

What I Kept and What I Left Behind: A Philosophy Professor Looks Back on his Fundamentalist Upbringing

By Dan Crawford



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It was 2001, and I was a philosophy professor on leave, studying and writing at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Taking a break, I browsed the seminary's holdings on fundamentalism, looking to see if anything was written about my evangelist father, Percy Crawford, a prominent leader in the fundamentalist movement in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, who had died in 1960 of a heart attack at the young age of 58.

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I did find several references that seemed to acknowledge the importance of his ministry, but I knew that there was much more that could be said. I began to think at that time that I wanted to write something about him. In eight years time, that thought turned into a full-length biography, *A Thirst for Souls*.¹

My primary motive was to secure my father's place in the historical record. He had been dead for over forty years, and the people who knew him and

worked with him or who were influenced by his ministry—people I needed to talk to—were getting older and dying off. Moreover, serious historians of fundamentalism at that time were few and far between (with some notable exceptions), and much of what they said about fundamentalism had a negative and condescending tone.² I wanted to write an account of his life and ministry that would be objective, but also sympathetic to his theology and his fundamental mission.

Placing Percy Crawford

Percy entered the fundamentalist world at the age of twenty, after having a life-changing conversion experience in Los Angeles in 1923. Fundamentalism was a relatively new movement at that time, having had its beginning in the 1910s, when various conservative Protestant groups began to separate themselves from the mainline denominational churches, which they saw as departing from the fundamental truths of the Bible. At the 1919 World Conference on Christian Fundamentals in Philadelphia, these forces emerged as an identifiable unit and soon thereafter acquired the designation “fundamentalist.”

Percy had his conversion experience at the Church of the Open Door, a nondenominational church in Los Angeles associated with the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. Entering the Bible Institute as a student a year later, he came under the influence of one of the founders of the new movement—the great revivalist preacher, evangelist, and educator, Reuben Torrey. During his two years at the Bible Institute, Percy learned the art of what was called

personal evangelism, that is, dealing with individuals on a one-to-one basis in order to bring them to Christ. At the same time, as a student preacher traveling with the school's evangelistic team on summer tours, Percy developed his gift for preaching, and soon realized that his calling in life was to be an evangelist for the cause of Christ.



Percy Crawford (photo courtesy of author)

The term “evangelism” means different things in different religious contexts, but in the fundamentalist community I grew up in it meant one thing only—*soul winning*, getting a person to make a decision to accept Christ as their savior and live the Christian life. Fundamentalists believe that every person who has some knowledge of Jesus and his sacrificial death must at some time in their life make an existential choice that will determine their eternal destiny—either to accept Christ and be *born again* into a new life, or reject Christ and face eternal damnation.

Percy was utterly convinced that the only question that really mattered in life was “what will you do with Jesus?” and he devoted his entire life and his whole being to the mission of persuading men and women to make the right

choice, the one that would assure them of their eternal salvation.

Keep in mind, please, that the brand of fundamentalism my father embraced, and that I experienced, was a *moderate* fundamentalism. Percy was a conservative in a conservative movement, with no time for liberal, or “modernist,” or neo-orthodox theologies, but he kept his distance from the extremists and the militants in the movement, people such as Bob Jones, Sr., John R. Rice, and Carl McIntire; he had an overall moderating influence on the movement in the 1930s and 40s, helping to repair the bad reputation that it had acquired in the early years. My father would have questioned the recent political alliance of fundamentalism with conservative politicians, and he would have thought the current conservative social agenda was putting the emphasis on inessential matters and missing the essential message of the New Testament, namely, to carry the gospel to the world, and save souls.

