The difference between ordinary missiology and frontier missiology is that the latter talks about the edge of change. Often things change gradually and we don't recognize it. History doesn't turn corners very rapidly. Everybody is trying to catch up with reality, so it's not unusual for us to have founded the International Society of Frontier Missiology (ISFM) to study the changes we aren't clearly aware of, or that we need to become aware of, or the things that are coming down the pike over which we have no control. That's why we aren't talking about traditional missions.

The Great Reversal

We often hear about the “Great Reversal.” The phrase refers to the early 20th century reduction of 19th century broad evangelism (including good deeds in this world) to narrow personal evangelism. In this regard we have talked about the tension between social action and evangelism. Professor David Moberg, author of The Great Reversal, was talking about the emergence of the polarization between fundamentalism and modernism. I want to address the source of that polarization.

Let’s go back a few years before Moberg’s book, The Great Reversal. In 1947, Carl F. H. Henry, who was a professor at Fuller and later Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, wrote a book entitled The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism. For a small book, it had an earthshaking impact, not necessarily positive, in the entire Evangelical world. As a result, the entire Fuller Theological Seminary was branded as New (or “Neo”) Evangelicalism. This was, you might say, the postmodernism of its day—emergent theology. There was a great deal of unpredictability about Fuller. Henry’s book essentially was the opening shot across the bow of where Evangelicals had been.

A decade later, in 1958, Timothy Smith, an obscure graduate student at John Hopkins, developed a dissertation on American history that hit the fan. He was soon asked to give lectures all over the country. He was the one who invented the phrase “The Great Reversal,” which David Moberg later used as the title.
to his book. Smith unearthed the fact that in the 1900s we had a very different kind of Evangelical Christianity, which we had forgotten about by 1958. His book was one of the single most explosive theses in the history of the American Society of Church History. It was titled very simply Revivalism and Social Reform. Why was it so explosive? Because in 1958 it was still a foregone conclusion that if any Evangelical talked about the Kingdom, he was a liberal, a modernist who didn’t believe the Bible, and had been taken in by German higher criticism.

But Timothy Smith’s research was irrefutable. Evangelicals earlier had indeed talked about the Kingdom and worked toward its extension on earth in this life. Line upon line he simply quoted the facts from the past. Everybody was totally surprised by all that had happened in an earlier, forgotten era.

By Timothy Smith’s day most American Evangelicals were settled in the conviction that there were just two kinds of Christianity, one valid and one invalid. The valid kind talked about Heaven (and later on the prosperity gospel for individuals)—an entirely personal-salvation gospel. We talked about taking that gospel around the world, getting everybody in the world saved. That was the philosophy and the gospel of a strong movement emerging in the 1920s. It was not the only kind of Christianity, but the mass of working-class Evangelicals considered it to be the most valid brand. The invalid kind of Christianity was modernist, mainly for university, well-fixed people whose pastors went to seminaries, not Bible Institutes.

However, by 1958 not only Timothy Smith and Carl Henry, but others, too, were beginning to rediscover the need for a broader understanding of our mandate.

Notice that both Smith and Henry were college graduates. In the 1920s college people were not in great favor in the eyes of the masses of Evangelicals. Evangelicals founded 157 Bible institutes instead of colleges. The 19th century Evangelicals founded colleges like Wheaton College, but much of what was founded later in the 20th century was polarized away from that college stream of Christianity—later “mainstream” denominations in general—which were considered suspect. In some ways it was assumed to be defective, and to some extent it was. But the muscular Evangelicalism that had developed by the year 2000 to be the dominant form of Christianity was neither that of the mainline denominations nor Catholicism. The older mainstream denominations in 2008 now comprise only 8% of the US population.

In 1968 David Moberg came through with the book titled Inasmuch, Christian Social Responsibility in 20th Century America. Then in 1972 Moberg wrote a second book called The Great Reversal. It could be more accurately termed “the great polarization.” Many people have described this phenomenon. There’s nothing novel about saying that Christianity became polarized. The question is, why did it?

