

"Lost Soul, Get Right with God": The Akron  
Gospel Tabernacle and the Plight of  
Urban Revivalism, 1924-1934

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Not until the latter 1920s did people in American cities begin to regard radio and motion pictures as chief sources of mass entertainment. Prior to that, recreation in America's emerging urban mass culture was typically live and often participatory. In the 1900s, 1910s, and early 1920s, professional and college sporting events, and vaudeville shows began their ascendancy among common urban folk. Another widespread outlet of popular diversion before the 1920s was mass revivalism: large evangelistic campaigns, incorporating musical performances, group singing, and, of course, animated preaching. Although grand-scale revivals did not represent a new approach to Christian outreach, these years brought them unparalleled cultural favor. In tapping the emerging culture of mass entertainment, and doing so with heightened expressions of religious zeal, urban revivalism enjoyed a golden age in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

The era's affinity for city-wide revivals is partially linked to efforts by the famous and controversial evangelist Billy Sunday. Around 1910, the already renowned Sunday began holding four and six-week preaching campaigns in many of the nation's great urban centers, drawing crowds well into the thousands every night. His acrobatic preaching style, combined with his forceful, sometimes vitriolic message of repentance, patriotism, and manhood, helped to amass a tremendous following and inspired

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<sup>1</sup>William McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham (New York: The Ronald Company, 1959), 411-26.

hundreds of imitators to reproduce his methods and message.<sup>2</sup> The culture of revivalism created by Sunday and his progeny reached its zenith in the years following World War One.

As society changed during the 1920s and early 1930s, so did popular responses to mass evangelism. In 1924, while doing initial research on Muncie, Indiana, Robert and Helen Lynd noted the city's strong and vibrant revival tradition. However, their return ten years later revealed a notably altered mood. By 1934, the sense of evangelical vigor among people in Muncie had visibly decreased.<sup>3</sup> The decade separating the Lynds' first and second visit to "Middletown" represents a significant transitional phase in America's religious evolution.<sup>4</sup> But because this decline was only temporary, scholars have regularly ignored the changing nature and stature of urban revivalism in the 1920s and 1930s. Clearly the phenomenon represents an important facet of America's Protestant development and, thus, warrants close study.

In studying urban revivalism during the 1920s and 1930s, events in Akron, Ohio provide useful and suggestive points of reference. Though an early evangelical stronghold, the city's "mainstream" support for revivalism had unravelled by 1928, forcing "disestablished" evangelists to find new means of support. The tabernacle strategy provided revivalists with one alternative

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<sup>2</sup>William McLoughlin, Billy Sunday Was His Real Name (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Lyle Dorsett, Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991).

<sup>3</sup>Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd, Middletown: A Study in Contemporary Culture (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929), 315-31; Lynd and Lynd, Middletown in Transition (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1937), 295-96.

<sup>4</sup>Grant Wacker, "The Demise of Biblical Civilization," in The Bible in America, eds. Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 121-38; Robert Handy, "The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935," Church History 29 (March 1960): 1-29.

to mainline patronage. The Akron Gospel Tabernacle epitomized this approach. But the emergent discord between Akron residents and the Tabernacle's leader during the New Deal era ushered in the demise of this tactic as well. The story of Akron's tabernacle experiment helpfully sheds light on the course of urban revivalism in the 1920s and 1930s.

Fundamentalist Mass Evangelism  
in Akron, 1924-1928

Mass revivalism was intimately tied to fundamentalism. Usually emphasizing personal piety, the Bible's dependability, and the evils of theological modernism, large-scale revivals found their greatest support among fundamentalists. But, for any time prior to the late 1920s, it is misleading, if not deceptive, to describe fundamentalism or revivalism as somehow marginal to the broader scope of Protestant America. The enormous popularity of Billy Sunday within the central corridors of American society underscores this point. Revivalism pulsed through the nation's cultural veins as an accepted element of "mainstream" life.<sup>5</sup>

Like Muncie, Akron in the early 1920s supported a thriving revival culture, sufficiently illustrated by the city's 1924 crusade at Goodyear field. Twelve east Akron churches, representing seven different mainline denominations, united in late September to host a five-week, city-wide preaching campaign. From its earliest planning stages, the crusade was orchestrated to achieve renown as one of the most important religious events in the city's history. The twelve-church coalition recruited 300 volunteers to erect a massive semi-permanent wooden structure to house the campaign. This "tabernacle" held a capacity of 5000

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<sup>5</sup>McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, 444; George Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 224. Words such as *mainstream* and *extreme* are here set off in quotes to underscore their relative meanings. The words cannot be used without begging the question, "in relation to what?" The terms must be used in relation to their own historical settings.

people, with provisions for a 600-voice choir. It was furnished with six large coal furnaces to control the climate under any conditions, and "hundreds of globes" bringing radiant light into every part of the building's interior.<sup>6</sup>

The campaign committee overlooked very little in planning for the event and its potential audience. "Everything has been arranged for the comfort and convenience of those who wish to attend the tabernacle services." They installed a nursery nearby where parents were asked to "check their children three years and younger" so "there may be no disturbances by babies during the services."<sup>7</sup> In addition to inclusive nightly assemblies, special meetings at various times were planned for men, women, "old folks," and children. Also, to increase the crusade's range and accessibility, daily "noonday shop meetings" were coordinated at various rubber factories. Thus, the five-week religious gathering became a nearly pervasive civic event, saturating most facets of Akron's cultural and social life.

