

Book Reviews

Bare, Daniel. *Black Fundamentalists: Conservative Christianity and Racial Identity in the Segregation Era*. New York: New York University Press, 2021. 233 pp. + 25 pp. (back matter)

In 1927 Mrs. W. T. Larimer, Assistant Secretary of the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, addressed an audience at the Winona Lake Bible Conference on the need to support the rights of African Americans and even more to join with black churches in joint endeavors to promote Christian harmony.¹ What is so intriguing about this address is how rare it was for white fundamentalist audiences to hear anything about such topics. Fundamentalism focused on theological issues—the “fundamentals” for which they were named—but fundamentalist speakers also discussed social and political issues such as immigration, evolution, and international conflict. Issues of race, however, were far from common topics. Even rarer was mention of fellow black believers with shared theological convictions.

Two books in recent years have examined the relationship of African Americans to fundamentalism in the first half of the twentieth century. In her book *Doctrine and Race*, Mary Beth Swetnam Matthews discusses the interactions of fundamentalists with the black community and how white fundamentalists viewed issues of concern to African Americans. However, she stresses social and cultural issues to the point that identifying a “black fundamentalism” in the book is really impossible—whatever sympathies may have existed—and she treats the two groups as essentially separate.² Daniel Bare in *Black Fundamentalism* takes a different tack in putting forth a black fundamentalist identity, which shows both similarities to and differences from the mainstream of the movement.

Bare suggests that observers have ignored black fundamentalism in part because they tend to see the movement as institutional rather than theological. African Americans were rarely part of fundamentalist institutions. Also black religious conservatives were not so sympathetic to the separatist tendencies that often characterized fundamentalism. Rather, racial pressures encouraged African American Christians of all theological views to maintain institutional unity in the face of racial discrimination. However, Bare sees a doctrinal kinship between white and black defenders of the fundamentals. He does not reject approaches to fundamentalism that emphasize its social, political, and cultural aspects, but he wants to include a perspective that also discusses doctrinal issues and attitudes.

For his theological framework, Bare uses the traditional concern of fundamentalists for “the five fundamentals.” He recognizes the disputed nature of the list of the five doctrines, which varies with different sources, and he includes a lengthy and helpful footnote on the whole concept. After

¹ Mrs. W. T. Larimer, “They of Another Color,” *Winona Echoes* (Winona Lake: Victor M. Hatfield), 147–57.

² *Doctrine and Race: African American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism Between the Wars*, Religion and American Culture (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2017).

due consideration, Bare decides on the following list for his analysis: “biblical inspiration and inerrancy, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the substitutionary atonement, and the physical resurrection and literal second coming of Christ.” His list is a fair distillation, although one might argue the last point could easily be divided to make six.

Using this structure the author identifies black religious leaders who not only defended these fundamentals but also labeled themselves as fundamentalists. Articles and addresses in African American publications defended the essentials of Christianity and rejected any form of modernism that questioned the fundamentals. Indeed, some argued that only by adhering to the essentials of Christianity could the United States solve its racial problems—an interesting slant on the argument of white fundamentalists that only by maintaining the fundamentals of the faith could America preserve its allegedly Christian civilization.

In addition to scrutinizing individual black advocates of fundamentalism, Bare also records the unique story of the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville (now American Baptist College). This school was a joint effort between the Southern Baptist and National Baptist Conventions. Unlike most other educational efforts by white Christians to help black churches, the ABTS had a racially integrated board and faculty, while others (such as Carver Bible Institute and Southern Bible Institute) began with almost exclusively white leadership. The seminary enjoyed some success, but its history also revealed tensions that showed even the best-intentioned white Christian outreaches to black Christians suffered from contemporary racial attitudes.

Complicating the story was conflict within the black community over such defenses of orthodoxy. Black critics regarded fundamentalism as an obstacle to racial progress and saw African American defenders of the faith as advancing ideas more harmful than helpful to racial progress.

Bare focuses mostly on black fundamentalism and not so much on how white fundamentalists viewed racial issues. In this respect Matthews’s book reveals more of white attitudes, although the evidence she cites tends to be that which is discreditable to fundamentalists.³ (Interestingly, both Bare and Mathews use the very negative example of Texas fundamentalist J. Frank Norris, who always seems to be a ready source of anecdotes showing fundamentalism in a poor light.) Bare, however, devotes much more attention to the African American conservatives whose stories he argues have been ignored.

Black Fundamentalism is an excellent historical study, but perhaps there is something beyond just history that we can take away from this book. In an article outlining “images” that writers have used to describe the black church in American history, Leon McBeth includes “the Joseph Image” of author Carter Woodson. The idea is that as Joseph was sold into slavery but became the instrument of deliverance for his family, so the black church—untouched by the racist attitudes prevalent in the American culture and even in American churches—could provide a testimony to a purer form of Christianity to the white churches in the United States. We need not press the analogy to recognize that there are facets of the Joseph image that fundamentalists and their heirs might consider. Bare’s

³ For a good (if brief) discussion of fundamentalism and racial issues see Douglas Carl Abrams, *Old-Time Religion Embracing Modernist Culture: American Fundamentalism Between the Wars* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), 139–47.

book suggests white fundamentalists have missed some vital cultural issues involving race and have overlooked allies who are already fighting against liberalism.⁴

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⁴ Leon McBeth, "Images of the Black Church in America," *Baptist History and Heritage* 16 (1981): 21–22.