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An Outpouring of “Faithful” Words Protestant Publishing in the United States

William Vance Trollinger Jr.

. . .

Central to Protestant doctrine is the conviction that religious authority rests in Scripture alone. “Sola Scriptura” notwithstanding, Protestantism was and is more than simply a religion of the Word. It is a religion of many words, those that are preached, prayed, sung, and—of special interest to this volume—words that are printed. Nowhere have more Protestant words been printed than in the United States. Optimistically evangelical, American Protestants have relied upon the written word to convert people, to inspire individuals to higher callings, and to effect moral behavior. From their first settlements, Protestants poured forth a stream of religious publications. Between 1880 and 1940, they inundated the American landscape with Bibles, hymnals, tracts, Sunday School lessons, novels, and nonfiction books.

Despite this deluge, the historiography of Protestant printing is quite limited. In 1963 Martin E. Marty lamented that a “sustained analysis of the religious press in America has long been overdue,” especially that of the Protestant press, which, despite its prodigious output, was “invisible” to scholars.¹ This chapter seeks to give the subject more visibility by providing a general picture of Protestant publishing in the United States between 1880 and 1940 and by suggesting some key themes. Understanding the history of the book in these years requires careful analysis of Protestant publishing. This essay offers a simple but consistently overlooked conclusion: including the religious press in the history of American print culture dramatically changes the landscape.

The Protestant Establishment

American Protestantism’s cultural hegemony was increasingly challenged between 1880 and 1940. This is not to say that “mainline” Protestants lost their cultural clout; as William Hutchison has noted, the influence of the Protestant establishment lasted into the late twentieth century.² Nevertheless, these seven decades mark America’s substantial transformation from a Protestant nation to

a religiously diverse nation. This shift largely reflects the massive immigration of Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Jews from southern and eastern Europe to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Darwinism, historical biblical criticism, and other intellectual challenges also threatened the foundations of Protestant orthodoxy. Accelerating urbanization exacerbated the process, contributing to Protestants' belief that traditional moral standards were eroding.³

In the first half of the nineteenth century, several Protestant publications in eastern coastal cities had operated as daily papers, providing both religious and nonreligious news. As the secular press expanded in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the Protestant press retreated from the news field. By the end of the nineteenth century, the typical Protestant periodical was a weekly or monthly magazine produced by a particular denomination or denominational subgroup, focusing on issues relevant to the group. This "denominationalization" process accelerated in the first half of the twentieth century.⁴

In 1963 Martin E. Marty argued that the Protestant press had failed "to cope with [the] pluralism and secularity" of twentieth-century America, the unfortunate result being an array of magazines that limited themselves to the "self-nurture of a [specific] denomination."⁵ Marty's point is well taken, but we should not discount the importance of Protestant denominational publishing. As Marty and other historians of American religion have observed, denominations — self-supporting religious organizations that were neither established churches nor dissenting sects, and that were equal competitors under the law — are unique to American Protestantism.⁶ Although some observers argue that a postdenominational age began in the late twentieth century, denominations were undoubtedly the organizational structure for American Protestantism between 1880 and 1940, and they were a critical locus of identity for American Protestants. Weekly and monthly periodicals played a crucial role in these organizations, providing the "vital link" in "disseminating denominational news" and "reinforc[ing] the common goals of the body."⁷

Virtually every Protestant body in America published denominational magazines.⁸ The 1915 *Federal Council Year Book* listed 91 Protestant denominations and 389 denominational periodicals.⁹ Methodists alone printed 69 journals; the major black Methodist denominations were responsible for 13 of these, including the *Allenite*, the *Christian Recorder*, and *Star of Zion*. Some denominations, especially the Lutherans, needed to publish in a variety of languages for a variety of ethnic groups. Some denominations also produced an array of state and regional journals, for example, the Episcopalians. Still, many of these journals aspired to reach both within and beyond their group, and across the nation. Even the smallest religious bodies published periodicals. The Christa-

delphians, with 1,500 members, put out the *Christadelphian Advocate*; the General Church of the New Jerusalem, 1,213 communicants, produced *New Church Life*; and, the Church of God, Adventist, 600 members strong, published two periodicals: the *Restitution* and the *Restitution Herald*.

A Plethora of Print

Twenty-five years later the situation was even more muddled. According to the 1941 Federal Council's *Yearbook of American Churches*, there were 430 periodicals produced by 140 denominations.¹⁰ To some extent this increase reflects more complete data, as periodicals produced by groups such as the Mormons were now included in the count. Much of the real increase, however, was generated by newer denominations established after the 1915 report, including the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, established in 1927, with 16,147 members and five periodicals; the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.), established in 1923, with 17,612 members and four periodicals; and, the Church of Revelation, established in 1930 with 520 members and one periodical.

