The Historical Background of the Five Fundamentals

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Norman F. Furniss in *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918–1931* concludes by depicting fundamentalism as a lost cause. Stewart G. Cole in the closing chapter of *The History of Fundamentalism* likewise pictures the fundamentalists as a minority drifting toward extinction. There are signs today, however, of a lively revival of interest in fundamentalism though sometimes manifested in a volley of criticism.

While the fundamentals of the faith can be traced through the Reformation to the early church, fundamentalism as it is known today has its roots in the nineteenth century whence its liberal counterpart also sprang. In 1877 a Prophetic Conference was held at the Church of the Holy Trinity in New York City. The New York Tribune published an edition of 50,000 copies giving in full the messages of the conference. Conferences held in various parts of the country brought together leaders from the major Protestant denominations. Their addresses alerted pastors and laymen to the significance of liberalism which was infiltrating the churches and rallied Christians to the defense of historic Christianity.

The statement of five fundamentals formulated by the Niagara group in 1895 became a focal point in the controversy. These were presented as the essentials of faith which all Christians must accept. Briefly they were: (1) the inerrancy of the Scriptures, (2) the deity of Christ, (3) His virgin birth, (4) His substitutionary atonement, and (5) His physical resurrection and future bodily return.

No major Protestant denomination escaped the impact of the fundamentals of the faith. Widespread interest in the subject was reflected in the space it occupied in such secular magazines as: *Atlantic, Forum, New Republic, Current Opinion, Literary Digest, Harpers, American Mercury, The Nation*. The *Forum* published its readers' definitions of a fundamentalist. One liberal caustically wrote, "A Fundamentalist is a besieged Christian anxious to dictate the terms of surrender to Science."[1] A fundamentalist reader offered a definition reflecting his stand against the relativism inherent in the liberal theology: "In every realm of life there are certain great ultimates of truth. These are basic and cannot be improved upon. You cannot improve on the straight line or the multiplication table or

[1] *Forum*, December, 1926, p. 862.

the seven primary colors. In the spiritual realm we have ultimates, such as, The Existence of God; the Inspiration of the Scriptures; the Supernatural birth and life of Jesus Christ; His bodily Resurrection and His Atonement for sin and His Coming Kingdom. The Fundamentalist accepts without questioning these great ultimates."[2]

To understand the full significance of the fundamentals we must consider the roots of the liberal theology which the fundamentalists opposed. Liberalism was the product of nineteenth-century thought. Noordtzy has pointed out the dominant strength of evolution in this era: "I think I do the 19th century no injustice when I say that it had set its heart on the evolutionary idea, not only in the domain of nature, but also in the realm of history. This had a twofold result. First that men were of course inclined to suppose a long period of development, and to place that which they considered lower, or less developed, earlier in history. And secondly, they were inclined to think optimistically concerning man, who had not only developed from ape to human being, but had further raised himself from the most rudimentary ideas to clearer ideas and concepts, for whom even religion was only an intermediary stage, and whose end would only be attained when we shall be 'like Hegel.' "[3]

Evolution contributed to the higher critical attack on the Old Testament which Wellhausen divided into documents rearranged to fit the assumed pattern of development from a very low religion to a higher ethical plane. Belief in the unchanging laws of evolutionary progress was incompatible with the miracles of Scripture. The Bible was valued as a record of man's growing religious experience.

Evolution supported an anthropocentric view of history rather than the theocentric position found in Scripture. Man was considered to be in control of his own destiny. Belief in objective ultimate religious truths was regarded as detrimental to further spiritual progress. Religion, like science, should be emancipated from traditional views and set free to discover new truth for the modern era. The New Testament was not viewed as the norm of Christian truth and practice. Liberals objected to having their doctrines "frozen" in the thought forms of the first century.

The industrial revolution also contributed to the molding of the liberal mind. After the Civil War the industrial community began to replace the predominant rural society. Cole observed: "The industrial society developed without regard for the well-being of Christianity. Material goods began to rival spiritual values in human lives. Sunday as a rest day was almost lost in the shuffle for power."[4] There were some Christian leaders

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[2] *Ibid.*

[3] A. Noordtzy, "The Old Testament Problem," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 97:471, October–December, 1940.

[4] Stewart G. Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism*, p. 17.

who "assumed a rational approach to determine the nature of Christian duty. Such names as Horace Bushnell, Washington Gladden, and Walter Rauschenbusch suggest a succession of social prophets who worked upon the gospel of applied Christianity. Experimental clergy built so-called institutional churches to minister to every phase of human need."[5]

Another significant factor was the increasing centralization of national church organizations which corresponded to a similar trend in political and economic life. Thus there emerged a new consciousness of the unity of all Christians. Any discussion of unity must naturally face the question: "What are the essential doctrines of Christianity?" Herein lies one reason for continued interest in the fundamentals of the faith today.

From this brief survey it can be seen that the cleavage between modernists and fundamentalists was not a superficial difference. As some observers noted, the division was as deep and broad as the gulf separating Protestants and Catholics.[6] Men whose theology rested heavily on evolutionary and higher critical premises while maintaining only a tenuous link with historic orthodoxy, began to raise their voices on the American Protestant scene in the late nineteenth century. Such drastic departures from Biblical faith brought sharp reactions. Professor Charles A. Briggs of Union Theological Seminary was suspended from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., by action of the General Assembly which heard his case on appeal in 1893. In 1910 the General Assembly recognized five doctrines (similar to the Niagara statement) as "essential and necessary." Candidates for ordination would have to affirm unqualified acceptance of these fundamentals.

