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LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Thomas H. L. Cornman

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

FOUNDATIONAL FAITH

The Apostles' Creed centers on Christ. It declares Christ to be the only Son of God and Lord. According to J. I. Packer, the creed expresses with confidence the essential reality that "Jesus was, and remains, God's only Son, as truly and fully God as his Father is."¹ It declares that He was virgin born. His crucifixion, death, and burial were followed by His miraculous resurrection from the dead. It also affirms that this same Jesus who ascended into heaven will return as judge.

This preeminent creed was written to protect the church from theological aberrations and clarify what constituted genuine Christian belief. At the time, the fundamentals of faith were being challenged and even twisted. Today, as these fundamentals of faith continue to be challenged by those who propose new doctrines, we need to clarify anew what are the fundamentals of the faith and look at their implications for the twenty-first century man and woman.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

When the early church began to carry the good news of salvation to the Gentiles, moving beyond the religious community of the Jewish people to whom the message of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ had been delivered initially, questions soon arose. What was essential to the Christian faith? What necessary beliefs and behaviors were required for belonging?

Acts 15 records the first institutional discussion of questions. In the first verse we read, "Some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'" This assertion led to significant discussion about the essentials of Christian faith and practice. The matter was so important that it could not be handled at a regional level. The disciples in Syrian Antioch sent a delegation to Jerusalem so that the matter could be concluded for the whole of the fledgling church.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

At this early stage, the core question was soteriological: What results in the forgiveness of sin and the redemption of the individual? The apostles Peter and James both spoke to the issue, arguing that individuals are saved by grace through faith and not by adherence to external standards or behaviors. Both indicated that those who would add to faith were returning to the failed models of the past that neither earlier Jews nor the contemporaries of Peter and James could achieve.

The solution to the problem was clear. The apostles, representing the entire community of faith, declared that Gentiles should not be troubled by Jewish custom, but should be bound to the essential doctrine that salvation was by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 15:8–11, 19–20, 28–29).

They concluded that the central message of Christianity is the work of Christ on the cross, validated by His resurrection. Today, even those who would not identify themselves with *evangelical* Christianity acknowledge this: “Christianity is the only major religion to have as its central event the suffering and degradation of its god.”² To that idea, the apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:12–19, adds that without the work of Christ on our behalf *and His resurrection from the dead*, we have a futile faith. The young church in Jerusalem understood this and protected her doctrine from the intrusion of contaminating elements that would have changed the message of life into a burden that no one could bear.

THE APOSTLES’ CREED

The discussion of what constituted the essential elements of the faith continued after the New Testament era. Because the ancient world had a high rate of illiteracy, it became critical to find ways to protect the church from those who sought to alter the message of Christianity. The creed or confession became a defense against those with variant views who wished to gain a platform for their theological aberrations.

The Apostles' Creed represents one of the earliest attempts to provide such protection for the larger community of belief. The creed began by affirming the cardinal belief in God. This was not subject to debate in the early church. God exists and He is both all-powerful and Creator. The core of the creed was Christocentric. It declared Christ to be the only Son of God and Lord, born of a virgin. It affirmed His death, resurrection, ascension, and return to judge the world's inhabitants.

Implicit in the creed, although not clearly articulated, are two other important beliefs. One is the truth that Christ came to provide for the forgiveness of sins through His death. The other is the reality of a *bodily* resurrection both of Christ and of those who believe in Him. Consequently, four facets of the foundational faith were expressed either explicitly or implicitly in this third-century creed: the deity of Christ, His virgin birth, the substitutionary atonement, and His resurrection and return.

The perceived threats to the faith that had called for the Apostles' Creed in the third century led to a series of church councils beginning in the fourth century. The Christian faith began to gain popularity and eventually became part of the cultural mainstream during the time of Constantine when the persecution of the church ended. The preservation of the essential facets of the faith required increased vigilance. Roman culture had long been an eclectic mix of traditions and religions. In this environment Christianity was in danger of becoming commingled with other belief systems.

In A.D. 318, a church leader from Egypt began to suggest new ways of thinking about Jesus and His relationship with God the Father. He attempted to combine Christian theology with Greek philosophy and provide a simpler model of understanding a complex, abstract notion. Arius proposed that Jesus could not be the Father's equal. Instead, He must have been God's first and most glorious creation. He claimed that Jesus Christ was of a different essence from the Father and was not God.³ The church

exploded in response. The very foundations of the Roman Empire appeared to be shaken as well.

THE CREEDS OF NICEA AND CHALCEDON

In an effort to preserve both theological and political unity, the emperor Constantine called the leaders of the church together to engage in theological discussion. A council of the church met at Nicea to resolve the debate about the nature of Jesus and His relation to the Father. After heated discussion, another creed was formulated, designed to codify what the members of the council believed was the church's orthodox understanding of the faith. The Nicene Creed, as we know it today, sought to provide a standard against which those professing membership in the community of faith could be assessed.

