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FLY ME TO THE MOON (OR NOT): EVANGELICAL RESPONSES TO THE 1969 LUNAR LANDING

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Abstract: *Few technological achievements rival man's landing on the moon in 1969. Responses rushed ahead in both secular and religious circles. This article evaluates how evangelicals received and interpreted this watershed moment and how they ultimately arrived at their paradoxical conclusions. Their responses mapped well onto those of the general public, but distinctly theological reflection served as the motivation for both their excitement and concern. Far from being anti-scientific Luddites, they generally applauded the scientific possibilities the landing offered. Those evangelicals who expressed hesitancy did not do so out of disdain for modern discovery but rather because their theological concerns about pride and stewardship led them to caution. As evangelicals continue to process technological endeavors, their twentieth-century predecessors provide an open window into how those from the past have wrestled with the biblical, theological, and technological tensions of scientific development.*

Key words: *evangelicals and science, technological advance, moon landing, space exploration, twentieth century*

Neil Armstrong's "small step" from the *Eagle* landing module onto the lunar surface forced twentieth-century evangelicals to ponder new scientific horizons and theological questions. Their musings on space exploration had been fermenting for over a decade, but according to an editorial in *Moody Monthly*, the moon landing itself "slipped up on" most Christians who were caught "napping" by the rapidity with which the Apollo program advanced.[1] But it did not take long for virtually every cross section of Protestantism, from white-collar theologians to blue-collar church folk, to express an opinion. Some embodied the joviality of Frank Sinatra's 1964 "Fly Me to the Moon" (a recording NASA used to publicize the Apollo missions). Others, however, sympathized with the angst of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Bad Moon Rising," fittingly released in 1969.

The nation at large carried both evaluations, and evangelicals mapped well upon the general contours of the national response. Given the political and militaristic tensions related to the Soviet rocket program, many Americans were thrilled with the United States' technological display of power, prestige, and preeminence. But many were appalled at the ballooning costs of the Apollo endeavor, while social programs designed to aid the hungry and homeless saw their funding literally

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[1] "Now That We've Reached the Moon," *Moody Monthly*, September 1969, 14.

disappear off the face of the earth. Opinions spanned these extremes, both in the public and political spheres. Evangelicals also shared wide-ranging views on the value of America's moonshot. However, along with their diverse opinions of the political, militaristic, and budgetary issues, evangelicals also incorporated biblical and theological reflections into the conversation—a spiritual dimension that mirrored the scientific. They highlighted concepts such as the cultural mandate, biblical anthropology, and the relationship between Creator and creation. Televised coverage of the landing, still the largest event in the medium's history, streamed into American Christians' living rooms and forced them to reckon with spiritual questions.[2] Their responses served as one rare instance of a reshuffling of the ideological deck in that they did not fall along established conservative and moderate party lines. Instead, groups that otherwise would agree on much saw disparate evaluations among their own ranks, and groups that would disagree on much nonetheless found solidarity in their excitement or concern regarding the lunar project.

This article reflects on an array of these responses, specifically from evangelicals in the late 1960s.[3] By investigating periodicals, speeches, and newspapers, I aim to demonstrate that evangelicals displayed paradoxical responses to the 1969 lunar landing that reflected those of their secular counterparts but were informed by distinctly theological excitement and hesitancy. Specifically, we see that evangelicals who held negative responses were driven by theological concerns rather than a fear or disdain of scientific advancement. Owing to their theological convictions, many evangelicals were hesitant about all the lunar landing entailed. Far from being anti-scientific crudes spooked by the specter of modern discovery, they sought to celebrate the landing appropriately while also acknowledging theological hesitations that were easily lost in the excitement of the event. Many 1960s evangelicals found the Apollo program to be a positive watershed moment in human history. They talked about it, wrote about it, evaluated it, and, often, supported it. Still, caution remained—not because their religious convictions forced them into fear or skepticism, but because they did not want to sacrifice biblical wisdom in the commotion of the moment. The trouble they saw was informed not by discounting the importance of scientific advancement but rather by their understanding of man's shaky relationship with efforts aimed at reaching the heavens (Gen 11). Contrary to Charles Reagan Wilson's claim that ministers thought the Apollo missions produced "limited scientific knowledge," the evidence shows that most evangelical pastors and theologians consistently embraced the possibility and potency of scien-

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[2] Gerard J. DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon: The Magnificent Madness of the American Lunar Quest* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 239.