The most vital and visible feature of any mass revival was its evangelist. Urban revivals in the Sunday tradition were built upon robust, flamboyant preachers that supplied their meetings with magnetism and fascination. Bob Jones, a dynamic rising star in the world of fundamentalist preachers, more than adequately filled this role at the 1924 Akron campaign.<sup>8</sup> Like Sunday, the Alabama evangelist used an energetic preaching style, challenging

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<sup>6</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 20 September 1924; 27 September 1924; 29 September 1924; 4 October 1924.

<sup>7</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 4 October 1924.

<sup>8</sup>Jones later became a world famous religious leader. He founded one of the largest and most rigid fundamentalist dynasties in America, with *Bob Jones University* in Greenville, South Carolina as its crown jewel. See William Ringenberg, The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1984), 178-86.

the assumptions and exciting the passions of those in his audience. The meetings focused on saving lost sinners and "backsliders" and challenging the already saved to "get better acquainted with spiritual living."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to "preaching the Gospel," revivals commonly included strong condemnations of their host cities' predictably epidemic levels of crime and vice. Evangelists worked hard 1) to reveal the community's wickedness and corruption, 2) to define the spiritual roots of its social problems, and 3) to rally the city faithful to stand against sin. Accordingly, Jones offered provocative sermons denouncing Akron's rampant "lawlessness, drunkenness, gambling, prostitution, dancing and motion pictures on Sunday." He emphasized the responsibility of Christians to take control of circumstances, stating, "There are enough church men in this tabernacle tonight to make Akron a Christian city."<sup>10</sup> His careful melding of religious fervor with civic duty was received with particular enthusiasm by one segment of Akron's population.

Nothing more clearly illustrates the "right-wing" nature of the Protestant "mainstream" in the early to mid-1920s than the widespread acceptance of the Ku Klux Klan within northern cities.<sup>11</sup> At various times between 1923 and 1927, Akron's Klan boasted the membership of the city's mayor, a Common Pleas Court judge, a candidate for congress, a city councilman, the school board president, the sheriff, a United States commissioner, and, not least of all, some of Akron's most prominent Protestant clergymen. Even as Jones preached, Akron's "Klan No. 27" was actively engaged in an ultimately successful bid to control the city school board.

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<sup>9</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 7 October 1924.

<sup>10</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 11 October 1924.

<sup>11</sup>Kenneth Jackson, The Ku Klux Klan in the City: 1915-1930, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 89-184.

Their mission was motivated by a desire to preserve "the Flag" and "the Bible" as the centerpieces of public life and education.<sup>12</sup>

The goals espoused by Jones easily harmonized and widely overlapped with those of the Klan. Not surprisingly, Jones devoted an entire night of the campaign to the Klan's Akron chapter. The Klan band and women's glee club provided music, while a special "electrified red cross" was erected behind the speaker's platform. Jones praised the Klan's civic efforts, affirming its dual commitment to Christianity and civic duty. As perhaps the most staunchly "Christian" of all groups, he described the Klan as "the only organization where you can preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and not make anybody mad." "Where the Klan is strong," he declared, "the Protestant churches are crammed on Sunday morning."<sup>13</sup>

The Jones campaign offers a striking example of the tremendous attention and far-reaching effects that city-wide fundamentalist revivals had on urban areas through the mid-1920s. Here, Jones shrewdly manipulated the revival method to promote his sensational moralism and unabashed nativist patriotism. Regardless of how "extreme" the Klan or Jones may sound by contemporary standards, their ideas and activities resonated with the prevailing currents of their time. For good or ill, they were

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<sup>12</sup>John L. Maples, "The Akron, Ohio Ku Klux Klan, 1921-1928," (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Akron, 1974), 47-94.

<sup>13</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 21 October 1924. Throughout John Maples's study of Akron's Ku Klux Klan are scattered references to active participation in the Klan by many Protestant pastors. A particularly interesting note about the close identification between revivalism and the Klan is the fact that Jones sold Goodyear tabernacle to the Klan for their use as a temporary meeting place. See Maples, 32-33.

both members of Akron's and the nation's cultural "mainstream."<sup>14</sup>

The city maintained its generally receptive posture toward fundamentalist revivalism over the next several years. However, a number of cultural forces began to begrime its reputable public image. In 1925, the nationally monitored Scopes "monkey" trial at Dayton, Tennessee portrayed fundamentalism in a less than flattering way, leaving it vulnerable for public humiliation. Writers like H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis--wrongly, but successfully--convinced many in America that fundamentalists constituted an uneducated, boorish class of hillbillies and derelicts, irrelevant if not destructive to modern America.<sup>15</sup> Although the Scopes debacle hardly spelled the demise of fundamentalism, the trial indirectly aggravated cracks in its mainstream status. The symbolic event served to significantly diminish the public authority of fundamentalist leaders.