Although an accurate tally of denominational periodicals is largely impracticable, counting readership is an even greater challenge. The standard source for circulation data in this era is *N. W. Ayer and Son's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals*. Established in 1880 as a reference tool for advertisers, the Ayer directory included a separate section on religious publications. Focusing on "regional" religious magazines that accepted advertising, the directory overlooked numerous other religious periodicals. Moreover, many listed periodicals failed to provide circulation figures. Thus, Ayer undoubtedly underestimated religious periodical circulation. Nonetheless, the numbers are still striking: according to the directory, Protestant periodical circulation peaked in 1909 at 12,770,937, dipped to 5,916,912 at the Depression's height in 1933, and then rose again to 8,157,656 in 1943. Rough calculations indicate that denominational periodicals accounted for 80 to 90 percent of total circulation.¹¹

Between 1880 and 1940, then, American denominational periodicals and readers were abundant. The mainline churches (Congregational, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, Methodist, Northern Baptist, Presbyterian, and United Lutheran) were unquestionably the most powerful contemporary publication machines.¹² As the twentieth century progressed, their share of the publishing field rapidly diminished. In 1915 the Federal Council *Year Book* reported that 51 percent of Protestant periodicals were published by mainline denominations; by 1940 only about 25 percent were mainline. As Dennis Voskuil has suggested, some of this reduction is explained by the elimination of weaker journals and the reduced need for foreign-language periodicals. Moreover, the Ayers' data

suggest that despite declining numbers of publications, mainline denominational journals circulated to more readers than journals produced by other denominations.¹³

✓ [Nevertheless, by the mid-twentieth century the increasingly bureaucratized denominations at the center of American Protestantism were not as energetically concerned with their periodicals as in earlier days. Generally speaking, the more marginal the sect, the more important the publishing enterprise, and the more frenzied the publishing activity. Some of this fervor emerged from the intense desire of many sectarian groups to convert others to their understanding of truth. In part this was a matter of survival: for nontraditional groups at odds with the religious and cultural mainstream, creating and maintaining communities of believers was essential; periodicals were indispensable to this effort. Publishing also established religious legitimacy: religious groups with magazines were marked as worthy of respect and attention.]

Denominational Publishing and New Protestant Movements

The press was vitally important for African American denominations. In the Colored (now Christian) Episcopal Church, ministers not only preached the gospel and administered the sacraments but were also “obligated by the [denominational] law” to secure “cash” subscriptions to the CME’s *Christian Index*.¹⁴ The African Methodist Episcopal Church’s *Christian Recorder*, contrary to the general trend among Protestant periodicals, continued throughout our period to summarize for subscribers “the principal events in the secular world” and to document “notes of racial progress.” It provided discussions of issues pertinent for African Americans, as well as denominational updates, reports from member churches, sermons, and Sunday School lessons. The *Christian Recorder* not only served as the key link between the African Methodist Episcopal Church and its socially marginalized membership but also countered the racism of the mainstream press, which rendered the African American community invisible.¹⁵

Radically decentralized Protestant groups further demonstrate the importance of the press in structurally unifying religious communities. Growing out of the nineteenth-century Restoration movement, the Churches of Christ were fiercely congregational, vehemently resisting any denominational label. Nevertheless, an informal organizational structure emerged, in which editors of journals such as *Firm Foundation* and *Gospel Advocate* became, in the words of historian Richard Hughes, “the functional equivalent of bishops,” defining theological orthodoxy and establishing the mission for members of

the Churches of Christ. Unlike some of their mainline counterparts, these periodicals were not official denominational publications routinely sent out to all members. The editors were thus, in Hughes's words, "democratically chosen" in that "their power was only as great as the length of their circulation lists."¹⁶

Periodicals also played a crucial role in advancing new movements that emerged within American Protestantism during these years, especially Pentecostalism, fundamentalism, and the holiness movement. These all utilized myriad weekly and monthly magazines, often locally or regionally based, to spread their particular religious message. This often required a wide variety of content; the *Moody Monthly* delivered large doses of fundamentalist theology and also Bible study materials, Sunday School lessons, and devotional materials. These periodicals frequently devoted space to fundamentalist battles or holiness meetings or Pentecostal revivals elsewhere in America, connecting their widely dispersed, often isolated adherents to a larger body of believers. Aggressive magazine editors utilized this sense of belonging for strategic purposes. In the 1920s and 1930s, William Bell Riley used his *Pilot* to create a fundamentalist empire in the upper Midwest, and Pentecostal revivalist Aimée Semple McPherson's *Bridal Call* welded her followers into a constituency supportive of her ministry (see figure 18.1).¹⁷

