

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 7

Digression One, Continued: And Now This

Kevin T. Bauder

Modernity, beginning with Nominalism and reaching its apex with Common Sense Realism, represented a dramatic shift in Western thinking. This shift constituted an alteration of the entire metaphysical dream.¹ In secular thinking, this alteration led Western civilization progressively to abandon transcendence, then morality, then order, and finally meaning. The decay of modernity—its obvious inability to justify its own categories in its own terms—was what led to the emergence of postmodernism as a critique of modern arrogance.²

Western civilization as a whole was deeply changed by these intellectual currents. Christians were also affected, particularly those Christians who adopted the categories of Common Sense Realism. The question that the present essay addresses is, How have those changes affected Fundamentalism? An answer to this question must begin with three caveats.

First, some scholars have alleged that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy was an outgrowth of Common Sense Realism.³ Their argument is not very convincing, largely because the categories of truth, fact, and error did not originate with Thomas Reid or, indeed, with modernity at all. This linking of Common Sense with biblical inerrancy does not even rise to the level of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*—the reality is more like *pre hoc ergo non propter hoc*.⁴

Second, some aver that dispensationalism is the outgrowth of Common Sense Realism.⁵ This suggestion has slightly more credibility, but is also deficient. That early expressions of dispensationalism were often influenced by Common Sense is indubitable.⁶ Arguably, however, dispensationalism is, with Covenant Theology, a development within the larger category of Reformed thought, and probably owes more to Reformed theology and less to Scottish philosophy than some

have thought.⁷ Dispensationalism is, in any case, a theology that stands or falls as it is justified by sound appeal to the text of Scripture.

Third, literal interpretation is often assumed to be the result of Common Sense Realism.⁸ Literal interpreters, however, can be found among the very early church fathers. Indeed, literal interpretation was never completely abandoned. Even at the height of fourfold interpretation during the Middle Ages, the literal interpretation was thought to be the correct interpretation of the text.⁹ As I shall point out in a moment, Common Sense Realism did have an effect upon what people thought *literal* meant, but literal interpretation itself antedates Scottish philosophy by nearly two millennia.

Having issued these three caveats, we should also note that Christians were spared some of the very worst consequences of Common Sense Realism because of their prior commitment to the authority of revelation. They did manage to hold on to some elements of order and transcendence. Nevertheless, modernity in general and Common Sense in particular took its toll.

Christians, under the influence of Common Sense, did not deny the transcendent, but they did demote it. In their metaphysical dream, they began to reverse the priority of the transcendent and the immanent.¹⁰ God and His Word were no longer axiomatic. These became matters to be defended, and that defense now involved the methodological priority of doubt and the appeal to neutral foundations within the immanent order. This shift in perspective led to a massive refocusing of the intellectual and spiritual center of Christian faith, with the result that the immanent order became “real” reality.

As Christians granted epistemological priority to the immanent order, they lost their sense of the numinous almost completely. Natural observation displaced revelation as the instrument by which they organized their knowledge of the world. Their naïve belief in the transparency of the world left Christians open to noxious influences against which they no longer sought to maintain any defense. Increasingly, divine intervention was limited to whatever gaps remained after the application of Baconian method. The doctrine of Providence remained formally intact, but it no longer exerted much influence over the everyday thinking of Christian people.¹¹

The focusing of Christians’ perceptions on the here and now also led to a shift in authority. Technically, American evangelicals continued to profess loyalty to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*. In practice, however, they elevated two related authorities to stand alongside Scripture. The first was reason, understood in the sense of plausibility. The second was consciousness, or the awareness of one’s own internal states of affairs. These authorities are seen with special clarity in one of the most influential evangelical theologians of the period, Charles Grandison Finney. Finney’s appeals to common sense, reason, and consciousness could only carry weight in the WYSIWYG world of Common Sense Realism.¹²