The creed reiterated the substance of the Apostles' Creed with one significant addition. The full and complete deity of Christ was not clearly explicit in the earlier creed. To those present at Nicea, this lack of clarity allowed for Arius's views. The council decided it would eliminate the possibility of such an error in the future. The newer creed stated that Jesus Christ, "the Son of God, [is] true God of true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father, through whom all things came to be."⁴ The deity of Christ was upheld as a doctrinal essential in the fourth century and it was stated in a way that few could misunderstand.

The church continued to refine its confessional statements, as discussions about the person of Christ and His relation to the Father persisted throughout this ancient period. In each case, councils were called and definitions framed in response to novel approaches to doctrine that the church either had not anticipated or considered to be beyond the pale of orthodoxy. By 451, the church had convened its fourth ecumenical council to discuss the person and work of Christ. In this case the main question had to do with the relationship between the deity and

humanity of Christ. A fifth-century monk by the name of Eutyches was accused of teaching that Christ's humanity was fully absorbed by His divinity.⁵

The Council of Chalcedon produced a definition that once again attempted to establish the boundaries of orthodox Christology. The essentials included the Virgin Birth, the deity of Christ, and His work of salvation on behalf of a sinful humanity. The members of the council did not feel the need to restate the certainty of His return to judge. They did allude to the authority of Scripture by affirming that the prophets of old and the Lord Himself taught in accordance with the content of the creed they produced.⁶

THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE REFORMATION

The church of the Middle Ages continued to define what doctrines should be considered the irreducible core of the Christian faith. While there were a variety of theological opinions during this period, the Virgin Birth, the deity of Christ, and the belief in the authority of Scripture continued to be affirmed.

Contributions of Anselm

Toward the end of the eleventh century, Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, England, wrote his landmark treatise *Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man)*, which argued two essential points: God became man, and that man was Jesus Christ. For Anselm, Christ's full and complete deity was never in question.⁷ Anselm's work also explained the reason why God had become man. The entire human race had sinned in Adam, leaving each person with a debt owed to God. Without satisfaction, "God cannot remit sin unpunished."⁸ Someone had to provide satisfaction to God for man's sin. Since no human could make restitution for such an enormous debt, God had to become man in order to satisfy His own justice and bring redemption to human beings.⁹

We see in Anselm's writing the clear lines of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, as opposed to the idea of Christ's death as a ransom to Satan. Anselm's treatise also alluded to the Virgin Birth and showed that he believed in the authority of Scripture.

Contributions of Luther

The Protestant Reformation continued the pattern of affirming the essential elements of Christian orthodoxy. Martin Luther, hailed as the first of the Reformers, was committed to the fundamental doctrines of an orthodox evangelical faith. Luther lived at the beginning of the sixteenth century and is credited with starting the Protestant Reformation in 1517, when he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Paul Althaus, in his *Theology of Martin Luther*, described Luther's view on the atonement. He wrote, "Luther, like Anselm, views Christ's work in terms of satisfaction."¹⁰

For Luther, Christ made satisfaction for sinners in two distinct ways. He fulfilled the will of God through a life of obedience to God's Law, and He suffered on the cross as the punishment for sin by experiencing the wrath of God. In both instances, the benefit accrued to humanity and was done in our place.¹¹

The first of the Lutheran confessions, Augsburg (1530), reflected Luther's commitment to the essentials. In this confession, all five of the core doctrines of the evangelical faith were clearly articulated. The authority of Scripture was affirmed in the preface and became the basis for all that followed.¹² The Virgin Birth, deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, and return of Christ were also spelled out:

It is also taught among us that God the Son became man, born of the Virgin Mary, and that the two natures, divine and human, are so inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ, true God and true man, who was truly born, suffered,

was crucified, died and was buried in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins, and to propitiate God's wrath. The same Christ also descended into hell, truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, . . . The same Lord Christ will return openly to judge the living and the dead as stated in the Apostles' Creed.¹³

Contributions of Calvin and Knox

Like the Lutherans, John Calvin and those who followed him in the Reformed tradition tied their theology to the historic creeds that were compatible with their understanding of Scripture. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, published in final form in 1559, Calvin expressed his positions on key doctrines. The Bible was authoritative, and as such it provided the foundation for the church and for her doctrines, rather than the Scriptures deriving their authority from the church. Calvin argued that the authority of Scripture must be determined through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, rather than exclusively through the internal proofs in the biblical text.

Of Christ, Calvin asserted, "We indeed acknowledge that the Mediator who was born of the Virgin is properly the Son of God. . . . Although he was God before he became a man, he did not therefore begin to be a new God."¹⁴ Calvin agreed with the position of Anselm and Luther, viewing Christ's death as satisfying God's justice.¹⁵

Calvin's influence spread throughout Europe and was carried to Scotland through the efforts of John Knox (1514–1572). He was responsible for the establishment of Protestantism in Scotland and for the formulation of a creed for the new church in 1560.¹⁶ The Scotch Confession of Faith followed a Calvinistic view and touched on the essential doctrines of evangelical Christianity. Christ came in the fullness of time, being born of a virgin.

