Throughout two world wars and the Great Depression, Ernest F. Tittle maintained optimism that society was being transformed into the Kingdom of God. From his prestigious pulpit in Evanston, Illinois, he told his educated and financially secure congregation that they should repent of their capitalist greed and do all they could to promote peace on earth. He maintained hope that society would gradually be perfected as individuals became more like Jesus in both spirit and behavior. By the late 1930's Tittle's perfectionism sounded innocent and naive, out of step with both neo-orthodox realism and dire world conditions. Even after Pearl Harbor, Tittle did not renounce the pacifism to which his theology led.¹

Tittle held tenaciously to social perfectionism out of his Wesleyan belief that individuals need not sin—they need not commit deeds known to be wrong. Evil was not intrinsic to the world, to social structure or to the nature of humanity. Where it existed, Tittle remained confident, it could be overcome.

Tittle's perfectionism was rooted in nineteenth century Methodism's moral crusades and in his theological education at Drew.² He developed more awareness of society's role in human suffering during his years as pastor in Columbus, Ohio, 1916-1919, where he read theologians such as Washington Gladden, a fellow though now ancient pastor in the same city, and Walter Rauschenbusch. Tittle's preaching resounded among Methodists, who took seriously their roles as social custodians. In 1918 Evanston, First Church, called Tittle as pastor.³

Before beginning this new pastorate, however, Tittle secured permission to serve as a chaplain in Europe. There he was supposed to boost soldiers' patriotism and morale. But letters home contained no glowing

³Miller, Tittle, 42-54; Tittle to William F. McDowell, 10 April 1917.
descriptions of the war. He was indignant that some clergy made it a greater sin for soldiers to make love to French girls than for them to kill German boys. He was shaken by all that he had seen.\(^4\)

The Evanston congregation to which he returned was well ahead of most others in the denomination in forging a way from nineteenth-century Wesleyan revivalism to twentieth-century liberalism, both of which had deep social concerns. Four decades earlier Frances Willard, a member of the church, had initiated her campaign against alcohol and, for her day, expounded radical social ideas. By Tittle's time the congregation retained the progressive moral goals of revivalism, but shunned its methods.\(^5\) William A. Dyche, the church's leading layman, told Tittle that the Evanston church contained many "visionary men and women" with "wild ideals" who believed nonetheless that their convictions, values and virtues were "equally applicable to the state, the nation, the world."\(^6\)

Indeed parishioners expected their new pastor to tell them how they ought to live in society, and to do so with both dignity and propriety. Amid the decorum, Tittle had one of the largest student audiences of any preacher of his time,\(^7\) drawing from Northwestern University, Garrett Seminary and other schools. Though he could not tolerate the young people's jazz, he told them that instead of attacking ancient dogmas they should eliminate race prejudice on their campuses and thereby put their youthful ideals into practice. In that way, he was sure, they would prove that goodness could triumph over evil, and this lesson would propel them into lives of social activism.\(^8\)

Christianity's continued ability to address the present age, Tittle believed, depended upon a revitalization of the true religion of Jesus. He believed that New Testament Christianity was filled with "moral idealism," and with "faith in the possibility of a better world." It was never content to let evil in any form remain.\(^9\) While Tittle urged return to a pure faith, he refused to tie his own theology to creeds which affirmed any doctrines, even those supporting the divine nature of Jesus. He reacted against those who supported what he called a "hopelessly individualist type of religion," who pictured Jesus as a "red-blooded, two-fisted 'he man.'" This type of

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\(^{4}\)Tittle to family, 30 September 1918; Tittle, *A World That Cannot Be Shaken* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1933), 45-58; Miller, *Tittle*, 64-74.


\(^{6}\)[William A. Dyche], ms., n.d.


Christianity made no vital moral demands, Tittle said, and did little for positive social change. That is, such Christianity did not seem to Tittle to bring men and women toward either the selfless poverty of spirit or the consistent ethical purity of Jesus. He hoped that a genuine return to the religion of Jesus would redress social wrongs and renew the church.