By 1928, the recently powerful Klan in Akron and around the nation was almost completely defunct. Essentially unrelated to the Klan's demise, fundamentalist Protestants also lost control of most mainline churches by the late 1920s. Though a measure of evangelical fervor remained in most American cities, mass revivals no longer retained their "mainstream" functions as venues of

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<sup>14</sup>Leo Ribuffo, The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right From the Great Depression to the Cold War (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 14. Quoting from Ellis Hawley, Ribuffo concurs that "100% Americans," vigilance organizers, and Ku Klux Klansmen did not yet stand out from the mainstream. Members of the Klan, for instance, adhered to both major parties, and Imperial Wizard Hiram Wesley Evans called on Democrats like William Gibbs McAdoo as well as President Coolidge," from The Great War and the Search for Modern Order: A History of the American People and Their Institutions, 1917-1933 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 126-29.

<sup>15</sup>Marsden, Fundamentalism, 184-95. Ironically, Mencken and Lewis both failed to recognize the close alliance between fundamentalism and the city. See also Ferenc M. Szasz, The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930 (University, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1982), 117-25.

popular entertainment and platforms of political and moral mobilization. Out of this malaise rose a new breed of independent revivalists, abandoned by the political and cultural powers of urban America, and determined to forge ahead with its own spiritual, moral, and political agenda.

Mass Evangelism and the Tabernacle  
Strategy, 1929-1932

Fundamentalists did not abandon American cities in the late 1920s and early 1930s. They instead adopted new evangelistic strategies. When city-wide preaching campaigns were supported by the Protestant establishment, evangelists did not need their own infrastructures of financial and emotional patronage. But after their "disestablishment," fundamentalist revivalists were deprived of mainline Protestantism's structural resources. They were forced to build their own institutions and seek out new religious markets.<sup>16</sup> Innovative approaches to revivalism were therefore devised to accomplish this goal.

One of the most striking attempts to re-invent fundamentalism's evangelistic task was Paul Rader's tabernacle strategy. Earlier than most, the Midwestern evangelist recognized fundamentalism's need to develop independently of the mainline establishment. In 1922, Rader led a mass preaching campaign in Chicago. But, instead of moving on to another city at its conclusion, he stayed on to establish a permanent enterprise of revivalism within the city. Instead of traveling the itinerant circuit and receiving support from cooperating cities, Rader

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<sup>16</sup>Joel Carpenter, "Fundamentalist Institutions and the Rise of Evangelical Protestantism, 1929-1942," Church History 49 (March 1980): 62-75. The newly vogue sociological language of religious markets is appropriately applied here. For a theoretical discussion and an model application of this method, respectively, see R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," American Journal of Sociology 98 (March 1993), 1044-93; R. Laurence Moore, Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

stayed in Chicago and developed his own following from within the city. His Chicago Gospel Tabernacle became the first in a network of independent tabernacles, temples, and storefront churches promoted by Rader.<sup>17</sup> As events in Akron indicate, urban fundamentalists, at least temporarily, succeeded in reaching new markets using the Rader approach.

While many revivalists had to adjust to fundamentalism's recent "disestablishment," Akron's Bill Denton began his ministry with an already well-developed sense of independence. Recently converted to fundamentalist Christianity, Denton came out of Akron's "slums" in the late 1920s with a "calling" to "save" the city's poor and miscreant. In 1928, he purchased a "Gospel bus," painting "Jesus Saves" on the front, and "Prepare to Meet Thy God" along the side.<sup>18</sup> On "Calvary's Traveling Gospel Mission"--complete with organ and electric bells--Denton traveled from city to city conducting street revivals.

A year later, Denton established his preaching activities at a permanent location. He opened a mission on Furnace Street, a district infamous for "dope fiends, harlots, drunkards, murderers, bootleggers and all that make up an underworld."<sup>19</sup> Though he devoted much of his energy to collecting food baskets and clothing for the area's impoverished, his primary objective was "soul winning." He conducted nightly services at the mission, with three on Sunday. For those who could not fit into the small

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<sup>17</sup>Larry Eskridge, "Only Believe: Paul Rader and the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle, 1922-1933" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Maryland, 1985), 75, 184; McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, 466-67. In his study of the rise of fundamentalist institutions, Joel Carpenter oddly ignores the entire tabernacle phenomenon, "Fundamentalist Institutions."

<sup>18</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 9 April 1929.

