

Historic Marks of Fundamentalism

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Fundamentalism began in the later nineteenth century as a concerned response to the rise of higher criticism and doctrinal deviation and also as a response to the worldly drift among God's people. How far back does the movement go? Surely not before the Believers' Meeting held in Chicago, 1875, with their concerns about prophecy and German theology. Some have dated it from 1909, with the publication of "The Fundamentals" and the first edition of "The Scofield Reference Bible". Surely it dates no later than the 1920 Northern Baptist Convention, when Curtis Lee Laws coined the term Fundamentalist. By any view, however, the movement was a departure from the drifting attitude expressed by main-stream Protestant orthodoxy. A look at the marks of the movement will bring that out clearly. The old Protestants did not seem to have these identifying qualities.

I. Biblicism.

The Fundamentalists took a more rigorous view of the Bible than many of their forefathers. Commonly during the 19th century the believers held a strong view of inspiration, but it was not yet an issue. The Princeton men get credit for their strong view, but the great majority of ministers would hardly have faulted them for the way they put into print what most had commonly accepted. Now with the strong view of inspiration came an equally strong view of inerrancy and of literal interpretation.

Part of the reason for this rigorous Biblicism was the rising concern for prophecy. A literally-interpreted Bible will wreck both postmillennialism and amillennialism. The rising Biblicism forced many to a choice: either a literal Bible, or the old Confession of Faith, but not both; most of the old confessions had a wrong view of prophecy. The hope of the Lord's return began cutting people off from their denominational homes.

With the literal Bible, especially after 1920, the key issues became the Virgin Birth and Creation. The literature of the time is full of these, and both of them reveal how faith in the Bible and Modernism are mutually exclusive.

II. Premillennialism.

The second great mark of the movement is the hope of the any-moment rapture and of the bodily return of Christ to set up His kingdom. The literature suggests that the early leaders had read Darby and then put his writing out of their minds, so as to form their own view of prophecy. By the end of the nineteenth century many came to recognize that God has dealt with Israel, the church and others in different ways, even though He always saves by grace through faith. This understanding soon led to dispensationalism, and during the 1920's the Scofield Reference Bible became a standard of the movement. Years ago I heard A. J. McClain remark that in his view the Scofield Bible was the leading device that the Spirit of God used to protect the faithful from the grip of Modernism.

III. Separatism.

Many of the faithful were slow to see the threat of Modernism. As of 1875 it was surely a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, but by 1910 it had become an army with banners. That year W. B. Riley was thinking to mount a pre-convention conference before the Northern Baptist Convention met, writing that from the chairman on down, the whole program was in the hands of the higher critics. Ten more years were to pass, however, until enough pressure would build to bring about such a meeting. By that time Northern Baptist Modernists held key pulpits, most of the schools, and many of the mission boards. Not until about 1927-29 was there any real despair over the head offices or any willingness to pull out.

With the coming of the 1930's it was clear that the Fundamentalists had no home in their old denominations. By then the apostasy was too well rooted to get it out. The only right course was to leave, and probably lose their retirement in the process. Separation now became a permanent mark of Fundamentalism.

At the same time separatism focused also on the Federal Council of Churches. There was no doubt that the Federal Council was under Modernist control, and Fundamentalists have held the same aversion to the World and National Councils that have appeared since then.

Separatism has had an additional expression, not only of the church from apostasy, but of the believer from the world. While the enemy would often cry legalism, it seemed to the Fundamentalists that any consistent love for the Lord would produce a revulsion for the world that crucified Him. They found plenty of verses to back up this view.

IV. Militancy.

A fourth mark of Fundamentalism is the mood that went with it, what I describe as a feeling of outrage at religious piracy. When a person views the Modernist takeover of some mission or endowment, he will react with either a benign tolerance or a sort of anger. The Fundamentalist has no option. He has no way to view calmly the man who takes that to which he has no doctrinal right. Ernest Gordon wrote an angry book about that, "The Leaven of the Sadducees". He reflected the feeling of a whole movement. Anyone who loved the grand old doctrines could not but react with emotion at the sight of an unbeliever drawing a salary from a school still calling itself Baptist or Presbyterian. Militancy was only a kind of consistency, the right product of conviction.

Any Other Marks?

Another trait of the movement has been its constant faith in preaching. From its earliest stirrings, its only way to express something was to express it in a preaching form. The leaders sometimes had to learn parliamentary law, but their hearts weren't much in it. It was preaching in which they believed. They have always distrusted secular education, even though some of them had their training in secular schools.

They stressed evangelism and foreign missions, but lately with decreasing success. Even of those who can report numbers, many have to use the methods of show business rather than the preaching that would have worked a generation ago.

The movement used to be rather interdenominational, but the last two decades have seen almost the end of that.

Fundamentalism has had its problems and inconsistencies; the position, however, still

happens to be right.