Common Sense Realism did not produce literal interpretation, but it did alter it in definite ways. Literalism is not necessarily wooden, and it should never be facile. Under the influence of Common Sense Realism, it tended to become both. Superficial similarities between terms or passages were taken as evidence of common purport. Texts, often torn out of context, were strung together to form Bible readings that were supposed to imply entire doctrines. The supposed illumination of the Holy Spirit was substituted for the hard work of study. In some circles, learning was even regarded as a distraction from and impediment to genuine biblical understanding.¹³

Common Sense Realism also affected polity. Propelled by the belief that one person’s perceptions were as accurate as another’s and, consequently, that one person’s opinions were as good as another’s, American Christians began to lose their sense of church structure and order. Distinction

and deference were displaced by a sense of every Christian's equal right to his opinion. Even congregationalism gave way to a very American version of democracy, while the importance of office fell into neglect until it was reinvented by religious demagogues during the Twentieth Century.¹⁴

The sense of permanence was also damaged. Because the world of perception is ephemeral and constantly changing, those who focus upon it risk losing track of permanent things. That is just what happened among many American Christians. There came to be a sense that the faith had to be reinvented or at least rearticulated for each new situation. A handful of Christian leaders still tried to begin with the permanent things and to emphasize universals as a background for all true knowledge. Such leaders were gradually marginalized by ecclesiastical entrepreneurs and (too often) by religious hucksters.

Facts never speak for themselves. They are always, already interpreted. When people believe that the facts are transparent, they do worse than to deceive themselves. They often mistake their interpretations for reality itself. Such people invariably foster an attitude of resentment toward careful reflection, the drawing of distinctions, the analysis of ideas, and the consideration of the implausible. What results is a tyranny of the immediate and (in the worst sense of the term) the popular.

The shift in metaphysical dream resulted in professing Christians (including fundamentalists) whose vision of the faith was surprisingly and appallingly earthbound. While they gabbled of the historic doctrines of the faith, those doctrines often ceased to grip their imaginations and consequently ceased to influence their lives. Focused almost entirely on the immanent order and driven by populism, these Christians felt compelled to adapt their religion to every breeze of cultural change. A concern for relevance displaced the thirst for transcendence, but what they thought of as relevance turned out to be mere trendiness (and nothing is less relevant than a trendy church). Evangelism became the new mysticism, and evangelicalism (including the later fundamentalism) became profoundly pragmatic. In the long run, much of Christianity was transformed into a venue for baptizing worldly trends so that the faithful could enjoy the same amusements as the rest of the culture, only in a partially sanitized way. Fundamentalists and evangelicals still struggle against (or, more often, capitulate to) this dynamic.

Over the past two essays I have described some of the changes that were wrought by the adoption of Common Sense Realism. In the process I have mentioned two areas that require further elaboration: church order and biblical interpretation. Some individuals seem to believe that the only alternative to Common Sense and Populism is elitism. Over the next two essays, I hope to show that this is not the case. ✖

¹A metaphysical dream is not the same thing as a worldview. Metaphysical dreams come before worldviews. A worldview is a mental map of the organization or order of the universe. A metaphysical dream is an intuition of the most fundamental structure of reality in terms of its relationship to transcendence, order, morality, and meaning.

²The shift from realism (as premoderns understood it) to nominalism and its heirs produced enormous consequences that I do not have space to detail here. The best short treatment of this subject remains Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). Weaver's work, written in the wake of the Second World War, is almost uncannily prophetic. After the passage of more than half a century, his arguments and observations remain as trenchant as when they were first published. If you can only read one book besides your Bible, this one had better be it. A mischievous parable of the shift from premodernity to modernity (and even to Common

Sense Realism) can be found in G. K. Chesterton, "The Tremendous Adventures of Major Brown," in *The Club of Queer Trades* (New York: Dover, 1987 reprint), 1-25, in which two brothers (Rupert and Basil) stand for modernity and premodernity, respectively.

