

William Bell Riley (1861-1947)

ACCC 78th Annual Convention, October 2019

Pastor Kevin Hobi

1. Annotated bibliography.
 - 1.1. Kevin Bauder and Robert Delnay, *One in Hope and Doctrine: Origins of Baptist Fundamentalism 1870-1950* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Books, 2014). Authors provide a thorough treatment of the Baptist-fundamentalist ecclesiastical and historical context in which Riley ministered, including carefully researched detail about the interpersonal challenges involved in the co-laborers among Baptist fundamentalist, including Riley.
 - 1.2. David Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1986). The author appreciates Riley's contribution to multid denominational fundamentalism with a wider lens. Includes a chapter on Riley and one on the WCFA. He finds Riley's lack of separatism enigmatic.
 - 1.3. Marie Acomb Riley, *The Dynamic of a Dream: The Life Story of Dr. William B. Riley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1938). The author is Riley's second wife, and she provides a sympathetic biography with important details of Riley's domestic background.
 - 1.4. C. Allyn Russell, "William Bell Riley: Architect of Fundamentalism," *Minnesota History* (Spring, 1972), 14-30. Author provides a fair historical summary of the many-faceted ministry of Riley. He appreciates Riley's importance in regard to shaping American Protestantism.
 - 1.5. Ferenc M. Szasz, "William B. Riley and the Fight Against Teaching of Evolution in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* (Spring 1969), 201-216. The author provides enlightening details about Riley's failed effort to see legislation passed in Minnesota that would prohibit the teaching of evolution in publicly funded schools in the 1920s.
 - 1.6. William Vance Trollinger, Jr., *God's Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). The author has written a carefully researched scholarly biography from the perspective of a non-fundamentalist. The work includes a chapter on Riley's anti-Semitism.
2. Major themes of W. B. Riley's life.
 - 2.1. Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Minneapolis.
 - 2.2. Northern Baptist fundamentalist.
 - 2.3. President of the World Christian Fundamentals Association.
 - 2.4. President of the Northwestern Schools (not covered here).
 - 2.5. Tardy separatist.
 - 2.6. Ministry lessons for today's fundamentalist.
3. Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Minneapolis.
 - 3.1. Family roots: William Bell Riley was born into a Scotch-Irish family in rural Green County, Indiana, just southwest of Indianapolis, on March 22nd, 1861. Less than a month later, the South would fire on Fort Sumter and the United States would be plunged into civil war. Riley's father was sympathetic with the southern cause of slaveholding rights, so he moved his family to a Kentucky tobacco farm that he rented and worked with his five sons. Riley remembered the hard work of those days beginning at the age of 9: "[Father] had us at the breakfast-table at five o'clock, winter and summer, and aside from the uncertain days at school, we knew but little rest between that early hour and about eight in the evening—in the summer months nine o'clock or even after" (Riley, 12). That early training explains the industrious work ethic Riley maintained throughout his productive life.
 - 3.2. Education and early ministry: At 17 years of age, Riley had grown and sold enough of his own tobacco to return to Indiana for an education, where he attended Valparaiso Normal School and Hannover College. He had made a profession of faith that year and had surrendered to a call to preach in his tobacco field. He was ordained to gospel ministry while

in college, and then attended Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, where he was instructed by a faculty led by John A. Broadus. Riley became convinced of premillennialism after graduation. He married a Methodist graduate of Purdue University, Lillian Howard, on New Year's Eve, 1890, and six weeks later baptized her by immersion into the Baptist faith. They would enjoy 41 years of marriage together and see their home blessed with six children. Their third child, Herbert, was killed in a hunting accident when only 19 years of age. Prior to the age of 36, when he became Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Minneapolis, Riley pastored four churches in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois. While pastoring Chicago's Calvary Baptist Church (1893-1897), Riley saw first-hand the liberalism of the newly founded University of Chicago (1890), the brainchild of John D. Rockefeller and William Rainey Harper.

