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Classics Revisited

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R. A. Torrey and others, *The Fundamentals* (4 vols), Baker, 1917 (reprinted 1994), \$75.00. ISBN 0 8010 8750 3

The origins of these volumes can be traced back to 1909, when two wealthy Christian businessmen decided to finance the production of a series of tracts, designed to reaffirm and defend the basic ideas of the Christian faith, for the particular benefit of missionaries and others engaged in evangelistic work. The tracts were collectively known as *The Fundamentals*, and were eventually gathered together and published in twelve volumes. Some 300,000 copies of the tracts were distributed during this initial phase. The contributors included many of the luminaries of the age, drawn from North America and Britain. American contributors included the Princeton heavyweight Benjamin B. Warfield; the British contributors included Handley Moule, then Bishop of Durham and a former Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University. Taken together, this assembly of writings from journalists, theologians, missionaries and pastors offered a basic presentation of 'the fundamentals of the Christian faith'. Such was its impact that, when the original funds ran out, the work was reissued in 1917 in a four-volume format by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (now Biola University). It is this edition which has now been republished, and which prompts this revisit.

What do the volumes contain? The most striking feature of the collection is their vigorous defence of traditional conservative positions on a range of issues relating to Scripture. Thus Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch is upheld, along with the literary unity of Isaiah. The emerging 'higher criticism' comes in for particular attention. Some of the titles will illustrate the approach: 'My Personal Experience with the Higher Criticism' (J. J. Reeve); 'Three Peculiarities of the Pentateuch which are incompatible with the Graf-Wellhausen Theories of its Composition' (Andrew Craig Robinson); 'The Recent Testimony of Archaeology to the Scriptures' (M. G. Kyle); 'Fallacies of the Higher Criticism' (Franklin Johnson). It is clear that the authors of this collection regarded the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture to be under significant threat from the emerging developments in biblical scholarship, and that they were determined to mount a sustained counter-attack. However, the collection also includes material relating to the 'cults' of the period, as well as expositions of the central themes of traditional evangelical Christianity.

From reading this collection of essays, it is perfectly obvious that the 'Fundamentalists' saw themselves simply as doing nothing more than returning to biblical orthodoxy. This point was recognised at the time by Kirsopp Lake (1872-1946), a leading British modernist writer who specialised in the field of NT and patristic studies. In his *Religion of Yesterday and*

Tomorrow (1926), which advocated a form of religion based on individual human perceptions and experience, rather than revelation, Lake wrote as follows:¹

It is a mistake often made by educated men who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology, to suppose that fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the sort; it is the partial and uneducated survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians.... The fundamentalist may be wrong; I think he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he, and I am sorry for the fate of anyone who tries to argue with the fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The Bible and the *corpus theologicum* of the church is on the fundamentalist side.

On the basis of a close scrutiny of the contents of these four volumes, this comment is justified. The authors of *The Fundamentals* wanted to defend basic Christianity against a series of threats, many of which they discerned as emanating from German NT scholarship, which were looming on the horizon. A modern Evangelical reading this collection would probably find it generally rather unremarkable. Many of the ideas which it contains and defends are the standard fare of what the 1940s called 'Bible-believing Christianity', and would continue to find wide acceptance within Evangelicalism today.

Yet the term 'fundamentalist' soon stopped meaning 'wanting to get back to Christian orthodoxy'. By the late 1940s, the word was widely used to mean something like 'reactionary, unthinking, uncritical, aggressive and vicious'. So what happened? What went wrong? How come that setting out the fundamentals of faith led to such a violent reaction? And what can Evangelicals within the Church of England learn from that reaction, and from subsequent developments? I think we can learn much; I certainly have myself.²

First, we need to be absolutely clear that we need never apologise for wishing to rediscover, reaffirm and reappropriate the fundamentals of the Christian faith. In our own Anglican tradition, we need only look back to Richard Hooker, who spoke of 'these things which supernaturally appertain to the very essence of Christianity, and are necessarily required in every particular Christian'.³ And nobody, except possibly Bishop Spong, is going to dismiss Stephen Sykes as a 'Fundamentalist' simply because he takes the ideas of 'the fundamentals of Christianity' seriously.⁴ As many readers of this journal will know, theological liberalism has now lost what little academic credibility it once possessed, its pastoral and apologetic credentials having

1 For these and other citations, see N. M. de S. Cameron, 'The Logic of Biblical Authority', in N. M. de S. Cameron, ed., *The Challenge of Evangelical Theology*, Rutherford House, Edinburgh 1987, pp 1-16.