By such preaching during the 1920's Tittle placed himself squarely with the modernists, who in general were filled with optimism about personal worth and social transformation, and who, like Tittle, had little concern about defending old dogmas. Tittle criticized fundamentalism’s lack of zeal for the continuing, progressive reform of society.

Since Tittle's preaching and theology developed in relation to world concerns, his pacifism became obvious whenever he talked about issues of war and peace. Initially, after the 1919 armistice, he was optimistic that autocracy had been defeated and that democracy and liberty had been secured. But in the 1920's he became cynical. He closely watched Congressional investigations into the munitions industry’s role in starting the war and eventually accepted revisionist historians’ theories regarding its economic causes. The supposed ideals for which the recent war had been fought seemed to him now no more than excuses for both exploitation and imperialism. If religion could both resurrect the lofty ideals of Woodrow Wilson and others, and provide the moral energy necessary to see them to completion, a better world would follow. But if men and women continued to prefer the “pomp of Caesar” to the “simplicity of Christ,” and to trust in “the sword rather than in the cross,” another war was inevitable. “We forget,” he wrote in 1928, in the midst of the United States's reconsideration of its reparations policy, “that there were children in Germany who were as utterly guiltless of the whole tragic business as our own children.” Not only did Tittle wish that the Germans not be further victimized during the post-war era, but at the 1928 General

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12 Cf. Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919–1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), ch. 9. Meyer writes (163) that social gospel proponents “were implementing the ideal of entire sanctification, of complete personal union with Jesus Christ, of—in a word—perfectionism.”
Conference he proposed a resolution that all military training be eliminated from American high schools.¹⁶

Tittle believed that the preservation of peace depended upon a strong League of Nations, upon a spirit of community transcending national boundaries, and upon a more equitable distribution of the world's resources. While critical of much American foreign policy during the 1920's, Tittle felt that the United States was morally superior to the rest of the world, and should join the League. He also considered a large-scale war between classes likely unless wealth was distributed among the world's masses. Christians should be made aware of the exploitations of others that stemmed from both their foreign investments and consumption. Even "dear elderly ladies," Tittle said, were "mean oppressors" whenever both comfort and profits from their investments resulted from the oppression of others.¹⁷ Furthermore, the ideal was a world freed not only from economic inequities but from racial discrimination as well. Tittle believed the "colored races" likely to rebel at any moment, and he nearly defended their right to do so. In both Africa and the United States their abject condition demanded radical economic change. Only by changes in attitude and behavior might racial violence be averted.¹⁸

While seeing the need for great changes in both human society and human spirit, Tittle was unremittingly optimistic that the old world order was indeed giving way to one more noble.¹⁹ With the Naval Disarmament Conference and the Kellog-Briand Peace Pact the world seemed to be renouncing militarism. He was confident that society's "moral assets" exceeded its "liabilities."²⁰ Only "selfish, antisocial, cowardly, complacent" attitudes would prevent the "dawning of that brighter day for which all earth's fairest spirits lived and labored."²¹ The cynics, he believed, had always been wrong; the possibilities of life together on earth were "boundless."²² God wanted men and women to help build that Kingdom and God did not even always wait for them to repent before saving them from their "vicious tendencies."²³ Christianity naturally created "utopians," Tittle believed, men and women committed to "an endless quest for the city

¹⁹Tittle, Who Are the Blessed?, 87.
²¹Tittle, What Must the Church Do?, 82.
²²Tittle, Who Are the Blessed?, 87.
²³Tittle, "Can We Believe in Miracles?" sermon pamphlet, 6 October 1929.
of God." Other signs of social perfection included lessened discrimination between sexes and races, and lowered levels of poverty, infant mortality, disease and juvenile delinquency.