It is a rather delicate subject. The Evangelical masses by 1920 were working-class people. They didn’t and couldn’t easily think about changing the structure of society. A parallel example would be the theology of the slaves. Look at what are called Negro spirituals. Written by slaves, these hymns reflect an exuberant form of Christianity. But note that they don’t speak of changing this world. It’s not that some of the slaves were theologians who lost track of what the Bible is talking about and just focused on heaven. They were not prosperity gospel people. The ranking characteristic of the slaves was that they were slaves. They were not about to march on city hall and make changes in society. They weren’t up for social action or social change. They didn’t have the potential for doing that. And neither did the working-class masses of Evangelicals in the 1920s. As a result they sub-consciously or deliberately chose a theology originating mainly from J. N. Darby, which described the world as getting worse and worse until Christ would return. Darby’s thinking was no recipe for challenging worldly problems in the name of mission. But it fit in with their limited capabilities as working-class people.

Thus, you can see the cause and effect between social status and choice of theology. Very often philosophers and theologians boast that their thinking changed history, when actually, much more often, turns of history changed their thinking.

What Exactly Was Reversed?

Let’s go back for a little bit of history. Our nation was founded in 1776, symbolically, and in 1789, formally. We then suffered a lot of commotion and confusion. There was a time when people were marching on Washington with little wooden guillotines, hoping to execute George Washington—something novel and exciting like the French were doing. We have little about this in our textbooks because we don’t want to talk about those days. But the real change did not happen in 1776, though 1776 was, you might say, the conception. The real change happened at the end of the War of 1812, in 1815. By then, for the first time, most Americans suddenly realized that the British were not going to come back again, and that this country was theirs. Add the huge Louisiana Purchase, and, of course, we seized Texas and
The talk about postmodernism is meek and flabby compared to the uproar and change of this earlier period. All kinds of changes took place.

This was the Evangelical “consensus.” It was though that it was the kingdom of God! There was a pastor named Sylvester Graham who left his church to be an evangelist of whole grain. Graham flour and graham crackers got their names from him. Coeducation and vocational education came into being; societies were established for the reform of morals; all kinds of amazing changes took place as a result of the Second Evangelical Awakening, mainly between 1815 and 1859.

Then Came the Reversal

In this period, note, the dominant leadership of the Evangelical movement also ran the country. They were upper-class people, not the masses of ordinary people. However, these upper-class Evangelicals soon were absolutely swamped by the massive avalanche of immigration between 1870 and 1930. Our population tripled and quadrupled due to this massive immigration of Southern Europeans who were mainly nominal Catholics. As a result, the spirit of revival idealisms was very much dampened.

Furthermore, a man came into the picture named Moody. His influence, in my opinion, was far greater than Billy Graham’s. He won millions and millions of working-class, non-college people. When the Moody Bible Institute was founded, it was founded on the assumption that colleges were for the elite, often “modernists,” and that Bible institutes were for the “ordinary” conservative Bible-believing people. One count, as previously mentioned, was that 157 Bible institutes were formed. Precisely because there was no hope for working-class people to change this world—because they had no real hope of changing the laws, the temper, or the trends of society—they did what they could. They founded inner-city
missions, good works of all kinds. There’s no question that they had as much of a social concern as anybody. But they had limited influence on bigger problems of society itself.

So what happened? Moody Bible Institute became known for its faculty’s insights into prophecy. Prophecy conferences abounded. In my teenage years, eschatology was often the main subject in church. The Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society wouldn’t even let you be a missionary unless you were pre-millennial (meaning the world is not getting better before Christ returns). We were confident that we had the future events all figured out. We were oriented toward heaven and to the future, toward personal soul-salvation, not social transformation, because this world was going to the dogs. Obviously, then, there was no reason to try to fix it.

This theology didn’t actually characterize all missionaries, because the Student Volunteers were “elite” college graduates. To a great extent they carried forward the earlier century’s idea of changing society. But they went out to establish universities. They also went to Africa and pushed African pastors out of the pulpit who were not college graduates! In some ways this rush of new, young missionaries set the cause of missions back 40 years. They were in another world from Moody Bible Institute missionaries. And yet, they still did some very good things. Their SVM lists of missionaries “sailing” did not include the thousands from Bible Institutes.