2 Alister E. McGrath, *The Renewal of Anglicanism*, SPCK, London 1993, and especially Alister E. McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1994.

3 Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity in Works*, vol. 1 (3rd edn), Oxford University Press, Oxford 1845, p 339.

4 Stephen Sykes, 'The Fundamentals of Christianity', in S. Sykes and J. Booty, eds, *The Study of Anglicanism*, SPCK, London 1988, pp 231-45.

long since disappeared.⁵ The rise of the movement known as 'postliberalism' in the United States has given a new intellectual vitality to Evangelicalism, and reinforced the importance of a theological 'back to basics'. As modern Evangelicals, we need neither hesitate to go back to Scripture for inspiration, challenge, education, guidance and nourishment, nor feel the need to apologise to anyone for doing so.

Second, we need to understand what made 'Fundamentalism' so objectionable to so many American Christians earlier this century. Why should such a programme of rediscovering the basics evoke such a hostile reaction? There is ample evidence to allow us to understand what went wrong. Those mistakes are too easily repeated, and we must learn from the failures of our fundamentalist forebears as much as we do from their successes. As George Santayana once wrote, 'those who are ignorant of the past are doomed to repeat its errors.'

At least two major strategic errors can be discerned. In both cases, it can be argued that the errors were forced upon Fundamentalism by the tactics of their opponents. Nevertheless, the errors were made. First, Fundamentalism was easily portrayed as unthinking and uncritical. It was child's play for their liberal opponents to dismiss them as ignorant, uncultured peasants. Most historians regard Fundamentalism as never having recovered its credibility in the aftermath of the Scopes 'monkey' trial of 1925. In May of that year, John T. Scopes contravened a recently adopted statute which prohibited the teaching of evolution in Tennessee's public schools. The American Civil Liberties Union moved in to support Scopes, while William Jennings Bryan served as prosecution counsel. It proved to be the biggest public relations disaster of all time for Fundamentalism.⁶ In the end, Bryan succeeded in winning the trial in the courtroom; Scopes was fined \$100. But a much greater trial was taking place in the nation's newspapers, in which Bryan was declared to be unthinking, uneducated and reactionary. Fundamentalism might make sense in a rural Tennessee backwater, but had no place in sophisticated urban America.

Even though Fundamentalism, in the strict sense of the word, never had much influence in England, English conservative Evangelicalism was easily pilloried in much the same way. The polemic directed by James Barr against the movement in the mid-1970s partly reflects this contemptuous attitude on the part of the liberal academic establishment.⁷ During the early 1950s, the

5 There is a huge literature. See Leonard E. Sweet, 'The 1960s: The Crises of Liberal Christianity and the Public Emergence of Evangelicalism', in George Marsden, ed., *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1984, pp 29-45, and the works discussed in McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, pp 90-94.

6 See Ray Ginger, *Six Days or Forever? Tennessee versus John Thomas Scopes*, Beacon, Boston 1958.

7 James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, SCM, London 1977. Barr believed himself to be adopting an eirenic approach in this work (pp 8-10); if so, his approach seriously miscarried. For the continuing controversy, see R. T. France, 'James Barr and Evangelical Scholarship', *Anvil* 8 (1991), pp 51-64; James Barr, "'Fundamentalism" and Evangelical Scholarship', *Anvil* 8 (1991), pp 141-152. In this article, Barr disappointingly shows himself to remain committed to the discredited 'Fundamentalist' category to refer to Evangelicals.

movement was characterised by an anti-intellectual defensiveness, nourished by a separatist mentality. 'Evangelicals inclined to the view that they were excused culture, scholarship and intellectual exercise on religious grounds and they felt exonerated from loving God with their minds. It was all part of their "backs-to-the-wall" attitude.'⁸ Although it is perhaps unwise to try and identify a single incident as illustrating the tidal change which would sweep through the English Church in the next forty years, the appointment of James I. Packer to a lectureship at Tyndale Hall, Bristol in 1955 can be seen as a milestone. Packer was the first such lecturer in England to have earned an Oxford doctorate in theology. The growing expansion and acceptance of Evangelicalism in English academia, particularly evident in a series of recent major academic appointments, is making it increasingly difficult for Evangelicalism to be dismissed in this way.⁹ Today, Evangelicalism has managed to establish its academic credentials, without in any way losing sight of its distinctive emphasis upon evangelism, personal conversion and pastoral relevance.

