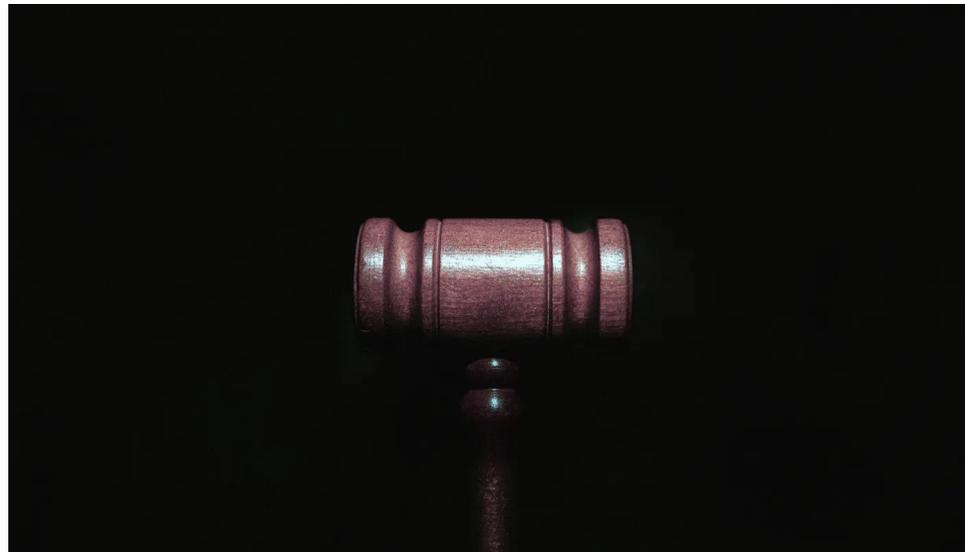


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When America Put the Bible on Trial

The Scopes Monkey Case a Century Later



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On July 10, 1925, the eyes of the nation looked upon the Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tennessee, as an all-star cast took the stage. Clarence Darrow played the lead for the defense team organized by the American Civil Liberties Union. William Jennings Bryan stepped in to assist the prosecution. There to chronicle it all was H.L. Mencken.

Darrow was the most successful and famous — and, to some, notorious — defense attorney of the day. Recently retired, he relished another opportunity to face off with Bryan. William Jennings Bryan was a three-time candidate for the presidency of the United States, sat in the House of Representatives, and served as Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson. He was called “The Great Commoner.”

Mencken epitomized the cigar-chomping journalist. From his desk at *The Baltimore Sun*, he opined on nearly every topic, including literature, art, politics, philosophy, and especially religion. Though he took only a single course post high school, he was a noted intellectual in addition to being a journalist, producing a bevy of books. It was Mencken who dubbed this trial that took place in the summer of 1925 “The Monkey Trial.”

Monkey Trial

This was a misdemeanor case that attracted over one hundred journalists, captured a nation’s interest, and was dubbed (at the time) the trial of the century. John T. Scopes, a math and science teacher at Rhea County Central High School, was clearly guilty. He violated the Butler Act of Tennessee law, named for Tennessee state representative John W. Butler. Passed in March of 1925, the Butler Act made teaching the theory of evolution in public schools a crime. The trial lasted eight days. The jury took merely eight minutes to return the guilty verdict. Scopes was fined \$100.

Darrow, never short on courtroom drama, had called Bryan to the stand as his only witness. Many have written of how Darrow humiliated Bryan in the exchange. Then, in his closing argument, Darrow actually reversed his client’s plea from not guilty to guilty. This ploy kept Bryan from making a closing argument and was part of a larger strategy of Darrow and the ACLU to take this case on appeals all the way to the United States Supreme Court. The first round in Dayton had clearly taken its toll on the

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Great Commoner. Five days after the trial, Bryan died in his sleep, at the age of 65.

During the trial, the town of Dayton had been transformed into a circus. The courthouse square was overrun with vendors, exhibits of chimpanzees dressed in suits, protesters trying to out-shout each other, and hawkers of souvenirs. The whole thing played out like a hastily constructed movie set. And the whole thing was orchestrated. The school superintendent and a few others enlisted Scopes, who had a law degree. They were eager for an opportunity to violate the newly minted law. The ACLU, equally eager, saw this as a first shot of a long war they were zealous to wage.

Much, much more was happening here than the clear-cut violation of a Tennessee law and a misdemeanor offense. Some have said the Bible was on trial. This case was about the biblical teaching on origins versus the theory of evolution. This case was about the role of religion in American public life and culture. The Scopes Case was a clash of worldviews.