Tittle's optimism waned, nonetheless, whenever he wailed over the sins of his generation. Indeed the contrast between his soaring optimism and his biting social criticism seems strangely juxtaposed. During the 1920's he lamented that conservative Republicans were reversing the liberal social advances of Roosevelt and Wilson. And the churches protested all of this too little. Perhaps some "cyclonic sorrow" was needed, he said, to turn people toward dependency upon God.

His desire to perfect the world, and the disappointments to which this desire naturally led, brought him both personal isolation and mental anguish. Like the ancient prophets with whom he compared himself, Tittle denounced the lifestyles of those who listened to him. He seemed to find it impossible to become fully a part of the social class to which he ministered. Maybe his roots in poverty were a part of it, but he sensed himself like a prophet destined to be rejected. While his preaching and theology raised more hopes than fears about the future, inwardly he was filled with doubts. He hid much of his anxiety, but certain ailments indicated the depth of his uncertainties. Shattered nerves prevented him from fulfilling any pastoral duties for nearly a year, from October, 1926 to September, 1927. Doctors at the Mayo Clinic judged that he was suffering a nervous breakdown.

His doubts continued in the 1930's. Fellow pastors questioned his theological orthodoxy. Adding to the pressures, Evanston First undertook a building program which left it greatly in debt during the first years of the Depression. Meanwhile, some attacked First Church's supposed tolerance of "worldly amusements." It allowed dancing at young people's meetings. At the same time, his pacifist and socialist stands brought attacks from those on the political right. Through all this he suffered inwardly. For several years in the early 1930's he was unable to sleep without the aid of drugs. In 1936 he told a friend that his eyes caused him constant pain and that he feared he might become paralyzed or even

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28 Tittle to Samuel McC. Cavert, 17 December 1934.
29 Tittle to Mrs. Walter Rauschenbusch, 1 July 1935.
He had his first heart attack in November, 1937 and did not preach again for nearly a year thereafter. He seemed to accept stoically criticisms as well as his own weakened health as his lot for being God's servant.

But on a social scale it was difficult for Tittle to make the same rationalizations about righteous suffering. As Tittle faced the Great Depression and other crises during the 1930’s he recognized that there were no easy answers as to why God would allow economic depression, unemployment and hunger. Faced with such hardships, he hoped, individuals would find a more just means of regulating society. God could not create a perfect Kingdom on earth without human response. God was not a dictator over human events. In a world in which God had given men and women responsibility for themselves and the freedom to fail, suffering was always possible. God was a partner with men and women, and would never leave them without divine presence, but God could not be blamed for evil. This was something of Tittle's theodicy.

The emphasis on human responsibility for sin led him to seek both active and peaceful means of controlling evil and producing a harmonious society. His theology of perfectionism led him somewhat naturally to embrace socialism. As did other socialists and intellectuals during the era, Tittle stated his admiration for the Soviet Union's faith in the future and praised its large-scale effort in "human perfectionism." The world needed to be shaken from its complacency with the status quo by such upheavals as the 1917 revolution, he said, though his pacifism was never content with any kind of violence. He preferred social change to come gradually. Several times he supported Norman Thomas's bids for the presidency and he was pleased when a young Methodist pastor decided to run for the state legislature as a Socialist. Tittle's church board reminded his detractors in 1935 that their pastor was "unalterably opposed to the methods of violence as advocated by communism, and steadfastly committed to the orderly processes of democratic government."

The Socialist viewpoint was perfectionist in that it offered a vision of what society should be while focusing on the factors, largely economic, which kept it from being perfect. With the Great Crash the corrupt old capitalist order, he hoped, finally had crumbled. He saw a more Christian structure coming out of the