- 3.3. Minneapolis Pastorate: Installed as Pastor of First Baptist Church of Minneapolis on March 1, 1897, Riley would serve there for 45 years. Controversy came quickly in the new post when the 36-year-old new pastor decided to put an end to the pew-rental system employed by the church because he believed that it created class-distinctions that were unbiblical. He encouraged tithing instead, and also put an end to many of the fundraising activities historically practiced by the church. "He condemned such amusements as dancing, card-playing, and theater-going and thus isolated himself from some of the young people and their parents" (Russell, 19). As a result of these and other changes, an anti-Riley faction arose in the church that endeavored to expel their new pastor. The effort failed, and 160 members left to form Trinity Baptist Church, leaving 585 remaining at First Baptist. When Riley retired from the pastorate, the church was comprised of over 3500 members.

Writing in a work he titled *Pastoral Problems*, Riley explained the kind of ministry he sought to lead at First Baptist: "There is an institutional church that dotes upon ice-cream suppers, full-dress receptions, popular lectures, chess-boards, bowling-alleys, the social settlement, not to speak of the occasional dance and amateur theatricals; and there is the institutional church that expresses itself in the organization of prayer-meetings, mission circles, Bible study classes, evangelistic corps, and multiplied mission stations . . . this latter institution repeats the essential features of apostolic times, and enjoys the essential spirit of the apostolic power" (Russell, 20). Beginning in 1923, Riley preached expository sermons for ten years through the entire Bible, eventually publishing his sermon notes in a 40-volume work titled *The Bible of the Expositor and Evangelist*. Riley took seriously Paul's injunction for pastors to do the work of an evangelist. His pastoral agreement with the church included a provision allowing him to be gone from the pulpit at First Baptist four months out of the year in evangelistic meetings. "One of his opponents of 1927 later described him as 'a tall, strikingly handsome man with a leonesque mane of white hair, a resonant voice, and a commanding presence. If he had not been a preacher he could have been an actor'" (Szasz, 201).

4. Northern Baptist fundamentalist.

- 4.1. The NBC problem was theological liberalism: "Liberalism, so much feared by conservatives, was especially prominent in American religious life following the Civil War. In adjusting to culture, it endeavored to harmonize beliefs with science while at the same time keeping the core of religious truth. Moderate liberals viewed the Bible not as an infallible book direct from God but as a historical record of a people's religious development. They favored Biblical criticism, convinced as they were that the most reverent attitude toward the Scriptures was to take them for what the critical and scientific study of the text and history indicated them to be. Their source of authority was self-authenticating experience. These liberals placed heavy emphasis on reason, did not believe in miracles, and held that all events were controlled by natural processes. They championed the social gospel, proclaimed freedom from theological domination by creeds, councils, or members of a religious hierarchy, and asserted that theirs was the religion of Jesus, not the religion about Jesus" (Russell, 22).