Examples of the Polarization
Let’s take an example of the interplay between evangelism and the changing of this world. In Guatemala for ten years I lived out in the mountains, while most of the “civilized” people lived in the cities. But an educated non-Indian believer, Adalberto Castillo, told me he needed another Ph.D. on his board of directors. I said, “Board of directors of what?” “Well, we’re starting an Evangelical university.” Here I am working with barefoot Indians. I couldn’t imagine the value of a university; besides, I was leaving the country in two weeks to teach at Fuller for the next ten years. I told him, “I won’t even be around.” He said, “At least you can stand up for the picture.” So I got my picture taken with the board of directors and never heard another word for 38 years.

A few years ago I read an article that said there were 41 new universities in the non-Western world which were founded, note, not by missionaries, but by national believers. One was in Guatemala, one of the oldest, Mariano Gálvez University, with 10,000 students. I said to myself, “What in the world, that’s the one for which I stood up for a picture!” And theoretically I was still a member of the board. So here I was, a proud founder of a university in Guatemala which I had not even believed in. Two weeks later I talked to a man visiting from the United States who was one of those early missionaries. He was very bitter about his experience. He went to Guatemala who weren’t preachers. They set up a vocational school to train people in dairy and printing. But, their school was later abolished by the mission. It was thought not to be “missionary work” to train people how to make a living. Some of their influence survived in these two families.

I soon noticed that there were two families. One was in the dairy business and one was in the printing business. They were sort of the spiritual and financial backbones of the 200 churches. They were not pastors, they were laymen, elders in the church. But they employed lots of people. I said to myself, how in the world did that happen? Everybody says missions goes to the poor people, and I think that’s only right, but you don’t have dairy industries and printing industries popping up among poor people. I found out later that two much-earlier missionaries had gone to Guatemala who weren’t preachers. They set up a vocational school to train people in dairy and printing. But, their school was later abolished by the mission. It was thought not to be “missionary work” to train people how to make a living. Some of their influence survived in these two families.

Later I tracked down in the States an old man who was one of those early missionaries, and he was very bitter about his experience. He’d gone down to Guatemala as a layman to help the people, but the theological missionaries looked down their noses at him and eventually phased out both him and his associate. He was bitter to the day he died. Now this is fairly recent historically. Nevertheless, we still have, to some extent, these two points of view, representing the polarization.

When I left Guatemala, what happened to those 17 businesses I left behind? One of them was a fairly large operation, run by eight seminary students. Well, the missionary who
took my place into radio and television. He was concerned about converting the people not assisting bi-vocational pastors which are 90% of those in Latin America! He wasn’t primarily thinking of raising their standard of living, and neither was I. I was merely thinking in practical terms about enabling more people to be pastors.

When I was back in Guatemala about three years ago, I visited the mountain territory where I had worked. It was a very rewarding and wonderful experience. When I left they had about ten churches in the area, now they have more like fifty. Even the secular businesses often have a Bible verse in their name. Practically everybody in that valley is a believer of one denomination or another. However, I found a disturbing reality: there were virtually no fathers living there.

The fathers are gone. Many of the older brothers are also gone. One out of every five people in that valley now lives in the United States as an illegal. When you cross the border, you’re spending thousands of dollars and risking your life. You can’t go back. Thus, thousands of families in this valley alone are being torn to shreds. The kids grow up in families like that. They say that elephants that grow up in the absence of, and, without the guidance of older elephants, become rogue elephants. These kids are becoming rogue kids. Their whole generation is getting into drugs and gangs, none of which was true when I was there. There’s one section of the capital city called ‘Via Hermosa,’ from which one youth gang alone, I was told, is extorting 100,000 US dollars per week. Every day in the larger city there are dead bodies on the street. Yet, Guatemala has the highest percentage of Evangelicals of any country in Latin America. It was 5% when I worked there. Now it is 40%—higher than Korea. However, with most families divided asunder that is the way to tear Christianity to shreds.

There is absolutely no future for micro-enterprise or any human activity that’s less efficient than some other process that is more efficient.