[3] Noting the vast array of perspectives on the term "evangelical," I am operating from Thomas S. Kidd's definition: "Evangelicals are born-again Protestants who cherish the Bible as the Word of God and who emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit." Thomas S. Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 4. Because most of the religious attention paid to the moon landing was from American publications (not unsurprisingly, given it was an American landing), I focus only on American evangelicals in this article.

tific progress, but the proposals required to achieve it were too costly, spiritually and financially, for some.[4]

Despite the role of NASA and Apollo in crafting an American "civil religion," there has been little reflection on how religiously affiliated Americans received the moon landing.[5] As Kendrick Oliver states,

> Few scholars of postwar American religion have really known what or even whether to think about the nation's enterprise in space. In most accounts of religion in the sixties, the space program either is not mentioned at all or features only briefly, popping up at odd moments in the narrative to show the colorful ecumenity of religion's encounter with the modern world during the course of the decade.[6]

Kari Edwards shares this sentiment:

> With just a few exceptions, the history of evangelicalism in twentieth-century America has remained virtually isolated from the realm of space history. Scholars of American religion tend to relegate space exploration to the margins of their studies of evangelicals in the 1960s.… [They] tend to overlook the Apollo missions and their significant impacts on religious Americans.[7]

Historians have examined broad responses to the entire Apollo enterprise, with many concluding that in the late 1960s a substantial percentage of the country was indifferent or opposed to the lunar project.[8] Many evangelicals mirrored their secular neighbors in this response, but for different reasons. However, there has been no investigation or interpretation as to why. I hope to narrow that gap. This article is an effort to heed Edwards's call for scholars of American evangelicalism to "incorporate American space exploration, particularly Apollo, into their analysis in a more concrete manner."[9]

Of course, July 20, 1969, was long in anticipation—eight years after John F. Kennedy's speech to Congress committing the United States to land a man safely on the moon by the end of the decade and over ten years since the launch of Sputnik I. Christians were already considering the ramifications of manned space travel well before the landing. Therefore, we begin with a prologue that examines evangelical anticipation of the manned landing dating to the late 1950s. Following that, we look at the numerous positive responses from evangelicals immediately preceding and following July 20, 1969, particularly the theological undertones they carried.

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[4] Charles Reagan Wilson, "American Heavens: Apollo and the Civil Religion," *Journal of Church and State* 26.2 (1984): 211.

[5] Wilson, "American Heavens: Apollo and the Civil Religion," 209–26. For an exception, see Catherine R. Osborne, "From Sputnik to Spaceship Earth: American Catholics and the Space Age," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 25.2 (2015): 218–63.

[6] Kendrick Oliver, *To Touch the Face of God: The Sacred, the Profane, and the American Space Program, 1957–1975* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 7–8.

[7] Kari Edwards, "Prayers from on High: Religious Expression in Outer Space during the Apollo Era, 1968–76," *European Journal of American Culture* 39.3 (2020): 312.

[8] Wilson, "American Heavens," 212.

[9] Edwards, "Prayers from on High," 312.

We then turn to the negative evangelical responses, with a focus primarily on the theological and social concerns that constituted their hesitancy. Finally, we will synthesize these responses and construct the paradoxical way in which evangelicals understood the moon landing and the ways in which their deliberations are helpful for contemporary discussions of science, technology, and theology.

I. THE PROLOGUE

In 1968, just one year before the landing, evangelical theologian Wilbur Smith could write that, with the successes of manned space travel, "the attention of all mankind is directed more forcibly, with profounder inquiries, toward the celestial heavens above than ever before in the history of the human race."[10] This attention toward the sky served as a release valve from the sorrow that weighed upon Americans in 1968, particularly after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, racial disharmony, swelling crime rates, and the bleak outlook in Vietnam. The country was desperate to celebrate something, *anything*, and the Apollo project was the obvious rallying point. While some Americans saw NASA's near monopoly of the airwaves as frivolous and disrespectful to ground-level affairs,[11] many embraced the moonshot as a "counterbalance for the national psyche"[12] and a "safe harbor in a sea of cynicism, violence, and despair."[13]

But while 1969 represented the culmination of space-aged political maneuvering and scientific invention, the inertia had been building for decades. From Jules Verne's 1865 *From the Earth to the Moon*, to Robert Goddard's rocketry innovation in the 1920s, to Americans' "aviation craze" after World War II,[14] space travel anticipation began nearly a century before liftoff and only picked up steam as the countdown neared.

Nazi transplant Wernher von Braun's advocacy throughout the 1950s and 1960s (and the willingness of American media outlets to position him prominently) was a significant driver of American (and American Christians') interest in the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo missions. His appeal to Protestants originated from a desire both to rehabilitate his own stained PR (given the horrific war crimes he was associated with in Germany) and to leverage his charisma to recruit this key bloc of American society toward support of his rocket program. He eventually claimed a born-again experience, a conversion that most evangelicals "took at face value" to breathe easier at night that at least one space race engineer was motivated, at least publicly, by spirituality.[15] He rarely attended a Protestant worship service, but American Christians were not much interested in the specifics of his personal faith beyond the apparent living proof he offered that science and religion were compat-

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[10] Wilbur M. Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 13.

[11] Oliver, *To Touch the Face of God*, 3.

[12] Bernd Brunner, *Moon: A Brief History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 236.

[13] DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, xii.

