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WHAT IS IN A NAME?

by Herschel H. Hobbs

In an effort to report the theological issue at the Southern Baptist Convention in San Francisco, the daily press presented it as a struggle between Conservatives and Liberals.

Was this actually the case?

During the discussion in the Convention such terms as "Conservative," "Liberal," and "Fundamentalist" were used. At this juncture it may be well for us to examine these words.

What is a "Conservative," a "Liberal," a "Fundamentalist"? How do these terms apply to varying shades of theological thought found in the Southern Baptist Convention? Do they really explain the issues involved?

This article is not an effort to defend or justify any person or group. It is an attempt to clarify the issues to enable us to arrive at a proper solution to our problems.

Leaving the word "conservative" for later consideration, let us examine the other two. "Liberalism" in its original sense refers to a theological movement during the 19th and early 20th Centuries which rejected the authority and inspiration of the Bible in favor of scientific materialism, humanism, Darwinian evolution, and rationalism as opposed to faith.

Its extreme form in America was known as "Modernism," the fruit of religious humanism and theistic naturalism. This extreme position has long since been repudiated in most theological thought, although, in some quarters in recent years, "a neo-liberalism (new-liberalism), less repentant and voicing more of the old optimism (see above), is increasingly vocal," a monograph in the Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists states.

"In recent years the term 'liberalism' has become a theological title intended to characterize a thinker of unorthodox bent who emphasizes free-thinking with regard to the classic doctrinal statements of the Christian faith. Such thinking is usually marked by philosophical and religious idealism, a rejection of the authority of the Scriptures in Christian faith and practice, an interpretation of creation in terms of Darwinian evolutionary pantheism, an emphasis upon the role of Christ as ethical teacher rather than as divine Redeemer and Lord, a superficial view of the seriousness of sin, and a strong repugnance toward the doctrine of eternal punishment for the unrepentant," it continues.

It would be well to gauge a person's theology by this very clear statement in determining whether he is a "liberal."

"Fundamentalism" has at least two connotations in American theological thought. As a theological position it came into being in the early part of the 20th Century

in contrast to the extreme liberalism of that period.

It rejected the critical approach to the Scriptures. In opposition to "Modernism" it emphasized the deity of Christ, the sinful nature of man, the vicarious atonement, and the visible return of Christ. Among its literature were produced 12 volumes entitled "The Fundamentals: A Testimony of the Truth (1910-1912)." One of its contributors was Dr. E. Y. Mullins, then the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

These volumes presented five "fundamental doctrines": (1) the virgin birth of Christ; (2) the bodily resurrection of Christ; (3) the inerrancy or infallibility of the Scriptures; (4) the substitutionary atonement; (5) the imminent, physical second coming of Christ to establish His millennial reign.

With respect to the Scriptures this work denied "all scientific approaches to the Bible and asserted the absolute infallibility of all its historical, cultural, and geographical pronouncements because of its literal 'verbal inspiration,'" again quoting from the Encyclopedia.

Dr. Wayne E. Ward, author of the monograph, notes that "many of the contributors would have interpreted these fundamentals in differing fashion, but upon the bare statement of them they were agreed." That this is true may be seen by an examination of certain teachings by Dr. Mullins in his "The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression" (Baptist Sunday School Board, Nashville, 1917); e. g., his treatment of the inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures, pps. 142-153.

But in the course of time "Fundamentalism" has taken on a different meaning in Southern Baptist thought. It refers to the Baptist theological and church movement whose principal figure was the late Dr. J. Frank Norris.

Growing out of certain differences within the Baptist General Convention of Texas, it became a severe critic of the Southern Baptist Convention, its agencies and some of its most trusted leaders. Ultrafundamentalist in nature, it raised the cry of "modernism" in Southern Baptist life, a charge which had no basis of fact.

Since Dr. Norris' death in 1952 the movement lost much of its dynamic drive. Some of its churches have since sought cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Dr. Wilburn S. Taylor notes that "the characteristic difference of the (Fundamental) fellowship lies in its shades of emphasis rather than divergent points of theology." But the term "Fundamentalist" in Southern Baptist thought still connotes an attitude in opposition to the general program and belief common to the Southern Baptist Convention.

This "fundamentalist" view is also found in certain movements among American denominations other than Southern Baptists.

Which brings us back to the term "conservative." Too often this term is thought of only as the antithesis of "liberalism."

However, this is to misunderstand the use of the word as applied to Southern Baptist theological thought. One may be "conservative" with respect to "Fundamentalism" as well as to "Liberalism."

It is a term denoting the middle-of-the-road theological position held by most Southern Baptists in opposition to extremes in theology either to the right or to the left. Certainly it is not identical with a reactionary Fundamentalism nor with a reactionary Liberalism.

For instance, Dr. Mullins is not to be listed in either extreme camp. Nor is Dr. W. T. Conner. Both were "conservatives," as any examination of their writings will reveal.

Now what may be said of the "conservative" position with relation to "liberalism" and "fundamentalism"? With respect to "liberalism," "conservatism" insists upon the divine inspiration of the Scriptures and their infallibility within the autonomy of religion.

It holds to the unique deity of Jesus Christ, His virgin birth, miracles, vicarious atonement, bodily resurrection and imminent, visible return. It insists upon the depravity of man, heaven for the redeemed and eternal punishment in hell for the lost. It repudiates any system of religion which denies the supernatural as revealed in the Bible.

With respect to "conservatism's" relationship to "fundamentalism" the picture is not so sharply drawn. For the difference between them is not so much one of basic content but of attitude and degree.