Globalization and Micro-Enterprise

I don’t see very many in mission leadership who are thinking about the physical dimension. I think it’s coming. The overseas churches certainly know that their people are poor. Thousands and thousands of Christian families in Southeast Asia are selling their children, not because they don’t want them, but because the children would otherwise starve.

But, getting food handouts isn’t the solution. Maltreated people need to be able to buy food. They need to be able to earn food. Why don’t they have a job? Globalization has taken their work away. How does that work? Take the case of our own Navajos in Arizona. They used to have jobs. They were famous for their beautiful handmade rugs and turquoise jewelry. It takes a woman three months to weave a Navajo rug, and she can sell it for 400 dollars. That’s not a whole lot of money for three months of work, but they scrape by. Nowadays, however, half of all those products they sell are made in China. They’re identical. You can’t tell the difference. So what do these Navajos do? This woman can buy the same rug for 50 dollars, and still sell it for 400. So why in the world would she make a rug by hand if the Chinese can make it more efficiently? But tomorrow other businesses will be there to sell directly to tourists and the Navajos will be out in the cold.

There is absolutely no future for micro-enterprise or any human activity that’s less efficient than some other process that is more efficient. What Does the Church Offer?

We talk about 10,000 people coming to Christ every day in Africa. That’s all to the good, because you cannot build a strong society unless you have people you can trust. But people keep saying that you can’t trust Christians.
I've heard pastors in this country more than once say that the businessmen in their congregation would never hire a Christian. On the other hand, when I was in Guatemala, even though the Evangelicals were less than 5% of the population, in every mountain town the treasurers were Evangelical. I talked to the owner of a big textile mill down in the city, a Jewish man who was advertising in the main newspaper for Evangelical workers. I asked him why. Without blinking he shot back, “They don’t booze, they don’t chase women and they come to work.” In the country of Chad, an absolutely Muslim country, in the president’s household all of the servants are Christians. The president trusts the Christians. Yet, even if you have honest people in the picture, the talk about micro-enterprise has no future.

The World Bank in 32 years has given away $3,500 billion (three and a half trillion), but, as evidenced by the subtitle of William Easterly’s book The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good, we are quite apparently doing a lot of harm and very little good. The chief problem is corruption. There’s so much corruption even in the World Bank itself, we read, that they would have to shut it down if it were investigated.

The Theological Polarization Is Still There

There is still a very good reason to convert people around the world (the honesty of transformed people is still essential), but by and large we Christians have the hope and the world has the work. It is not the church but the world who is fighting the major problems. Our missions are not doing what they did in the 19th century. My chapter “Three Eras of Mission: The Rise, Reduction, and Recovery of Kingdom Mission” (Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader, 2009) essentially gives more of the historical picture of just how it happened that there was a great loss of Kingdom Mission among Evangelicals.

Carl F. H. Henry, Timothy Smith and David Moberg were all university professors, but 50 years earlier they would have been Bible Institute professors. They were the early prophets of a recovery of what I call Kingdom Mission. They began to see what a wealthy, professional Evangelical can do that a working-class Evangelical can’t do. This is my theory as to one of the major factors in the longstanding polarization between “fundamentalists” and “modernists.”

The tragedy is that it has taken Evangelicals so long to come back into the picture of fighting the real problems of this world that many of the options are no longer ours. We are in the minority in the universities. George Marsden, one of the most famous Evangelical historians of Christianity in the USA, says that in 1870 Evangelicals were very highly respected in the halls of Washington and among educated people in general, but that by 1920 Evangelicals were the laughingstock of America. (Marsden 2006:x) I’m not saying education is the solution. It’s just that in Moody’s day, only 2% of the people went to university, and they were from wealthy and influential families. That level was not an option for most of the Moody converts, and the polarization reflected to a great extent the kind of theology that corresponded to the capacities of the two different class levels.

I have not changed my mind at all about the primacy of evangelism and church planting.

The World Bank in 32 years has given away $3,500 billion (three and a half trillion), but, as evidenced by the subtitle of William Easterly’s book The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good, we are quite apparently doing a lot of harm and very little good. The chief problem is corruption. There’s so much corruption even in the World Bank itself, we read, that they would have to shut it down if it were investigated.