Paul Tinlin has proposed that the number and popularity of Pentecostal magazines "suggest that people widely stereotyped at worst as illiterate and at best as little concerned with the printed page in fact invested heavily in print media and were fundamentally shaped as a people by the printed word."¹⁸ For groups at or beyond the definitional edge of Protestantism, the importance of the press for survival, recruitment, and legitimacy was even more pronounced. In 1941 Seventh-day Adventists were publishing fourteen periodicals; the Jehovah's Witnesses had one magazine, the *Watchtower*, with a global circulation of more than 1 million by the 1940s. The Mormons produced a number of publications, including one daily newspaper (*Deseret News*) that in the late nineteenth century fiercely defended the legitimacy of the Mormon experiment in Utah, including the practice of polygamy.¹⁹

The Protestant Press: A Fractured Whole

Considering the entire Protestant press between 1880 and 1940, one finds little evidence of consolidation. As the century progressed, some periodicals were combined within mainline denominations. In general, however, the Protestant press in these years largely resisted the consolidation occurring in the secular press. This is not surprising given the vigorous diversity of both the Prot-



FIGURE 18.1. Sister Aimée (Aimée Semple McPherson) preaches to her followers in 1938. *Los Angeles Examiner* Collection, Regional History Collection, University of Southern California.

estant press and American Protestantism at large. Holiness, Christadelphian, Pentecostal, and restorationist publications, for example, varied in theological content, and they were produced and read by strikingly disparate communities. In short, diversity was the rule in Protestant periodicals.²⁰

While periodicals were the crown jewels of denominational publishing, they were not the only printed material denominations produced. Survival as a cohesive denomination required an enormous amount and array of publications, most of which were even more invisible to the outside observer than the denominational periodicals. The Methodists were most impressive in this regard, producing a cascade of hymnals, Sunday School and Vacation Bible School materials, evangelistic tracts, and a variety of devotional and other religious books and booklets. They employed a vast array of editors, printers, publishers, and salespeople to aggressively ensure that their captive adherents were surrounded by Methodist publications.²¹

Even small denominations like the Mennonites produced a surprising number of publications. Between 1908 and 1945, the Mennonite Publishing House released 262 books and pamphlets, including such distinctively Mennonite publications as *Can Christians Fight?* and *Martyrs' Mirror*.²² An even more striking example is the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), a holiness denomination originating with preacher and editor Daniel Warner in the 1880s. As Colleen McDannell has detailed, Warner's Church of God was maintained not by "a set of doctrines and rituals but [by] a publishing company." Between 1881 and 1915, the Golden Trumpet Company was run by workers who lived communally, earned no wages, and devoted their time and energies to promoting their particular understanding of Christian truth. As McDannell observes, "while the communal life eventually died when the business expanded . . . the faith commitments of the workers survived." Early Golden Trumpet works included books, tracts, songbooks, and a periodical, as well as a variety of cards, paper mottos, and postcards. By the 1930s they were producing placemats, lamps, key chains, mirrors, and other products, all of which were imprinted with Bible verses, pious phrases, or religious pictures.²³

Of course, as with periodicals, those groups at or beyond the Protestant border were most eager to publish books and pamphlets. This was especially true of groups whose sacred or near-sacred text was not the Bible, as with the Mormons' *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrines and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*. Distributing these texts to believers and potential believers was a critical venture. The Seventh-day Adventists also produced various publications by visionary Ellen White, most notably *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (1884). The Christian Scientists had Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health*, claimed in 1950 to

be second only to the Bible in all-time sales: "This volume has gone through hundreds of editions, comprising several million copies, bought by individuals all over the world."²⁴

Broader Movements in Print

This chapter has focused thus far on Protestant publishing within particular faith communities. Indeed, most Protestant publishing between 1880 and 1940 was denominationally based. Beyond such boundaries, however, Protestant publishers produced numerous works more visible to the general public and more connected to the larger culture. That was certainly the case with the Disciples of Christ magazine, *Christian Century*. Established in 1884 as *Christian Oracle*, it was renamed in 1900 to envisage the enduring strength of Christianity for the coming 100 years. Despite this optimism, insolvency was a constant threat until 1908, when Disciples minister Charles Clayton Morrison purchased the magazine at auction. Morrison edited *Christian Century* until 1947, aggressively stripping the periodical of its denominational bias. His "undenominational weekly" emphasized Protestant unity and the social gospel while engaging larger cultural issues. Morrison's magazine gradually became the voice of the Protestant establishment. As a later editor suggested, under Morrison's leadership *Christian Century* became the "most influential Protestant magazine" in America.²⁵ By the mid-twentieth century, *Christian Century* was often the sole Protestant magazine carried in public and college libraries; to the academy and the media, it was generally the *only* voice of American Protestantism.²⁶ Yet, for the public more generally, there were other influential nondenominational publications.

