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The Gospel and the Spirit of Fundamentalism

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The Spirit of Fundamentalism

We are witnessing a worldwide resurgence of fundamentalism. In the 1980 and 1984 U.S. elections Protestant fundamentalism demonstrated substantial political clout. Islamic fundamentalism has seized political power in Iran and is making its presence felt in Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and Indonesia. Sikh fundamentalism, with the recent outbreak of violence, has leaped into prominence in India.

Not only are there many kinds of religious fundamentalism— Protestant, Catholic, Moslem, Hindu, Jewish— but there are also economic and political forms of fundamentalism. In the Communist world, for example, Marxist fundamentalists want to resist the tendency to experiment with free enterprise. In Australia, trade-union *fundamentalists* are holding the nation hostage in their effort to resist changes which must accompany the modernization of industry. Fundamentalism is associated with some of the most dangerous tensions and explosive trouble spots in the world today— Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, Indonesia, India, Northern Ireland and South Africa. James Barr says:

Few can doubt what many observers have noted: that the continuance of religious fundamentalism, and of the attitudes associated with it, may have great importance in determining whether or not mankind is to be destroyed through nuclear warfare. 1

Again he says:

Fundamentalism has suddenly become a matter of concern for everyone, whether or not they are personally religious. It affects education in science and history; it affects political elections in some countries, and through this it affects international relation; it may affect the question of whether mankind survives into the twenty-first century. Therefore, if people want to understand the world in which they live, they may find it necessary to understand something about fundamentalism. 2

The Common Bond

The different types of fundamentalism are frequently associated with a number of characteristics— dogmatic claims to possess the truth, resistance to compromise, reluctance to change, strident polemics, the disposition to impose a certain view of things on everyone else, a divisive influence, paranoid attitudes to all opposing influences, authoritarian structures, social conservatism, etc. Yet none of these characteristics accurately identifies the various forms of fundamentalism. If we are to understand fundamentalism, we must understand its essential spirit. There is a common spirit shared by even the most disparate forms of fundamentalism.

Protestant fundamentalism is the classic form of modern fundamentalism. It is here

that the term “fundamentalism” originated. Early in this century conservative Christians, reacting to the inroads of rationalism, biblical skepticism and liberalism, formed a coalition to champion the fundamental positions of traditional Christianity. Today most Protestant fundamentalists do not call themselves fundamentalists but prefer a less pejorative banner. Since the public mind often associates fundamentalism with closed-mindedness or old-fashioned bigotry, Protestant fundamentalists generally prefer to call themselves evangelicals. This can be confusing because not all evangelicals are fundamentalists. In fact the true evangelical spirit is the antithesis of the spirit of fundamentalism. It is therefore essential that we accurately identify the spirit of fundamentalism.

The hallmark of Protestant fundamentalism is a certain view of the Bible. The Bible is regarded as the absolute Word of God to man. All information contained in the Bible is said to be inerrant, and the book is given the status of the Christian’s supreme authority. Protestant fundamentalists see themselves as “people of the Book,” and their religion is “the religion of the Book.” So it is in all forms of fundamentalism— some book (e.g., the Koran for Islamic fundamentalists), some code of conduct, some ideology, some manifesto, some principle, some creed, some Magna Charta is given the status of absolute truth.

The blackest word in the fundamentalist’s vocabulary is the word *compromise*. The fundamentalist is a purist, a man of principle who is dedicated to live by his Magna Charta of truth.

In order to appreciate the real spirit of fundamentalism we need to look at a classic form of fundamentalism which existed long before modern Protestantism. We suggest that the archetype of all fundamentalism was first-century Pharisaism. We do not say this to unfairly prejudice the case against modern fundamentalism, for in our Christian tradition we have caricatured the Pharisees and made them appear so ridiculous that we have prayed, “God, we thank you that we are not like the Pharisees.”

