

FUNDAMENTALS OF THE FAITH

INTRODUCTION

A. Perspectives on Theology

1. Importance

The issue of theology is not only for academics but of central import to every Christian. A look back into history reminds one of the crucial issues addressed and defined in terms which allows the Church to stand on solid theological foundations. The Council of Jerusalem affirmed the universal nature of the Gospel, for Jews and Gentiles. The 2nd - 4th centuries focused on the Bible canon and the nature of Christ and His relationship to the Godhead. The 11th century saw a split between East and West over the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and to the Son. The 16th century saw the affirmation of the priority of Scripture and salvation by faith alone.

Today, doing theology and doing it well is as important as ever. Some issues have changed but some are being studied anew with frightening consequences. Leith Anderson clearly notes, *One of the greatest values of theological education is learning from the past as a preventive against becoming heterodox in the future.*¹

As church leaders and elders, we must be especially careful to be theologically minded. Great responsibility has been placed on us by Scripture. Paul declared that an elder is to be *holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.*² Ted Kitchens notes that "for pastors and church elders the standard is more rigid since, they are especially responsible to teach and defend "the whole purpose of God"(Acts 20:27).³

If those warnings are not sobering enough, seriously consider one church's covenant:

I therefore promise, in dependence upon the grace of God which helpeth our infirmities, to contend earnestly for the faith which was once delivered to the saints, to do good unto all men, especially those who are of the household of faith, to sanctify the Lord's day by diligent and devoted attendance upon the public worship of God in this church, to support the work of the church as God prospers us, to keep the ordinances as they have been delivered unto us, to pray faithfully for those who have the rule over us, who speak the Word of God, and to preserve the good name of this church by a consistent walk so that no reproach shall be brought upon the name of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We are accountable to do good theology. Often, it is a responsibility avoided due to fear of failure. Charles Spurgeon rightly declared, *The way to defend the Bible is the same way you defend a lion. You just let it loose.*⁴ Our responsibility is to feed on the Word which will not only nourish us but those God has called us to serve. McLachlan rightly observes, *Emaciated women cannot give birth to healthy children. Neither can emaciated Christians.*⁵

¹Leith Anderson, "Theological Issues of 21st-Century Ministry," *Bibliotheca Sacra*.

²Titus 1:9, New American Standard Bible (NASB).

³Ted G. Kitchens, "Perimeters of Corrective Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra*.

⁴Quoted by Donald W. McCullough, *The Trivivization of God*, p. 123.

⁵Douglas R. McLachlan, *Reclaiming Authentic Fundamentalism*, p. 21.

The study of theology must always be tempered by the realization of our own human frailties. *The theological enterprise demands humility as much as critical thinking.*⁶ Our cognitive abilities are limited but our faculties for obedience must be stretched. *Doctrinal orthodoxy without a living faith is like an empty treasure chest; it awaits the riches for which it was intended, yet lacks that richness itself.*⁷ On one side, we have limited knowledge but on the other we limit our response. Theology can and must spur us on to know and obey better. That is a pursuit well-pleasing to God.

2. A Conservative Theological Position

Several words are currently mentioned to describe the theological position of some conservative churches. One would be *fundamentalist* and another, *evangelical*. When properly understood, both give an accurate description of our place in theological circles. These terms came to describe a movement reacting to a dramatic trend toward liberalism at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. One noted historian specifically pointed to the development of the *Social Gospel* and *the efforts of scholars to reconcile science and religion by the application to the Scriptures of the kind of historical method which was known as the "higher criticism."*⁸

The term *fundamentalist* came from a series of twelve books which were published starting in 1910, entitled *The Fundamentals*. The basic doctrinal tenets included the *inerrancy of the Bible...the deity and virgin birth of Christ, Christ's atoning and substitutionary death, his bodily resurrection, his second coming, the work of the Holy Spirit in the conversion and the sanctification of the sinner, the eternal blessedness of those accounted by God as righteous because of their faith in Christ, and eternal punishment of the wicked.*⁹ *Evangelical* is term which clearly represents the central truth of our faith, the evangel, or good news of Jesus Christ.

