This report is intended to be a resource to help Fundamentalist Christians in studying and evaluating religious leaders and movements. It draws primarily upon materials housed in the Fundamentalism File in the J. S. Mack Library on the campus of Bob Jones University.

Although every effort has been made to provide an impartial study of the topic, this work will naturally reflect the interpretations and viewpoint of its author. This report should not be taken as representing an official statement of the position of Bob Jones University. The University’s theological position is well expressed by its creed.

The staff of the Fundamentalism File would welcome any questions or comments concerning the content of this report.
During a sermon in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1933, seventy-year-old Billy Sunday suffered a heart attack while in the pulpit. As the song leader grasped the staggering evangelist, Sunday pointed to the audience and said urgently, “Don’t let them go. They’re lost. Give them the invitation. I’d rather die on my feet seeing them come than quit.”

Although Sunday lived two more years—still preaching all the while—that incident typified the intense, almost consuming drive of the early twentieth century’s most famous urban evangelist. “I never expect to be an old man,” he once told another audience earlier in his career. “I am burning up to do you good and keep you out of hell.”

He was born William Ashley Sunday in Iowa in 1862. His father, a soldier in the Union army, never saw Billy. He was in an army camp at the time of his son’s birth and died of pneumonia a little more than a month later. Billy’s mother was left with three children, a tiny farm, and little with which to make a living. “I am a rube of the rubes,” Sunday later said. “I am a graduate of the University of Poverty. I have blacked my boots with stove-blacking, greased my hair with goose grease. I never knew what an undergarment or a nightdress was until I was eighteen years old. I have dried my face and wiped my proboscis on a flour sack towel.”

With Mrs. Sunday struggling to make ends meet, Billy bounced around, living sometimes with his mother, sometimes with his grandfather, and for four years in an orphanage. Sunday might have remained in obscurity except for his athletic skill. Playing for a baseball team in Marshall-town, Iowa, Sunday caught the eye of “Pop” Anson, manager of the Chicago Whitestockings (today’s Chicago Cubs). Anson thought that the speedy, agile Sunday would be a solid addition to the Chicago club, and in 1883 he signed Sunday at $60 a month.

Billy Sunday spent eight seasons in the major leagues, compiling a respectable record, primarily as an outfielder, and playing on two pennant-winning teams. He was, in baseball terms, “good glove, weak bat”—showing skill as a fielder and as a base stealer, but rarely hitting for high average.

More important than his accomplishments on the playing field, however, was God’s work of grace in his heart. He met Helen “Nell” Thompson, a devout Presbyterian whose family was not too sure what to make of the scrappy young ballplayer who was trying to court their daughter. It was not the Thompson family who reached Sunday with the gospel, though. One Sunday afternoon in 1886, while on a drinking binge with his teammates, Sunday heard a group from the Pacific Garden Rescue Mission on the street singing old hymns like those Sunday’s mother had sung when he was a boy. Drawn, the ballplayer went to the mission and heard the gospel. He returned several times and was finally converted. Years later he showed his gratitude to the mission by giving it the entire $56,000 freewill offering from his Chicago campaign.

Thus it was a “new” Billy Sunday who married Nell in 1888. He continued to play baseball after his conversion but began to feel burdened to do some sort of Christian work. After much prayer and discussion with his wife, he decided to quit baseball and work for the YMCA. Almost immediately he received a tempting offer to play for the Cincinnati team for $500 a month. He asked Nell what he should do. “There is nothing to consider,” she said. “You promised God to quit.”

Sunday worked for the YMCA for two years and then took a position in 1893 as an assistant to Evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman. Sunday was the “advance man” who worked behind the scenes, going ahead of the rest of the evangelistic team to do the preparation work for each campaign and often speaking to overflow meetings. When Chapman decided to return to the pastorate in 1895, Sunday was at a loss for what to do. Chapman encouraged the younger man to become an evangelist, and he even arranged for several churches in Garner, Iowa, to invite Sunday to hold an evangelistic campaign in January 1896.

