



Book Review: *Promise Unfulfilled: The Failed Strategy of Modern Evangelicalism*, by Rolland D. McCune

Reviewed by Andrew David Naselli

Ambassador International, 2004, \$24.99, 398 pages

Promise Unfulfilled is the most penetrating book-length evaluation of the "new [evangelicalism](#)" (about fifty years after its genesis) by a self-identified [fundamentalist](#). [McCune](#) (b. 1934) is former president and current professor of systematic theology at [Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary](#). He testifies, "I first heard that there was such a movement called 'new evangelicalism' when I entered [Grace Theological Seminary](#) in the fall of 1957. . . . In 1967 I began teaching on the seminary level and annually lectured on the new evangelicalism. This book"—McCune's first—"is a partial harvest of all my years of research, study, and teaching on the subject" (p. xv).

SUMMARY: TRACING THE ARGUMENT

The title reflects McCune's thesis: Evangelicalism (which is now synonymous with "modern," "new," and "neo-evangelicalism") deliberately distinguished itself from fundamentalism in the 1940s and 1950s with a fresh promise and strategy, but its promise is unfulfilled and its strategy has failed. By "new evangelicalism" McCune means "a strain of conservative, traditional, Protestant, religious thought that coalesced into a movement in the mid-twentieth century, purporting to avoid the fundamentalist right and the neo-orthodox/neo-liberal left" (p. xvi). McCune argues his thesis by discussing historical and theological issues, divided into nine parts (and twenty-five chapters).

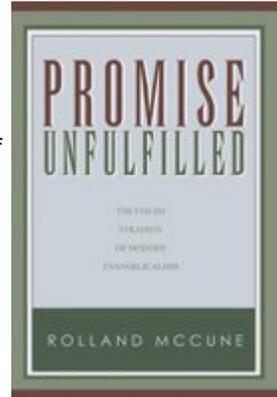
1. "Historical Antecedents" (pp. 1–26) recounts the rise of [liberal or modernist theology](#) and how that resulted in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in America. Fundamentalism's "*esprit* is principally its militant separatism. Fundamentalism is a movement, not an attitude of belligerence, ugliness, or a negative mentality as often depicted" (p. 16). The fundamentalist movement's "essence" consists of (1) "core biblical truths, principally those concerning Christ and the Scriptures," (2) "ecclesiastical separation," and (3) "militancy" (p. 16).

2. "The Formation of the New Evangelicalism" (pp. 27–63) begins with "four crucial issues": (1) Unity/separation: The [National Association of Evangelicals](#) began in 1942 and declined to merge with [Carl McIntire's American Council of Christian Churches](#). (2) Social concern: [Carl Henry's The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism](#) (1947) decried "the lack of social concern in the fundamentalist movement of which he considered himself a part" (p. 34). (3) Scholarship/ intellectualism: [Fuller Theological Seminary](#) began in 1947, partly as a reaction to fundamentalists who "simply were not up to par intellectually" (p. 38). (4) Evangelism: [Billy Graham's](#) evangelistic crusades from 1949 to 1957 came to a head at the [1957 New York Crusade](#), which "finally made the two camps irreconcilable" (p. 45) because of Graham's new and compromising policies on both sponsorship and convert referrals. "Graham brought an end to evangelical unity" (p. 55).

Eight other factors contributed to evangelicalism's formation: (1) [Vernon Grounds's](#) "The Nature of Evangelicalism" in *Eternity* (Feb. 1956); (2) [Christianity Today](#), created in 1956; (3) "Is Evangelical Theology Changing?", a symposium in *Christian Life* (March 1956); (4) [Harold Ockenga's news release](#) announcing evangelicalism's change of strategy from separation to infiltration (Dec. 8, 1957); (5) [Robert O. Ferm's](#) 100-page [Cooperative Evangelism: Is Billy Graham Right or Wrong?](#) (1958); (6) [Edward Carnell's The Case for Orthodox Theology](#) (1959); (7) [Donald Grey Barnhouse's](#) support of evangelicalism from 1953 until his death in 1960; and (8) articles by evangelicals published in the liberal [Christian Century](#).