In other denominations leaders were examining liberal theology in the light of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. Liberals encountered stiff opposition. At this juncture a mediating school arose dividing the conservative forces. Practical-minded churchmen, more concerned with the progress of their church programs than with theological debate, urged both sides to quit arguing about the gospel and unite in preaching it. Since liberals were struggling to gain status in the ministry of orthodox churches, this plea suited their purposes quite well. With the middle-of-the-roaders shielding them from fundamentalist attacks, modernists were able to strengthen their forces within the church. Eventually they gained the ascendancy.

There were some like Bishop Manning of the Protestant Episcopal Church who sought a mediating theology. He wrote an article rejecting the liberal attacks on the miracles and on the deity of Christ. He yielded to their opposition to Biblical infallibility, however,

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[5] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[6] Rollin Lynde Hartt, "The Disruption of Protestantism," *Forum*, November, 1925, p. 679.

saying: "It is the spiritual message of the Bible which is inspired, not its scientific allusions, which naturally reflect the knowledge of the time."[7]

Perhaps more significant was the trend for some conservatives to accept an inclusive church as the means of obtaining peace and harmony. A group of Presbyterian ministers sent forth a statement titled, "A Plea for Peace and Work."[8] The plea stressed the need for unity among those who held diverse beliefs lest the progress of missions be hindered. The Northern Baptists elected as their president in 1926 James Whitcomb Brougher, a doctrinal conservative who favored forgetting the controversy with modernism. He toured the country advocating this position in a sermon titled, "Play Ball."

To thoroughgoing fundamentalists like Machen it was unthinkable that any true Christian should resolve to work harmoniously with the liberals. The reason for this stand was simple, Machen declared: "The church of Rome may represent a perversion of the Christian religion; but naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all."[9]

Fundamentalists differed from conservatives on the question of inclusivism. An editorial in the *Christian Century* made the sharpest distinction between fundamentalists and modernists, but with the conservatives the liberal *Christian Century* saw only "the range of intellectual differences within a common fellowship."[10] Thus liberals wooed conservatives as allies in the campaign for an inclusive church.

True to its evolutionary origin, liberal theology has no fixed or ultimate form. None are lost or saved, some are just more advanced than others. Faith is valued for the good it does for man. Anyone is justified in clinging to the belief that helps him the most. The *Christian Century* pictured God as "the eternal Democrat."[11] rather than a sovereign whose truth is eternal. From the liberal viewpoint, a church with a wide range of religious beliefs is no more incongruous than a congress with representatives of all political shades of opinion.

A fundamentalist who accepts the concept of an inclusive church ceases to be a fundamentalist. Conservatives and liberals might regard orthodox Biblical theology as one of the forms of faith recognized in the church, but fundamentalists insist it is the faith of the church.

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[7] William Thomas Manning, "Fundamentalist and Modernist," *Forum*, December, 1926, p. 859.
[8] Quoted in *The Presbyterian Enterprise*, edited by Armstrong, Loetscher, and Anderson, pp. 253–54.
[9] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, quoted in *Fundamentalism versus Modernism*, Eldred C. Vanderlaan, editor, p. 366.
[10] Quoted by Vanderlaan, *ibid.*, pp. 69–70.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

The climate of opinion created by the conservative-liberal coalition for "peace and work," culminating in the Auburn Affirmation, paved the way for the withdrawal in 1927 by the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., of its earlier stand for the five fundamentals. Similar developments in other denominations gave liberal ministers a secure standing in American Protestantism. Fundamentalism lost its dominant position in most of the major denominations and has not regained its former status. This setback was primarily at the level of clerical control of organizational machinery. It is generally recognized that fundamentalism is today a powerful force among rank and file ministers and laymen. Although the terms *fundamentalist* and *conservative* tend to connote various shades of meaning depending on the view of the speaker, a survey conducted by Opinion Research Corporation in October and November of 1957 revealed three fourths of the Protestant ministers classifying themselves as fundamentalist or conservative. On the specific issue of Biblical authority, two thirds held that "it is essential to preach and teach the Bible as the authoritative rule of life."[12] One third said "it is *not* essential to preach and teach that the Bible is verbally inspired by God in original writings."[13]

One of the striking reactions to inclusivist leadership in major Protestant denominations has been the phenomenal growth of interdenominational faith missions and small, intensively conservative, denominational mission societies. According to Lindsell: "Whereas in 1925 and 1938 the number of missionaries from agencies connected with the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America represented a larger percentage of foreign missionaries, today the situation has been reversed."[14]

The expanding strength of fundamental mission boards and the growth of the inclusive World Council of Churches are two of the reasons the fundamentals will continue to be theologically important in the coming years. Fundamentalists themselves do well to review the lessons of their history.[15]

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[12] "What Protestant Ministers Believe," *Christianity Today*, 2:13:30, March 31, 1958.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Harold Lindsell, "The Eloquence of Missionary Statistics," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 113:241, July–September, 1956.

[15] Price, O. (1961). "The Historical Background of the Five Fundamentals." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, *118*, 35–40.