Sunday spent several years learning his trade. He tried at first to imitate the reserved pulpit style
of Chapman but found that it did not suit his personality. As he became more comfortable in preaching, Sunday began to let more of his own boisterous spirit show through, and crowds responded warmly to this sincere if sensational evangelist. Sunday preached throughout the Midwest in small towns (mostly in Iowa and Illinois at first), what Sunday called “the kerosene circuit” after the kerosene lamps that lighted the places in which he spoke. It was in this period (1896-1906), historian William McLoughlin argues, that Sunday proportionately saw his greatest success. McLoughlin says that in a third of the campaigns Sunday held during this time (mostly in towns with populations under 10,000), the evangelist saw 20 percent of the population profess conversion. McLoughlin adds that contemporary reports indicated “that a high percentage of these joined a church.”

These early years were difficult. Biographer Lyle Dorsett notes, “There is no way to romanticize his first eleven years of ministry—nearly a third of his career as an independent preacher. The towns where he stayed had shabby hotels and rooming houses. The buildings were lighted by kerosene lamps, the streets were unpaved, and for most of that time the evangelist was so poor and unimportant that he had to help erect his own tents and tabernacles. Frequently he was broke.”

The evangelist’s campaign in Burlington, Iowa, in 1905 was his first “big” revival, and it began a trend. Burlington was the largest city in which he had preached to that point in his career, foreshadowing increasingly larger venues. Burlington was also the first campaign in which Sunday put a significant emphasis on the liquor issue, which was to be a constant theme in his work. In this campaign he called, with some success, for the enforcing of laws on the books concerning the closing hours of saloons. Soon he would be advocating legal prohibition of alcohol.

After Burlington, by degrees, the Sunday evangelistic team moved into progressively larger cities. In the 1910s Sunday was preaching to huge crowds in the largest cities in the United States, including New York City (one and a half million people in attendance), Boston (one and a half million), and Philadelphia (two million). The years 1905 to 1918 were the height of Sunday’s evangelistic fame. He became a nationally known figure, ranking in surveys as one of the ten most admired men in America.

Billy Sunday was often called the “baseball evangelist,” highlighting his fame as an athlete. Sunday’s status as a celebrity undoubtedly attracted some hearers to his meetings, and he would often work baseball references into his sermons:

> Faith, O, that puts a song on your lips, that puts fire in your blood, that puts cement in your backbone, that puts the ball over the fence, the last half of the ninth inning: score three to nothing against, bases full, two strikes and three balls called, That is faith! That is faith! That is faith! F

Furthermore, his sports career and athleticism gave him an appeal to men who regarded religion as “effeminate.”

But, over time, it was Sunday’s flamboyant style and unusual methods, not his baseball fame, that caught the public’s eye. Above all, his pungent sermons, preached in the vernacular of the man on the street, won attention. Consider the following example from his sermon “The Three Groups”:

> I don’t expect one of these ossified, petrified, mildewed, dyed-in-the-wool, stamped-on-the-cork, blown-in-the-bottle Presbyterians or Episcopalians to shout “Amen!” but it would do you Methodists good to loosen up. Many of you are hidebound.

> I believe half of the professing Christians amount to nothing as a spiritual force. They go to church, have a kindly regard for religion, but as for having a firm grip on God, a cheerful spirit of self-denial, enthusiastic service and prevailing prayer, and willingness to strike hard, staggering blows against the devil, they are almost failures.

Sunday defended his use of slang to a reporter: “As you see, I use slang scarcely at all in ordinary conversation. I deem it necessary in my work.… I want to reach the people so I use the people’s language.” In another place he said more bluntly, “I want people to know what I mean, and that’s why I try to get down where they live. What do I care if some puff-eyed, dainty little dibbly-dibbly preacher goes tibbly-tibbling around because I use plain Anglo-Saxon words.”
Sunday originally used tents to house his campaigns. Although portable and adaptable, tents had their limitations, especially in cold weather. Sunday decided to abandon tents entirely after a snowstorm in Salida, Colorado, in October 1905. The weight of the snow shredded his tent, despite Sunday’s best efforts to save it. Church and city auditoriums often proved inadequate to hold the growing crowds at Sunday’s meetings, so he borrowed an idea that D. L. Moody had pioneered—the tabernacle.

