

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."

September 11, 2009

Fundamentalism: Whence? Where? Whither? Part 5

Fundamentalism and Sentimentalism

Kevin T. Bauder

The evangelical mixture from which Fundamentalism developed made serious concessions to populism. Charles Finney took those concessions to an extreme by patterning the inner ministry of the church after the worlds of commerce, politics, and entertainment. Finney made these adaptations at the precise moment when popular culture was coming into existence. The result was that the predecessors of Fundamentalism invested heavily in adapting their Christianity to popular culture. Fundamentalism inherited this link with popular culture and has perpetuated it rather consistently through the years.

Popular culture came into its own during the Victorian-Edwardian era.¹ It provided a channel through which Victorian influences began to affect the lived Christianity of most American evangelicals, and consequently of the Fundamentalists who came after them. While Fundamentalists have not been alone in attempting to assimilate popular culture into Christianity, they have been among the foremost.

One of the main characteristics of Victorian popular culture was its sentimentalism. Victorians did not invent sentimentalism, but they made it a significant aspect of their mental and emotional furniture. As the predecessors of Fundamentalism absorbed Victorian popular culture, they imported its sentimentalism into their Christianity.²

Sentimentalism is more than simple overindulgence in emotion. It is a combination of two factors. First, it attaches the wrong degree or kind of emotion to an object. Second, it pursues emotion for the sake of the emotion itself.

Historically, Christians understood each object or activity to merit a certain emotional response (an ordinate affection). To feel more strongly toward a thing than it merited was considered sentimental; to feel less strongly was considered brutal. Alternatively, to direct toward one thing a feeling that rightly belonged to another was also either sentimental or brutal, depending upon the quality of the feeling and its harmony with the object.

Sentimental people mismatch feelings to objects by incorrectly perceiving the value of the objects themselves. They smooth out or eliminate the complicated nature of being and feeling. Consequently, the feelings themselves are sweetened or otherwise imbalanced. ³

Dickens is a good illustration of sentimentalism. His characters tend to be one-dimensional stereotypes. Feelings aroused by those characters are clichéd and, from a later perspective, simply corny. For example, little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is such an impossibly sweet character that it is ridiculous to think of her as human at all. She is more like a porcelain doll. When Nell dies, the reader is supposed to be overcome with pathos. A person who understands what real thirteen-year-olds are like, however, is more likely to be overcome with the humor of the situation. Dickens attempted to evoke a sense of sorrow that far outweighed the value of Nell's character.⁴

Nell was one of Dickens's most popular characters. Why? Because sentimentalism is more concerned with the experience of the emotion than with its object. Dickens's readers really wanted to feel the kind of bathetic sadness that he tried to evoke. Their clichéd grief, however, was very different from the misery that one experiences at the grave of a real girl. It was a feeling that people could relish. They could and did wallow in it. Their faux sorrow existed for its own sake, not for the sake of the plastic character toward whom it was directed.

A sentimental person is more interested in the feeling than in the object. The feeling must be quickly aroused and predictable. The words *stereotype* and *cliché* really are applicable to the process that occurs.

Because sentimentalism exists for the sake of the emotion, the focus naturally turns toward the individual who feels the emotion. As sentimentalism develops, it focuses less and less upon the object of sentiment, and more and more upon the quality of the sentiment itself. A sentimental song cannot say why a boy loves a girl. All it can say is how very, very, very much he loves her. As people become more sentimental they become more and more occupied with their own inner states, eventually resulting in profound self-absorption.

The consequences of sentimentalism for Christianity were profound. For example, sentimentalism changed the very categories in which unconditional election and efficacious calling were debated. Previous generations had resorted mainly to arguments about the nature of freedom (this approach can be found as late as Finney). The new sentimentalism, however, completely changed the way that people saw God. God was no longer complicated. He was no longer terrible in His holiness. He was not a God who hid Himself or who left His children weeping in perplexity.⁵ Rather, His fundamental attribute became niceness. God was now thought to be the quintessence of fair-mindedness. Such a God would never barge into an unresponsive heart. Furthermore, His niceness and even-handedness required Him to do everything that He could possibly do for every single sinner. It was unthinkable that God might do more for some (call them the "elect") than He might do for others.⁶

Salvation was also sentimentalized. The unsaved were no longer regarded as rebels, lawbreakers, and criminals. They were now seen as poor, lost, lonely wanderers who needed to be shown the way home. The problem with sin was no longer that it scandalized justice and offended moral sense, but

that it left the sinner weary, empty, and sad. The question became, "Are you weary? Are you heavy-hearted?" The invitation to salvation was no longer to repent, but to "Come home, come home, ye who are weary come home." And, of course, the response was, "I've wandered far away from God. Now I'm coming home."