3. "[Ecumenism](#)" (pp. 65–123) defines the term as the effort to implement a unity that ignores or greatly minimizes "doctrine, truth, and group distinctives" for "a united front," particularly "the collaboration between evangelicals and non-evangelicals in promoting various religious and spiritual projects" (p. 65). This ecumenism errantly extends to evangelism, church councils, accolades, journalism, [charismaticism](#), and [Roman Catholicism](#).

4. "Ecclesiastical Separation" (pp. 125–54) explains arguments for non-separatism ([pragmatism](#), infiltration, apostasy, and the impossibility of a pure church), refutes them, and then explains four "categories of separation":



(1) Christians must separate from *heresy*, which denies what is essential to Christianity (Acts 20:28–30; Rom 16:17–18; 2 Cor 11:4; Gal 1:8–9; Phil 1:15–18; 1 Tim 6:3–5; Titus 1:3; 2 John 9–11; Rev 2:14–15).

(2) Christians must avoid *unequal alliances* by separating from non-Christians in spheres such as worship, marriage, and ministry (2 Cor 6:14–7:1).

(3) Christians must separate from *organized apostasy*, which includes belonging to apostate denominations or associations, giving them money, speaking for them, and sponsoring them (Rev 18:4; cf. Isa 52:11; Jer 50:8; 51:6, 9, 45; 2 Cor 6:17).

(4) Christians must separate from *disobedient Christians* (2 Thess 3:6–15; cf. Matt 18:17; 1 Tim 1:20; 5:22). This fourth category is unique to fundamentalism and is known as "secondary separation," which "is the refusal to cooperate with erring and disobedient Christians who do not adhere to primary separation and other vital doctrines" (p. 146). "Ecclesiastical separation does not really admit of 'degrees.' [n. 26: "Bob Jones, "Scriptural Separation: 'First and Second Degree.'"] Separation is directed to the other person because of *his* deviations from Scripture in whatever ways he may express them. If the erring brother runs with the wrong crowd, separation at this point is from *him* as well as from the unbiblical company he is keeping. The reason for separating may well involve someone's unscriptural involvements, but in reality this is no more 'secondary' than a 'primary' separation from apostasy" (p. 147).

Separation "is not one-size-fits-all," but includes three levels that "carry their own doctrinal and practical requirements": (1) personal, (2) local church, and (3) organizational (p. 154).

5. "The Bible and Authority" (pp. 155–94) chronicles the controversy over biblical revelation, inspiration, and inerrancy. This issue arose largely because of neo-orthodoxy's influence.

6. "Apologetics" (pp. 195–228) argues that "the new evangelical view" of apologetic methodology is "semi-rationalism or semi-biblicism" (p. 198–99) and concludes that after fifty years of evangelicalism, its leaders "have abandoned the sense of an absolute and infallible religious authority, and today the evangelical movement is groping to find some kind of a basis or an authority to meet a rootless, non-absolutist, relativist culture on the culture's own terms with the claims of the living and true God" (p. 195).

7. "Social Involvement" (pp. 229–74) traces the history of evangelical social activism and contrasts it with "the biblical idea of social action," which (consistent with [Alva J. McClain's form of dispensationalism](#)) maintains "there is not presently a messianic kingdom of God in existence; there is no 'kingdom now.' The church is not the kingdom and cannot participate in any social proposals attributable to the kingdom, and for that reason there can be no tenable sociopolitical kingdom advancement by the church in the present age" (p. 264).

8. "Doctrinal Storms" (pp. 275–308) highlights three unfortunate controversies in evangelicalism: (1) the status of the unevangelized, (2) the destiny of the finally impenitent, and (3) the open view of God.

"These internal controversies have not caused groups to break away from the evangelical movement because division, schism, and separation are the scarlet sins in new evangelical thought. What happens is that the *avant garde* ideas cause internal controversy and calls then go out for more prayer, more open-mindedness, more finessing, and more effort to find some kind of tolerable middle ground. These summons may be accompanied by not-so-veiled charges of causing disorder in the body of Christ, but when the turmoil quiets down, the new element is simply absorbed into the general new evangelical movement, and life goes on in the name of Christian brotherhood. Meanwhile as the movement has become doctrinally diluted and less and less biblical there is internal debate about what an evangelical really is. In the end, no one seems to be excluded from being considered an evangelical" (p. 275).

