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Holding On: *Biblical Christianity* *Remembering the Faith*

“You must remember this . . .

The fundamental things apply

As time goes by.”

-- Sam (Dooley Wilson), “As Time Goes By,” in *Casablanca* (1942)

The spread of liberalism throughout the various denominational traditions of Christianity and the rise of the cultic sects espousing heretical versions of the Christian religion have not gone unanswered in the church. The Christian faith revealed in Scripture has been remembered and proclaimed in churches all over the world throughout the modern era. Yet the onslaught of criticism and attacks against biblical Christianity have not left its adherents unchanged. If we are to carry on the mission of proclaiming and defending Christian faith and values into the third millennium, we must be aware of how the various

religious and cultural challenges to our faith have shaped the church as it seeks to hold fast its confession.

While there are tens or even hundreds of millions of Christians worldwide who are seeking to uphold the Christian faith in a way that resists its corruption by liberalism and other heretical movements, the ways in which they seek to do this vary dramatically. Each of these arguably has its strengths as well as its weaknesses. In this chapter we will consider several closely related approaches to upholding the biblical Christian faith. Along the way we will look at some of the major challenges facing biblical Christianity from within as we enter the third millennium.

Catholicism: Faith of Our Fathers?

By far the largest segment of Christianity in the world is Catholicism, by which we mean primarily the Roman Catholic Church.¹ Liberalism, or modernism as it is generally called in Catholic contexts, had a delayed impact on Catholicism as compared to Protestantism (where liberalism originated). While mainline Protestant denominations were being overwhelmed with naturalism and liberalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Roman Catholicism remained relatively stable theologically. During the postwar years Catholic scholars began exploring liberal theories and interpretations of the Bible more freely, and after Vatican II in the 1960s the conservative consensus of faith in the Catholic Church began to break down, notably in the United States.

The primary mechanism by which the Catholic Church seeks to preserve authentic Christianity is the Church's exercise of authority to interpret tradition. Catholicism places

great emphasis on its sacred tradition, and claims that its teaching office (headed by the Pope) is guided by God to interpret that tradition infallibly.

Not all Christians, of course, accept the Catholic Church's authority claims. The Eastern Orthodox churches hold to a similar theological system and church structure, except that it does not acknowledge the Roman claim that church authority is centralized in the Papacy. Protestants question the whole notion of an authoritative church teaching and argue that Christians have the right and the responsibility to question church institutions and teachings in the light of Scripture. The Protestant Reformation began as a movement to reform the Catholic Church in the light of a fresh understanding of the biblical gospel, and led to the formation of new church bodies only when the Church institution refused to acknowledge its error.

In the 1960s the Catholic Church held its landmark council Vatican II and instituted sweeping ecclesiastical reforms and reformulated its theology to create more openness to Scripture and the Protestant churches. Since then Protestants have been debating what they ought to think about Rome. The views range from fierce denunciations of Catholicism as a cult or false church to calls for Protestants and Christians to put their old differences aside and to worship and evangelize side by side.

All Christians should commend the efforts of the Catholic Church to resist the onslaught of modern naturalism and other philosophies at odds with the biblical revelation of God working to redeem humanity through the supernatural saving work of Jesus Christ. The Catholic Church continues to maintain the historic faith in Christ as the eternal Son of God, born of a virgin, crucified and risen for our salvation. To the extent that the Catholic

system of authority and tradition has worked as a conserving force in Christianity, even Christians outside that Catholic system should be appreciative.

