

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."

October 16, 2009

Fundamentalism: Whence? Where? Whither? Part 10

The Social Shift

Kevin T. Bauder

To hell with the Twentieth Century!

—Billy Sunday

New York City

April 15, 1917

Ideas always precede movements. Movements (by which I mean large numbers of people sharing a common set of concerns and working together toward a common goal) grow out of ideas. As the idea turns into the movement, however, other ideas and influences get mixed in. The result is that movements rarely or never reflect purely the ideas that produced them.

The Fundamentalist Movement embodies the Fundamentalist idea only imperfectly. One of the most common mistakes in discussing Fundamentalism is to confuse the two, to speak of the movement as if it were the idea or vice versa. The idea of Fundamentalism (which we have not yet discussed) is certainly a component in the Fundamentalist movement, but Fundamentalism as a movement has also assimilated other ideas and ceded to other influences.

Attempting to tell the story of Fundamentalism, I have tried to describe some of the intellectual and social influences that shaped the early Fundamentalist movement. Fundamentalism emerged as an identifiable movement around 1920, but it came from and displayed the characteristics of an earlier American evangelicalism. I have suggested that this earlier evangelicalism was deeply influenced by at least three trends: Scottish Common Sense Realism, populism, and sentimentalism. Though not alone in succumbing to these influences, Fundamentalists certainly did evidence them.

My thesis has been that the early Fundamentalist movement was deeply influenced by Common Sense Realism, populism, and sentimentalism. Over the past several essays I have taken a digression, answering certain objections to this thesis. First, I tried to show how Common Sense Realism represented a metaphysical dream that differed substantively from the metaphysical dream of premodernity. Second, I tried to demonstrate how a genuinely historical-grammatical (literal) hermeneutic need not rely upon either Common Sense or populism. Finally, I attempted to explain the difference between congregational polity and that version of church democracy that grows out of American populism.

Because of these three influences, the Fundamentalist movement was never dedicated purely to defending the faith. To some extent, its defense of the faith always presumed and included a defense of the ideals of Common Sense, populism, and sentimentalism. In other words, the early Fundamentalists were men of their times, reflecting their own situatedness and displaying the concerns not only of historic Christianity but also of their own intellectual and social location.

Because they were committed to more than historic Christianity, the commitments of the Fundamentalist movement have tended to place Fundamentalists in double binds. By this I mean that Fundamentalists and their heirs have regularly found themselves in situations in which their ideals have come into conflict with each other. They have had to choose between their commitments and, with each choice, they have lost some aspect of the original consensus of the movement. The result has been a Fundamentalist movement that has necessarily grown weaker over time.

For purposes of illustration I will cite only one example, namely, the Fundamentalist commitment to populism. This commitment was formed within American evangelicalism at the very time when popular culture was coming into existence. Popular culture is not the same thing as folk culture. Folk cultures reflect and grow out of the traditions and values of a people, while popular culture is imposed through commercial means. Popular culture is mass culture. It is produced for consumption, requires vehicles for mass distribution, and thrives on commercialism. It is culture for sale.

Popular culture requires an efficient engine of propagation. No such engine existed before the invention of the steam-powered printing press. This new technology came into widespread use at almost exactly the moment when American Christians were being led to shape their ministry after the methods of politicians, advertisers, and entertainers. Thus, the evangelicalism out of which Fundamentalism emerged was profoundly shaped by and committed to Victorian popular culture with its individualism, subjectivism, and sentimentalism.

Emerging as a distinct and identifiable movement after the Great War, Fundamentalism was a thoroughly inculturated exemplar of Victorian popular values. Already by 1920, however, the Fundamentalist movement also found itself faced with a massive social and cultural shift. The social consensus of Victorianism, which had begun to unravel in the early years of the century, was rapidly dissolving in the face of what would become known as the "Jazz Age."