In recent years scholarly research has demonstrated that we have often seriously misrepresented the Pharisees. Far from being blatant legalism, their religion freely acknowledged that Israel was given privileged covenantal status by grace alone. The Pharisees were not shallow externalists who ignored the weightier matters of the Law. Years before Christ, Rabbi Hillel had enunciated the ethic of the “golden rule.”

The roots of Pharisaism can be traced to the reorganization of Israel after the Babylonian exile. Before the exile the Torah (or Law) was a flexible, expanding tradition. Beginning with Moses, as prophet after prophet spoke the Word of the Lord to Israel, the custodians of the sacred tradition reinterpreted and added to that growing tradition. But after the exile Israel’s sacred tradition was carefully assembled and the

Torah was given its final form. It became something static and inflexible. As never before, Israel became a people who covenanted to live by the written Torah. The Torah, which in the broad sense included the entire body of Jewish Scripture, was increasingly lauded as the Word of God, the light of the world, the way, the truth and the life, etc.

When circumstances arose in Israel's history which threatened her commitment to the Torah, the faithful resisted these corrupting influences. Nearly two hundred years before Christ Hellenism (Greek culture and philosophy) made its influence felt within the Jewish nation and posed a threat to the integrity of the Jewish religion. Among the pious who resisted compromise with the world were those who came to be called the Pharisees. In the midst of apostasy they determined to stand true to the Torah. The Pharisees were purists, men of principle. Not a few chose martyrdom rather than compromise. The Pharisees, therefore, stood in the illustrious tradition of defenders of the orthodox faith.

It seems, then, that the Pharisees and Jesus should have had so many things in common that they should have stood together in defense of the faith. But surprisingly, they were foremost opponents. The spirit of Jesus was the antithesis of the spirit of the Pharisees. To make matters intolerable, Jesus said their religion was hypocritical. This must have deeply hurt them, because their best rabbinic teachers had denounced hypocrisy as one of the three great sins. If the Pharisees were guilty of hypocrisy, this was certainly not their intention. It was their religious commitment which forced them into hypocrisy.

In the vertical dimension or relationship the Pharisees perceived that their supreme obligation was to do the will of God as expressed in the Torah. In the horizontal dimension they acknowledged their obligation to love the neighbor in deeds of compassion and justice. Rabbinic literature taught high ethical and humanitarian ideals. Yet believing that their chief obligation was to do the will of God as expressed in the Torah, the Pharisees fulfilled their religious commitment irrespective of how many people were hurt or neglected. Thus, their religious zeal proved to be a dehumanizing force. For example, in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan the priest and Levite left the wounded man on the side of the road. Presumably their primary religious commitment to the Torah prevented them from becoming involved in the lesser obligation to the neighbor. Paul's pre-Christian zeal to honor the Torah was so great that he persecuted innocent people unto death.

The same spirit of fundamentalism is at work in Iran today. Innocent Bahai women are being tortured and killed on the altar of religious fundamentalism. Is this because the Moslem religion is without ethical principles or humanitarian ideals? On the contrary, the Koran teaches love to the neighbor as explicitly as does Judaism or

Christianity. But Islamic fundamentalists are such purists and men of uncompromising loyalty to the Koran that their allegiance to the “truth” outweighs their concern for people.

If we are appalled at the inhumanity of Moslem fundamentalism, we need to remember that Christian history abounds with inhuman cruelty. For most of its history Christian society has been oppressive, intolerant and ready to persecute dissenters, Jews, Arabs or even other Christian believers. Protestants have been no better than Catholics. Religious tolerance gained the ascendancy in Christian society very late in history; and even where physical persecution is contrary to the law of the land, religiously committed Christians employ all types of social and psychological pressures to impose their religious views on others. People are still run over, ground up and left to bleed in the name of Christian commitment. Someone once lamented that the committed people are not civil and the civil people are not committed. Must religious commitment have an inhuman face?

