“Closing the Door: The Fundamentalist Narrative and Its Impact on Adventism”

By Katrina Blue

A question often posed to Seventh-day Adventists is, “Are you Fundamentalists?” This may be due to the fact that Seventh-day Adventist doctrines are named, *The 28 Fundamental Beliefs*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Over the years, I have heard a variety of answers. Some respond with a resounding “Yes,” Adventists are fundamentalist because we are firmly Bible believing Christians. The Scriptures *are* our authority and we seek to faithfully follow its teachings. Others maintain a definite “No,” we are not *Fundamentalist*.[[2]](#footnote-2) Adventists do not teach biblical inerrancy, verbal inspiration, and a host of other doctrines taught by Fundamentalist Christians. An anachronistic question, perhaps. Didn’t the Fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century die out with the passing of William Jennings Bryan in 1925 at the conclusion of the Scopes Trial? The influential political coalition headed by Bryan that campaigned nationally to ban the teaching of evolution in American schools petered out with his passing. Liberalism won, end of story. This myopic perspective overlooks Fundamentalism as a cultural force deeply influencing American Protestantism. This includes Seventh-day Adventism, which is part of the American religious landscape. Fundamentalism provides a context to consider how the 1919 Bible Conference and Teacher’s Council were impacted by religious narratives of the day. Current issues facing Seventh-day Adventism may also be rooted in a Fundamentalist narrative that is holding this denomination at an impasse. It may be time for Adventists to close the door on Fundamentalist narratives that breed anti-intellectualism, inhibit scholarly inquiry, and limit the sharing of the gospel.

The latter half of nineteenth century America saw Christianity questioned and begin to lose its place of respectability in a society where white Protestant evangelicalism had been *the* dominant narrative. Exportation of new theories after the Civil War from European soil which included exponents of higher critical theories of the Bible, Darwinism, science at odds with religion, and the increasing prevalence of naturalism as a worldview haunted American evangelicals from the 1860s onwards.[[3]](#footnote-3) One of the greatest areas of transformation was in the universities.[[4]](#footnote-4) In 1870, Professor Roswell Hitchcock declared at a meeting of the Evangelical Alliance, “Infidel bugles are sounding in front of us, Papal bugles are sounding behind us. It would be idle to say that we are not alarmed.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Scottish Common Sense Realism which had dominated mid-nineteenth century American thought and the ideals of Baconian science had seen no conflict between faith, science, and the Bible. Science, it was believed, would confirm Scripture.[[6]](#footnote-6) These assumptions were challenged by the new skepticism, rationalism, and higher criticism coming from Europe.

Fundamentalism was an American response to these issues on several fronts. Included were intellectuals at universities who were part of the old religious establishment. With strong ties to Puritanism and Calvinist heritage they debated new ideas with both fear and fervor. Benjamin B. Warfield responded by developing the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, while fellow Princeton theologian John Gresham Machen feared ideas undermining the Scriptures would become mainstream, representing a new cultural, social divide between Christianity and American culture. A dire effect included a decline in student numbers of those entering the ministry. Machen expressed his frustration with the church’s seeming lack of response.

Thoughtful men are wondering why the students of our great Eastern universities no longer enter the ministry or display any very vital interest in Christianity. Various totally inadequate explanations are proposed, such as the increasing attractiveness of other professions—an absurd explanation, by the way, since other professions are becoming so over-crowded that a man can barely make a living in them. The real difficulty amounts to this—that the thought of the day, as it makes itself most strongly felt in the universities, but from them spreads inevitably to the masses of the people, is profoundly opposed to Christianity, or at least—what is nearly as bad—it is out of all connection with Christianity. The Church is unable either to combat it or to assimilate it, because the Church simply does not understand it.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The spreading rejection of traditional belief in God and the Bible was an alarming development for Protestant evangelicals. Fundamentalism emerged in response to purge modernism and Darwinian evolution from church and society, understood to be the source of a spiritual and cultural crisis threatening American civilization.[[8]](#footnote-8)