He was completely God and completely man, and the authors of the creed specifically denounced the doctrines of Arius and Eutyches, among others. This same God-man was crucified, died, was buried, and rose again from the dead. The confession affirmed that this resurrection was witnessed by many, including Christ's enemies. The reason for Christ's death was that He might voluntarily offer Himself as a sacrifice on behalf of sinful humans. This included suffering the wrath of God that sinners really deserved. Christ suffered in body and soul "to mak[e] the full satisfaction for the sinnes [sic] of the people."¹⁷

The authority of Scripture comes rather late positionally in the Scotch Confession. Despite its place, the confession follows the typical Reformed formula, expressing the sufficiency of Scriptures to reveal that knowledge of God to man that is essential for the Christian life. This authority came from God and not by church or council.¹⁸

The Westminster Confession

When the English and Scottish ministers met at Westminster in 1640 to create a new confession of faith for the English speaking kingdoms, they too came to the conclusion that the age-old standards of orthodoxy should be reaffirmed in the work they were producing. Since their confession was an extension of the Protestant Reformation, it must be understood as a reaction to Roman Catholicism and the prevailing fears that the monarchy was ceding ground to Roman doctrine. Nonetheless, the confession produced at Westminster was an attempt to articulate a clear and proper Reformed doctrinal standard. While the bodily resurrection of Christ was not explicit in the confession, the other four points were stated boldly. Scripture has authority and ought to be believed and obeyed. It is self-authenticating and because of that is to be received as the Word of God. Jesus Christ was

virgin born and He is of the same essence as the Father and equal with God the Father in every way.

The ministers gathered at Westminster also committed themselves and their churches to the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. “The Lord Jesus,” they wrote, “by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself; which through the eternal Spirit once offered up to God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father . . .”¹⁹

THE RISE OF MODERNISM

The views established during and immediately after the Protestant Reformation remained the core of evangelical Christianity throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Reformed confessions continued to be the general expression of belief. German Lutherans developed the doctrine of Scripture to a more complete level, building on the core “Scripture alone” concept of Luther. During the seventeenth century, Lutheran theologians began to explore the origin, inspiration, and authority of Scripture in depth. Luther and earlier Lutheran scholars had been content to take these areas for granted. Those who came later focused on the concept of verbal and full (plenary) inspiration; that is, the very words and the complete content of Scripture come from the Holy Spirit and are therefore authoritative.²⁰

Presbyterians within the United Kingdom and the fledgling colonial church in America continued to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith, which clearly articulated Reformed convictions. Those who abandoned some of the trappings of Reformed theology still clung to its core doctrines. John Wesley, credited with founding the Methodist Church, struggled with and finally abandoned some aspects of Calvinism. In doing so, however, he did not deny doctrines like the authority of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, the satisfaction theory of the atonement, or the bodily resurrection and physical return of Christ.²¹

However, two major intellectual forces shook the conservative evangelical world in the mid-nineteenth century and began to undermine the foundation of evangelical faith. Darwinian evolution and a scientific approach to understanding the Scriptures known as higher criticism began to make headway in American academic circles and from there began to filter into the churches. Neither concept was new. Yet both became viewed as significant threats to orthodoxy as more and more Protestants accepted these ideas and attempted to reconcile the Bible to them.

Evolutionary ideas had existed for some time in Europe and America. While the general theory of evolution had not raised significant concern among evangelicals, there had been some attempts to reconcile the new discoveries of science and the Bible.²² Even C. I. Scofield, in an effort to explain apparent geological age, included explanatory notes in Genesis suggesting a gap theory of God's creative activities and incorporating the day/age theory in a footnote in his *Scofield Reference Bible*. The efforts of conservative Protestants to continue to reconcile science and the Bible was dealt a serious setback by the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859. The key issue was Darwin's introduction of the doctrine of natural selection to explain the basis of his evolutionary model. Before Darwin, most evolutionary theories had included the idea of intelligent design and progress in the upward ascent of the species. It was fairly easy for those who wished to maintain their commitment to conservative religion to see God's handiwork in an evolutionary model that acknowledged supernatural design and direction. However, by introducing a scenario that eliminated God's direct involvement (using the term "natural"), Darwin now proposed a theory antithetical to any view that attributed human origins to a supernatural source.²³

The anxiety of early fundamentalists over Darwinian evolution had to do with what they perceived to be a bias against supernaturalism that lay behind the theory of natural selection.

Charles Hodge, writing in 1874, expressed the crux of the matter succinctly, “It is however neither evolution nor natural selection which give Darwinism its peculiar character and importance. It is that Darwin rejects all teleology, or doctrine of final causes. He denies design in any of the organisms in the vegetable or animal world.”²⁴ The denial of design eliminated the supernatural and therefore ultimately ruled God out of the process. Hodge concluded that Darwin’s theory disallowed supernatural revelation, miracles, and Christ’s resurrection, and as a result destroyed the possibility of salvation.²⁵ This is what made Darwinism so pernicious to conservative evangelicals and would later kindle their backing of a spate of antievolution bills.

