"The Devil Hates That Doctrine": Hell in American Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, 1900-2015

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“THE DEVIL HATES THAT DOCTRINE”: HELL IN AMERICAN FUNDAMENTALISM AND EVANGELICALISM, 1900-2015

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Theologically conservative Protestants have, at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, attempted to secure the continued relevance of the idea of eternal damnation in the face of perceived growing public antagonism or disinterest towards the doctrine. While this thesis does concede that some of this hell-talk among American fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants has arisen in political contexts, it is nevertheless crucial to understand the distinctly theological importance clergy, theologians, and laypeople alike assigned to hell. Many of these figures saw belief in hell as essential to the intellectual coherence of their Christian way of life, and they employed a variety of theological and rhetorical means to ensure that American Christians’ faith in damnation did not wane.

Yet, by the end of the twentieth century, many evangelicals were nevertheless coming to see certain aspects of hell and eternal damnation as morally problematic, and some even argued that the traditional soteriological scheme ought to be replaced by another model that either minimized the suffering of the damned or allowed that more people would eventually receive salvation. Because of these debates and those surrounding the increasing number of “near death experiences,” hell served as central site of contemporary intra-evangelical wrestling with questions of religious authority and identity.
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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2011, American evangelical blogs, message boards, and twitter accounts burst into an uproar over megachurch pastor Rob Bell’s little book *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*.¹ The book’s critics – many of them theologically conservative Calvinist Baptists – lambasted the book for teaching soteriological universalism, the doctrine that all rational creatures will eventually enter into heavenly bliss. For his part, Bell denied any such outright endorsement of universalism, although he certainly made gestures towards a more inclusivist understanding of Christian salvation.² Although those onlookers who do not consider themselves members of the evangelical fold might remain skeptical, the Bell brouhaha reveals the extent to which the doctrines of hell and eternal damnation still maintain a firm grip on the minds of a significant number of twenty-first century Americans. Indeed, in the most recent Pew survey, fifty-eight percent of Americans expressed belief in hell, a number that – depending upon the poll – can rise as high as seventy percent.³ Still, the question remains as to why this public debate, one conducted largely through social media and blogs, occurred in the first place. Why is the rejection of the traditional doctrine of eternal damnation seen as

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problematic for some and a necessary change for others? How does this event fit into the larger history of American Protestant discourse about heaven, hell, and the afterlife?

1. Historiographical Context

Eschatology has, as of late, received something of a boom in interest in recent American religious history and religious studies more generally. Scholars like Matthew Avery Sutton, Gary Scott Smith, and Greg Garrett have produced book-length examinations of concepts like premillennial dispensationalism and heaven. The study of the history of the concept of hell, too, has benefitted from Kathryn Gin Lum’s recent work Damned Nation: Hell in America from the Revolution to Reconstruction. However, as of yet, little scholarly attention has been devoted to tracing ideas about hell and eternal damnation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and those studies that do exist tend to be either somewhat dated or restricted in scope. Likewise, American evangelical Protestantism has become a favorite subject of scholars of nineteenth and twentieth century American religions. However, those studies, like Sutton’s, that focus on the role of eschatology among theologically conservative Protestants tend to concentrate on apocalyptic schemes to the exclusion of heaven and hell. Yet, American evangelicals generally profess to remain some of the most strident and significant believers in hell, and, as such, this remains a fruitful site for investigation.

Furthermore, a good number of these studies emphasize how the language of hell and damnation was employed for political and social ends, for instance, in the construction of

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national identity. Consequently, scholars have viewed notions of hell and damnation as being primarily political, in the sense that they were meant to demarcate and condemn liberal (political or otherwise) or secular outsiders. A related assumption in certain quarters of this literature is that eschatological concepts like hell were typically employed by fundamentalist and evangelical leaders in a utilitarian sort of fashion to increase religious devotion. For instance, Jonathan M. Butler writes, “Sermons on eternal punishment…were preached not to round out a systematic theological position, but to ignite revival fervor. At the same time, where the hellfire technique no longer proved effective, it was discarded.” Likewise, Matthew Avery Sutton’s recent book on premillennial dispensationalism fails to even include “hell” in its index, and when Sutton does mention it, he portrays damnation as primarily a reassuring boundary-marking gesture: “They [evangelicals] also know that their critics will soon face the wrath of the Almighty and the torments of hell.” All of this is undoubtedly true to an extent. Fundamentalist and evangelical preachers did utilize the threat of damnation as a means to convert people into the faith, and their language often did serve political purposes meant to constrict the boundaries of some community. At the same time, this scholarly trajectory runs the risk of viewing Protestant discourse of hell as merely tactical, simply a tool to secure the power of ecclesiastical leaders.

2. Argument

This thesis will complicate such accounts by arguing that hell proved to be such a central concept to twentieth and twenty-first century theologically conservative Protestantism because it fulfilled a crucial structural place in the logic of their religious system. Because fundamentalist

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and evangelical Protestants largely accepted a penal substitutionary theory of the atonement (whether or not this belief was always articulated explicitly), eternal damnation served as the primary problem to which Jesus’ sacrifice and Christianity as a whole provided an answer. Conservative Protestant leaders recognized this fact and consequently saw that the very foundations of their form of Christianity was threatened if hell were to disappear. After all, if humans were not destined for eternal punishment for their sins, why did Jesus need to incarnate at all? Hell, the prospect of which served as the impetus for conversion, stood at the center of the fundamentalist and evangelical identity. Without the threat of hell, what was the point of being a Christian? What grounded the central commandment (theoretically believed, if not always practically followed) to evangelize? Could Christian social bonds survive the elimination of hell and eternal damnation?

Of course, the concept of hell was coming under increasing fire from theological liberals and a growing contingent of atheists and agnostics by the turn of the twentieth century. The idea of hell, then, proved to be a central site of liberal and conservative theological debates over biblical authority, the nature of God, and the proper conception of religious truth. As conservatives entrenched themselves in an inerrantist reading of scripture, it became necessary to defend those passages that seemed to, on a plain-sense reading, support the concept of eternal damnation. While modernist or progressive Protestants found ways to explain away or reinterpret such biblical verses – for instance, by using historical-critical methods or arguing that the notion of hell could not cohere with God’s love and justice – conservatives felt the need to double down, lest their rejection of hell lead to the rejection of the authority of the Bible entirely. Yet, by the latter decades of the twentieth century, even some of those within the evangelical fold were coming to question the more traditional Christian understanding of eternal damnation.
During this time period, the growth in popularity of “near death” and visionary accounts of heaven and hell led to additional intra-evangelical divisions over the connection between the nature of the afterlife and the proper role of religious experience in ascertaining theological truth. Consequently, hell proved to be a contentious issue within evangelicalism and stood at the heart of several crucial divides that continue to shape twenty-first century American Protestantism.

Still, while hardline conservatives attempted to secure belief in eternal damnation as a fundamental principle of true Christianity, they nevertheless changed hell in the process. Conservative Protestant preachers typically expressed a moral repulsion at the idea of eternal damnation, and they subsequently were pushed to offer defenses of the divine decision to damn some (perhaps even most) human beings. Hell also served as a site of reflection for larger anxieties about the spiritual and political situation of the United States. Consequently, the continued relevance of hell serves as another point of evidence against any strict notion of increasing and unremitting American “secularization,” although it might also press scholars of American religion to further contemplate exactly how religion has survived. That is, even as self-described defenders of traditional Christian beliefs attempted to uphold their theological convictions, they have at times adjusted those theological beliefs – and the ways in which they presented them – in subtle ways that speak to the perceived need to cohere to some degree with modern ideas and sensibilities.

3. Methodology and Clarification of Terms

This thesis is historical in methodological orientation and, as such, relies heavily upon a variety of primary sources from sermon transcripts and theological treatises to Sunday morning cartoons and illustrated tracts. Because of the employment of these different types of sources, I have also drawn when possibly on the insights of media and popular culture studies.
Furthermore, the topic at hand also contributes to the field of religious studies broadly in that it touches on questions related to the transmission of and debates over theological ideas, the nature of American secularism, and the construction of religious identity. Centrally, it argues that current debates over the development of American secularism(s) and modernity should not ignore the expressly theological dimensions of these trends or simply reduce them to cultural or economic anxieties. For many American Christians, the modern age brought about a struggle to cogently present and defend their religious system, yet this was not a simple process of capitulation versus resistance. Rather, especially for the fundamentalists and evangelicals covered in this thesis, this process involved a two-pronged effort of recapturing and rearticulating traditional doctrines and practices while simultaneously altering these very doctrines and practices – whether in content or rhetorical style – to adapt to skeptical arguments and changing intellectual and moral attitudes.

Furthermore, while much of this work deals with the writings and sermons of popular evangelists and theologians, it does attempt to listen to the voices of laypeople as well. And, against a certain tendency within the lived religion approach to religious history to (intentionally or not) portray “theology” as belonging primarily to elites, this thesis argues that theology in the broader sense of discourse about the intellectual claims of a religious worldview is inextricably woven into the religious experiences of laypeople and religious elites alike. Even if they do not systematically lay out their own theological convictions, laypeople rely upon theological concepts, like hell and eternal damnation, to articulate their worlds and their places within them.

At this point, however, I do wish to speak to the scope of this project and thus highlight avenues for further study. In recent years, there have been a number of works outlining the contours of a variety of theologically conservative black Protestant traditions, many of them
plausibly labeled “evangelical.” Likewise, scholars are increasingly coming to recognize the growth of Latino Pentecostals in the United States. However, due to limitations of space, this paper considers those “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” forms of Christianity that remain largely – although by no means entirely – racially white. A larger study of this topic would certainly be enhanced by determining whether similar trends can be found in Latino and black form of evangelicalism and if these communities are wrestling with similar questions. The place of hell in American Catholicism would prove similarly fruitful. Robert Orsi has gestured towards the idea that even when the magisterium was far more officially rigid in its soteriological pronouncements, lay Catholics found ways of upholding a certain latitude in terms of the scope of salvation for non-Catholic friends and family. This latter point speaks to a recurring worry for many of the figures covered in this present work: how to reconcile a just and loving God damning those very people American Christians lived, worked, and spent time with. Nevertheless, a broader study that also paid attention to the potential differences in these various sectors of American culture would be valuable.

Finally, as is customary with any work dealing with evangelicalism, a clarification of terms is required. Categorization and naming are, as most scholars of religion now recognize, fraught territory, and terms like “evangelicalism” and “fundamentalism” are indicative of this in a number of ways. For one, “evangelicalism” has meant different things at different times.

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Nineteenth century historian and clergyman Robert Baird’s *Religion in America* defined evangelicalism as encompassing practically any trinitarian Protestant denomination, whereas contemporary historians would typically employ it for a more limited subset of traditions in the twentieth century.\(^{12}\) Secondly, as scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith and Tomoko Masuzawa have noted, many of the terms that scholars of religion employ – especially the category of “religion” itself – were not originally ideologically-neutral, but rather implemented for sometimes subtle polemical purposes and contained implicit biases.\(^ {13}\) Furthermore, because these terms and categories are often internally-contested within the communities of study themselves, it is difficult for the scholar to remain neutral. The scholarly decision to include certain individuals within some category or community will likely be contested by those within that community who have attempted to keep those individuals out. This raises a related issue, as William James famously noted in *The Varieties if Religious Experience*: “Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. ‘I am no such thing,’ it would say; ‘I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone.’”\(^ {14}\) Our descriptions and categories of a subject will often be resisted by that subject because they fail to indicate crucial points of difference that the subject sees as essential to her or his identity.

Yet, as J.Z. Smith convincingly argues, it seems that “to fail to reject the crab’s sentence is to condemn the study of religion to an inconclusive study of individuals and individual


phenomena.”\textsuperscript{15} Without such classifications, the scholar is doomed to say nothing of more than very narrow importance. Still, we can still wonder whether any particular category is useful in the sense that it does generally accurately describe some phenomenon or cluster of phenomena. On this point, the historian D.G. Hart has presented the most systematic case against using the term “evangelicalism” on the grounds that it is the “wax nose of twentieth-century American Protestantism…void of any discernable features.”\textsuperscript{16} By lumping the audiences of \textit{Veggie Tales} with high church Presbyterians (like himself), Hart contends that historians have overlooked crucial differences between these two groups and, furthermore, too easily accepted the narrative of mid-century neo-evangelicals like Carl Henry of a united theologically conservative American Protestantism.\textsuperscript{17}

To an extent, Hart’s worries are resolved simply by employing more specific terms. Consequently, when possible, I have attempted in this thesis to use modifiers like “Calvinist,” “Baptist,” and “inerrantist” in conjunction with or instead of more vague and general categories like “evangelical” or “fundamentalist.” That being said, in certain cases, these broader terms are unavoidable and even necessary. Although certain figures and communities continued to refer to themselves as fundamentalists into the latter decades of the twentieth century,\textsuperscript{18} I will use “fundamentalist” to refer primarily to those forms of theologically conservative Protestantism in the first three decades of the twentieth century that defined themselves as being at odds with an

\textsuperscript{17} Hart, \textit{Deconstructing Evangelicalism}, pp. 49-53, 182-183.  
\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, prior to the 1970s, Falwell, a self-described fundamentalist Baptist, had exhibited some of the characteristics of a more cloistered form of Christianity that spent less time engaging in political efforts. However, this attitude changed dramatically by the 1980s, with Falwell serving as the figurehead for a very visible coalition of religious and political conservatives. See Susan Friend Harding, \textit{The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 14-17.
increasingly liberal and secular American culture. “Evangelical,” on the other hand, will refer
primarily to theologically conservative Protestants generally in the second half of the twentieth
century. As Molly Worthen has shown, “evangelicalism” in this sense was created in the 1940s
and 1950s by the likes of Carl F.H. Henry, Harold Ockenga, and Billy Graham through venues
like Christianity Today and the National Association of Evangelicals for the purpose of
distancing themselves from the separationism of earlier fundamentalists.\(^{19}\) Recently, Matthew
Avery Sutton has argued that this narrative of fundamentalist withdrawal from culture is
somewhat illusory, and, to be sure, fundamentalists and evangelicals did express similar beliefs
and cultures practices.\(^{20}\)

Both early century fundamentalists and the evangelicals (or neo-evangelicals) of the latter
part of the century tended towards a similar form of Protestant theological conservatism that
emphasized the direct divine inspiration of scripture, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ,
and the historical truth of biblical miracles. Furthermore, both traditions shared a ready and
creative employment of new forms of mass media like television and radio for evangelistic
purposes. We can heed Hart’s warning of the dangers of drawing too close of a comparison
between “high churchly” conservatives like J. Gresham Machen and revivalists like Billy
Sunday; however, it remains clear that almost all theologically conservative Protestants in this
period were united by a similar emphasis on the need for personal conversions through an
intentional acceptance of salvation. However, the evangelicalism of the late twentieth century
certainly has adopted an even more acutely commercialized form of emotive and individualized

University Press, 2013), pp. 15-35, 56-74. Of course, as Worthen notes, an antipathy towards liberalism, secularism,
and atheism proved central to this neo-evangelicalism as well. Thus, theologically-speaking, the divide between
fundamentalists and evangelicals was and is, if anything, less theological than one of style.

religiosity. Consequently, as Heather Hendershot has noted, one of the most notable and central institutions of contemporary evangelicalism is the Christian bookstore, which stocks a variety of Christian toys, music albums, assorted gifts and decorations, and self-help manuals for the devoted to purchase.\(^{21}\) In many ways, this emphasis on mediatized and commercialized spirituality has allowed for a more institutionally decentralized yet widely-shared evangelical culture to develop.