9. The "Conclusion" (pp. 309–60) evaluates evangelicalism:

"The new evangelicalism has been slowly but decidedly moving toward neo-orthodoxy and beyond. . . .

"When ultimate religious authority cannot be successfully identified, the gospel has no sure parameters. When the gospel cannot be precisely defined, what it means to be a Christian cannot be agreed upon. If the marks of a genuine Christian cannot be construed, then the question of what the Christian church is becomes moot. In liberal Protestantism the church became everyone and, in reality, was no one and thus nondescript. If everyone is a Christian, then no one is a Christian in this amorphous blob of religion. The new evangelicalism appears to be well on its way toward becoming such a conglomerate bereft of true biblical distinctives.

"A movement that wants to be called evangelical and yet has to debate itself over what the genius of Christianity actually is, is putting the finishing touches on its own coffin. It seems certain that the new evangelicalism is incapable of self-correction" (pp. 309, 319–20).

Following this evaluation is a critical review of Robert Webber's *The Younger Evangelicals*, a time line of major events in evangelicalism from 1942 to 2003, and an informative annotated bibliography.

ANALYSIS

Strengths

In the summers of 2000 and 2001 (following my sophomore and junior years of college), I was privileged to take two seminary classes at DBTS from McCune. I stocked up on his lengthy course syllabi and devoured them (about 900 pages on systematic theology as well as lectures on hermeneutics, apologetics, and the like). I have listened to dozens of his audio lectures and sermons, read his [journal articles](#), interacted with former students (including one of my former pastors) who esteem him as their mentor, and interacted directly with him a bit (e.g., I interviewed him for my dissertation on Keswick theology). His thinking is rigidly logical, his conclusions firm, his commitment to God and His word immovable, and his character unquestionably above reproach. *Promise Unfulfilled*, which I first read when it was published in 2004 and then a second time in October 2007, evidences McCune's strengths:

1. It is well researched, which is not surprising since it is the result of nearly four decades of teaching and research on the subject. This is evident simply by scanning the footnotes, bibliography, and index.
2. It is unusually well informed. McCune has intimate, first-hand knowledge of many of the people and events he discusses.
3. It is logically and clearly organized (with some exceptions, e.g., the headings in chap. 2).
4. It is genuinely earnest and courageous. McCune did not dispassionately write this book as a mundane, scholarly exercise to climb the academic ranks or secure tenure. He is committed to obeying God by guarding the gospel. He knew that it would not be a popular book, but rather than floating along with the current, McCune addresses a controversial issue head-on, including the application of a series of Scripture passages that many others are inclined to ignore or at least not study in detail (e.g., Rom 16:17–18; 2 John 9–11; 2 Thess 3:6–15). It is disappointing that many are unaware of or perhaps have ignored his work. (To my knowledge not a single review of *Promise Unfulfilled* has been published in a theological journal, and now most journals consider the book too old for a review.)
5. It is convincing. McCune successfully proves his thesis with the vast majority of his supporting arguments. [Spurgeon's downgrade controversy](#) is an exceptionally moving illustration supporting ecclesiastical separation (pp. 126–28), and numerous evangelical analyses of evangelicalism (several of which McCune mentions in his annotated bibliography) corroborate McCune's thesis.

Weaknesses

From my young, inexperienced, limited perspective, *Promise Unfulfilled* also has some weaknesses (besides more than a handful of typos and formatting issues). Since I do not want to give the impression that I have everything worked out infallibly, I submit these suggestions [corrigibly](#) and respectfully (though not timidly).

