CHAPTER 1

A New Kind of Protestant

To many contemporaries, the Protestant fundamentalist movement of the 1920s seemed to come out of nowhere. In 1923, Congregational Minister Arthur B. Patten blasted the “horrific . . . dismal and devastating . . . stygian and destructive . . . desperate . . . barbarous . . . cult” of fundamentalism as an evil that had only recently “come into vogue.”¹ Journalist and critic H. L. Mencken traced the roots of fundamentalism back to the passage of Prohibition in 1918. From Mencken’s alarmed view in 1926, in a few short years fundamentalists had undertaken a “rapid descent into mere barbaric devil-chasing,” plunging rural America “into an abyss of malignant imbecility.”² Although the fundamentalist movement had only recently come to the attention of these critics, fundamentalism had much deeper roots. The most influential cause of the movement was the nineteenth-century intellectual revolution that included such ideas as materialistic evolution, higher criticism, and theological modernism. All three of these ideas transformed mainstream American thinking and fundamentalism emerged in part as a response to this trend.

Just as contemporaries had a difficult time understanding the history of the fundamentalist movement, so historians have disagreed on proper definitions. Since the early 1930s, popular and academic historians have described fundamentalism in egregiously misleading ways. Although the movement claimed a number of institutional bases and various types of adherents, early historians uncritically accepted hostile contemporary stereotypes of fundamentalists as rural, anti-intellectual demagogues. Early historians called fundamentalist leaders “disturbed men”³ from a limited, “static” social environment⁴ who suffered from “ignorance, even illiteracy.”⁵

More recently, historians Ernest Sandeen and George Marsden have overturned this oversimplified view of 1920s-era fundamentalism. Both have conclusively demonstrated that early fundamentalists as a whole were no more
rural, isolated, and uneducated than their liberal foes. However, Sandeen and Marsden each asserted a different definition of the term. Sandeen argued that fundamentalism was a modern efflorescence of the theology of premillennialism, according to which Jesus Christ would return to save a sinful world and usher in a thousand-year reign of peace and harmony. Marsden objected to such a restrictive definition. He conceded that premillennialism accounted for one important root of fundamentalism but argued that fundamentalism itself meant a wider “militantly antimodernist Protestant evangelicalism.”  

This revision in the historical understanding of fundamentalism has generated a spate of scholarly interest in the early years of the movement. Recent historians have demonstrated that fundamentalism meant different things to different people in the 1920s. But for all of the activists involved, the causes stretched back to the cultural and intellectual revolutions of the nineteenth century. In order to understand the intensity with which both sides fought the school controversies of the 1920s, we need to review briefly those nineteenth-century transformations.

For instance, Darwin’s theory of natural selection had a revolutionary effect beyond the realm of the natural sciences. As soon as Darwin introduced his transmutation hypothesis with his *Origin of Species* (1859), leading American naturalists quarreled about its assumptions and implications. Within fifteen years, however, the overwhelming majority of American naturalists had accepted the premise that species had evolved. Huge segments of the American public remained unconvinced. This division between leading scientific opinion and popular thought fueled much of the vitriolic debate of the 1920s.

Darwin’s bombshell operated with a longer fuse among American theologians. Although many prominent voices quickly concluded that Darwin’s transmutation hypothesis merely demonstrated God’s method, many others restrained themselves at first from fully pondering the religious implications of Darwin’s theory. Most conservative clerics assured themselves that the theory would soon be disproved by natural scientists. By 1900, however, as the tide of scientific thinking embraced the idea of organic evolution, Protestant intellectuals in America had split into two contending camps. Some favored adapting religious belief to new scientific truths and others insisted on the supremacy of revealed religion over science.

The more pressing issue for many Protestant thinkers in the years immediately following Darwin’s publication of *Origin of Species* was the issue of higher biblical criticism. Such criticism had been hotly debated in Great Britain and America since at least 1846, when an English translation of D. F. Strauss’s *Life of