³This argument is very important to Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 235-248, 258-260, 289-292, 331-332. It also plays a role for Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 200-208.

⁴A convincing refutation of Rogers and McKim can be found in John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 135-140.

⁵Mark Noll makes this argument in *Scandal*. He links Scottish Common Sense Realism, biblical literalism, inerrancy, young-earth creationism, and dispensationalism in virtually a single complex of ideas.

⁶Craig Blaising admits as much in "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 13-34, but especially 22, 29-30. Blaising does not mention Common Sense Realism specifically, but he does list its effects. He has confirmed to me in conversation that Baconian method and Common Sense Realism are what he has in view.

⁷For an evaluation of dispensationalism as a branch of Reformed thought, see Stephen R. Spencer, "Reformed Theology, Covenant Theology, and Dispensationalism," in Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 238-254.

⁸Noll makes this point repeatedly in *Scandal*.

⁹Properly, only the literal interpretation yielded the accurate meaning of the text. The, allegorical, and anagogical meanings were considered to be latent, not in the text, but in the thing to which the text pointed.

¹⁰It is a conceit of modernist Philistines that the premodern metaphysical dream is superstitious. The fact that some evangelicals—and fundamentalists—could repeat this absurdity is evidence of how profoundly modernist they have become in their hearts and souls.

¹¹Baconianism is not the same thing as Common Sense Realism, but it is assumed as an element within Common Sense Philosophy.

¹²Finney is an example of this displacement of authority, both because he is so clear about it, and because his influence was so widespread. Finney repeatedly appeals to reason, consciousness, and common sense as authorities alongside the Bible. See Charles G. Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, edited by Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis (Grand Rapids, MI.: Academie Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 57; idem, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, abridged, edited by J. H. Fairchild (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1976), 13, 401; idem, *The Heart of Truth* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1976), 21-22. One of Finney's defenders wrote, "To be considered in connection with the above, and not separable from it, was the emphasis which President Finney always placed on reason and common sense. He could never speak complacently of the idea that the doctrines of a confession or truths of Scripture could be taught as Christian truths if they were to appear fundamentally unreasonable. The importance of this second point cannot easily be overestimated in the attempt to understand his position as a theologian. He

made very clear the place to be assigned to pure reason, that deepest inborn power of the soul which makes it not only possible but imperative to recognize the being and attributes of God, if man is to become the normal being he was created to be. . . . Instead of going to the Bible as to a final external authority, he began, as the Bible begins, with God. And he used the Bible as an aid to inquiry, and not the authority with which mechanically to extinguish thought." Albert Temple Swing, "President Finney and an Oberlin Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 57 (1900), 468, 470.

¹³What fundamentalist pastor has not had the experience of spending weeks of study on the exegesis of a difficult passage, only to have a dear saint inform him that some nonsensical interpretation is more correct because, "This is what the Holy Spirit showed me"?

¹⁴This divergence can still be observed in the wide disparity of practice among fundamentalist Baptists. All Baptists are formally committed to congregational church polity. In some churches, however, the pastor may be harried by committees and boards, leaving him little actual authority to lead. In other churches the pastor is viewed as "the Lord's anointed," a virtually unassailable figure. Ironically, the latter churches are almost invariably those that make the most of their populism. The pastor rules as a demagogue, just as dictators typically have.

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.

Blisse

Thomas Traherne (1636-1674)

All Blisse

Consists in this,

To do as Adam did:

And not to know those Superficial Toys

Which in the Garden once were hid.

Those little new Invented Things.

Cups, Saddles, Crowns are Childish Joys.

So Ribbons are and Rings.

Which all our Happiness destroys.

Nor God

In his Abode

Not Saints nor little Boys

Nor Angels made them, only foolish Men,

Grown mad with Custom on those Toys

Which more increas their Wants do dote.

And when they Older are do then

Those Bables chiefly note

With Greedier Eys, more Boys tho Men. ✕