Christian Century's circulation never exceeded 40,000, while the *Christian Herald*, a nondenominational New York periodical circulated 250,000 copies in 1910, and perhaps more than 400,000 at midcentury. Theologically conservative and thoroughly moralistic, the *Christian Herald* promoted what Marty wittily called "the theology of the *Reader's Digest*," possibly explaining its lack of attention from scholars.²⁷ Nonetheless, *Christian Herald* more truly represented American Protestantism than any other periodical at the time.

Adapting the Bible

Most nondenominational Protestant publishing involved books, most importantly, of course, the Bible. Here the metaphor of a flood of "faithful" words seems most appropriate. There were about 487 English editions of the Bible and its various components published in the United States between 1880 and 1940.

When one subtracts Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish editions the tally comes to approximately 450.²⁸

From the founding of the colonies, the King James Bible held sway among American Protestants. This changed in 1881 when the long-awaited Revised Version of the New Testament was published amid great fanfare. In a front-page story, the *New York Evening Post* proclaimed that the appearance of the Revised Version—considered to be the most accurate version of the Bible ever produced—would prove to be “among the great events of the nineteenth century.”²⁹ The *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Times* went so far as to print the complete New Testament, pirating the text from the authorized publishers. The *Tribune*’s New Testament sold more than 100,000 copies; 3 million copies of the bound edition were eventually sold. Such fanfare was repeated in 1885 with the release of the entire Revised Bible, which also had stunning sales, though no newspaper reprinted all sixty-six books.³⁰

The revision was produced by a committee of British and American scholars who viewed its creation as a great ecumenical and evangelistic opportunity. They failed, however, to reconcile the fact that some Protestants would perceive their efforts as alteration or distortion of the biblical text in the service of a liberal theological agenda. Critics like C. I. Scofield called for allegiance to the King James Version.³¹ Scofield, a Dallas minister, was involved in the prophecy and Bible conference movement that swept through American Protestantism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³² Seeking to emphasize a literalistic and dispensational premillennialist understanding of the Bible, Scofield developed a King James edition that was filled with premillennialist notations and an extensive system of cross-referencing. Issued in 1909 by Oxford University Press, the Scofield Reference Bible quickly became a publishing phenomenon, the Bible of choice among fundamentalists and other conservative Protestant groups (see figure 18.2). As a result, dispensational premillennialist beliefs spread like wildfire among Protestants; many devotees came to see Scofield’s annotations as part of the biblical text itself.³³

The Scofield Reference Bible highlights an important point. American Protestantism was (and is) a bewildering panoply of faith communities sharing a sacred text but approaching it in a variety of ways. Thus, like Scofield, many individuals produced Bible editions to fit their community’s particular theologies and needs. Numerous denominational ministers produced Bibles with accompanying notes to advance their interpretation; one holiness minister began his edition of the Bible with a greeting to “the Holiness People in All Lands.” In Baptist Bibles and those produced by other believers in adult baptism, the Greek word “baptizo” was translated as “immerse” instead of “baptize.”³⁴

Even more dramatic was Joseph Smith’s Bible. The Mormon prophet’s “trans-

in thee: for thy merchants were the great men of the earth; for by thy sorceries were all nations deceived. 24 And in her was found the blood of prophets, and of saints, and of all that were slain upon the earth.

CHAPTER 19.

(*Paranthesis: the four alleluias of the glorified saints.* Cf. Rev. 17. 1-7; 18. 1-8.)

AND after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God:

2 For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand.

3 And again they said, Alleluia. And her smoke rose up for ever and ever.

4 And the four and twenty elders and the four beasts fell down and worshipped God that sat on the throne, saying, Amen; Alleluia.

5 And a voice came out of the throne, saying, Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great.

6 And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

The marriage of the Lamb.

7 Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.

8 And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.

A.D. 96.