<sup>19</sup>Bill Denton, "Bill Denton's Life Story," in For God and Country, 2.

mission, he fastened an amplifier to the building's exterior, reportedly attracting 200-300 cars each week to hear his messages.<sup>20</sup>

In 1930, Denton made his foray into mass evangelism. He invited "nationally known evangelist" Ira Bassett to lead a five-week revival in Akron, similar in scope to the Jones campaign of six years prior. The Bassett meetings, however, differed in their lack of city-wide cooperation. Denton independently hired fifty unemployed workers to construct a large wooden tabernacle with seating for 3000, and a choir of 250.<sup>21</sup> He alone shouldered the burden of organizing and advertising the meetings. While the Jones revival had enjoyed the emotional and material backing of twelve churches (whose reported combined membership approaching 10,000), Denton possessed no such institutional base. But what Denton lacked in organization, he attempted to make up for with his predilection toward sensationalism.

One week before the revival began, Denton sponsored a promotional event at the Akron Armory where he showed his own silent film entitled "The Secrets of Akron Revealed," containing footage of the corrupt and squalid neighborhoods near his mission on Furnace Street. He set the sordid images of crime and corruption in contrast to scenes of his own heroic work feeding the hungry and preaching against immorality and vice. A rather lively clip shows an obviously staged "booze" raid with law enforcement agents storming a bootleg operation, smashing jugs of

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<sup>20</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 19 October 1929; Souvenir Bulletin: Furnace Street Mission (Akron: Furnace Street Mission, 1930), 2-4, 11.

<sup>21</sup>Akron Times-Press, 2 November 1930; Akron Beacon Journal, 7 November 1930.

moonshine, and arresting its guilty perpetrators.<sup>22</sup> The attention and controversy stirred by the film was intended to attract curiosity for the coming revival meetings.

The Bassett campaign, however, proved despairingly unsuccessful. Akron newspapers gave it virtually no exposure, in contrast to the nightly front page coverage of Jones during his comparable stint. The lack of attention may be explained by the fact that few people bothered to attend. Although no attendance figures survive, the campaign's financial record indicates an overall dismal showing. Bassett, himself, had provided the \$6609 needed to erect the tabernacle, and another \$3417 for staff salaries and basic expenses. Yet, the entire five-week crusade drew only \$1362, producing a net loss of \$8664!<sup>23</sup> The disastrous campaign left both Bassett and Denton in shock, yet each accounted for the results in very different ways.

Bassett publicly chided Denton for his belligerence toward Akron's clergy. He told reporters that Denton's inability to get along with area churches was to blame for the revival's dreadful outcome. "We understood churches of the city would join us," noted his business manager, Pasely E. Zartman. But "we were told on arrival that Denton was planning the campaign alone."<sup>24</sup> Just before leaving town, Bassett met with city pastors to distance himself from Denton's ill-tempered methods, and to underscore his own synergetic philosophy of revivalism. Failing to discern the

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<sup>22</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 7 November 1930; Although no copies of the film, The Secrets of Akron Revealed, survive to this day, two others produced by Denton have amazingly been preserved. Upon viewing Underworld Vs. Youth and Reblazing the Trail, it seems highly probable that Denton recycled the scenes from various projects for use in others. For instance, Underworld Vs. Youth shows a staged booze raid identical to the one talked about in The Secrets.

<sup>23</sup>Akron Times Press, 22 December 1930.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

nation's changing religious climate, Bassett continued to view revivals as occasions for city-wide unity under the sterling banner of mainline Protestantism.

Denton, on the other hand, perceptively recognized that Akron's religious climate had changed profoundly since 1924. In reality, the city's Protestant clergy, not Denton, had been "uncooperative" during the Bassett campaign. In deserting Denton, these ministers publicly disaffirmed their former solidarity with fundamentalism. The adversarial role Denton would assume within Akron's religious and political culture sprang largely from this experience. Thereafter, he keenly understood the pressing need to create and maintain his own independent structure of support. A latecomer to Paul Rader's tabernacle strategy, Denton initiated plans to erect his own institution of perpetual "revival."<sup>25</sup> He received Bassett's permission to use the wooden tabernacle until its lease expired, and in the meantime, searched for a suitable and permanent home for his Akron Gospel Tabernacle.

In 1931, Denton moved the ministry to a large brick building formerly occupied by the Franklin Sales and Service Company. The old garage was refurbished to accommodate a broadcasting studio, a "cafeteria for the needy," a bookstore, and as many as 3000 congregants.<sup>26</sup> In order to save money, he again moved the Tabernacle one year later, this time to its final home

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<sup>25</sup>Denton and Rader were well acquainted, evidenced in the number of times Rader and his associates held preaching campaigns and special concerts at Denton's tabernacle and mission, Akron Beacon Journal, 5 August 1930; 13 September 1930; 18 October 1930; 13 June 1932; Akron Gospel Tabernacle News, 19 June 1932. By Fall 1932, Rader listed Akron as one of sixteen cities with tabernacles in his movement. It is worth noting that Rader penned an evangelistic novel entitled Big Bug, whose central character was a "kind, paternalistic, multi-millionaire philanthropist who owned a rubber plant in Akron" (Eskridge, 184-85).