THE EFFECT OF HIGHER CRITICISM

Origin of Higher Criticism

Higher criticism posed an additional threat to evangelical belief during this period. An attempt to apply the scientific and historical methods of the period to the study of the Bible, it should be distinguished from textual, or lower, criticism, which primarily focuses on the accuracy of the transmission of the text of Scripture. The biblical criticism of that period focused on issues such as the authenticity of the text, identity and intent of the author, and the discovery of the chronological order of various underlying sources of the text.

The beginnings of higher criticism are typically credited to Jean Astruc, who proposed a documentary hypothesis to the Old Testament in 1753. Astruc argued that there were two underlying documents behind the Pentateuch, one for each of the names for God used in the text (Yahweh and Elohim).²⁶

This method of criticism was carried to Germany, where it gained momentum and found academic respectability through the exposition of Johann Eichhorn. In 1780 he published an in-

roduction to the Old Testament that reworked Astruc's theory and was widely accepted among European biblical scholars. Beyond the two original strands that he identified for the Pentateuch, Eichhorn supposedly found more evidence of multiple fragmentary sources for the first five books of the Old Testament. The work of German higher criticism found a home in Britain and the United States in the works of Bible scholars like Charles A. Briggs of Union Theological Seminary. In 1897, he published *The Higher Criticism of the Hexateuch*, which sought to employ the methodology developed in Germany during the course of the nineteenth century.

Impact of Higher Criticism

Like Darwinism, higher criticism as applied by liberal Protestants had a corrosive effect on traditional beliefs. Edgar Krentz provides a clear picture of the effect:

It is difficult to overestimate the significance the nineteenth century has for biblical interpretation. It made historical criticism *the* approved method of interpretation. The result was a revolution of viewpoint in evaluating the Bible. The Scriptures were, so to speak, secularized. The biblical books became historical documents to be studied and questioned like any other ancient sources. The Bible was no longer the criterion for writing of history; rather, history had become the criterion for understanding the Bible. The variety of the Bible was highlighted; its unity had to be discovered and could no longer be presumed. The history it reported was no longer assumed to be everywhere correct. The Bible stood before criticism as defendant before judge. This criticism was largely positivist in orientation, imminentist in its explanation, and incapable of appreciating the category of revelation.²⁷

Higher criticism led to an examination of the texts in a way that threatened the authority of Scripture. No longer viewed as “God-breathed,” the Bible became a purely cultural creation, not very different from other similar writings of the same period.

With the authority of Scripture undermined, the key doctrines of the faith soon tumbled and resulted in the kind of theological modernism that the early fundamentalists characterized as “liberalism.” Theological modernism emerged out of the social and intellectual climate of the mid- to late nineteenth century. It was marked by a strong anti-supernaturalism and a tendency to look at the Bible and Christianity through the lens of the developing ideas in the fields of historical and literary criticism, scientific theories, and comparative studies in the field of religion. J. I. Packer described the essential position of theological modernism:

Liberalism maintained that modern literary and historical criticism had exploded the doctrine of an infallible Bible, modern science had made it impossible to believe in the supernatural as Scripture presents it, modern comparative study of religions had shown that Christianity, after all, was not unique, and modern philosophy required the dismissal of such basic biblical concepts as original sin, the wrath of God and expiatory sacrifice, as primitive superstitions.²⁸

Theological modernism represented a divergence from the historic Christian orthodoxy that had marked the church since the Reformation and stretched back to the apostles. Liberalism no longer accepted the age-old message of supernatural redemption of sinners by God’s sovereign grace. It rejected the grace of God and replaced it with nature. Liberalism took the divine written revelation and reduced it to mere human reflection. The central doctrine of faith alone in Christ alone was replaced by the belief that He had come to be an example worthy of humanity’s imitation. The new birth became a natural change and the promise to do better. Theo-

logical modernism viewed Christianity as one more form of natural religion—a mixture of exhortation and experientialism.²⁹

THE FUNDAMENTALIST RESPONSE

This radical refashioning of the historic faith drew a reaction from conservative evangelicals who strove to preserve the essential elements of historic Christianity. Evangelical Christianity had its American genesis during the eighteenth century in a movement known as the First Great Awakening. In the American colonies, ministers like George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and Gilbert Tennent worked to revive the churches of the American colonies from the dead, lifeless orthodoxy that had overcome them. Now, in light of this spiritual lethargy, some members of the evangelical community began to stand up for the historical truths embraced by John Wesley, Nicholas von Zinzendorf, and others in Europe, which they believed were essential to the Christian faith: the necessity of a supernatural rebirth; the Bible as God's revelation to humanity; the mandate to spread the gospel; and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which provides a saving relationship with God.³⁰

They met in Bible conferences, started Bible institutes, and fought for the control of denominations because they believed that Christianity was at stake. Unlike the modernists, they believed that saving Christianity depended upon maintaining the supernatural elements of the faith that distinguished it from all other religions. They were convinced that to abandon these truths was to abandon the faith itself.