Some like to attack *fundamentalist* or *evangelical* beliefs as reactionary. It is interesting to note the remarks of a leading theological liberal, Kirsopp Lake:

*It is a mistake, often made by educated persons 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 kind: it is the ...survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians...The Fundamentalist may be wrong; I think that 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 a Fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The Bible and the corpus theologicum of the Church is on the Fundamentalist side.*¹⁰

Some attempt to distinguish between the two terms. The basic difference concerns separation. The rise of liberalism within denominations raised concern as to how fundamentalists should respond. McGrath notes that due to the slide into modernism, there was a *growing demand within fundamentalist circles for separation from allegedly corrupt denominations. If it proved impossible to reform a denomination from within, the only course open was to break away from the denomination and form a new, doctrinally pure, church body.*¹¹

⁶McCullough, p. 33.

⁷Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, p. 75.

⁸Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol. 2*, p. 1264.

⁹Latourette, p. 1421.

¹⁰Quoted in McLachlan, p. 2.

¹¹McGrath, p. 31.

Today, the major division between those who prefer one term or the other again centers on separation. How is a believer to relate to culture? What is separation that is biblical? Les Ollila offers an opinion on the gap which exists between the two camps.

*...there do clearly appear to be two spectrums within conservative Christianity with a lot of other mixed philosophies in between. On one side of the spectrum **apologetics** is magnified and leadership does a commendable job of expositing Scripture, but often they cower from issues and ignore controversies. Separation, whether personal or ecclesiastical, is considered legalism or pharisaism and is a non-issue. The other side of this spectrum magnifies **polemics**, which is an attack on another's position. These leaders typically focus on attacking error or perceived error and sometimes are irresponsible in handling the Word of God accurately or honestly. Separation, on this side of the spectrum, becomes the main focus, and there seems to be an absence of joy, a conditional love, and a lack of freedom in their Christian walk.¹²*

A balanced position must allow access to culture without personal pollution. McCullough strongly declares, *The ground of holiness is the holy God, the one whose separateness paradoxically manifests itself in the will not to be separate. A community that makes separatism an end in itself may very well find itself separate not only from the world but from the God who loves this world enough to send the Son to redeem it.*¹³

The importance of theology is based on how we do theology. McLachlan clearly defines our distinctive, *The belief system of contemporary Fundamentalism is not sourced in its reaction to the cultural milieu, but in its understanding of the Biblical mandate. Fundamentalists hold to a set of beliefs which transcend all cultures and all times because those beliefs are sourced in the eternal Word of God.*¹⁴ May we do theology in such a way that we honor the Word and impact our culture for God's glory.

B. Current Trends in Theology

1. Introduction

Theology becomes a diverse study in human wisdom when the centrality of God's Word is forsaken. Our people must be consistently reminded to think *biblically*. God has spoken to us as Francis Schaeffer so clearly stated in the title of his book, *He is There and He is Not Silent*. Doing theology is more than an academic exercise. It is becoming familiar with our God on His terms for the purpose of worship and service. McCullough clearly points out the fallacy of how many do theology today, *There are fundamentally only two approaches to knowing God—one that begins with humans or one that begins with God.*¹⁵ Let's first examine some of the theological roads being traveled by those who begin with human wisdom.

¹²Quoted in McLachlan, p. v.

¹³McCullough, p. 140.

¹⁴McLachlan, p. ix.

¹⁵McCullough, p. 64.

2. Liberal (Neo-Protestant) Theology

a. Shift in Theology Proper

Many doing theology have abandoned the biblical view of God and do not believe in a supernatural, personal God Who is self-existent in His own perfections. This view holds to reality as *one-layered, namely the world of experience here and now*.¹⁶ Leslie Dewart expresses this view in a recent book, "The Christian theism of the future might not conceive God as a being. By the same token, God cannot be said to exist. In the future it may become increasingly possible for the Christian faith at all levels...to reserve a special place for silence in discourse about God."¹⁷

b. Linguistic Analysis

This movement places emphasis on empirical data which alone has meaning. Religious language may be functionally meaningful to express emotions but does not contain truth. Paul Van Buren in his book *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* argues that *When Christians said that Jesus was God, they were saying in secular terms that Jesus was an individual who provided them with values and direction that were of supreme importance to them*.¹⁸