<sup>26</sup>Akron Times-Press, 7 February 1931.

in the old Miles Royal Theatre--a once popular vaudeville stage.<sup>27</sup> From these sites, Denton sponsored a concerted effort to capture a new religious market comprised of individuals from within Akron's nebulous radio audience, "marginal" peoples, and disillusioned mainline Protestants.

Denton was among the nation's first fundamentalist preachers to appreciate radio's enormous potentiality as an instrument of evangelism. He began sermonizing via radio as early as 1926 and secured his own program in 1928.<sup>28</sup> Like others, he quickly discovered radio's novel ability to procure religious adherents apart from mainline Protestantism's institutional authority. Denton aired many of his evangelistic meetings, first from the Furnace Street Mission and later from the Akron Gospel Tabernacle. He regularly made printed sermons and other Tabernacle literature available to his listeners for small financial contributions.<sup>29</sup> Ministries like this one marked the beginning of the long and sometimes turbulent marriage between fundamentalism and the electronic mass media.

Historian William McLoughlin correctly identifies another demographic segment drawn to the tabernacle strategy: "former tenant farmers, 'hill billies,' poor whites, small town folk who

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<sup>27</sup>Akron Times-Press, 20 September 1932.

<sup>28</sup>Quentin Schultz, "Evangelical Radio and the Rise of the Electric Church, 1921-1948," Journal of Broadcasting and Electric Media 32 (Summer 1988): 289-306.

<sup>29</sup>Akron Gospel Tabernacle News, 12 June 1932. A promotional "Ink Blotter" with Denton's picture on it--probably serving as a marketing device for his radio broadcasts--lists his show, "The Gospel Breakfast Program," as "Akron's Oldest Gospel Program--1928-1945." In a 1987 calendar celebrating the Furnace Street Mission's 60th anniversary, Denton's youngest son, Bob, suggested that his own show genetically descended from his father's, making it "the oldest Christian radio program in the United States."

had drifted into the cities to work in mills and factories."<sup>30</sup> Akron experienced a population explosion after 1910 due to the remarkable growth of its rubber industry. Workers by the tens of thousands, mainly from Appalachia and rural parts of Ohio, streamed into the city in search of employment. A burdensome housing strain was conferred upon Akron by the subsequent 200 percent population increase. The social problems associated with rapid urbanization befell Akron, creating a class of "marginal" people who, struggling to find proper housing and stability within the community, lapsed into poverty. The increasingly onerous Great Depression also did much to augment this marginal class.<sup>31</sup>

The Akron Gospel Tabernacle attracted many marginal Akronites through its massive charity outreach, an undertaking that belies all stereotypes regarding fundamentalism and social consciousness. Denton denounced the Protestant churches of Akron for their abandonment of the city's economically strapped. He accused them of literally stealing from the needy to build "great churches" with "fine kitchens." "For the sake of God's children," he exhorted, "open your church kitchens and bring in these starving children and feed them."<sup>32</sup> He likewise criticized his

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<sup>30</sup>McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, 466. Although McLoughlin rightly mentions marginal peoples as central to the tabernacle movement, he suggests that the movement itself was primarily grassroots inspired. This may have been true, to a degree. But religious leaders like Denton certainly played a key role in mobilizing the grassroot elements.

<sup>31</sup>Daniel Nelson, American Rubber Workers and Organized Labor, 1900-1941 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 44-55; Kevan Delany Frazier, "Model Industrial Subdivisions: Goodyear Heights and Firestone Park and the Town Planning Movement in Akron, Ohio" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Kent State University, 1994), 4-5.

<sup>32</sup>Bill Denton, "The Coming Crash," printed sermon, 1932. Historians often implicitly assume that fundamentalists, by definition, paid no attention to social problems. Denton turns this widely accepted formula on its head by hotly giving local

fundamentalist colleagues for their policy of *preach first, feed later*, noting that one should not "expect a man to listen to talk about spiritual food when he is physically hungry."<sup>33</sup> In a given month, the Tabernacle gave away \$500 worth of food, \$100 in furniture, \$150 in clothing, and \$200 toward other miscellaneous needs. It also supported a 40-acre garden and its own filling station, both tended by unemployed men. The proceeds from both of these went directly to aid the Tabernacle's needy associates.<sup>34</sup>

Membership at the Tabernacle, though, was hardly limited to Akron's underclass. To charges that he focused only on "gutter snipes" and "mission bums," Denton retorted,

each Sunday I preach to congregations of 1500 to 2000 persons made up of the best class of Akron citizenship who flock to this tabernacle to worship their God. Therefore it is unfair to them that you limit my abilities to fishing in the gutters.<sup>35</sup>

By supplying parishioners with evangelical passion and an unmistakable sense of mission, the Tabernacle capitalized on a

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mainline Protestant churches--usually associated with the "Social Gospel"--a blistering reprimand for ignoring the poor. See Paul Carter, The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel: Social and Political Liberalism in American Protestant Churches, 1920-1940 (Hamden, Conn.: Shoestring Press, 1956), for a typical rendering of the stereotype.