[14] Douglas Brinkley, *American Moonshot: John F. Kennedy and the Great Space Race* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), 98.

[15] Oliver, *To Touch the Face of God*, 57.

ible.[16] He spoke the *lingua franca* of American evangelicalism—with uncertain sincerity—and "never hesitated to invoke religious language in justifying his plans to invade the heavens."[17] His rallying efforts toward the faithful proved effective, and that in turn allowed him to continue blasting rockets into the sky. To understand how Americans (broadly) and evangelicals (specifically) were drawn into the orbit of NASA, Apollo, and the thrill of space, the role of Wernher von Braun cannot be overstated.

Back to the prologue. A decade before the launch of Apollo 11—prior to John F. Kennedy's visionary speeches and the advent of the mythic American astronaut—Southern Baptists were already referring to the "atomic and space-age civilization" in which they lived.[18] Many writers understood that the scientific and sociological tectonics were shifting under their feet as the atomic age evolved into the space age. In *Christianity Today*, A. W. Tozer highlighted the monumental changes these phases produced, not least of which was that "the quiet, anthropocentric world of the Bible is gone and, sadly enough, with it has gone the confidence of millions."[19] While he comforted his evangelical readers with the reminder that even these sweeping changes need not cause fear or despair for those who believed in the risen Christ (seated in the heavens, after all!), his perspective foreshadowed what many evangelicals would articulate a decade later:

> If God smiles he must surely be smiling at Sputniks and Explorers. Without doubt he pities the little man who can control growing numbers of swiftly moving missiles but cannot curb his own temper or direct his feet free of the grave. And he will yet judge in great severity a race that has made a moral wallow of the earth and is now determined to extend its pollution to the heavenly bodies.[20]

Moody Monthly also recognized that the "conquest of space, perhaps more than any other single topic, is engaging the minds of men."[21] However, despite the daily excitement of new technological vistas, the author issued a warning: "This is how

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[16] Adon Taft, "Why Has God Allowed Us into Space?," *Christian Life*, July 1969, 21.

[17] James Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture: American Religion in an Age of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 246. See also Wilson, "Apollo and the Civil Religion," 216–17. Kendrick Oliver captures well the difficult-to-nail-down authenticity of von Braun's spirituality: "Von Braun's conversion was probably most directly occasioned by a desire to find a new direction for his life after the moral chaos of his service for the Third Reich.… Described by one biographer as 'a twentieth-century Faust,' Wernher von Braun had already concluded one bad bargain with the devil; perhaps now he felt a need to have God securely at his side." Oliver, *To Touch the Face of God*, 23–24.

[18] K. Owen White, "Welcoming Address to Pastors' Conference," Southern Baptist Convention Pastors' Conference, Houston, TX, May 1958. While some Southern Baptists were still grappling with their identification as evangelicals (or not) during this time, it is appropriate to include them here as representative because of the clear commonalities of their fundamental beliefs with those of other American evangelicals from various denominations. For more, see Collin Hansen and Justin Taylor, "From Babylon Baptist to Baptists in Babylon: The SBC and the Broader Evangelical Community," in *The SBC and the 21st Century: Reflection, Renewal, and Recommitment*, ed. Jason K. Allen (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016): 33–49.

[19] A. W. Tozer, "A Christian Look at the Space Age," *Christianity Today*, 13 October 1958, 13.

[20] Tozer, "A Christian Look at the Space Age," 14.

[21] Paul R. Alderman Jr., "Space Flight?," *Moody Monthly*, May 1959, 18.

the present age—The Space Age—will end: in judgement. And we doubt not that one of the prime contributing causes will be the stiff-necked pride of man as he brazenly seeks to invade the heavens, in spite of God's 'no trespass' signs."[22] But others seemed more optimistic. In response to this article (and to present a positive perspective on future possibilities), George Speake of the Moody Institute of Science challenged readers to "put a tickler in your files and look up this letter ten years from now. If the Lord hasn't already come for His own, I think the first man will have already landed on the moon."[23] Speake's letter ran in the July 1959 issue of *Moody Monthly*, and his prophecy would come to fruition ten years later to the month.

These disagreements among *Moody*'s demographic are indicative of both the prospects and perils that evangelicals expressed at a wider scale in the years leading up to the lunar landing. There were marked divisions in how evangelicals of seemingly similar theological convictions understood the cosmic horizon. Some were ecstatic and some were terrified, and both claimed the Bible as to why. Granted, these reactions were sometimes mixed so that both concern and elation characterized the same publication and authors at different times. But in general, these dueling positions carried over into print and pulpits across the nation as a lunar attempt became increasingly likely into the 1960s. For example, the intramural bristling was evident in one 1968 *Christianity Today* article titled "An Open Letter to the Apollo 8 Spacemen," penned by David Kucharsky. Opening with words of encouragement about the astronauts' Christmastime space flight, Kucharsky lamented that "not all churchmen are behind you" and that "some Christian leaders have very deep reservations about the whole space program."[24] He noted that Sherwood Wirt, an editor of *Decision* magazine (and otherwise sympathetic with *CT*'s mission), saw the enterprise as "toying with the moon," the first step to a disastrous attempt to colonize other planets.[25] However, Kucharsky appealed to Gordon Clark who understood the moonshot to be "a divinely appointed task."[26] Kucharsky ended his open letter with an unmistakably passive-aggressive sign-off to the astronauts (but directed at the planetary nay-sayers among his brethren): "All of which is to say that some of us are for you. Bon voyage."[27]