What keeps non-Catholic Christians (and especially Protestants) from giving unqualified praise to the Catholic Church is the fact that its use of authority has not been limited to efforts to conserve the historic Christian faith. During the late nineteenth century, when confidence in the Christian faith began to be assaulted from all sides in Western culture, the Catholic Church strengthened the authority of the Pope by declaring at the first Vatican Council (1870) as dogma the claim that the Pope could speak infallibly for the whole Church. The purpose of this declaration was not to strengthen the Pope's hand to uphold the essential truths of the Christian gospel but to warrant papal pronouncements that exalted Mary. Already in 1854 the Pope had declared that the Immaculate Conception of Mary (the idea that she was conceived without original sin, and so never sinned) was to be received as dogma. At the same time the Pope elevated to the level of dogma the belief that Mary served as "Mediatrice," an ongoing role in salvation by which she mediates between Catholics and Jesus Christ. In 1950 the doctrine of the Bodily Assumption of Mary (the idea that she was taken up into heaven and did not suffer death) was also pronounced dogma by the Pope.

It is true that these ideas existed within Catholicism before the Pope made them dogma. What is disturbing, though (beyond the fact that these dogmas are not warranted by Scripture),² is that the Church's authority has been used to promote excessive devotion to a creature (as truly great a creature as Mary was and is).

If, despite these controversial pronouncements and dubious authority of the Pope and the Catholic Church hierarchy, the Church was in other respects succeeding in propagating the biblical gospel, Protestants would on balance be obliged to commend the Catholic Church. But this does not appear to be the case. For one thing, the Catholic teaching and preaching of the gospel from a Protestant reading of the Bible is woefully inadequate. We may gratefully acknowledge that the Catholic Church has an accurate view of the person of Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God incarnated in human flesh for our salvation, and that the Church faithfully preaches that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead. The Catholic Church also teaches that salvation is ultimately a work of God's grace, not the result of our efforts. But the Church's claim that this salvation is appropriated not simply or even necessarily through personal faith in Jesus Christ, but essentially through participation in the rites and disciplines of the Church (especially the sacraments), greatly obscures and distorts the biblical doctrine of grace (see John 3:16-18; Rom. 11:6; Eph. 2:8-10; Titus 3:3-8). It is all too easy, and common, for Catholics to trust in their religious observances rather than in Christ for their salvation, and this is an error which Catholic doctrine inadvertently encourages.

Setting aside the differences between Catholics and Protestants on the doctrinal content of the gospel, the fact is that the Church's authority has not proved effective in preventing apostasy from Christian convictions within its own walls. Millions of Roman Catholics are Christian in name only and Catholic in formal affiliation only. In the last third of the twentieth century the Church has been rocked by heretics of all kinds, from New Age mystics like Matthew Fox to blasphemous humanists like John Dominic Crossan (a

defrocked priest who openly denies the Resurrection of Christ and is a leading member of the ultraliberal “Jesus Seminar”). Although the Church has disciplined such teachers, it has not been able to prevent them from swaying many Catholics (and Protestants) and contributing to the general unbelief which is increasingly prevalent in Western society.

By no means are we denying that Catholics and Protestants can make common cause on issues on which they agree. For example, Catholics and Protestants who affirm an orthodox view of Scripture as divinely inspired and historically reliable can stand together against radical biblical criticism which denies the truth of the Bible and offers revisionist theories about the life and teachings of Jesus. Conservative Catholics and Protestants also share many ethical convictions and concerns, especially on such issues as abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, and religious expression in public life. Some of the most important work being done in these areas today is the work of Catholic Christians. But we cannot agree with Catholics when they urge us to look to the Catholic Church’s authority as the key to defending Christian faith and values. That authority appears to be neither effective nor valid. Not only does Scripture not accord such authority to the Pope or to the Roman teaching office, but the Catholic Church uses that authority to promote dogmas that are not taught in Scripture and which widen the divide between Catholic Christians and Protestant Christians.

Calling on Christians to respect tradition and Christian leaders and to honor the Mother of our Lord is legitimate; demanding that Christians bow to tradition, ascribe infallibility to their leaders’ doctrinal pronouncements, and to venerate Mary as the Mediatrix between Christ and all Christians is not legitimate. Such teachings, if anything,

work against the laudable efforts of the Catholic Church to uphold “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

Fundamentalism: Not Just That Old-Time Religion

The term fundamentalism has been widely used and abused, and numerous definitions have been offered, most of them abusive and some of them only slightly tongue in cheek (e.g., a fundamentalist is an evangelical who’s mad about something, or a Christian who’s more conservative theologically than we are).