<sup>33</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 20 September 1932; Bill Denton, "The Coming Crash."

<sup>34</sup>Akron Times-Press, 23 September 1932; "Buy your gas at our Service Station and give the work a break that is feeding the poor and preaching the Gospel" (Akron Gospel Tabernacle News, 19 June 1932). "SAVE TIME: While attending the services let us service your car with grease, change of oil and tire attention" (Akron Gospel Tabernacle News, 12 June 1932)

<sup>35</sup>Akron Times-Press, 27 August 1933.

widespread disillusionment among the Protestant laity.<sup>36</sup> Unlike Rader, Denton ran the Tabernacle in direct competition with local churches, enlisting his followers to recruit new members. He reminded them that, "we are living in the last and perilous days, and must bend every effort to save lost souls."<sup>37</sup> The Tabernacle did, in fact, resemble a church in many ways. However, Denton guaranteed its singularity by maintaining a perpetual atmosphere of revivalism and by maximizing his own keen sense of showmanship.

Rarely would one have used the term "boring" to describe a service at the Akron Gospel Tabernacle. "You can't expect people to come to your church," noted Denton, "if you don't make it interesting."<sup>38</sup> From a converted Persian Priest preaching in traditional garb, to a 16-year-old "girl evangelist" from Cleveland, Denton sent a steady stream of unique, colorful, and sometimes exotic exhibitions flowing through the Tabernacle. A particularly memorable service featured evangelist Louise Nankivell, who allowed a monkey to run loose on the theater platform apparently to illustrate the lunacy of evolutionary science. While playing the ukulele, she reinforced her point singing "I'm a Baboon Hater and I Don't Like Monkeys Anyway." The scene understandably aroused visions of P.T. Barnum.<sup>39</sup>

Undoubtedly, the tabernacle strategy enabled urban

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<sup>36</sup>"I tell you the only place that draws the crowds today is the place that is on fire for God. If you want proof of that fact come to Akron Gospel Tabernacle tonight and I'll show you a greater crowd than you could find gathered in more than a hundred dead, modernized churches" (Bill Denton, "Communism Versus Christianity," Printed Sermon, 1932).

<sup>37</sup>Eskridge, 67. Akron Gospel Tabernacle News, 12 June 1932.

<sup>38</sup>Akron Times-Press, 23 September 1932. A feature article on the Akron Gospel Tabernacle describes its worship services as "replete with entertainment."

<sup>39</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 24 February 1932.

revivalism to subsist in a climate bereft of mainline Protestant sponsorship. As exhibited by Bill Denton's work in Akron, the tabernacle approach penetrated new and significant religious markets, all well primed to embrace fundamentalism's message and even many of its vaudeville-like methods. But Akron's experiment in "tabernaclism" proved to be a short one. An extraordinary cultural divergence that began to occur in the early 1930s claimed Denton's solitary outpost of urban revivalism as one of its early casualties.

Reactions to the New Deal and the Demise of  
Tabernacle Revivalism, 1933-1934

With the disestablishment of fundamentalism in the late 1920s came a growing public resistance to conservative religious involvement in civic matters. An incipient version of the now-famous "Christian Right" emerged from this context. But it was not as if fundamentalists suddenly embraced "right-wing" political ideas as they came to terms with their socially peripheral status. Their ideas, in fact, had scarcely changed from what they had been in decades past. What had changed was the political milieu in which fundamentalists voiced their ideologies. According to historian Leo Ribuffo, tensions spawned by the Great Depression and, more directly, the New Deal, polarized the nation's political culture. "As Americans weighed rival explanations of the crisis, the country's formerly amorphous ideological spectrum was divided into relatively clear segments."<sup>40</sup> A powerful New Deal coalition emerged in opposition to a newly distinct and religiously charged far right. As an assertive voice on the right, the Akron Gospel Tabernacle collapsed under pressures--both real and imagined--created within this new and formidable environment.

Throughout his career, Bill Denton delivered an unyielding message of moral and spiritual reform, seasoned with blatantly patriotic overtones. Never one to mince words, he acquired a city-wide reputation for his candid and forthright condemnation of

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<sup>40</sup>Ribuffo, 13.

public subversion, corruption, and vice. When limited to helping Akron's poor and criminal elements, his efforts and utterances received extensive praise all across the city. Law enforcement officials even endorsed Denton's Mission as an extension of their operations.<sup>41</sup> But as his Tabernacle ministry made him more visible in the community, Akron residents began to view his outspoken ways with careful suspicion.