The World Christian Movement: A Reader

In the other direction to do God’s will but if that’s all we sing, if we don’t turn important things in our singing, if we don’t turn important things into the picture of fighting the real problems of this world that many of the options are no longer ours. We are in the minority in the universities. George Marsden, one of the most famous Evangelical historians of Christianity in the USA, says that in 1870 Evangelicals were very highly respected in the halls of Washington and among educated people in general, but that by 1920 Evangelicals were the laughingstock of America. (Marsden 2006:x) I’m not saying education is the solution. It’s just that in Moody’s day, only 2% of the people went to university, and they were from wealthy and influential families. That level was not an option for most of the Moody converts, and the polarization reflected to a great extent the kind of theology that corresponded to the capacities of the two different class levels.

I have not changed my mind at all about the primacy of evangelism and church planting.

The tragedy is that it has taken Evangelicals so long to come back into the picture of fighting the real problems of this world that many of the options are no longer ours. We are in the minority in the universities. George Marsden, one of the most famous Evangelical historians of Christianity in the USA, says that in 1870 Evangelicals were very highly respected in the halls of Washington and among educated people in general, but that by 1920 Evangelicals were the laughingstock of America. (Marsden 2006:x) I’m not saying education is the solution. It’s just that in Moody’s day, only 2% of the people went to university, and they were from wealthy and influential families. That level was not an option for most of the Moody converts, and the polarization reflected to a great extent the kind of theology that corresponded to the capacities of the two different class levels.

The World Bank in 32 years has given away $3,500 billion (three and a half trillion), but, as evidenced by the subtitle of William Easterly’s book The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good, we are quite apparently doing a lot of harm and very little good. The chief problem is corruption. There’s so much corruption even in the World Bank itself, we read, that they would have to shut it down if it were investigated.

The World Christian Movement: A Reader

In the other direction to do God’s will but if that’s all we sing, if we don’t turn important things in our singing, if we don’t turn important things into the picture of fighting the real problems of this world that many of the options are no longer ours. We are in the minority in the universities. George Marsden, one of the most famous Evangelical historians of Christianity in the USA, says that in 1870 Evangelicals were very highly respected in the halls of Washington and among educated people in general, but that by 1920 Evangelicals were the laughingstock of America. (Marsden 2006:x) I’m not saying education is the solution. It’s just that in Moody’s day, only 2% of the people went to university, and they were from wealthy and influential families. That level was not an option for most of the Moody converts, and the polarization reflected to a great extent the kind of theology that corresponded to the capacities of the two different class levels.

I have not changed my mind at all about the primacy of evangelism and church planting.

The tragedy is that it has taken Evangelicals so long to come back into the picture of fighting the real problems of this world that many of the options are no longer ours. We are in the minority in the universities. George Marsden, one of the most famous Evangelical historians of Christianity in the USA, says that in 1870 Evangelicals were very highly respected in the halls of Washington and among educated people in general, but that by 1920 Evangelicals were the laughingstock of America. (Marsden 2006:x) I’m not saying education is the solution. It’s just that in Moody’s day, only 2% of the people went to university, and they were from wealthy and influential families. That level was not an option for most of the Moody converts, and the polarization reflected to a great extent the kind of theology that corresponded to the capacities of the two different class levels.
for many years of a lower-class standing and no opportunity to make major changes. Evangelicals are genuine believers, generous and eager to help, just as high quality as anybody, but with a background of limited social potential. But now all of a sudden, we’ve got people like Chuck Colson, who has started projects in prisons all over the world. The average Christian can’t do that. Colson is in the halls of power. Many other Evangelicals today are wealthy. Evangelicals fritter away more money per year than Bill Gates gives away. Evangelicals often don’t think clearly about what they could do with the resources they have. They have been buying boats and second houses and adding on to their homes.