The most careful analysts of church history seem to be in broad agreement that fundamentalism per se is a development in early twentieth-century American Protestantism. It was not merely a movement that affirmed the “fundamentals” of the Christian faith (although it certainly did that), but one whose affirmation of those fundamentals was characterized by its opposition to the modernist or liberal teachings which threatened or denied them. In short, the basic impulse of fundamentalism was *reactionary*. The point is not that the fundamentalists rejected liberal, antisupernatural views of the Bible — all orthodox Christians rejected such views — but that the fundamentalists’ reaction against those views became a major, and often consuming, aspect of their religious identity.³

One of the five “fundamentals” commonly identified in the early years of the movement was the inerrancy of Scripture — the doctrine that the Bible, as the word of God, is completely true in all matters on which it speaks and therefore does not contain substantive error in any of its teachings, statements of fact, or ethical principles. The doctrine as such is actually not new; it can easily be shown to have been the view of most or

all of the major Christian theologians prior to the nineteenth century (e.g., Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, to name but a few). What was new was that fundamentalists began more and more to equate commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture with acceptance of particular interpretations of Scripture, about which orthodox Christians had honest and legitimate disagreements.

For example, fundamentalists generally insist that the Bible must be interpreted “literally” to teach the creation of the universe no more than about six to ten thousand years ago. The issue here is not the specific conclusions that fundamentalists reach: for example, many evangelicals who are not fundamentalists also believe that the universe is only a few thousand years old. What is distinctive about fundamentalists is that they typically believe that those who do not reach these conclusions do not “*really* believe the Bible.” Christians who understand the Bible to allow for a billions-old universe, or who do not hold to the same views about the end-times events as they do, are commonly said not to believe the Bible *literally* — which is to say, as fundamentalists see it, *not at all*.

The motive and concern that drives this emphasis on literal interpretation of the Bible is itself noble and Christian. Fundamentalists rightly recognize that liberals often claim to believe and respect the Bible while systematically dismantling its teachings by “interpreting” the Bible “in the light of modern knowledge.” They quite properly repudiate efforts to reinterpret the Resurrection as communicating a spiritual truth or timeless insight. Jesus *literally* came back to life, just as he was literally conceived in the womb of a virgin, was literally crucified, and will literally return to the earth to bring eternal judgment on the wicked and eternal life to those who trust in him. A “literal” reading of

these biblical teachings is quite proper and is in fact the historic Christian way of understanding the Bible. Where fundamentalism is distinctive and new is in its absolutizing the principle of literal interpretation and its condemnation of Christian understandings of secondary doctrinal issues as unbiblical because they do not follow such absolute literalism.

Fundamentalists typically prefer to separate themselves from denominations if a significant portion of the denomination does not accept their understanding of the Bible. In one major case, that of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), fundamentalists were able to gain control of the denomination away from the “moderates.” While the fundamentalists in the SBC regard the moderates as really liberals, for the most part the moderates appear to be Christians who hold to an orthodox theology but do not accept the literal approach and interpretations of the Bible mentioned earlier.

From a cultural and sociological perspective, fundamentalism is generally marked by a reactionary approach to a wide range of issues and in a variety of ways. Fundamentalists have often resisted cultural changes that were for the better, such as the civil rights and racial integration movement of the 1960s (though most fundamentalists today support minority civil rights). In general, fundamentalists all too often react to new developments in the culture with initial suspicion if not hostility, and eventually come to terms with those developments after they have become a *fait accompli*.