It is worth noting that not all theological conservatives partake or approve of this especially mediatized form of evangelicalism, and there remain a number of instances in which these broader categories are less helpful than more specific terms and modifiers. In any case, the distinction between “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” for the purposes of this thesis will be primarily chronological, with the former term referring to theologically conservative Protestants in the first three or so decades of the century and the latter indicating theological conservatives in the succeeding time period.

4. Arrangement of Chapters

The thesis will proceed by first providing some context for the theological debates surrounding the existence of hell and the scope of salvation in twentieth century American Protestantism. Towards the beginning of the century, liberal Protestants came to either ignore or discard the standard teachings of eternal damnation. This trend was wound up with larger debates about the nature of religious truth, the proper interpretation of scripture, and the relationship between faith and science. In this same time period, theological conservatives pushed back on what they saw as this secular perversion of Christian doctrine and emphasized

hell as a central component of true Christianity. Throughout the middle decades of the century, as this gap between the liberal mainline and conservative fundamentalist and evangelical branches of Protestantism grew, neo-evangelical leaders continued to portray the rejection of hell as a fatal flaw in modern American culture. However, the 1980s saw self-described conservative evangelicals beginning to question the traditional doctrine of eternal damnation, whether by rejecting it entirely or modifying their conception of hell to seem less at odds with a just and loving God.

The succeeding chapter will trace the language of hell in theologically conservative preaching from the fundamentalist sermons of Aimee Semple McPherson and Billy Sunday to the resurgent neo-evangelicalism of Billy Graham and his successors. Such preachers unanimously upheld the doctrine of eternal damnation as central to Christianity, yet they made certain gestures towards the modern moral discomfort with its implications by admitting to their own repulsion toward it. Nevertheless, they bemoaned hell’s lack of influence in American culture, and it was precisely this lack of attention that made it a required topic in sermons.

The final chapter traces the surge in popularity of visionary and near death experiences of heaven and hell in the 1970s, following the publication of Raymond Moody’s *Life after Life*. Among conservative Protestants, Pentecostals were most often the authors of such accounts (e.g. Kenneth Hagin, Mary K. Baxter, and Bill Wiese), and they utilized them both to evangelize as well as to provide justification for their distinctive theological positions like spirit baptism and healing. Along similar lines, certain evangelical apologists like the physician Maurice Rawlings and philosophers Douglas Groothuis, Gary Habermas, and J.P. Moorland saw NDE research in the 1980s and 1990s as a useful resource in combatting skeptical and atheistic critiques of supernatualist Christianity. At the same time, even such apologists expressed a wariness of the
connections of NDEs with New Age themes, a worry that must be understood in the context of the “satanic panics” of the 80s and 90s. With the increased usage the internet in the late 90s and early 2000s, NDEs came under fire from typically inerrantist Calvinist evangelicals, even as personal memoirs describing NDEs (often associated with children) hit record sales. These critics worried that the reliance upon personal revelations of the afterlife conflicted with scripture and potentially undermined biblical authority. Some commentators have taken this internal debate to indicate a division within evangelicalism over emotion (supporters of NDEs) versus reason (critics).22 There is some truth in this characterization; however, it oversimplifies the extent to which the debate is actually over different understandings of theological reasoning and authority and not simply a strict dichotomy of feeling and thought.

In the end, this thesis finds that viewing contemporary theologically conservative Protestantism through the lenses of hell and damnation reveals a number of crucial features and divides within this broader tradition (or group of traditions). Hell was not simply a scare tactic, but was taken by evangelical leaders to be central to the intellectual coherence of Christianity itself. Thus, belief in hell was portrayed as one of the bedrocks of Christian identity, yet this was accompanied by the growing fear that even American Christians were becoming too tainted by liberalism and pluralism to take hell seriously anymore. Many evangelicals who defended the doctrine were shaped by pluralistic and liberal attitudes that made hell seem morally questionable, while many of those evangelicals who challenged the traditional doctrine of eternal damnation were driven ostensibly by a desire to uphold a more conservative view of biblical authority. Consequently, while hell was inevitably wound up in the political and cultural

concerns of twentieth and twenty-first century Protestants, it also served important theological and communal functions.
II. HELL BE DAMNED?: PROTESTANT DEBATES SURROUNDING THE EXISTENCE OF HELL

1. Changing Attitudes toward Hell in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

The threat of damnation had accompanied European colonists as they conquered the New World, and that existential dread helped spark the religious revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.23 Still, the traditional doctrine of hell had met increasing resistance by British and continental European intellectuals in the mid-seventeenth century, and figures from the freethinking Ethan Allen to the Universalist Hosea Ballou had challenged the doctrine since the latter decades of the eighteenth century in America.24 Yet, as Kathryn Gin Lum has argued, “the concept of hell did not just survive in antebellum America: it thrived.”25 At the same time, however, Americans were coming to reject the high Calvinism of Edwards and Whitefield for an Arminianism occasionally accompanied by a sentimental conception of divine judgment and death. Consequently, even former Calvinist strongholds like the Presbyterian Church eventually sought to redress, in James Turner’s phrase, the “soft underbelly of Calvinism” – infant

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25 Kathryn Gin Lum, Damned Nation: Hell in America from Revolution to Reconstruction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 3. This sentimental understanding of death, Gin Lum argues, is exemplified by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s 1868 novel, The Gates Ajar.
damnation.\textsuperscript{26} By the turn of the century, the doctrine of hell was increasingly rejected, or at least suppressed, by many mainline Protestant clergy and even some conservative revivalists.\textsuperscript{27}

In its June 1900 issue, the \textit{North American Review} ran an article asking “What Has Become of Hell?”\textsuperscript{28} The author, Episcopalian clergyman George Wolfe Shinn, remarked that:

\begin{quote}
We hear very little about [hell] except in the profanity of the day. We do not hear of it in the pulpit, nor see any religious reference to it in the religious press, nor in the modern theological book, nor is it brought up in religious conversation generally. It is tabooed by the pulpit generally. When, under stress, the preacher has to refer to it, he may adopt the euphemistic method of one who spoke of ‘the place which could not be named in the presence of cultured people.’\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Shinn contended that even fifty years earlier hell dominated the religious landscape, in large part because he saw the revivalist atmosphere as fertile ground for fiery preaching. Shinn located a number of causes for this shift: a better understanding of the historical context of the scriptures, a growing moral repulsion at the ideas of original sin and a divinely-sanctioned torture chamber, and pity for the “heathen” who had not been presented with the gospel.\textsuperscript{30} But, despite his earlier

\textsuperscript{26} James Turner, \textit{Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America} (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 90. For an excellent account of these controversies over infant damnation and the darker sides of Calvinist orthodoxy, see Peter J. Thuesen’s \textit{Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 175-192. Although there was some debate in Reformed circles, Calvinist doctrine seemed for many to necessitate that at least certain – if not most – infants would be predestined by God to perdition despite not ever having committing a sin or possessing the chance to accept salvation (due to the fact that they were already seen as guilty by the fact of inheriting Adam’s original guilt). As the nineteenth century wore on, individual freedom and responsibility became an increasingly crucial concept, especially in regards to personal salvation. Additionally, somewhat more sentimental notions of childhood and family became popular, causing intense mass discomfort with the idea of damned children in general, never mind infants who seemed the most “pure.” On this point, see Margaret Bendroth, “Children of Adam, Children of God: Christian Nurture in Early Nineteenth-Century America” in \textit{Theology Today} Vol. 56, No. 4 (Jan. 2000), pp. 495-505.


\textsuperscript{29} Shinn, “What Has Become of Hell?” p. 837.

\textsuperscript{30} Shinn, “What Has Become of Hell?” pp. 842, 846-847. The nineteenth century saw a great boom in American missionary activity both on the American continent to native populations and abroad, which inevitably brought Americans into greater contact with societies and cultures vastly different from their own. As Kathryn Gin Lum
characterization of hell being practically absent from religious life, Shinn later conceded that the prominence of various understandings of divine judgment – from modulations of the traditional view to annihilationism and universalism – revealed “a most unsettled condition of Christian eschatology at the close of this nineteenth century.” This controversy, furthermore, was “evident in sermons in newspapers, in trials for heresy, and in the discussions of ordinary people.” Hell-talk, then, was both nowhere and everywhere in American religious life.

As Shinn’s comments about profanity indicate, part of this change was visible in the manner in which the word “hell” was itself becoming unmoored from its original theological context. “Hell” was no longer solely the eternal pit over which the preacher would dangle her or his congregation, but also a source of amusement and a mild vulgarity with which to strike back at the little inconveniences of life. An anonymous poem entitled “Oh! Hell” circulated throughout local newspapers from South Carolina to New Mexico towards the end of the 1910s. The poem revealed the sense in which hell’s linguistic meaning was becoming

shows, much of this activity was fueled by the assumption that these people were unsaved as they had not heard the Christian gospel; such missionary work arose from a paternalistic desire to rescue them from hell (Gin Lum, Damned Nation, pp. 63-72). By the turn of the twentieth century, far fewer parts of the globe were unexplored, but this process had posed some serious questions to Christian theologians. They began to recognize how many people – just in their lifetimes, not to mention ages past – had gone without the possibility of salvation, if its requirements included an explicit recognition of Jesus as their savior. Consequently, certain Protestants, even some conservatives (as we will see, Aimee Semple McPherson is one such example), began to make gestures towards a more inclusivist understanding of the process of salvation for the “heathen” which allowed for the possibility of their salvation, despite the fact that missionaries had never reached them or had failed in the process to convert them.

31 Shinn, “What Has Become of Hell?” p. 844. While the increased diversity of eschatological and soteriological opinions grew in the modern period, these views did have precedents within the Christian tradition even in late antiquity.


33 The poem appears in a variety of publications, typically submitted by readers but with no acknowledged author. The earliest attestation I could find was in an anthology of American folk songs and poems, Immortalia: An Anthology of American Ballads, Sailors' Songs, Cowboy Songs, College Songs, Parodies, Limericks, and Other Humorous Verses and Doggerel Now for the First Time Brought Together in Book Form by a Gentleman About Town” (privately printed, 1927), p. 127. The volume attributes a version of the poem – entitled “Hell” rather than “Oh! Hell” or “Oh, Hell!” as it often appears in the newspapers – to an E.A. von Kleim. However, given that the poem was appearing in newspapers up to a decade before the publication of Immortalia, the authorship of von Kleim should be viewed with at least some suspicion.
increasingly elastic: “They say sometimes ‘It’s cold as hell’/Sometimes they say ‘It’s hot as hell’.../Now how in the Hell can anyone tell/What in the Hell they mean by this word ‘Hell?’” 34

As the decade went on, mentions of hell increasingly came to take on a humorous tone. In 1937, the Chicago Tribune reported that Catholic attempts to use the threat of hell to convert the Inuit in Alaska failed when, in the words of a Spanish priest, “the natives expressed a desire to go there [hell] to keep warm and to keep from hauling wood.”35 The next year, the Tribune ran a short cheeky story about a pet store robbery with the title “Parrot Says ‘Go to Hell!’ as Thief Carries It Away.”36

As new forms of mass media came to dominate American popular culture, hell quite literally took on a cartoonish form. In a 1953 animated Looney Tunes short entitled “Satan’s Waitin’,” Sylvester the Cat takes an escalator to hell after falling to his death in the process of chasing Tweety Bird. Yet, the devil, a deep-voiced and horned red bulldog, informs Sylvester that, because cats possess nine lives, he is safe from damnation for the time being. Once eight of his lives are used up, Sylvester locks himself in a bank vault to prevent his final demise, yet his plain is foiled when two robbers use too many explosives to blast open the door, killing Sylvester for the ninth time in the process.37 In the nineteenth century, some Universalists invoked sarcastic jabs and other modes of humor to critique the dominant doctrine of eternal damnation.38 Yet, the twentieth century saw both an increasing elasticity in the range of “hell’s” meaning and a willingness to use images of hell for mere entertainment. In 1958, a writer for Christianity Today, the premier neo-evangelical magazine, worried that even evangelicals spoke “lightly and

35 “Don’t Tell Eskimos About Hell’; They’d Like to Go Get Warm” in the Chicago Tribune (Jul. 15, 1937), p. 1.
38 See Ann Lee Bressler, The Universalist Movement, pp. 69-71.
in jest concerning the sufferings of hell,” despite the fact that hell was “a subject which cannot be humorous in the slightest degree to Christians with a heart.”[^39] Damnation was a serious matter, and the author worried that evangelicals, in being able to take a lighthearted attitude towards it, indicated apathy at best and a drift towards secularism at worst.

This is not, of course, to say that hell no longer held any of its former religious power in the first half of the century. Despite the 1914 claim of Charles Eliot, former president of Harvard, that “in the present day no educated person believes in a hell,”[^40] the first decades of the twentieth century saw repeated defenses of the doctrine by theologically conservative ministers and theologians. The biblical scholar L.T. Townsend resisted Eliot’s charge that only “archaic ministers” and their acolytes could believe in the doctrine, and furthermore claimed that “no one except stubborn sceptics can bring themselves to question its existence.”[^41] The sheer incongruity of these positions, each declaring the impossibility of the other’s belief, indicates an increasing epistemological divide between theological conservatives and those with liberal sympathies. Each side was relying upon disparate conceptions of religious, philosophical, and scientific authority. Conservatives assumed, for the most part, an inerrant Bible supported all of their claims, whereas liberals had embraced the findings of historical-biblical criticism and modern science, both undergirded by a broader philosophical progressivism.