Eternity was sentimentalized. Christians used to think of heavenly places primarily as the throne of God and Christ: "The Prince is ever in them." Faced with the wonder of their eternal home, the faithful had exclaimed, "Beneath thy contemplation sink heart and voice oppressed!" Such a complicated view of eternity had to be flattened out. Heaven was transformed into a kind of church picnic in which a big family reunion would take place. The redeemed could now express their expectation of a spiritual romp to the rollicking, "Oh that will be glory for me, glory for me, glory for me."

Even the Lord Jesus was transformed by the sentimentalism of the age. No longer was He viewed primarily as the transcendent sovereign who was coming to judge the quick and the dead. He was now seen primarily as a friend (oh, such a friend).⁷ This shift probably grew from a desire to emphasize intimacy with Christ, but it resulted in two gross misapprehensions of spiritual closeness. On the one hand, Christ was envisioned more and more as buddy or chum, and spiritual intimacy gave way to mere familiarity. On the other hand, a growing body of expression began to envision Jesus as a kind of spiritual boyfriend and to speak of intimacy in terms of romantic love. People came to the garden alone while the dew was still on the roses in order to meet the Son of God in a parody of a lover's tryst. From a later perspective, such expressions seem scandalously comical. At the time, however, there were plenty of people whose vision of spirituality was significantly shaped by such stereotyped clichés.⁸

Finally, under the influence of sentimentalism the role of the individual changed. Expressions of piety became more subjective and self-focused. The perfections of God and the splendor of His plan were pushed to the side as the emotional experience and expression of the worshipper assumed center stage.

These were the influences that Fundamentalism inherited.⁹ They are the same influences that continue to affect the movement. The shape of sentimentalism has changed, but Fundamentalists in general have either tried to adapt to its latest expressions or else to perpetuate the older expressions as if they were somehow the faith itself.

The past three essays have attempted to define the intellectual and cultural location of Fundamentalism. They have expounded three influences that shaped the evangelical movement out of which Fundamentalism emerged. Those influences were Common Sense Realism, populism, and sentimentalism. All three influences were detrimental, and all three continue to affect the Fundamentalist movement.

To understand Fundamentalism better, we next need to discuss the theological environment out of which it developed. Before that discussion can take place, however, a few loose ends need to be tied up. To do that, I want to go back and to answer certain nagging questions about the matters we have been discussing. In other words, it is time for a digression. ✖

¹The Victorian era properly ends with the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. Victorian sensibilities continued to remain influential throughout the Edwardian period, which is typically extended past

the death of Edward VII to the end of the Great War. During the Edwardian period, however, a transition was taking place that would produce the Jazz Age following the World War.

²Victorian sentimentalism is one of the commonplaces of literary and historical discussion. Recently, however, it has come in for a good bit of scholarly examination. One of the more influential recent volumes in Victorian sentimentalism is Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987). Another influential discussion occurs in Murray Roston, *Victorian Contexts: Literature and the Visual Arts* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). Recent interaction with both of these authors is provided by Suzy Anger, *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press).

³A brief but helpful discussion of sentimentalism can be found under the heading "Sentimentality" in Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz, *Literary Terms: A Dictionary* (New York: Farrar, Strous and Giroux, 1975), 228-229. See also Thomas Winter, "Sentimentality" in Bret E. Carroll, ed., *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia* (New York: Moschovitis Group, 2003), 414-416.

⁴For a thorough treatment of Dickens, see George H. Ford, *Dickens and His Readers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955) or, more recently, Mary Lenard, *Preaching Pity: Dickens, Gaskell, and Sentimentalism in Victorian Culture (Studies in Nineteenth-Century British Literature, Vol. 11)* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 1999).

⁵Psalm 88.

⁶My point is not to argue for either side in the debate. It is simply to note the shift in the kinds of arguments that seemed plausible to Christian people. Sentimental arguments about what God's love or fairness obligate Him to do would have been met with incredulity from both sides a few generations earlier.

⁷It is noteworthy that in Scripture, we are never told to address Jesus individually as a friend, though His enemies accused Him of being the friend of publicans and sinners. He names us as His friends, but that is a very different matter. The shift to "friend" language as a norm for defining one's relationship with Christ represents a very marked downgrading of esteem for Him.

⁸There is a legitimate use of marriage imagery to depict the relationship between God and the soul or Christ and the church. Also, Christians have sometimes employed sexual imagery to explain the simultaneous longing and self-forgetfulness of spiritual intimacy, together with the awful nakedness of the soul before God. All of this is miles away from the "Jesus is my boyfriend" sentimentalism of the Victorian period.

⁹D. G. Hart, "When Is a Fundamentalist a Modernist? J. Gresham Machen, Cultural Modernism, and Conservative Protestantism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65:3 (Autumn 1997), 605-633.

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.

The Recovery

Thomas Traherne (1636-1674)

Sin! wilt thou vanquish me?
And shall I yield the victory?
Shall all my joys be spoil'd,
And pleasures soil'd
By thee?
Shall I remain
As one that's slain
And never more lift up the head?
Is not my Saviour dead?
His blood, thy bane, my balsam, bliss, joy, wine,
Shall thee destroy; heal, feed, make me divine. ✠

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