^a Cf. Nah. 3.4.
^b Rev. 17.6.
^c Rev. 18.20; 11.15.
^d the salvation. See Rom. 1.16, note.
^e power of our God.
^f Rev. 17.1.
^g Cf. Rev. 6.10; cf. Lk. 18.7,8.
^h v.1.
ⁱ Cf. Rev. 18.9,16; cf. Mk. 9.48.
^j Elders. Tit. 1.5-9.
^k living creatures.
^l Cf. Rev. 18.4.
^m Cf. Psa. 134.1.
ⁿ Cf. Ex. 20.18.
^o Bride (of Christ). vs. 6-8; Rev. 21.3. (John 3.29; Rev. 19.6-8.)
^p Cf. 1 Cor. 15.10.
^q righteousness. Righteousness (garment). (Gen. 3.21.)
^r Cf. Lk. 14.15.
^s Inspiration. Rev. 21.5. (Ex. 4.15; Rev. 22.13.)
^t Cf. Heb. 1.14.
^u Cf. Eph. 1.9,10; cf. 1 Pet. 1.10-12.
^v Contra. Rev. 6.2; cf. Psa. 45.3; contra. Mt. 21.2-5.
^w Christ (Second Advent). vs. 11-21; Rev. 20.4-6. (Deut. 30.3; Acts 1.9-11.)
^x Cf. Rev. 3.7.
^y Rev. 1.14.
^z diadems.
^{aa} Cf. vs. 13,16; cf. Mt. 11.27; cf. 1 Tim. 6.16.
^{ab} Cf. Isa. 63.2,3.
^{ac} v. 21; cf. Rev. 1.16; cf. 2 Thes. 2.8.
^{ad} Rev. 14.20; Isa. 63.3,6; cf. Mt. 21.44.
^{ae} Rev. 17.14; 1.5.
^{af} mid-heaven.

9 And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God. 10 And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellow-servant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

The second coming of Christ in glory. (Cf. Mt. 24. 16-30.)

11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.

12 His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself.

13 And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God.

14 And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.

15 And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

The battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16. 14; 19. 17, note).

17 And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and

¹ The "Lamb's wife" here is the "bride" (Rev. 21. 9), the Church, identified with the "heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12. 22, 23), and to be distinguished from Israel, the adulterous and repudiated "wife" of Jehovah, yet to be restored (Isa. 54. 1-10; Hos. 2. 1-17), who is identified with the earth (Hos. 2. 23). A forgiven and restored wife could not be called either a virgin (2 Cor. 11. 2. 3), or a bride.

² The garment in Scripture is a symbol of righteousness. In the bad ethical sense it symbolizes self-righteousness (e.g. Isa. 64. 6; see Phil. 3. 6-8, the best that a moral and religious man under law could do). In the good ethical sense the garment symbolizes "the righteousness of God . . . upon all them that believe." See Rom. 3. 21, note.

³ The vision is of the departure from heaven of Christ and the saints and angels preparatory to the catastrophe in which Gentile world-power, headed up in the Beast, is smitten by the "stone cut out without hands" (Dan. 2. 34, 35).

⁴ Armageddon (the ancient hill and valley of Megiddo, west of Jordan in the plain of Jezreel) is the appointed place for the beginning of the great battle in which the

FIGURE 18.2. The Scofield Reference Bible (1909) was an annotated version of the King James Bible presenting a fundamentalist, premillennialist understanding of the Bible. This opening presents the text and annotations for the nineteenth chapter of the book of Revelation. University of Dayton.

lation” was developed between 1830 and 1833 but was not published until 1867. It was repeatedly published in the following decades, with a “corrected edition” released in 1944. As Philip Barlow has observed, Smith sought to bring the King James Bible into “line with the insights of his revelation and understanding.” The result was the Inspired Version, containing 3,410 verses that differed from their King James counterparts. Smith, in keeping with his personal experience of having seen God, changed John 1:18 from “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” to “And no man hath seen God at any time, except that he hath borne record of the Son; for except it is through him no man can be saved.”³⁵

Portending future biblical scholarship, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others published the *Woman’s Bible* in the late 1890s, including scriptural selections along with commentary supporting a feminist understanding of the Bible. There were Masonic editions with attached Masonic materials, as well as “numeric Bibles” appealing to those Protestants seeking additional evidence of the Bible’s divine origins by suggesting that biblical text is based on a mathematical code. Some editions were clearly produced by a community of one, including the 1922 version by Johannes Greber, who made use of an unusual editorial method: “In the rare instances in which a text pronounced correct by the divine spirits can be found in none of the manuscripts available today, I have used the text as it was given to me by those spirits.”³⁶

As Harold Scanlin observes, these numerous editions of the Bible “are testimony to a vigorous and variegated history of religion in America.”³⁷ Religious diversity alone does not explain the flood of Bibles, however. There was also the market. As R. Laurence Moore observed in his masterful work, *Selling God*, mid-nineteenth-century publishers discovered the economic benefits of “re-packaging” the Bible.³⁸ By 1900 commercialization had produced an astounding variety of Bibles that only expanded as the twentieth century progressed. Even their covers were diverse; a Bible sheathed in “protective” gilt metal and stamped with the phrase, “May God Bless You,” was marketed to World War II soldiers, though it proved to be no protection against bullets. There were Bibles supplemented with timelines, maps, and other materials. Some seemed to contain everything: the M. R. Gately Company’s 1880 edition included not only “100,000 Marginal References and Readings . . . Embellished with Nearly Two Thousand Illustrative Engravings,” but also a “History of the Translation of the English Bible,” a “Description of Israelite Tabernacles,” a “History of the Books of the Bible,” a “Map of the Holy Land . . . and maps of Jerusalem,” a “Household Dictionary of the Bible,” and, at the end, a “Family Record, Index, Concordance, Metrical Psalms, and Portrait Album.” Some Bibles used colored type: the first “red letter” New Testament, with the words of Jesus in red type,