- 4.2. Organized in 1907 the Northern Baptist Convention was infected with liberalism from its inception, especially (in Riley's view) through the influence of the University of Chicago (founded in 1890). The JEDP theory of Julius Wellhausen (d. 1918), which employed evolutionary assumptions to postulate multiple authors for the Pentateuch, was especially influential. Writing in his work *Inspiration or Evolution*, Riley responded: "When, 4,000 years from now, the living critics exhume the First Baptist Church of Minneapolis and find my library, they will take my books and prove that they are composites. Wherever I speak of God, they will find one author and name him 'G'; wherever I speak of the Heavenly Father, they will find another author and call him 'H.F.'; wherever I call him Lord, they will find a third author and name him 'L'; and wherever I speak of Christ, they will name a fourth author 'C'; and they will have the exact same basis to prove that my books were produced by four men that they have applied to the composite theory of the Pentateuch" (Russell, 17).
- 4.3. Riley led a political strategy within the NBC to expose and purge liberalism from the denomination. During the 1910s these efforts were buoyed by connections made between battles against German theologians and battles against German armies in the Great War (1914-1918). The publication of *The Fundamentals* (1909-1917) presented a united front of powerful arguments for orthodoxy. A notable victory for Riley's leadership came in 1920, when the NBC withdrew from the liberal Interchurch World Movement, a \$100,000,000 drive which would eventually include the participation of Unitarians, Catholics, and Muslims in addition to liberal Protestants. Critical to this success was a booklet authored by a young Robert T. Ketcham, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Butler, PA, against the drive. Riley ordered 20,000 copies of the booklet for distribution, which established Ketcham as an important spokesman for fundamentalism. Prior to 1920 over 200,000 copies of the booklet had been distributed (Beale, 274).
- 4.4. After 1920 political opportunities for fundamentalist victories evaporated with a major shift in public opinion and the spiritual temperature of the prosperous Roaring 20s. Efforts to expose liberals at NBC schools, to introduce the New Hampshire Confession of Faith as a confessional standard for the denomination, and to require immersion credo-baptism for church membership all failed for a lack of support. An indication of the shift in mood was the negative reception Riley received when he sought passage of legislation in Minnesota against publicly funded evolution. "The days preceding March 8, 1927, the date set for the public hearing before the senate and house committees on education in the house chamber, found the bill the universal topic of discussion. Newspapers gave the subject considerable space. Rumors were rife that the legislators were receiving twenty-five letters a day in favor of the bill and that fifty-four house members were already pledged to support it. University students called a mass rally on March 8. Classes were dismissed a half hour early, and the meeting attracted 5,000 of the 9,600 students. Several hundred were turned away. The students unanimously condemned the bill, passed a resolution urging that the state kill it, and began circulating petitions to this effect in the classrooms. *The Daily* of March 9 called student reaction 'one of the greatest undergraduate protests against a legislative measure ever felt at the University'" (Szasz, 213). There would be no more political victories for fundamentalists in the NBC.
- 4.5. The battles between fundamentalists and modernists in the NBC included orthodox men who were unwilling to militate against error. Riley believed these neutralists were the cause of his political defeats. Frustrated with the Fundamental Fellowship's lack of militancy, Riley and others like T. T. Shields and A. C. Dixon led the formation of a more militant group in 1922 called the Baptist Bible Union. The rift between the two fundamentalist factions proved fatal. In 1926, the NBC elected as its President J. Whitcomb Brouger, who the prior year had toured the country urging NBC members to end controversy. At the same annual convention, the Fundamental Fellowship leader, J. C. Masee, called for a six-month truce between fundamentalists and modernists "to put ourselves distinctly and definitely in grace for a

service which cannot be accomplished by the direct contentions and the controversial issues” (Trollinger, 59). Riley later wrote of these men in a *Pilot* article titled “Fundamentalism and Religious Racketeering” (October 1938): “Compromisers believe with us on the Nine points, but who have an exalted notion of their own wisdom in matters of controversy, and who conclude that soft-pedaling the truth and outward friendship for its enemies is the way to win this battle. . . . These men can make themselves comfortable with either side of the theological conflict. They are the friends of fundamentalism, in faith, but they have become its foes, in fact” (15; quoted in Trollinger, 59-60).

5. President of the World Christian Fundamentals Association.

5.1. Coming out of the prophecy conferences of the late 19th and early 20th century, the first meeting of the WCFA occurred in 1919. “Working skillfully through the prophetic conference of 1918 which met in New York City, Riley laid the groundwork for the charter assembly of the WCFA by changing the emphasis of the next scheduled conference from prophecy to the great fundamentals of the faith. Some 6,000 conservatives from the United States, Canada, and eight foreign countries gathered in Philadelphia from May 25 to June 1, 1919, for the meetings that gave birth to organized fundamentalism” (Russell, 25). Riley saw the meeting as more historically significant than Martin Luther’s nailing of the 95 Theses on the Wittenberg Chapel door.

5.2. One author appreciates the significance of the WCFA to the later ACCC and NAE organizations: “The most consequential [achievement of Riley’s life] seems to have been his vision of an inclusive fellowship of fundamentalists on a world basis. He was unable to realize his dreams for reasons that have already been considered, but Riley awakened ultraconservatives to the possibility of a united strength upon which others might build. In 1941, when the WCFA had reached a low point, Carl McIntire organized the American Council of Churches (ACC). A year later, Harold J. Ockenga, J. Elwin Wright, and Carl F. H. Henry led in establishing the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). These two organizations agreed doctrinally but were divided in method. The former required members to separate from denominations or churches affiliated with the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America; the latter did not. While these were national rather than world organizations (as the WCFA proved to be in reality), they had caught the vision of a union of conservative forces. Riley had laid the foundation for the work of others” (Russell, 30). Beale comments on the value of the WCFA: “These annual meetings were a major Fundamentalist platform for powerful preaching, a rallying place for strength and encouragement, and a time for Fundamentalists to talk with one another rather than about one another” (Beale, 104).

