CHRISTIAN STUDIES
SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE CHURCH

A PUBLICATION OF THE FACULTY OF AUSTIN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Volume 24 / 2010

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Christian Studies (ISSN–4125) is a publication of the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology. *Christian Studies* is funded by gifts from readers and friends of the graduate school. Subscription is free upon request. Back issues are available for $3.00 each, plus postage. Correspondence should be addressed to Michael R. Weed, or M. Todd Hall, Austin Graduate School of Theology, 7640 Guadalupe Street, Austin, Texas 78752. *Christian Studies* is indexed in ATLA Religion Database. Copyright Institute for Christian Studies. FAX: (512) 476–3919. Web Site: www.austingrad.edu. E-Mail: christianstudies-press@mail.austingrad.edu.

Austin Graduate School of Theology
CHRISTIAN STUDIES
Number 24 2010 ©

CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Volume 24 2010

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American Fundamentalists: The Left Behind

Michael R. Weed

> In every church, in every institution, there is something which sooner or later works against the very purpose for which it came into existence.
> C.S. Lewis[1]

All religions are founded upon visions of what is believed to be transcendent reality: a "metaphysical vision" of what is ultimately true and good.[2] From such visions attempts are made to illuminate the nature and purpose of human existence. Further, all religions develop doctrines, rites, and symbols repristinating the transcendent vision and conveying its relevance to everyday life. The longer a religion exists, the more challenges it endures, and the more doctrines, rites, and disciplines it accumulates. Historically, when an awareness arises that a religion's transcendent vision is endangered, movements appear to recover that vision, correcting and reemphasizing neglected truths and practices.

Understandably, it is not uncommon for such reform or recovery movements to be imprinted by factors associated with their immediate historical contexts, e.g., the perceived failure of leaders, threatening social changes, and outside influences that need to be resisted.[3] Consequently, it is not infre-

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[1] *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1984), 94. It is not uncommon that what react and recovery movements recover—or restore—becomes predominantly shaped by what they perceive themselves to be reacting against.

[2] Cf. Max L. Stackhouse, "Fundamentalism Around the World," *The Christian Century*, August 28–September 4, (1985), 770.

[3] Ibid.

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quent that beliefs and practices recovered in challenging circumstances may display emphases differing from a religion's previous history that significantly alter their earlier meanings.[4]

American Protestant Fundamentalism

In American Protestantism, the designation "fundamentalism" is derived from a widely circulated series of twelve volumes published between 1910 and 1915 titled *The Fundamentals*.[5] These volumes, financed by California millionaires Milton and Lyman Stewart and written by conservative scholars from America and Great Britain, were distributed at no cost throughout the English-speaking world.[6] In all, some three million volumes were distributed, reaffirming fundamental doctrines of Protestant Christianity with the intent of protecting churches against threats posed by theological liberalism perceived to be making inroads into American Protestant churches.

The circulation given *The Fundamentals* notwithstanding, American Protestant fundamentalism had its origins in a constellation of historical, social, intellectual, and religious factors developing in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Although not capturing the attention that the circulation of *The Fundamentals* received, similar statements had been composed in the latter half of the previous century. The Niagara Bible Conference, for example, initiated in

[4] For example, Martin Luther's emphasis on justification *sola fidei* to the neglect of a doctrine of sanctification is generally recognized as a reaction to the Medieval Church's preoccupation with "works righteousness" as "sanctification."

[5] Baptist editor of the *Watchman-Examiner* Curtis Lee Laws (1868–1946), who is commonly credited with applying the appellation "fundamentalist" to describe conservative Baptists, did not attach belief in "biblical inerrancy" to the designation. Rather, Laws contended that "The infallibility of the Bible is the infallibility of common sense, and of the experiential triumph within us. . . . It is our authority because it does for us what our souls need." George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870–1925* (Oxford University Press, 1982), 118f.

[6] Ibid. Pastors, missionaries, theology professors, theological students, YMCA and YWCA secretaries, college professors, Sunday school superintendents, and religious editors were recipients.

1876, issued a statement in 1895 asserting five "essential" doctrines perceived to be threatened by theological liberalism: (1) verbal inerrancy of scripture, (2) the deity and virgin birth of Christ, (3) substitutionary atonement, (4) Christ's physical resurrection, and (5) Christ's bodily return to earth.[7] In 1910, the Presbyterian General Assembly adopted a declaration of essential doctrines: (1) the inerrancy of scripture, (2) the virgin birth of Christ, (3) substitutionary atonement, (4) Christ's bodily resurrection, and (5) the authenticity of biblical miracles.[8]

Clearly behind such statements were perceptions that orthodox Protestant beliefs were being threatened and the vision of a Protestant America was endangered. In the North, urbanization, education, immigration (e.g., the arrival of Roman Catholic immigrants), and social mobility were combining to weaken influences of traditional Protestant culture while spreading new religious ideas.

