,” and to stand out among all other denominations “in the realm of social service—such as giving to the poor, providing for the hungry, clothing the cold, visiting the sick, sympathy with the soldier, with the bereaved, showing brotherhood to the imprisoned and love for the social outcast.” For Riley, these were not “entanglements” but the central mission of the Church.²⁸

Though Scofield, Pettingill, and other Philadelphia premillennial dispensationalists saw no need in building institutions for the long term (which may not exist, after all) Riley argued before the conference that premillennial

dispensationalism should move from a distinctive theological movement toward a denomination unto itself. “No single denomination,” argued Riley, “is as definite in its fellowship and as distinct in its doctrinal teaching as is the brotherhood of premillennialism.” The weakness of the premillennial dispensationalist movement, according to Riley, was that it was decentralized and lacked political ambition. Riley saw enormous potential in premillennial dispensationalism. The only thing preventing this massive and growing movement from winning the whole world for Christ was that they had resigned themselves to the idea that the world would end at any moment.²⁹

Riley’s desire to remake the movement had little influence in the months that followed the Philadelphia Prophetic Conference. Most people in the movement were more confident than ever that the Second Coming was impending. The return of the Jews to Palestine was, for many, the final indisputable sign that all pre-Rapture biblical prophecy had been fulfilled. After the fall of Jerusalem, it was evident to many premillennial dispensationalists that the purpose of the war had been to clear the path for a “United States of Europe,” which would create the Jewish state. The Rapture, however, was sure to happen before such a state was created, and likely before the United States of Europe was brought to fruition. Pettingill, anticipating the news of the fall of Jerusalem for his readers, reminded them “before all this, however, the Church is to be caught away, and this may occur at any moment. It behooves us to *watch every minute*. That’s the word: watch every minute!”³⁰

DISPENSATIONALISM COLLAPSES

On November 11, 1918, the unthinkable happened. The war to end all wars had come to an end, but the world had not. The end of World War I was a crisis for premillennial dispensationalists. Sure that the war would not come to an end before the Rapture, many leading figures in the premillennial dispensationalist movement viewed the Treaty of Versailles with surprise and disappointment. If the Great War was not the immediate precursor to the Rapture, what was it?

Not having a clear answer, the Philadelphia premillennial dispensationalist movement was in full retreat after the war. Pettingill stopped interpreting world events. *Serving and Waiting* began publishing polemical articles excoriating the rise of theological modernism, petitioning for money for the PSB, and searching for evidence of Jews returning to Palestine. Scofield, too,

took the disappointment of the war's end especially hard. Though his health continued to worsen, Scofield never stopped anticipating the rise of the Antichrist. He became obsessed with centralization. All around him, Scofield saw his decentralized Bible conference movement coalesce into annual international conferences. Though, ironically, some of the blame for this trend can be attributed to Scofield. It was he, after all, along with Pettingill and Huston, who consolidated much of the premillennial dispensationalist movement under his authority. Scofield viewed the process of centralization within the Bible conference movement as precisely what the Antichrist wanted the Church to do. A movement that previously provided Bible teaching to the masses was now just the kind of hierarchical organization that an Antichrist could commandeer for his own satanic purposes.³¹

The end of the war was also very difficult for Charles Huston, the Philadelphia premillennial dispensationalist movement's chief financier. When wartime demand for steel suddenly stopped, Lukens Steel found itself overextended. During the war, the company had to build more facilities and hire more workers to try to keep up with demand. Without this demand, steel plate manufacturing facilities stood idle and Huston's workers grew restless. This restlessness was felt throughout the American iron and steel industry. Beginning in May 1919, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers, in association with the American Federation of Labor, began organizing the country's steelworkers. The AA called for a general strike and on September 22, 1919, a quarter of a million American steelworkers (and five hundred of Huston's workers) walked off the job. Suddenly, the seemingly unlimited supply of money that underwrote so much of the premillennial dispensationalist movement in Philadelphia dried up.³²

Amidst this postwar crisis, William Bell Riley emerged from within the models created by the Philadelphia Committee to reshape the movement in his own image. The Philadelphia Prophetic Conference of 1918, during which William Bell Riley expressed his frustration at dispensationalism's lack of ambition, was the last prophecy conference organized by the premillennial dispensationalist community in Philadelphia. Shortly after it ended, Riley contacted Charles Huston, Cyrus Scofield, and William Pettingill with a new idea. Riley wanted the Philadelphia Committee to plan a different kind of conference, a conference devoted to organizing a new movement, distinct from dispensationalism, and chiefly committed to preserving the fundamentals of the Christian faith. He hoped this second conference could meet in Philadelphia at the same time as the premillennial dispensationalists'

annual prophetic conference. Riley's idea, which would become the World Conference on Christian Fundamentals, marks the first emergence of a distinct fundamentalist movement. However, the contentious relationship between Riley and the members of the Philadelphia Committee proves that the transition from premillennial dispensationalism to fundamentalism was not a smooth one. Riley took advantage of a moment of weakness, disappointment, and confusion within dispensationalism caused by the end of World War I. The emergence of fundamentalism in Philadelphia was not a natural evolution but a coup.³³