Further evidence of this growing chasm is available in the spate of sermons delivered in the 1920s in New York by liberal ministers like Henry Emerson Fosdick and S. Parkes Cadman that downplayed hell as a relic of a bygone and primitive religious consciousness. Conservatives

molded their own sermons in response. In addressing Cadman’s denial of eternal damnation, the Baptist minister John Roach Straton rhetorically asked his congregation, “Which shall we believe, the Divine Son of God or the President of the Federal Council of Churches?”

Conservatives saw the liberals’ acceptance of an evolutionary notion of religious truth as antithetical to orthodox doctrine, which, because it was divinely inspired, could not admit of such alterations. Straton’s rhetorical jab also reveals the expanding institutional divide between the two camps; liberals were both gaining rapid control of the mainline denominations and forming a powerful ecumenical movement.

Townsend took up Shinn’s earlier observation about the lack of hell in the pulpit and reworked it as a complaint: “The preaching that is now largely in-favor is that which does not entail upon the hearer any considerable burden of thinking. Two or three bright things, a bouquet or two of rhetorical flowers…but not one word about God’s austerity or about death or eternity.” Preachers, claimed Townsend, had succumbed to a sentimental moralism that ignored the severity of God’s judgment and played up divine benevolence. The threat of hell, Townsend argued, had actually served as a “wholesome and restraining check upon humanity,” and whose absence would lead to societal and moral decay. This had long been one of the chief arguments against tinkering with or discarding the doctrine of hell. Shinn, too, had worried in 1900 that

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44 “Only Stubborn Sceptics,” p. 2.

45 See, for instance, Walker, *The Decline of Hell*, pp. 262-263, who argues that even some of the seventeenth century European thinkers who came to doubt the existence of eternal damnation generally kept the conviction private, out of the fear that hell was needed as a deterrent for the less enlightened – and hence morally suspect – common folk.
the lack of pious fear could have negative societal consequences, although he thought a greater emphasis on retributive justice could replace the archaic notion of hell. Even Eliot, although pointing out that the threat of hell had never led to a utopian world, wondered whether the “new religion” of the twentieth century could ultimately provide the moral foundation necessary for a functioning society. In 1924, judicial and law-enforcement officials in Altoona, Pennsylvania requested that local clergy more often invoke God’s wrath to lower the crime rate in the town. “In a recent address,” the New York Times reported, “Attorney Robert W. Smith declared that he had not heard a sermon on hell for ten years and that discourses on this subject might help abate the wave of crime that is sweeping the country.”

In response to this call, Protestant and Catholic clergy alike preached on the “torments of the condemned” to filled pews. The predominance of hell over the American moral imagination, then, was not merely a spiritual issue, but also a political one.

The extent to which belief in hell actually declined among Americans at large in the first decades of the twentieth century is difficult to determine. A 1929 survey of Chicago-area Protestant clergy revealed that fifty-three percent believed in hell as an actual location, and sixty-one percent affirmed that “a considerable part of the human race will suffer eternal punishment because of their rejection of Christ.” Congregationalists were most skeptical of hell, whereas Baptists, “Evangelicals,” and Lutherans expressed a high rate of belief in the doctrine. So,

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46 Shinn, “What Has Become of Hell?” pp. 846-847. Indeed, Shinn even blamed the optimism and lack of appeals to fear as one of the causes of the “weakening of the force of religion” in the modern world.
49 George Herbert Betts, The Beliefs of 700 Ministers (New York: The Abington Press, 1929), pp. 28-29. The framing of these prompts are, however, somewhat ambiguous. For instance, the latter question regarding “eternal punishment” could potentially have been answered in the affirmative by annihilationists who saw punishment as eternal, even as they denied the eternality of hell or conscious torment. Likewise, such ministers could affirm hell as an actual place, while still believing that everyone would eventually leave it.
50 Betts, The Beliefs of 700 Ministers, p. 47, Table III.
while there was clearly a strong minority of those who expressed disbelief the traditional doctrine of eternal damnation, a significant portion of ministers, even those in mainline denominations, continued to note their assent to the doctrine. Among Protestant laypeople, these numbers were likely even higher, and we can reasonably infer than many were unaware or unconcerned that theologians in New York and Chicago were challenging traditional notions of hell and damnation. As evangelical businessman Paul E. Johnson recollected of his conversion at a Chicago-area revival in 1930, “much of the preaching in those days was of hellfire and brimstone, and I didn’t want to go to hell.”\(^{51}\) The “decline of hell” was, consequently, likely dependent both upon one’s religious tradition and geographical location. Old time revivalism, with its impassioned pleas to accept Christ and avoid damnation, was alive and well in the beginning decades of the twentieth century. At the same time, attitudes about what hell was like and who would be there were changing to an extent, and conservative evangelists nevertheless feared that the decline of belief in hell by liberal theologians, agnostics, and the like might spell doom for America as well as for its inhabitants’ souls.

2. Disagreement within the Evangelical Theological Ranks

At the end of the twentieth century, evangelicals continued to mark themselves as fervent believers in hell, as opposed to the broader American culture. Yet, writing in 1987, the sociologist James Davison Hunter noted a certain tension in contemporary evangelical attitudes towards divine judgment: yes, most conservative Protestants asserted their belief in hell; however, they were simultaneously coming to express an increased discomfort and distaste with its implications. For instance, ninety-five percent of a group of evangelical seminarians affirmed

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\(^{51}\) Robert Schuster, “Interview with Paul E. Johnson,” 5 August 1988. Tape 1, Collection 399. Audio file. A link can be found at http://espace.wheaton.edu/bgc/audio/cn399t001.mp3. The relevant material can be found at 8:20.
belief in the doctrine of eternal damnation, a number which remains slightly higher but generally consistent with more recent polling data from a broader evangelical sample. Hunter takes this as an indication that self-described evangelicals tended to resist the central liberalizing trends within mainline Protestantism; however, this did not mean, for Hunter, that such evangelicals had emerged entirely unscathed from this larger American cultural process. For example, in that same poll of evangelical seminarians, one third of respondents left open the possibility of salvation for those who “have not had the opportunity to hear of Jesus Christ.” This latter view would have been unacceptable to many earlier Protestants and Christians generally on the grounds that it seemed to provide, against verses like John 14:6, a means to salvation other than Christ.

Some respondents in Hunter’s survey were confident in their reasoning that certain non-Christians could receive salvation without having explicitly accepted Christ. One student, for instance, said, “I think it would be unfair for those who have not heard of Christ to be sent to hell. What is important in their case is that they have conformed to the law of God as they know it in their hearts.” Others, however, took a more cautious tone. A Methodist M.Div. candidate said, “It’s hard for me to say. If I had to say yes or no (pause) I guess I would have to say yes, they are in hell. But I don’t have full conviction about what God is doing there.” Hunter seems to take this as a more recent shift, citing an earlier 1948 survey of a Midwestern town, in which over ninety percent of respondents concurred that only those who explicitly professed faith in Christ would be saved (thus seemingly precluding the possibility of salvation for those in parts of

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53 Hunter, *Evangelicalism*, p. 35.
54 Hunter, *Evangelicalism*, p. 37
55 Hunter, *Evangelicalism*, p. 36.
the world – or in history – who did not have this opportunity).\textsuperscript{56} Furthermore, Hunter presents this as something of a crucial departure from the “soteriological demands of orthodox Christianity.”\textsuperscript{57}

This latter point is insufficiently nuanced on Hunter’s part. To be sure, most Western Christian bodies have tended to promote an exclusivist understanding of salvation that usually required explicit belief in Christ – along with membership with the proper communion – for salvation. However, there are certainly other soteriological models with fairly significant representation at some point in the history of Christianity,\textsuperscript{58} and, in any case, it is not clear what “orthodoxy” might mean for such a disparate group as American evangelicals. That is, there is no universally agreed-upon ecclesiastical body by which evangelical orthodoxy has been established; attempts to do so tend to represent the interests of certain sectors of evangelicalism.\textsuperscript{59} By framing a more traditional understanding of soteriological exclusivism as the orthodox opinion, in contrast to a liberal pluralism, Hunter is implicitly suggesting that “true” Christians are required to hold that some individuals would be eternally damned and probably that all who have not explicitly professed faith in Jesus Christ belong to this category.

\textsuperscript{56} Hunter, \textit{Evangelicalism}, p. 35. Although Hunter does concede some ambiguity when this issue was further pressed; it seemed that respondents were slightly less confident that ignorance of Christ would lead to damnation. \textit{Ibid}, p. 36. However, this hesitancy was not as pronounced as in the “Evangelical Academy Project” survey Hunter cites of seminarians.

\textsuperscript{57} Hunter, \textit{Evangelicalism}, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{58} Indeed, in the first few centuries of Christianity, there appears to have been no universally agreed upon soteriological position. Noteworthy proponents of universalism, annihilationism, and eternal damnation can all be found. For an extended discussion of forms of \textit{apokatastasis} or universal salvation in Christian antiquity, see Ilaria Ramelli, \textit{The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena} (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

\textsuperscript{59} For instance, the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, despite its authors’ contention that it should not be given “creedal weight,” is often used as a sort of definitive statement on the requirements of evangelical orthodoxy. However, this was constructed in large part as a means to restrict the boundaries of evangelicalism to exclude a number of self-professed evangelicals who held instead to an “infallibilist” view of the authority of scripture, which left more latitude for an appreciation of factually incorrect scientific statements in the Christian Bible that reflected the ancient views of the time.
Furthermore, although the data on this matter are thin, there are good signs that some theologically conservative Protestants had proposed that non-Christians living in “ignorance” of Christ might be saved before this point. The early twentieth century Pentecostal evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, for instance, claimed, “We are judged according to the light we have. The more sermons you hear, the more light you have. Take the poor heathen – God takes into consideration his heart, his mind, and his opportunity.”\footnote{Aimee Semple McPherson, “Hell and Who Will Be There,” 1 November 1925. Folder 4, Box 10, Collection 103, Ephemera of Aimee Semple McPherson. Microfilm, sermon manuscript. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, p. 6.} A related trend that Hunter did not emphasize was the rhetorical move common among twentieth century evangelical evangelists from McPherson to Billy Graham to express their own moral discomfort with the concept of eternal damnation. In one 1957 sermon, Graham relayed that he “hate[d] the very thought of hell.”\footnote{Billy Graham, “Hell,” 23 June, 1957, Folder 45, Box 17, Collection 265, Records of the BGEA: Montreat Office: Billy Graham – Papers. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, p. 1.} However, such figures always supplemented this admission with the assertion that the Bible clearly taught the doctrine. God’s direct word trumped any human moral discomfort. Yet, this same sort of moral revulsion at the idea of eternal damnation – especially as a punishment for a crime, in the case of the unevangelized “heathen,” which was unavoidable – is present among many of Hunter’s respondents. This is a point that will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

A variety of long term trends played a role in this shift in moral sentiments. First of all, as a number of scholars have noted, the nineteenth century saw a broad rejection of the austere Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards, in which God arbitrarily damns most and saves some, towards a more optimistic Arminianism which emphasized the role of human cooperation in salvation.\footnote{See, for instance, Peter J. Thuesen, Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); James Turner, Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); and Kathryn Gin Lum, Damned Nation: Hell in America from Revolution to Reconstruction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).}
The concept of free will thus became integral to most Protestant understandings of conversion. God, then, was coming to be seen less as a severe and inscrutable sovereign and more as an ultimately benevolent father figure. In conjunction with a recognition of the vastness of the non-Protestant world and the limited success of missionary work, the fate of the un-evangelized posed a particularly acute difficulty. That is, if salvation required a conscious decision to accept Christ, would it not be unfair for a loving God to damn those who never possessed the opportunity to do so? Although the twentieth century saw an increased institutional and ideological schism between theologically liberal “modernists” and conservative “fundamentalists,” many of these issues clearly continued to haunt fundamentalist – and eventually evangelical – leaders and laypeople alike.

It was, however, not until the 1980s that the idea of conscious eternal torment itself came to be often and openly challenged within theologically conservative Protestant circles. Before this point, some version of hell was simply assumed, even if, as in the case of McPherson, this hell was slightly more sparsely populated than the hell of Calvin and Edwards. The last two decades of the twentieth century saw the open espousal of alternative soteriological models by self-described evangelical theologians and laypeople. Yet, as Freeman Barton noted in 1996, unlike the spats of the early decades of the century, “this time it is not the agnosticism or universalism of the ‘liberals’ against the certitudes of the ‘conservatives.’ The debate about eternal destiny is taking place within evangelical Christianity.”

Some theologians since the 1960s or 1970s had made tentative endorsements of a version of the “inclusivist” view – seemingly espoused, not coincidentally, by the Anglican author and

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63 Gin Lum, Damned Nation, pp. 63-72.
academic C.S. Lewis – that hell was “locked from the inside.” That is, against the traditional view that damnation to hell was final, this option retained the concept of an eternal hell, but it left open the possibility that some might accept salvation and thus leave it. However, one of the most impactful denunciations of the dominant view of eternal damnation came at the ends of a seminary graduate and lawyer named Edward Fudge. Fudge had in a 1976 article for Christianity Today suggested that Christians look more critically at the biblical portrayal of the afterlife rather than simply assuming any view, especially the traditional one, to be correct. The article itself made no specific recommendations as to the proper interpretation, but by 1982, Fudge had completed a book by the title of The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment that argued explicitly for conditional immortalism or annihilationism, the idea that the unsaved would not be relegated to eternal damnation but rather be simply wiped out of existence.

Fudge, affirming his own belief in the inerrancy of scripture, denied that he was a theological liberal. To the contrary, Fudge argued that it was the traditionalist who was in fact not taking the Bible seriously enough. Fudge implied that Christianity required another reformation, precisely because Christianity needed to be “always reforming, with the guidance of the Holy spirit and under the authority of the Word.” No doubt resulting from his broader theological approach, Fudge’s arguments were primarily exegetical, relying upon the contention that all of the Bible’s references to “eternal” punishment could be shown to refer instead to a

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65 John Sanders, “Raising Hell about Razing Hell: Evangelical Debates on Universal Salvation,” Perspectives in Religious Studies, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Fall 2013), pp. 273-274. This conception of hell seems present in Lewis’ fictional work The Great Divorce, although Lewis’ precise views on the matter are more difficult to determine.