Distant yet increasingly closer, the moon was within grasp as the decade ended. It was not the only point of conversation among evangelicals, but it did occupy ample attention both in the academy and in the pew. And if there *were* positive anticipatory comments from evangelical writers in the years leading up to the landing (and there were), it does seem that the more common posture was one of pause and caution. Of course, the two were not always mutually exclusive, but the lines

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[22] Alderman, "Space Flight?," 20.

[23] "Letters," *Moody Monthly*, October 1969, 6. The original letter ran in the July 1959 issue and was republished here ten years later.

[24] David E. Kucharsky, "Open Letter to the Apollo 8 Spacemen," *Christianity Today*, 20 December 1968, 31.

[25] Kucharsky, "Open Letter," 31.

[26] Kucharsky, "Open Letter," 31.

[27] Kucharsky, "Open Letter," 31.

do seem to have been drawn along those two perspectives. It was one of those rare (only?) moments when American evangelicalism shared similar sentiments with American rock 'n roll, in this case the likes of the Byrds, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, and Pink Floyd—all of whom expressed both a "fascination" and sometimes "unease" with space travel.[28] But if these opening acts prepared the way, the real song began when a Saturn V rocket was carted to the launch pad at Cape Kennedy on July 16, 1969. With a cacophony of thunderous jet engines and fuzzy dialogue between suits on the ground and in the air, the soundtrack of the nation was changed forever. Given the intensifying rhetoric bubbling up for a decade beforehand, it's no surprise that evangelical opinions rushed ahead only slightly slower than the rocket itself.

II. THE POSITIVE: EVANGELICAL CELEBRATION

Four days and 200,000+ miles later, a substantial evangelical bloc was thrown into elation with all the moon landing meant for the world and, potentially, for the church.[29] One common argument for why the moment was worthy of celebration was that it fit precisely into God's expectation that man subdue the earth, a command some have referred to as the "cultural mandate" (Gen 1:28). Not a few evangelicals understood the moon landing to be only the next manifestation of this God-ordained mission for humanity. Rodney W. Johnson (perhaps from a biased perspective as a NASA scientist writing in the pages of *CT*) was representative of this line of argumentation when he applauded that "a lunar landing marks a major new step in our dominion over the earth."[30] Johnson understood human beings to be their true selves when they submit to the commands of God, including the command to subdue the earth. Therefore, he believed that "the more we are able to do in a technical sense, the more human we become."[31]

Others too viewed the lunar landing as an extension of Genesis 1:28. Mrs. Estelle Jackson, a writer with the Astronaut's Office of NASA and tasked with engaging various publicity opportunities on behalf of the agency, challenged one pastor's negative evaluation of Apollo 11 in a letter to *The Baptist Standard*. In her defense of the mission, she drew upon the cultural mandate: "[God] gave man dominion over the works of His hands, and [he] put all things under man's feet. If the moon is 'under man's feet' now, surely God put it there!"[32] Billy Graham shared this position when he mused that, "It is clear, I think, that whatever God created is man's

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[28] Matthew D. Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age: The Apollo Moon Landings and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 139.

[29] For a thorough account of how one fundamentalist leader who self-consciously existed outside of the evangelical stream also praised efforts in space exploration, see David Anthony Schmidt, "God's Strange Messengers: Carl McIntire and the Fundamentalist Exploration of the Flying Saucer Question," *Nova Religio* 20.1 (2016): 60–85.

[30] Rodney W. Johnson, "Space, Science, and Scripture," *Christianity Today*, 18 July 1969, 3.

[31] Johnson, "Space, Science, and Scripture," 3.

[32] Estelle Jackson, "Letters to the Editor," *The Baptist Standard*, 27 August 1969, 2.

heritage, and that includes the universe."[33] This was a common cause for celebration: the outworking of man's mastery over creation naturally led to his exploration of heavenly bodies beyond our own. The moon was the first step. For many evangelicals, this squared perfectly with how God both expected and blessed mankind to explore and master the world (and worlds) around them. It was the perfect overlay between the earliest chapters of Genesis and modern man's scientific advancement, and evangelicals argued that only the Bible helped elucidate the deepest importance of the moment.