5.3. Reasons the WCFA became ineffective:

5.3.1. Trollinger offers 3 reasons for the demise of the WCFA: (1) “Fundamentalist leaders were proud, stubborn, and independent men who jealously guarded their personal fiefdoms” (41-42); (2) “the failure of the WCFA to provide an institutional alternative to the modernist-tainted denominations” (i.e., a lack of separation; 43-44); (3) “By 1923 at the latest, the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association had abandoned its goal of eliminating modernism from the major Protestant denominations,” in favor of an agenda protecting schools from evolution (44).

5.3.2. The embrace of political causes popular for the time may have also contributed to the demise of the WCFA. Note two examples.

5.3.2.1. Anti-Semitism sapped the spiritual power of the organization’s leadership by grieving the Holy Spirit. Riley wrote in *The Pilot* 13 (July 1933), 298-299 under the heading “For Fear of the Jews”: “Jewry, from the day that she crucified Jesus Christ until the present time, has given many occasions for her own rejection and for that opposition which she has politically pronounced persecution. Hear Hitler, who speaks from first-hand knowledge: ‘The Jew is the cause and beneficiary of our slavery. The Jew has caused our misery, and today he lives on our troubles. That is

the reason that as Nationalists, we are enemies of the Jew. He has ruined our race, rotted our morals, corrupted our traditions, and broken our power” (Trollinger, 74). Note that some fundamentalists supported Hitler in those days even in spite of their genuine love for the Jewish people, such as A. C. Gaebelein.

5.3.2.2. “Riley lavished the most attention on Father Charles Coughlin. In an interesting foreshadowing of recent political alliances of fundamentalists and Catholics, Riley overcame his native anti-Catholicism to support the Detroit priest. . . . In his 1935 book *The Philosophies of Father Coughlin*, Riley congratulated Coughlin for his blistering attacks on atheistic Bolsheviks and international bankers. . . . But after 1938, when Coughlin, to quote Alan Brinkley, moved from ‘embittered conservatism’ to ‘an ugly anti-Semitism,’ Riley praised him to the heavens” (Trollinger, 74).

5.3.3. A sense of denominational superiority entertained by otherwise good men. “Van Osdel went on to criticize Riley’s interdenominationalism [in an article rebuking Riley’s Cleveland Fosdick appearance] (again). This time he deployed a new argument.

“All our lives we have opposed Christian people in any endeavor to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials in the Word of God. For anyone to say that the Word of God contains matter that is not essential, is to disparage the inspiration and revelation and the Author of the Bible itself. . . . We believe that the Bible is inspired from the first word to the last. It is all essential and all Fundamental, or the Holy Spirit would not have dictated it. . . . To be sure there are doctrinal portions, prophetic portions, and historical portions, but every part is essential to the fully developed Christian life, or God would not have placed these particular things in His Word.

“While Van Osdel’s criticism of Riley’s participation in the convention was cogent, his objections to interdenominationalism are puzzling. For one thing, Van Osdel certainly did not believe in a dictation theory of inspiration, though he sounds like he did here. For another, the aged pastor did not treat all doctrines as equally important. He disagreed with Shields over eschatology and covenant theology, but the two regularly exchanged pulpits and worked together in the Bible Union. He held peculiar views on women’s ministry (more on this later), but he did not cut off fellowship with people who disagreed. He had brought the Methodist evangelist Bob Jones into his pulpit, and he had been willing to have the Presbyterian J. Gresham Machen in the pulpit of Des Moines University” (Bauder and Delnay, 174). Keeping the guns of orthodoxy pointed in the right direction has always been challenging for good men.