68 Fudge, The Fire That Consumes, p. 23.
punishment “eternal” in the sense of definitive but which did not entail conscious suffering.⁶⁹ At the same time, Fudge denied that his position entailed any sort of universalism, although he acknowledged the recent growth of a new form of universalism “located in Reformed and evangelical yards” in contrast to the universalism of “nineteenth century liberal theologians.”⁷⁰ Thus, although “liberalism” remained a dangerous path, Fudge expressed an openness to a variety of viewpoints, so long as they were grounded in scripture.

Had Fudge’s annihilationism remained restricted to a fairly abstract book published by a small, independent press, it likely would have had little impact. However, certain prominent evangelicals came to publically express sympathies with his annihilationist or conditional immortalist position. As evangelical philosopher John Sanders notes, no figure was more influential in this manner than British writer and clergyman John Stott.⁷¹ In the co-authored 1988 book Evangelical Essentials, a dialogue between Stott and the more liberal theologian David L. Edwards, Stott expressed moral discomfort shared by McPherson, Graham, and other prominent evangelicals: “Well, emotionally, I find the concept [of eternal conscious torment] intolerable…But our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it.”⁷² The Bible was the only trustworthy source of religious truth, yet, like Fudge and unlike McPherson or Graham, Stott leaned toward the possibility that the damned would not suffer forever but be annihilated instead. In addition to his exegetical arguments, however, Stott also contended that the idea of eternal damnation seemed to

⁷⁰ Fudge, The Fire That Consumes, pp. 351-352. Although, Fudge seems to include forms of “inclusivism” in which hell is locked from the inside, despite the fact that many, if not most, of the advocates of this view were not universalists in the sense that they thought everyone would eventually escape hell.
threaten God’s sovereignty, since it required “an unspecified number of people…to continue in rebellion against him” for all eternity in hell.\textsuperscript{73}

The increase in dissenting opinions to the traditional view of hell as eternal conscious torment clearly played a large part in the decision to hold a conference in 1989 at the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School entitled “Evangelical Affirmations.” The subjects of hell and annihilationism became prominent topics of debate at the conference, and a number of attendees argued that annihilationism should be condemned as a nonbiblical and hence non-evangelical position. Yet, John Stott’s recent declaration of openness to the doctrine presented a difficulty, especially given his place of esteem in Anglo-American evangelical circles. John Sanders, who actually attended the conference, describes how the discussions ensued:

Kenneth Kantzer, the Dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, pleaded with the delegates not to exclude annihilationism because that would mean that John Stott could not be called an evangelical. The conferees decided that Stott could not be excluded, so the statement was carefully worded to allow for annihilationism. In my opinion, if it had been someone of lesser stature in the evangelical community than John Stott, annihilationism would have been excluded by the participants at the conference. Hence, the boundary of acceptable evangelical doctrine was decided, in the case, by \textit{who} held the position and not by the biblical or theological arguments.\textsuperscript{74}

As Molly Worthen has recently noted, the British Stott has become, like other British Christians G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis, a special object of veneration for American evangelicals.\textsuperscript{75}

Each of these figures ostensibly held theological views at odds with dominant conservative

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., p. 319.
\textsuperscript{74} Sanders, “Raising Hell,” p. 271.
evangelical perspectives, but evangelicals nevertheless managed to largely overlook these, displaying a certain charity that they did not reserve for those deemed “liberals” or “secularists.”

Indeed, Stott was held up as, variously, an evangelical “guru” and “pope,” and Worthen convincingly contends that this American evangelical reverence for British figures is rooted, at least in part, in an “intellectual inferiority complex” caused by the loss of reputation they suffered in the wake of the Scopes Trial. Evangelicals felt that “if these Oxford and Cambridge-trained gentlemen with plummy accents believed that God spoke from a burning bush and Jesus truly rose from the grave, that is proof that one can be an intellectual, a sophisticate, and a Bible-believer too, no matter what the snide mainstream media says.”76 The “Evangelical Affirmations” conference serves as another point of evidence in favor of this understanding of the dynamics of evangelical intellectual authority and Britishness.

Furthermore, the 1980s and 1990s also saw the introduction of evangelical theological defenses of universalism, the view that all human beings will eventually receive salvation. Perhaps the most prominent of such figures was the evangelical philosopher Thomas Talbott, who had vigorously argued against the resurgent neo-Calvinism of John Piper and others in the 1980s and eventually advocated universalism by the early 1990s.77 Although Talbott also employed a variety of exegetical arguments for his position, he also relied upon philosophical arguments that contended that the doctrines of eternal damnation and annihilationism alike either denied God’s goodness or God’s power, both unacceptable conclusions in his view. Either God was unable to save all of his human creatures, or he was able to but refused to. Indeed, eternal

76 Worthen, “John Stott…”
damnation – especially a version that depended upon the notion of unconditional predestination ordained by God – ultimately affirmed a “demonic picture of God.” As Sanders and Barton note, these accounts prompted a flood of literature by traditionalists, contending that eternal conscious torment remained the only biblically viable view. But, the floodgates were open both ways, and the existence of hell and the scope of salvation would remain constant and pressing points of contention within evangelical circles.

3. A “Conspiracy of Silence”: Alternative Views on Hell among Evangelical Laypeople and the Current Debate

Nevertheless, one might get the impression from the figures discussed so far that these debates remained at a fairly abstract level and restricted institutionally to academic conferences and scholarly journals. However, there is good evidence that at least from the 1980s, evangelical laypeople and local clergy were wrestling with similar soteriological issues and even coming to adopt these minority theological positions. Articles dealing with these topics appeared sporadically in the pages of the premier evangelical popular publication *Christianity Today*, and the responses chosen for the “readers’ letters” section are instructive of these attitudes. In a 1986 editorial entitled “Do You Believe in Hell?” Kenneth Kantzler noted both the general lack of mentions of hell in evangelical preaching and the larger rejection of hell among modern theologians: “The last sermon on hell I heard I preached myself,” he wrote. “And that was nearly 30 years ago.” Although acknowledging his own moral discomfort with eternal damnation and praising the ingenuity of the arguments of Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, Kantzler adopts the

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standard traditionalist argument of assuming that scripture clearly and unambiguously taught an understanding of hell that required eternal conscious torment.

Given that this article was written four years after the publication of Fudge’s *The Fire That Consumes*, it is a bit odd that Kantzler does not feel the need to defend his reading of scripture. Similarly, in an article from that same year, evangelical theologian J.I. Packer argued that although there remained the possibility that those ignorant of Christ could be saved, this was by no means to be “expected.” Indeed, the only assurance was that hell existed and that it remained the eternal destiny of the unsaved: “Universalism is in fact a theological speculation that discounts the evident meaning of some New Testament passages in favor of what is claimed to be the overall thrust of New Testament thinking.”\(^81\) That is, alternative soteriological positions to the traditional view were mere “speculation” and not true biblical thinking. Packer, like Kantzler, still takes a rejection of hell to be indicative of a theological liberalism that does not take the Bible seriously. Some readers of *Christianity Today* noticed and took issue with this strategy. In response to Packer’s article, one Joseph G.S. Robinson suggests that the theologian conflated his interpretation of scripture with what scripture inherently said: “may we not have an example of the infallibility of God’s word versus the fallibility of man’s interpretation of that Word?”\(^82\) Along similar lines, a Paul Dentler charges Packer with propounding the “same time-worn response that elitists of fundamentalism have been handing down to their followers for centuries.”\(^83\)

What is most surprising about these letters, however, is how many of them explicitly reject the traditional view of eternal conscious torment in favor of either annihilationism or

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universalism, even before this issue becomes a prominent point of discussion at evangelical conferences and in journals. A Frederick H. Dise, for instance, responded to the Kantzer piece with a passionate rejection of the traditional view: “For too many centuries the teaching of this doctrine has defamed our Creator, driven millions away from Christ and redemption, and scared countless others into ‘accepting Christ’ in order to escape the horrors of eternal torture.”

Far from being foundational to the integrity of the gospel, Dise saw the idea of hell as the great hindrance to it. Dentler, in the above-mentioned letter, concludes: “How can God claim to be All and in All if the best he can do is save only the tiny fraction of mankind Packer has limited him to?”

Joseph G.S. Robinson likewise took issue with the presentation of “a God who is love…consign[ing] 99 percent of a creation pronounced by his wisdom ‘very good’ to a purposeless punishment.” Annihilationism, too, had its defenders among these letters. A Grace Irwin situated annihilationism as something of a medium between universalism and eternal damnation, and she notes the oddity of its absence from Packer’s article: “Packer, and all scholarly evangelicals, know this doctrine, its antiquity, and its exponents. Why do they never cite it, even for the purposes of refutation? Can there be a conspiracy of silence where the glory of God, the integrity of Scripture, the Good news of our Lord Jesus Christ, are concerned?”

Of course, these letters are selected by the editors, and a major criterion was likely to give a voice to interesting and opposing viewpoints. Consequently, universalists and annihilationists may have been overrepresented in the pages of the magazine compared to traditionalist letters of support sent to the magazine (some of which were also printed). However, it is surprising that such passionate defenses of these alternate viewpoints appear from presumably evangelical

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87 Christianity Today (March 21, 1986).
readers of this widely-read publication. This suggests that laypeople had been struggling with these central theological issues surrounding hell and God’s love, justice, and sovereignty and even coming to adopt alternative positions, despite the fact that these were at this point rarely discussed as true evangelical alternatives by leading evangelical figures.

Likewise, the internet proved to be fertile ground for the advocacy of these sorts of minority theological positions in the 1990s and 2000s. Websites like that of Tentmaker Ministries (tentmaker.org) and the Evangelical Universalist Forums (http://www.evangelicaluniversalist.com/) provide both theological resources and a space for debate and discussion on their message boards. Rethinking Hell (http://rethinkinghell.com/) serves a similar role for advocates of conditional immortalism and annihilationism. Indeed, the firestorm surrounding Rob Bell’s tentative endorsement of universalism – or least his rejection of the traditional depiction of hell – was inaugurated in large part because opinions on the book were both speedily and readily available through Twitter and popular blogs.

For instance, in response to a promotional video for the book, “neo-Calvinist” figurehead John Piper famously tweeted “Farewell Rob Bell,” indicating that he felt Bell no longer belonged within the evangelical fold.88 Somewhat curiously, Piper later claimed that this tweet had less to do with Bell’s view of hell specifically, but rather with his general understanding Christ’s atonement and salvation: “My issue there was not primarily his view of hell. It was his cynicism concerning the Cross of Jesus Christ as a place where the Father atoned for the sins of his children and dealt with his own wrath by punishing me in his son.”89 Bell’s rejection of the

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88 John Piper, Twitter, February 26, 2011: https://twitter.com/johnpiper/status/41590656421863424.
traditional understanding of hell was inextricably linked to a number of other central theological
tenets for Piper, including penal substitutionary atonement. Indeed, as *Christianity Today* staff
writer Sarah Pulliam Bailey noted at the time, what was even more unusual was that this
backlash had been unleashed not by the book itself, but a promotional video spread through these
same electronic avenues. The release of the book, however, moved the topics of hell and the
scope of salvation once again to the forefront of public intra-evangelical dialogue, prompting a
slew of books, a 2012 documentary entitled *Hellbound?*, and conferences to discuss the doctrines
of eternal damnation, annihilationism, and universalism.

The most recent and striking of these conferences was held in June 2015 at Fuller
Theological Seminary and organized by the conditional immortalist group Rethinking Hell. The
conference, entitled “Conditional Immortality and the Challenge of Universal Salvation,”
brought in defenders of practically all of the evangelical perspectives on the afterlife. However,
as one of the organizers, Chris Date, noted in his opening address, the most ardent traditionalists
– who did not even allow that some people might come to accept Christ after death – were
largely (and conspicuously) absent. Indeed, certain radio hosts in this camp condemned the
conference and excoriated Fuller for hosting it (the conference organizers were careful to qualify
that the seminary was not actually endorsing the conference but merely provided the space for
rent).

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90 Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Rob Bell’s Upcoming Book on Heaven & Hell Stirs Blog, Twitter Backlash on
Universalism,” *Christianity Today* (February 26, 2011):
twitter.html.
91 From my own observer’s notes from attending the conference. Rethinking Hell also provides a DVD recording of
the various sessions.
The events of this conference, as well as the consistent debates surrounding hell in evangelicalism over the last thirty years, reveal a certain growing divide within evangelicalism, one not just limited to the specific theological positions at play. For instance, a number of defenders of eternal damnation, like Jerry Walls and Oliver Crisp, were present at the 2015 Rethinking Hell conference, although admittedly these tended to have a modified view of hell which allowed for the possibility that some might be saved in a post-mortem state. Furthermore, both Calvinists and Arminians were present, as were creationists and evolutionists, inerrantists and infallibilists. What united most of the conference’s speakers and attendees was the conviction that although immensely important, the issue of hell should not be taken to be one of division, demarcating who counted as a true evangelical or Christian or not.

That is, unlike the public outcry from (predominantly conservative Calvinist) quarters like The Gospel Coalition surrounding Bell’s supposed universalism, the attendees of the Rethinking Hell conference did not primarily frame the issue in terms of faithful Christian resistance to an onslaught of theological liberalism in the guide of an anti-Christian universalism. Rather, it was assumed that the parties involved – annihilationist, universalist, or traditionalist – acted in good faith and came to their conclusions in a sincere and eminently Christian way. Of course, this more ecumenical attitude is unsurprising coming from the proponents of minority positions. Indeed, the language of openness was central to Edward Fudge’s defense of annihilationism in The Fire That Consumes in 1982. However, the fact that certain traditionalist defenders also advocated this broader approach to theological disagreement indicates that this is part and parcel of a larger group of evangelicals tired of certain forms of

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92 In the 2012 documentary by Kevin Miller, Hellbound?, famous neo-Calvinist pastor Mark Driscoll used a geopolitical analogy of claiming that universalism represented a different “country” than true evangelical Christianity.
boundary-marking and theological bickering that they see as having characterized American evangelicism. There are some common features of these two respective camps: the more ecumenically minded seem to lean more towards Arminianism and a rejection of strict scriptural inerrancy, whereas the hardline traditionalists have often been Calvinist and inerrantist in orientation. However, these tendencies are not without exceptions, and the larger point seems to be this divide in ecumenical orientation rather than more specific theological positions.