With the Jazz Age, the individualism of the Victorian era gave way to a passion for personal autonomy. The characteristic of the age was a yearning for freedom. Typified by the "Flapper," the spirit of the age was the rejection of restraint. The flouting of social and sexual traditions was enhanced through the availability of new technologies: the movie theater, the phonograph, and the automobile. The new music, jazz, had come a long way since the rags of Scott Joplin, and its improvisational methods both reflected and encouraged the autonomy of the times. In spite of some setbacks during the Depression (which technically marked the end of the Jazz Age), the same spirit

continued to flourish through the Second World War, resulting in the explosion of youth culture after the war.

The popular culture of the Jazz Age, and the youth culture that emerged from it, contrasted sharply with Victorian ideals and sensibilities. This contrast left Fundamentalism with a difficult choice. Either Fundamentalists could perpetuate their loyalty to Victorian ideals or they could continue to seek relevance and effectiveness by following the popular culture, but they could not do both.

Billy Sunday was typical of those Fundamentalists who rejected the new culture, though he embraced its technologies. Part of Sunday's appeal—and part of the appeal of Fundamentalism in general—was that he gave voice to the concerns of the older Victorianism against the new culture. In doing so, however, he was not so much defending Christianity as he was defending an older cultural consensus. Neither he nor the churches rejected the pursuit of popular culture. Instead, they drove a stake into the air and attempted to fasten Christianity and American culture in general to the older Victorianism, trying to halt the slide into the new culture.

Sunday's sermons in New York on April 14-15, 1917, are a good example. To be sure, Sunday did mention certain Christian verities, such as the reality of "hell, fire, and brimstone," the "shed blood of Jesus Christ," and the "bleeding form of the Son of God." The bulk of his sermon, however, was an attack on frappish parties, social sophistication, made-up women, frivolous music, miniature dogs, girls' hair styles, liquor, tobacco, divorce, pew rental, and urbane ministers. Sunday also denounced the Germans for their apostasy and the French for their impiety. He noted, however, that God had been with America from the days of Columbus. Reporting on the event, the *New York Times* noted that some of Sunday's expressions "cannot be printed." The one that it did print, however, was Sunday's anathema: "To hell with the Twentieth Century!" The crowd loved it.

These tactics worked as long as there were Victorians to rally. By the end of World War Two, however, they had nearly died out. Sunday himself had passed away in 1935, and even he saw a marked decrease in influence during the closing decade or so of his life. The pressure was increasing to give in to the new and growing social consensus.

The question was not whether Fundamentalism would follow the popular culture and (as Fundamentalists have sometimes put it) employ the world's methods. Doane, Sankey, Bliss, and Rodeheaver were all direct reflections of Victorian popular culture. Sunday was a showman in the truest Victorian sense—a Christianized P. T. Barnum. Whether he was climbing to the top of the pulpit, pretending to slide into home plate, or slugging it out with the devil, Sunday always provided great entertainment. And Rodeheaver (the Christian alternative to the Barber Shop Quartet) was indispensable, setting the mood for Sunday's sermons with the vapid but sprightly *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*.

These amusements, however, lost their appeal during the next generation. What is worse, they began to seem simply goofy, and with good reason. Nothing is ever less relevant or more eccentric than a fashion that has just gone out of style.

By World War Two, Fundamentalists found themselves in a dilemma. Their commitment to Victorian forms of expression was hurting their popular appeal. Their commitment to popular culture exerted an increasing pressure to move into the Jazz Age. They had built their movement partly by their opposition to the mores and expressions of the new culture. Could they now adapt to it without surrendering their identity? ✖

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.

A Meditation of Death

Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667)

Death, the old Serpents Son,
Thou had'st a sting once like thy Sire,
That carried Hell, and ever-burning fire:
But those black dayes are done;
Thy foolish spite buried thy sting
In the profound and wide
Wound of our Saviours side.
And now thou art become a tame and harmless thing,
A thing we dare not fear
Since we hear
That our triumphant God to punish thee
For the affront thou didst him on the Tree,
Hath snatcht the keyes of Hell out of thy hand,
And made thee stand
A Porter to the gate of Life, thy mortal enemy.
O thou who art that Gate, command that he
May when we die
And thither flie,
Let us into the Courts of Heaven through thee.
Allelujah. ✠

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