appeared in 1899. The Marked Bible (1928) offered “the Themes of Salvation [Red], The Holy Spirit [Green], Temporal Blessings [Brown], Prophetic Subjects [Purple].” There was also the “Self-Pronouncing Bible” to aid in reading Biblical names and places, the “Runner’s Bible” for “him who runs,” and the “World’s Smallest Bible . . . with imitation leather cover” for, presumably, the collector of religious miniatures.³⁹

By the late nineteenth century, commercial publishers—including Harper’s, Thomas Nelson, and J. B. Lippincott—were clearly aware of the profits to be made from publishing Bibles. The competition could be very intense: as John Tebbel observed, 1920s “publishers vied with each other to make improvements of every kind, in type, paper, sewing, and binding.” In flush times and in depression, in peace and in war—the Bible, in all its forms, sold.⁴⁰

Nonprofit Publishing

Despite this vigorous commercial traffic in Bibles, there were several nonprofit, primarily Protestant groups that sought to increase the distribution of Bibles. The Pocket Testament League, established in New York in 1916, encouraged people to carry the Bible with them everywhere, reading from it daily. More famous was the Christian Commercial Travellers Association, organized in 1899 by a group of Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, businessmen concerned with “the religious life of commercial men who spent long periods away from home.” Better known as “the Gideons,” they began placing Bibles in hotels throughout America. Just three years later, the Gideons placed an order for 100,000 Bibles from Thomas Nelson and Sons, whose presses ran nonstop for two months to fill the request.⁴¹

The Pocket Testament League and the Gideons continued and expanded the efforts of older organizations like the American Tract Society and the American Bible Society. From its founding in 1816 through most of the nineteenth century, the American Bible Society dominated the printing of Bibles in the United States, distributing free and paid copies.⁴² By the late nineteenth century, unable to match rapidly improving technologies employed by commercial printers, the society reduced its printing efforts and stopped printing Bibles altogether in 1922. In 106 years, the American Bible Society had printed more than 76 million Bibles.⁴³ Even after 1922, it continued to distribute Bibles, particularly during wartime. Distribution of Bibles to American soldiers was so complete in the Spanish-American War that, according to John Tebbel, Spanish troops reported that “a copy of a gospel or a Testament could be found on the body of nearly every dead, wounded, or captured [American] soldier.” For some, like General Toral, this was “evidence of ‘the deep-rooted hypocrisy

existing in the American nation.’” World War I was a much greater challenge for the American Bible Society, but it succeeded in providing chaplains and Young Men’s Christian Association representatives with almost 5 million pocket-sized New Testaments—with khaki or navy blue covers—for distribution. The society provided only Protestant New Testaments, though, refusing the Paulist Press’s offer to provide Douay New Testaments for Catholic soldiers. By World War II, however, the American Bible Society belatedly accepted that America was now religiously pluralist: the 7,420,910 volumes it provided during that war included Douay New Testaments for Catholics and Old Testament selections for Jews.⁴⁴ In World War II the drive to supply military personnel with Bibles was accelerated when it was reported that Eddie Rickenbacker and his crew survived twenty-one days adrift at sea because they had a New Testament to read. The result was a crusade to equip every lifeboat with a waterproof Bible: one airman reported that “I have been ordered not to pack these rafts until a New Testament goes in each one of them.”⁴⁵

In times of war, Bibles were more than Scripture to read in lifeboats or fox-holes. The Bible has long had a central place in American civil religion. It is a source of ideas about America’s place in the world—America as the New Israel, with a special covenant with God—and a tangible sign of the linkage between God and the American nation, as demonstrated by its use in political ceremonies like presidential inaugurations. Such linkages are often emphasized in wartime, as with the Wilson administration’s portrayal of America’s World War I involvement as a divinely mandated crusade. Thus, not surprisingly, New York City saw a huge public celebration in 1917 when the press released the first 100,000 New Testaments for American soldiers. As Creighton Lacy recounts, the celebration was replete with “martial music, patriotic anthems, abundant speeches, and ‘the most beautiful silk American flags’ that John Wanamaker’s store . . . could provide”; the ceremony culminated with the “token presentation [of Bibles] . . . to representatives of the Y.M.C.A. and the Army and Navy.”⁴⁶

