

# 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."

January 8, 2010

Proto-Fundamentalism, Part 5

### Personal Piety

Kevin T. Bauder

Historical periodization is a subjective business. People do not just go to sleep in one period and wake up in another. Usually they do not even realize that a significant change has occurred except in retrospect. For historians to impose periods upon history is necessarily subjective and somewhat arbitrary.

Nevertheless, since history is linear and progressive, it is possible to trace development. The movement from one period to the next does result in change. Examining the record, a historian can detect these changes and can discern when some significant transition has taken place.

In the history of American Fundamentalism, the years from about 1870 to about 1920 seem to comprise a distinct period. During this period, Fundamentalism was not yet a discernable, self-aware movement. All the same, changes were taking place across American evangelicalism, and these changes strongly shaped Fundamentalism when it emerged in 1920.

In previous essays, I have posited that this proto-fundamentalist period was characterized by eschatological fascination, evangelistic fervor, and an emphasis upon worldwide missions. Secondary characteristics included a minimizing of denominationalism, the growth of the faith missions movement, and the development of the Bible institute as an important venue for proto-fundamentalist education. These influences, however, are only part of the story.

Another major influence during this period was a resurgence of personal piety. This resurgence was necessary because American Christians—indeed, American society—had become preoccupied with personal comfort and affluence. This was the gilded age, and businessmen were riding the crest of the

second industrial revolution to amass fortunes. These individuals may have been a small minority, but they captured the imagination of the country and established an ethos that governed much of American culture.

This was also the period during which entertainment became an industry. To be sure, theaters and music halls had existed earlier, especially in the larger cities. After the Civil War, however, both Broadway and the Bowery blossomed. The rich could afford operas, the comfortable preferred melodramas and minstrel shows, and even the working class could afford Vaudeville. For the dislocated farm boy, drawn to the city by the prospect of employment and excitement, entertainment began to take the place of church.

The churches responded early on by reconfiguring their worship to offer more entertainment. For example, many congregations began to employ secular musicians for their services, reasoning that the humble efforts of volunteer Christians would fail to attract the unchurched. An unsaved virtuoso was thought to contribute more to the service than a pious dilettante.

These practices were challenged directly during the proto-fundamentalist period. Church leaders began to challenge the faithful regarding their personal devotion to Christ. They were able to draw upon a variety of older versions of piety. Wesleyanism still had strict adherents, and these eventually gave rise to the Holiness movement (and later still, to Pentecostalism). A Reformed version of piety was very much alive at Princeton Seminary, and its influences can be traced through the Hodges into Armstrong, Warfield, and Machen. Revivalism represented an American adaptation of Charles Finney's methodology, incorporating a kind of bipolar spirituality.

During the proto-fundamentalist period, however, a new form of piety swept across American churches. It was imported from Great Britain, where it had been adapted from certain of Finney's emphases. It was known as the Higher Life movement or, more simply, as the Keswick movement.

Each of these versions of piety had its own theory of sanctification. Wesleyans emphasized perfect love. Revivalists emphasized rededication. The Reformed had a theology of suppression, and Keswick taught a theology of displacement.

What is remarkable, however, is not the differences between these groups, but their commonalities. For whatever reasons (the new dominance of Keswick probably had much to do with it), virtually every branch of American evangelicalism began to emphasize personal dedication to Christ and holy living. In theory, the groups displayed significant tensions. In practice, however, they managed to sublimate those tensions in view of a common devotion to the Lord Jesus. Even for the Princeton theologians, this was a time for the display of generosity and irenics (see, for example, the remarkable writings of Archibald Alexander Hodge).

During the proto-fundamentalist period, pastors preached for the goal of personal spiritual awakening among their members. They also opposed what they viewed as worldly practices within the churches. For example, many churches fired their unsaved musicians whom they had hired, and they abolished their pew-rental systems. Personal holiness became the deliberate focus of some conferences (such as Keswick), but it was also a major focus of prophecy conferences. The doctrine of imminence and the intensity of personal devotion seemed like natural accompaniments.

The time was ripe for the turn toward the personal. Victorian individualistic sentimentalism lent itself to the demand for a personal, inwardly-focused form of devotion. Furthermore, in an era of rapid social upheaval, the inward turn provided a source of stability and even comfort for the average Christian.