The primary vehicle Percy chose to use for the purpose of evangelism was the then still new medium of radio. He had seen how other preachers had used radio for the cause of evangelism—R. R. Brown in Omaha, Aimee Semple McPherson in Los Angeles, Paul Rader in Chicago, and Donald Barnhouse in Philadelphia—and he firmly believed that radio was the instrument that God would use to bring a “modern revival” to the nation and the world.³

He started his radio ministry in 1931 on one station in Philadelphia, while still a seminarian at Westminster Theological Seminary, with a program he called the *Young People's Church of the Air*; within a decade, he would be reaching a national audience on more than four hundred stations. He was never pastor of a church; instead he formed a radio church whose “members” were thousands of faithful supporters. And then, eighteen years later

in 1949, he took the radio broadcast onto television with the first coast-to-coast religious program, *Youth on the March*, on the ABC network.

Along with his radio and television broadcasts, Percy branched into many satellite enterprises: fishermen's clubs (whose purpose was to fish for souls), a popular summer Bible conference (Pinebrook), bookstores and book clubs, a liberal arts college (The King's College, named after the King of Kings), the Victory Center in Atlantic City for service men and women, new types of youth rallies (Youtharama), the first religiously owned and operated television station (WPCA, Philadelphia), and at the end of his life, his boldest venture, a Christian broadcasting network.

A Partnership

Percy's ministry and life's work would not have been nearly as successful if it had not been for my mother, Ruth, a talented pianist and arranger, who put together an entire musical entourage—male quartet, female trio, brass quartet and trio, various vocal and instrumental soloists, and eventually a full orchestra—that provided the musical portion of Percy's broadcasts and evangelistic rallies.

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Ruth combined her own warm, harmony-rich arrangements of traditional hymns with newly-minted gospel songs by the best composers of the day to create a distinctive brand of gospel music that dominated Christian evangelical circles for several decades.

A large part of the broadcasts and services were taken up by Ruth's heartfelt medleys, and while she and Percy both viewed this portion of the services as preparing the listener for Percy's hard-driving, convicting sermons, I suspect that many listeners were tuning in to enjoy Ruth's music for its own sake. It was through her original musical productions, I believe, that Ruth contributed more to the success of Percy's ministry than even he realized.⁴

My father and mother traveled by car four, five, and six nights a week all over the Northeast, conducting meetings and rallies at churches, town halls, and other venues, logging 40-50,000 miles a year. I was the third of five children—Don, Dick, Dan, and Dean, and our baby sister, Donna Lee—and we were brought into “the work” at an early age, singing on the radio and television broadcasts. I started singing at the age of three on my father's daily devotional program, *Pinebrook Praises*, broadcast from our home.

My father preached a lot about hell, and I paid very close attention to what he said. As a child, I was absolutely terrified of the possibility of spending eternity in hell. And I made sure I was not going there by accepting Christ—not once, but twice, the second time when I was twelve years old. It did seem to me even then, and certainly does now, that this one-way ticket out of hell was a little too easy to obtain, but generally speaking, we children all imbibed the whole package of fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes that pervaded our household. We didn't mind being part of our father's evangelistic team and having this privileged place in his various enterprises.

Though asked to make large sacrifices—traveling long hours in the car to meetings, often on or before school-days—we gave our testimonies and sang our gospel songs willingly and enthusiastically because we believed in

the importance of the work our parents were doing. You may think that we were being indoctrinated or brainwashed, but my parents were no different from most others; they were simply training their children to adopt the beliefs and values they themselves espoused. We had to mature into these beliefs and attitudes as best we could—or mature *out* of them.

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Separated from the World

Fundamentalism, as I experienced it growing up, was much more than a set of beliefs or doctrines; it was a mindset, a way of thinking about oneself and how one is related to others and to the larger culture in which we lived. Our self-identity was very much bound up with our community of believers. We drew sharp boundaries around our group and carefully differentiated ourselves from other groups, both religious and secular. We referred to secular society as “the world,” a term that had definite negative connotations. It was a “lost world,” “godless,” “sin-stained,” its chief problem being that it had rejected God, and Christ, and the Bible as God's Word.