Debates over the existence of hell and what types of people would be saved were consequently connected to other debates surrounding the interpretation of scripture and the nature of God. In the beginning decades of the century, most theologically conservative Protestants remained united in their defense of the concept of eternal damnation as it was coming under increasing attack by the theological liberals in the mainline denominations. However, by the last few decades of the twentieth century, some evangelicals were themselves coming to doubt the traditional view of damnation as eternal conscious torment, despite the fact that they professed to be quite theologically conservative themselves. However, as will become clear in the next chapter, this shift was grounded in an older and more widespread change in American attitudes towards suffering, death, and God. In order to rescue the concept of hell, a number of theological conservatives even in the first decades of the century had come to characterize hell as an unfortunate byproduct of human sin and not something in which God took any large amount of glee. Thus, even many of the hardline conservatives ended up accepting certain of the premises of their more “liberal” opponents.
III. A SHOCK TO FINER SENSES: HELL IN FUNDAMENTALIST AND EVANGELICAL PREACHING

1. Fundamentalist Hells

As she rose to give her sermon at the 7:30 evening service on November 1, 1925 at Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, Pentecostal evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson made a confession: “I am just as scared and nervous as can be. I wish somebody else would preach this sermon.” McPherson’s affective delivery likely intrigued her audience. What topic could cause such anxiety for perhaps the most prominent evangelist of the era? That evening, Sister Aimee was preaching on hell. McPherson’s November sermon combined an emotional repulsion at such an unseemly doctrine with a firm biblical commitment to nevertheless asserting its reality. In doing so, she anticipated many of the tropes that theologically conservative Protestant preachers would employ in the twentieth century to wrestle with the place of hell in a modern world that they saw as increasingly hostile to it.

The fear that belief in hell was rapidly declining plagued conservative Protestants throughout the twentieth century. Most of these evangelists used the growing liberal rejection of eternal damnation for polemical purposes, calling for a renewed trust in the infallible authority of the Bible against modern skepticism. Hell also served as an essential component of the internal logic of conservative twentieth century Protestantism by providing the fundamental problem to which the evangelical religious message supplied an answer. Thus, in attempting to defend the reality of hell in a cultural context seemingly more and more wary of it, these figures were doing more than attempting to save face; they were trying to uphold the legitimacy of what they saw as

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the Christian way of life. Nevertheless, these fundamentalists and neo-evangelicals had not totally escaped the alteration in American sentiment that was increasingly repulsed by the ideas of hell and a wrathful deity. Thus, fundamentalist and neo-evangelical preachers from Aimee Semple McPherson to Billy Graham felt the need to express their discomfort with the idea of hell, while they simultaneously defended it. This discursive strategy of claiming that hell was in danger of eradication ironically ensured that twentieth century conservative Protestant preachers managed to both revive and maintain the relevance of the idea of eternal damnation for a large portion of the American populace. And, in doing so, evangelical preaching on hell revealed some of the internal and external pressures that evangelicals faced over the place of their religion in a modern America.

If some revivalists like Dwight Moody had, towards the end of the nineteenth century, taken a more optimistic approach in the pulpit, fire-and-brimstone sermons had something of a comeback in ex-baseball-player and revivalist Billy Sunday. Jonathan M. Butler has argued, however, that Sunday’s use of hell was less a traditional revivalist appeal to convert and more a provocative attack on modernist outsiders. “Instead of being terrified by the pulpit pyrotechnics,” Butler writes, “the audiences were amused by them…The revivalist message confirmed the rightness of their faith and dismissed the Darwinists and higher critics, modernists and infidels, as hopelessly wrong.” Butler, then, identifies the appeal of bombastic revivalists like Sunday with the growing American preoccupation with entertainment. Certainly, Sunday was troubled by what he saw as the fashionable dependence upon new forms of modern inquiry. “You can preach sociology, or psychology, or any other kind of ology,” he said, “but if you leave Jesus

Christ out of it you hit the toboggan slide to hell.”\textsuperscript{95} The liberal tendency to, in his view, ignore the clear teaching of the Bible was unacceptable. In an interview with the Chicago newspaper \textit{The Day Book}, Sunday admitted that, by holding fast to such notions as the devil and hell, he would be charged with “sixteenth century preaching.” To this, he replied, “But when a century gets too smart to believe in the devil and in everything else the Bible teaches, I say to HELL with the century!”\textsuperscript{96} Although Sunday was less nuanced – although certainly more provocative – than fundamentalists like Straton, he shared with them the basic epistemological presupposition that God’s truth was timeless and changeless. And, he couched this in intentionally anti-modernist and anti-progressivist language.

Consequently, Sunday typically saw no need to defend hell by any means other than assertions that it was what the Bible taught. Nevertheless, on occasion, Sunday drew upon other argumentative means, most notably a version of the seventeenth century French-Catholic polymath Blaise Pascal’s wager argument:

\begin{quote}
Suppose there is no hell? Suppose that when we die that ends it? [...] Suppose death is eternal sleep? I believe the Bible; I believe its teachings; I have the best of you in this life. I will live longer, be happier, and have lost nothing by believing and obeying the Bible, even if there is no hell. But, suppose there is a hell? Then I’m saved and you are the fool. I have you beat again.\textsuperscript{97}
\end{quote}

Christianity, for Sunday, was always the safer bet. If hell was real, only the Christian would be saved, and if it was not, the Christian still gained the most from a life of faith and virtue over atheism and moral decay. Contrary to the ancient Christian conviction that belief in Christ would lead to earthly suffering, Sunday asserted that the Christian would have it best both in the life to

\textsuperscript{97} Ellis, “Billy” Sunday, p. 399.
come and in the here and now. This was, no doubt, tied to his muscular Christianity, which prized (male) physical vitality.\textsuperscript{98} Still, this passage raises the question about why Sunday would employ, wittingly or not, this type of philosophical argument, despite his reluctance to rely upon non-biblical, “worldly” knowledge. At least in part, the appeal of this argument was that it was more pragmatic than theoretical; it fit Sunday’s practical and popularist style of argumentation that gave little credence to idle speculations. It was the sort of argument that just about anyone – especially an American – could understand, an appeal to self-interest.

All the same, it is important not to overstate the extent to which Sunday used hell merely in a polemical fashion against modernist foes. For one, Sunday employed hell more generally to attack what he saw as the social evils of the day. The saloon, in particular, proved to be a major object of Sunday’s rhetorical ire. Alcohol, Sunday declared, sends people “into the mouth of hell.”\textsuperscript{99} Occasionally, such critiques would take on a gendered dimension. For the ex-baseball player, it was not merely a lack of a virile masculinity that troubled modern American society, but also the decline of civilized femininity. Womanly virtue was the “rampart wall of American civilization,” the razing of which would lead to “the hottest hell, and reeking vice and corruption.”\textsuperscript{100} This passage reveals the social dimension of Sunday’s message. Hell was not merely a destination in the afterlife, but a positive force that threatened to overtake the temporal world. Satan was leading an all-out assault, and human beings were collectively the target:

\textsuperscript{98} As W. Scott Poole notes, Sunday presented the Christian life as a boxing match with a very real and active Devil. Christians, and especially men, needed to be both spiritually and physically trained to fight off Satan and the creeping forces of hell in their lives. See \textit{Satan in America: The Devil We Know} (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), pp. 60-61.

\textsuperscript{99} Ellis, “Billy” \textit{Sunday}, p. 90.

\textsuperscript{100} Ellis, “Billy” \textit{Sunday}, p. 230.
“When you go to hell you’re going to drag someone else down with you and if you go to heaven you’re going to take someone else with you.”

Additionally, while Butler is correct that some of Sunday’s heated rhetoric was directed towards outsiders – liberal theologians, agnostic professors, drunkards – Sunday nevertheless maintained the eighteenth and nineteenth century revivalist emphasis on converting those in the crowd. He repeatedly stressed to his audience that faith in Christ was crucial to salvation: “Your admission into heaven depends upon your acceptance of Jesus Christ; reject him and God says you will be damned.”

Moral goodness was not enough for salvation, and death put an end to any additional chances to receive it. “If a man doesn’t settle his future before the undertaker pumps the embalming fluid into him,” Sunday warned, “then he’s a goner.” This sort of direct appeal was not merely a rhetorical firework display, intended solely to enthrall an audience, but something of a traditional appeal for those in the audience to convert or suffer damnation.

If Sunday thought that repeated threats of damnation could wake a lethargic modern audience from their spiritual malaise, the Pentecostal preacher Aimee Semple McPherson held that such audiences instead needed to hear of the love of God. Matthew Avery Sutton writes that “instead of the retributive deity of many revivalists, McPherson promoted a loving, benevolent, and immanent God who worked with humans in the twentieth century exactly as he has in the first to save souls.” One contemporary of McPherson quipped that “Aimee believed in hell – but not for advertising purposes.” Nevertheless, McPherson would, on occasion, speak on hell,

102 Ellis, “Billy” Sunday, p. 415.
105 Quote by Nancy Barr Mavity, found in Sutton, Aimee Semple McPherson, p. 47.
although, as her November first sermon indicates, not without some fear and trembling. In part, she blamed this reluctance to preach the harsh truths of God upon her gender, saying “one even draws back from preaching about it [hell], especially a woman.” Yet, she also assumed that Christians were supposed to be focused upon more positive things; consequently, hell was rightfully “a shock to their finer senses.” McPherson thus welcomed the change in sentiment that found predestination, divine judgment, and damnation repulsive. At the same time, despite her intense discomfort with the concept, McPherson defended the reality of hell with a commitment to biblical authority that rivaled that of Sunday. As Sister Aimee put it: “What are you going to do about it? It is in the Bible.”

For McPherson, the worst aspect of hell was not whatever tortures it might contain, but rather the spiritual and relational desolation it entailed. In fact, intentional separation from God was the very essence of hell. God, argued McPherson, “never did and He never will send anybody to destruction.” Damnation was no arbitrary decision God made eons ago, but the choice of individual sinners in this life. This position enabled McPherson to remain open to the possibility of the salvation of the “poor heathen.” God, she said, “takes into consideration his heart, his mind, and his opportunity.” Furthermore, the sinful pleasures of this life, for McPherson, were temporary distractions that Satan employed to mask their destructive terminus: “Oh, it must be an awful thing to be lost. It is no wonder the Devil has so many jazz bands, so many saxophones to drown out the cries and the sorrows of the lost.” This identification of jazz with sin and hell was not an isolated case; the evangelical businessman Paul Johnson

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106 McPherson, “Hell and Who Will Be There,” p. 3.
claimed that his conversion was initiated in part by his recognition that the jazz clubs at which he enjoyed playing were identified with spiritual decay. Modern American culture was implicated in the devil’s plan to drag humans down to hell.

Like Sunday, McPherson also tended to default to pragmatic arguments for belief in Christ when not directly invoking scripture. In the November sermon, McPherson told a parable of some men in a boat who, caught in a current, almost fell over Niagara Falls. One of the men, a declared agnostic, made some heavenly supplications in the struggle, after which one of the others, a Christian, queried this apparent hypocrisy. The agnostic replied: “That ‘No Hell’ doctrine is good enough to live by, but it is no good when we were going over the falls.”

These popular revivalists, then, did not attempt to combat the historical-critical or philosophical arguments that well-educated critics of the doctrine employed, but rather appealed to their audiences’ basic sense of self-preservation. The possibility of damnation remained, in their minds, a live option for most people, such that a rational calculation of their interests would push towards religious faith.

2. Crusades and Communication: The Neo-evangelical Hell at Midcentury

As Molly Worthen has most recently traced, the retreat of fundamentalists from many of the mainline denominations in the 1930s and 1940s led to a deliberate effort by self-described “evangelicals” like Carl F.H. Henry and Harold Ockenga to form a coalition of theologically conservative Protestants who could once again engage the broader American intellectual culture. One figure who, in many ways, served as an archetype of this neo-evangelical project

112 Robert Schuster, “Interview with Paul E. Johnson.”
was the evangelist Percy B. Crawford. Even in the 1920s, Crawford had been at the forefront, along with Aimee Semple McPherson, of utilizing the medium of radio for evangelistic purposes.\textsuperscript{115} In 1938, Crawford founded his own Christian liberal arts college named The King’s College in Belmar, New Jersey.\textsuperscript{116} King’s, said Crawford, would serve as an intellectual refuge, where young Christian students could receive a biblically-based education without being forced to accept the “trend of skepticism” that professors inculcated at state schools.\textsuperscript{117} In December 1959, just under a year before his death, Crawford addressed the school in a chapel sermon explaining the school’s doctrinal statement. The theological maxim that Crawford emphasized was, somewhat curiously, not biblical inerrancy or the divinity of Christ, but the doctrine of eternal damnation. In the sermon, Crawford echoed many of the same points that Billy Sunday has expounded decades before:

\begin{center}
\begin{quote}
You say you believe in a literal and real hell that burns with fire and brimstone forever and ever. Yeah. Why? Because Jesus believed it. Well, people say to me that a really unpopular teaching today. You’ll hurt people if you believe that. It's true. I usually, when I was on the networks, I would usually preach on it once or twice a year. Everlasting, eternal hell. The living, burning fire that never goes out. I’d get more criticisms, I’d actually get up into the hundreds of letters tearing me apart. Arguing. People of other faiths that'd turn me down. I can’t help it, it’s in the book. What good is me being a preacher if I don’t preach what’s in the book. I'm not innocent in social welfare, I’m not innocent in philosophies of man. I listen to what the book says. That’s the important thing.\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}
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\textsuperscript{116} Crawford, \textit{A Thirst for Souls}, p. 189-190.
\textsuperscript{117} Crawford, \textit{A Thirst for Souls}, pp. 187-188.
\textsuperscript{118} “Chapel Sermon by Percy Crawford on King’s College’s Doctrinal Statement,” 10 December 1959. Tape 8, Collection 357, Papers of Percy Bartimus Crawford and Ruth Crawford Porter. Archives of the Billy Graham Center.
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On one hand, Crawford’s ultimate appeal to the infallibility of biblical revelation – and his assumption that the Bible’s teaching on the matter were clear – revealed the extent to which, theologically, neo-evangelicalism had not strayed all too far from the fundamentalism of the 1910s and 1920s. Still, the sermon is of note for at least two reasons. First of all, Crawford admitted that the criticism he received for defending hell was not limited, as it largely had been for early fundamentalists, to liberal preachers and mocking modernists. Now, he had received criticisms from “people of other faiths.” In utilizing mass media like radio and eventually television, mid-century evangelists both expanded the reach of their message, as well as opened up the possibility of criticism from more diverse groups in an increasingly pluralistic society.