Described as “a big turtle-back barn of raw, unfinished timber,” these large structures, each built especially for a campaign, seated thousands on their plain, wooden benches. By agreeing to build tabernacles, the committees inviting Sunday to preach showed their earnestness and began to unite for the effort even before the evangelist arrived. Practicality, not aesthetics, was the key feature of the tabernacles. To deaden noise and settle the dust, the builders poured a layer of sawdust on the ground. Soon newspapers began playing on the idea and described going down the aisles in response to altar calls as “hitting the sawdust trail.”

Exactly how many people “hit the sawdust trail” in Sunday’s meetings is uncertain; historians estimate a total of perhaps a million over his forty-year career. As mentioned before, Sunday’s greatest success, in terms of percentage, came in the smaller towns, where up to seventy-five percent of those who “hit the trail” actually joined a church. In Jefferson, Iowa, in 1903, the local paper reported that more than half of the unchurched population was converted. However, many who hit the sawdust trail were Christians coming for “reconsecration” (as Sunday called it). The evangelist did not mind. “We know you are in the church,” he would tell audiences, “but we want you to get out fully for God.” In his Kansas City campaign, for instance, over a third of decisions were for reconsecration.

As the campaigns grew larger, so did the staff necessary to run them. With what is undoubtedly unintended irony, Sunday’s official biographer wrote, “John the Baptist was only a voice: but Billy Sunday was a voice plus a bewildering array of committees and assistants and organized machinery.” Two people were particularly important to the Sunday meetings. Nell Sunday, or “Ma” as Billy called her, played a key role behind the scenes. She recalled of her husband, “While supreme in his own province of preaching, he was otherwise dependent upon me.... I was his business manager, and no decision was ever made without consulting me.” The other major figure was Homer Rodeheaver, Sunday’s music director for twenty years. Rodeheaver was responsible for the music—solos, choir numbers, and congregational singing. In the song service (usually about a half-hour), Rodeheaver would serve as the emcee, warming up the crowd and setting the stage for the sermon. An unanticipated side effect of the campaigns was a lucrative career for Rodeheaver. From the publishing of tabernacle songbooks grew the Rodeheaver Music Company, the leading gospel music publisher of its time.

Although evangelism was Sunday’s central theme, his campaigns had their social effects as well. “Every economic question can be settled by the Golden Rule!” he told the Winona Lake Bible Conference in 1915. On another occasion he said, “The gospel rightly understood and faithfully preached interferes with every form of iniquitous business.” This fact was certainly true of the liquor industry. Brewers and distillers considered Billy Sunday one of those most responsible for establishing nationwide prohibition through passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1919). In Louisville, Kentucky, in 1914, bourbon distillers managed to exert enough pressure on church leaders to make them withdraw an invitation to Sunday to hold a campaign there. The evangelist himself was unbending in his hatred of what he called the “most damnable, corrupt institution that ever wriggled out of hell and fastened itself on the public.”

Adapting a passage from Methodist evangelist Sam Jones, Sunday once declared, I have sworn eternal and everlasting enmity to the liquor traffic: as long as I have a foot, I’ll kick it; as long as I have a fist, I’ll hit it; as long as I have a tooth, I’ll bite it; as long as I have a head I’ll butt it; and when I’m old and gray, and bootless, and toothless, I’ll gum it till I go to heaven and it goes to hell.

Advocates of prohibition considered Sunday a major weapon in their battle against booze. When a prohibition vote failed in Colorado in
1912, foes of the liquor industry persuaded Sunday to visit the state before a second vote in 1914. After his campaigns in Colorado Springs and Denver, the state reversed itself and passed a ban on alcohol. Likewise supporters credited his 1916 campaign in Detroit with swaying Michigan to pass prohibition. On the other hand, not even Sunday’s best efforts in his 1916 Boston campaign could persuade that city to vote for prohibition. Sunday was unquestionably a force for prohibition, but his efforts were not sufficient by themselves to win the victory.

The revival trail was not without its unusual side. During a revival in Springfield, Illinois, in 1909, a man leaped from the pews and struck at Sunday twice with a horsewhip, saying, “I have a commission from God to horsewhip you.” Sunday leaped from the platform yelling, “Well, I have a commission from God to knock the tar out of you, you lobster.” His assistants seized the man, but Sunday sprained his ankle from the leap and had to finish the campaign on crutches.