Marxism declared itself against religion and for man. It has had great humanitarian ideals. Yet the Marxist fundamentalist is so committed to the Communist Manifesto or to socialist ideology that he will dehumanize both himself and others for the sake of the “truth.” Communism has an inhuman face for the same fundamental reasons that Pharisaim had an inhuman face. In fact Marxism is also a religion. Whereas the Pharisees’ supreme commitment was to live by the Jewish Torah, the Communists’ supreme commitment is to live by the Marxist Torah.

The Spirit of Jesus

In order to sharply contrast the spirit of Jesus and the spirit of Pharisaim (fundamentalism) we draw attention to two aspects of the gospel:

1. Truth (the Word of God) is embodied in a Person. Truth is spirit and life. It is not an impersonal book, a text, a principle, an ideology. The Pharisees studied their holy book because they thought that therein was the way, the truth and the life. The entire Gospel of John puts a Person in the place of honor where Pharisaim had placed a book. John expressly contradicts the fundamentalists’ thesis that a book is our guide, shepherd, light bread, word, truth and comforter. Our supreme authority is not a book but the Person of the risen Christ.

2. Truth (the Word of God) became the neighbor in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ God appeared as one of the people— with the people and for the people. But out of

loyalty and zeal for God (the vertical relationship) the Pharisees killed this neighbor, Jesus Christ (the horizontal relationship).

The incarnation means that God is not to be sought and served in some nonworldly religious sphere. Since God has revealed himself as the neighbor in Jesus Christ and as one who stands with and on behalf of all neighbors, he can only be served by serving the neighbor. If, as the gospel proclaims, the whole world of people stood before God in one man, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:18; 2 Cor. 5:14), the reverse is true—that every neighbor stands before me as the representative of Christ. Christ is present in every neighbor because Jesus Christ, God’s image, is now written clearly on every man. What I do to my neighbor and for humanity I do for God.

Let us draw two practical consequences of this gospel of Christ:

1. It means that truth is person-centered and people-oriented. Whereas the Pharisees taught that the people must serve the Torah at any cost, Jesus taught that the Torah was intended to serve the people. For example, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). Human need must always take precedence over religious requirements. People are not to be enslaved and dehumanized by any so-called truth, ideology or theological system. Rather, all laws and theological systems must be subordinate to the needs of humanity.

Whereas Paul’s religious commitment once led him to hurt people, his new commitment was person-centered and people-oriented. What a great “compromiser” he was prepared to be for the benefit of people! If it would help the Jews or weak Christians, he would have Timothy circumcised, keep the Sabbath, eat kosher food, refrain from eating meat offered to idols, drink no wine, and even take a Nazarite vow and offer sacrifices at the Jewish temple. On the other hand, if it would benefit Gentiles, this very Jewish man would refuse to have Titus circumcised, would regard all days alike and would eat Gentile food or meat offered to idols. He met the libertines on their own ground (“All things are lawful”— 1 Cor. 6:12). To the ascetics he came as an ascetic (1 Cor. 7), and to the ecstatic he came as an ecstatic (“I speak in tongues more than all of you”— 1 Cor. 14:18). In short he would be all things to all men so that he could benefit as many people as possible (1 Cor. 9:19-22). There is no commitment to an abstract truth or an abstract theology here. The book Paul lived by was the book of life. The God he served always had a human face.

2. The incarnation means that the sacred has been secularized and the secular has been sacralized. God has joined the human race. But how often religion leads people to escape from the world and from the human race! By all kinds of religious iron curtains— belief systems, sacraments, institutions— people are effectively isolated from the rest of mankind. What religionists call evangelizing, is proselytizing. All kinds

of religious tests are imposed for fellowship in their little holy cities. Salvation thus becomes a withdrawal or escape from the human race.

In the light of the gospel, however, there is no separation between the sacred and the secular. The sacred has been secularized, for the tabernacle of God is with men. Jesus announces the arrival of a kingdom which imposes no religious test on those who would enter it. His gospel throws down all religious walls which separate man from man. It sets the prisoners of religious systems free to join the human race. All who live to help their fellow men and to make the world a better place have the spirit of Jesus and shall not fail of finding entrance into his kingdom on the final day (Matt. 25). Jesus left only one vivid image of the final judgment. One thing is startlingly clear. No religious tests are imposed, but only one question is asked: How did you treat Christ, who was always present in your neighbor?