Contrary to the prevailing view in late 19th and early 20th century America, that our country was on an upward path of continuing economic and moral *progress*, we fundamentalists believed that the world, without Christ, was in a state of irreversible moral and spiritual decline, all too evident in social ills such as juvenile delinquency, crime, divorce rates, Hollywood movies, alcoholism, and drugs. We thought that all human efforts to create a just society were bound to fail. We opposed the “Social Gospel” movement, even though this had been an important element in our own evangelical tradition. We were opposed to the League of Nations and the United Nations; these sorts of man-made institutions could never attain international peace. We were strongly suspicious of science and did not believe that science and technology could deliver us from our ills. The situation was so dire that we believed we were living in the “end times,” and we looked for Christ's imminent return when he would establish his kingdom and judge the living and the dead. We prefaced many of our sentences with the phrase “if the Lord tarry.” But in truth, most of us young people hoped that the Lord would tarry for a while longer, until we had a chance to live our lives, or else we just didn't worry about it.

The world, for its part, treated us as though we were narrow-minded sectarians on the fringe of society. We felt this hostility, and reacted defensively. My father viewed his entire life as one of combating the obstacles that were put in the way of his preaching the gospel—primarily by the radio and television networks and station owners, who would charge high fees, arbitrarily change his time slots, or just put him off the air—and this is mainly what motivated him to start a Christian broadcasting network at the end of his life.

All the fundamentalists I ever knew were united in the belief that we were

separated from the world. Beyond embracing the austere Protestant ethic that we inherited from our Victorian forebears, we went the extra mile to differentiate ourselves from unbelievers and other nominal Christians: we refrained entirely from alcohol, tobacco, swearing, Hollywood movies and theater, card-playing, any form of gambling, dancing, and popular music. (“No jazz, no swing, no rock and roll,” my father admonished.) We associated all of these things with the morally corrupt society we were living in. My father tried to help us understand our relationship to our schoolmates by telling us “you’re not better than them, you’re different.” (Admittedly, it was hard not to believe that we were better because of our differences.)

The spirit of philosophy, of free inquiry, of examining one’s beliefs and looking for their grounds was inimical to the fundamentalist mindset, which clings steadfastly to basic truths and eschews doubt.

But as children, our life was not as different as you may think from that of our schoolmates. We were very much in the world: we went to a secular private school, since our father wanted us to have the best education. I had close friends (whom I did not try to convert), and a Jewish girlfriend (whom I did try to convert—unsuccessfully); I was president of my class, and partici-

pated in sports. My father bragged about the fact that his children, though different, were good, red-blooded American boys, not misfits or social dropouts.

Doubts

While three of my four siblings have pretty much retained the fundamentalist beliefs we grew up with, my younger brother and I have moved away from them. But interestingly, while all three of my brothers emerged from childhood with conflicted feelings and deep-seated anger toward our father that took time to work through, I felt no resentment toward him for having tried so hard to steer us along the path that he envisioned for us. In my case, since I was the “brainy” one in the family, he wanted me to step into his shoes as the leader and perhaps the president of the college he founded. But more than anything, he wanted me (and all of us) to adhere to the fundamentalist doctrines, lest our souls be damned forever, and he wanted us, in one way or another, to evangelize and save lost souls. It didn’t work out that way for me.

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The spirit of philosophy, of free inquiry, of examining one’s beliefs and looking for their grounds was inimical to the fundamentalist mindset, which clings steadfastly to basic truths and eschews doubt. I was turned on to philosophy in high school, and then majored in philosophy at my father’s college, The King’s College. My father was so worried that studying philosophy would cause me to lose my faith, that once, in the presence of the academic dean of the college, he shed tears over the possibility of this happening. But I did not think that what I was getting from philosophy was in conflict with my faith; in fact, I was convinced that I could find in philosophy a rational basis for my religious beliefs.

It was only after my father’s death in the fall of my sophomore year at King’s that I felt at liberty to transfer to a more academically challenging school, and so I applied to a small Quaker college, Haverford College, and fortunately was accepted.