In the deep background of Protestant fundamentalism, however, looms the Civil War as a major watershed in American cultural history, affecting virtually all areas of American life, especially life in the South. While in the postwar North, the old order of American Protestantism was "about to crumble,"[9] in the postwar South, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians remained separated from their northern counterparts. Further, in the Reconstruction period (1865–70), southerners found themselves overrun by northern occupation forces, carpetbaggers, adventurers, and opportunists. Consequently, southern culture maintained nostalgic views of the antebellum past, visions which reinforced southern resistance to change, innovation, and perceived "outside influences." In the postwar South, religion would become a crucial

[7] Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1965), 283.
[8] Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* 117.
[9] Ibid., 17.

means of preserving traditional beliefs and customs associated with an idealized vision of antebellum southern Christian culture.[10]

Winds of Change in the North

The dominant outlook in the post-Civil War North was considerably different from that of the South. Riding on the heels of the North's victory and preservation of the Union, "unbridled cheerfulness, confidence, and complacency" underwrote a cultural mood of optimism, trust in human progress, and openness to the future.[11] Social mobility, industrialization, and the influx of European immigrants (many Roman Catholic) occasioned significant social and cultural changes. Equally important would be the influence of European intellectual culture entering the American academic scene through professors and students returning from study on the Continent. Darwinism and German higher criticism of scripture proved to be among the most significant influences in the area of religion.

Inevitably these influences reshaped perceptions of the nature and veracity of scripture and the function of the Christian religion. In time they would eventuate in the evolution of American Protestant liberalism. As early as 1868, the president of Princeton (then the College of New Jersey), James McCosh, who had come to the United States from Scotland, maintained that modern science and Christianity were not in conflict. McCosh argued that scripture tells that God created the universe while modern science discerns the manner in which He did so.[12]

During this same period northern seminaries and churches also began to be exposed to developments in European (essentially German) biblical scholarship in the form of higher criticism, which, as opposed to "lower," or "tex-

[10] Southern Methodists had separated from their northern counterpart in 1845, Baptists in 1845, and Presbyterians in 1857. Cf. Hudson, 217.

[11] Ibid., Winthrop S. Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 137.

[12] Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture,* 17f.

tual criticism,"[13] investigates the historical setting and authorship of ancient documents. German scholars F. C. Baur (d.1860) and D. F. Strauss (d.1874), pioneers in higher criticism, were influenced by G. W. F. Hegel (d. 1831) and utilized his dialectical/evolutionary views in reconstructing the historical development of the New Testament and the early church.[14] Although such views evoked opposition, many traditional confessions were nonetheless modified.

A new attitude was appearing, represented in Henry Ward Beecher's exhortation to theological students at Yale in 1872 that "disposition, conduct, and greatheartedness is more akin to the Gospel spirit than dogma or doctrine."[15] For the most part, however, advocates of the "new Christianity" did not overtly attack historical Christian doctrines. Rather, they preached a message that resonated with the optimistic and future-oriented culture. Phillips Brooks (d.1893), author of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," offered a statement representing the confidence of the era:

> [T]here is nothing in religion, there is nothing in Christianity, which has not its roots in human nature and in the fundamental affections of mankind. . . . [B]elieve in yourselves and reverence your own human nature; it is the only salvation from brutal vice and every false belief. An optimist is a believer in the best, and any man who believes that anything less than the best is the ultimate purpose of God . . . has no business to live upon the earth.[16]

Within this broad context, European intellectual culture was finding its way into American universities and theological schools, especially the influences of Darwinism and higher criticism.[17] Charles Darwin's *Origin of Spe-*

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[13] Lower criticism, or textual criticism, is the discipline of examining ancient manuscripts with the intent of recovering the earliest—if not original—text. Cf. Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1961* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 61 ff.

[14] Cf. E. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 137 ff.

[15] Ibid., 138.

[16] Ibid., 139.