Secondly, while Crawford exhibited many of the ambitious qualities of mid-century neo-evangelicals, he also displayed their quirks and insecurities. In the chapel sermon, Crawford was careful to emphasize that he was “not innocent in the philosophies of man.” Worthen contends that, especially due to public perception of the Scopes Trial, neo-evangelicals were left with an “intellectual inferiority complex.” Consequently, mid-century neo-evangelical leaders often sought advanced degrees from top American universities or those in Britain and Germany. This helps makes sense of Crawford’s almost obsessive tendency to flout his intellectual credentials. When, for instance, he spoke about hell during a 1953 episode of his television program, *Youth on the March*, Crawford assured his viewers that, ridiculed by skeptics as a young man, he chose to attend seminary, UCLA, the University of Pennsylvania, and spend “four hours on Hebrew alone for one solid year that I might found out about what this book the

120 Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*, pp. 82-83.
Bible says about the question of hell.”¹²¹ This certainly reveals a development from the populist and more-or-less anti-intellectual approach of Billy Sunday. Now, the defender of hell and orthodox Christianity had to first establish her or his intellectual credentials. And, whereas Sunday dismissed the need to examine the native biblical terms for hell like “gehenna” and “hades,” Crawford went to great lengths to explicate these terms and their original historical contexts.¹²²

Crawford adopted a tough-minded air in speaking about damnation. He began his April 12 sermon with a warning: “Today I want to talk to you about is there really a hell? [...] Now, if you don’t want the truth about this subject, I suggest you turn to another program and get a comedian…or a puppet show…for this is going to be something that will hurt.”¹²³ Crawford acknowledged that the medium of television was more suitable to entertainment than hard theological truth, but this belied the ways in which Crawford’s sermons contained performative aspects themselves. Crawford delivered the sermon by looking directly into the camera and confronting his audience with the prospect of death: “You’ll think in hell. Yes, you will. You will remember how you scorned the love of Calvary and how you spit in his face and refused Jesus.”¹²⁴ Television provided Crawford the opportunity to, much in the vein of a nineteenth century revivalist, force his audience to confront this ultimate soteriological choice, although on an unprecedented scale. And, like Sunday, he enthralled his viewers and listeners in the process.

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¹²² Butler, Softly and Tenderly, p. 74.
¹²³ “Sermon on ‘Is There Really a Hell?’” 12 April 1953.
For neo-evangelicals like Crawford, the primary problem of the middle of the twentieth century was not that people did not believe in God. Indeed, most Americans at this time believed in some form of deity. The issue was rather that Americans were not worshipping this God properly. As Billy Graham said in his 1957 sermon “Choose This Day Whom You Will Serve” at Yankee Stadium, “We believe in God. We’re not against God…We just don’t have time for God. We’re too busy.”\(^{125}\) While Graham, like Crawford, feared that “secularism” was becoming an idol of the day, he also stressed spiritual maladies particularly appealing to prosperous post-War Americans: “materialism,” “amusement,” “indifference.”\(^{126}\) This was something of a shift from the earlier fundamentalist screeds against specific sins of indulgence like alcohol or jazz. Nevertheless, Graham’s prescription was the same: faith in Christ. Perhaps Graham’s greatest strength laid in his presenting salvation as a stark and immediate concern:

> Every heartbeat is a heartbeat nearer death…the Bible teaches that the wages of sin is death, the result of your idolatry, the result of your sin means spiritual death. It means separation from God. It means destruction. It means Hell and thousands of us tonight are on the broad road that leads to destruction…that is the message of God tonight to this great audience of people at Yankee Stadium. They must decide and you must decide whether you want to serve other gods or whether you will serve the true and living God, and Joshua said you must decide now, not tomorrow, but immediately.\(^{127}\)

Graham made hell a very real and present danger by forcing his audience to phenomenologically confront both their immediate mortality and future immortality. For Graham and other twentieth century evangelicals, these various temptations to lead Americans astray – whether materialism, a theological liberalism, or communism – were traps set by a scheming Satan. In their minds, the


\(^{126}\) Billy Graham, “Choose This Day,” p. 3.

\(^{127}\) Billy Graham, “Choose This Day,” p. 4.
devil, writes W. Scott Poole, “worked overtime to prevent conversions to the Christian faith.”128 Evangelicals lived in a world permeated by supernatural forces warring over individual souls, which would either spend an eternity in heaven or hell.

In another sermon during his 1957 New York tour, Graham warned that the damned would be in perpetual “mental torment,” experience “craving lusts that cannot be satisfied,” remain in complete isolation, and be haunted eternally by their own memory.129 Thus, he did not stress the stereotypical physical torments of hell portrayed in medieval art, but rather the psychological, relational, and spiritual desolation entailed by an eternity in solitude. Alongside this, Graham also employed a similar rhetorical move to McPherson when he said that eternal damnation was “perhaps the hardest of all teachings of Christianity to receive” but one that nevertheless could not be swept aside.130 When one woman told him, “I hate the very thought of hell,” he responded, “So do I.”131 Yet, Graham denied that this justified the attempt to “[distort] the idea of future punishment so as to make it abhorrent to the sense of justice and love and the Biblical conceptions of the love of God.”132 Thus, while some earlier revivalists like Sunday were generally content to point to the Bible and appeal to mystery, Graham attempted to rescue God’s reputation.

In large part, he did so by representing hell as a necessary consequence of human existence. Hell was simply the logical corollary of human beings possessing free will and living in a morally-significant universe: “if there were no punishment then man would not be a free

128 Poole, Satan in America, pp. 114-115.
moral agent.”

In contrast to many of the critics of hell who asserted that hell was an affront to God’s justice, Graham contended in a 1954 London sermon that it was precisely God’s justice that bound God to allow some people to be damned: “God is a great God, but there are one or two things that even God cannot do. God cannot tell a lie, and He cannot save a man who refuses to come to His Son, Jesus Christ. He cannot. God, with all of His might, and with all of His greatness, is held back by His holiness and his justice.”

This passage shows the extent to which a basically Arminian language of freedom, human nature, and salvation had permeated the post-war evangelical sphere, despite the fact that many of the neo-evangelicals who spear-headed this effort were professedly Reformed. Graham’s God, by all accounts, did not arbitrarily damn vast swathes of humanity for his own glory. Rather, God desperately wanted to save all, but could not, if this meant overruling human free will. This merciful deity would “weep” for the lost, but could not rescue them from themselves if they persisted in their denial of salvation.

This was a significantly more advanced defense of the doctrine of hell than had been seen in earlier decades. Indeed, Graham would occasionally even dedicate portions of his sermons to considering alternate eschatological viewpoints like annihilationism and universalism. And, as his free will defense attests, Graham’s arguments did not always rely upon revelation to combat them. Hell, Graham argued, was “intuitive and instinctive,” and he claimed that the field of anthropology confirmed that all “tribes” believed in it.

In doing so, Graham was implicitly arguing that raw human nature naturally accepted hell as a consequence of justice, a truth that modern people could only dismiss through willful intellectual stubbornness. At other times,

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Graham employed a folksy comic persona to make his point. One favored illustration was the story of a wealthy patron who descended into a coal mine and, because of the increasing temperature, remarked, “I wonder how far it is to hell.” The miner accompanying him replied: “I don’t know the exact distance, Sir; but if one link of the chain gives way, you’ll be there in a short time.”\textsuperscript{136} This story basically encapsulates the early Graham’s general approach to the doctrine of eternal damnation. Graham felt that most people instinctively knew hell was real; they just needed to be shocked into recognizing the immediate danger of death that faced them. In this respect, he shared the pragmatism of earlier revivalists like Sunday and McPherson.

3. Hell, Old and New: Damnation in Contemporary Evangelicalism

Throughout the twentieth century, theologically conservative Protestant preachers decried what they saw as the American rejection of biblical Christianity, a major symptom of which they located in declining professions of belief in hell. The timelines for these declension narratives occasionally varied: the Episcopalian George Wolfe Shinn, although something of a modernist himself, claimed the last few decades of the nineteenth century had ushered in a newfound skepticism about now-archaic concepts like eternal damnation. Fundamentalists and neo-evangelicals generally blamed the trend on early twentieth century theological liberalism and scientific skeptics. Yet, in 1985, Marshall Shelley, host of the evangelical audio journal \textit{Preaching Today}, contended that the shift in focus from preaching on heaven and hell to the “here and now” had occurred in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Christianity Today} editor Kenneth S. Kantzer, like Sunday and Graham, blamed liberal theologians for inaugurating this unfortunate course, yet a

\textsuperscript{136} Graham, “Hell,” p. 11.
subtle shift is evident. Whereas fundamentalists and neo-evangelicals in the first half of the century feared the decline of belief in hell, these evangelical preachers in the 1970s and 1980s feared that their flocks might still confess to believe in hell, but that it did not have a major impact on their lives. Concern about the future destination of one’s soul had been supplanted by worries about day to day mortal life.

To some extent, this was true. Grant Wacker has argued that even Billy Graham came to speak less of hell and divine judgment towards the end of his public career, and these decades saw an increase in “seeker-friendly” churches that creative ways to spread the message of God’s love rather than more traditional fire and brimstone sermons. This style of American evangelicalism stressed the Christian’s faith as an intimate relationship with an ever-present and all-caring Father. Clearly, this deeply relational understanding of Christianity was heavily influenced by earlier figures and trends like Billy Graham and Aimee Semple McPherson’s brand of Pentecostalism. Yet, evangelical Christians in this period were becoming increasingly innovative in the ways in which they delivered this message, from megachurches with lobbies that resembled shopping malls to Christian bookstores carrying Christian toys and rock albums.

Bill Hybels, the pastor of the Illinois megachurch, Willow Creek Community Church, was one of the great figureheads of this style of evangelicalism, yet even he expressed a similar concern to Shelley and Kantzer that evangelicals were too often ignoring hell. Yet, whereas

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Butler contends that Billy Sunday’s fiery sermons entranced listeners, Hybels contended that negative subjects like death, judgment, and hell ran the risk of making it “easy for people to yawn and leave.” Hybels worried that late twentieth century Americans were simply no longer worried about their immortal souls. “You sound like you’re from Mars when you tell people to prepare for eternity,” Hybels remarked. “If you try to awaken modern man to the fact that he’s going to spend time in eternity, he says, ‘but that’s at least two weeks from now.‘” Notice how Hybels preaching style both borrows and develops the sort of folksy and anecdotal humor that had been present in the sermons of Graham, McPherson, and Sunday. Despite the seriousness of the topic at hand, he uses a certain lightheartedness to make his audience comfortable with speaking of it. In a sermon entitled “A Look at Hell,” Hybels relayed a story in which a young man who yelled out to his friends “see you in hell.” American culture had come to see hell, argued Hybels, if it even existed, as “a sort of eternal Animal House.”

However, Hybels primary concern was not for this lack of belief in hell among non-Christians, but among those in the evangelical pews (or, more common by this point, cushioned seats). He confronted his congregation by asking them if hell functioned in a concrete way in their lives: “Do all of you really believe in a hell as well as a heaven? You really believe this stuff?” Whereas McPherson had attributed the lack of desire to think about hell to Christians’ optimistic nature and Crawford viewed liberal disbelief in the doctrine as the real threat, Hybels was concerned that his listeners might acknowledge hell on some theoretical level, and yet that it might have lost all relevance in their actual lives. So, Hybels speaks to an anxiety that becomes increasingly highlighted by the end of the century. He, like all of this figures covered here, points

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141 “Preaching Today, Tape 28.”
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
out a general decline of belief in hell among Americans at large, although he is decidedly less interested in laying the blame at the feet of liberal theologians and professors. And, like those other evangelists, he too sees hell as a foundational belief to the entire Christian system. But, Hybels fears that evangelicals had themselves become corrupted by this broader, secular American culture.

In response, Hybels actually mines the history of Christian theology to offer rather traditional defenses of the doctrine, foremost among them the Anselmian argument that the principles of retributive justice require that sin against an infinite God be met with an equally infinite punishment. This sort of argument had been presented by American figures like Jonathan Edwards in the past, but despite its heritage, popular evangelical preachers in the twentieth century had rarely employed it. In large part, this is likely due to increasing American discomfort with the arbitrary and terrifying God that such an argument tended to portray, but Hybels remodeled it to fit with twentieth century sensibilities. For instance, he presents the case of a young girl who was raped and murdered and whose mother requested life in prison for the perpetrator on the grounds that death would be too light a punishment. Hell, argued Hybels, was like an eternal life sentence, yet by this analogy, he – wittingly or not – presented hell as the just reward for primarily the truly horrible and not for the average sinner. Furthermore, although he clearly desired to resuscitate hell as a central point in the Christian message, Hybels resisted the urgent appeals for repentance that had characterized revivalist preaching from George Whitefield and Charles Finney to Billy Sunday and Billy Graham. Such urgency was “distasteful,” argued Hybels, because it precluded the possibility of making a fully informed and rational decision:

Now look, maybe the guy has been living under a secular world and life view for forty-five years! Now, in forty minutes, he has heard something that is completely different from all he’s been thinking and valuing and understanding about life. Let him catch his breath, let him think it over, let him see the implications, let him ask his questions.146

Such an approach may have worked in an age when Christianity was more-or-less assumed by most Americans, yet secularism had undermined such cultural and religious cohesion. Presenting the unconverted with such a pressing and stark choice, argued Hybels, actually threatened the likelihood that they would take the message to heart.