Battle Cry of Modernism

From the turn of the twentieth century, perhaps the most significant cultural impulse was that of progress. The twentieth century would be a century of progress, fueled by an enshrinement of science. The theory of biological evolution itself evolved into the theory of social evolution. There was a near-giddy sense of being on the cusp of mankind's achievement of greatness. All eyes were looking forward to new discoveries upon new horizons, new beliefs, new possibilities. There could be no going backward, no looking back.

At issue here, of course, is the role of an ancient book, the role of the Bible. And the singular question of the moment was how the church would respond to this cultural impulse of progress. Would the church look to God's word as the authority for life in the twentieth century? Or would the church broker a peace with a new authority?

American culture was ready to move on from the Bible. The Bible speaks of man and woman created in God's image. The Bible speaks of a person's crowning achievement of reflecting the glory of his Creator. To glorify God and enjoy him forever — that is the goal. To live in obedience to God's word — that is the ethical standard.

But by the 1920s, the science of anthropology had espoused the notion that all religion was merely a human creation and human aspiration, the product of oversized hopes naively and falsely placed in some divine being. For many of the cultural gatekeepers and tastemakers, the idea of God was a relic from our pre-scientific, pre-modern past. The battle cry of modernism was that the Bible needed to go.

Compromise Called 'Liberalism'

Having played a significant role in American culture up until this point, the church faced a crisis in the 1920s. Could it continue to have a voice in this new modern world?

And here entered the temptation to compromise. Whole denominations began to “rethink” key orthodox beliefs, among them the belief in the divine origin, truthfulness, and trustworthiness of the Bible. A new view emerged, a view that would be selective regarding the Bible's teachings, a view that would submit the Bible to modernist sensibilities, to the new ways of thinking.

In his classic text from 1923, *Christianity & Liberalism*, J. Gresham Machen saw a clear divide between the orthodox view and that of liberalism. The Christian, he wrote, “finds the seat of authority in the whole Bible, which he regards as no mere word of man but as the very word of God” (64).

Liberalism believes that you can hold on to cultural influence by compromising your convictions. And in so being and doing, it is a fool's errand. For one, the world or culture is not interested in compromise. Nothing short of

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for a compromise;

wholesale endorsement will suffice. Second, compromising the Bible's truthfulness and trustworthiness destroys the foundation and the superstructure of Christianity itself. The church does not stand over God's word. Culture or "progress" does not have the final word on matters.

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To be sure, the Bible is not the only word on matters. This is the world God made, which is to say, there is general revelation. We are called to explore and learn from this world. We praise God for mathematicians, scientists, and engineers. We need not eschew new discoveries or disdain the sciences. Science is not the same as "scientism." Scientism believes that the seat of authority is science. This clash of worldviews is what the Scopes Case in 1925 was truly about.

Still on Trial

What can we learn from that moment nearly a century ago? One thing is that the Bible remains on trial. In 1925, the attacks on the Bible came from the hard sciences. Those attacks remain. Today, however, additional attacks come from the social sciences. Same-sex and transgender issues directly contradict the teaching of Genesis 1–3. These opening chapters of the Bible declare that we are created in the image of God, that we are created as male and female, and that marriage is between a man and a woman. We did not evolve. Gender is not a social construct. So-called homosexual marriage is both unnatural — not according to nature — and unbiblical.

Behind these particular issues are two opposing worldviews. One takes God's word, an ancient book, as the authority even for today. The other worldview sees no reason whatsoever to be fettered to an ancient book when, through science, we know so much more and so much better today.

How has this clash of worldviews affected the church? Some in the church have chosen cultural influence by compromising their convictions. They seek

to broker a truce with culture by “rethinking” gender and marriage. As it was in 1925, this strategy is a fool’s errand. Again, culture is not looking for a compromise; nothing short of wholesale endorsement will suffice.

We are not serving fellow men and women well by not telling them the truth. When we compromise our convictions, we no longer have the truth to offer. We must, of course, speak the truth in love. But we must speak the truth. We are serving our neighbor when we speak the truth. We are loving our neighbor when we speak the truth.

The Greek word *apologia* is a legal term, referring to the defense offered in court. In 1925, a literal courtroom in Dayton, Tennessee, served as the setting for an apologetic for the Bible’s authority. The crucial question was this: Does an ancient book, the Bible, still have authority? That was the question one hundred years ago, and it remains the question today. As [1 Peter 3:15](#) commands, we must be ready, always ready, to give an answer.

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