

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."

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Fundamentalism: Whence? Where? Whither?

Part Three: Fundamentalism Common Sense

Kevin T. Bauder

By definition, Fundamentalism does not concern itself with the whole counsel of God. As the name implies, it concerns itself with fundamentals, i.e., with those matters that are essential to the bare existence of Christianity. Fundamentalists may, and many Fundamentalists actually do, go beyond this limited concern. When they do so, however, they are no longer acting merely as Fundamentalists, but as Fundamentalists who also happen to be something else.

On one hand, as an actual, historical movement, Fundamentalism has often tended to settle for an abbreviated form of Christianity. Though clear exceptions exist, it has often sacrificed doctrinal breadth and detail. On the other hand, Fundamentalism has also tended to add elements that are not necessary to any form of biblical Christianity. Over the next few essays, I wish to explore three of these additions: Common Sense Realism, populism, and sentimentalism.

Common Sense Realism was a reaction to and development of Enlightenment philosophy. It was articulated by Thomas Reid of Aberdeen (later Glasgow) and sold to the philosophical world by Dugald Stewart of Edinburgh. A relatively late development, Common Sense Realism represented an attempt to circumvent several philosophical impasses. Continental rationalism had never been able to move convincingly beyond solipsism. British empiricism had led to the subjective idealism of Berkeley and the skepticism of Hume.

Reid hoped to get past these problems by grounding knowledge in a core of self-evident common sense. Where earlier thinkers had distinguished appearance from reality, Reid posited that people perceive reality directly. Normally, perceptions can be relied upon as accurate and trustworthy. For Common Sense Realism, reality is transparently available to the perceiving subject.

How did Reid justify this appeal to common sense? In a way, he refused to. He argued that the truths of common sense cannot be established by deductive proofs. Common sense is properly Reid's foundation, his axiom beyond which no appeal is possible. It cannot be proven, nor does it need to be. Opinions that reject common sense always end up in absurdity.

For Common Sense Realists, common sense is the final court of appeal in all matters of intellect. No special training or philosophical ability is required. Matters of common sense lie within the purview of common understanding. Every person is a competent judge.

Many Christians embraced Common Sense Realism, particularly in America. It became a powerful force in American theology before the Civil War. It was still influential in the proto-Fundamentalist milieu of the 1870s through the 1910s. Proto-Fundamentalism is the social and ecclesiastical environment out of which the Fundamentalist movement emerged around 1920. Not surprisingly, Fundamentalists inherited and were profoundly affected by Common Sense categories. The Fundamentalists who were most affected tended to be those who were convinced that they had no philosophy at all.

Scottish Common Sense Realism proved to be a mixed blessing for Christians. On the positive side, it provided evangelicals with a handy defense against the skeptics of the early Nineteenth Century. Indeed, by embracing Common Sense Realism, evangelicals found themselves in the forefront of a leading intellectual fashion. They were able to speak from a position of respectability.

Their moment of prestige was short-lived, however. During the second half of the century the philosophical winds shifted. Because they had invested heavily in Common Sense Realism, evangelicals now appeared outmoded and irrelevant. Furthermore, since Christians had committed themselves so heavily to Common Sense, they ended up defending it as if it were the Faith itself.

Theologically and ecclesiastically, Common Sense lent itself to theories that emphasized human autonomy and ability. It provided no mechanism for assessing the noetic effects of sin. It also tended to produce contempt for disciplines (including theological disciplines) that relied upon specialized knowledge and a high degree of training. Combined with Baconian method, it led to a vision of theology in which the Bible is essentially a warehouse of disordered but transparent theological facts, which the theologian's task is to organize. In short, the Bible became a jigsaw puzzle, a game at which everyone was equally qualified to play.

Common Sense Realism is now more than two centuries old. So thoroughly did Christians accept its categories, however, that it remains influential among many evangelicals and most Fundamentalists. The conflict between Fundamentalists and Modernists was not merely a conflict over theology, but also was a conflict over philosophy. Theological Modernists had moved away from Common Sense into a philosophy that was more influenced by Romanticism and Kantian Idealism. Fundamentalists found themselves defending not merely orthodox doctrines but also Common Sense ways of thinking.

Therein lies one of the great ironies of the Fundamentalist movement. Common Sense is simply a slightly older form of Modernism. It is an Enlightenment philosophy that accepts all of the modern assumptions about detached, objective observers, clear and distinct foundations for knowledge, and neutral common ground as a starting point for discourse. Like nearly all evangelicals of the early Twentieth Century, most Fundamentalists were Modernists. If they objected to the Modernism of William Rainey Harper and Shailer Mathews, it was only because they wished to assert an alternative Modernism in its place.

Fundamentalism is a great idea. In the actual development of the Fundamentalist movement, however, the idea of Fundamentalism was confounded with other ideas. One of those ideas was Scottish Common Sense Realism. To the extent that Fundamentalists were (and are) committed to defending the categories of Common Sense, they were (and are) adding something to the Faith. They are confusing their Christianity with a very recent philosophy.

The practical consequences of Common Sense Realism were serious. One of the worst was that Common Sense provided an intellectual accelerant for a version of populism that was already becoming widespread. In the next essay, I wish to explore how Fundamentalism has added not only Common Sense Realism but also populism to its vision of the Christian faith. ✘

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.

Holy Father, Cheer Our Way

Richard Hayes Robinson (1842-1892)

Holy Father, cheer our way
with thy love's perpetual ray
grant us every closing day
light at evening time.

Holy Savior, calm our fears
when earth's brightness disappears;
grant us in our later years
light at evening time.

Holy Spirit, be thou nigh
when in mortal pains we lie;
grant us, as we come to die,
light at evening time.

Holy, blessèd Trinity,
darkness is not dark to thee;
those thou keepest always see
light at evening time. ✘

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