In the fall of 1927, Thomas Gillespie took the stage to deliver the opening address at a Bible conference in Pittsburgh. Like many in his audience, Gillespie felt that the American norms and cultural values on which he had built a successful life and career had shifted out from under him. His aggressive, energetic leadership of one of the largest steel and iron firms in the region was still successful in the new age, but he nevertheless found himself under attack. Instead of his accustomed role as a respected businessman and pillar of the community, he squirmed awkwardly on the receiving end of public ridicule and attack. Why? Because of his sincere commitment to his conservative Presbyterian beliefs, which he thought reflected the best moral traditions of his country. This exasperating situation led Gillespie to welcome the bully pulpit from which he expressed his frustration at the ignorance and maliciousness of his foes. He mocked those benighted liberals and secularists who lumped all Bible-believing Christians into the same mold. He knew that critics labeled fundamentalists as “stand patters,” “traditionalists,” or even “reactionaries.” Gillespie marveled that liberals could blithely equate his urban, bourgeois, respectable fundamentalism with that of the Tennessee backwoods. He hoped to ward off these new attacks by reminding his Bible conference audience that “we claim to be progressives,” and no amount of facile generalizations could shake fundamentalists such as Gillespie from that comforting self-knowledge.1

Gillespie articulated the frustration felt by many fundamentalists in the years following the Scopes trial. He was disheartened by the widespread popularity of the new image of the movement. Like many activists, he had been attracted to the fundamentalist movement in the early 1920s as a wide coalition of conservative evangelical Protestants. After the extraordinary publicity surrounding fundamentalist school campaigns, including the Scopes trial, he did not feel
comfortable with the new public image of fundamentalism that only had room for rural, Southern, antimodern, anti-intellectual revivalism.

Like Gillespie, many leading fundamentalists sought to combat the definitions of fundamentalism that had gained influence as a result of fundamentalist educational activism. William Bell Riley sought earnestly to refute charges of ignorance and bigotry. He pointed to fundamentalism’s long intellectual tradition. Riley, however, remained committed to the fundamentalist label no matter how its popularly accepted definition may have shifted. When he lost his fight to maintain wider definitional boundaries for the movement, he clung bitterly to fundamentalism and took solace in his ability to control his Minnesota educational empire. Other early fundamentalists did not have such a fierce commitment to fundamentalism. As they resisted the ascriptions of liberals, these less-committed fundamentalists also reminded audiences, as Gillespie did, of their claims to other cultural identities, such as progressivism.

In the end, however, their efforts to assert a more inclusive definition for the fundamentalist movement were unsuccessful and many fundamentalists unobtrusively abandoned the label. To extend sociologist of science Thomas Gieryn’s cartographic metaphor, these fundamentalists quietly allowed the boundaries of fundamentalism to shrink past their own positions. That is, they remained in the same cultural space, along the boundaries of early fundamentalism. As those boundaries constricted, these early fundamentalists passively allowed themselves to be defined out of the newly restricted fundamentalist movement. They did not change their own fundamental beliefs about the Bible or education. Nor did they abandon their commitment to activism that had remained outside the shrunken boundaries, such as drives for mandatory Bible-reading laws. Many even continued to maintain a reluctant and ambivalent association with fundamentalism. But they no longer eagerly embraced public campaigns, such as the drive to ban evolution from schools that had become inextricably equated with fundamentalism, nor did they identify themselves as fundamentalists unless forced to by the absence of acceptable alternative labels.

It would not be until the late 1940s that a new evangelical identity emerged more in line with this ambivalent position. A new generation of evangelicals, those who had felt alienated by the restricted definitional boundaries of 1920s-era fundamentalism, embraced theologian Carl Henry’s 1947 call for a “progressive Fundamentalism.” Henry and his peers succeeded where Gillespie and other 1920s fundamentalists had failed. The next generation was able to construct a neoevangelical identity that included fidelity to traditional interpretations of the Bible while still achieving mainstream intellectual respectability.

For fundamentalists in the 1920s, however, that kind of wider definition for fundamentalism remained elusive. Even more frustrating, the complex