While some recent historians have described this reaction in sociological terms, it is best to understand the fundamentalist movement in its early years as a theological reaction to innovations considered detrimental to the faith delivered "once for all."³¹ For example, at the Niagara Bible Conference, begun in 1883, earnest conservatives met to study the Bible in a serious

and scientific way. During their annual meetings in Ontario, Canada, near Niagara Falls, the major themes explored each summer included the doctrines of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and studies in missions and prophecy.³² The conference at Niagara eventually produced a statement of essential beliefs, known as the five fundamentals of Niagara. This was subsequently restated later in a variety of forms throughout the years, but the basic formula was orthodox and conservative.

The statement included the doctrine of the physical return of Christ and the participants in the Niagara Bible Conference were generally premillennial. It was agreed that the imminent return of Christ should be omitted because not all conference leaders agreed on that point. Like the church all the way back to the early centuries, the leaders of the conference returned to a confessional expression of the faith.

ORIGINS OF THE FUNDAMENTALIST MOVEMENT

Interdenominational and Conservative

The Niagara Bible Conference established some of the essential foundations of what is today called the fundamentalist movement. It helped to establish the movement as interdenominational and as a result, allowed for a conservative ecumenism. Niagara also provided a platform for world missions, through the ministry of speakers like A. T. Pierson and J. Hudson Taylor, providing the impetus for the faith missions movement. It was also the seedbed for the Bible institute movement. Many of the foot soldiers of the conservative evangelical response to theological modernism were inspired directly or indirectly through the conference and its speakers.³³ The Niagara Conference also gave birth to similar Bible conferences, such as D. L. Moody's efforts at Northfield, Massachusetts.

While the Bible conference movement was solidifying an in-

terdenominational force that focused on the popular study of the Bible and essential doctrines of the faith at the lay level, a group of denominational professors were attempting to concentrate on a scholarly study of the Scriptures and defense of the faith. The most noteworthy group to engage in this pursuit was a core of professors at Princeton Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian school in New Jersey. Since its 1812 beginnings, the school had fought against the encroaching tide of modernism. This group of professors were committed to orthodox Presbyterianism and a key focus of their study was the inspiration of Scripture. Charles Hodge, writing in 1857, argued in favor of plenary inspiration and what he considered the logical corollary doctrine of the inerrancy of the original autographs of the Bible.³⁴

Declaring The Fundamentals

The Princeton professors also defended the deity of Christ, His virgin birth, the satisfaction theory of the atonement, and His bodily resurrection. While many argue that these professors did not share all of the values of fundamentalism, Princeton professor B. B. Warfield unquestionably associated himself with the movement through his participation in the publication of a series of booklets aimed at stemming the tide of modernism.

Shortly after the turn of the century, the production of this series of polemic booklets permanently established a movement and a name. Two wealthy oilmen from Los Angeles provided a quarter of a million dollars to supply every Christian worker in the United States with the work, which presented the conservative view of the major theological issues of the day. The work, published initially between 1910 and 1914, consisted of twelve booklets, collectively entitled *The Fundamentals*. A variety of conservative Protestant theologians from the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States authored essays in the booklets, as they sought to present a case against modernism and for what were now being called

the fundamentals of the faith.³⁵ While broader than the five fundamentals established at the Niagara Conference, the articles offered a conservative response to theological modernism, focusing on higher criticism, the doctrine of the Bible, the Virgin Birth and deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and the return of Christ.

The Fundamentals concluded with testimonies from leading conservative Protestants extolling the virtues and life transforming power of the doctrines and ideas presented. The pamphlets, as edited by A. C. Dixon and R. A. Torrey, did not address the creation/evolution debate but did find fault with the Darwinian concept of natural selection.³⁶ The dispensational model often associated with later developments in fundamentalism was notably absent from the work.³⁷

The Fundamentals had two primary effects on the debate over essential Christianity. The editors and benefactors, by calling upon such a wide group of contributors, achieved a broad conservative Protestant consensus. This created an alliance of sorts between seemingly incompatible forces within conservative, evangelical ranks. Those from the Bible institutes, most of whom were interdenominational and generally dispensational (represented by James M. Gray and R. A. Torrey), found themselves cooperating with the seminary-based conservatives who were denominational and predominately nondispensational (represented by B. B. Warfield of Princeton and Y. E. Mullins of Southern Baptist Seminary).³⁸

THE FUNDAMENTALIST/MODERNIST CONFLICT

Tolerance Versus Intolerance?

By 1922 the controversy over what was essential to the Christian faith took on a new dimension when Harry Emerson Fosdick, the pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, preached his now famous sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" Fosdick strongly suggested that the battle pitted tolerance, as expressed

by those who were known as modernists, against intolerance, which he purported to be the core value of the fundamentalists. According to Fosdick, the fundamentalists were harming the Christian church by “quarreling over little matters when the world is dying of great needs.”³⁹ The quarrels referred to were clearly delineated in the body of Fosdick’s sermon. Fundamentalists argued for the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, verbal plenary inspiration, the substitutionary death of Christ, and the Second Coming.