Occasionally, evangelical preachers pushed back against the contingent of evangelicals pushing for a more benevolent conception of divine judgment. For instance, in a sermon entitled “Is John Wayne in Hell?” the Los Angeles fundamentalist Baptist Robert L. Hymers took issue with the account of Robert H. Schuller, founder of the Crystal Cathedral in Orange County and the “Hour of Power” television program, of meeting with John Wayne on the famed actor’s deathbed. The Holy Spirit, said Schuller, told him that he need not warn Wayne of the danger of damnation, but rather simply pray for him. This, argued Hymers, was a theological travesty: “John Wayne was a good American, and he deserved better than some liberal preacher let him go to hell.”147 Supposed evangelicals like Schuller, argued Hymers, were on their way to joining the “Bible-rejecting Methodists” and “liberation theologians that have become communists.”148 A rejection of hell and biblical Christianity indicated political and religious apostasy.

Furthermore, many evangelicals continued to stress the dangers of hell, often in creative ways. For instance, Jason Bivins has traced the ways in which figures like the tract-writer Jack

146 “Preaching Today, Tape 28.”
148 Hymers, “Is John Wayne in Hell?” Curiously enough, Hymers leaves open the possibility at the end of the sermon that Wayne did come to be saved after all, despite Schuller’s failure.
Chick and cultural productions like “hell houses” formed a culture of fear in contemporary American evangelicalism. Chick’s tracts often depicted demonic forces looking to lure individuals to a life of sin, whether this was through Catholicism or fantasy role-playing games. Hell Houses likewise employed theatrics to display how the devil attempted to entice people to accept a life of sin and thus consign themselves to damnation. However, Bivins often presents the deployment of language about damnation and hell as a tactic meant primarily to rally evangelicals against godless secular liberals, often with the aim of concrete political action. This leads him to downplay the extent to which hell functioned as a very real and tangible fear for those within evangelicalism, the intense horror at the possibility that they, too, might be damned. So, for example, Bivins contrasts contemporary evangelicalism with seventeenth century Puritanism: “In Puritan and early evangelical culture, these obsessions were interiorized, while in Hell Houses and the Left Behind novels, one finds few traces of the tortured conscience, of Martin Luther’s anfechtung.” Both points are true to an extent: evangelicals clearly did use hell as an othering tactic to demarcate opponents, and many evangelicals did become less concerned with the possibility of damnation.

All the same, these hell houses were often filled with converts, and presumably many such individuals did not fit the roles of school shooters or abusive spouses that often populated the hell house productions. Although Hell Houses displayed the eternal consequences of what are perceived to be especially grievous sins (e.g. suicide, homosexual activity), they were not merely political theater; hundreds of attendees were themselves moved to “accept (or reaccept) Jesus

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150 Ibid., p. 31.
into their hearts” in order to avoid damnation. Additionally, by highlighting the political dimensions of this rhetoric of horror, Bivins loses sight of the ways in which hell served as a site of evangelical wrestling with the intellectual quandaries of modernity. That is, the reality or unreality of hell was wound up with questions about the authority of the Bible and the very self-coherence of the evangelical intellectual system. Hell was not just a tool; it was and remains a central component of the intellectual integrity of most evangelicals’ identities.

Two rhetorical tropes can be seen in much of the twentieth century fundamentalist and evangelical preaching about hell. First, almost all such sermons included a lament that preachers no longer spoke on the subject and that Americans generally no longer believed in it. Yet, a number of preachers also supplemented this move with an acknowledgement of their own discomfort with the idea of eternal damnation. Early fundamentalists like Aimee Semple McPherson and Billy Sunday were generally content to appeal to faith in the Bible to encourage belief in the doctrine, although they occasionally supplemented this with pragmatic appeals as well. However, by the mid-century, evangelists like Billy Graham were coming to offer increasingly complex arguments that relied upon assumptions about human free will, the intrinsic nature of justice, and the comprehensibility of the idea of eternal damnation. They were united, however, in holding that hell was a central component of genuine Christian belief.

Indeed, if these preachers occasionally seemed more concerned with ensuring that Americans

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151 See the 2001 George Ratcliff documentary Hell House. Consequently, the Gallup poll’s result of only six percent of Americans saying that they have a “good” or “excellent” chance of ending up in hell does not necessarily suggest that they never had such a concern. Rather, in keeping with a long-standing Arminian Protestant tradition of free will, they might have simply moved past this phase of anxiety in the process of their conversion. The Calvinist Puritans, however, denied this sense of security; indeed, a true Christian needed to be constantly fearful of the possibility of self-deception about their status as one of the elect. With regard to the latter point, see David E. Stannard, The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).
continued to believe in hell than actually preventing them from ending up there, it was only because the two were intimately connected in their minds. However, hell was not simply contentious within theologically conservative Protestantism because of debates over its existence, but also because the twentieth and twenty-first centuries saw an increased willingness to make claims about the nature of the afterlife based on personal testimonies of near death or visionary experiences. It is to such accounts that we now turn.
IV. “HELL IS NOT SATAN’S PLAYGROUND”: VISIONARY AND NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES OF HELL IN AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM

1. A Curious Trend

On January 13, 2015, the evangelical blog Pulpit and Pen, run by Reformed Southern Baptist pastor JD Hall, posted an open letter from Alex Malarkey, the co-author and main subject of the bestselling 2010 book The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven. Malarkey, who had been involved in a car accident at the age of six that left him paralyzed, claimed to have visited heaven while in a coma in the wake of the wreck. In his open letter, however, Malarkey retracted his story, saying:

I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. I said I went to heaven because I thought it would get me attention. When I made the claims that I did, I had never read the Bible. People have profited from lies, and continue to. They should read the Bible, which is enough. The Bible is the only source of truth. Anything written by man cannot be infallible.

The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven was just one entry into an expanding and successful genre of, in Malarkey’s words, “heaven tourism.” Other works, like Todd Burpo’s Heaven is for Real and Don Piper’s 90 Minutes in Heaven had not only sold millions of copies, but have now also been turned into major motion pictures. After Malarkey’s retraction, the book’s publisher ceased production of the book, the Southern Baptist Convention released a resolution largely

152 Alex and Kevin Malarkey, The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven: A Remarkable Account of Miracles, Angels, and Life Beyond this World (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.).
condemning near death accounts of the afterlife, and the denomination’s bookstore chain took heaven tourism books off the shelves.155

Malarkey’s letter, the blog on which it appeared, and the backlash by the Southern Baptist Convention reveal that personal accounts of the afterlife are increasingly viewed with suspicion by certain segments of American evangelicalism. Yet, this is not unanimously the case; ever since Raymond Moody helped popularize near death experience (NDE) research in the 1970s, there has been an explosion of theologically conservative evangelicals employing such personal accounts of the afterlife for evangelistic, theological, and apologetic purposes.

As the titles of the most recent entries in this genre indicate, heaven has more often served as the setting for these narratives. Yet, personal accounts of the less sunny side of the Christian afterlife, hell, have for the last few decades existed alongside these positive ones. Charismatic and Pentecostal authors exhibited an acceptance of spiritual and experiential accounts to both proselytize and legitimate their distinctive theological positions. Additionally, in the 1980s and 1990s, the physician Maurice Rawlings and evangelical apologists employed the growing scholarly literature on NDEs as scientific and philosophical evidence for the existence of an afterlife against naturalistic assaults. At the same time, such apologists were generally wary of “occult” or “New Age” influences on this research, and stressed that some such accounts contained anti-Christian and potentially even demonic messages. Finally, with the rise in popularity of the Internet and the boom in afterlife tourism books in the 2000s, certain

biblicist evangelicals – often with Reformed or Calvinist leanings – pushed back against the reliability of such accounts on the grounds that they threatened the authority and sufficiency of scriptural revelation. The manner in which these evangelical figures both presented and responded to these accounts of hell are helpful in revealing the different notions of religious evidence and authority at play within conservative American Protestantism.

2. Early Pentecostal Narratives

Three years before the psychologist Raymond Moody published his 1975 bestselling popular exposition of NDEs, *Life after Life*, the Pentecostal preacher Kenneth Hagin had already published one of the most influential evangelical near death accounts of hell. As a teenager with a congenital heart defect, Hagin claimed that in 1933, he died multiple times, in each instance descending into hell and returning. Hagin’s description of hell is fairly sparse, as he claimed its horrors could not be translated to those who had not witnessed it. Nevertheless, at least two theological functions are explicit in Hagin’s narrative: first of all, his account of hell served as a warning against Christian complacency and stressed the need for a conversion experience. As he was dragged down to hell for the third time, Hagin screamed, “God, I belong to the church. I’ve been baptized in water.” In a 1982 work recounting this experience in more detail, entitled *I Went to Hell*, Hagin tied this rote form of Christianity with his Southern Baptist upbringing. Thus, Hagin’s account served as a fairly typical evangelical warning that external

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appearances of religiosity, including baptism, were not sufficient for eternal salvation. The sinner needs to be born-again, to specifically ask Jesus to forgive her or his sins.\textsuperscript{160}

Secondly, Hagin depicted his near-death experience as a \textit{resurrection} to support his particular charismatic theological perspective. He said, “My experience of being brought back from the dead is not new. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead… the Apostle Paul raised a young man from the dead – others down through church history of have had similar experiences.”\textsuperscript{161} In doing so, Hagin utilized his return from hell to argue against the cessationist view – often held by Southern Baptists – that abilities like speaking in tongues and performing miraculous works of healing – had generally ended in the apostolic age. In the following decades, charismatic and Pentecostal evangelicals would follow Hagin’s strategy of employing NDEs and visions of hell to proselytize and support their own theological convictions. During the 1980s and 1990s, the authors of these accounts would occasionally appear on Christian television networks, preeminentely, the Trinity Broadcasting Network.\textsuperscript{162}

Perhaps the most extravagant Pentecostal account of hell is Mary K. Baxter’s 1993 work \textit{A Divine Revelation of Hell}.\textsuperscript{163} Baxter’s narrative is particularly interesting for at least three reasons. For one, unlike Hagin, Baxter’s tour of hell was not framed as a conversion experience where she went from sinner to saint, but rather as a divine mission from Christ himself to warn

\textsuperscript{160} Hagin, \textit{I Believe in Visions}, pp. 15-16.
\textsuperscript{161} Hagin, \textit{I Believe in Visions}, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{162} For one such example, see the appearance of physician-turned-evangelist Richard Eby on Paul and Jan Crouch’s program “Praise the Lord,” where he recounted his vision of hell while visiting the traditional site of Lazarus’ tomb. “Praise the Lord,” 19 March 1985. A recording can still be found in TBN’s website at: http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/ec/s1bmx0Mjr3mROREhyFNAwYMDDYGK7c9E. See also the documentary \textit{Death & Beyond} produced by John and Joel Osteen of Houston’s Lakewood Church, which dramatized Hagin’s narrative, presented an interview with Raymond Moody, and drew upon the research of one of the figures covered in the next section, Maurice Rawlings. As Phillip Luke Sinitiere notices, the documentary utilized non-evangelical scientific sources – from quoting Einstein to interviewing Moody – and attempted to create a reconciliation between religion and science. See Phillip Luke Sinitiere’s Salvation with a Smile: Joel Osteen, Lakewood Church, and American Christianity (New York: New York University Press, 2015), pp. 55-56.
\textsuperscript{163} Mary K. Baxter, \textit{A Divine Revelation of Hell} (New Kensington, PA: Whitacker House, 1993).
sinners of what she had seen.\textsuperscript{164} Secondly, while Baxter speaks of her experience as a “vision,” her language is ambiguous about what precisely this entailed. For instance, she says that her soul literally left her body and that “it was as though I had died.”\textsuperscript{165} This was no mere passive dream, yet it was not initiated by the medical trauma that generally accompanied popular NDEs. Baxter presented herself, it seems, as inhabiting a liminal space between life and death.

The topography of Baxter’s hell is also of note. For Baxter, hell was positioned in the center of the earth,\textsuperscript{166} was shaped like a human body,\textsuperscript{167} and contained a zone known as the “fun center,” in which witches and other willing followers of Satan were torn apart by demons and “scattered across hell in a kind of demonic scavenger hunt.”\textsuperscript{168} In a Dante-esque mode, Baxter interviewed the damned, although, unlike Dante, her guide was Jesus himself. One such figure was a preacher, who previously expressed disbelief in hell and rejected the central Pentecostal teaching of Spirit baptism.\textsuperscript{169} So, in addition to rebuking specific sins and calling for conversion, Baxter’s account, like Hagin’s, also contained theological critiques of Christian perspectives that she found dangerous.

3. The Apologists of Near Death

While these Pentecostal accounts of hell typically served to proselytize and perform theological boundary-keeping, other evangelicals around the same time saw the new research on near death experiences as evidence for broader Christian theological claims. In 1978, the cardiologist Maurice Rawlings published a book entitled \textit{Beyond Death’s Door}, which served as

\textsuperscript{164} Baxter, \textit{A Divine Revelation of Hell}, pp. 13-14.
\textsuperscript{165} Baxter, \textit{A Divine Revelation of Hell}, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{166} Baxter, \textit{A Divine Revelation of Hell}, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{167} Baxter, \textit{A Divine Revelation of Hell}, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{168} Baxter, \textit{A Divine Revelation of Hell}, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{169} Baxter, \textit{A Divine Revelation of Hell}, pp. 75-77.
a corrective to the tendency among non-evangelical NDE researchers to emphasize positive afterlife experiences and discount negative ones.\textsuperscript{170} In the work, Rawlings gave his account of a patient, who went into cardiac arrest and died, yet was repeatedly resuscitated. When he came back, the patient, with great distress, begged Rawlings to keep him alive and furthermore to pray for him, since he had seen hell.\textsuperscript{171} In his 1993 book \textit{To Hell and Back}, Rawlings depicted himself as a skeptic at the time, yet led what he called a “make-believe prayer.” The patient repeated the prayer, died, and came back once again, yet this time he was calm. Rawlings framed this series of events not only as a conversion experience for his patient, but for himself as well.\textsuperscript{172} Rawlings, then, utilized his own medical and scientific credentials to both employ NDEs as proof of an afterlife against skeptical critiques and stress a particularly evangelical message of the need for conversion.