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30 Tittle to Kirby Page, 24 April 1934.
31 Miller, Tittle, 110–113.
32 Tittle, A World, "In the Prophetic Succession," First Church Review, 10 (12 June 1949).
35 Tittle to William Kroll, 30 April 1934.
36 First Church Review, 10 (11 May 1933): 1.
Throughout the dark, calamitous 1930's Tittle still outwardly maintained not only that a religious revival was on the way, but that civilization was progressing toward the Kingdom of God. Tittle's vision of a perfect society continued in the 1930's to incorporate the ideas of economic equality, non-violence and racial harmony. He said that racial intermarriage was both inevitable and beneficial to the progress of the world. In 1932 he succeeded in persuading northern Methodism's General Conference to adopt a rule requiring that it meet only in cities which would assure equal accommodations for both black and white delegates. Where eating facilities were segregated at denominational gatherings, Tittle ate with the Blacks. During merger talks with southern Methodists he strongly opposed the creation of a separate, "Central" Jurisdiction for blacks. He argued even at this early stage in the civil rights movement for integration. When the union of 1939 provided, nonetheless, for such a separate Jurisdiction, Tittle lamented that this was both an intolerable compromise and a surrender of the ethics of Jesus. Yet Evanston First, located in one of Chicago's rich northern suburbs, had no black members. Once more his vision was juxtaposed to social reality.

While Tittle believed that God would perfect society only through peaceful processes, other Protestants argued that social reality sometimes necessitated war and other violent means in order to achieve just aims. Reinhold Niebuhr, for one, leveled arguments against "ethical perfectionism." He denounced any who did not admit that struggle and even violence might secure a more just society, and stated that the Kingdom of God was not of this world. Perfect justice was unachievable. In fact, Niebuhr argued, too lofty an ethical ideal prevented men and women from taking necessary, and sometimes necessarily brutal measures against social structures. He called Tittle's sort of theology an "unholy compound of gospel perfectionism and bourgeois utopianism," which unwittingly became the "accomplice of tyranny."

As the impact of Niebuhr, neo-orthodoxy, and the increasingly alarming world situation grew among American Protestants, helping to pave the way for the country's entrance into the World War II, Tittle held that
The ethical, literal teachings of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" were still valid for human affairs. These precepts provided for him, as it did for his Methodist forbears, not simply goals for which to strive but both means by which to work for justice and peace and the vision itself of what yet might be on earth. But living by perfectionist precepts, Tittle realized, was possible only if individuals were both transformed by God's grace and filled with Christ's Spirit. History proved that violence had never brought revolutionary changes for the good, for violence was incapable of changing the human soul. But Tittle's stance was increasingly in the minority, even in the Methodist Federation for Social Service. Tittle left it in 1939, when he felt that it equivocated on its long held stand against violence as a means of social change—an action which signalled for him the decline of the ethics of social perfection among Methodists. The paradox for him was that the Federation, which championed liberal social causes with which Tittle was in agreement, and which was largely in sympathy with pacifism in international relations, now seemed to permit violence. Tittle had to be consistent: if he opposed war as a means to solve international tensions, he must also oppose it as a means to end domestic injustice.

Nonviolent approaches to world crises seemed to Tittle practical and realistic ways to preserve peace, but he sensed that there was a "religion of nationalism" sweeping the world—evident not only in Japan, Italy and Germany, but also in the United States. During debates in the Federal Council of Churches over how to respond to Japan's new aggressions in China in 1937, Tittle held to his non-retaliation stance. He believed that economic sanctions, as advocated by E. Stanley Jones, among others, were too harsh. Evil could not be overcome by evil, aggression by economic retaliation. That type of action had brought about the demise of the peace laid down at Versailles, he said, and served only to exacerbate world tensions. The United States and other western powers were to blame for the economic exploitation of both China and Japan, Tittle thought, and had taught the latter its militarism and aggressive imperialism. So now the west was reaping what it had sown. Until the United States and other countries

45 Tittle to Harry F. Ward, 8 March 1935, and 5 November 1935. Actually, as Walter G. Muelder shows (*Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century* [New York: Abingdon, 1961] 148–159, 166, 180–182), the pacifist element in Methodism was far from extinguished at this time; but Donald Meyer writes that by the late 1930's the "Methodist phase' of the [social gospel] passion was drawing to a close," eclipsed by Niebuhrian realism (*The Protestant Search*, 311).
repented of their own collective sins in east Asia they could hardly con­
demn Japan. The way to bring peace was for all foreign powers, including
western ones, to relinquish their interests in China and then to help Japan
cope with its own economic difficulties.47