Fosdick contended that those who held to such rigid requirements were hopelessly stuck in the past, unable to avail themselves of modern learning. Fosdick argued further that there are two sources of knowledge about God—natural law and the Scriptures.

Many of the early conservatives who supported fundamentalism also embraced this idea. But Fosdick began to apply this principle in a way that undermined Christian doctrine. A secondary effect of Fosdick’s sermon was to reinforce the belief that fundamentalists of the late nineteenth century were unlearned and anti-intellectual. Unable to agree with the core beliefs advanced by conservative evangelicals, he labeled them intolerant and ignorant and wrote them off.⁴⁰

Within a year of Fosdick’s sermon, a group within the Northern Presbyterian Church produced the Auburn Affirmation, which denied the right of the church to establish theological tests for orthodoxy. The affirmation declared theological positions such as the infallibility of Scripture, the Virgin Birth, the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection, and all miracles to be theories about the message of the Bible rather than essential facts upon which an orthodox faith stood.⁴¹

Machen’s Response

That same year, 1923, J. Gresham Machen (the last of the Old Princetonians) took up his pen to produce *Christianity and*

Liberalism. His message was clear: “Despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs to a totally different class of religions.”⁴² Through the rest of the book, Machen carefully delineated the essential elements of orthodox Christianity. He affirmed the doctrine of plenary inspiration and inerrancy, the Virgin Birth and deity of Christ, and the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement.⁴³ A few years later he devoted another entire work to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. It was important to defend the Virgin Birth because with it stood the authority of the Scriptures.⁴⁴ In Machen’s mind there was a fundamental difference between conservatives and liberals when it came to Jesus Christ:

There are generically different views about Jesus, and they are rooted in two generically different views about God and the world. According to one view, God is immanent in the universe in the sense that the universe is the necessary unfolding of His life; and Jesus of Nazareth is a part of that unfolding and supreme product of the same divine forces that are elsewhere operative in the world. According to the other view, God is the Creator of the universe, immanent in it but also eternally separate from it and free; and Jesus of Nazareth came into the universe from outside the universe, to do what nature could never do. The former view is the view of modern naturalism in many different forms; the latter view is the view of the Bible and the Christian Church.⁴⁵

Machen, like the fundamentalists, had identified those crucial core doctrines that had to be defended to save Christianity. If the modernists succeeded in taking the mystery out of the Christian faith and reducing it to a generic ethical system founded by a good moral teacher, all was lost. The supernatural element of Christianity set it apart from the other religions of the world.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Modern science and the new literary criticism were demystifying the faith. If they were successful, they would reduce Christianity to an equal among the world's faiths, no different and certainly not superior or the truth.

Machen already saw this coming to fruition in the Northern Presbyterian Missions Board. In 1932, *Re-thinking Missions* was published. Supported by John D. Rockefeller Jr., the report was cosponsored by a number of Protestant denominations, including the Northern Presbyterians. The report relegated Christianity to one of many religions and urged its readers to avoid any attempts to "destroy" other religions. Instead, it encouraged Christian missionaries to seek ways to support the peaceful co-existence of all of the world's religions. Christianity, it asserted, should not be viewed as distinct from or hostile to other religions around the world.⁴⁶

THE CONFLICT OVER EVOLUTION

By 1925 Darwinism and evolution had become synonymous, and the anti-supernaturalism of Darwinism became the focal point of a popular attempt to stem the tide of modernism and its destruction of the Christian faith. The small Tennessee mining town of Dayton, Tennessee, was the scene for the conclusion of the theological phase of early fundamentalism. Many fundamentalists became concerned about the cultural impact of modernism, particularly through the theory of Darwinian evolution. At the same time, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) watched with growing concern as a number of states enacted laws prohibiting the teaching of evolution in public schools. In 1925 the governor of Tennessee signed into law the Butler Act, which forbade the teaching of evolution in any public school in the state. The goal of the ACLU was to find a high school science teacher in the state of Tennessee who would be willing to test the Butler Act as a violation of the First Amendment guarantee of free speech.

The ACLU advertised widely in order to attract the person they needed to challenge the law. Citizens of the town of Dayton recruited a high school coach to offer himself for the ACLU's test case. The townspeople hoped that this trial would revive the depressed mining town, which had steadily lost population. The subsequent trial took on a life of its own.

By the end of the trial, what had begun as a battle over free speech became a referendum on science and the Bible. An anti-evolution doctrine was not one of the established essentials of the faith within the theological fundamentalist movement.⁴⁷ Darwinian evolution, with the idea of natural selection, no intelligent design, and no special divine creation of humans by God, was the issue. This new theme suggested a change in direction for those who felt the need to maintain a strict framework of orthodoxy. No longer fighting on purely theological grounds, the movement began to see itself engaged in a larger sociological conflict vying for the very soul of the American culture.⁴⁸ The primary theological focus from 1870 to 1925 gave way to a new central battle. Most see the Scopes Trial in Dayton as the end of fundamentalist respectability and the death of the movement. The excesses and sensational reporting of the events in Dayton pictured fundamentalism to the watching world as old-fashioned and anti-progress.

