In the Presence of a Common Foe:
Billy Sunday and Conservative Presbyterians in the Battle Against Liberalism

By Scott Korljan

Introduction

In March, 1915, Princeton Theological Seminary found itself embroiled in unusual controversy. The controversy, which involved the Seminary, University, and the town of Princeton itself, centered on the unanimous invitation given by the Seminary faculty to prominent revivalist William "Billy" Sunday. The disagreement began when use of Princeton University's Alexander Hall, the largest lecture hall in town, was requested for the Sunday meeting, but the President of Princeton University denied its use. The storm which broke out following this denial was described later by Seminary Professor J. Gresham Machen as a "tremendous tempest."[1] Machen himself considered this action unfair, considering that this hall was "constantly opened to most any Tom, Dick and Harry of a lecturer" (Stonehouse, ibid.). The editors of *The Presbyterian*, a conservative Presbyterian periodical at the time, agreed with Machen and attacked the University for the apparent double standard in refusing to cooperate with the Sunday campaign:

> Parents have been wishing and hoping that their sons might have the benefit of these [Sunday's] sermons, but they are disappointed. On the other hand, so-called liberal preachers, in response to invitations, will come trooping from the ends of the earth to Princeton Chapel, with messages, attempting to shred the bible to pieces … and students will be compelled to hear them. Has there ever been in Christendom a scene more marked for narrowness and hardness![2]

The University did not back down, however, and the University Dean published a list of Sunday's vulgar and un-Christian sayings as justification for the University's decision (Stonehouse, 226). The main reason advanced against Sunday's visit, as made public by Dean West, was Sunday's methods. He was simply too over the top, too vulgar, too offensive, for the gentlemen students at Princeton. "I gladly admit that Mr. Sunday means to be evangelical in his statements. But many of his utterance are, to put it mildly, not Christ like…."[3] Dean West complained that Sunday's speech was at times irreverent towards God, personally abusive towards others, and indecent for a minister of the Gospel of Christ. One particular example singled out by the dean was a comment made by Sunday in one of his sermons: "And as he prayed the fashion of his [Jesus'] countenance was altered. Ladies, do you want to look pretty? If some of you women would spend less on dope, pazaza, and cold cream, and get down on your knees and pray, God would make you prettier."[4] Statements like this by Sunday ultimately led the dean to protest his invitation to Princeton:

> So, in the name of the decency and of the purity and sanctity of our Christian faith, Princeton University

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1. Ned Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1955), 225.

2. "The Princeton Spectacle," *The Presbyterian*, Feb 18th, 1915, 4.

3. Andrew West, "Mr. Sunday and Princeton," *The Presbyterian*, April 15th, 1915, 9.

4. Other statements that the dean specifically referenced: "Mary was one of those sort of uneeda biscuit, peanut butter, gelatin, and pimento sort of women. Martha was a beefsteak, baked potato, apple sauce with lemon and nutmeg coffee and whipped cream, apple pie, and cheese sort of women. So you can take your pick, but I speak for Martha…" The dean also thought that many of Sunday's comments were abusive, such as "If a woman on the avenue plays a game of cards in her home, she is worse than any blackleg gambler in the slums." "If a minister believes and teaches evolution, he is a stinking skunk, a hypocrite and a liar." *The Daily Princetonian*, February 22, 1928.

> positively refuses to approve Mr. Sunday's performance as suitable for the edification of our students. In time of hysterical excitement we think it our right and our duty to stand firm against all inflammatory mob-oratory in whatever field it may appear (West, 10).

The seminary faculty stood by their decision to invite Sunday, however, and according to Machen, the opposition they received actually increased their enthusiasm and support for Sunday's visit. They acknowledged that Sunday had some unorthodox methods, but defended him on the ground of his powerful and orthodox preaching. "His [Sunday's] methods are as different as could possibly be imagined from ours, but we support him to a man simply because, in an age of general defection, he is preaching *the gospel*."[5] Other Presbyterians gave their full support to the Seminary's decision as well: "Does Dean West propose to erect the infelicities he quotes into a barrier between the young men of Princeton and the Gospel, while he is ready to admit to Princeton all manner of false teachers … if they only bring it in esthetical form?"[6]

Despite all of the controversy, by all reports Sunday's visit to Princeton went smoothly. Sunday arrived on Monday, March 8th, a day off from his revival campaign in Philadelphia, and conducted two meetings in Princeton's First Presbyterian Church. The first was intended especially for seminary students and focused on preaching, with Sunday giving warnings and helpful hints on how to preach the gospel in the most effective way.[7] According to the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, this message to the seminary students was one of the "best addresses of the year."[8] The second was a service given in the afternoon for the university students, and resulted in 600 students being led to profess Christ.[9]

Purpose and Outline

From the perspective of Sunday's career as a revivalist, his one-day visit to Princeton is rather historically insignificant. After all, by 1915, Sunday, who had left professional baseball to preach, had become a nationally known religious leader, routinely speaking to crowds in the tens of thousands during his revival campaigns. So influential had he become, that just the previous year he had been ranked 8th in a nationwide poll conducted by the American Magazine on the question "Who is the greatest man in the United States?"[10] Over the next several years, his influence and popularity would be further demonstrated by public declarations of support and appreciation of his ministry by men such as Theodore Roosevelt, Williams Jennings Bryan, and President Woodrow Wilson (McLoughlin, 401). His campaign revivals were so effective during this time, that it has been estimated that he averaged over 500 converts a day in larger cities, roughly 300 for every sermon preached.[11] In fact, newspaper records indicate that his campaign in Philadelphia produced over 41,000 converts during his nearly two month stay in the city.[12] By comparison, his "field trip" to Princeton Seminary and the two messages given are hardly noteworthy.

However, Billy Sunday was not just a revivalist, he was also an ordained Presbyterian minister in good standing within the Church. From that perspective, Sunday's invitation and visit to Princeton, the bastion of Presbyterianism, is historically significant indeed. His visit to Princeton, and the controversy that surrounded it, highlight the strong endorsement that the conservative base of the Presbyterian Church gave to Sunday's ministry during the peak of his career. Not only were confessional conservatives like Machen willing to hear Sunday and *invite* him to speak, but they were willing to *defend* him in the wake of controversy. Machen himself, in fact, interpreted the Seminary's defense of Sunday as a public endorsement of his ministry: "Despite all of the trouble … I am glad that the Seminary in this public way is giving the right hand of fellowship to a man who is doing the Lord's work" (Stonehouse, 227). Although the faculty did not personally agree with all of his methods, they nevertheless supported his ministry and were willing to publicly endorse the work he was doing.

This strong show of support by the seminary faculty raises the interesting and often unaddressed question of the reaction to Sundays' ministry by his fellow Presbyterian ministers.[13] More specifically, it raises the question of how Sunday could enjoy public support from confessional conservatives like Machen, considering

5. Stonehouse, *Machen*, 226, emphasis original.
6. "Dean West and Evangelist Sunday," *The Presbyterian*, March 4, 1915, 5.
7. "Evangelist Sunday at Princeton," *The Presbyterian*, March 18, 1915.
8. *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol 10 No 1 (1916), page 18.
9. "Evangelist Sunday at Princeton," *The Presbyterian,* March 18, 1915.
10. William McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1959), 401.
11. William McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 104. McLoughlin notes that these numbers far exceeded those of Moody and Finney before him.
12. W.T. Ellis, *Billy Sunday: The Man and His Message* (Philadelphia: L.T. Myers, 1914), 60. Ellis also mentions that churches in the area reported two and three times as many conversions taking place outside the tabernacle itself. Ellis' biography was the second authorized biography of Sunday written during the prime of his career, and highly sympathetic to Sunday.
13. While there are many scholarly works that discuss the life

key components of his theology were in what would seem to be clear contradiction with historic Calvinism. As will be demonstrated shortly, Sunday held and preached theological views that were eerily similar to those of an earlier Presbyterian revivalist, Charles Finney, whose views had been condemned by conservatives in the 1830s.

Looked at from this perspective, the successful ministry of Billy Sunday suggests that a substantial change had taken place in the Presbyterian Church between the mid nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Theological views which had once been attacked when preached by Charles Finney, were considered acceptable, even praised, in the ministry of Billy Sunday. Conservative Presbyterians in the 1830s wanted Finney out of the denomination, but the Princeton episode demonstrates that the same group embraced and defended the ministry of Billy Sunday as a man who was "doing the Lord's work."[14]

This article seeks to identify what this change was, and explain how that change created an environment in which a minister like Billy Sunday could flourish in the Presbyterian Church. To accomplish this, I first survey the message that Billy Sunday brought to millions of Americans as an ordained Presbyterian minister. Second, I document the overwhelming support that Sunday received from his fellow Presbyterians. Third, I provide an explanation for Sunday's nearly unqualified acceptance despite his substantial theological departures from historic Calvinism. My contention is that the near universal acceptance of Billy Sunday by conservatives within the Presbyterian Church was a consequence of the broadening theological tolerance and diversity of the Presbyterian Church in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This broadening had the effects of softening theological requirements for the ministry, changing ministerial conceptions of the nature and work of the church, and reshaping the standard of theological orthodoxy in the denomination. As a result, not only did the Presbyterian Church become more accepting of theological liberalism during this period, it also became more open to the non-Calvinistic revivalism embodied by Sunday. Conservatives were willing to embrace a man like Sunday because he helped them in their fight to maintain the fundamentals of the faith against the increasing liberalism in the Church.

I. The "Gospel" of Billy Sunday

What exactly was the message that Sunday proclaimed to over 100 million Americans? If you asked Sunday, he would have told you that his preaching was nothing more than simply the "old -time religion." "I am an old-fashioned preacher of the old-time religion that has warmed this cold world's heart for two thousand years" (Ellis, 146). Near the end of his life, he could summarize his message in the following way:

> I preach Christ. That is the sum and substance of my message. That cannot change. He alone can save. I hold fellowship with all who believe in Christ and follow Him as Lord and Master. My particular church is the Presbyterian and I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister. We Presbyterians know what we believe and why. I believe in the absolute Deity of Jesus, His virgin birth, His atoning death, His resurrection from the dead, His future coming in glory, and the helpless state of men aside from the redeeming work of Christ.[15]

Was this self-proclaimed orthodoxy of Sunday an accurate assessment of his message? Many interpreters of Sunday have concluded that it was. For many Christians, both during Sunday's lifetime and all the way to the present, Sunday's preaching contained all of the core doctrines of evangelical Christianity. Conservatives during and after Sunday's life praised him as one of the greatest evangelists the world had ever known.[16] A more recent biographer, Lyle Dorsett, could summarize

and ministry of Billy Sunday, the reaction to Sunday's ministry by his fellow Presbyterian ministers is a question that has largely been left unaddressed in the secondary literature. Further, his ministry is never explored consistently from the perspective of his ministerial credentials in the Presbyterian Church, or the controversies within the Church which took place during his career. Almost all biographers make brief mention of his Presbyterian affiliation, but then fail to explore his relationship with the church past that point.

14. A quote from J. Gresham Machen. Stonehouse, *Machen*, 227.

15. William Sunday, *The Sawdust Trail: Billy Sunday in His Own Words* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 83.