The spirit of Jesus was willing to make all laws and all theology subservient to the real needs of people. If God himself was willing to come down from his high heaven to serve people, laws and theology must always come out of the unreal world of religious devotion and be servants which bend to the needs of people. If devotion to any truth, theology or ideology hurts or neglects the real needs of humanity, we can be sure that this is the spirit of fundamentalism, which is the antithesis of the spirit of Jesus.

The Mark of Christ

All who share in the resurrection of Christ belong to him. They receive his mark. This mark is not found, however, in worshiping at designated places, in observing sacred times or in any other religious test which distinguished the covenantal people of God in Old Testament times. Those religious marks had become a wall of implacable hostility between Jews and non-Jews. With the coming of Christ therefore, all such barriers were swept away (Eph. 2:14, 15). Henceforth no one was to be disqualified from the fellowship of Christ over the question of times or places or foods or circumcision, for as the apostle says, "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value" (Gal. 5:6).

Unfortunately, Christianity itself has been troubled by other religious marks. Tremendous importance has been given to various belief systems. Often the question, "What do you believe?" has determined not only how people stand in the fellowship of men, but how they supposedly find acceptance with God. This was wholly alien to the apostle Paul, who, just before his execution, declared, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (2

Tim. 1:12). The apostle's ultimate confidence was not in "what", nor how much he knew; it was "whom" he knew. Thus, the mark of Christ cannot be identified with any belief system. Nor can the mark of Christ be any religious observance or ceremony. In the history of Christianity it has sometimes been said that others can have fellowship with us, for example, only if they share our views of the Supper. However, when we reflect that those with differing views and practices still enjoy full and uninhibited fellowship with the Almighty, it becomes clear that the mark of Christ cannot be any religious observance.

So none of the things of the Old Testament dispensation, none of the belief systems developed in the history of Christianity, nor even Christian religious observances can be the mark of Jesus Christ. Rather, the mark of Christ is the Spirit of Christ. In the great events of Christ's death and resurrection he never really left the world; he changed the mode of his being present. Paul said that by his resurrection Christ became a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45). And the apostle further said, "The Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17). He became spiritually present in the world and Lord of the world so that he might be with his people in a more meaningful and more effective way and so that his fellowship with them might be more intimate than if he had remained here as the historical Jesus.

We are at no disadvantage because we have not walked with the historical Christ. Through his death and resurrection and the gift that he gave of his Spirit his presence is more real and more effective and more available than if we had him here in the flesh. So God's mark is the Spirit of the resurrected One. This mark of Christ is the spirit of good will, the spirit of outgoing generosity, of compassion, forgiveness and mercy, the spirit of passion for justice among men.

Furthermore, the Spirit of Christ is not confined to any sect within the Christian church. No Christian group has a monopoly on the Spirit of Christ. Nor do all Christians together have a monopoly on the Spirit of Jesus Christ. He is bigger than any religious group or belief system. He cannot be confined even to public Christianity. Even in the non-Christian world, wherever there is love, kindness and compassion, wherever there are fellow human beings working unselfishly to uplift humanity and to make this world a better place, there the resurrected One has gone before us. There we recognize that the Spirit of God is not silent because in all nations he has not left himself without witness (Acts 14:16, 17). In the only description Jesus gives of the final judgment, all nations, all peoples, are there. And in that solemn hour the Lord imposes no religious tests for entrance into the kingdom of God, but only, Do you bear the mark of Christ?

Thus, ultimate meaning is not found in the sacralization of our own identity through religions tests, beliefs or observances. Our identity is found only with those who bear the mark, the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version

1. James Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. x.
2. James Barr, "Religious Fundamentalism," *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 1 June 1982, p. 24.

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