c. Secularity

This is another attempt to rid man of personal accountability to God. Dutch theologian C.A. van Pueren describes it as *the deliverance of man first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language*.¹⁹ Man is one-dimensional with concern only for this life. Sallie McFague bluntly espouses such a view in her book *Models of God-Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, which won the 1988 American Academy of Religion Award for Excellence, *Who God really is, in other words, shouldn't concern us; what matters is finding an image of God that will be useful*.²⁰

d. Process Theology

Nothing is absolute, nothing is unchanging. Everything evolves and is in process. *Reality is future-oriented, reaching forward to that which is future and unknown, that which is becoming and which man has a part in making. The future is open-ended...The nature of truth and reality is processive, relational, and pragmatic...God Himself is viewed as in process; He is becoming. He is not absolute and unchanging*.²¹

Such views aren't taken seriously by evangelicals but we should still be concerned. Gundry notes the seriousness of their endeavors, *Their public forums are TV talk shows, Time magazine, religious*

¹⁶Stanley N. Gundry, "Today's Theological Trends, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April 75):127.

¹⁷Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief*, pp. 171-215.

¹⁸Gundry, p. 128.

¹⁹Gundry, p. 129.

²⁰Quoted in McCullough, p. 30.

²¹Gundry, p. 131.

columns in the newspapers, and the paperback book racks. Like it or not, these theological trends will be reflected in the views of non-evangelical ministers, and very quickly these trends filter down to become known and influential at the lay level.²²

3. "Evangelical" Theology

a. Power Evangelicalism

Alister McGrath coined this term to define groups whose theology is based on subjective criteria. Much of this is evident in the *Faith Movement* as seen on television evangelism.

Power Evangelicalism owes a substantial part of its appeal to its force of conviction: perhaps not so much the views that are held, or the doctrines that are preached, but the conviction and authority with which they are held and preached. And within power Evangelicalism, this conviction is increasingly coming to be based on subjective criteria, such as "The Lord told me to say this...The appeal to subjective experiences of God, personal visions of Christ or esoteric and unverifiable words of knowledge is as powerful as it is dangerous...The virtual marginalization of Scripture within power Evangelicalism is one of the greatest scandals of our age."²³

This subjective twist on theology is described by McCullough as *god-of-my-experience...The subjective, in other words, never has trouble overwhelming the objective.*²⁴ The cornerstone of our theology is the Word of God. When that foundation is undermined, theology will be flawed, whether they be in the liberal camp or a *camp meeting*.

b. Seeker Sensitive Worship

A strong trend in Evangelicalism has been toward focusing worship on reaching the unchurched. Services are geared toward attracting those who do not attend traditional churches. The positive side is attention toward evangelism and outreach. But, the negative side is noted by John Armstrong, *Seekers become casual shoppers, looking for something to "meet felt needs" and make them feel good, never dealing with their ultimate need-reconciliation to God...The seeker-sensitive technique presumes that the primary purpose for the Lord's Day gathering is to reach the unchurched, not worship that is God-centered and Scripture directed.*²⁵ Our culture is entertainment oriented. We must not allow our worship to follow the same course as noted by James Montgomery Boice,

The masses may settle for having someone on a screen telling them who to be, what to buy, when to laugh, etc. Yet there will always be some who have decided that 'there has to be more to life than this,' and God's church, if it hasn't bought into the entertainment rap, can confidently proclaim, "Yes, there is much more to life and this is where you'll find it."²⁶

²²Gundry, p. 131.

²³McGrath, p. 152.

²⁴McCullough, p. 34.

²⁵John Armstrong, "The Mad Rush to Seeker Sensitive Worship," *Modern Reformation* (Jan/Feb 1995):22-28.

²⁶James Montgomery Boice, "Wanted: Thinking Christians," *Modern Reformation* (Jul/Aug 1994):4-7.