6. Tardy Separatist.

6.1. On March 20, 1930, *The Hamilton Evening Journal* [OH] reported the following on the NBC convention in Cleveland in June of that year: “The appearance of the names of Dr. Fosdick and Dr. Riley upon the program is, nevertheless, taken as an indication that there has been a drawing together of the breach which for some years has existed in Baptist, as in other Protestant denominations, between those holding to a rigid orthodoxy and the more liberal theologians.” This quotation illustrates the confusion created by a lack of associational circumspection. Riley had opted for this appearance over an invitation from Van Osdel to attend a BBU meeting at his Wealthy Street Baptist Church to discuss forming a separatist organization from the remnants of the BBU. Van Osdel was heartbroken, and a critical exchange between these fundamentalist allies ensued in the press.

6.2. After remaining a lifelong member of the corrupt Northern Baptist Convention, Riley finally rescinded his membership in the year of his death (1947) at the age of 86. His letter of resignation gave his reasons for doing so, including he following: “I am no longer a young man, having seen my eighty-sixth birthday, and I should be ashamed to die in the fellowship that seemed to me un-Biblical, and consequently un-Baptistic.

“John, in his second epistle, verses 9 to 11, writes, “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.’ I accept those words as divinely inspired.” He then quotes 2 Cor. 6:14 and 17 and writes, “I believe this to be divinely inspired direction; hence, my request” (Beale, 394-395).

6.3. This final act of obedience to the commands referenced in Riley’s resignation letter came after a long life of discouraging separation among Northern Baptist fundamentalists. As one of the founding leaders of the Baptist Bible Union, Riley agreed with a resolution passed at its first meeting in 1923 that read in part: “That we declare our determination not to withdraw from the various conventions represented by our membership; but on the contrary with renewed vigor to endeavor to purge our beloved denomination from such heresies, which if unchecked must inevitably destroy the foundations upon which Baptist churches rest” (Trollinger, 57). Beal notes in this regard: “There is little doubt that the BBU [Baptist Bible Union] would have been a more separatist movement had it not been for Riley. When some members of the Union’s first Executive Committee printed a pamphlet (*Pamphlet Number One*) that described the NBC as beyond salvaging and promised a truly separatist fellowship, W. B. Riley ordered the immediate destruction of all thirty thousand copies” (Beale, 211).

7. Ministry lessons for today’s fundamentalist.

7.1. Worldly ways of doing church are nothing new, although terms like “seeker sensitive” are. God blessed Riley’s ministry philosophy at First Baptist Church in Minneapolis, though the stands he took for the right kind of church met with initial opposition. Jesus still promises to build His church, but the work must be done His way.

7.2. Doing the work of the evangelist is an important emphasis for the biblical pastor. We need to be lead gospel witnesses and disciple-making examples for our congregations.

7.3. Passages that teach local church discipline must not be manipulated to justify political solutions to denominational problems. The commands of ecclesiastical separation from apostasy are clear. It is our task to obey these rather than try to find another solution to the problem. To do less is to partake in the evil deeds of apostasy and confuse light and darkness for observers like the readers of *The Hamilton Evening Journal*.

7.4. Compromising neutrality must always be dealt with along with liberal apostasy in the battle between right and wrong. In the war between the militant Baptist Bible Union and the militant NBC liberals, the irenic Fundamental Fellowship was an aid to the wrong side. Dealing with this problem has been criticized as “secondary separation,” but it is an unavoidable part of the responsibility.

7.5. Biblical multi-denominational ecumenism that is orthodox and separatist can be a blessing for God’s people. Denominational arrogance can spoil this Christ-desired unity with shallow self-centered inconsistencies. We need to know where and why to point the guns of fundamentalist separatism. Political alliances with false religion are also deadly.

7.6. Good men can be enigmatic (Beale, 279). Riley was mightily blessed of God and cheered by the best of fundamentalists for his tireless militancy, and yet in the end historians still ask the unanswerable question about this blessed fundamentalist leader. If Riley “should be ashamed to die in the fellowship that seemed to [him] un-Biblical, and consequently un-Baptistic,” why was he not ashamed to live in it? We must deal with the same kind of enigmas today, for we humans are enigmatic. We must do so appreciating the good that good men do, lovingly but pointedly addressing the error that good men commit, humbly seeking a clear conscience before the commands of Scripture to obey whatever the cost, and maintaining an ever teachable spirit that seeks the unity of Christ’s church in purity.