If Catholicism places too much confidence in ecclesiastical authority and traditions, fundamentalism tends to give too little credence to the role of the church and the importance of Christian tradition. Most fundamentalists are suspicious of denominations

(perhaps because of the widespread liberalism of the mainline bodies) and insist on the autonomy of the local church — a position especially associated with Baptists but held by numerous other fundamentalist church associations and independent churches.

Fundamentalists also tend to downgrade or deny the importance of the early creeds, such as the Apostles and Nicene creeds, and regard church history and tradition as irrelevant to the understanding and application of the teachings of Scripture. This seems to be itself contrary to Scripture, which speaks of Christ through his Spirit working in and with his church continuously until his second coming (Matt. 16:18; 18:20; 28:18-20; Eph. 4:11-16; 5:25-27).⁴

Despite its tendencies toward excessive dogmatism and narrowness and its reactionary cultural spirit, fundamentalism is an orthodox Christian movement whose people have often exhibited strength of conviction and fidelity to the gospel when everyone else around them was exhibiting neither. As the movement matures, many Christians who are part of institutions that are historically fundamentalist have transcended the movement's cultural and temperamental limitations even if they hold to its usual distinctive doctrinal conclusions. For this reason fundamentalism may be better thought of as a particularly narrow and reactionary approach to the Christian faith that characterizes some institutions and individuals in a larger orthodox Protestant tradition in varying degrees. That larger orthodox Protestant tradition is known as evangelicalism.

Evangelicalism: In Search of a Biblical Balance

Although the term *evangelical* (from the Greek *euangelion*, “good news” or gospel) was used as early as the sixteenth century to express the Reformation emphasis on the gospel, the movement that bears its name originates in 1942, the year when the National Association of Evangelicals was formed in the United States.⁵ It has been associated from its early years with evangelist Billy Graham and such theologians as Carl F. H. Henry. By the late 1940s evangelicalism had clearly distinguished itself from its fundamentalist roots as a movement that sought to defend the gospel without being reactionary.

Billy Graham became known internationally by the 1950s as an evangelist who preached a simple, old-fashioned gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and who would work in his crusades with all Christian denominations (even with Catholics) in order to bring the gospel to as many people as possible. A quick and dirty, but fairly accurate, rule of thumb to distinguish evangelicals from fundamentalists might be that American evangelicals generally commend and support Graham, while fundamentalists (even if they acknowledge his contributions) generally criticize Graham for his openness to Catholics and the mainline denominations.

The larger point is that evangelicals, while they reject liberalism, do not typically insist on complete separation from churches or church bodies that include or tolerate liberalism in varying degrees in their midst. Evangelicals are much more likely to support efforts to renew the mainline denominations than to abandon them (although some evangelicals can also be found in historically fundamentalist churches).

Again, the line between fundamentalists and evangelicals is a blurry one. There are denominations that split away from their mainline parent bodies but which see themselves as simply carrying on their historic denominational tradition. These include the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, both of which are extremely conservative theologically but which do not fit the usual fundamentalist profile in certain respects. For example, these denominations use and respect the ancient creeds and are more appreciative of Christian history than most fundamentalists. They tend to be less literalistic in their interpretation of Scripture than fundamentalism. Yet they also tend to be fairly intolerant of theological differences from their doctrinal distinctives on the part of other evangelical denominations, a trait common in fundamentalism. It is therefore somewhat arbitrary whether one classifies these denominations as fundamentalist or not.

Evangelicalism, then, is a broad term referring to Protestants who uphold an orthodox theology, maintain a conservative view of Scripture as the word of God, and emphasize the importance and centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ for the Christian faith. Fundamentalism shares the evangelical doctrine and evangelistic focus of evangelicalism, but takes a more hard-line, separatist, and generally reactionary approach to the evangelical faith.