But there were other grounds for celebration. Many evangelicals saw the moon landing as a confirmation of biblical texts about God's greatness, the grandness of the universe, and the organization of the heavens.[34] They leveraged these texts for both apologetic and evangelistic purposes. The landing did not send them into a tailspin of scientific skepticism or doubt; instead, the opposite happened. Space was further proof of God's sheer majesty, and humankind now had a glimpse into the narthex of God's dwelling place for the first time.

Clyde Taylor, general director for the National Association of Evangelicals, believed that "in the light of Psalm 19:1–2 and Romans 1:19–20, it [space exploration] might very well have the effect of enhancing faith in the true God as the Creator of heaven and earth."[35] Others echoed Taylor's hopes. John Whitcomb drew upon Isaiah 40:15 when he argued that new developments in space allowed "the greatness of our God [to be] understood in a way that Isaiah could never have known."[36] *Christianity Today* ended one editorial on the eve of the landing by emphasizing that "the moon is there in part to attest to God's greatness.… It speaks eloquently of both the magnitude and the magnificence of the God who put it there."[37] Perhaps the richest engagement with a "biblical theology of the moon" was penned by J. Dwight Pentecost for *Moody Monthly*. Here he traced the role of the moon in creation and in the nation of Israel, as well as the theological significance of light and darkness throughout the New Testament. Pentecost concluded with an evangelistic plea by correlating Christians with the moon itself and by reminding his readers that "God has not made us suns, He has made us 'moons'—reflectors whereby we receive the light that comes from Him and reflect that light into the darkness in which we live."[38]

Some churches leaped at the opportunity to apply their old-time gospel message to new space-age realities. They saw no discrepancy between their ancient book and Apollo 11. Adrian Rogers, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Merritt Island, Florida (and later pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, and a significant figure in the Southern Baptist Convention), described his local

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[33] "God, Man, and Outer Space: An Interview with Billy Graham," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 13 July 1969.

[34] John Whitcomb, "The Christian Stake in Space," *Moody Monthly*, July–August 1969, 19.

[35] Clyde Taylor, "The Christian Stake in Space," *Moody Monthly*, July–August 1969, 18.

[36] Whitcomb, "The Christian Stake in Space," 19.

[37] "Man on the Moon," unsigned editorial in *Christianity Today*, 18 July 1969, 21.

[38] J. Dwight Pentecost, "What the Bible Says about the Moon," *Moody Monthly*, July–August 1969, 84.

congregation as "a space-age church with a space-age mission."[39] He found that science-minded employees of the Kennedy Space Center "respond [well] to old-fashioned, Bible-centered preaching."[40] *Christianity Today* reported that upon the landing, interest was palpable across the nation's pulpits, as "thousands of ministers built sermons around the moon theme."[41] These were positive and lighthearted, with pastors utilizing lunar mania in order to arrive at the spiritual message of the gospel.[42] If the moon offered a platform for preaching and evangelism, these evangelicals would not miss the opportunity.

One other noteworthy aspect of celebration among evangelicals is how they employed interest in the moon landing toward commercial ends. Evangelicals were not unique in this way. As Gerard DeGroot notes, "In July 1969, it was virtually impossible to find an advertisement that did not mention the lunar landing.… Advertisers used space themes to peddle soft drinks, alcohol, cigarettes, candy, cars, airlines, panty hose, perfume, and hundreds of other products."[43] And while they might have shunned certain products in the preceding list, evangelicals nonetheless exhibited the same impulse. Numerous institutions applauded the exciting space-age future, and they invited potential students and readers to gravitate toward their schools or products for training in such an era. For example, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary in Portland, Oregon, invited students to experience "space-age training for space-age preaching."[44] Fort Wayne Bible College took out a full-page color advertisement with a photograph of the moon and the tagline "Beyond the moon … what?"[45] They believed that young men and women with deep Christian commitments needed to be conversant with the scientific and spiritual questions posed by people in this new age, and relevant biblical and theological training was important. The Baptist Film Center used "Space-Age Evangelism" to describe how they articulated the traditional Christian message in fresh and creative ways.[46] These and more saw not only the spiritual but the commercial benefits of what the moon landing offered to the evangelical public.

Overall, then, there was a sense of excitement among a large swath of evangelicals in the months immediately preceding and following Apollo 11. In their minds, the moon landing checked numerous boxes worthy of admiration: another achievement in the divine cultural mandate, a reiteration of the glory and majesty of God (including toward evangelistic and apologetic ends), a chance for churches to demonstrate their awareness of technological advancements and the ongoing relevance of the Christian message in the modern age, and an opportunity for evangelical enterprises to increase involvement in kingdom causes.

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[39] Chris Bruton, "Space-Age Church with a Space-Age Mission," *Moody Monthly*, July–August 1969, 44.

[40] Bruton, "Space-Age Church with a Space-Age Mission," 44.

[41] David Kucharsky, "The Lunar Landing," *Christianity Today*, 1 August 1969, 32.