What were the results of the new emphasis upon personal piety? Positively, many believers were indeed challenged to place Christ ahead of all earthly goods and goals. Many believers offered themselves for full-time service as pastors or missionaries. For others, yieldedness to Christ became an essential element of everyday life, affecting their use of time, money, and other resources. Bible institutes, mission agencies, itinerant preachers, and local churches were built upon the sacrifice of such people

The life of devotion to Christ was thought to consist mainly in attraction to the Lord Jesus. It was evidenced by a desire to study the Scriptures and to engage in the life of prayer. Active service, whether as ministry within the local church or witnessing to the lost, was another effect.

Devotion also had a negative side, and proto-fundamentalists increasingly rejected personal practices that were viewed as worldly. It was during this period that many churches added a prohibition against alcohol to their church covenants. Theater attendance, dancing, and card-playing became renewed taboos. Smoking tobacco was prohibited, at least in the North. Some (though not all) versions of proto-fundamentalism also rejected jewelry and other adornments for women. Proto-fundamentalism was the movement that more-or-less codified the "thou shalt not" list for American evangelicals (it should be remembered that even the first-generation New Evangelicals tried to maintain these prohibitions, though the Reformed rejected certain of them).

The new spirit of devotion also had negative consequences for American fundamentalism and evangelicalism. One was that the codified list of prohibitions tended to be maintained as a given. Little attention was devoted to the examination and justification of these standards. Over time, their repetition resulted in a kind of legalism. Anyone who practiced the "dos" and avoided the "don'ts" was viewed as spiritual. In the long run, when a reaction set in against what were viewed as the "cultural taboos" of Fundamentalism, few people could articulate actual reasons for the prohibitions.

More seriously, the sublimation of differences between theories of sanctification had long-term consequences. Revivalists tended to emphasize quick decisions, the bigger the better. For them, the Christian life was a series of crises. Theorists for both the Reformed and Keswick (at least in its milder versions) theories tended to emphasize steady growth as the mechanism for living the Christian life.

The difference between the crisis metaphor and the growth metaphor has never been resolved within American Fundamentalism. Indeed, the two imply radically different approaches to real-life Christianity. They differ in their understanding of the role of the church, of worship, of Christian leadership, and of the nature and function of preaching. Because these differences were downplayed, however, Fundamentalists have often confounded the two approaches, resulting in confusion and unnecessary spiritual defeat.

Indeed, these two approaches to sanctification have resulted in two markedly different versions of Fundamentalism. Many of the struggles within Fundamentalism itself can be traced to precisely this problem. The problem has only been exacerbated by the determination of some Fundamentalist leaders and institutions to deny that a difference exists. But that is getting ahead of the story.

Perhaps the worst consequence of the renewed piety was that it provided cover for the theological liberals. Liberalism was just coming on the scene. It was not widely understood theologically. The liberals, however, could preach and pray in very pious-sounding phrases. Since differences were already being sublimated, the poorly-grasped differences with liberals also tended to be swept under the rug. Pious phraseology gave theological liberalism at least a two-generation head start within American church life.

Personal piety became one of the major emphases of the proto-fundamentalist period. The results were both positive and negative, as might be expected in a fallen world where unforeseen consequences often follow the best of intentions. Nevertheless, the emphasis upon devotion to Christ and denial of self has continued to mark Fundamentalism, even if sometimes in cliché form. ✘

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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](mailto:inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu).

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## Upon the Epiphany, and the three wise men of the East coming to worship JESUS.

Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667)

A Comet dangling in the aire  
Presag'd the ruine both of Death and Sin;  
And told the wise-men of a King,  
The King of Glory, and the Sun  
Of Righteousness, who then begun  
To draw towards that blessed Hemisphere.  
They from the furthest East this new  
And unknown light pursue,  
Till they appeare  
In this blest Infants King's propitious eye,  
And pay their homage to his Royalty.  
Persia might then the rising Sun adore,  
It was Idolatry no more:  
Great God, they gave to thee  
Myrrhe, Frankincense, and Gold:  
But Lord, with what shall we  
Present our selves before thy Majesty,  
Whom thou redeem'dst when we were sold?  
W'have nothing but our selves, & scarce that neither,  
Vile dirt and clay:  
Yet it is soft, and may  
Impression take:  
Accept it, Lord, and say, this thou had'st rather;  
Stamp it, and on this sordid metal make  
Thy holy Image, and it shall out-shine  
The beauty of the golden Myne. Amen. ✘

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