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Haverford opened up for me the realm of scholarship and the academic study of religion. In my philosophy classes, I dived into the great metaphysical systems in the history of philosophy from Plato to Whitehead. And my religion courses helped me understand how Christianity had developed historically, enabling me to see that our way of interpreting the events recorded in the Bible was not the only way of interpreting them, and that our way was not necessarily the *true* way. In other words, I experienced what the theologian Paul Tillich called “the shaking of the foundations” of my faith.

As it turned out, my father was right: gradually my faith was eroding under the influence of philosophy and open inquiry. I can’t say when I stopped believing in God, or even if I have fully and completely abandoned that idea in my life. I had something like an intellectual conversion experience in graduate school away from my Christian beliefs, but I continue to struggle with the question of whether some divine being or reality interacts with humans and influences what has happened and is happening in the physical and moral universe. This then is all that is left of the fundamentalist creed in my lived experience.

More important than giving up any particular doctrine of fundamentalist belief, however, was giving up the idea that we can ever obtain *certain* knowledge about any of these matters, for I soon realized that we cannot attain certainty in the realm of philosophy and ethics, and we cannot have it in religion either. I am a fallibilist, who holds that all of our human efforts to know about ourselves and our world—including our current scientific theories—are tentative, provisional, and liable to error. This means that we cannot know with certainty that the Bible is without error; we cannot know that there is only one path to salvation; we cannot have the “full assurance” that we are destined to spend eternity with the Lord.

Reunited with the World

What remains, then, of the attitudinal side of my fundamentalist upbringing, and in particular the feeling of being separated from the world? Gradually I left behind the self-image of being marginalized by society, and the defensive stance that it engendered in the fundamentalist camp. I joined the world by entering academia. As for the prohibitions of the separated life—drinking, smoking, dancing, and the rest—I soon condoned most of these things that I once thought were sinful, though careful to partake of them only in moderation (as the philosopher Aristotle recommended).

The activities I enjoyed most were various forms of art and entertainment that had been censored: movies, theater, and secular styles of music. I acquired a taste for classical music that has greatly enriched my life.

I no longer view the world as being a “lost” world, ineluctably headed for destruction and judgment. I take a more optimistic view, that we humans can at least identify the social and ecological problems that threaten our survival and how we might solve them, so that it is at least *possible* that we can

save ourselves, but I doubt that we have the will to make the necessary sacrifices.

Soul-Saving Work

My father’s life was what fundamentalists call a “surrendered life,” surrendered to the cause of Christ. Once he knew that his calling was to be an evangelist, everything else in his life—his marriage and family, his social status and financial security, even his health—was subordinated to the purpose of saving souls. Although I did not fully appreciate it at the time, I have come to see that there was a *humanitarian* motive in my father’s ministry, and I now realize how fortunate I was to have had parents who devoted their lives, unselfishly, to bringing others to a new life.

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I can see that some of these same motives have characterized my career as a college professor. When I encourage my students to think about their beliefs and commitments and the reasons they have for them, and to find *the better reason* for maintaining those beliefs and commitments, I think that I am doing them a service, and helping them become better persons and citizens. I don’t care where the students

finally end up on these questions, or even if they conclude that there is no solution. I am satisfied if only they have thought carefully about what they believe, and why they believe it, and have tried imaginatively to place themselves on the other side of the question.

Is this soul-saving work? Certainly not the kind that my father would recognize or approve of. But I do care about my students’ souls, and I do want them to undergo a kind of conversion in my classes—not to what I think is the true path, but to a way of approaching the complex problems and choices they will face in their lives, thoughtfully and sympathetically to the opposing view. In this indirect way, and on a much smaller scale, I believe I have carried on my father’s passion for saving souls, and making the world a better place.

Notes

1 Dan D. Crawford, *A Thirst for Souls: the Life of Evangelist Percy B. Crawford (1902-1960)*, Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2010.

2 The exceptions, I discovered early in my research, were William G. McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (1959); Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (1988); and George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* (1980).

3 Percy Crawford, “A Modern Revival,” *Revelation* (August 1932): 325, 349-50.

4 Ruth’s music programs are available on the website www.percycrawford.com where many of the Young People’s Church of the Air broadcasts of the 1940s are archived.