[42] Kucharsky, "The Lunar Landing," 32.

[43] DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 237.

[44] *Moody Monthly*, June 1969, 71.

[45] *Moody Monthly*, June 1969, 61.

[46] *The Baptist Program*, August 1969.

But alongside these positive aspects, evangelicals (some who simultaneously expressed the above) also noted concerning aspects of the moon landing, and their fears registered as both caution and critique of certain elements of space exploration in general and the lunar landing in particular.

III. THE PROBLEMATIC: EVANGELICAL CRITIQUE

The two primary concerns noted by evangelicals regarding landing on the moon were the fear of pride and the cost of the endeavor. Did not man have a tenuous track record of trying to reach the heavens, and did not God clearly demonstrate his feelings toward the attempt? And were there not enough needs here on earth worthy of time, attention, and resources? These two concerns served as the primary areas of evangelical critique.

One of the most common references evangelicals alluded to in their hesitation and critique was the Genesis 11 account of the Tower of Babel. How could they not? Despite hermeneutical and contextual differences between the two events, it was nonetheless a meaningful illustration to demonstrate the danger of pride in this greatest of technological accomplishments. For some evangelicals, the tower of jet-engine smoke reaching the heavens was too close a parallel to the earlier tower that invited God's judgment upon mankind's pride.

Almost every warning about hubris contained some allusion to Babel. In an editorial that highlighted the relationship entitled "Apollo 11—Genesis 11," John Zercher, editor of the *Evangelical Visitor* (and one not opposed in principle to space travel), mentioned that he had "some second thoughts—an uneasiness that haunts me" about the theological significance of the landing. First on his list was "the danger of pride." He sketched the connections that many evangelicals naturally made:

> I agree with the late president John F. Kennedy who called space the new ocean on which we must sail. But I confess that when I see those towering rockets on the launching pad at Cape Kennedy I instinctively think of Genesis 11. I recall the words recorded there: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its tops in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves.…" And I remember God's judgment on their pride.[47]

Babel gave many evangelicals pause, not because they discounted the value of technology or the sheer scientific importance of the moon landing, but because it seemed to toy with an unsatiable appetite for divine ascendency.

With this said, it is no surprise that pride was the foundational fear that evangelicals shared, despite much agreement that the space program had "added another dimension to the marvels of modern scientific achievement."[48] Just as they alluded to Babel, evangelicals also saw parallels between the Apollo program and the biblical presentation of Nebuchadnezzar, who built Babylon as a city testifying to

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[47]John E. Zercher, "Apollo 11—Genesis 11," *Evangelical Visitor*, 11 August 1969, 2. This was a publication of the Brethren in Christ, a group with Anabaptist and pietistic roots that was drawn into the neo-evangelical wave that blossomed in the 1940s and 1950s.

[48] L. Nelson Bell, "Supernatural and Miraculous," *Christianity Today*, 28 February 1969, 30.

his own power and rule (Dan 4:30). In outlining the risks of technological advance, one *CT* editorial stated, "The lunar landing could lead man to a sense of pride and independence from God not unlike that of Nebuchadnezzar."[49] In the very next editorial, *CT* described humanity as "puffed up by conquest of a few feet of the moon's surface."[50] Whether they were pointing to Babel or the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, evangelicals saw clear and frightening warning signs between ancient and modern history. They rarely questioned the worthiness of the program on scientific grounds (they recognized the validity and benefits of technological advance). Their deepest fears were intertwined with excitement. They wanted to see a successful landing and prayed for as much, but they knew the byproduct would likely be a sense of pride in man's ability, strength, and horizons, which they warned could minimize dependence upon God.

Ten years before the landing, in 1959, Paul Alderman wrote an article entitled "Space Flight?" for *Moody Monthly* in which he articulated numerous warnings about the rapid advancement of space travel. But Alderman drew from an even more ancient account of pride than that of Babel. He anticipated the same concern his fellow evangelicals would later share when he wrote, "So closely do man's ambitions today appear linked to this original sin of God-defying pride [God's judgement upon Lucifer] that one must consider the future—perhaps the immediate future—with dark foreboding."[51] It is too much to say that Alderman saw the program as satanic, but he certainly recognized the penchant for pride in how some were conceiving of space travel. It scared him then, and it continued to scare evangelicals for the next decade.

The second key concern for evangelicals was the extravagant financial burden of the landing. Americans in general, given the stressful domestic and geopolitical concerns at the forefront of their minds, wondered if catapulting a few humans to the moon was worth it. People were dying. People were hungry. People were homeless. With access to visual media increasing for average Americans, people could *see* the devastation of war and poverty and famine and drought from the comforts of their living rooms, and they were horrified. While money might not solve these issues, it could help alleviate them. But federal dollars were disappearing with every rocket launch, and many began to question the country's moral and budgetary stewardship. Journalist Edward R. Murrow, a significant voice in the national psyche, wondered, "Is it possible that we concern ourselves to much with outer space and far places, and too little with inner space and near places?"[52] It was a concern voiced by evangelicals, as well.