16. All of the biographies which appear during his lifetime share this perspective of Sunday's message. Elijah Brown, in the introduction to his authorized biography, claims that Sunday's preaching "has in it the spirit of Christ and the power of Christ, and that it accomplishes what Christ commissioned His disciples to do." Elijah P. Brown, *The Real Billy Sunday* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1914), 12. In the 1950's, John Rice held the same view of Sunday, entitling his compilation of Sunday's sermons: *17 Burning Sermons from the Greatest Evangelist the World has Ever Known*. The titles of other biographies of Sunday clearly indicate their overall endorsement of Sunday and his message. *The Spectacular Career of Rev. Billy Sunday, the Famous Baseball Evangelist* (1917); *Giant for God* (1951), etc. Lee Thomas, in his 1961 *The Billy Sunday Story,* claims in a similar fashion: "He was not preaching a new message, but merely proclaiming the old Gospel." Sunday was a prophet sent to make America "God-conscious." Lee Thomas, *The Billy Sunday Story: The Life and Times of William Ashley Sunday* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1961), 87.

Sunday's message as "biblical Christianity."[17] However, other interpreters of Sunday have offered a substantially different view of the essence of his message, concluding that Sunday's "Gospel" represented a departure from traditional Christian orthodoxy. These interpreters, existing already in Sunday's lifetime, found Sunday's message to be Pelagian in its theology and moralistic in its emphasis. Even during Sunday's peak ministry years, many liberal and Unitarian ministers who opposed Sunday claimed that his preaching was "simply a religion of morality and ethics even though he called himself a fundamentalist."[18] William McLoughlin concurred, writing in 1959 that a serious departure in Sunday's preaching was "the apparent nonchalance with which he equated salvation with decency, patriotism, and manliness."[19] Thirty years later, Douglas Frank reached the same conclusion, summarizing Sunday's message in the following way: "Billy Sunday's Gospel was a moral gospel. The good news in this gospel was the news that people could be good, and that if enough people were good, America would be saved."[20] Similarly, William Cooper, a 21st century interpreter, claimed that "Under Sunday, all that is left (of the Christian message) is some sort of general morality based on common sense and the standard values of the audience rather than that which is uniquely Christian."[21]

Which interpretation of Sunday's message is accurate? Unfortunately, Sunday never published any theological writings in which he set forth a system of doctrine. The only sources that can be used to determine his theological beliefs are the sermons that he preached throughout his career.[22] Making assessment more difficult, Sunday, despite being an ordained Presbyterian, distanced himself from holding any particular theological system. He routinely downplayed both his personal knowledge of theology, and its importance for the Christian. "I don't know any more about theology than a jack-rabbit does about ping-pong, but I'm on my way to glory," was one of his favorite sayings.[23] Despite his apparent disregard for theology, however, a close examination of his preaching reveals several clear theological presuppositions and emphases that undergirded his "Gospel" as he proclaimed it to millions of Americans. What becomes clear when his sermons are examined is that while Sunday often used orthodox language, his message was based on theological presuppositions which altered the traditional meaning of those doctrines. He preached a Christianity in which the human will was sovereign and God was ultimately helpless. He preached Christianity in which man, by the sheer resolve of his will, could choose his own nature, and thus choose God and live a life pleasing to him. He preached a Christianity that was sometimes indistinguishable from moralism and patriotism. The following provides a brief overview of Sunday's theological emphases as found in his sermons.

Sunday's Theology

Sunday believed that a true spiritual revival could be created by man, and that anything that promoted the conversion of men to the Gospel should be used in a revival. Clearly echoing the definition of revival made famous in the early 19th century by Charles Finney, Sunday offered the following as his understanding of spiritual revival:

> Revival is a purely philosophical, common-sense result of the wise use of divinely appointed means, just the same as water will put out a fire; the same as food will appease your hunger; just the same as water will slake your thirst; it is a philosophical common-sense use of divinely appointed means to accomplish that end. A revival is just as much horse sense as that.[24]

17. Lyle Dorsett, *Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991),156. Similarly, Daniel Anderson, in his ThD Thesis analyzing point by point the theology behind Sunday's sermons, could conclude that "Sunday's gospel was orthodox in its basic ingredients." Daniel Anderson, "The Gospel According to Sunday," (ThD thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979), 87.

18. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 409.

19. Ibid., 433. McLoughlin also identifies Sunday's message as "Pelagian" in its content, focused on making men "decent." Ibid., 434.

20. Douglas Frank, *Less than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1986), 195.

21. William H. Cooper, *The Great Revivalists in American Religion, 1740–1944* (Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2010), 130. Similarly, Gerald Bieber, in his 1968 PhD dissertation, concluded his analysis of Sunday's message with the following: "Sunday… while claiming to preach a traditional, Biblical theology, actually preached a form of character salvation. He believed that man is born pure and with an effort of will can restore himself to this state of original perfection and thus, having 'repented,' he is eligible for 'heaven' and saved from 'hell.'" Gerald Bieber, "Billy Sunday: A Study of His Message During the Second Decade of the Twentieth Century, and the Means He Used to Persuade His Audiences," (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1968), 418.

22. Sunday published a short autobiography, written for the *Ladies Home Journal,* in a series of articles between 1932–1933. Other than that, his only other published work was a short book entitled *Great Love Stories of the Bible and their Lessons for Today,* in 1917. Neither of these sources provides information on his theological beliefs.

23. Ellis, *The Man and His Message*, 147. Similarly, he would tell audiences: "Nobody is kept out of heaven because he does not understand theology. It isn't theology that saves, but Christ." Ibid.

24. Billy Sunday, "The Need for Revivals," as produced in Ellis's 1914 authorized biography.

The implication of this definition, for Sunday, was that a revival of religion ultimately depended upon human effort.

> We may determine tonight whether we will have a spiritual awakening and put the Devil in the hospital before the Fourth of July. The responsibility has never been with God, never!… We can have it now if we will do what God tells us…. If the city sags morally, oh, the trouble is not with God but with the citizenship. It's up to you.[25]

Consistent with this understanding of revival, a second theological presupposition that dominated Sunday's preaching was the complete freedom of man's will. Sunday's beliefs concerning free will and human ability were liberally sprinkled throughout his sermons, and were based on his conviction that *obligation implied ability*:

> A man said, 'I cannot be a Christian. I cannot obey God.' That is not true. That would make God out a demon and a wretch. God says if you are not a Christian you will be doomed. If God asked mankind to do something, and he knew when he asked them that they could not do it, and he told them he would damn them if they didn't do it, it would make God out a demon and a wretch.[26]

God made man a free moral agent, and this implied, for Sunday, that every human has:

> Freedom to sin if he wanted to sin and to do right if he wished to do right. A man without the freedom to do either would be a nonentity and so, when God created man free that left him free either to do right or to do wrong while God tells him the reward if he does right and the punishment if he does wrong.[27]

Sunday applied this view of free will and human ability, without qualification, to the choice of choosing Christ for salvation. In a sermon based on Revelation 3:20, for example, Sunday told his audience:

> God has decreed the freedom of your will…. He won't come in (to your heart) unless you invite him…. He will come in response to your invitation. If you don't invite Him, He will never cross your threshold…. You need Him, but if you are not man or woman enough to invite Him to come in, He will never come.[28]

In yet another sermon, he declared plainly:

> Although I'm a Presbyterian, I peel my hat off to John Wesley. John Wesley and Whitefield preached the free will of man—'God won't coerce you, God won't dethrone your will; he will provide salvation and if you reject it, you will go to hell. God won't cram it down your throat; it's up to you.'[29]

A logical outflow of this emphasis on man's free will was his consistent message of the ultimate helplessness of God in man's salvation. Sunday viewed man's free will and ability as trumping God's sovereign will to save sinners. God has done all He can, and salvation ultimately rested in the free choice of individuals.

> Now in spite of God's omnipotence my friend, listen—God could not make a free being incapable of doing wrong, as freedom carries with it, my friend, the liability to sin if you want to sin, and he only is able to do right who is also able to do wrong, if he is fool enough to do it. When you talk about a free agent, a free agent is one that can do either right or do wrong, and God Almighty decreed the freedom of the human will. So you

25. Billy Sunday, "Defense of Revivals," as found in John Rice, ed., *The Best of Billy Sunday: 17 Burning Sermons from the Greatest Evangelist the World has Ever Known* (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1965). Sunday believed that a revival was merely a matter of following the right "spiritual laws" which worked in the same way as laws of nature. Later in this same sermon, he would say to the audience: "There is no doctrine more dangerous to the church today than to convey the impression that a revival is something peculiar in itself and cannot be judged by the same rules of causes and effects as other things." Similarly, in an untitled sermon given during his 1917 New York campaign on 1 Kings 18:30, Sunday proclaimed :"And God has spiritual laws that are as positive in their working and subject to conditions as the natural laws. The laws of faith are just as certain as the laws of steam and the laws of electricity; and there are laws of spiritual growth and fruit are just the same as there are of a potato or a hill of corn growing, and to secure spiritual results, human conditions must be met with." By stressing this point, Sunday again shows his reliance upon and continuation of the earlier thought of Charles Finney, who made the same point in his *Lectures on Revival*.

26. Ellis, *The Man and His Message*, 384. From Billy Sunday's sermon, "What Shall the End Be?"

27. Billy Sunday, Matthew 26:22 (sermon, New York, 1917). In another untitled New York Sermon, Sunday preached that "God couldn't have made anybody a free agent without giving that man or woman the liberty to do wrong if they want to do wrong; otherwise they wouldn't be free…And so, the freedom of the will carries with it, my friend, your privilege to do right or wrong, just as you please." Again, from the New York sermon "Ye must Be Born Again," he declared "God almighty was free to create freedom of the human intellect and freedom carries with it the privilege of the liability to sin if you want to. God couldn't make anybody a free agent without giving them the right to do right or wrong just as he pleased."

28. Billy Sunday, "Knocking at the Hearts Door," as printed in Rice (ed), *The Best of Billy Sunday: 17 Burning Sermons*.