Beyond the Bible

Despite the Bible’s secure dominance in American civil religion and culture, *Publishers’ Weekly* reports that about 37,000 other religious books were published in the United States between 1880 and 1940, more than 600 per year on average. These numbers, imprecise and problematic, do not allow for confident generalizations. In some regards, however, production of religious books seemed to follow trends in book publishing more generally. Only during the Great Depression was there an exceptionally precipitous decline in the publication of religious books. According to *Publishers’ Weekly* annual reports, reli-

gious books were usually between second and fourth in new titles, behind fiction and in close competition with children's books. Accurate sales figures are harder to determine, but the Census Bureau reported that 42,999,266 religious books were sold in 1945, constituting about 10 percent of total book sales in the United States that year.⁴⁷

While numerous denominationally affiliated publishers poured forth books, pamphlets, and tracts, there were some nondenominational Protestant presses that intentionally sought a more general reading public. These presses included Thomas Nelson, William Eerdmans, and, most notably in these years, Fleming Revell. Revell's sister was married to the famous evangelist, Dwight Moody, whose sermons and other writings Revell began publishing in the 1870s. Moody's works served as a solid foundation, and Revell soon expanded his efforts, moving his headquarters from Chicago to New York. By 1900, to quote one scholar, Revell's "energetic program of publishing, importing, and distributing evangelical books, tracts, and periodicals made his the most important commercial religious publishing house in America," remaining as such into the middle of the twentieth century.⁴⁸

As with Bibles, "religious" publishers were not the sole purveyors of other religious literature. The demand for religious publications lured many trade presses into the field. This trend accelerated in the 1920s, when Harper's, Doubleday, Macmillan, and Holt, perceiving an increased interest in religious topics, all established separate religious departments. In that same decade, a Religious Bookstore Group and the Religious Book Club were founded. *Publishers' Weekly* established its annual Religious Book Issue, while interested publishers established Religious Book Week.⁴⁹ "Religious" publishers and "nonreligious" publishers utilized comparable marketing devices.⁵⁰ Religious books produced by general trade presses clearly demonstrate such overlap. There were "best sellers," including the steady stream of religious fiction, from Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Harper, 1880) to Harold Bell Wright's *The Shepherd of the Hills* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1907) to Lloyd Douglas's *The Robe* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1942) (see figure 18.3). The most popular was probably *In His Steps* (1898), not properly copyrighted by author Charles Sheldon and thus released by at least sixteen different publishers, with very little money going to Sheldon.⁵¹

Even more significant was religious nonfiction, including Giovanni Papini's *The Life of Christ* (Harcourt Brace, 1923), Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1925), and his follow-up, *The Book Nobody Knows* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1926). The two Barton volumes were second and third on the 1926 best-seller list for nonfiction, not surprising given that between 1900 and 1950 the majority of nonfiction best sellers were religious in nature. Most sig-