Just three weeks after the landing, *The Baptist Standard* surveyed several pastors, leaders, and laypersons about their willingness to see the space program continue. The study concluded that "the main reasons given for opposing a high priority space program were needs on earth that could use the space budget and a question

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[49] "Our Foothold in the Heavens," editorial, *Christianity Today*, 22 August 1969, 22.

[50] "A Dangerous Intersection," editorial, *Christianity Today*, 22 August 1969, 23.

[51] Alderman, "Space Flight?," 20.

[52] Quoted in Brinkley, *American Moonshot*, 269.

as to whether God intends man to infringe on 'His' territory."[53] The second concern was examined above, but the first garnered much attention from the evangelical landscape as well as the country at large. Many Americans found the Apollo 11 mission to be a "flight *from* responsibility" and therefore "hardly an occasion for joy."[54] This was especially manifest in the African American community, which found it frustrating that "one small step" amassed an astronomical federal budget absent a "giant leap" in societal progress at home.[55] Evangelicals, too, personifying the activism aspect of Bebbington's classic quadrilateral, expressed tension about the expense of the landing relevant to its actual impact upon human suffering on the ground. David Kucharsky, himself bullish on the landing, reported that "the most common" argument from ecclesiastical circles opposing the moonshot was "expenditures for [the] space effort should be channeled into improving the lot of the underprivileged."[56] This was true of Protestantism in general and represented a significant concern of the evangelical community as well.

Even here, though, there were disagreements. No figure exerted more influence upon the evangelical landscape than Billy Graham, and Graham positioned himself in favor of whatever financial burden the mission would bring. However, he argued that these costs ought to be directed toward the greater purpose of world peace. He believed that if the moonshot improved communication capabilities, created a common telos for the world's scientific community, and (somehow) knit together the moral and spiritual fabric of the globe (which was pulling apart throughout the space race), then "any price will be cheap" given the possible positive outcomes.[57] Still, despite Graham's push for taxpayer investment in the possibility of future world peace through the more immediate means of NASA's budget, there remained a significant evangelical bloc that disagreed with his vision. As one evangelical editorial stated, "There are a lot of bills not paid."[58] And if those bills were not paid today—for food, for housing, for programs that would strengthen the moral and economic grounding of the nation—there might not be much of a world to bring peace into tomorrow. These evangelicals were not simply spiritually starry-eyed, staring into the heavens and squinting to see anything that redirected their minds away from concrete needs. They voiced their reticence to the massive allotment of money that fed and housed nobody, except for three men thousands of miles away on a round trip to the moon.

Bernd Brunner paints the responses to the moon landing in two stark categories: "Depending on political perspectives, the story of the U.S. space program can be portrayed as a feel-good triumph or as a waste of money that should have gone to social programs."[59] And politically speaking, that may very well be true. But a

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[53] "What Do You Think? Space Program Opposed," *The Baptist Standard*, 13 August 1969, 9.
[54] Oliver, *To Touch the Face of God*, 130, italics added for emphasis.
[55] Oliver, *To Touch the Face of God*, 130.
[56] Kucharsky, "The Lunar Landing," 32.
[57] Graham, "God, Man, and Outer Space."
[58] Zercher, "Apollo 11—Genesis 11," 2.
[59] Brunner, *Moon: A Brief History*, 240.

third way emerges when one considers the religious perspectives of evangelicals. They carved out the paradoxical position of championing the scientific, nationalistic, and theological possibilities that the moonshot offered, while also registering deep concern about the investment and aftermath. They remained unable to shake the sense that the project was in effect telling the world to "be warmed and filled" and launching the financial means away into the cosmos (Jas 2:16). These sorts of paradoxical views characterized evangelical appraisals, and we turn finally to examining how both positive and critical elements melded together with theological excitement and concern to fashion the broad strokes of how evangelicals interpreted the moon landing.

IV. THE PARADOXICAL: EVANGELICAL APPRAISAL

Bringing together these positive and critical threads, one sees the paradoxical evaluations that were knit together by evangelical publications, theologians, pastors, and laypersons in the years surrounding Apollo 11. Their eyes were focused both high above and down below, both on the stars and on the streets. Praise and concern, a celebration of dominion and a warning about pride, applauding the investment and worries about cost—these and more were representative of different evangelical appraisals that transcended traditional boundary markers. Evangelicals shared with their secular counterparts a discomfort with the government's ever-increasing funding commitments for NASA. But they also shared with the nation at large a desire to emerge from the space race as convincing victors (even though they feared this would lead to militaristic utilization of space technology and a prideful disposition before God). Polarities existed among almost every demographic of the nation, including in the evangelical subsection.