The second mistake concerned the siege mentality which became characteristic of the movement. Fundamentalists saw themselves as walled cities, or circles of wagons, like a Boer *kraal*, defending their distinctives against an unbelieving culture. 'Oppositionalism', to use a clumsy but helpful term coined by Martin Marty (University of Chicago), became a leading characteristic of a fundamentalist outlook. Anything to do with a secular culture had to be rejected. Whereas most nineteenth-century forms of American Evangelicalism were culturally centralist, committed to engaging with culture in order to transform it through the gospel, the fundamentalist reaction against 'modernity' carried with it, as part of its religious package, a separatist attitude to culture. The result was as predictable as it was unacceptable: American Evangelicalism began to lose its influence on American culture. It had turned in on itself, and ceased to try to influence the culture.

It turned in on itself in another sense as well. One of the most worrying features of Fundamentalism in the later 1920s was the civil war which broke out within the movement. Fundamentalism was originally about fighting liberalism. Yet somehow, it seemed to end up doing little more than encouraging spectacular and pointless fire fights within Evangelicalism. While bemused liberals (the supposed targets of the fundamentalist criticism!) looked on, Fundamentalism proceeded to tear itself to pieces in an orgy of mutual recrimination. The debates did not really centre on 'the fundamentals' at all; the most vicious of all the fire fights focused on whether Bible-believing Christians should stay within mainline churches and try to reform them from within, or leave them altogether and form a separate church. As Francis Schaeffer, himself a victim of this fury at the time, remarks, Evangelical ended up fighting Evangelical, rather than liberal.¹⁰

8 Randle Manwaring, *From Controversy to Co-existence: Evangelicals in the Church of England, 1914-1980*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, p 55.

9 I recall the reaction of one of my Oxford colleagues to my election as Bampton Lecturer in 1990: 'that puts paid to the myth of Evangelicalism as a bolt-hole for fools.'

10 Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, Crossway, Westchester, IL 1984, p 75.

The periodicals of those who left tended to devote more space to attacking people who differed with them on the issue of leaving than to dealing with the liberals. Things were said that are difficult to forget even now. Those who came out refused at times to pray with those who had not come out. Many who left broke off all forms of fellowship with true brothers and sisters in Christ who had not left. Christ's command to love one another was destroyed. What was left was frequently a turning inward, a self-righteousness, a hardness.

The weapons which Fundamentalism intended to use against liberalism ended up being turned against their fellow Fundamentalists. The result? A shell-shocked, battle-weary and demoralised movement, which had not the energy to fight those whom it originally intended to oppose. English Evangelicalism could easily have gone the same way in the aftermath of the 1966 confrontation between John Stott and Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones at the Second National Assembly of Evangelicals. It could easily go the same way today. Happily, it has not, and it gives every indication that it will not. However, the fate of Fundamentalism — both as a movement and as a word in the English language — reminds us of what might happen, if we allow sectional interests to obscure the wonder of the gospel itself.

To read *The Fundamentals* is to rediscover the world of early twentieth-century American Protestant Christianity, and learn of its hopes and fears. The work is now seriously dated. Its evaluation of the threats posed by biblical criticism and Darwinian evolution would need to be restated if they were to have any significant value today. Some of the controversies to which much space is devoted have disappeared without trace, leaving the bewildered reader wondering why they were referred to at all. Many of the personalities who contributed to these volumes, though well-known at the time, have faded away from memory altogether. Although I have made a speciality of the study of this period, I have to confess that I had to resort to reference works in ten cases to establish the identity of the people involved. Yet perhaps the importance of these volumes lies less in the ideas and arguments developed, important though these were at the time, but in the realisation of the need to identify, defend and affirm the 'fundamentals of faith'. Fundamentalism came close to bringing this approach into disrepute — not because of a flaw in the method, but on account of its own weaknesses and failings, and especially (if I am being ruthlessly honest) the fact that some of its representatives were *prima donnas* who seemed to have confused their personal status with some of the articles of faith they sought to defend. We cannot afford to make the mistakes which Fundamentalism made. We can, however, learn much from their objectives, as set out here, and above all from the spirit of total dedication to the defence and proclamation of the gospel of our Lord which saturates these essays.

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