1. It appears at times to shape fundamentalism into what McCune thinks it ought to be rather than stating what it is or presenting arguments with which most fundamentalists would agree. (1) It does not critique fundamentalism as intensely as it critiques evangelicalism. One of the fundamental rules of book reviewing is to analyze a book on its own terms rather than criticizing the author for not writing a different book, so I simply mention that a similar critique of fundamentalism could be embarrassing for fundamentalists. (2) It argues for the superiority of [Van Til's presuppositional apologetics](#), but many evangelicals are Van Tillian and many fundamentalists are not Van Tillian. (3) It rejects evangelicalism's social activism partly because it does not line up with [McClain's postponement theory of the kingdom](#), a subset of revised dispensationalism (pp. 36; 263–66), but some fundamentalists reject dispensationalism and a much larger group rejects that particular variety of dispensationalism.
2. It lacks sufficient [nuance](#), notably in the following five areas.

(1) Some of its arguments do not logically follow. For example, "Promise Keepers has many strata of belief and practice, one stratum of which is charismaticism, as seen in the charismatic conference speakers and their writings (such as Greg Laurie,

Chuck Smith, and Jack Hayford), *the conduct of the public gatherings (including the music and hand lifting/waving)*, and the composition of its governing board" (p. 108, emphasis added). Moving from such "conduct" to charismaticism is a non sequitur since many non-charismatics worship with similar music and "hand lifting/waving." That seems to be an unguarded statement that would understandably frustrate non-charismatics who worship with that kind of music and "hand lifting/waving."

(2) It employs a slippery-slope argument, namely, that evangelicalism, because it rejects at least some categories of separation, inevitably leads to doctrinal aberrations such as non-inerrancy, neo-orthodoxy, or open theism (cf. the concluding evaluation in Part 9 quoted above). It does not logically follow, however, that *all* evangelicals tolerate such error or are moving on an unavoidable trajectory in that direction. For example, Ligonier Ministries has avoided this slippery slope. Further, there are many churches (some of which I have visited) that McCune would not consider to be fundamentalist but that do separate from heresy, unequal alliances, organized apostasy, and disobedient Christians.

(3) It includes "interdenominationalism" as an objection to ecumenical evangelism since it cannot agree on "what is truly essential and what is non-essential or peripheral" (pp. 74–75), but this objection lacks sufficient qualification. No doubt his description of interdenominationalism is often—perhaps usually—the case, but this is not necessarily so. McCune acknowledges that fundamentalism itself is interdenominational (pp. 17, 20; cf. McCune's "[Doctrinal Non-Issues in Historic Fundamentalism](#)," *DBSJ* [1996]: 178–79). Furthermore, evangelicalism includes many doctrinally sound groups that are interdenominational, six of which readily come to mind: (1) [Ligonier Ministries](#) led by [R. C. Sproul](#); (2) [Desiring God Ministries](#) led by [John Piper](#); (3) [9 Marks](#) led by [Mark Dever](#); (4) [The Shepherds' Fellowship](#) led by [John MacArthur](#); (5) [Together for the Gospel](#) led by [Mark Dever](#), [Ligon Duncan](#), [Al Mohler](#), and [C. J. Mahaney](#); and (6) [The Gospel Coalition](#) led by [D. A. Carson](#) and [Tim Keller](#).

(4) Its criteria for applying "secondary" separation based on 2 Thess 3:6–15 could be clearer. McCune explains that fundamentalists sometimes tolerate "those who fellowship with new evangelicals, or those who engage in entangling unbiblical alliances of various sorts, or whose standards of personal deportment and music are intolerable. . . . If, after the passing of reasonable time, and appropriate biblical confrontation, it is apparent that the organization is unable or unwilling to put its house in order, then the Bible-believing separatist has no choice but to withdraw" (p. 148). At what point do fellow believers qualify for separation with reference to their "personal deportment and music"? How does positive Scriptural teaching on unity fit into this paradigm?

(5) It lacks nuance when distinguishing fundamentalists from evangelicals. Sometimes McCune's description of fundamentalism is unrealistically narrow:

"Broadly speaking, ecclesiastical separation is the refusal to collaborate with or the withdrawal of a working relationship from an ecclesiastical organization or religious leader that *deviates from the standard of Scripture* or that *does not believe and obey the word of God in doctrine or practice*. Separation is the refusal to join hands or make common cause with those who *deny or disobey the Scriptures*" (p. 138, emphasis added; cf. 125, 148, 151).