The fundamentalist movement prior to 1925 was denominationally eclectic, including Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, and Reformed Episcopalians. In a very real sense this was a conservative ecumenical movement in which primary theological issues were the focus and secondary theological positions (polity, eschatological nuances, etc.) took a backseat. The list of primary issues was concise. After the Scopes Trial of 1925, fundamentalism began to move beyond a theologically conservative ecumenism toward a more strident conservatism that focused on sociological and cultural concerns. During this period the fundamentalist movement became more militant.⁴⁹ Fundamentalists

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began to dispute about ever more minute issues, preferring to argue among themselves rather than press the essential issues in the broader arena of Christendom. Despite this change in focus, all sides continued to agree that the historic Christian faith had included the key beliefs addressed above since ancient times.

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE FAITH

By the end of the nineteenth century, the attempts of conservative evangelicals to stem the effect of liberalizing modernity on the Christian faith had narrowed the list of doctrinal essentials to five key points. The five essentials articulated at the Niagara Bible Conference in 1897 were written specifically because modernism had denied God's supernatural involvement in the writing of the Bible, in human beginnings, and in the salvation of the human race from sin. They were:

- the authority of Scripture,
- the deity of Christ,
- the Virgin Birth,
- substitutionary atonement, and
- the bodily resurrection and physical return of Christ.

This list has been restated in many other contexts since the Niagara Conference. Although some have asserted that the original list was more complete or that a few of the points were different,⁵⁰ the five doctrines listed above represent the most common expression of what conservative evangelical Protestants have considered to be the essential elements of the faith. Some might argue that the list could have included a fuller representation of evangelical theology.⁵¹ None, however, can deny the centrality of these five fundamental truths.

These truths continue to be challenged today by those who

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propose new doctrines, such as the “openness” of God, as well as by those who question established doctrines like the inerrancy of the Bible, substitutionary atonement, the existence of a literal hell, and the eternal punishment of unbelievers.⁵² It is time for the evangelical church to reclaim Christianity’s essentials and reaffirm our fundamental doctrines of the faith.

NOTES

1. James I. Packer, *Growing in Christ* (Wheaton: Good News, 1994), 43.
2. Bamber Gascoigne, *The Christians* (New York: William Morrow, 1977), 17.
3. For a thorough treatment of Arius and the doctrine of Arianism, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Longmans, Green, 1958), 226–31.
4. *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 27–29.
5. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 331–33; see also Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1937), 107.
6. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 29. The following appears in the Definition of Chalcedon (p. 451): “Thus have the prophets of old testified; thus the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us.”
7. Anselm, “Why God Became Man,” in *Readings in Christian Thought*, ed. Hugh T. Kerr, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 85. As Anselm noted, “Thus, while it is necessary to find a God-Man in whom the integrity of both natures is preserved, it is no less necessary for these two complete natures to meet in one person—just as body and rational soul meet in one man—for otherwise the same person could not be perfect God and perfect man” (pp. 90–91).
8. *Ibid.*, 88.
9. *Ibid.*, 92.
10. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 202.
11. *Ibid.*, 203.
12. *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, ed. John H. Leith (Atlanta: John Knox, 1968), 65.
13. *Ibid.*, 68–69.
14. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (2.14, 5) (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989), 419.
15. Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 138–39. See also Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2.13, 4).
16. Knox returned to his native Scotland in 1559 after years of exile. The following year (1560) the queen regent of Scotland died and left her young daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, to rule alone. With the help of the nobles, Knox established Protestantism as the national religion of Scotland the same year and a new creed (The Scotch Confession of Faith) was formulated. The new queen retaliated against Knox charging him with treason and imprisoning him from 1560 to 1567. He was released after his acquittal by the Scottish Court.
17. *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 446–47.
18. *Ibid.*, 464.