[17] Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* 18 ff.

cies (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) proposed arguments for the evolution of life through "natural selection" as opposed to the biblical accounts of the divine origin of the universe, including human life.[18]

Challenges to Fundamentalism

While some read Darwin as providing scientific grounds for atheism, others attempted to correlate Darwin's *how* with biblical understandings of *why* the universe—and human beings—exist. Still others sought to defend the Genesis account of creation as literal historical narrative. For the latter, scripture's trustworthiness was directly threatened by Darwinism and higher criticism.

In the spring of 1925, the evolution issue received nationwide attention through the famed Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, punctuated by William Jennings Bryan's death five days after the trial.[19] With the coverage of the *Baltimore Sun*'s reporter, agnostic H. L. Mencken, the Scopes trial would become viewed as the turning point in marginalizing fundamentalism in America by linking it with uneducated rural southern culture.[20] Mencken widely publicized such associations, taking the Scopes trial and Bryan's death as opportunities to mock both Bryan and Southern rural America as backward and superstitious—and to associate fundamentalism with both.[21]

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[18] Cf. T. A. Burkhill, *The Evolution of Christian Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 366.

[19] See Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* 184 ff. Biology teacher John Scopes was brought to trial for teaching evolution in the local high school in violation of state law banning such teaching. Aging William Jennings Bryan represented the state while the American Civil Liberties Union provided Scopes' defense with Clarence Darrow, atheist son of a Unitarian minister. Scopes was found guilty and fined $100.

[20] Ibid., 187. Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee's 1955 Broadway play and later film *Inherit the Wind* did much to reinforce stereotypes regarding southern culture as backward, sectarian, superstitious, etc.

[21] Also see Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 13–32, 57–75. Larson argues that the Scopes trial was not the turning point for fundamentalism as is commonly portrayed. Although rewriting the history of the Scopes trial would carry significant weight, this did not occur for decades after the trial.

Countering contentions of fundamentalism's origins as a southern and rural phenomenon, however, is Gresham Machen (1881–1937), a major figure in the development of American fundamentalism. After graduating from Johns Hopkins, Machen studied in Tübingen, Germany. There he was unsettled by Wilhelm Hermann's persuasive articulation of Protestant liberalism as the religion *of* Jesus, not the religion *about* Jesus. Hermann focused on the Sermon on the Mount in contrast to complicated Christological formulae developed over centuries by the church. Corresponding with his family in America, Machen described Hermann as "overpowering in the sincerity of religious devotion,"[22] "brilliant," and "devout."[23] Four days later Machen further described Hermann's effect upon his own views:

> He speaks right to the heart; and I have been thrown all into confusion by what he says—so much deeper is his devotion to Christ than anything I have known in myself during the past few years.[24]

Two weeks later Machen, appearing to have collected himself, wrote:

> Hermann has shown me something of the religious power which lies back of this great movement, which is now making a fight even for the control of the Northern Presbyterian Church in America. In New England those who do not believe in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus are, generally speaking, religiously dead; in Germany, Hermann has taught me that that is by no means the case.[25]

Machen returned to America concerned about the threat posed by European liberalism's duplicitous attractions to "the religion of Jesus." He would teach at Princeton from 1906 until 1929, leaving to form Westminster Theological Seminary in response to liberalism's inroads at Princeton Seminary. While Machen expressed respect for those whose studies led them to reject

[22] J. Gresham Machen, *A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 106.
[23] Ibid., 106–108.
[24] Ibid., 106.
[25] Ibid., 107.

traditional Christian beliefs (e.g., miracles and the bodily resurrection of Jesus), he had no respect for those who modified such beliefs and subscribed to them in a symbolic and arguably deceitful fashion.[26] Such concerns led Machen and others, in 1936, to found the Presbyterian Church of America, which shortly afterward became the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Machen's reaction to "Modernism"—principally European higher criticism—in founding a conservative "fundamentalist" Presbyterian church was not an isolated event; it mirrored similar developments occurring in Protestant churches throughout America. As a call "back to the Bible," fundamentalism resonated with most Protestant Americans as a practical or common sense approach to honoring God and preserving biblical faith from threats—real and perceived—whether from European intellectuals or from Roman Catholicism.

Certainly Restoration churches, which had become one of the fastest-growing Protestant groups in America, were able to capitalize on such sympathies. In time, however, Restoration churches would experience disagreements and irreconcilable differences over both theology and church polity.[27] These differences would eventuate in divisions reflecting issues associated with the broader spectrum of American Protestantism as well as issues unique to restorationism.