Yet, in the real world it’s the sixth-grade kids that are thinking about slavery in Africa. It seems like everyone is thinking about demolishing world problems—except the church. It is as if one could go to church for another 100 years the way things are going and never hear about poverty in Africa, never hear that 45 million people every day in Africa are withdrawn from the workplace because of malaria alone, either because they are sick or are caring for someone who is sick. If we did hear, we might not hear how Evangelicals can deal with it. When we are losing 45 million people in Africa out of the workforce every day, even if Africa had no other problems, it would be a poor continent. We don’t ever hear about that. We may not even pray for malaria scientists. You are supposed to go out of your church door, stay legal, be generous and thoughtful. Don’t mess with society.

A second step would be for the pastor to say, “Ask God if you are serving the Kingdom as effectively as you could. You have no right to do anything, make a living or whatever, if you are not sure what you are doing is the most urgent thing you are able to do for the Kingdom of God—and still make a living. Get rid of the job, get a lower-paying job, do the thing that will advance the kingdom more than any-

thing else.” This would be about individuals changing or confirming jobs.

A third step would be for pastors to tell their people, “Don’t go out the door, stick around and I want all the attorneys to get together and talk about how they can help the International Justice Mission.” Or, he gathers them to start a new organization to fight some other insidious evil in this world. This is not what you hear in church. Rather, at best, we are thinking of ways to extend the church to the last unreached people group.

Church Mission, which is absolutely basic and absolutely valid, is to extend the faith, and transform people into reliable people of integrity. Kingdom Mission is when the church stops thinking about itself and its members and pursues God’s will in this world, not just pursues more members. In his book Church Shift, Sunday Adelaja, the pastor of the largest church in Europe, says that when members do things like help in the nursery and direct traffic on Sunday, that’s not mission. It’s church housekeeping. The church exists to extend the glory of God and His will in society whether or not it makes advances in church membership. Many people are leaving the church today because what secular people are doing is more exciting, more relevant, more concrete, and may seem to be more Biblically valid. But, I still believe that those people need to keep in mind that everything they do out in the world will flounder if they don’t have the church’s redeemed souls right at the heart of it. IJM

References
Adelaja, Sunday

Easterly, William
2006 The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good. New York: The Penguin Press.

Engels, Frederick
1943 The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844. George
The Old Siders/Schoolers felt that evangelism and missions should be conducted through agencies managed by the denomination and not involving outsiders, since this would involve a watering down of the church's theological distinctives. The two sides also had different attitudes towards their seminary professors: Princeton Theological Seminary, the leading institution of the Old School, demanded credal subscription and dedicated a large part of its academic efforts to the defense of Calvinist Orthodoxy (1922). The splits between fundamentalists and modernists had been bubbling in the Presbyterian Church for some time.

What are my sources about fundamentalism? Over the years that I have been teaching courses in modern and contemporary theology and church history at three Christian universities, I have invited several self-identified Christian fundamentalists to my classes to speak about the subject. I have also had many encounters and interactions (some pleasant, some not so pleasant) with self-identified, knowledgeable fundamentalist theologians. It seems to me that the words "fundamentalism" and "fundamentalist" have taken on many different meanings in recent years—like many religious labels. I remember reading in a secular publication that C. S. Lewis was a "fundamentalist Anglican." When I taught at Oral Roberts University, the local newspaper referred to Oral as a "fundamentalist." The Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy is a major schism that originated in the 1920s and '30s within the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. At issue were foundational disputes about the role of Christianity, the authority of Scripture, the death, Resurrection, and atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Two broad factions within Protestantism emerged: Fundamentalists, who insisted upon the timeless validity of each doctrine of Christian Orthodoxy, and Modernists, who advocated a conscious understanding of the Polarization between Fundamentalist and Modernist Mission. To his book, Smith unearthed the fact Evangelicals founded Christianity. But note that they don't. that in the 1900s we had a very different Bible institutes instead of colleges. speak of changing this world. Liberal, a modernist who didn’t believe that had developed by the year 2000 to that. And neither did the working-class. the Bible, and had been taken in by, be the dominant form of Christianity masses of Evangelicals in the 1920s. German higher criticism. But Timothy Smith's research was irrefutable. Evangelicals earlier had indeed talked about the Kingdom.