29. Billy Sunday, 2 Tim 2:15 (sermon, New York, 1917).

> can choose to do right or choose to do wrong, as freedom carries with it the privilege to do either; and God tells you what will happen if you do right and what will happen if you do wrong. If you want to go to heaven, go ahead; and if you want to go to hell, go ahead. It is up to you, that is all.[30]

A third theological presupposition held by Sunday was his belief that man's nature was *not* inherently corrupt or sinful. Though Sunday occasionally referenced the doctrine of "Original Sin," what came out consistently in his preaching was his belief that man's nature was, deep down, basically good. Sunday set forth his understanding of the human sin nature most fully in his sermon "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," based on Romans 7:24. In it, he could acknowledge: "You may not like the doctrine of an original sin but unless you are a moral idiot you can't deny the fact that there is an inborn tendency on the part of men to sin."[31] However, what becomes clear as the sermon progresses is that Sunday's understanding of "inborn tendency to sin" did not mean that mankind has an inherently sinful or corrupt nature. As Sunday understood it, every person has within himself a Dr. Jekyll nature and a Mr. Hyde nature that battle for control: "There is a Dr. Jekyll in everybody. They want to do good, but here is an old Hyde that doesn't want you to do good and there you struggle…."[32] The Mr. Hyde nature in people entices them to sin, while the Dr. Jekyll nature encourages them towards righteous living. According to Sunday, however, *every man and women had the ability to choose which nature they would allow to dominate.* For Sunday, neither the sin nature (Mr. Hyde), or the righteous nature (Dr. Jekyll), is inherent in anyone. Whatever nature a person has is the nature he has voluntarily chosen to follow:

> In front of you tonight stands the … Dr. Jekyll nature that wants to pray, wants to be a Christian…. On the other side crouches … Hyde, and he asks control. Neither of them can take control until you say which. You can say who will win, heaven or hell. You can say whether hell will weep tonight, or heaven will weep…. You can say whether your name will be written on the Lamb's book of Life or whether it will not. You will is supreme—that is the pivot of your destiny. It's up to you to say whether it's Hyde or Jekyll who wins.[33]

Moreover, Sunday made it clear that he believed people are naturally prone to choose the good, Dr. Jekyll, nature. "There is a Dr. Jekyll, thank God, in every man, and woman." "I believe that at heart nine-tenths of the people in the world want to be better than they are. I make no exception…."[34] Ultimately, the good news that Sunday had for his audience is that they have the power to choose to forsake Mr. Hyde and put on Dr. Jekyll:"Thank God, folks, there is a ray of light to the story and I bring it to you. Your will is supreme. That's the ray of light. Your will is the pivot of your destiny, that's the ray of light. You are the one who can say who will take the throne of your life, and if you weren't I wouldn't be preaching to you."[35] A result of his functional denial of original sin, in Sunday's preaching regeneration and conversion were understood as a result of the sinners own autonomous act. The role of the Holy Spirit was reduced to that of influence, merely presenting the truth to sinners, who were then responsible to make up their minds on their own power. Further, "Sin," according to Sunday, was something that could only be the result of voluntary actions. "You ask me, 'What is Sin?' Sin is any willful violation of a known law of God. That is what theologians call sin, the doing of the thing. Sin is the willful violation of a known law of God."[36] As a result, in Sunday's preaching "Sin" was almost always defined by, or synonymous with, social vices such

30. Billy Sunday, Psalm 142:4 (sermon, New York, 1917). This is just one of a multitude of examples that could be used.

31. Billy Sunday, "Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," (sermon, New York, 1917).

32. Sunday, "Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," ibid.

33. Ibid. Sunday emphasized this point repeatedly throughout the sermon. Consider the two following examples which highlight the same point. "Now wait a minute! The drug which he drank had no discriminating action at all, oh no, not a particle! he would change from Hyde to Jekyll as easily as he would change from Jekyll to Hyde. It was the person who took the drug that had the power of discrimination! He could decide which he would be. It wasn't the drug. So, you've got the power to decide whether you will go to heaven or hell, hell or heaven. You are the discriminating power in you." Again, "Do you mean to tell me that fellow is a thief because of chance" No, he made his choice! Do you mean to tell me I am a Christian because of chance? No, I made my choice. I'm going to heaven instead of hell, I made my choice. There [is] no chance to it at all, not at all, not a bit! We make our own fortunes and then somebody tries to name it fate, or chance. Every man is the architect of his own fate."

34. Again, "The archeologists have digged magnificent cities from under the sands of centuries and what they have uncovered they have been pleased to name 'buried magnificence,' and I believe that there is in the heart of every man and woman with whom we rub elbows on the street, in society, a 'buried magnificence.'" Ibid. Many of his other sermons are peppered with similar statements that assume the basic goodness of human nature.

35. Billy Sunday, "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Again, "Your will is supreme. The seat of your religion is not in your lachrymal glands; no, it is not in your handkerchief; no, it is not blowing your nose and singing "come to Jesus" Oh, no, religion is not in your tears…. its in your will, not your handkerchief."

36. Billy Sunday, John 3:16 (sermon, New York, 1917).

as drinking, dancing, card playing, and theatre-going. Two of Sunday's most popular sermons, in fact, were devoted exclusively to attacking these four vices.[37]

Thus Sunday's preaching proclaimed a Christianity that seemed to be, at least on the surface, substantially out of accord with the doctrinal position of the Presbyterian Church in which he was a minister. His high view of human ability, low view of God's sovereignty, and narrow view of sin, just to name a few, are much more in line with outright Pelagianism then the historic Calvinism articulated in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Particularly noteworthy in this regard, is that all of these theological presuppositions were present in the earlier writing and preaching of Charles Finney. They shared the theological assumption that Divine *obligation implies human ability*; the same denial *that man's nature is inherently sinful or corrupt,* that *sin only attaches itself to voluntary actions*, that man's will is totally free, and that the w*ork of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and conversion* is limited to one of persuasion.[38] Further, Finney understood that in holding these doctrines he had positioned himself well outside the theological system set forth in the Westminster Standards. In his autobiography, for example, Finney reflected: "When I came to read the confession of faith and saw the passages that were quoted to sustain these particular positions, I was absolutely ashamed of it. I could not feel any respect for a document that would undertake to impose on mankind such dogmas as these."[39] Not surprisingly, it was precisely on these particular doctrinal points that conservative Presbyterians in Finney's day charged him with returning to the principals of Pelagianism, and called for his departure from the denomination.[40] And although Sunday was never as outspoken or direct in his attack on the Westminster Standards as Finney was, the two shared a common theology on these points.[41] But Billy Sunday, only eighty years later, received quite a different reception from his conservative brothers.

II. Presbyterian Acceptance of Sunday

It is difficult to believe that conservative Presbyterians who valued their Calvinistic heritage could listen to quotations from Sunday like the ones just presented without extreme dissatisfaction. One letter from a Presbyterian pastor, providing an update for *The Presbyterian* on Sunday's 1916 campaign in Detroit, MI, demonstrated that at least some Presbyterians did in fact struggle with Sunday's theology:

> While rejoicing beyond measure at the success of Billy Sunday, we cannot but wonder at some things that certainly mar his effectiveness. Why should he find it necessary to make an attack on Calvinism, and amid the applause of a lot of Methodist ministers glorify Arminianism? There are no ministers in Detroit or anywhere else who preach a fuller gospel than do

37. "Get on the Water Wagon" was his sermon against Booze, and "Amusements" was his attack on the other three. While these were the major sins that Sunday preached against, he preached against a wide range of other sins. Bieber summarizes: "Sunday condemned a wide range of personal sins … dishonesty, cheating, bickering … pride, gossip, stinginess, ill tempter, grumbling, envy, faultfinding, covetousness, and so forth. Of a more churchly nature, Sunday condemned absenteeism in church and Sunday school, and among Sunday school teachers, unwillingness to 'witness' to the unchurched, or to welcome strangers…. Household sins were also castigated, such as a husband showing insufficient affection for his wife, or a wife's spending too little time making her husband happy and contented." Bieber, "Billy Sunday, a Study of His Message," 93.

38. Finney clearly sets forth his views in his Lectures on Revivals and his later Systematic Theology. See Charles Finney, *Revivals of Religion* (Old Tappan, Fleming H Revel); and Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, Bethany Fellowship Inc, 1976).

39. Charles Finney, *Charles G. Finney: An Autobiography* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1876), 60. Finney further wrote "I was not aware that the rules of the presbytery required them to ask a candidate if he accepted the Presbyterian confession of faith. As soon as I learned what were the unambiguous teachings of the confession of faith … I did not hesitate on all suitable occasions to declare my dissent from them. I repudiated and exposed them. Whenever I found that any class of persons were hidden behind these dogmas, I did not hesitate to demolish them, to the best of my ability." Ibid., 59.

40. The conservative response to Finney's theology is most clearly set forth in a series of articles published in the Princeton Seminary journal, *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review,* in the 1830s and 1840s. Many of these articles have been collected and published in book form as *Princeton vs. The New Divinity* (Carlisle, Banner of Truth, 2001).

41. While it is hard to make a pronouncement with certainty due to Sunday's own lack of theological publications and precision, my own reading of Sunday's sermons leaves me in agreement with those who have concluded that Sunday was every bit as Pelagian as was Finney (see footnote 21). This is not to say that Sunday and Finney were identical in all theological areas. However, the above analysis of Sunday's message demonstrates that the substance of his theology was essentially the same on these key theological issues related to Pelagianism. Moreover, Sunday had a high view of Finney, occasionally praising him in his sermons, and clearly relying on his publications for at least some of his own thought. While Sunday was never as direct as Finney in his attacks on the Westminster Standards, his relative silence can be explained partly as a result of the desire to avoid controversy in his preaching, believing that it would be a hindrance to revival. "I always steer clear of anything about which there is controversy. It is my business to get men to take a stand for Christ" (Quoted in McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday,* 124). It may also be true that Sunday, unlike Finney, was not fully aware that his message brought him into such clear contradiction with the Westminster Standards. He was not an educated man, and, as was observed in an earlier one of his favorite sayings was "I don't know any more about theology than a jack-rabbit does about ping-pong, but I'm on my way to glory."

> the Presbyterians. Certainly Mr. Sunday knows that no denomination has stood by him more loyally or contributed more royally than the Presbyterian. He must know that his caricature of Calvinism was unfair and antiquated. But in spite of all this, the Presbyterians will stand by him, pray for him, work for him; give for him and to him and prove that he was only repeating an outgrown slander.[42]

Notice how this local Presbyterian pastor described Sunday's preaching: "attack on Calvinism," "glorify Arminianism," "caricature of Calvinism," "outgrown slander." Given the overview of Sunday's message just completed, this description of Sunday's message is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is the devoted support that this minister still offers to Sunday *in spite of* his theological divergences. The author "rejoices beyond measure at the success of Billy Sunday," claims that the Presbyterian Church has "stood by him loyally," and confidently assumes that Presbyterians will continue to "stand by," "pray for," "give for him and to him." This confidence was not misplaced, as history demonstrates that Sunday experienced widespread acceptance, support, and praise from his Presbyterian brothers. Although uncomfortable with some of his methods, most conservative Presbyterians heartily endorsed his message, united behind him as a man who had been sent from God, and called on others to do the same.[43]

One way this support was consistently demonstrated was by Presbyterians joining with other denominations in inviting a Sunday revival to their city. As Sunday's national popularity grew, so did his requirements on cities who requested his services. By 1912, Sunday had three requirements that he expected every city to meet before he would accept an invitation to hold a revival campaign. One of these requirements was that he received united support from all the evangelical churches in the city.[44] The "support" that Sunday desired from the churches included more than simply their endorsement of his campaign and presence at the tabernacle. He also expected, and received from them, a commitment to suspend their worship services during his campaign in the city. Ellis, in his biography on Sunday, remarked, "He asks that they (evangelical churches) surrender their Sunday services, all uniting in common worship in the Tabernacle" (Ellis, 62). Although this requirement seems incredible, throughout the peak of his ministry Presbyterians consistently joined hands with other Protestant ministers in supporting a Sunday revival in just this way. Reporting at the beginning of Sunday's 1915 Philadelphia campaign, for example, *The Presbyterian* observed: "Three Presbyterian churches in Philadelphia … were reported in the papers as being antagonistic to the Sunday meetings, but all three of these churches and pastors have publicly denied this…. *This makes the Presbyterians well nigh a unit in this work.*"[45] Just a few weeks into the Philadelphia campaign, this Presbyterian solidarity was publicly demonstrated as two thousand elders of the Presbyterian Church, from Philadelphia and the surrounding area, marched together as a body into the Tabernacle to hear Sunday preach.[46] Similarly, reporting on Sunday's 1916 revival campaign in Detroit, one Presbyterian pastor could write that "As far as the Presbyterian pastors are concerned, they are standing by Dr. Sunday with one accord."[47] Another minister, reporting on his 1916 campaign in Trenton, NJ, wrote: "Mr. Sunday can never complain of any lack of pastoral support in Trenton. To a man the ministers of the co-operating churches were loyal

42. William Bryant, "Michigan Letter," *The Presbyterian*, Nov 2nd, 1916, 23.

43. This is not meant to imply that every single Presbyterian minister in a given city supported a Sunday revival. The Presbyterian Church during the peak of Sunday's ministry was already beginning to divide along "modernist" (liberal) and "anti-modernist" (conservative) lines. The growing antagonism between these two groups of ministers, which would eventually break out into open controversy in the 1920s, made unanimous support among Presbyterians almost impossible. Although evidence is limited, it seems clear that, although Sunday did receive some support from modernist ministers, his appeal was more to "anti-modernist" ministers in the denomination. Darryl Hart and John Muether, in their recent history of American Presbyterianism, make the observation that even "conservative" Presbyterians during this time were made up of two very distinct groups, the pietist conservatives and the confessional conservatives. Although both rejected the modernism sweeping into the church, these two groups differed significantly among themselves as to what the nature and work of the church should be, as well as the importance of maintaining a unique Presbyterian identity. Darryl G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, P&R Publishing, 2007), 203. However, as will be seen, Billy Sunday received support from both of these conservative groups. Confessional conservatives like J. Gresham Machen, as well as pietistic/fundamentalist conservatives like William Jennings Bryan, threw their support behind Billy Sunday.

