

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

## IN THE NICK OF TIME

Occasional Essays and Other Stuff for Christian Students Presented by the President of  
Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs Christian leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

"...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine."

August 21, 2009

## Fundamentalism: Whence? Where? Whither?

### Part Two: Fundamentalism and History

Kevin T. Bauder

It is a mistake, often made by educated persons who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology, to suppose that Fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind: it is the partial and uneducated survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians. How many were there, for instance, in Christian churches in the eighteenth century who doubted the infallible inspiration of all Scripture? A few, perhaps, but very few. No, the Fundamentalist may be wrong. I think that he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he, and I am sorry for the fate of anyone who tries to argue with a Fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The Bible and the *corpus theologicum* of the Church is [*sic*] on the Fundamentalist side.<sup>1</sup> —Kirsopp Lake

The above words were not written by a Fundamentalist or even a friend of Fundamentalism. The quotation comes from a theological liberal who was writing at the height of the Fundamentalist controversy. As such, it represents rather a startling admission. Not many liberals were willing to concede as much.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the quotation has become a favorite of those who have identified with Fundamentalism. David Beale appeals to it in his attempt to define Fundamentalism. Both Fred Moritz and Mark Sidwell refer to it in their defenses of separatism. Robert Reymond (a systematic theologian who was trained at Bob Jones University) includes it in his discussion of divine revelation. It even shows up in a sermon by Wayne Bley on the website of the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship International.<sup>2</sup>

Fundamentalists are flattered to think of themselves as neither more nor less than representatives of historic Christian doctrine. They take comfort and courage in believing that they have neither added to nor subtracted from the deposit of faith, but that they simply proclaim and defend exactly the same message as the apostles did. This kind of reassurance feeds a craving for identity and significance.

It is also rather badly misguided, notwithstanding Lake's observations. Of particular interest is Lake's use of the word *partial*. Fundamentalism, said Lake, is the "*partial . . . survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians.*" In other words, Fundamentalist theology is represented in the Christian theology of antiquity, but not all of the older Christian theology has been preserved in fundamentalism.

Was Lake correct in his assertion that fundamentalism has preserved only some of the early Christian faith? To answer this question we need only look at the three chief symbols: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. If we make allowances for one or two controversial locutions (particularly *filioque* and the descent into hell), the remainder of these creeds confess the early Christian consensus about the biblical answer to the most important disputed questions in the early history of Christianity. In short, they are brief summaries of fundamental doctrines.<sup>3</sup>

How ironic that most contemporary Fundamentalists—even many Fundamentalist pastors—have hardly even read them, let alone studied them. This is not because Fundamentalists are adverse to creeds and confessions! No, Fundamentalists write doctrinal statements like Washington prints money. The Fundamentalist neglect of these particular creeds, however, is revealing. Fundamentalism is not so much an attempt to preserve historic Christianity as it is an attempt to leapfrog theological development and to repristiniate the church by appealing directly to the New Testament while ignoring many intervening centuries of doctrinal struggle and articulation.

To be fair, Fundamentalist theology does continue to reflect the results of Nicea and Chalcedon, just as it evidences influence from Wittenberg and Geneva. The problem lies in the Fundamentalist appropriation of those influences, and it is threefold. First, Fundamentalists often naively assume that their ideas simply arise from the text of Scripture, without mediation. There is little sense of the struggle that was necessary in order for their doctrines even to be articulated, let alone to be preserved. Most Fundamentalists actually think that church history must include an unbroken line of true Christians whose beliefs and articulations were pretty much identical to those of today's Fundamentalists.

