Matthew Avery Sutton


“Jesus is coming soon” (31), “Jesus saves” (153), “the coming of our Lord draweth nigh” (210). It is not difficult to imagine the origin of these sayings: a street preacher, a religious periodical, or a church sign. These images all rise out of the context of modern premillennial fundamentalism, specifically a brand of “radical apocalyptic evangelicalism” (3) that placed a high emphasis on the imminence of Christ’s return and a fascination with a certain stripe of biblical prophecy.

In American Apocalypse, Sutton endeavors to chronicle the exploits and escapades of modern Evangelicalism as exemplified by the burgeoning fundamentalist movement in the early twentieth century. In this regard, the book narrates the history of fundamentalism, which has had a profound impact on Evangelicalism as a whole. Contrary to a popular belief that fundamentalists are all isolationist sectarians who withdraw from the broader culture, Sutton's impressively extensive documentary evidence demonstrates a consistent belief among such adherents “that God has called them to use their talents to occupy, reform, and transform their culture in ways that matched their beliefs and ideologies” (xiii–xiv). To this end, the book presents compelling narratives beginning at the inception of fundamentalist thought and theology, through the turbulent war years, and carrying into the very recent past. Far from the predominant assumptions of their detractors, these “apocalyptic evangelicals” shared surprisingly diverse beliefs, including what their premillennial convictions required of them with regard to the public sphere. One thing is clear: the theological convictions of this group led them to radically alter the religious landscape of the United States. “While many Americans expected the apocalyptic worldview of [such believers] to foster complacency, indifference, and apathy, it had the opposite effect [...] In anticipating the imminent end of the world, fundamentalists paradoxically transformed it” (7). Sutton's chapters are arranged chronologically (rather than geographically, denominationally, or otherwise by theme), which aids in grasping the continuities as groups holding to premillennial theology shifted in their foci, beliefs, and convictions.

Exemplifying the surprisingly diverse convictions of premillennial adherents is the lack of consensus of their views on war and violence. Even with the two World Wars looming large in the public eye, the faithful were convicted in different ways of their theological responsibility with regard to the concomitant violence. “Billy Sunday [...] concluded a Manhattan revival service by leaping ‘up on top of his pulpit’ and ‘wildly waving a flag with both
hands while every soul in the audience was on his feet cheering.' The journalist called it ‘a roaring climax to a meeting that had oscillated between patriotism and religion all evening’” (60). During a benediction before the United States Congress, Sunday prayed, “we pray thee that thou wilt bare thy mighty arm and strike that great pack of hungry, wolfish Huns, whose fingers drip with blood and gore” (61). Meanwhile, Texas pastor J. Frank Norris was once confronted by a local Roman Catholic businessman over Norris’s disparaging remarks about the town’s Catholic mayor. Norris pulled a revolver out of his desk and fatally put three bullets into the businessman’s chest. Norris was later acquitted on grounds of self-defense.

Other leaders, however, maintained a staunch stance of nonviolence, even while affirming their commitment to the United States itself. The burgeoning Assemblies of God declared at their 1917 convention, “we cannot conscientiously participate in war and armed resistance which involves the actual destruction of human life, since this is contrary to our view of the clear teachings of the inspired Word of God” (58–59). Others still modified their positions over time. An early issue of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles’s periodical King’s Business read, “How must a God of infinite love feel as He looks down from heaven and sees these antagonists both praying to Him and both ready to kill one another!” (59). But following the congressional declaration of war, the periodical adopted a more nuanced stance praising the work of Christian soldiers who had the bravery to sacrifice themselves for their country.

Sutton’s treatment also does the reader a service by demonstrating the continuity of contemporary fundamentalist thought with its historical origins. Consider premillennial approaches to issues of race and gender. The historic fundamentalist views on race are resonant today, especially with reference to the contemporary climate. In a 1922 sermon, Billy Sunday preached, “There never will be social equality between the white and the black […] The black man is entitled to civic equality […] When you are out on the highway with your Pierce-Arrow limousine you have got to give half of the road to that darkey with his tin lizzie” (135). Sutton summarizes, “The former baseball player’s messages reified white Americans’ racial prejudices. Not only did he fail to see racial equality as a component of the Christian faith, he saw segregation as a characteristic of godly living” (136). This line of argumentation is still deployed in contemporary debates about border security and immigration.

Additionally, consider gender: fundamentalists were themselves “coming of age” during the Roaring Twenties, and their sermons reflected it. Sutton notes, “fundamentalists had identified women and their bodies as a significant battleground […] fundamentalist leaders almost always blamed women rather than men for the nation’s supposed sexual decline” (139–140). Decrying women’s