44. The other two requirements were (1) the city had to build a tabernacle for him in a central location, and (2) the city had to provide financial guarantees in advance to cover at least part of the estimated expenses of the revival. McLoughlin comments, "Unless these stipulations were met to his complete satisfaction, Sunday declared, no invitation, no matter what city or what individuals stood behind it, would be considered. McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday*, 50–51.

45. "The Sunday Meetings in Philadelphia," *The Presbyterian*, January 7, 1916, 21. Emphasis added.

46. "The Sunday Meetings in Philadelphia," *The Presbyterian*, January 28, 1915, 21.

47. William Bryant, "Michigan Letter," *The Presbyterian*, Sep 28, 1916, 22.

from the opening gun to the last."[48] Sometimes, in fact, the local presbytery of the city in which a Sunday campaign visited would make a united show of support for his campaign. During his 1916 Trenton, NJ campaign, for example, Sunday was received as a "corresponding member" by the Presbytery of New Brunswick, and was given an opportunity to address the entire Presbytery.[49] Likewise, during his 1918 campaign in Chicago, he was asked by the moderator of the Chicago Presbytery to preach the opening sermon before the Presbytery.[50] And just a few weeks later, a correspondent from Chicago wrote concerning this event: "Anyone who heard the sermon or the expressions of approval during or following its delivery would have known that Mr. Sunday has the hearty endorsement of his Presbytery."[51]

More than just uniting behind his revivals, conservative Presbyterians also had high public praise for the man and his message. Local Presbyterian pastors who had experienced the blessings of a Sunday revival publicly expressed their admiration for him in local newspapers and periodicals throughout the country. Although there are multiple examples of prominent Presbyterian leaders at the time, the comments of J. Gresham Machen and other Princeton faculty during the 1915 "tempest" at Princeton are again worth noting. In addition to holding firm in their decision to invite Sunday, several of the faculty members also expressed their appreciation for Sunday's ministry individually. Prior to Sunday's visit to the Seminary, for example, Professor Machen twice attended a Sunday revival meeting in Philadelphia and wrote to his mother about the experience and his opinion of Sunday. At the first meeting he attended, Machen was too far away from Sunday to get a "proper impression of the meeting," although he wrote that he was impressed with the sermon "as I have seldom been impressed with the permanent power of great words" (Stonehouse, 223). At the second meeting, in which Machen had a much better opportunity to hear the message and make a judgment on Sunday, his remarks about Sunday's preaching and methods are strikingly positive:

> The sermon was old-fashioned evangelism of the most powerful and elemental kind. Much of it, I confess, left me cold … but the total impact of the sermon was great. At the climax, the preacher got up on his chair—and if he had used a step ladder, nobody could have thought the thing excessive, so dead in earnest were both speaker and audience! The climax was the boundlessness of God's mercy; and so truly had the sinfulness of sin been presented, that everybody present with any heart at all ought to have felt mighty glad that God's mercy is boundless. In the last five or ten minutes of that sermon, I got a new realization of the power of the gospel (223–224).

These comments, along with his defense of Sunday in 1915, indicate that even a strongly confessional conservative like Machen, although not personally in agreement with all of his methods, nevertheless stood firmly behind the ministry of Billy Sunday. Moreover, it is clear that Machen approved of the content of Sunday's message as well. This is evidenced not only by the preceding comment, but more emphatically by the fact that, the day before Sunday's arrival at Princeton, he had led a student prayer meeting in which he talked to the Seminary students regarding "Billy Sunday evangelism and Princeton theology and the relation between them—*which I think is a very close relation*."[52]

In addition to Machen, other Princeton faculty members also individually and publicly expressed their appreciation of Sunday's ministry. President J. Ross Stevenson, for example, who also served as moderator for the General Assembly in 1915, wrote positively concerning Sunday in a 1923 pamphlet entitled "The Presbyterian Church and Revivals of Religion."[53] High praise also came from popular Princeton theologian Charles Erdman, who also later served as moderator of the General Assembly in 1925.[54] The *New York Times*

48. Clarence Hills, "The Latest Battle of Trenton," *The Presbyterian*, May 4, 1916, 8–9. Other Presbyterian ministers in New Jersey expressed their strong support of Sunday's work there. *The Presbyterian* reports two Presbyterian ministers in particular, Henry Minton and William Curry, who publicly stated their approval of the campaign: "Nothing that we could give him in the form of money could pay him for this service to us. His influences has been unmistakable upon the social life of the community and upon civic order in the city itself." "Sunday Campaign Closes," *The Presbyterian*, Feb 24, 1916, 20.

49. Clarence Reynolds, "New Jersey Letter," *The Presbyterian*, January 27, 1916, 20.

50. "Billy Sunday in Chicago," *The Presbyterian*, March 28, 1918, 29.

51. "Chicago Letter," *The Presbyterian*, April 18, 1918, 21. The sermon was described as "An exceedingly strong discourse in criticism of that liberalism that is sometimes preached from the pulpit, and is much more frequently longed for by the pew."

52. Stonhouse, *Machen*, 227, emphasis added.

53. "The evangelistic service of J. Wilbur Chapman, 'Billy' Sunday, and Wm. E. Biederwolf is too recent and well known to require any comment." In context, in which he is discussing revivalists who have positively impacted the Presbyterian Church, this comment is clearly an affirmation of Sunday's ministry. J. Ross Stevenson, "The Presbyterian Church and Revivals of Religion" (New York: Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1923), 14–15.

54. Interestingly, and as further testimony to the general support for Sunday, four out of the six moderators of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church between 1913–1918 publicly made statements endorsing Sunday. The four were John T. Stone (1913), Maitland Alexander (1914), J. Ross Stevenson (1915), and J. Wilburn Chapman (1917).

reported that during Sunday's 1917 New York campaign, Erdman introduced Sunday as "the best-loved man in the world," and as a man who ranked second only to Jesus himself in the number of people he had influenced for the Gospel.[55]

Popular opinion of Sunday, as reflected in the pages of *The Presbyterian,* contained the same strong endorsement during Sunday's peak years. Although slow to initially embrace Sunday due to his irreverence and slang, by 1913 the periodical was consistently praising Sunday's ministry and message. One 1913 editorial left no doubt of the paper's belief that he was indeed endorsed by God. "To us, 'Billy' Sunday is a forerunner of some visitation of God, either with grace and mercy or judgment. He is sent to call this age to forsake its idols, and turn to the living God…. Dr. Sunday has a message for this age which is sent from God, and badly needed."[56] Between 1913 and 1917, the paper published articles and editorials in promotion and defense of Sunday's ministry with increasing frequency. "It would be difficult for a believer in the evangelical faith to oppose Mr. Sunday in his present labors," claimed the editor, in a later 1913 editorial.[57] "Mr. Sunday will continue to preach the gospel and flay error, and men will continue to hear, repent, believe and be saved."[58]

By 1914 the paper began to provide periodic updates on his campaigns in certain cities. In an editorial on the closing night of Sunday's Pittsburgh campaign, the paper gave perhaps the strongest endorsement to date of his ministry.

> We stand heart and soul with Billy Sunday in his masterly exposure of modern errors, in his loyalty to the truth of the Scriptures, his splendid ability to present and impinge it upon the mind and attention of the people. We love the man, rejoice in his success, and glory in his courage. We have no criticism on his methods or phrases, or upon the results of his work; we have defended him, and will defend him against the attacks of liberals and all unbelievers and opposers of sound doctrine.[59]

The paper also began to publish full-page articles by other Presbyterian ministers praising Sunday's ministry. For example, in a 1914 article entitled "Carmel Fire—A Pastor's view of Billy Sunday," the Rev. Edwin Reinke reported that twenty-five Presbyterian ministers had gone from Philadelphia to visit Sunday's revival campaign in Scranton, OH. Of the twenty-five, he observed, "there was not one who was not of the opinion that his work is remarkable to the last degree."[60] Further, Reinke called upon the Presbyterian Church to fully recognize the work that Sunday was doing: "It is high time that the Presbyterian Church realizes that Mr. Sunday, is one of the most efficient American evangelists that God ever raised up for a special work" (Reinke, ibid.). Concerning the content of his preaching, "The matter of his sermons is good…. He is resoundingly orthodox in the best sense of the word" (Reinke, ibid.). The concluding remark is another testimony of the high regard that Sunday had among his peers: "Against the dashing waves of a great apostasy the Spirit of the Living God has lifted up a standard. The Presbyterian Church should rally round this leader."[61]

All in all, the attitude displayed toward Billy Sunday in *The Presbyterian* after 1912 was remarkably consistent. Although expressing disapproval over Sunday's irreverence, particularly in his prayers, there was united support behind the man and praise for his ministry. Sunday was endorsed as a man who had been raised up by God, faithfully preached the Word of God, and had clearly received God's blessing on his ministry. Moreover, the paper does not hide its expectation that every other Bible-believing Presbyterian would come to the same conclusion: "How any man holding the evangelical fundamentals could oppose his message is not so clear."[62] It is evident, then, that Billy Sunday received remarkable support from his fellow Presbyterians *in spite* of the fact that his message directly contradicted the Calvinism of the Standards he was supposed to support. Despite Sunday's conflicts with Presbyterian doctrine, thousands of conservative Presbyterian ministers across the country were more than willing, over and over again, to declare his message orthodox and unite behind his revivals. This raises a provocative question: Why were conservative Presbyterians in the early 20th century so willing to embrace Billy Sunday, when

55. "Sunday Ends Week To Crowded House," *New York Times*, April 15, 1917.

56. Two Notable men and Two Notable Addresses," *The Presbyterian*, vol 83, no 16, April 16, 1913.

57. "Attacks on Billy Sunday," *The Presbyterian*, June 25th, 1913, 7.

