

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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Proto-Fundamentalism, Part 6

Liberalism

Kevin T. Bauder

After the Civil War, American evangelicalism entered a period of change. Developments occurred in the areas of eschatology, evangelism, missions, education, and personal piety. From about 1870 to about 1920, evangelicals were building an entire infrastructure of churches, schools, conferences, missions, and other institutions. It is this network that constituted what, in retrospect, can be called *proto-fundamentalism*.

One very significant influence upon proto-fundamentalism was the rise of theological liberalism. The proto-fundamentalist period occurred during just those decades when modernist and liberal theologies (I will not distinguish the two) were working themselves into the denominational structures. Proto-fundamentalists were forced to deal with the initial manifestations of the new theology.

Liberal theology originated with F. D. E. Schleiermacher, who realized that the cultured and educated people of his day almost universally despised Christianity. What Schleiermacher tried to do was to relocate the center of Christian faith from the Bible and doctrine to religious experience. Doctrines and Scripture were no longer viewed as authoritative statements about external realities but as varied expressions of a common inward experience.

God was thought to be entirely immanent, both in the created order and within historical process. Since all humans somehow participated in the divine, liberals had no trouble speaking of the divinity of Jesus. One liberal, accused of denying the divinity of Christ, responded, "I have never denied the divinity of anyone." What the liberals could not do, however, was to affirm that Jesus Christ is God in any unique sense.

Rather than recognizing Jesus as the object of faith, liberals regarded Him as an important example of faith in God. They were fond of saying that Jesus was the first Christian. They saw Him as a more advanced version of the thing all humans were becoming. Christ's death on the cross was an inspiring picture of God's love and a model of sacrifice that all humans should follow. The notion of penal substitution became repugnant to most liberals.

Since humans participated in the divine nature, liberals softened their theory of sin. For them, evil was located primarily in social structures. The function of the gospel was to alter those structures, alleviating poverty, oppression, and ignorance. Humans and human societies were perfectible, and definite progress was being made toward perfection. Hell became unnecessary: humans were too good to be sent there, and God was too good to send them.

Liberals of all versions embraced the "assured results" of biblical criticism. Both literary and historical criticism were applied to the Bible in the same way that they would be applied to other literature. The Pentateuch was discovered to have been redacted from no less than four sources, Isaiah from no fewer than two. Daniel could not have been prophetic in nature—all of those details must have been written after the event. The pastoral epistles could not have been Pauline. The gospels were late compositions that only partially reflected the historical Jesus. Most importantly, the overall morality of the Bible had to be sacrificed in favor of a progressive version of Jesus' ethical teachings.

Perhaps the most revealing critique of old liberalism was authored, not by a Fundamentalist, but by H. Richard Niebuhr. In his book, *The Kingdom of God in America*, he observed that in liberalism "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross" (193). To these characteristics could be added that liberals knew God through a Bible without authority—a defect that Niebuhr also shared.

How did proto-fundamentalists respond to liberal theology? The answer to that question is complicated. When they recognized liberal theology and saw it for what it was, they reacted swiftly. For example, the Presbyterian Church (USA) conducted a series of heresy trials with results that were not favorable to liberals. David Swing was forced to withdraw from the Presbyterian ministry in 1874. William C. McCune was reprimanded by the General Assembly in 1877. Charles Briggs was defrocked in 1891. Arthur C. McGiffert was "counseled" in 1898, and then withdrew in 1899.

Presbyterians also adopted a series of statements that attempted to erect a barrier against liberal theology. The Portland Deliverance of 1892 declared the inerrancy of Scripture to be an essential doctrine. In 1899, the General Assembly adopted a statement naming four essential doctrines. This statement was expanded in 1910 to include inerrancy, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the authenticity of miracles.

Baptists also reacted when they recognized the presence of liberals. Crawford Toy was dismissed from Southern Baptist Seminary in 1879. In 1909, Oliver W. Van Osdel led most of the Grand Rapids Baptist churches to leave the Grand Rapids Baptist Association, forming the Grand River Valley Baptist Association as an alternative organization. In 1913, Baptists established Northern Baptist Seminary as a reaction against the liberalism of the divinity school at the new University of Chicago.

The problem was that few Americans were in a position to recognize liberalism for what it was. True, Charles Hodge had studied with Schleiermacher and had offered critiques of early liberalism, but not many American theologians had direct acquaintance with the new theology. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that, for the most part, liberals were not exactly open about announcing the change in their views. They tended to repeat pious utterances in public but to reserve their criticisms of orthodoxy for the privacy of the classroom.

A few did make their views clear. For example, Charles Briggs' public declaration of liberal principles was what led to his defrocking within the Presbyterian Church. The lesson was not lost on other liberals. Most of them became very careful about openly advocating liberal views.

Proto-fundamentalists would challenge heterodoxy when it was obvious, but they were not heresy hunters. For the most part, they were not on the lookout for apostasy. It would be fair to say that they thought liberalism to be a rare exception before the 1910s—and by that time, they had other distractions.

Even today, some expressions of liberalism are parroted by the heirs of the proto-fundamentalists. Fundamentalist churches sometimes sing Washington Gladden's "O Master Let Me Walk with Thee" or Henry Van Dyke's "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." They have even been known to lift their voices in "God of Grace and God of Glory" by Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the most notorious liberals of his day. The ready reception that some Fundamentalists have extended to Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps* is a testimony to the difficulty with which liberalism can be detected when it is hidden behind a pious-sounding phrase.

The proto-fundamentalists did challenge liberalism here and there. Liberals, however, did not go away. They simply went underground. By the 1910s they were becoming more numerous and more obvious. Among proto-fundamentalists there was a growing awareness that all was not well in the churches and seminaries. One of the manifestations of proto-fundamentalist uneasiness was the publication of a series of volumes entitled *The Fundamentals*. A discussion of that series will occupy the next essay. ✕

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.

Of the Day of Judgement.

Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667)

Great Judge of all, how we vile wretches quake!
Our guilty bones do ake,
Our marrow freezes, when we think
Of the consuming fire
Of thine ire;
And horrid phials thou shalt make
The wicked drink,
When thou the winepress of thy wrath shalt tread
With feet of lead.
Sinful rebellious clay! what unknown place
Shall hide it from thy face!
When earth shall vanish from thy sight,
The heavens that never err'd,
But observ'd

Thy laws, shal from thy presence take their flight,
And kil'd with glory, their bright eyes, stark dead
Start from their head:
Lord, how shall we,
Thy enemies, endure to see
So bright, so killing Majesty?
Mercy dear Saviour: Thy Judgement seat
We dare not Lord intreat;
We are condemn'd already, there.
Mercy: vouchsafe one look
On thy book
Of life; Lord we can read the saving Jesus, here,
And in his Name our own Salvation see:
Lord set us free,
The book of sin
Is cross'd within,
Our debts are paid by thee.
Mercy. ✠

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