Based on that definition, I would have to separate from *everyone*—including myself since I often "disobey the Scriptures"! McCune obviously means that only certain types of deviation from the Scriptures (i.e., flagrant, habitual unbelief or disobedience) merit separation, but his statements lack nuance and clarity.

At other times he has an "us vs. them" mentality that seems to view all evangelicals as disobedient Christians from whom fundamentalists must equally separate. For example, while McCune greatly appreciates many aspects of their ministries, he lists the [Southern Baptist Convention](#) as an example of "organized apostasy" (p. 146) and [John Piper](#) and [John MacArthur](#) as "disobedient Christians" (pp. 151–53). Many who are intimately familiar with the SBC, Piper, and MacArthur (including some within fundamentalism) would disagree with McCune's assessment. Such people might counter that (1) efforts by men such as [Mark Dever](#), [Al Mohler](#), and [Tom Nettles](#) in the [SBC's conservative resurgence](#) are similar to what [David Beale](#) calls "nonconformist fundamentalism" (*In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* [Greenville, S.C.: Unusual Publications, 1986], pp. 3–12) and that these men are worthy of support on several levels and (2) Piper and MacArthur are militantly orthodox but *apply* the same principles of separation differently.

The issue here seems to be nuance. People have a tendency to broad-brush groups of which they are not a part, often because they fail to see distinctions from a distance. Movements are complex, and pockets of people within a particular movement are often frustrated when others critique their movement without acknowledging its complexity or diversity. For example, many [Mormons](#) are understandably frustrated when the media lumps them together with fringe Mormons who are [polygamists](#), and many fundamentalists are understandably frustrated when evangelicals lump them together with, say, the [King James Only movement](#), [anti-intellectualism](#), or [legalism](#).

At least two groups are similarly broad-brushed in *Promise Unfulfilled*. (1) Many non-cessationists (e.g., [D. A. Carson](#), [John Piper](#), or [Wayne Grudem](#)) would be understandably frustrated with McCune for how he implicitly lumps them all together with

charismatics whose "presence in the new evangelical ranks has contributed to the deterioration of evangelical theology as a whole and has fostered an experience-oriented Christianity" that gives "an enormous boost to the ecumenical movement" (pp. 108–9). (2) Many evangelicals would be understandably frustrated with McCune for how he lumps them all together as non-separatists. It seems that evangelicals and fundamentalists tend to caricature each other with the result that evangelicals have as much trouble fitting intellectually respectable fundamentalists like McCune and [Kevin Bauder](#) into their conceptual grid of fundamentalists as fundamentalists do fitting militantly orthodox men like Carson, Dever, MacArthur, Piper, and Grudem into their conceptual grid of evangelicals. (See, e.g., Bauder, "What's That You Smell? A Fundamentalist Response to *The Smell of Sawdust*," part 2 in [Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail: Evangelical Ecumenism and the Quest for Christian Identity](#), ed. Timothy George [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004] and "[A Fundamentalism Worth Saving](#)"; and Grudem "Why, When, and for What Should We Draw New Boundaries?" chap. 10 in [Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity](#), ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, Paul Kjoss Helseth [Wheaton: Crossway, 2003], pp. 339–70.) McCune seems to treat all non-fundamentalist Christians as "new evangelicals," as though the current theological milieu is the same as it was in the 1950s. The fundamentalist-evangelical landscape, however, has changed considerably.

CONCLUSION

Despite the disproportionate space given to them, the alleged weaknesses are relatively peripheral to McCune's thesis, which he argues convincingly. McCune is on the side of the angels. Evangelicalism has become increasingly diluted, and the result is that it has compromised what is most precious to Christians: the gospel. *Promise Unfulfilled* is a sober, eye-opening reminder that all believers are charged with the important and often difficult responsibility to guard the gospel.

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Special thanks to Rolland McCune for responding to my review. His rejoinder is available at <http://andynaselli.com/theology/review-of-mccunes-promise-unfulfilled-with-a-response-from-mccune>.

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