58. "Attacks on Billy Sunday," 7.

59. "Billy Sunday Closes at Pittsburgh," ibid., March 4, 1914, 7.

60. Edwin Reinke, "Carmel Fire—A Pastor's View of Billy Sunday." *The Presbyterian*, April 22, 1914.

61. Reinke, ibid. In another 1914 article on Billy Sunday written by a Denver Presbyter, the author wrote: "Surely there is a deep heart-hunger of the people for the Gospel that denounces sin and exalts Christ as Savior, and 'Billy' Sunday is preaching that Gospel. God bless the world by lengthening the years of his life, making the strength of his bow to abide, and by raising up others, as strong, as faithful and as consecrated as he." "Billy Sunday" *The Presbyterian*, Dec 16th, 1914, 9.

62. "Dr. Stewart Opposes Billy Sunday," ibid., August 3rd, 1916.

conservatives in the 1830s had so opposed Finney, a man with the same theological principals?

III. In the Presence of a Common Foe

Before looking at the Presbyterian denomination specifically, it is worthwhile to identify the primary reason for Sunday's acceptance within broader Protestantism as a whole. After all, although ordained by the Presbyterian Church, Sunday's revivals could not have reached the magnitude they had if they had not been broadly supported by Protestants from almost every denominational stripe. On what grounds then, were ministers and lay Christians from broadly Protestant denominations so willing to embrace Sunday's ministry? There is no doubt as to the answer: *he got results*. Even Sunday's most admiring supporters were unwilling to endorse all of his message or methods. However, for most American Protestants, the number of "converts" that Sunday could produce was more than enough to justify whatever might have been disagreeable to them about his ministry. Consider the following statements from Sunday's two authorized biographies, which were both highly sympathetic to Sunday:

> Sunday would be the last man to expect everybody to approve all that he says, either in form or in substance. I don't; and I know no other thinking observer of his meetings who does…. Nevertheless, there remains the unanswerable rejoinder to all criticism of Evangelist Sunday's utterances and message: he 'delivers the goods.'[63]

> "Didn't Samson thin the ranks of the enemy with the jawbone of an ass? Didn't David use a sling, and Shamgar an oxgoad…. These were all unconventional methods, but notice that they brought more than conventional results. When some evangelist who never uses slang begins to shake the world for God in a way more glorious than Sunday has done, it will be time enough to condemn its use as an unpardonable sin" (Brown, *The Real Billy Sunday*, 109).

This "ends justify the means" argument, given by his biographers, carried the day for most Protestant ministers in the country. Billy Sunday got results, and his results opened doors of support for him that otherwise would have remained closed. An incredible statement made by a Congregationalist pastor can be taken as representative of the way many ministers who supported Sunday's campaigns no doubt felt:

> The man [Sunday] has trampled all over me and my theology. He has kicked my teachings up and down that platform like a football. He has outraged every ideal I have regarding my sacred profession. But what does that count, as against the results he has accomplished? My congregation will be increased by hundreds…. He is doing God's work. That I do know![64]

To what extent does this "ends justified the means" mentality explain the conservative Presbyterian support for Sunday? Certainly, it cannot be overlooked as an important factor, at least on the surface. Like many Presbyterians of Finney's day, Presbyterian ministers, even those who had substantial disagreements with his theology, were willing to overlook his errors because he got results. His very entrance into the denomination, in fact, offers an example of this principal at work. In his autobiography, Sunday briefly summarized his 1903 ordination exam. When asked a question about St. Augustine, he replied, "He didn't play in the national League, I don't know him." Lee Thomas, in his 1961 biography of Sunday, includes two additional questions given to Sunday during the exam. One asked him to give a brief history of Savonarola, the great Italian reformer. The other question asked about Martin Luther and his contribution to Protestantism. Sunday could not answer either (Thomas, *Billy Sunday Story*, 84). After this, Sunday recounts that one of the committee members moved that the examination be stopped, stating:

> 'What difference does it make if he knows about Alexander, Savonarola and Cleopatra, or Pop Anson? God has used him to win more souls to Christ than all of us combined, and must have ordained him long before we even thought of it. I move you that he be admitted to the Presbytery and we give him the right hand of fellowship and the authority of the Presbyterian Church' (Billy Sunday, *The Sawdust Trail*, 51).

Evidence that this type of "ends justified the means" mentality extended to other conservative ministers is not hard to find. No less a conservative than J. Gresham

63. Ellis, *The Man and His Message*, 72. Earlier in the biography, Ellis made a similar comment. "Why are we so confident that Billy Sunday is the Lord's own man, when so many learned critics have declared the contrary? Simply because he has led more persons to make a public confession of discipleship to Jesus Christ than any other man for a century past." Ibid, 16–17.

64. Lindsay Dennison, "The Rev. Billy Sunday and His War on the Devil," *American Magazine*, Vol LXIV, September 1907, no. 5; 454.

Machen, whose positive appreciation for Sunday has already been highlighted, embodied this pragmatic attitude, writing to his mother after seeing Sunday preach for the first time, "… The big argument for Billy Sunday is the result of his preaching" (Stonehouse, 223). Similarly, Joseph Odell, pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church of Scranton, publicly explained the reason why his church, which had first been opposed to the coming of the evangelist, ended up supporting him:

> …Wherever Sunday conducts a campaign men and women who still differ from him in theology and who cannot temperamentally accept his methods nevertheless find themselves able to support his work because 'the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, and the poor have the Gospel preached unto them.'[65]

When the ministers of New York City were debating the idea of issuing an invitation for Sunday to come, they called upon Presbyterian minister Maitland Alexander of First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh to speak about the effects that Sunday's campaign had in Pittsburgh. Alexander reported to them: "Billy Sunday succeeded in moving the city of Pittsburgh from one end to the other. That, to my mind, was the greatest result of the meetings. It is easy to talk about religion now in Pittsburgh."[66] Even prominent Presbyterian Williams Jennings Bryan, who was then Secretary of State, adopted this mentality. Writing to Sunday after hearing him speak in Pittsburgh, Bryan told him "Do not allow yourself to be disturbed by criticism. God is giving you souls for your hire and that is a sufficient answer."[67] Bryan also publicly defended Sunday in a national magazine with the same argument, "The preacher who finds fault with Sunday should, before complaining, be sure that he can offer in support of his kind of preaching a longer list of names of persons who have been converted."[68]

If these comments can be taken as representative, it is fair to conclude that Presbyterian support for Sunday was, at least superficially, largely based on his ability to produce results. However, this "ends justified the means" pragmatism fails to satisfy as an adequate explanation of Sunday's near universal acceptance in the Presbyterian Church. After all, this type of pragmatic reasoning was by no means original to the ministry of Billy Sunday. The same argument was made by many Presbyterian ministers in support of Charles Finney in the 1830s. Conservatives in the denomination did not capitulate to it, however, but took a stand against Finney and the views he espoused, in spite of his tremendous results. Thus, the acceptance of this argument by conservative ministers of Sunday's day must have had a deeper underlying cause. Their willingness to embrace Sunday's results as justification for overlooking the problematic elements of his theology was symptomatic of a bigger change that had taken place within the Presbyterian Church as a whole. Underneath conservative Presbyterian acceptance of Sunday was the growing "spirit of tolerance" in the denomination. This increasing tolerance, by opening the door to theological liberalism, created a denominational environment in which he could flourish.[69]

Broadening Tolerance of the Presbyterian Church

The idea that the Presbyterian Church, after the 1869 reunion of Old School and New School parties, was marked by a steady broadening theological tolerance,

65. Joseph Odell, "A Revivalist Judged By Results," *Outlook*, April 11, 1914, 805. Odell goes on to make the general comment that "Men who repudiate his (Sunday's) creed, and abhor his methods … nevertheless go on with the campaign and cooperate in the mission."

66. Ellis, *The Man and His Message*, 174. McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 55.

67. The letter is reprinted in its entirety in Ellis, *The Man and His Message*, 191.

68. Quoted in Bieber, "Billy Sunday: a Study of His Message," 387.

69. Many of Sunday's biographies and secondary literature are so uncritical of Sunday that the only real explanation offered for his acceptance within Protestantism is that he was sent by God, and God mightily blessed his work. Others, while more realistic about Sunday's faults, still rely primarily on this interpretation. Of the few scholars who interact more critically, none offer reasons for his acceptance that are specific to Presbyterianism, as I am doing, but only for his success in Protestantism a whole. Douglas Frank believed that evangelicals in America turned to Sunday primarily out of fear that America, which had been so rapidly changing, was beginning to forsake its heritage as a "Christian" nation. Billy Sunday was the man sent from God to call the nation back to its roots. Frank, *Less than Conquerors*, 167, 180. McLoughlin is essentially in agreement with this proposal, stating that Sunday "Offered Americans of the 20th century the ideology of the 19th century." McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday*, 35. However, he also adds a second reason, namely, the distressed state of the American Protestant Churches during the first two decades of the 20th century. McLoughlin believed that the American church was undergoing a religious "slump," with slowing membership rates and declining influence in America's growing cities. Sunday, because he had proven himself able to reach the great masses in the cities, was embraced because it was believed he could turn the tide on the slump. See McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday*, pages 189ff for his discussion on this point. While both of these ideas have some explanatory power for Billy's Sunday's acceptance within broader Protestantism as a whole, neither of them address Sunday's acceptance within Presbyterianism specifically. Moreover, both of them are variations of the "end's justifies the means" approach to Sunday's acceptance, which I have just alluded does not have sufficient explanatory power for explaining Sunday's acceptance, at least in Presbyterian circles. No secondary work that I have encountered has directly tied Sunday's acceptance within Presbyterianism specifically to the theological broadening of the denomination.

is not a new one. Most notably, Lefferts Loetscher, in his classic work *The Broadening Church*, persuasively demonstrated this reality with great detail and support.[70] Building on Loetscher's work, what follows is a brief overview of several noteworthy examples of this "broadening" within the Presbyterian Church that took place during Sunday's ministry years, and which are particularly significant for understanding his acceptance within the denomination.

A first example can be found in the over a decade-long movement within the church to revise the Confession of Faith, culminating with the changes of 1903, which, it may be recalled, is the year that Sunday was ordained as a Presbyterian minister. Calls for revision to the Confession had been coming for several years, initially with substantial changes being proposed.[71] The general motive behind the revision was a desire to remove problematic implications from statements in the Confession, as well as to expressly state important truths which were not addressed. One prominent pastor, Dr. Van Dyke, listed three objections which became points around which revision discussions centered. First, the doctrine of reprobation; Second, the phrase "elect infants" implied that some infants were damned; third, the Confession lacked a clear statement of God's universal provision and free offer of salvation in Christ (Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 43). These objections were all addressed in the changes that were actually approved in 1903. A preamble and declaratory statement was added to the Confession, the purpose of which was to disavow "certain inferences" of the Confession as well as to declare "certain aspects of revealed truth which appear at the present time to call for more explicit statement."[72] The changes also included changing the description of good works by unregenerate men (16.7) from "sinful" to "falling short of what God requires," and adding two new chapters to the confession on "The Holy Spirit" and "Of the Love of God and Missions."