Such incidents, unfortunately, were part of what helped make Billy Sunday’s name a household word. Satires of the evangelist abounded. British author P. G. Wodehouse created a character named “Jimmy Monday” for one of his “Jeeves and Wooster” stories. Broadway actor/producer George M. Cohan (best remembered for writing “Over There” and “You’re a Grand Old Flag”) featured a character called “Billy Holliday” in the comedy “Hit the Trail Holliday” about an itinerant advocate for teetotalism. In reviewing the play, drama critic Heywood Broun wrote, “All in all we believe that Sunday has more of the dramatic instinct than Cohan.”

Part of the appeal of Billy Sunday was the idea of bringing the allegedly purer values of the country to the corrupt city. One biographer referred to Sunday in his title as the “Hero of the Heartland.” For many, Sunday represented the triumph of the decent, common sense of rural America over the wickedness of the cities. “If I ever live to be old,” said Sunday, “I would like to live out in the country. I am a rube of the rubes, a hayseed of the hayseeds. I would like to live in the country near some crackin’-good town and listen to the birds. I would like to go to Heaven from out in the country somewhere. I don’t like to live in the city.” As Lyle Dorsett said in the title of his biography, Sunday sought “the redemption of urban America.” His solutions to social problems were, first of all the gospel, but second an embrace of the values of an earlier America: hard work, diligence, thriftiness, and honesty. It is not true that Sunday did not care about the condition of the poor, as some charged, but the solution he offered was Horatio Alger-style self-improvement—the experience of Sunday himself.

After the New York campaign of 1917, Sunday’s career seemed to flag. Some have characterized his later years as a fall from the pinnacle of success. This characterization contains some truth but is overstated. Certainly Sunday’s fame and popularity diminished, but he continued to hold successful campaigns in the Midwest, which had always been his base, and increasingly in the South, where crowds embraced his conservative message. The fact remains that no evangelist had ever enjoyed the spectacular success Sunday did from 1905 to 1918. After that time, he remained America’s best-known evangelist, but urban evangelism itself declined in popularity.

Through the years critics leveled many charges at Sunday, and even friends raised concerns. It was no secret that Sunday had earned $1 million by 1920, which at that time seemed a phenomenal amount for a minister. Although Sunday was known to be generous and regularly tithed his income, he saw no reason to open his finances to public scrutiny. Furthermore, there is evidence that the Sundays, at their height, became fixated on success and maintaining their level of income and renown. Probably the hardest trial for the Sundays was the failure of their children. The evangelist’s children became involved in divorce, adultery, and alcoholism, and one committed suicide. Even in his message—where Sunday was always unquestionably sincere—the preacher sometimes seemed to mix the gospel with other, lesser themes; Sunday could sometimes make reform and the “American way of life” sound equal in importance to the gospel. “Come on down,” said the evangelist to one group of trailblitters, “and take my hand against booze, for Jesus Christ, for your flag.”

Neither praise nor criticism seemed to make much difference to Billy Sunday. Shortly before his death in 1935, he wrote, “I do not conceal the fact that I am in this world for the purpose of
making it easier for people to do right and harder for them to do wrong…. I am not a mountebank. I am not … a reprint of some one else. I am and always have been plain Billy Sunday trying to do God’s will in preaching Jesus and Him crucified and arisen from the dead for our sins.”

1 Quoted in William G. McLoughlin, Billy Sunday Was His Real Name (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 291.
2 Ibid., 45.
5 McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, 414.
9 Quoted in McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, 429.
10 Quoted in Ellis, 68.
11 Ibid., 63.
12 Quoted in McLoughlin, Billy Sunday, 101.
13 Ellis, 61.
14 Ibid., 436.
16 Quoted in McLoughlin, Billy Sunday, 28
17 Ibid., 87.
18 Ibid., 175-76.
19 Ibid., 64.
20 Ibid., 163.
22 John R. Rice, ed., The Best of Billy Sunday (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Sword of the Lord, 1965), 211.
23 In their biographies, both McLoughlin and Dorsett make much of this point.
24 Quoted in McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, 434.
25 Quoted in McLoughlin, Billy Sunday, 293.