Hardly bogged down with theological abstractions, Denton's "straight from the shoulder" sermons were chiefly comprised of evangelistic anecdotes, social commentary, and frequent political harangues. Behind his ministry slogan, "Lost Soul, Get Right With God," crouched an implicit, yet unmistakable, socio-political ideology. Denton was convinced that "red-blooded Americans" were in serious danger of "bolshevism" and radicalism, discerning clear links between "Red propaganda," the "damnable doctrine of Modernism," and the "great financial depression."<sup>42</sup> The United States Constitution had, as its basis, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Following this logic, the only way to preserve the nation and its sacred heritage was to deport "godless" foreigners, atheists, Bolsheviki, and modernist pastors, and to foster continual widespread, "old-fashioned" revivalism.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, Denton made no distinction between the Akron Gospel Tabernacle's spiritual and political functions. Its role in calling "red-blooded, loyal Americans" to spiritual renewal was, at the same time, its civic duty. The nation's future depended on

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<sup>41</sup>In his film, Reblazing the Trail, Denton made it clear that he worked closely with city law enforcement and the criminal justice system. He also showed letters he had received from various city officials praising his efforts in cleaning up Akron's "slums."

<sup>42</sup>Bill Denton, "Communism versus Christianity," printed sermon, 1932.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

a revival of epic proportions, and the Tabernacle, in Denton's opinion, represented Akron's last great hope for making it happen. While this social prescription might have found widespread public approval years before, the vast majority of Americans no longer affirmed that civic problems had simple, spiritual solutions.<sup>44</sup> As this resistant attitude was translated into public policy, those on the still spiritualized "right" found themselves at odds with their own government.

In the spring of 1933, the newly installed Democratic administration began a nationwide push to recruit supporters for the National Recovery Administration (NRA). Roosevelt confronted the Depression with a "social revolution," instituting unprecedented monetary redistribution, public welfare, bank regulation, and cooperation between government and industry.<sup>45</sup> To persons of Denton's stripe, this "new deal" smacked of an economic experiment similar in kind to Mussolini's Italy and Stalin's Russia. Not only did it run contrary to Denton's plans for national renewal, it seemed also to justify earlier fears of impending Bolshevik encroachment.<sup>46</sup> With his customary fervor, Denton lashed out in open defiance of Roosevelt and the NRA.

He first voiced objections to the NRA because it ostensibly encouraged patrons to "boycott" businesses that failed to support New Deal programs. "I cannot reconcile myself to a policy which seeks deliberately and forcefully to ruin another Christian merely

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<sup>44</sup>Quoting from Conrad Wright's Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism (1961), Grant Wacker notes that by the end of the 1930s, people largely used "a secular rather than a theological vocabulary when issues really seem[ed] worth arguing about" (122).

<sup>45</sup>Richard Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 81; William Leuchtenburg, Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 61.

<sup>46</sup>Ribuffo, 16-22.

because he differs with me in theories of government."<sup>47</sup> The practice, he argued, was "illegal," "un-Christian," and based on "hatred." From the Tabernacle pulpit and over the radio, he further suggested that the New Deal represented nothing more than a poorly disguised brand of communism, controlled by an ominous and powerful "brain trust."<sup>48</sup> Given Akron's successful mobilization behind Roosevelt and the NRA, reaction to Denton's caustic discourse was predictably hostile.

Numerous angry letters began to appear in Akron newspapers, seething over Denton's malicious comments and his obvious disrespect for the President.

I once admired Bill Denton. That was when he confined his practice to feeding the hungry and trying to bring good men from the ways of crime. But when he tries to fill the minds of these poor people with falsities and turns their hearts against a man like President Roosevelt who is working day and night to bring peace and prosperity to this great land, he should be ostracized by every loyal citizen.<sup>49</sup>

Recognizing an authentically spiritual element in America's problems, another writer described Roosevelt as a "kindly doctor, treating a fatal disease." Although his New Deal could never heal a nation "overwhelmed with sin and crime," she denied Denton's right to condemn "his good efforts."<sup>50</sup> People began to clamor to have the evangelist silenced.

In August 1933, E.A. Marshall, station "secretary" of Akron's WADC, pulled the plug on Denton's weekly Tabernacle broadcasts. "Naturally," he stated, "we won't tolerate the use of

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<sup>47</sup>Akron Times-Press, 10 September 1933.

<sup>48</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 19 May 1934. This letter to the editor by Denton supporter reflects on "helpful" information about Roosevelt he received from Denton.

<sup>49</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 13 September 1933.

<sup>50</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 14 September 1933.

our facilities for remarks against the President's program."<sup>51</sup> As one might expect, the action merely deepened Denton's suspicions about the government. Reasoning that subversives were gaining control of America, he saw all attempts to "muzzle" resistance as merely part of their scheme. With some justification, he accused the station of denying his right to free speech, and, on this point, he received a measure of support. One resident fully agreed that Denton's remarks were illogical and "deplorable," but hardly treasonous. "If he sets himself up as a prophet of war, disaster and the end of the world, that is not sedition."<sup>52</sup> A mere prophet--even a false one--would be preferred over a martyr. WADC directly restored Denton to the airwaves, on the condition that he tone down the political content of his sermons.