Overall, none of the changes explicitly repudiated anything that was formerly contained in the Confession. However, the changes had the effect of softening the harder edges of Calvinism, making room for ministers, like Billy Sunday, who did not find the Confession's articulation of God's sovereign election as palatable, and who had a high view of human moral ability.[73] Billy Sunday's ministry, publicly proclaiming his high view of human ability and free will throughout the country, is a testimony to the fact that these views had become acceptable in a denomination that had previously condemned them. Or at least, it demonstrates that those Presbyterians who disagreed, were unwilling to publicly condemn or bring charges. Further, underneath the various proposed revisions were issues that had greater significance for the future of the church, as many of the advocates of the revisions saw this as the first step towards union with other churches, and towards a much more inclusive church as a whole.[74] This hope to see the standards of the Church revised to the extent that it could unite with other Protestant churches would reach its culmination in 1918, when thirty-five Presbyteries overtured the General Assembly to propose a union of "All Evangelical churches in the United States" (Loetscher, 100). Perhaps it is not coincidental that the undisputed peak of Sunday's career was 1917–1918, directly

70. Lefferts Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: a study of the theological issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954). In a more recent contribution to the history of Presbyterianism, Darryl Hart and John Muether make a similar point when they conclude that American Presbyterianism during this time frame was marked by increasing theological diversity. "With the Westminster Standards becoming optional among ministerial membership in the church, a broad and often incoherent pluralism became the defining mark of American Presbyterianism in the twentieth century." Hart and Muether, *Seeking*, 203. As mentioned previously, Hart and Muether also add to Loetscher's thesis, observing that "conservative" Presbyterians during in the early 20th century were made up of two very distinct groups, the pietist conservatives and the confessional conservatives, who disagreed about the nature of the church's work. Later in this essay, I will argue that the issue of the nature of the church's work was a factor in Sunday's acceptance in the denomination.

71. The issue appears to have first been raised in 1889, when around fifteen presbyteries overtured the GA to revise the Confession of Faith. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 41. This was the same year that Charles Briggs published *Whither? A Theological Question for the Times*, which promoted revision to the Standards. In 1892, the committee on the Revision of the Confession of Faith gave a report to the Assembly with proposed changes much more comprehensive then what was actually approved, proposing changes to the following sections: 1.5; 3.3–4; 3.7; 4.1; 6.5; 7.3; 7.4; 5.8; A new chapter on the Holy Spirit; 9.1; 9.3; A new chapter on the Gospel; 10.1; 10.2; 10.3; 10.4; 11.1;11.3; 14.1; 15.4; 16.7; 21.4; 22.3;22.7; 24.3; 25.6; 29.2; and 30.2. See the *Minutes of the 1892 General Assembly,* pages 130–137.

72. *Minutes of the 1903 General Assembly*, 124. The two inferences which the statement specifically disavows concern God's eternal decree, declaring that his election to salvation must be held consistently with his love for all mankind, and his election to reprobation must be held in harmony with the truth that he does not desire the death of any sinner and his readiness to save all who seek him. A second point made in the declaratory statement is that all infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit.

73. Some have argued, including Darryl Hart and John Muether, that the changes to the Confession go farther than merely softening the Calvinism, but actually constitute an embracing of Arminianism. Hart and Muether, *Seeking*, 184.

74. Loetscher lists Dr. Charles Briggs as the prominent example, although noting that "Other Presbyterians, too , were stressing the possibilities that revision held for church union." Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 42.

corresponding with the peak of movement for union. The Church ultimately rejected the plan, but the broad support that it received demonstrates the movement away from a strict confessional orthodoxy and a broadening toleration of theological views outside the bounds of historic Calvinism.

A second, and closely connected example of the broadening theological posture of the Presbyterian Church, was the reunion with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1906. The Cumberland Presbyterian Church began in the early nineteenth century after years of controversy surrounding revivals in Kentucky (Loetscher, 95). Due to the lack of ministers for their churches, Cumberland Presbytery began to license men to preach who only partially adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith, only requiring them to adopt it as far as they believed it corresponded with Scripture.[75] After an investigation was made by the Synod of Kentucky, several ministers and licentiates of the Cumberland presbytery were suspended in 1805 (Barrus et al, 63–64). What followed was several years of legislative battles between Presbytery, the Synod of Kentucky, and the GA, but eventually the ministers formed a separate Cumberland Synod in 1813, effectively separating themselves from the larger Church (Barrus, et al, 82). As part of their independent status, the Cumberland Presbyterians revised the Westminster Confession to eliminate language they found problematic with their beliefs. Specifically, they denied God's decree of reprobation, the doctrine of limited atonement, and any part of the Confession that seemed to teach, in their opinion, the doctrine of fatalism (Hart and Muether, *Seeking*, 101).

Although the churches had been theologically estranged for nearly one hundred years, after the revisions of 1903, the two denominations began discussing possible re-union. Official statements made by the Presbyterian Church deny that the reunion with the Cumberland Church was the result of any change in the theological stance of the Church.[76] Despite such assurance, a minority of the Church was unconvinced. Francis Patton, Billy Sunday's former pastor, and then president of Princeton Seminary, stated that the potential merger was "… in effect, not necessarily in intention, an indirect way of revising the Confession of faith on radical grounds" (Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 96). Even if the reunion did not imply, as Patton feared, a "radical" revising of the Confession of Faith, it did certainly indicate a greater toleration in the interpretation of the doctrinal standards. The fact that the majority of the Church now "declared that there was sufficient theological agreement to warrant union with a Church which some had previous regarded as non-Calvinistic" (Loetscher, 97) casts serious doubt on GA's declaration that the integrity of the system had not been impaired by the revision. Even if this statement was true in letter, the reunion demonstrates that it was no longer true in spirit. The attitude of the Church toward certain theological doctrines had broadened, and was now wide enough to reunite with a body that had explicitly repudiated parts of its standards for almost one hundred years. The significance for Billy Sunday's acceptance is obvious. With the addition to the Church of the Cumberland ministers, it became significantly less likely that Billy Sunday's departures from the Westminster Confession would be noticed, or receive any negative attention.

A third example is found in the repeated General Assembly affirmations of the five "fundamentals" in 1910, 1916, and 1923.[77] These affirmations were typically made as the result of controversy concerning the licensure or ordination of ministerial candidates. The very fact that the denomination deemed it necessary to emphasize these five doctrines as necessary and essential for ministers, is in itself an indicator of how theologically broad the denomination was becoming, as men were now entering the ministry of the Presbyterian Church who could not affirm the inerrancy of Scripture or the Virgin Birth of Christ.[78] And although these affirmations were intended to slow the growing theological boundaries of the Church, somewhat ironically, they actually helped to further it along by downplaying the importance of the Confession of Faith as a whole. These declarations, as will be seen below, played an important role in Billy Sunday's acceptance within the denomination.

75. Ben Barrus, Milton Baughn, and Thomas Campbell, *A People Called Cumberland Presbyterians* (Memphis: Frontier Press, 1972), 60.

76. For example, the GA declared that "the revision of the Confession of Faith effected in 1903 has not impaired the integrity of the system of doctrine contained in the Confession and taught in Holy Scripture, but was designed to remove misapprehensions as to the proper interpretation thereof." Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 96. See also the 1904 minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church.

77. The five fundamentals were: Inerrancy of Scripture, Virgin Birth, Substitutionary atonement, reality of miracles, and bodily resurrection.

78. Two brief examples of this liberalism in the church come from Charles Briggs and Harry Emerson Fosdick. Briggs, a professor of Hebrew at Union Seminary, rejected inerrancy in his 1891 inaugural address : "I shall venture to affirm that, so far as I can see, there are errors in Scriptures that no one has been able to explain away; and the theory that they are not in the original text is a sheer assumption" (as quoted in Hart and Muether, *Seeking*, 183). Harry Emerson Fosdick's Sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" was delivered from a Presbyterian pulpit in 1922. In it, Fosdick preached that the Virgin Birth (among other fundamentals) did not need to be accepted as historical fact. "To believe in virgin birth as an explanation of great personality is one of the familiar ways in which the ancient

Billy Sunday and the Broadening Church

The acceptance of Billy Sunday by conservatives is best understood as a consequence of this broad theological tolerance that had come to characterize the Presbyterian Church as a whole. While Sunday was strongly opposed to theological liberalism, the broadening of theological boundaries in the denomination had several consequences that explain why Sunday's ministry, despite his substantial theological departures from the Confession, was embraced by conservatives.

The first, and arguably the most important, effect of the broadening theological tolerance, was the entrance into the church of ministers who, at least from the standpoint of many conservatives, had departed from historic Christianity altogether. In other words, the Church had so softened its theological requirements for ordination, that many conservatives believed that there were ministers in the Church who did not actually believe or preach Christianity. This was the belief of J. Gresham Machen, whose 1923 book *Christianity and Liberalism* argued that the liberalism present in the Presbyterian Church "not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions."[79] Conservative Presbyterians who accepted Machen's analysis rejected the Auburn Affirmations downplaying of theological differences between liberals and conservatives as merely different "theories" explaining the same "facts," but believed they represented two entirely different religions altogether.[80]

The result of this conservative mindset, as it related to their acceptance of Billy Sunday, is highly significant. *Simply put, conservatives were willing to embrace Sunday because he was an ally to them in the larger battle with the liberals*. Compared to the overhauling of the faith that the liberals were after, Sunday's anti-confessional, even Pelagian theology, was a much less significant threat to conservatives. Additionally, in the battle for holding on to the fundamentals of the faith as defined by the General Assembly deliverances, Sunday was a powerful ally to the conservative camp. Sunday was speaking to up to sixty thousand people a day, and he frequently took aim at the liberal theological innovations in his sermons. For example, regarding higher criticism, Sunday quipped in a sermon:

> When some bigwig who has dreamed his theories over the beer mugs, tobacco smoke and the battle fumes of Heidelburg and Leipsig butts into me and says to me, 'Mr. Sunday, the consensus of the latest scholarship has decreed thus and so regarding the divine origin of the Scriptures,' I say 'When the consensus of the latest scholarship says one thing and the Word of God says another, the latest scholarship can go plumb to Hell for all we care.'" [81]

With respect to evolution, Sunday was equally emphatic:

> I do not believe in the bastard theory of evolution … I do not believe that my great, great grandfather was a monkey with a tail wrapped around a coconut tree. If you believe your great, great granddaddy was a monkey, then you take your daddy and go to hell with him, but leave me out![82]

He had similarly disparaging remarks for those who rejected other fundamentals of the faith. On the positive side, Sunday devoted an entire sermon in most of his campaigns to defending the doctrine of Christ's substitutionary atonement; declared unequivocally that the "Bible is the Word of God from cover to cover," and was clear in his hope of the bodily resurrection and physical return of Christ. Sunday was even willing to publicly berate liberal minister *to their face*. During his Toledo revival in 1911, a liberal minister who had supported Sunday's revival in the city, attempted to dissuade him privately from being so intolerant on

world was accustomed to account for unusual superiority." He then concluded: "Knowing this, there are within the evangelical churches large groups of people whose opinion about our Lord's coming would run as follows: those first disciples adored Jesus—as we do; when they thought about his coming they were sure that he came specially from God—as we are; this adoration and conviction they associated with God's special influence and intention in his birth—as we do; but they phrased it in terms of a biological miracle that our modern minds cannot use. So far from thinking that they have given up anything vital in the New Testament's attitude toward Jesus, these Christians remember that the two men who contributed most to the church's thought of the divine meaning of the Christ were Paul and John, who never even distantly allude to the virgin birth."

79. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1923), 7.

80. The Auburn Affirmation was first published in 1924 in response to the 1923 General Assembly affirmation of the five fundamentals. The affirmation challenged the right of the assembly to establish the five points as tests of orthodoxy, but more importantly, it was a clear articulation of the demand for a broader definition of orthodoxy in the Presbyterian Church. Regarding the five fundamentals, the affirmation declared that they were not facts themselves, but rather "…certain theories concerning the inspiration of the bible, and the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and the Continuing life and Supernatural Power of our Lord Jesus Christ." Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 118.

81. Billy Sunday, "Nuts for Skeptics to Crack," as published in *17 Burning Sermons.*

82. Billy Sunday, "Nuts for Skeptics to Crack," ibid.

the subject of evolution. The next day, Sunday went to where the minister was sitting, shook his fist in his face, and yelled loud enough for the audience to hear, "Stand up there, you bastard evolutionist! Stand up with the atheists and the infidels and the whoremongers and the adulterers and go to hell!"[83] Given the overall context, and Sunday's aggressive attacks on the liberal theology that was increasingly taking hold in Presbyterianism, it is not surprising that conservatives within the denomination were willing to embrace Sunday. Such men were, in their understanding, battling to keep the denomination as a whole from departing from historic Christianity. In the midst of such a battle, they needed support from every quarter possible, and that included Billy Sunday. This is the key to understanding Machen's statement in defense of Sunday when the controversy in Princeton erupted: "In an age of general defection, he is preaching *the gospel*."[84] In such an "age of defection," when engaged in all out warfare for historic Christianity, Machen, and other conservatives like him, were willing to set aside theological differences that would have, in another context, broken fellowship. A 1926 statement made by Machen, after the fundamentalist/modernist controversy had broken out, summarizes this point well: "Do you suppose, gentlemen, that I do not detect faults in many popular defenders of supernatural Christianity? … Most certainly I do. But in the presence of a great common foe, I have little time to be attacking my brethren who stand with me in defense of the Word of God" (Stonehouse, 337–338). Editors of *The Presbyterian* published a remarkably similar statement at the conclusion of Sunday's 1915 revival campaign in Philadelphia:

> Some of Mr. Sunday's expressions were not to our liking. When he touched on certain public questions, we were not always in accord with him. We might use different expressions with regard to the ministry and the Church, but when a brother stands upon the firing line, battling against the enemy for the saving of men, with devils and evil men hurling venomous darts and javelins against him, it is not the time to magnify minor mistakes and to point out the weak part in his harness. God forbid. In such case, there is but one thing to do, join the brother and belabor the foe, until they give way."[85]

This reality, that conservatives believed they had a "great common foe," against which they must fight together, further explains why so many of the editorials and articles in *The Presbyterian,* between 1912 and 1918, highlighted Sunday's conflicts with liberals as a *positive* feature of his ministry. From the perspective of the conservative readers of this periodical, anyone whom the liberals were attacking was worth supporting, even if his theology was deficient in other areas. Thus, the magazine delighted to draw attention to how, in his preaching, Sunday gave "body blows … to all of liberal thought in their rejection of the plan of salvation."[86] Speaking to criticism of Sunday in local papers during his Philadelphia campaign, the editor wrote that underneath criticism of Sunday was "a battle between those who believe in the Bible as the infallible Word of God, and those who do not so believe it. This is the real issue."[87] Similarly, commenting on disagreement among ministers about Sunday's possibly coming to the city of Rochester, NY, the paper wrote "it is evident that the real point of differences is doctrinal. The orthodox men are for him, and the liberal men are against him."[88] "The severest line of division is held in regard to Mr. Sunday's theology. It is a regular separator or touch-stone between the liberals and the evangelicals."[89]

Further, the magazine went out of its way to highlight, with approval, how Sunday's revival campaigns forced liberals out into the open.

> These evangelistic meetings are the occasion of drawing the line between liberalism and evangelicalism. On the one side with Mr. Sunday are the large body of evangelical churches; on the other side is the small body of liberals … all this goes to show that Providence is moving in a way which draws the line between the believers and the unbelievers. The effort to unite and compromise the two has failed, and has ceased, and the man who does not show his colors is a weakling or a coward.[90]

Indeed, Sunday was the man whom God had chosen and raised up to lead the conservative fight against liberalism.

> The doctrinal issue now in the front, and which centers about the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a part of the great world movement…. We dreamed that the Philistine would come out of Boston, but we looked for the champion of God to come from some

83. Recorded by McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 411. Originally printed in "The Trouble with Billy Sunday: Some grounds for Opposition," *The Congregationalist*, May 29th, 1913.
84. Stonehouse, *Machen*, 226. Underline added.
85. "A Measure of Mr. Sunday," *The Presbyterian*, March 25, 1915, 1.
86. "The Sunday Meetings in Philadelphia," ibid., March 4, 1915, 18.
87. "The Sunday Meetings in Philadelphia," ibid., February 25, 1915, 18.
88. "The Sunday Contention in Rochester," ibid., April 1, 1915, 5.
89. "Sunday and Sundayism," ibid., December 7, 1916, 2.
90. "The Sunday Meetings in Philadelphia," ibid., January 7, 1915, 21.

> seminary fully panoplied in the full armor of modern learning. But God had not chosen him. God sent away back to a log cabin among the farmers of Iowa, to the son of a widow, a soldier's orphan, a baseballist, and anointed him, and prepared him with the preparation of the Gospel, and the two champions met in the city of Philadelphia … the Philistine has been put to flight, while the champion of Israel is winning his victories by the thousands.[91]

In a battle of such significance, conservative Presbyterians must unite behind God's champion:

> Since Prof Briggs attacked the inerrancy of the Scriptures … there has been an insinuation of liberalism into the church … which has denied the Scriptures … and Jesus Christ as God and Savior, his shed blood as a vicarious atonement for sin, the resurrection of the body, the hope of heaven, and the peril of hell, and the glorious second coming…. Now comes this man, defiant, humane, preaching the Word with all boldness and fullness, standing for the law of God against the license and sin of men … they (the people) join heart and hands in this struggle against the tide of unbelief and wicked practices in this age and in this community.[92]

Professor J. Gresham Machen captured the essence of this unified conservative support for Sunday when he wrote to his mother: "I like Billy Sunday for the enemies he has" (Stonehouse, 224).

A second effect of the broadening theological tolerance was an increasing emphasis on "practical" work within the denomination, a shift in ministerial conceptions of the nature and work of the church. As the theological particulars of the Church were slowly deemphasized and broadened, there was a corresponding increase in the emphasis on uniting for the sake of accomplishing the practical work of the Church. Evidence of this "unite and work" attitude is found in the increasing willingness of the Presbyterian Church to unite with other denominations to tackle the problems of America after 1869.[93] Summarizing the attitude behind this cooperation, Hart and Muether comment: "Altogether, the dangers of materialism, skepticism, infidelity, and Catholicism persuaded Presbyterians to work with other Protestants on the basis of their common convictions" (*Seeking a Better Country*, 172). If accomplishing practical work was at first an incentive to cooperate with other Protestant denominations, it was also an incentive to tolerate any theological diversity within the Presbyterian Church itself. After the 1892 General Assembly made a pronouncement known as the Portland Deliverance, which endorsed biblical inerrancy as an essential view for ministers of the church to hold, a group of ministers within the Church responded with a protest document entitled "A plea for Peace and Work." A brief quotation from this document demonstrates the pragmatic mindset of many ministers:

> To those who are actively engaged in the Ministry of the Christ, *the chief interest and the first duty is the bringing of the simple Gospel Home to the hearts and lives of men*. This is the great work of the church to which everything else must give … we are filled with the gravest fears lest the usefulness of the church should be hindered, her peace disturbed, and her honor diminished *by the prevalence of theological controversy over doctrines which are not essential.*[94]

The document goes on to claim that most ministers in the Church are weary of, and have little sympathy for, "the extremes of dogmatic conflict," and are "longing for peace and united work." In other words, the Presbyterian ministers who signed the document were claiming the primary importance of the practical work of the Church, and they appealed to their fellow ministers to tolerate a diverse range of theological opinions for the purpose of uniting to accomplish such work. Implicit in such a statement, is a view of the mission of the Church that is more social than spiritual, one that is more focused upon national welfare and public morality than on Word and Sacrament (Hart and Muether, *Seeking*, 173). Further, as Hart observes, this increasing desire for "peace and work" was prevalent among conservatives, as well as "liberals" in the denomination:

> It is important to underscore that the ecumenical impulse was not limited to those who would come to embrace theological modernism. Some conservative Presbyterians were also establishing ecumenical connections, especially with other Protestants who were

91. "Doctrinal Duel-Eliot and Sunday," *The Presbyterian*, January 21, 1915, 6.

92. "Why do the Heathen Rage?" *The Presbyterian*, February, 18, 1915, 6.

93. For example, the Church joined the Evangelical Alliance and the Presbyterian Alliance shortly after reuniting in 1869. The purpose of these societies was to bring a closer unity between Christians to work together to tackle the problems the country was facing. Hart and Muether, *Seeking a Better Country,* 171.

94. "A plea for Peace and Work." The document is available for online viewing at: http://ia600309.us.archive.org/31/items/pleaforpeaceworkooslsn/pleaforpeaceworkooslsn.pdf.

> also adamant about defending the 'fundamentals' of the faith.[95]

This type of environment was a perfect condition for Billy Sunday to flourish among conservative Presbyterians. Although he preached the need for the new birth and conversion, the general tenor of his message, and the advertising for his campaigns, betrayed his greater interest in the moral welfare of the nation. In other words, his preaching was focused on accomplishing "practical work" in and for America. A major emphasis of Sunday's preaching was personal and public morality. Sunday's campaign repeatedly advertised itself by holding out to potential campaign cities the social benefits of his revival campaigns. In fact, an entire chapter of his second authorized biography by Ellis is focused on the benefit of Sunday's preaching for general welfare of society.[96] He writes unequivocally, "The verdict of all Christians who have studied conditions in a community after one of the Sunday campaigns is that Sunday has been like a thunder storm that has cleared the moral atmosphere. Life is sweeter and safer and more beautiful for boys and girls after this man has dealt plainly with social sins and temptations" (Ellis, 202). Again, "The results of Sunday's preaching are primarily social and ethical. He is a veritable besom of righteousness sweeping through a community" (Ellis, 170). And again: "Once cannot cease to exult at the fashion in which the evangelist makes the Gospel synonymous with clean living. All the considerations that weigh to lead persons to go forward to grasp the evangelist's hand, also operate to make them partisans of purity and probity" (171). Sunday himself tapped into this rhetoric, regularly advertising his campaigns as civic reforms. William McLoughlin records a press release by the Sunday campaign to the city of Philadelphia just prior to his campaign in the city: "Does Philadelphia want to see a 'For Rent' sign hanging in the window of every brewery, saloon, and house of ill-fame? Does Philadelphia want to see thieves made to steal no more?..homes of squalor and want turned into abodes of peace and plenty?"[97]

Thus, Sunday's focus on the moral welfare of the nation, and on Christians working together to accomplish "practical work," resonated with the prevailing attitude within the Presbyterian Church. His emphasis on personal and national morality was important to conservative and liberal Presbyterians alike, and it further explains why many conservatives were willing to support him. In some cases, ministers openly acknowledged that the major motivation for inviting Sunday were the social benefits of his campaigns. For example, one Presbyterian pastor from Detroit explained how Sunday's campaign was invited with the purpose of increasing support for prohibition, of which Sunday was an adamant supporter: "We are making a tremendous effort to make Michigan a 'dry' state. To help us in that movement it was planned to have these meetings just now.… *We all believed that the coming of Billy Sunday at this time would give an impetus to the movement*. We are not disappointed."[98] For ministers who believed that the nature and work of the Church was more social and practical then spiritual, the ends of Sunday's campaigns clearly justified the means, even though they may have held theological convictions much different from him. The appeal of the city-wide moral benefits of a Sunday campaign proved to be powerful enough to earn their support.