For instance, both agree upon the imminent visible, bodily return of Jesus. But they may differ as to the details connected with the event, a difference which exists even within the ranks of "Conservatism." These have never been a test of fellowship among Southern Baptists.

For obvious reasons by-passing the "Fundamentalism Fellowship Movement," let us compare "conservatism" with "fundamentalism" in its original sense.

"Fundamentalism" was opposed to the scientific approach to the Scriptures. "Conservatism" sees in science a companion, not a competitor, although it insists upon the autonomy of religion in its own realm.

It must be remembered, however, that Fundamentalism was dealing with an extreme "liberalism" based upon an infant, impudent science which repudiated the Christian revelation in its entirety. The present-day atmosphere between science and religion is quite different. The extreme dogmatism which separated them is gone.

Science has become more reverent, and theology has become less dogmatic. Each regards the other as a companion, within its own realm, in the search after ultimate truth. Many leading scientists today deny the extreme naturalism of 40 years ago. Many of our greatest scientists are men of deepest Christian faith.

Some years ago in an interview in a Chicago newspaper Dr. Arthur H. Compton, leading physicist, declared "In the beginning God created...." to be the sublimest

words ever penned.

There is no proven fact or tenable theory of science which does not find a compatible atmosphere in the pages of the Bible. The biblical revelation has nothing to fear from a reverent science, so long as each recognizes the autonomy of the other in its own realm.

The same may be said with regard to historical criticism. In the first quarter of this century "fundamentalism" was confronted by a destructive criticism of the Scriptures. In the intervening years "historical criticism" has proved that it can be constructive insofar as our understanding of the biblical revelation is concerned.

Had the friends of the Bible not adopted historical criticism as a legitimate tool in biblical research, it is difficult to imagine what the theological picture might be today. In fact the "friends" of the Bible have seized the weapon of its "foes," and have turned it on them to their consternation and near-destruction.

Two examples will suffice. The destructive critics found many supposed historical "errors" in the writings of Luke. But the friends of the Bible were not content simply to reply, "I believe the Bible."

Armed with the tools of a friendly historical criticism they went forth to battle. The result is that archaeology has completely vindicated Luke, so that one of his former critics, Sir William Ramsey, declared Luke to be a historian of the first rank.

Even when Luke's writings conflicted with the official records of the Roman Empire it was found that the latter were either incomplete or in error, and Luke was right.

A second example has to do with Belshazzar (Daniel 5). The destructive critics noted that the last king of Babylonia was Nabonidus. Therefore, they said that reference to Belshazzar as the last king of that empire was a biblical error.

Archaeology produced a Babylonian inscription which says that for several years Nabonidus was absent from Babylon during which time he entrusted the kingship or coregency to the crown prince, Belshazzar. It was during this time that Babylon fell.

So Dan. 5:30 was right in listing Belshazzar as the last king of Babylon.

Of all the archaeological discoveries throwing light upon problems of biblical accuracy, every one has vindicated the Bible. The Bible has found a tried and true friend in the scientific approach to its record.

What of textual criticism, the critical approach to the text of the Bible? Obviously some higher critics have created problems which have perplexed us and still do. But the overall effect of textual study has benefited the Bible more than it has troubled it.

For instance, it has enabled us to arrive at the truest text through the discovery (archaeology) and study of the oldest and most accurate manuscripts of the Scriptures.

Textual criticism in the hands of reverent scholars has strengthened and clarified the deeper meaning of the biblical revelation.

There is no basis of fact upon which to place "Conservatism" in opposition to "Fundamentalism" in its original connotation within the American theological scene. In all probability many of these identified with this group 50 years ago would call themselves "Conservatives" today. Indeed many were then, as has been seen in the case of Dr. E. Y. Mullins.

The difference is more that of terminology than theology. But because of its association with other more extreme movements, the term "Fundamental" has been replaced by the term "Conservative."

What, then, is a "Conservative"?

He is one who accepts the Bible as the inspired word of God. Within this position there may be differences of opinion as to the process of inspiration, but not as to the product of inspiration.

He accepts the supernatural as being in harmony with God's purpose and work in divine revelation. He recognizes and uses the tools of a scientific and systematic approach to the study of the Scriptures, but also recognizes the right of the Bible to speak the final word on a given problem within the autonomy of religion.

He allows for differences of opinion in areas where tradition alone is involved. But he accepts fully the teaching of the scriptural text itself.

Where textual and/or historical problems remain he maintains an open but inquisitive mind, content to trust and wait until through reverent research the problem is resolved in truth.

The "Conservative" accepts the full and complete revelation of God in Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. He recognizes as truth the biblical teaching regarding sinful man and God's redemptive work in history.

In short, a "Conservative" is one who accepts "the entire Bible as the authoritative, authentic, infallible Word of God." The San Francisco Convention voted unanimously to adopt a motion affirming such a faith.

Men, women, teachers, preachers and laymen of varying views as to details and definitions joined without a dissenting voice in affirming that they so believed. The Convention rejoiced in its unanimity, and was not surprised that it was so.

Throughout the fellowship of Southern Baptists there went a thrill of delight. The world was apprised of the fact that Southern Baptists still stand where they have always stood--a people of the Book.

Dr. A. T. Robertson used to tell his students, "Let the Bible say what it says." As "conservatives" Southern Baptists must never endeavor to make the Bible say less than it says. Nor should they endeavor to make it say more than it says. In the words of Dr. W. T. Conner, as reported by one of his former students, "The Bible means what it means."

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BAPTIST PRESS

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Dear Editor:

Dr. H. H. Hobbs asked us to relay this article to you. We are passing it along to you in its entirety.

Your friend,

Theo

Theo Sommerkamp