Second, and consequently, Fundamentalists tend to have little sense of indebtedness to the Christian past. They do not value the richness and fullness of Christian faith and practice. Both their forms and their formulations tend to be invented *ad hoc*. For most fundamentalists, church history between the apostles and the revivals of the nineteenth century is a near blank, something like the undrawn areas on old maps that used to be labeled, "This way be dragons." Except in a handful of educational institutions, most fundamentalist leaders have little or no awareness of history.<sup>4</sup>

Third, Fundamentalists have displayed a tendency to focus upon the affirmation of an ever-shrinking list of core doctrines (and, to be sure, those doctrines deserve focus) at the expense of neglecting both doctrinal detail and doctrinal breadth. Because they are cut off from the Christian past, fundamentalists have little sense of the extent to which they have truncated the whole counsel of God. While they rightly insist upon the necessity of confessing certain fundamentals, they have little patience for careful doctrinal exploration and articulation, even when the doctrines under consideration are fundamental. They profess to love the Bible as an object, but even in the better

neighborhoods of fundamentalism it is not difficult to find people who despise the attempt to understand biblical teaching in any depth.<sup>5</sup>

Fundamentalists are all about defending the faith. Too often, however, all that they are willing to defend is a truncated faith of slogans and clichés. Even the most important areas of doctrine are reduced to rather pat formulae. Non-fundamental areas of the faith may be left completely unexplored.

Comparing Fundamentalist faith and practice to the faith and practice of historic Christianity is like comparing a hamburger to a filet mignon. The two obviously have something in common, but it would be misleading to say that everything in the steak is also in the hamburger.

Kirsopp Lake said that Fundamentalism is the “partial . . . survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians.” To the extent that he is correct, Fundamentalists should probably be a little less enthralled with his description. And I think that he is right.

Fundamentalists have preserved and defended something less than the whole counsel of God. Two other questions must be addressed before a conversation about fundamentalism can go forward. The first question is, Did fundamentalists also add anything that was not a component of historic Christianity? In the next essay, I shall give reasons for answering this question in the affirmative. The second question is, How did we get to this point? The answer to that question is going to take a bit longer. ✕

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<sup>1</sup> Kirsopp Lake, *The Religion of Yesterday and To-morrow* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), 61-62.

<sup>2</sup> David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, S.C.: Unusual Publications, 1986), 3-4; Fred Moritz, *Contending for the Faith* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 2000), 158; Mark Sidwell, *The Dividing Line: Understanding and Applying Biblical Separation* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 1998); Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 16; Wayne Bley, “Vigilance for Religious Liberty,” sermon at <http://www.fbf.org/content/view/78/24/> accessed on 19 August 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Some Fundamentalists object quite strenuously to the phrase, “baptism for the remission of sins.” They need to remember, however, that the creed is merely echoing the language of Scripture (specifically, Acts 2:38). Whatever these words mean in Scripture is what they mean in the creed.

<sup>4</sup> I once made a favorable comment in writing about the second-century church father, Ignatius. A fundamentalist leader sent me a rather vexed reply reminding me that Ignatius (by which he meant Ignatius Loyola) was a committed Catholic and the founder of the Jesuit order. The author of the letter had no idea that he was confusing a character from the second century with a character from the sixteenth.

<sup>5</sup> Such attitudes are not universal within fundamentalism. My own undergraduate and seminary education was pursued in fundamentalist institutions that valued both doctrinal breadth and theological detail, including conversation with other faith traditions. This kind of thoughtfulness can be found in the better Fundamentalist educational institutions and among some of the better churches and pastors. These are not, however, characteristic of Fundamentalism as a whole.

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of [Central Baptist Theological Seminary](#). Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses. New subscriptions to this electronic newsletter can be requested at [inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu](mailto:inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu).

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## Alone With None But Thee, My God

Attributed to Columba (521-597)

Alone with none but thee, my God,  
I journey on my way.  
What need I fear when thou art near,  
O King of night and day?  
More safe am I within thy hand  
than if a host should round me stand.

My destined time is known to thee,  
and death will keep his hour;  
did warriors strong around me throng,  
they could not stay his power:  
no walls of stone can man defend  
when thou thy messenger dost send.

My life I yield to thy decree,  
and bow to thy control  
in peaceful calm, for from thine arm  
no power can wrest my soul.  
Could earthly omens e'er appal  
a man that heeds the heavenly call?

The child of God can fear no ill,  
his chosen dread no foe;  
we leave our fate with thee, and wait  
thy bidding when to go.  
'Tis not from chance our comfort springs.  
thou art our trust, O King of kings. ✠

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