A third and final side effect of the broadening tolerance was the subtle reshaping of doctrinal "orthodoxy" in the Presbyterian Church away from strict adherence to the Confession of Faith, to a much broader commitment to certain fundamentals. In a denomination that had allowed increasing theological diversity within its ranks, conservatives in the denomination were willing to lower the theological common denominator in order to stem the tide of liberalism. This move was demonstrated first by the Portland Deliverance of 1892, and them more emphatically by the repeated General Assembly affirmations of the five "fundamentals" in 1910, 1916, and 1923. As Hart and Muether observe, these declarations were motivated by conservative attempts to resist the advancing liberalism in the Church. In the war against the liberals, conservatives picked the five fundamentals as their doctrinal battle ground, attempting to form an alliance between as many ministers as possible to subdue liberal aggression. However, by uniting around these specific doctrines as *the most* essential and necessary, the importance of the Confession as a whole was undermined. The affirmations effectively created a canon within the canon for Presbyterian ministers, making "certain doctrines the Bible's truly nonnegotiables, rather than the standards themselves as

95. Ibid., 186. This is where Hart and Muether's distinction between the pietist and confessional conservatives becomes significant for understanding the acceptance of Sunday.

96. See Ellis, chapter 14, "The Service of Society." Chapter 16, "A Clean Man on Social Sins," also gives emphasis to Sunday's focus on "clean living."

97. McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday*, 228. McLoughlin lists numerous other examples and includes many quotations from newspapers which highlighted the moral improvement in their cities after a Sunday campaign.

98. William Bryant, "Michigan Letter," *The Presbyterian*, October 19, 1916, 22. Emphasis added.

containing the system of doctrine found in the Scriptures" (Hart and Muether, *Seeking*, 186). Functionally, these five points became the new Confession of Faith for conservatives during these years, effectively redefining who was considered an "orthodox" conservative Presbyterian. As long as a minister held firmly to these five points, the rest of his theological system was tolerated, even if not consistent with the Confession at other parts.

As a result, theological positions which had once been considered well outside the bounds of Presbyterianism in the 1830s, were accepted, and even considered conservative, in the years of Billy Sunday's ministry. As William McLoughlin has deftly observed, "…What was heresy in that generation turned out to be orthodoxy in the next. By 1870 the Old School Presbyterians had joined hands with the New School and the democratically defined interpretation of orthodoxy proved victorious."[99] This shift of orthodoxy is perhaps nowhere more clearly exemplified than in the shift of attitude displayed toward Charles Finney by conservatives in the church. No less than Princeton Seminary President J. Ross Stevenson, for example, writing in a pamphlet published in 1923 for the denomination, could write that Charles Finney was a "notable evangelist" through which "multitudes were brought to a saving knowledge of Christ." He then makes the following assessment:

> Charles F. Finney is rated as one of the greatest American revivalists, whose long and conspicuous career as a soul-winner was so honored of God that it is estimated as many as five hundred thousand persons were converted throughout his instrumentality. He was brought up in a Presbyterian parish, received his ministerial training in a Presbyterian manse, and was an ordained Presbyterian minister, although he subsequently identified himself with the Congregational Church.[100]

These words represent a complete reversal of the judgment of Finney made by Princeton theologians in the 1830s, who had condemned Finney's theology as Pelagian and his revivals as a "system of soul-destroying deception."[101] How could the president of Princeton Seminary make a judgment on Finney so different from Princeton in the 1830s? The answer, it seems, is that President Stevenson was assessing Finney's ministry by a different standard of orthodoxy.[102] Certain statements taken from *The Presbyterian* during Sunday's ministry years also reflect this subtle reshaping of orthodoxy. For example, in one article which declares Sunday "resoundingly orthodox," the author, in his following commentary, provides the reader with what he considers "orthodox." He did not mean that Sunday's preaching was consistent with the standards, but "Seldom have we heard the atoning Cross better preached or more worthily exalted … he preaches the terrors of hell, and he uses fear as an argument…he honors the Word of God as inerrant and supreme."[103] In other words, the author was basing his judgment that Sunday was "orthodox" on the fact that Sunday preached the newly defined "fundamentals" of the faith—vicarious atonement, inerrancy, and hell. In another editorial, Billy Sunday is defended from criticism because "this evangelist honors God, and his Word as infallible, and his Son as deity, and the blood of the cross as the only way of forgiveness, and the resurrection of the body and the blessed hope of his return."[104] What conservatives appealed to in defense of Sunday was not his teaching with respect to the Standards, but his teaching with respect to these certain fundamentals.

This subtle reshaping of orthodoxy and the strong emphasis on the five fundamentals as the new definition of conservatism and biblical fidelity, created, a perfect environment for Sunday to flourish among conservatives in the Presbyterian Church. Although Sunday's theology was out of accord with the Standards on many levels, he was a conspicuous and tenacious defender of each of these fundamentals. If conservatives

99. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 65. McLoughlin is the only interpreter that I have come across that gives any attention to, as I have tried to do, the irony of later American revivalists such as Moody and Sunday, being praised by conservative Presbyterians despite holding very similar doctrinal positions to Charles Finney. Commenting on several of Moody's theological statements particularly, he comments "This was the very same view of man's omnipotence for which Hopkinsians and Presbyterians had denounced Finney forty years earlier." Moody was not, like Sunday, however, ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church.

100. J. Ross Stevenson, "The Presbyterian Church and Revivals of Religion," (New York: Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1923), 14–15.

101. See *Princeton vs. New Divinity*,. See also Samuel Miller, *Letters to Presbyterians on the Present Crisis in the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Anthony Finley, 1833), 157–158.

102. Another example of this reversal of judgment on Finney comes from *The Presbyterian*. In article about Billy Sunday's 1914 visit to Carnegie Hall in New York, the author, himself a Presbyterian minister, speaks glowingly of "Dr. Finney." "Only one church invited him to Rochester at first. The odds were against him. But God was with him, and so he triumphed … Rochester still feeling the impulse of his mighty work. Billy Sunday is another such man as Dr. Finney. He believes that nothing is impossible with God. But in order to success, we must use the means and abide God's time." Alexander Alison, "Billy Sunday in New York," *The Presbyterian*, March 18th, 1914, 11.

103. Edwin Reinke, "Carmel Fire—A Pastor's View of Billy Sunday." *The Presbyterian*, April 22, 1914.

104. "Whatsoever a Man Soweth," *The Presbyterian*, January 21, 1915.

had analyzed Sunday, as they had with Finney, from the viewpoint of the entire Confession, they may have been more restrained in their uncritical praise of Sunday's ministry. However, analyzing him through the lens of the five fundamentals, he became for most conservatives the "banner" that God had lifted up "against the dashing waves of apostasy."

Conclusion

Billy Sunday's meteoric rise in American Presbyterianism was a consequence of the growing theological tolerance of the Presbyterian Church, which by the early decades of the twentieth century had resulted in an environment in which he could flourish. This tolerance opened the doors of the denomination to liberal theological positions, which many conservatives believed were outside the bounds of Christianity. In the presence of this great common foe of theological liberalism, conservative ministers were willing to rally behind Sunday, even though he preached a message that an earlier generation of Presbyterians had condemned as Pelagian, and he essentially equated morality and patriotism with Christianity. In their zeal to defeat this foe, conservatives were willing to accept and support men in the denomination who were not distinctly Presbyterian at all. As a result, Billy Sunday was not only tolerated, but was looked to as a leading figure in the conservative Presbyterian attempts to stop the advance of liberal theology within the Church.

But precisely because a great common foe was the dominant reason for conservative support of Sunday, their uncritical acceptance of him was limited, and could not last forever. It is not coincidental that the undisputed peak of Sunday's ministry occurred within the years of the General Assembly pronouncements of the five fundamentals, beginning in 1910 and ending in 1923. During these years, as noted earlier, conservatives centered their hopes for resisting the encroaching modernism in the Church on preserving the five fundamentals in their integrity. It was specifically during this time-frame that conservative praise of Sunday was the strongest, both among broader Protestantism generally, and Presbyterianism specifically. Even *The Presbyterian* was hesitant to fully embrace Sunday as late as 1909. It was not until 1913 that unqualified support behind him became the norm.[105] The strongest and most unqualified support came to Sunday primarily during the years in which conservative Presbyterians united on the five fundamentals as "Plan A" in their resistance to liberalism. Before this, and after this, Sunday's popularity and influence would not be the same.

In this light, the ministry of Billy Sunday in the Presbyterian Church offers insight concerning the state of the Presbyterian Church leading up to the fundamentalist/modernist controversy of the 1920's and 1930's. Somewhat ironically, the embracing of Billy Sunday by Presbyterians was both an example of, and a response to, the broadening theological tolerance in the Church which had opened the doors wide to theological liberalism. If it were not for the fact that the Presbyterian Church had broadened significantly since the conservatives battle against Finney in the 1830s, Billy Sunday could not have entered, much less enjoyed unqualified support and praise for his ministry in the Presbyterian Church. As has been seen, even the criticism that Sunday did receive within the denomination did not center on his message or theology—which was assumed to be orthodox—but on his unusual and irreverent methods. In this respect, Sunday serves as an example of the broadening theological tolerance and diversity that had come to characterize the Presbyterian Church in the early twentieth century. But the central importance of Billy Sunday's ministry in the Presbyterian Church was not merely that a man with his theological views was present in the denomination. After all, there were many liberal ministers, far more radical in their theological views than Sunday, who were also members in good standing. Rather, the lasting significance of Sunday's ministry in the Presbyterian Church is in how his acceptance exemplified the strategy that conservative Presbyterians adopted, for a time, in the fight against liberalism. Giving up any attempt to preserve confessional identity as a whole, conservatives rallied around the five fundamentals as their strategy for slowing the spreading liberalism. The rise of Billy Sunday was the fruit of this conservative game plan, and in this respect, support of Billy Sunday by conservatives was their response to the increasing theological liberalism. Billy Sunday became the "David" that conservatives hoped would slay the liberal "Goliath," and like the armies of Israel, they supported their champion eagerly. ▪

105. William McLoughlin, in *Billy Sunday was His Real Name*, finds a similar trend in other denominational magazines. For example he traces a similar development in the Baptist periodical , the *Watchman-Examiner*. In 1907 the paper described Sunday as "outrages every accepted canon of religions worship." By 1914, the same magazine could say "no man who heard him doubted his profound sincerity or questioned his tremendous power," and was printing Sunday's sermons. McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday*, 194–195.