In time, the Disciples of Christ would emerge aligned with Protestant liberalism, while the more conservative Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ would align with "anti-modernists," variously viewing themselves as "conservative," or "fundamentalist." Among Churches of Christ, publications such as the *Gospel Advocate* (founded in Nashville, 1885, by David Lipscomb) and the *Firm Foundation* (founded in Houston,

[26] J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991, orig. 1925), 34.

[27] See Kevin R. Kragenbrink, "The Modernist/Fundamentalist Controversy and the Emergence of the Independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ," *Restoration Quarterly*, 42:1 (2000), 3f.

1884, by Austin McGary[28]) and, over time, Christian Colleges (e.g., Lipscomb, Abilene Christian, and Harding) attempted to provide stability beyond the boundaries of theoretically autonomous "local congregations."[29] Over the past half century, both the influences of the Christian colleges and reaction to the incessant contentiousness of quasi-fundamentalist publications have led to the majority of Churches of Christ mirroring a *de facto* version of the mid-century recovery of the Reformation designation "evangelicalism."

Emergence of Neo-Evangelicals

Within a decade of Machen's death in 1937, American fundamentalism experienced challenges which would expose its weaknesses and directly contribute to the eventual dismissal of fundamentalism as a significant voice in American culture. Ironically, fundamentalism's strongest challenge did not come from Protestant liberalism. Rather, fundamentalism's marginalization would come from the ranks of disenchanted fundamentalists who had come to recognize that in defending biblical Christianity against the threats of Protestant liberalism, they themselves had adopted serious, even endangering, misemphases.

In this regard, four developments are commonly cited as bringing about the waning of American fundamentalism. First, in 1942, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was founded by Harold John Okenga and others. Second, within five years, in 1947, Carl F. H. Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* observed that fundamentalism's preoccupations with arguing about scripture's authenticity and veracity (namely, against higher criticism), however well intended, had led to a loss of touch with the religion of scripture and had seriously diminished the relevance of

[28] It is not insignificant, and it is perhaps prophetic, that the *Firm Foundation* was founded to combat the *Gospel Advocate*'s approval of David Lipscomb's admission of Baptists into Churches of Christ on the basis of Baptist baptism.

[29] Eventually, the influences of such publications among Restoration churches would raise questions regarding congregational autonomy and occasion the epithet "Editor Bishop."

the Gospel to all areas of human life.[30] In effect, American Protestant fundamentalism had allowed itself to become more of a religion *about* the New Testament than the religion *of* the New Testament.

Specifically, Henry was concerned that fundamentalists were silent regarding Christ's relevance to the problems of the world which God had created and for which Christ died. Henry viewed this failure as, in large part, a result of fundamentalism's divorce of doctrine from life; of separating orthodoxy ("right belief") from orthopraxy ("right practice"). Henry reminded readers that "the great contemporary problems are both moral and spiritual," and that with regard to the "near and distant neighbor," fundamentalism had in effect become a modern version of the priest and Levite, bypassing suffering humanity.[31] Consequently, the Gospel was being privatized and the world was being deprived of the only means of substantial and lasting social reform, namely, the living water of the Gospel. Henry exhorted those recognizing these misemphases of fundamentalism—and their fuller implications—to set about to recover the essence of Christian faith, drawing their vision for American Christianity from the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation's recovery of the *euangelion*, the good news of the Gospel: ". . . in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Cor 5:19 RSV).

Third, in 1947 Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, was founded by radio evangelist Charles E. Fuller and Harold Ockenga as a seminary to provide an evangelical alternative to both modernist and fundamentalist seminaries in America. The seminary was an immediate and lasting success, today enrolling over 4,000 full- and part-time students.

Finally, almost a decade later, in 1955, with evangelist Billy Graham's backing, the periodical *Christianity Today* was launched with Carl F. H. Henry as its first editor. In part, the magazine was envisioned as an

[30] Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 1 ff.
[31] Ibid., 2.