Riley assured the Philadelphia Committee that he was not trying to co-opt their movement. He imagined that conference attendees and speakers could move from one conference to the other "without the loss of time or money." Huston was an enthusiastic supporter of Riley's fundamentalist idea from its inception. With two conferences, the Philadelphia Committee could focus more on premillennial dispensationalism while Riley and his cohorts were hard at work defending the fundamentals of the faith.³⁴

Pettingill, however, did not believe the conferences could exist amicably. He believed that allowing Riley to move forward with his plans was tantamount to turning over the reins of the premillennial dispensationalist movement. He warned Huston that the Philadelphia Committee had built a brand through their prophetic conferences. Dispensationalists all over the world looked forward to the Philadelphia conferences every year, Pettingill argued, and failing to provide a conference would be a "calamity." Pettingill viewed Riley's growing movement as a threat to premillennial dispensationalism and urged Huston not to sacrifice their own movement for Riley's. "The people," Pettingill warned Huston, "are looking to the Philadelphia Committee to provide leadership in this crisis."³⁵

Huston did not see Riley as a threat because he failed to see the difference between Riley's movement and premillennial dispensationalism. Riley's ambitions for the World Conference on Christian Fundamentals were evident from the initial planning. Once he had created his "distinct fellowship" out of the premillennial dispensationalist movement, his goal was to create a network of Bible schools, seminaries, religious colleges, periodicals, book publishers, churches, and denominational boards that were committed to fundamentalism. Riley wanted his Worldwide Christian Fundamentals Association to be distinct from premillennial dispensationalism. Dispensationalism offered a critique of Christendom. Riley's wanted to remake American Christianity so that it could become the New Christendom.³⁶

Scofield was adamantly opposed to Riley's fundamentalist conference. After Riley released his conference call and the statement of beliefs for his new movement, Scofield responded by saying, "there has been NO response to that. No one is thinking about it." To Scofield, Riley's new fundamentalist conference was a plot on behalf of a few fundamentalist Baptists to take control of American Christianity. Scofield believed that the world needed to be awakened to the fact that Jesus could return at any moment. No such awakening could ever come about through such a long "theologically phrased plan supplemented by plans for a new theological seminary." Riley and the fundamentalists had turned their backs on the importance of End Times prophecy. In his efforts to build a denomination out of the husks of the premillennial dispensationalism movement, Riley had forgotten the central importance of End Times prophecy. And Riley's efforts to create a centralized fundamentalist movement were precisely the type of centralization Scofield had warned about.³⁷ Scofield worried that the Antichrist could easily take advantage of the large-scale organizations like the one Riley proposed. He suggested that a group of like-minded premillennial dispensationalists should assemble "a statement of belief which may be a protest" against Riley's burgeoning fundamentalism.³⁸

Despite Scofield's opposition, the World Conference on Christian Fundamentals was held between May 25 and June 1, 1919. Over six thousand delegates gathered in Philadelphia representing forty-eight states and several countries. The fundamentalist movement was born. It was clear to Riley that his movement was distinct from the premillennial dispensationalist movement from which it arose: "I have no question that the future will look back to this World Conference . . . as a meeting of equal, if not greater moment than that which resulted from the nailing of the ninety-five theses o'er the door at Wittenberg. I have no question of the hour, for a new Protestantism has come!"³⁹

CONCLUSION

William Bell Riley may have overstated his "new Protestantism," but he was correct in pointing out the novelty and importance of the new movement he had built. The emergence of fundamentalism in Philadelphia was not a seamless integration of prior theological and political movements into one fundamentalist coalition. The transition from premillennial dispensationalism to fundamentalism in Philadelphia was more complicated and contentious

than theological affinities would suggest. Fundamentalism arose from within a premillennial dispensationalist movement that was weakened by unfulfilled prophecy after the end of World War I. As Riley predicted, the premillennial dispensationalists had grown too assured that the war was the foretold war of Armageddon. And when the Rapture failed to appear, the movement built around the imminence of the Second Coming all but collapsed. Riley took advantage of this weakness and harnessed a long-standing and powerful coalition of Philadelphia premillennial dispensationalists into the new political, religious, and social movement of fundamentalism. Though Scofield resented fundamentalism and had a particular antipathy toward Riley, it was his own organizational prowess that allowed fundamentalism to be so successful in the 1920s and beyond. Pettingill gave Riley's fundamentalism a powerful, influential, and recognizable voice through his writing in *Serving and Waiting*. In Charles Huston, Riley's new movement had a supporter with deep pockets and years of experience building an effective network for the propagation of his religious beliefs. The almost instant national prominence of the early fundamentalist movement can be attributed, in part, to the sizable foundation already built by the premillennial dispensationalist movement in Philadelphia.

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NOTES

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