

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 Four: Fundamentalism and Populism

Kevin T. Bauder

Prior to Thomas Reid and Scottish Common Sense Realism, people typically recognized a distinction between appearances (whether understood as perceptions, phenomena, or, in Locke's case, ideas) and reality. From antiquity until the late Middle Ages, this distinction had produced two effects upon the way that most people thought about reality. First, they reckoned that whatever reality they encountered had to be interpreted—and not everyone was in an equally good position to do the interpreting. Second, they believed that reality possessed dimensions of meaning or significance that stretched well beyond sensory awareness. Grasping those levels of meaning was also something that not everyone was equally qualified to do.

Common Sense Realists denied the distinction between appearance and reality. They insisted that perceiving subjects have direct and unmediated access to reality itself. Consequently, reality does not need to be interpreted—it is as it appears to be. This move had the effect of placing every person on an equal footing for understanding any aspect of reality.

As presented by people like Reid and Dugald Stewart, Common Sense Realism was a responsible if misguided academic option. Ironically, however, many of the people who appropriated and applied Reid's conclusions would not have been capable of understanding his arguments. Chief among them were Americans.

Even before Reid, Americans had begun to affirm the competence of the ordinary person in all matters. This perspective is called *populism*. The harshness of the American frontier and the necessity of individual accomplishment tended to negate aristocratic influences. The sense that they were starting anew gave Americans an antipathy toward traditions. The arrival of Common Sense Realism

confirmed the populist prejudice and opened the throttle for its acceleration. This process continued throughout the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian periods.

At the time of the American Revolution, populism was widely (though not universally) assumed by American Christians. The influence of populism continued to grow during the first half of the Nineteenth Century. Under its sway, many expressions of American Christianity became anti-traditional, anti-clerical, and anti-intellectual. Branches of American evangelicalism rejected the value of creeds and confessions, of advanced study (sometimes of any specialized study), and of a trained ministry. The ideal became the individual who, without any particular theological training, read the Bible and came to his own convictions. Such individuals, if articulate, could become the leaders of significant communities and movements.

Some of those movements turned out to be less than evangelical. Seventh-Day Adventism owes its origins to this period, as does the Stone-Campbell movement. Indeed, this was a time when novel sects and cults were beginning to abound.

Among evangelicals, populism contributed to and was fed by the Second Great Awakening. It produced the camp-meeting movement, and, at a slightly later period, the urban revivalists. The most influential of these was Charles Grandison Finney.

Finney is widely remembered for the spectacular results of his meetings. His main contribution, however, lay in systematizing and nearly canonizing the methods of populist revivalism. He spelled out his theological underpinnings in his *Systematic Theology*, but expounded most of his methodology in his *Memoirs* and his *Revivals of Religion*.

For Finney, the normal Christian life is one of decline. Left to themselves, believers are easily distracted by the cares of the world and they will quickly backslide. In order to interrupt this backsliding, their attention must be refocused from temporal things onto spiritual things.

In order to do that, the preacher first has to get their attention. On the one hand (according to Finney), this required him to eliminate the preaching of any doctrines that were not immediately practical in nature. On the other hand, gathering a crowd and gaining their attention required novelty.

Finney insisted that, since God has not ordained any specific methods, the preacher is free to develop his own methodology. Effectiveness is the key to choosing techniques. Finney argued for the necessity of novelty, and he suggested that Christians should look at techniques that had proven successful in the worlds of commerce, politics, and entertainment.

For Finney, appropriating these techniques was an aspect of spiritual wisdom. Indeed, the spiritual wisdom of any preacher or Christian leader could be gauged by counting the numbers who responded. Finney was quite explicit at this point: "The amount of a minister's success in winning souls (*other things being equal*) invariably decides the amount of wisdom he has exercised in the discharge of his office."¹

These ideas put a new twist on the old populism. They had the effect of pegging the internal methods of the church to whatever techniques were dominant in the surrounding secular culture. They also linked, for the first time, Christian gathering to secular entertainment. The results of this move would prove to be profound.

The time when Finney was experimenting with his new measures and articulating his ideas was the very time when popular culture was emerging for the first time. A discussion of popular culture will

require separate treatment. At this point, only two observations need to be offered. First, popular culture is mass-produced culture, and as such it could not exist before the invention of the steam-powered printing press in the early 1800s. Second, popular culture is commercial culture, and as such it is intrinsically secularizing and sensationalizing.

Finney's methods were developed just prior to the explosion of popular culture. He could not have foreseen the wedding that was about to occur between his methods and the new direction in culture, nor could he have foreseen where the newly-invented popular culture was eventually going to lead. Even so, the adaptation to popular culture came to characterize American Christianity during the latter half of the Nineteenth Century.

All of this occurred long before Fundamentalism arose as an identifiable movement. Nevertheless, populism was a significant aspect of the milieu out of which Fundamentalism emerged. Certainly Fundamentalism reflected the evangelical context that gave it birth.

The results of populism can be traced throughout the history of the fundamentalist movement. Fundamentalism has typically displayed the populist contempt for tradition, for learning, and for an educated ministry. It has defined spiritual success in terms of numerical results. It has envisioned Christian gathering (one hesitates to call it *worship*) as a form of amusement, and it has struggled to maintain itself in the face of a continually-changing popular culture. Wherever Fundamentalism has flourished, it has done so by appealing to and building upon some aspect of the popular culture.

Many will object that this description does not fairly characterize all Fundamentalists, and that objection certainly carries weight. Nevertheless, as Les Ollila once observed, "The problem with pragmatism is that it does work."² When a *less* populist version of Fundamentalism has been forced to make common cause with a *more* populist version, the *more* populist version has almost always dominated through sheer force of numbers. The result is that today virtually all churches, and certainly all institutions within Fundamentalism, have been influenced by the populist outlook.

People like to pride themselves upon being able to make their own choices and develop their own opinions. The fact is, though, that not everyone is equally qualified to make every choice or to hold every opinion. When unqualified people are asked to develop opinions and to make choices, they invariably look for leadership—often, the kind of leadership that will lead them to believe that they are acting on their own, while manipulating or stampeding them into doing its will. That kind of demagoguery has come to typify some branches of Fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism is a great idea. It deserves to be preserved and defended. Almost universally, however, the Fundamentalist movement either began or has become populist. Indeed, many Fundamentalists defend populist perspectives as if they are important aspects of the Christian faith. The populist dynamic helps to explain how Fundamentalism has reached the point at which it stands today. ✖

¹Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, Christian Classics reprint edition (Virginia Beach, VA: CBN University Press, 1978), 189.

²Les Ollila, forward to Douglas R. McLachlan, *Reclaiming Authentic Fundamentalism* (Independence, Mo.: American Association of Christian Schools, 1993), vi.

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.

Frescoes in an Old Church

Walter de la Mare (1873-1956)

Six centuries now have gone
Since, one by one,
These stones were laid,
And in air's vacancy
This beauty made.

They who thus reared them
Their long rest have won;
Ours now this heritage—
To guard, preserve, delight in, brood upon;
And in these transitory fragments scan
The immortal longings in the soul of Man. ✠

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