But their appraisals were different too. They did not decouple theological reflection from scientific evaluations, and distinctly theological excitement and concern colored how they responded to the landing. Little evidence exists that they were motivated by any fear of science or concern about modern scientific possibilities. No hand wringing about technology was common among evangelicals, nor were they distressed about losing political or social footing with this new scientific achievement. Most evangelicals—including those who were troubled by the potential of pride or the threat of trespassing into a prohibited realm—genuinely marveled at the scientific progress represented by the mission and the positive outcomes it would hold for humanity.

Perhaps the greatest shared perspective among both bullish and bearish evangelicals regarding the landing was a question: "What if this causes people to look upward?" Perhaps they would look beyond a module streaking across the sky and wonder what, or Who, was behind it. Both the favorable and the concerned shared this hope. It was a key, unifying appeal for the world to see the spiritual behind the scientific, and evangelicals, despite their own positions, appealed constantly to the need for people to ask, even if subconsciously, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" (Ps 8:4). Neither scientific advancement, military strength, nor cultural

achievement surpassed the importance of the deep and searching questions that evangelicals prayed the landing would spark throughout the world.

V. CONCLUSION

The story of how evangelicals received and interpreted the 1969 lunar landing is one of prologue, celebration, concern, and paradoxical conclusions. Immediately preceding the landing, theologians and pastors wrestled with how to understand the new era of space-age technology and how to grasp Scripture's application to the moment. Upon the landing, many evangelicals celebrated another notch in the cultural mandate, an affirmation of the glory of God for apologetic and evangelistic purposes, and capitalized on commercial opportunities using lunar themes for kingdom ministries. But other evangelicals suspected a swelling pride in humanity eerily like that of Babel. They feared that judgment awaited creation's attempt to subjugate the Creator, and they could not rally behind what was (to them) an obvious recapitulation of Genesis 11. They also criticized the colossal price tag of the mission and wondered how one could defend such stewardship, considering Christ's command to love one's neighbor as oneself. Taken together, these paradoxical celebrations and concerns populated evangelical magazines, sermons, periodicals, and articles in the late 1960s. Often, the same authors or publications would accent celebration or concern at different times. This was not altogether unlike how the nation was processing the landing, but evangelicals were different in that spiritual concerns (not only the political or scientific) provided the infrastructure for their positions. Like American Catholics, evangelicals sought to understand space developments and the moon landing in "their own distinctive terms."[60]

Increasingly, evangelicals (individually and collectively) will consider ventures like SpaceX, Virgin Galactic, Mars exploration, and civilian space travel from a biblical perspective. One may see snippets about these stories in the present, but they will increasingly occupy the thought of politicians and the public. Technological advancements and resulting scientific, philosophical, and theological questions in coming decades will be inescapable. For Christians, how should Scripture inform our assessments? Where can we celebrate developments, and where should we prophetically warn? How should Christians live faithfully and make disciples when the Lord's commission to go to "the ends of the Earth" no longer exhausts our range? These will be pressing questions. As Deana Weibel and Glen Swanson write,

> While countless studies have emphasized the engineering of spacecraft, the dynamics of pulsars, or the effects of microgravity on biology, research that focuses on the human experience in, and ideas about, the universe also holds value and may, in fact, turn out to be essential as human societies move beyond our home planet.[61]

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[60] Osborne, "From Sputnik to Spaceship Earth," 219.

[61] Deana L. Weibel and Glen E. Swanson, "The Mutual Influence of Religion and Science in the Human Understanding and Exploration of Outer Space," *Religions* 12.6 (2021): 3.

Thankfully, evangelicals in the late 1960s wrestled with similar issues. Their considerations, while informed by their own historical context, can serve believers today as they seek to remain committed to Scripture's authority and sufficiency amid increased interest in intragalactic exploration.

The years surrounding 1969 show that it is not unprecedented nor uncommon for evangelicals to hold differing opinions about technological developments. These tensions can be healthy. And while space exploration continues to advance, midcentury evangelicals might be surprised at how little it occupies our everyday lives. Instead, we are consumed with increasing depression, addictions, disagreements, and divisions. Over fifty years later, we too are seeking relief from the brokenness around us. And while some may think that requires escaping to the heavens, Christians maintain that the solution has stepped out of the heavens and onto earth. As one evangelical writer put it, despite the marvelous feats of space exploration, it was still the Son of God who had "traveled farthest."[62]

As we evaluate these midcentury Christians, we see that some evangelicals embodied the optimism of "Fly Me to the Moon," others the omen of "Bad Moon Rising." Both appealed to biblical and theological rationale for their respective positions. Ultimately, spirituality—more than scientific utopia or fear mongering—was the scaffolding for their paradoxical conclusions. Therefore, whether positive or negative, all could agree with Paul Simon's later lyrical sentiment in "Song about the Moon," that a deep consideration of the lunar landing requires a sense of the spiritual, not only the scientific.

[62] Kucharsky, "Open Letter," 31.