Tittle also nurtured hopes for peaceful settlements in Europe. The
1938 ecumenical Oxford Conference, of which he was a prominent par­
ticipant, recognized that economic conditions often led to war, and urged
Christians be loyal to Christ above nation. Tittle agreed. With both
“intelligent planning” and “unselfish cooperation for the common good”
peace could be maintained.48 In November, 1938, following the Munich
agreement, he applied biblical words to the situation, stating that military
aggression could be stopped only by valiant, persistent attempts to “do
justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.”49 As tensions in
Europe mounted, Tittle called upon the United States to remain neutral.
He did not even want the country to supply arms to the Allies, and urged
the United States to send food and clothing to Germany as well as to
Great Britain. If Hitler were given a forum at which to explain his griev­
ances, Tittle hoped, his aggressive actions could be understood, and
then somehow he might be appeased. The rise of Nazism resulted from
the unfair settlement of World War I and by economic depression, Tittle
argued. Hitler was not to blame for Germany’s unrest. Even as news
spread of Hitler’s persecutions of Jews, Tittle advocated only moral pro­
tests.50

In the midst of all this Tittle reminded his congregation that God’s
will being done on earth depended upon Christians committed to peace at
all costs. Which was worse, Tittle asked, “to say with the optimists that
progress was necessary, or to say with the pessimists it was impossible?”
Tittle continued to profess hope that God was “slowly but surely drawing
mankind to Himself.” 51 He told his congregation in the summer, 1940: “I
am myself convinced that in the present crisis we who are members of the
First Methodist Church of Evanston can maintain in this corner of the earth
that fellowship in Christ which is all-essential to the preservation of a free
and humane culture and to the establishment of a just and lasting peace.”52

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51 Tittle, “The Triumph of God,” sermon ms., 28 March 1940.
Thus unwilling to bend his principled pacifism, he envisioned a remnant which would remain true to its ideals.\(^{53}\)

At the 1940 Methodist General Conference Tittle helped to win adoption of several pacifist resolutions and one indicting anti-semitism. As chairman of the “Committee of the State of the Church” he guided the passage of the declaration that “the Methodist church, although making no attempt to bind the consciences of its individual members, will not officially endorse, support or participate in war.”\(^{54}\) The resolution’s opponents sought to differentiate kinds of war and to condemn “aggressive,” but not “just” wars, but Tittle’s position won.\(^{55}\)

While staying in the vanguard of ministers trying to prevent the United States’ entrance into the war, Tittle emphasized personal faith in a way he had not before. World crises turned him to a more “God-centered” theology. He laid implicit criticism at some of his own earlier inclinations. Though he wanted men and women to follow the sayings of Jesus literally he also wanted them to experience the peace of God. A week after the bombing of Pearl Harbor he declared to his congregation that in “one of the most chaotic and critical times that history has seen, human beings need to know through personal experience that there is a God, personal and Christ-like, who is the Ruler of the world and the Father of man, sharing the life of His human children and working evermore for their salvation.”\(^{58}\) God alone could turn men and women from their self-centeredness. The more he realized the severity of human need, the more he admonished individuals to rely upon divine grace. Everyone, he said, needed to know their sins forgiven and their souls purified of pride. Only then would their relationship to God and to others be made right. He believed that he caught the essence of John Wesley’s doctrine of sanctification in declaring that “there is at work in the world a transcendent love and power that is able to help men to become righteous.” God could save individuals from sinning and cleanse their hearts “from all unrighteousness,” Tittle declared. By divine grace they could be “radically transformed.”\(^{57}\) Indeed, there was no hope for the world except in such God-centered and God-transformed people. Such statements evidenced the Wesleyan and perfectionist roots which gave strength to both personal and social sanctification in Tittle’s thought.\(^{58}\)