While evangelicalism in theory avoids some of the extremes found in fundamentalism, there are plenty of problems associated with the evangelical movement. Most of these have to do with the question of how Christianity is to relate to the larger culture or cultures in which it finds itself. American evangelicalism in particular has all too often mirrored the American obsession with success and power, while at the same time

other evangelicals live in virtual isolation and retreat from “the world.” While many evangelicals appear preoccupied with doctrine, both essential and speculative, most seem to have lost their passion for truth and to be more interested in self.⁶

Perhaps one of the most basic pitfalls into which some evangelicals fall is to define themselves primarily as an alternative to fundamentalism. To do so is to become reactionary in the opposite direction, with the potential result an accommodation of the evangelical message to the pressures of appearing “contemporary” and anything but “fundamentalist.” Such a danger can be avoided only by seeking to learn from the positive contributions of fundamentalism and by incorporating the sound biblical principles and motives that it embodies at its best.

Nathan O. Hatch has identified three “pressing challenges for American evangelicals on the eve of the 21st century.”⁷ The first is the “rampant pluralism” of evangelicalism, with “its populist and decentralized structure, and its penchant for splitting, forming, and reforming.” As such renowned leaders as Carl Henry and Billy Graham are expected soon to pass on, it is unclear who will emerge as the new leaders of evangelicalism and what new shape the movement will have. The second and related challenge is the need “to recover a higher view of the Church as an institution” — the need for evangelicals to gain a higher respect for the historical institutions and traditions of Christianity. The third challenge is the need for “nurturing first-order Christian scholarship.” This last challenge is difficult for evangelicalism because its decentralized structure has resulted in its lacking such institutions as a major research university and in its developing its own evangelical

publishing houses and associations within which its research efforts are largely directed at internal disputes.⁸

Evangelicals, then, have much learning and growing to do. What they have going for them is their adherence to Scripture as the source and standard for faith and values.

Whatever the shortcomings of evangelicals individually and as a movement, the answers will surely be found in the word of God.

To allow one's ideas and values to become controlled by anything or anyone other than the self-revelation of God in Scripture is to adopt an ideology rather than a theology; it is to become controlled by ideas and values whose origins lie outside the Christian tradition — and potentially to become enslaved by them. . . . The only way Christianity can free itself from subservience to cultural fashion is to ensure that it is firmly grounded in a resource that is independent of that culture. The traditional evangelical approach is to acknowledge the supreme authority of Scripture as a theological and spiritual resource, and the contemporary task as interpreting and applying this resource to the situation of today.⁹

It is this question of the application of the authoritative revelation of God in Scripture to the cultural issues of our changing world that will occupy our attention in the remainder of this book. As McGrath warns us, it is all too easy for evangelicalism to become corrupted by the culture instead of working as salt and light to the culture.

Notes to Chapter 9: Holding On

¹There are a number of Catholic church groups, such as the Old Catholic Church, which have broken from the authority of the Pope and the Roman Catholic hierarchy. At present all such groups probably number in the hundreds of thousands worldwide, whereas the Roman Catholic Church counts roughly a billion members worldwide.

²See Elliot Miller and Kenneth R. Samples, *The Cult of the Virgin: Catholic Mariology and the Apparitions of Mary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

³See George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). There is a recent helpful discussion in Alister E. McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 27-35.

⁴One way of solving this problem is to argue that the Spirit's guidance of the church is more intense and effective at some times than at others, and that the Holy Spirit is guiding the church today in an unparalleled and dramatic fashion. This is the claim traditionally made in Pentecostalism, a movement closely related to fundamentalism but differing in its emphasis on new experiences and manifestations of the Spirit in the church today. Nearly a century old, Pentecostalism runs the gamut from biblically sound, mildly experiential churches to thoroughly heretical sects and churches exhibiting the most bizarre and offensive behaviors.

⁵McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, 22.

⁶Cf. Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994); David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

⁷Nathan O. Hatch, "Response to Carl F. H. Henry," in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 97.

⁸Ibid., 97-100.

⁹McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, 62, 63.