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19. "The Westminster Confession of Faith" (chap. 1, sec. 4; chap. 8, sec. 2; and chap. 8, sec. 5), in *Creeeds of the Churches*, Leith, ed., 195, 203–4.
20. Gonzalez, *History of Christian Thought*, 238–39. Gonzalez suggested that this is the first clear presentation of the doctrine known as verbal plenary inspiration. Although he suggested that they may have held to a dictation theory, Gonzalez credited these Orthodox Lutherans with maintaining that "the contributions of each writer to the canon show his style, personality, and situation which would suggest a more nuanced theory of inspiration than the dictation theory allows." The place for the writer's style, personality, and situation is critical to the discussion since in the twentieth century, modernists like Harry Emerson Fosdick will accuse fundamentalists of a wooden dictation theory presenting a caricature of a more thoughtful position. See "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" comp. Michael Warner, *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Library of America, 1999), 780.
21. *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978). See vol. 5, sermons 2, 15, and 20; vol. 6, sermons 42, 62, 70, and 77. In these sermons, among others, Wesley affirms all five of the fundamentals of faith.
22. For a discussion of the various attempts to reconcile faith and science, see Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 177–208; and George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford, 1980), 118–23.
23. Charles Hodge, "What Is Darwinism?" in *The Princeton Theology 1812–1921: Scripture, Science, and Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield*, ed. Mark A. Noll, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 149.
24. *Ibid.*, 150. Hodge added (p. 151), "It is the distinctive doctrine of Mr. Darwin that species owe their origin, not to the original intent of the divine mind; not to special acts of creation calling new forms into existence at certain epochs; not to the constant and everywhere operative efficiency of God, guiding physical causes in the production of intended effects; but to the gradual accumulation of unintended variations of structure and instinct, securing some advantage to their subjects."
25. *Ibid.*, 151.
26. Charles A. Briggs, *Higher Criticism of the Hexateuch* (New York: T & T Clark, 1897), 46.
27. Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 30.
28. James I. Packer, "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 37.
29. *Ibid.*, 27.
30. Noll, *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 9.
31. David Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones Univ., 1986), 29. Beale indicated that the political and sociological issues that become a distinct part of the fundamentalist movement in the 1920 and beyond was not present at Niagara. "Naturally there were distinct differences between old Niagara's embryonic Fundamentalism and the movement since the 1920s. For instance, although the Niagara leaders expressed interest in political conservatism and patriotism, they rarely mentioned these things."
32. *Ibid.*, 27. Beale indicated that while premillennialism dominated the conferences, speakers expressed both pretribulational and posttribulational rapture positions.
33. *Ibid.*, 29–31.

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34. Hodge, "Inspiration," *Princeton Theology*, 137. "An inspired man could not err in his instruction on any subject."
35. Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), 815.
36. R. A. Torrey and A. C. Dixon, eds., *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (Chicago: n.p., n.d.). In volume 4, chapter 4, James Orr of Glasgow, Scotland, discussed "Science and the Christian Faith." In his writing he argued that evolution and the creation account of Genesis need not be viewed as incompatible." He wrote: "The conclusion of the whole is, that, up to the present hour, science and the Biblical views of God, man, and the world, do not stand in any real relation of conflict" (104). In volume 7, chapter 1, George Frederick Wright of Oberlin College argues that the real issue is not so much evolution as Darwinism, which "practically eliminates God from the whole creative process." He concludes his thoughts by writing, "The evidence for evolution, even in its milder form, does not begin to be as strong as that for the revelation of God in the Bible" (20).
37. George W. Dollar, *A History of Fundamentalism* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones Univ, 1973), 175–76.
38. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 815–16. At least during the period between 1870 and 1925, conservatives attempting to stem the tide of modernism were much broader and more focused on what they perceived to be the essential elements of the Christian faith. While there were those within the movement who could be viewed as militant, the movement was still primarily defensive rather than offensive.
39. Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" comp. Michael Warner, *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Library of America Press, 1999), 785.
40. *Ibid.*, 783–85.
41. D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995), 24.
42. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 7.
43. *Ibid.*, 74, 114, 117.
44. J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1930), 382.
45. *Ibid.*, 387.
46. Hart and Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight*, 27.
47. Dollar, *A History of Fundamentalism*, 72–73.
48. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 185. For a history of the movement from the 1930s through the middle of the twentieth century, see Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).
49. *Ibid.*, 1. "A more precise statement of the same point is that an American fundamentalist is an evangelical who is in militant opposition to liberal theology in the churches or to changes in cultural values or mores, such as those associated with 'secular humanism.'" While Marsden attempts to apply that term to the entire history of Christian fundamentalism in America, it appears better to use this as the post-1925 definition. Theological fundamentalism (1870–1925) was far more concerned with consolidating and maintaining the faithful and arguing on theological grounds rather than cultural and sociological grounds.
50. Dollar, *A History of Fundamentalism*, 72–73. Dollar lists the original five points as "the inspiration of the Bible, the depravity of man, redemption through Christ's

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blood, the true church made up of all believers, and the coming of the Lord to set up His reign” (72). He also argues that the “original list of fundamentals included the Trinity, the fall of Adam, the need of the new birth, full deliverance of guilt at salvation, the assurance of salvation, the centrality of Christ in the Bible, the walk after the Spirit, the resurrection of both believers and unbelievers, and the ripening of the present age for judgment” (73).

51. Richard J. Mouw, *The Smell of Sawdust* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2000), 71–72. Mouw argues that the list of the fundamentals does not represent the whole of the conservative evangelical theology. Yet as we know from the history of the movement, it has presented itself as theologically shallow at times.
52. Timothy Morgan, “Theologians Decry ‘Narrow’ Boundaries,” *Christianity Today*, 10 June 2002, 18.

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