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During the war Tittle analyzed once more both the causes of war and the prospects of peace. Though still seeming to him the result of economic greed as well as spiritual pride, he looked more to the character of individuals and less to international action for resolutions to the evil which had provoked the war. Tittle chastised his own earlier tendency to believe that social progress was inevitable. He admonished his audiences to apply the teachings of Jesus to their own lives first, before turning to culture. They, if no one else, should live now by kingdom ethics. 59

Tittle also told his congregation that despite the war then raging God still planned a better world. Throughout the 1940's Tittle held on to the slightest evidences that a global transformation of human character was coming. God would not stop wars by direct action, since the divine will had given men and women control over the course of the world; but God maintained through everything the "moral order of the world." 60 Tittle defended those who declared their conscientious objection to fighting the war. He worked with the Federal Council of Churches' Commission to Study the Basis of a Just and Durable Peace while vigorously protesting the indiscriminate Allied bombing of Germany cities and non-military targets. 61

As might be expected, he received a great deal of criticism for his lack of support for the war. At the 1944 Methodist General Conference Tittle again chaired the Committee on the State of the Church. Predictably, the report of the Committee included a blessing upon those who had abstained from actual combat for conscience sake, and otherwise refrained from calling the war "just." The report followed Tittle's view that God could never sanction or bless any aspect of life so evil as war. Tittle could not bring himself to pray for Allied victory. When debate on the report reached the floor of the Conference, delegates rejected the report and passed another more nationalist one written by Lynn Harold Hough, dean of Drew Theological Seminary. 62

The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki revealed to Tittle the depths to which humankind had descended. He recognized the possibility that civilization might be destroyed and that the church might have only


60 Tittle, "In Time of Trouble," The First Church Pulpit, 7 (4 June 1944): 8.

61 John Foster Dulles to Tittle, 8 December 1942; Tittle, "What Shall We Do with Germany?" The First Church Pulpit, 7 (14 November 1943): 6, 15.

decades to fulfill its earthly mission—to transform individual lives and thereby build the Kingdom. But atomic warfare gave him a slight hope that churches would more energetically seek to perfect the world in order to prevent global annihilation.63

Though Tittle counselled inner comforts and continued to find signs of progress, his confidence was truly shaken by the war. His perfectionism and pacifism had convinced few and had done little good to change global events. He remained troubled by nationalism. Tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union foreshadowed another war. All the more he attempted to convince Christians that pacifism was true to the religion of Jesus.64

The progressivism and social optimism of leaders such as Tittle seemed strangely out of place after World War II. Unlike the situation after World War I, confidence and optimism in either humanity or God did not easily return to American Protestants after 1945. Men and women resigned themselves to the evil both within and around them. Salvation would not come, Niebuhr and others told them, in historical time. In American Protestantism waves of evangelical revivals in the post-war decades affirmed the authority of the Bible and the experience of personal salvation, but largely failed to generate optimism that society could be transformed through lives so changed. While few heirs of modernism believed that society would benefit much from so-called religious conversions, before civil rights consciousness began to revive old social passions many liberal Protestants seemed also to acquiesce to the given order. The Vietnam War rekindled old debates as to the place of war and pacifism within the system of Christian ideas. Ernest Tittle had been consistently perfectionist during the course of a world war universally rebuked for its tyranny and destruction. The perfectionist approach to culture, that of progressive social reform through the transformation of both institutions and individuals, seemed overly optimistic, naive and impossible to all but the most idealistic elements of American society.65 Under various shelters religious faith continued strong, but global crises shook humanity's hope for actual improvement.

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63 Tittle, "That You May Live," sermon pamphlet, 16 September 1945.
64 Tittle, The Gospel According to Luke: Exposition and Application (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), passim. Tittle died just as he finished work on this volume, which was to have been part of the Interpreter's Bible, but which editors found too pacifist. See Paul Scherer to Tittle, 19 March 1949.