"evangelical" response to the liberal Protestant periodical *Christian Century*. The stated intent of *Christianity Today* was to "express the evangelical Christian point of view in an intellectual manner" and to "place the evangelical flag in the middle of the road"—"conservative theologically and liberal socially."[32]

Fundamentalists: The Left Behind

By the 1950s, most Protestant churches (e.g., Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Free Churches) were experiencing wrenching divisions with all the complexity and unpleasantness associated with family feuds. While these invariably involved issues unique to each tradition and were shaped by different church polities, they also reflected the reality of unresolvable differences associated with fundamentalist positions on matters such as the manner of scripture's inspiration and the meaning of scripture's "inerrancy." The result was that most American Protestant churches, in reacting against what they perceived as the narrow and unbiblical extremism of fundamentalism, were adopting positions similar to those of the emerging American evangelical movement. Significantly, fewer churches were using the term "fundamentalist" as a self-designation.[33]

Fast-paced changes associated with urbanization, social mobility, secular education, and mass communication all contributed to the evolution of a social environment which made it increasingly difficult for fundamentalist churches to shield their members from encountering not only secular forces but also—perhaps an even greater threat—evangelical versions of Christianity that were more compatible with the clear teachings of scripture and with the engaging message of the gospel.

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[32] Cf. Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[33] The present writer remembers Dr. J. D. Thomas in the early 1960s, Chair of the Bible Department at Abilene Christian University (then ACC), encouraging students to read *Christianity Today* and telling us—although he knew there were fundamentalists among us—that we "restorationists" were not "fundamentalists"; we were "conservatives."

Today, half a century later, while fundamentalist churches may be located on the outskirts of large urban areas, they are more commonly found in small towns and rural areas of southern and midwestern states. Further, the demography of such churches suggests that fundamentalists have difficulty attracting young families and are largely unable to pass on their beliefs to teenagers and young adults.

In practice, modern American fundamentalists commonly employ fear and intimidation to sustain a "bunker mentality" among the faithful few.[34] Recitations of threats posed by modernity (liberalism, communism, modernism, psychologism, existentialism, secular humanism, and postmodernism, etc.) constitute a litany of warnings against evils lurking to snare those who might explore beyond the boundaries of fundamentalist enclaves. For those resistant to such warnings, who question—much less challenge—fundamentalist presuppositions, stronger measures include threats to an individual's reputation, embarrassment to his or her family, and perhaps being publicly identified ("written up") in fundamentalist publications.

Fundamentalism, being a religion *about* the New Testament rather than *of* the New Testament (believers mentioned in New Testament writings did not possess New Testaments), most fundamentalists have a minimal understanding of New Testament teaching on sanctification.[35] That is, one "gets right with God" by living in strict adherence to lists of directives—mainly

[34] Alister McGrath observes that fundamentalists, developing an "oppositionalist mentality" through their preoccupation with identifying opponents, have virtually "imploded" in controversies as they have turned on one another in "pervasive infighting." Cf. Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 394.

[35] Ultimately, fundamentalists acknowledge the Bible's authority on the basis of rational arguments for its inspiration. Historically, the foundation of Christian faith is not human reason but trust in the one who said, "I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13) and "he who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). While fundamentalism accepts such statements, it does so on the basis of its prior authentication of scripture through rational argument. This unbiblical epistemological commitment reverses—and arguably voids—the "scandal" of the gospel. Lacking criteria to "assess God," would-be believers must "come" in order to "see" (e.g., John 1:39, 46, 4:29).

restrictions and prohibitions—constructed from New Testament writings.[36] In fact, this caricature virtually precludes any understanding of sanctification or significant spiritual growth; once "right," one cannot become "more right." Consequently, the fundamentalist view of the Christian life tends to be analogous to a holding pattern in which one stays "right with God." This static view of the Christian life also lies behind one of the most noxious aspects of fundamentalism: not unlike schoolyard bullies whose treatment of others expresses their insecurity, fundamentalists must reassure themselves of being right through relentless criticisms of others.

Early Christians were instructed that, rather than rational arguments *about* the word of God, "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom 10:17, KJV). Tragically, fundamentalists are not left in the first century, nor even the second century. Rather, fundamentalists are stranded somewhere in the early decades of 20th century America, anxiously defending a religion *about* the New Testament in a world increasingly open to the religion *of* the New Testament.

> God in his grace works through our limitations;
> for that very reason we should ask for the grace
> to recognize what those limitations are.
>
> George Marsden

[36] "Jesus clearly saw that there are two decisive weaknesses to moral legalism. One is that even if there were a law, man can keep it outwardly as he sins inwardly. The other is the impracticality of making a law corresponding to every situation that might occur." (Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 419f). Henry further observes that "this negativism in fundamentalist ethics may conceal the fact that one who abstains from the proscribed may be every bit as carnal as one who indulges. Arbitrary legalism is a poor substitute for an inner morality. Not only this, but such legalism emphasizes the less important issues in life, and ignores or excuses the weightier maters of the law. Smoking can be a subject of legislation; pride cannot" (421).

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Number 24 2010 ©