Less than a month later, however, another crisis beset Denton's organization. In September, William Skehan, Commercial Bank and Trust Company liquidator, announced that the Akron Gospel Tabernacle would be evicted from the Miles Royal Theatre. Standing before his Tabernacle congregants, Denton blamed the enactment on the harsh opposition to his political ideas, calling it "a 20th century inquisition." "Just because I'm opposed to the unchristian principles of the National Recovery Act," mourned Denton. "It looks as though I'm going to lose this monument to Jesus." Skehan flatly denied the charge, insisting that the eviction amounted to nothing more than an issue of long over-due rent. "I don't give a damn what Bill Denton said," he proclaimed, "I'm sick and tired of the whole sordid business."<sup>53</sup>

In all likelihood, politics played no role in Skehan's action. In fact, the eviction should have come as no surprise due

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<sup>51</sup>David Burnham, "The History of the Furnace Street Mission" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Akron, 1960), 26.

<sup>52</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 7 September 1933.

<sup>53</sup>Akron Times-Press, 8 September 1933.

to the Tabernacle's eight-month delinquency in rent payments. Regardless of whether Denton's anxiety was based on fact or fiction, the episode illustrates a critical point: his experiment in perpetual revivalism was crumbling, along with all semblance of financial patronage. The ministry no longer possessed the infrastructure necessary to maintain its prominence in Akron's religious culture. The tabernacle approach to urban revivalism hinged on the assemblage of viable and sturdy markets of sponsorship. After the New Deal and its fallout, Denton simply could not maintain this necessary web of support. Though he managed to keep the Tabernacle running several months after Skehan's announcement, its doors closed forever by late December.<sup>54</sup>

Still, Denton refused to accept his Tabernacle's defeat. Convinced that the organ of mass evangelism would soon emerge from the ashes of controversy and criticism, he began to lay a framework for renewal. Throughout 1934, he tried to recover his lost moral authority while demonstrating the enduring righteousness of his crusade. At the Furnace Street Mission and over the radio, he continued to rant against Roosevelt's policies, even criticizing such right-wing paragons as Father Coughlin for being too soft.<sup>55</sup> Also, during the summer, he waged a highly publicized war against gambling. Taking the law into his own hands, he smashed two local slot-machines, and afterward posed for a newspaper photograph with his sledgehammer raised. In doing so, he hoped to turn public opinion against state and city officials, suggesting that they encouraged city gambling operations to run amuck.<sup>56</sup>

Regrettably for Denton, his antiquated display of

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<sup>54</sup>Akron Times-Press, 29 December 1933.

<sup>55</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 19 February 1934.

<sup>56</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 21 June 1934; 2 July 1934.

contentious moralism only intensified public enmity toward him. Instead of showing signs of conciliation and restraint, he appeared inflexible and captive to delusions of fundamentalist hegemony. He was "losing all sense of reason in his ministry," exclaimed one aggravated resident.<sup>57</sup> "It seems like cruelty to animals to criticize some people," added another less bridled Akronite. "But when they use what little brains they have : . . . by taking the law into their own hands, to try to force others to conform to their own little conception, it is time something is done."<sup>58</sup> Any hope for restoring the Tabernacle now seemed out of the question. Though Denton remained active at his Mission and other outreach efforts for another almost fifty years, he would never again participate in large scale, perpetual revivalism at a level akin to the Akron Gospel Tabernacle.

Gone were the days when urban revivalism could marshal the attitudes and policies of the cultural "mainstream." A determined intolerance marked the way in which a preponderance of Americans now viewed the fusion of religion with politics. Many, like the editor for the Akron Times-Press, believed that places such as Bill Denton's Tabernacle should focus solely on religious matters, leaving political concerns at the door.

Pick [the Bible] up again, Bill, and go on with your good work in the Mission. Leave troublesome economic problems to those who cannot make as good use of their time as you make when you go down into the gutters for your type of humanity that only men of your type can understand and rehabilitate.<sup>59</sup> Not by his own choosing, the "two fisted" evangelist was forced to accept a comparably limited realm of influence.

The tabernacle strategy, as events in Akron demonstrate, provided a means of sustaining urban revivalism under post-

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<sup>57</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 19 July 1934.

<sup>58</sup>Akron Beacon Journal, 23 July 1934.

<sup>59</sup>Akron Times-Press, 31 August 1933.

fundamentalist Protestantism. Evangelists thereby continued to wield authority, albeit limited, to promote their uniquely spiritual vision for American life. But the tumult surrounding Roosevelt's New Deal ultimately helped to squeeze many of their voices out of the nation's marketplace of culture. The passing of the tabernacle strategy, while far from halting fundamentalism's evangelistic enterprise, clearly showed its abatement in the sphere of public life. Though mass revivalism would regain its prominence by the late 1940s under Billy Graham, rarely again would it ever exhibit the level of political and social leverage that it had prior to the 1930s.