

In Vain We Seek for Peace with God

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

In vain we seek for peace with God,
By methods of our own;
Jesus, there’s nothing but Thy blood
Can bring us near the throne.

The threatenings of Thy broken law
Impress the soul with dread;
If God the sword of justice draw,
It strikes the spirit dead.

But Thine illustrious sacrifice
Hath answered these demands;
And peace and pardon from the skies
Came down from Jesus’ hands.

Here all the ancient types agree,
The altar and the lamb;
And prophets in their vision see
Salvation through His name.

’Tis by Thy death we live, O Lord,
’Tis on Thy cross we rest;
Forever be Thy love adored
Thy name forever blest.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

**Roger, Roger
Part Four: Today’s Situation**

Kevin T. Bauder

A few weeks ago, Roger Olson of Baylor University devoted a blog post to asking “What Is ‘Fundamentalism?’” By way of contrast he was also trying to say how fundamentalism differs from evangelicalism. He used Edward John Carnell’s critique of fundamentalism as the fulcrum of his argument. Olson did not mention that Carnell’s “Exhibit A” for fundamentalism was J. Gresham Machen. When Carnell talked about fundamentalism as “cultic orthodoxy,” Machen was who he had in mind.

As we have seen, the key difference between Machen and Carnell was ecclesiological. Machen insisted that the gospel, and therefore Christianity and Christian fellowship, had to include a significant doctrinal component. Carnell was willing to overlook at least part of this doctrinal component at least part of the time in favor of apparent piety and a form of demonstrated love that amounted to niceness. To be clear, Machen would not have denied that Christianity is *more* than doctrinal. He would have insisted that it also included significant ethical and affective components. His argument was simply that an irreducible doctrinal minimum was essential to the definition of the true Christian gospel, of the Christian faith, of the visible Christian church, and of Christian fellowship. This component was what Carnell was willing to compromise.

Machen never knew Carnell, but he knew people like him. He called them *indifferentists* and thought that they were a serious threat to the integrity of the gospel, faith, and fellowship. Later fundamentalists followed Machen in denying any Christian fellowship to gospel deniers (such as theological liberals) and in limiting their cooperation with indifferentists. By Carnell’s day the indifferentists were calling themselves *new evangelicals*.

Most American evangelicals, however, fit neither party exactly. The often-silent majority of American evangelicalism agreed with the fundamentalists about separating from gospel deniers, but did not wish to limit their cooperation with neoevangelicals. When this middle group had to choose between limiting fellowship with neoevangelicals and limiting fellowship with fundamentalists, it rejected the fundamentalists.



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Any schema that reduces American evangelicalism to two parties (fundamentalist and evangelical) will necessarily result in skewed judgments about particular cases. In the first place, fundamentalists *are* evangelicals; fundamentalism is one subset of evangelicalism. In the second place, fundamentalism and neoevangelicalism are not the only, or even the majority, positions on the spectrum. Instead, fundamentalists and neoevangelicals competed for the minds and loyalties of the mainstream or moderate evangelicals. This is the dynamic that Roger overlooks.

He also overlooks a series of historical developments that occurred from the 1960s to the 1980s. On one side, the new evangelicalism tried to build bridges to non-conservative theologians and churchmen. Not surprisingly, people began to cross these bridges—almost always from evangelicalism into the broader ecumenical world. The problem is that they kept calling themselves evangelicals. The result was the so-called Evangelical Left, which began by denying inerrancy. It ended up denying a whole series of other doctrines that fundamentalists and moderate evangelicals would have considered essential to the gospel, to Christianity, and to Christian fellowship.

On the other side, some fundamentalists allowed themselves to become dominated by incidental concerns or idiosyncratic positions. Some gave themselves to uncontrolled suspicion or adopted a “warfare” ethic that allowed them to defend behavior that would normally have been censured as reprehensible. This variety of fundamentalism was often dominated by personality cults and strong-arm tactics.

These two trends produced a double reaction. Some of the original neoevangelicals (Ockenga and Lindsell, e.g.) reacted strongly against the Evangelical Left. At the same time, a few fundamentalists (Falwell and Van Impe among others) reacted against the Hard Right by rejecting any level of separation from disobedient brethren. In short, both groups found themselves moving into the position of the old “moderate evangelicalism,” which was historically the mainstream evangelical position. This revitalized version of evangelicalism gained special momentum within the Southern Baptist Convention where, over a process of several years, its leaders succeeded in pushing the liberals and their indifferentist defenders to the margins.

Roger wants us to believe that today’s conservative evangelicals are nothing but fundamentalists who lack the nerve to wear the correct label. He is wrong. People like Al Mohler, Paige Patterson, Danny Akin, Mark Dever, Jerry Falwell, D. A. Carson, Kevin DeYoung, Carl Trueman, and Daniel Doriani (to select names almost at random) do not occupy the position of historic, separatist fundamentalism. Rather, they take exactly the stance of the older evangelical mainstream. In terms of position (and probably numbers), they are the true center of the evangelical spectrum. I write this as a separatist fundamentalist who disagrees with them at certain important

points (and who is willing to engage them about those disagreements), and yet who wishes to see them represented fairly.

Why does Roger want to claim that these people are fundamentalists? I cannot judge his motives, but his intent seems clear enough. Roger has proclaimed himself in favor of “big tent” evangelicalism. His vision of evangelicalism includes people who call themselves evangelical, but who have wandered across those old bridges toward non-conservative theologies. Conservative evangelicals, however, will not let him define evangelical fellowship that broadly. They believe in certain clear doctrinal boundaries, and they are indelicate enough to insist upon maintaining those boundaries. They are getting in Roger’s way and keeping his friends out of their circles. It would be very convenient for Roger if he could simply label and dismiss them.

It won’t work. It won’t work historically. It won’t work theologically. Most of all, it won’t work practically, because the conservative evangelicals are here to stay.

If Roger had his way, evangelicals would not be able to agree how much of the Bible was really true. They would not be able to say exactly what justification was or how the atonement works. They would not agree about which human decisions are included in whatever future God can know. They would not be sure whether God ever really created an historical Adam. They might not even be sure whether Jesus always told the truth while He was on earth.

The new evangelicalism represented a bundle of ideas that could not be held together. Some of those ideas gave rise to the Evangelical Left. Others led to today’s conservative evangelicalism. Neither branch perpetuates all the concerns of the now-defunct neoevangelical movement. Both can rightly claim to have descended from it. Fundamentalists, however, (and I mean real ones) repudiated the ecclesiological trunk from which both branches sprang. They still do.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