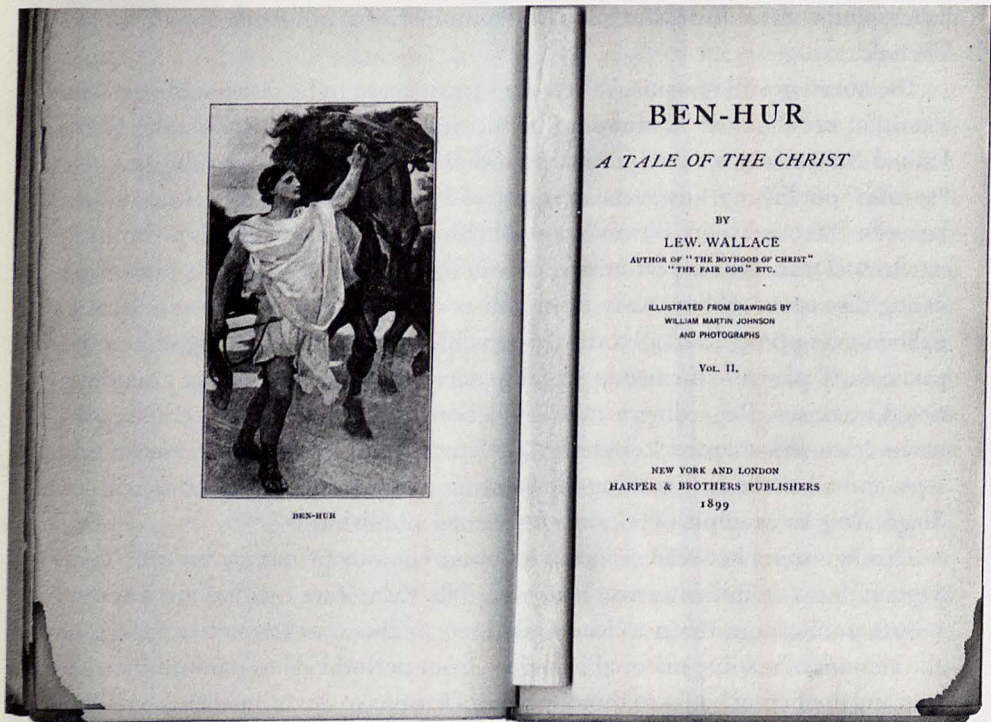


FIGURE 18.3. Facing pages in Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1899) shows the frontispiece and title page. The staged photograph of Ben-Hur is an early use of this method of illustration, added to an edition of popular religious fiction issued some twenty years after its initial publication. University of Dayton.

nificant, however, was the flood of devotional, inspirational, and “Christian living” books put out by nonreligious publishers, most of which have escaped the attention of print historians.⁵²

Printed Devotion:

Understanding the Impact of the Protestant Press

Differentiating religious from nonreligious publishers was (and remains) extremely difficult. Of course, trade presses that specialized in religious books sought to reach the broadest possible audience, and thus they resembled non-denominational publishers more than the denominational houses that concentrated primarily on their own particular religious communities. American Protestant publishing might best be understood as a spectrum ranging from more sectarian to less sectarian, with much greater diversity among sectarian pub-

lishers, and with trade presses and nondenominational publishers on the opposite pole.

The question still remains, When does print cease to be classifiable as Protestant, or as religious? Examining the history of Protestant publishing in the United States seems to require a bounded understanding of religious and “secular” publishing. Given the ubiquity of Protestantism in American culture between 1880 and 1940, however, establishing such a boundary is a daunting intellectual task. This is particularly true in light of Joan Shelley Rubin’s fascinating discussion of how early twentieth-century mainline Protestant groups deliberately appropriated all sorts of ostensibly nonreligious reading material—particularly poetry—for use in worship services, summer camps, and devotional exercises. Regarding a 1926 collection of popular poetry, Rubin asks, when “campers chanted Longfellow or Ezra Pound before quiet meditation, taps, and a benediction seeking the blessing of the Great Camp Director, was *Magic Ring* an example of religious or secular publishing?”⁵³

Distinguishing between religious and nonreligious print may indeed be important, but a definitive answer is not feasible. Even if we confine our attention only to publications that are clearly religious, by the most restrictive definition, the amount of reading material is huge—from periodicals to pamphlets to fiction and nonfiction books to Sunday School lessons to devotional aids to Bibles, and more. Here, then, is the central argument of this essay: American print culture between 1880 and 1940 cannot be fully understood without taking account of the staggering quantity and variety of Protestant reading material produced in these years. (Yet how will the inclusion of Protestant publishing change our understanding of print culture in the United States? Three possibilities can be explored. First, the full range of Protestant publications includes a good deal of printed material that was not driven or shaped by the market. Most religious periodicals were heavily subsidized by their producers, who sought to create and sustain group identity and cohesion while finding converts to their understanding of the truth. Although the ever-expanding market may have somewhat affected these publications, and while groups did compete for followers in a market of religious ideas, religious periodicals generally resisted and stood apart from the trend of increasingly commercialized print. Protestant groups’ determined efforts to distribute the Bible further elucidate the importance of Protestant publishing in a broader understanding of American print culture. While some Bible publishers had commercial motives, the market alone cannot explain the Gideons or the American Bible Society.)

The Bible itself suggests a second way in which our understanding of American print culture might change. That is, to include Protestant publishing in the history of the book in America requires that the Bible have a central place in

the narrative—as a category unto itself. Given the Bible's enduring ubiquity in American culture, no history of the book that neglects it is adequate. The Bible must be considered as a commercial product, as a cultural icon, and as a material object. It has been used liturgically by churches, devotionally by individuals, and collectively by that most popular form of book club, the Bible study.

This discussion of the Bible suggests a third way in which full inclusion of Protestant publishing can inform the history of the book in America. Individuals and small groups who read the Bible or other devotional literature did not (and do not) do so to gather information; instead, they often read slowly, meditatively, prayerfully—perhaps hoping for consolation or inspiration or spiritual insight. A person reading the *New York Times* and a person reading the Psalms were engaging in very different activities. Fully incorporating religious publications into the history of print culture thus requires full attention to different modes of reading, particularly reading as a devotional and contemplative exercise.

Such analysis merely scratches the surface. There is much left unknown about Protestant publishing in the years between 1880 and 1940. This, however, is certain: full consciousness of Protestant (and religious) publishing in all of its forms will fundamentally enrich our understanding of print culture in America.