While Rawlings clearly saw NDEs as useful for evangelism, he simultaneously feared that non-evangelical researchers were presenting NDEs in harmful ways. This also troubled evangelical apologist Douglas Groothuis, who, in a 1995 article for \textit{Christianity Today}, critiqued the near death account offered by Betty J. Eadie in her best-selling 1992 work, \textit{Embraced by the Light}.\textsuperscript{173} Eadie’s account, according to Groothuis, represented a pluralistic trend in American religiosity that arose from increasing secularization. Religious beliefs were banished to the private sphere, allowing them to escape the critical eye of traditional religious authorities. The result was a “self-styled, ill-conceived, and sloppily syncretistic” theology that downplayed divine judgment, tended towards a soteriological universalism, and discounted a biblical

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{170} Maurice Rawlings, \textit{Beyond Death’s Door} (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978).
\textsuperscript{171} Rawlings, \textit{Beyond Death’s Door}, pp. 17-22.
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understanding of God. That same year, Groothuis published an expanded version of this critique entitled *Deceived by the Light* that, like Rawlings, worried about occult, New Age, and pluralistic themes in NDE literature.

Furthermore, both Rawlings and Groothuis expressed concern that these positive NDEs of an all-loving, pluralistic, and benevolent being could actually be vehicles of demonic deception, intended to lure individuals into a false feeling of salvific security. For this reason, Groothuis saw hellish NDEs as actually offering the most trustworthy accounts, since God might be using such experiences to “give a sinner a shocking taste of hell in order to awaken a healthy fear of God.” The fear of real satanic and occult power should, I think, be connected to the larger evangelical preoccupation with these themes in the 1980s and 1990s (for instance, in the panic surrounding fantasy tabletop games like *Dungeons & Dragons*). And, in fact, some evangelical writers wrote critically both on these supposedly occult games and NDEs.

At the same time, however, Groothuis saw NDEs as offering decent evidence for at least some notion of a soul and afterlife. On this point, he was drawing upon the work of apologists J.P. Moreland and Gary Habermas, who, in their 1992 book *Immortality: the Other Side of Death*, contended that NDEs, while not always reliable, offered fairly definitive proof that “life

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176 Groothuis, “To Heaven and Back?” p. 42.
beyond the grave exists beyond a reasonable doubt.” Moreland and Habermas were hesitant to claim much more than this; the cultural contingency of such accounts showed that they could not be employed as a firm proof of a Christian heaven and hell. Yet, for such apologists, NDEs counted as an important piece of evidence in favor of a generally theistic worldview, which had been increasingly attacked by Anglo-American analytic philosophers in the twentieth century.

4. Religious Authority and the Contestation over the Legitimacy of NDEs

Even as they were skeptical of overly positive NDEs, these apologists took for granted that at least some NDEs actually involved a legitimate experience of an afterlife state. However, by the late 1990s, a more thoroughgoing skepticism regarding all claimed experiences of the afterlife became prevalent, especially among Calvinist or Reformed evangelicals. The Internet provided a home for such critiques, even by laypeople or lesser known clergy who might not have previously been able to publish a book. Pentecostal accounts like those of Hagin and Baxter were the most common objects of critique, both for the way in which they threw “veiled threats” against opposing evangelical viewpoints as well as their tendency to claim exclusive revelation. One major worry was that these Pentecostal narratives contained purported direct quotes from Jesus, with the result, as Reformed pastor Bob DeWaay remarked, that “readers are intimidated into accepting these new revelations lest they be found rejecting Jesus.” The prohibition in Revelation 22 against additions or subtractions to the work served, furthermore, as an argument that non-canonical revelatory experiences were null. Hagin, Baxter, and others were

180 DeWaay, “Visiting Heaven and Hell.”
compared to declared heretical figures like Ellen G. White, Mary Baker Eddy, and Joseph Smith who similarly relied upon these sorts of personal revelations.\(^{181}\) In additional to worries that personal revelations undermined scripture, DeWaay also argued that such accounts were unfalsifiable and thus it was impossible to discern which were true – save from a comparison with the claims of the Bible.

And such critics did indeed find many claims in these accounts that seemed to contradict scripture. They took particular issue with the common trend of depicting demons or even Satan himself as personally torturing the souls in hell. One such critic, Justin Peters, strikingly summarized this position:

…contrary to popular perception, Hell is not Satan’s playground. Hell is not to Satan as the briar path is to Brer Rabbit; a place where he longs to go and roam about freely. Satan and the demonic hordes do not want to go to Hell any more than we do.\(^{182}\)

Such Biblicist critiques, however, were not limited to relatively marginal Internet websites, but also picked up by influential Reformed evangelicals like John MacArthur and John Piper. MacArthur, for instance, combined the biblicist critique against new forms of revelation with the older fear that such accounts promoted a “superstitious, shallow brand of spirituality.”\(^{183}\) One


\(^{182}\) Peters, “Your Best Afterlife Now.” At the same time, these conservative Reformed critics were not alone in critiquing NDEs and visionary accounts of heaven and hell. Mary K. Baxter, for instance, came under fire from evangelical universalists, who argued that the traditional doctrine of eternal damnation that she expounded was incompatible with a just and loving God. See Evelyn Uyemura, “Book Review: Thoughts on A Divine Revelation of Hell by Mary K. Baxter,” on Tentmaker, n.d.: http://www.tentmaker.org/reviews/ADivineRevelationofHellbyMaryKBaxter.html.

curious aspect about this critique was that whereas evangelical apologists in the 1980s and 1990s had primarily critiqued those NDEs that smacked of occult or obviously heterodox themes, now evangelicals were turning on accounts that were written by expressly evangelical figures with clear evangelistic purposes. MacArthur worried that the trend of evangelical accounts of heaven indicated that wishy-washy, New Age forms of spirituality were now infecting evangelicalism.¹⁸⁴

What can this intra-evangelical discourse teach us about contemporary American evangelicalism, on one hand, and the religious employment of near death and visionary accounts of the afterlife, on the other? Well, first of all, as Aaron Griffith has noted in a recent article for the Religion News Service, this trend reveals a divide within evangelicalism between “rationally minded” biblicists and those who are more “experiential minded.”¹⁸⁵ I have tried to identify these rationalist biblicists primarily, if not exclusively, with a resurgent Reformed evangelicalism that, for instance, occupies much of the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention. Furthermore, I have attempted to clarify the role that charismatic and Pentecostal afterlife accounts played in the development of this “experientially-minded” form of evangelicalism. The advent of the Christian bookstore, I think, helped integrate charismatic forms of Christianity into something of a “core” evangelical culture that emphasized the experiential nature of one’s relationship with God. This, in turn, helped open the possibility that God might reveal some religious truths – for instance, the nature of heaven or hell – in this relational process.¹⁸⁶ This helps explain why various

¹⁸⁴ MacArthur, “Heaven in Real.”
¹⁸⁶ Although I do not want to argue that this openness to personal revelations is a new phenomenon. My hunch is that the introduction of Wesleyan forms of Protestantism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century contributed to this Protestant divide on the status of personal revelations from God.
evangelical leaders, from Groothuis to the Southern Baptist Convention, saw the inclusion of certain afterlife accounts in Christian bookstores as dangerous.

At the same time, however, it is important to avoid a strict dichotomy between rationalist evangelicals who rejected afterlife accounts and experientially-minded evangelicals who accepted them. The evangelical apologists covered in this chapter were very much concerned with philosophical and theological reasoning, yet they – with some reservations – accepted NDEs as offering useful arguments against a naturalistic worldview. Nor do I think, as Todd Brenneman has argued in reference to Todd Burpo’s *Heaven is for Real*, that an opposition between emotion and intellect is the best way to frame this intra-evangelical tension.187 Surely, there is some truth to that conceptualization, and these hell accounts clearly employ emotionally-charged language and imagery. But, this does not entail that the authors of such accounts accept a purely emotional fideism. After all, the majority of *Heaven is for Real* involves the father, Todd Burpo, finding evidence, both biblical and otherwise, to “authenticate” his son Colton’s account. For instance, the elder Burpo finds that Colton can describe biblical characters in a scripturally-accurate manner, despite the fact that Colton did not have contact with those passages before his hospitalization.188 But, Todd is also intellectually-convinced by other proofs: for instance, that Colton could name and describe his dead grandfather, even though his parents had never mentioned him to Colton.189

At the root of the issue, it seems to me, is a disagreement both about what *types* of evidence are permissible for Christians to draw upon and what authoritative *weight* each should

189 Todd Burpo, *Heaven Is for Real*, p. 86.
hold. For Reformed critics like MacArthur, scripture alone served as the source of religious authority and evidence, although they also supported this with claims about the harmful consequences of accepting personal revelations. The authors of these evangelical afterlife accounts clearly upheld the Bible as authoritative, but also saw personal revelations as being at least potentially legitimate sources of religious truth. Finally, the apologists also accepted the centrality of biblical authority, but viewed scientific and philosophical reasoning as serving an essential function when defending their beliefs in a naturalistic and secular age. Consequently, this latter group attempted to establish a synthesis – or, at least, a friendly relationship – between science and religious belief.

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Thus, the rise in near death and visionary accounts of heaven and hell proved to be a further site of internal dissension within evangelicalism. Those evangelicals already more open to using experience as a means to theological truth welcomed such accounts on the grounds that they seemed to confirm the reality of heaven and hell in an age of skepticism, as well as bolster their own specific doctrines. Evangelical apologists likewise saw in near death experiences potential proof to rebut modern scientific skepticism of the supernatural. Yet, there was still a contingent of evangelicals – many of them the same conservative inerrantist Calvinist Baptists who most vigorously resisted challenges to the traditional view of eternal damnation – who felt uncomfortable with relying upon these first-person accounts because they seemed to undermine the sole authority of scripture. Consequently, one’s ideas of hell and salvation were almost never isolated affairs, but wound up with a number of theological concerns about religious truth and the boundaries of evangelical and Christian identity.
V. CONCLUSION

By decrying the decline of belief in hell, fundamentalists and neo-evangelicals assured the doctrine’s continued relevance. Jonathan M. Butler has argued that such evangelists used hell primarily as a rhetorical technique to attack cultural opponents and “ignite revival fervor.” Consequently, he occasionally frames its importance to these figures as intensely situational.¹⁹⁰ To be sure, conservative Protestants spoke of hell with varying intensities at different points, and they certainly employed the rhetoric of damnation to condemn particular vices, perpetuate the theological divide between liberals and conservatives, and mark the boundaries of true Christianity. At the same time, hell was not merely a rhetorical strategy for these evangelists; they believed that the conservative Protestant theological system rested upon the notion of damnation. Hell was the consequence of sin, and Jesus’ vicarious sacrifice on the cross resolved precisely this problem. Thus, the danger of discarding hell was not simply the possibility of societal decay or the need to concede a theological point to liberal critics, but the intellectual coherence of their entire way of life. And, if this worldview was found to be faulty, what could provide legitimacy to evangelical morality, institutions, and social relationships? As conservative apologists had argued for decades, the only real alternative – whether in a wishy-washy theological liberalism or fervent atheism – was relativism and nihilism.

As indicated in the introduction to this thesis, this narrative of the trajectory of the concept of hell in twentieth century America would be well-served by future research on the ideas of salvation and damnation in black and Latino evangelicalism, as well as Catholicism. Furthermore, while I have attempted to provide some glimpses of the visual representations of hell in this time period, it would be valuable to further examine how images of hell changed both

¹⁹⁰ Butler, Softly and Tenderly, p. 2.
in popular culture and in the evangelistic materials of conservative Protestants. For instance, what commonalities and differences might we see in the dispensational charts of an early twentieth century fundamentalist like Clarence Larkin compared to the portrayal of damnation in the tracts of Jack Chick or in hell houses? Furthermore, I have attempted to give voice to laypeople as well as Protestant preachers and theologians; however, future studies of the discourses surrounding hell would do well to engage lay people directly through ethnographic interviews and through more systematic surveys.

The homiletic discourse surrounding hell in twentieth century American conservative Protestant circles reveals not only the particular cultural concerns such as alcohol, materialism, and jazz that plagued these preachers, but also a deeper anxiety over the continued place of Christianity in the modern world. Nevertheless, this form of religious belief proved to be quite resilient. Despite the perpetual fear of its decline, the language of hell persisted for most fundamentalists and evangelicals throughout the twentieth century precisely because fundamentalist and evangelical leaders continued to bemoan its decline. However, while these preachers made these moves to reclaim hell as a traditional and central belief from "liberal" or "secular" attacks, they oftentimes changed it in the process, either by acknowledging their own discomfort with it or by making it more palatable to contemporary moral sensibilities. Hell was increasingly becoming seen as the consequence of conscious human rejection of salvation, not some arbitrary and wrathful judgment of an inscrutable God. Furthermore, greater access to numerous peoples who had not been presented (or not successfully presented) with the Christian gospel raised the question as to why a loving God would allow so many people to be damned when they had no opportunity to accept salvation. Consequently, later evangelicals exhibited an increased felt need to provide more detailed justification for God’s behavior in the damnation of
sinners than earlier fundamentalist revivalists. Although most evangelicals did not go so far as to renounce their Christianity or even adopt universalism, their modifications of eternal damnation to make the doctrine less severe indicates that they too were touched by many of the same concerns as the archetypal thinkers of the Enlightenment.191 Thus, even those traditionalists who berated Christians who adopted the “heretical” ideas of annihilationism or universalism did not escape unscathed by modern or liberal ideas and sensibilities.

Many of the figures covered in this thesis insisted that true Christians must continue to assert the doctrine and have it structure their lives. This was crucial not only because they believed hell was a concept taught in the inerrant Bible, but because the very idea of eternal damnation, the worst possible outcome for human beings, required an intense seriousness. Consequently, contra Butler, fundamentalists and evangelicals did not stop preaching hell when it proved ineffective; rather, it was precisely when audiences were most indifferent or hostile to the idea of eternal damnation that they felt the need to most vigorously expound it. Indeed, the rejection of hell in the broader American culture was symptomatic of a grand spiritual war occurring every day, one in which the devil was constantly attempting to undermine the faith of American Christians. As the Baptist preacher Robert Hymers declared, “The devil hates that doctrine more than any other, because he knows it’s true.”192 For many of these fundamentalists and evangelicals, to believe in hell was to fight against it.

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191 For instance, both Leibniz and Lessing continued to justify the doctrine of eternal damnation, although both made similar moves to figures like McPherson in leaving open the possibility that more people – especially those in non-Christian regions – would be ultimately saved than traditionally thought. See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “Leibniz on Eternal Punishment,” in Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings, ed. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 37-60.

192 Hymers, “Is John Wayne in Hell?”
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Masuzawa, Tomoko, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).