Other trends could be noted but these seem to show the diversity in evangelical theology. The importance of doing theology based on objective knowable truth protects the church from subjective distortions. The centrality of worship which centers on God protects the church from frivolity. Current study of theology reveals that many follow the path noted by Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, *At one time theologians argued that the chief purpose of humankind was to glorify God. Now it would seem that the logic has been reversed: the chief purpose of God is to glorify humankind.*²⁷

C. Classification of the Fundamentals

1. Introduction

Defining the fundamentals of the faith can be wrought with danger. Who determines what is primary in contrast to what is secondary? Are there justifiable reasons for maintaining a doctrinal statement, at all? Denominations have split and are even now splitting over such questions. McLachlan soberly states, *The problem arises when we forget the vast difference between our view of God and the reality of God...What we know of God, we must receive from God. As Saint Augustine observed, when God gives, it is to empty hands.*²⁸

An air of pride must not enter one's thinking as a list is formulated. McGrath gives proper warning,

*Those who offer precise definitions of Evangelicalism usually have axes to grind-generally the "I'm an evangelical and you're not" kind of ax. On occasion one even encounters what might be called the Elijah syndrome (1 Kings 19:14)-the "I alone am faithful, whereas everyone else has compromised and needs to repent" kind of evangelicals who exclude from their magic circle those who do not conform to their highly specific, and often equally highly dogmatic, definition of Evangelicalism.*²⁹

Safeguards against such a danger were given in a forum in Christianity Today which included several notable evangelical scholars. The following excerpts, taken to heart, will keep us on the right track in our study of theology.

Darrell Bock, *The church needs to develop a prioritized theology that concentrates on and emphasizes the things that Scripture does. And the questions that Scripture covers in less detail, we should give less attention to as well...Even though we are redeemed, we still have fallen minds. We still make judgments that are sometimes wrong, so we need to do our theology with humility. And if we emphasize what Scripture emphasizes, we are going to have a better chance of getting it right than if we pick areas of interest to us just because they're fascinating.*³⁰

²⁷Quoted by McCullough, p. 40.

²⁸McLachlan, pp. 37-42.

²⁹McGrath, p. 54.

³⁰Darrell Bock, Professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, in "Scandal: A Forum on the Evangelical Mind," *Christianity Today* (Aug 14 1995).

Richard Mouw, *It may be that the evangelical mind, as it develops, must be modest, tentative, humble, and searching as opposed to thinking in categories of finality...As scholars from different areas of speciality, we are not saying we have it all together, but that all things hold together in Jesus Christ and that all of the disciplines and all of the intellectual discussions are held together in him...Our job is to grow into an awareness of our unity and life in Christ, to show this force to a world that desperately needs to know something about the One who is both the Savior and our Lord.*³¹

2. Considerations

There are several ways to develop a list of the fundamentals of the faith. One would be to specify critical issues within a classic division of systematic theology. The most commonly recognized divisions follow:

- Bibliology - the study of the Bible
- Theology Proper - the study of the nature of God and the Godhead
- Angelology - the study of unfallen and fallen angels
- Anthropology - the study of man
- Christology - the study of the person and work of Jesus Christ
- Soteriology - the study of salvation
- Pneumatology - the study of the person and work of the Holy Spirit
- Ecclesiology - the study of the church
- Eschatology - the study of future things

Opinions of what constitutes the fundamentals are available from an historical perspective. Latourette gives a solid list which include:

- Biblical inerrancy
- Deity and virgin birth of Christ
- Christ's atoning and substitutionary death
- His bodily resurrection
- His second coming
- Work of the Holy Spirit in conversion and the sanctification of the sinner
- Eternal blessedness of those saved by faith in Christ
- Eternal punishment of the lost.³²

For the purpose of developing this series, I have chosen to incorporate the above concepts along with a variation of McGrath's *six controlling convictions of Evangelicalism,*"

- *The supreme authority of Scripture as a source of knowledge of God and a guide to Christian living.*
- *The majesty of Jesus Christ, both as incarnate God and Lord and as the Savior of sinful humanity.*
- *The lordship of the Holy Spirit.*
- *The need for personal conversion.*
- *The priority of evangelism for both individual Christians and the church as a whole.*
- *The importance of the Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship and growth.*³³

³¹Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, in "Scandal: A Forum on the Evangelical Mind," *Christianity Today* (Aug 14 1995).

³²Latourette, p. 1421.

³³McGrath, p. 55.