For concerned Christians, modernism, evolutionary theory, and Liberalism were no laughing matter. With the biblical foundations of American society threatened, the paperback series known as *The Fundamentals* (1910-1915) became a symbolic reference point for the movement.[[9]](#footnote-9) Edited by Bible teachers and evangelists and funded by Southern California millionaires, these essays sought to stem the tide of unbelief by defending Scripture against higher criticism, attacking various “isms” such as Mormonism, modern spiritualism, and Romanism, while promoting faith in biblical teachings on such topics as the virgin birth, the incarnation, and the deity of Christ. Sets of the volumes were sent free of charge to every pastor, missionary, theology professor, theology student, YMCA/YWCA secretary, college professor, Sunday School superintendent, and religious editor in the English-speaking world in an attempt to combat heresy.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Other Christians concerned with the inroads of modernism and Liberalism were premillennial Dispensationalists, Holiness groups (including Wesleyan and Keswick spirituality), and Pentecostalism.[[11]](#footnote-11) Rooted in revivalism and an individualistic pietist heritage, these groups tended to have a strong ambivalence toward culture and were ridiculed as being anti-scientific and anti-intellectual. Dispensationalists were by far the most influential and developed a large following based on the teachings of John Nelson Darby, an English clergyman. Darby’s ideas flourished in America through itinerant preachers gaining enormous influence across denominational lines. Dispensationalists held strictly to a literal interpretation of Scripture, developed elaborate charts of prophecies based on Daniel and Revelation, and actively promoted the literal, imminent Second Coming of Christ. Millennial fervor in the nineteenth century, fueled by Dispensationalist teachings, promoted the idea of a faithful remnant of spiritual persons kept holy and separate from the world awaiting the return of Christ.[[12]](#footnote-12) Ecumenical prophecy conferences of the twentieth century were an outgrowth of Dispensationalist millennial fervor. Drawing Christians from diverse backgrounds, the conferences focused on prophecy, and meeting a common foe. They were of special interest to some Seventh-day Adventists who saw in them shared interest in the Second Coming of Christ.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Seventh-day Adventists by and large however were unaware of the intellectual debates surrounding Liberalism, modernism, and science at the turn of the twentieth century. They did experience the crisis and uncertainly of life experienced after World War 1 and were intensely interested in end-time events. Following Ellen White’s death in 1915, a number of unresolved issues came to the fore for thinking Adventists that required attention. Influenced in part by the prophecy conferences, a Seventh-day Adventist Bible Conference was organized and held from July 1-19, and a Teacher’s Council from August 20 to September 1, 1919. Approximately 65 persons attended these meetings representing fourteen colleges. Transcription of the lectures and discussions were not ‘discovered’ until 1974 in the new office of Adventist Archives.[[14]](#footnote-14) The minutes provide a fascinating insight into the issues that concerned participants, revealing at times heated discussions and debate. It was issues not on the agenda however, that subsequently gained the most attention.[[15]](#footnote-15)

A two-day discussion at the Teacher’s Council on inspiration in regard to Ellen White’s writings and the Bible revealed a divided group. Some defended a verbal-inspiration view, that God inspired the actual words of Scripture; while others, including General Conference president, Arthur. G. Daniells, Francis M. Wilcox, and William. W. Prescott promoted a thought-inspiration view consistent with Ellen White.[[16]](#footnote-16) Concern expressed by chairman Warren E. Howell, observed that most church members’ view of the Bible and Ellen White’s writings were that they were verbally inspired. Should the teachers educate their students on thought inspiration, they would be regarded as liberal and at variance with the rest of the church. In this context, Jacob N. Anderson posed the following dilemma:

Can we hold something in the back of our head that we are absolutely sure about, and that most of the brethren stand with us on?—can we hold those things back and be true to ourselves? And furthermore, are we safe in doing it? Is it well to let our people in general go on holding to the verbal inspiration of the Testimonies? When we do that, aren‘t we preparing for a crisis that will be very serious some day? It seems to me that the best thing for us to do is to cautiously and very carefully educate our people to see just where we really should stand to be consistent Protestants, to be consistent with the Testimonies themselves, and to be consistent with what we know we must do, as intelligent men, as we have decided in these meetings.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Anderson’s words were not heeded and the group remain divided. This decision would have disastrous consequences for Seventh-day Adventists who unwittingly adopted a verbal inspiration view of not only Ellen White’s writings, but of the Bible itself.

Division at the Bible Conference and Teacher’s Council facilitated creation of the terms Adventist ‘liberals’, as opposed to ‘conservatives’. Michael Campbell in his dissertation on the significance of the 1919 Bible Conference for Seventh-day Adventism has noted its polarizing effects between progressives and traditionalists.[[18]](#footnote-18) The fact they had an open and honest dialogue is constructive and refreshing. Yet, the aftermath is disturbing. Some wanted to share the minutes with the church at large, while others wanted it sequestered away. The reigning paradigm of verbal inspiration fashioned on the heels of biblical inerrancy, ultimately saw Daniells unelected three years later. Did this Conference portend Seventh-day Adventism to become a voice for American Fundamentalism? Were the so-called liberal scholars who supported thought-inspiration, held by Ellen White herself, driven into silence? Did the Adventist church as a result harbor a long, uncomfortable, misunderstanding of the Bible and Spirit of prophecy that would explode in the 1970s, the effects of which we are still experiencing today?

Mark Noll in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994) points to the disastrous effects of Fundamentalism on American Christianity in his chapter titled, “The Intellectual Disaster of Fundamentalism.”[[19]](#footnote-19) His ideas may help shed light on the situation in Adventism. Noll identifies Fundamentalism as creating major problems for “the life of the mind” in three areas: 1) a new impetus to anti-intellectualism; 2) a hardening of conservative evangelical commitments; and 3) a chilling effect on the exercise of Christian thinking about the world.[[20]](#footnote-20) Anti-intellectualism bred by Fundamentalism is expressed in the thought that “to be spiritual, one must not pay attention to the world.”[[21]](#footnote-21) The result is a gnostic tendency to create charts and diagrams, without a careful study of actual events and conditions. This has led a one-sided focus on redemption and the supernatural, with a concomitant loss of respect for creation.[[22]](#footnote-22) Fundamentalists, eager to defend the Bible, do so by focusing on the inerrancy of the original autographs, while missing the larger meaning and context of the Word of God. Fundamentalist Christians have effectively created a culture unable to engage the real world, its questions and discoveries, by simply ignoring them. This has proved disastrous for American evangelical Christianity in the twentieth century.

What about Seventh-day Adventism? What impact has Fundamentalism had on this denomination? Further exploration is needed on the gradual exclusion of women from ministry and church administrative positions in the 1920s and beyond. Literalism in biblical hermeneutics as opposed to a contextual reading of Pauline letters continues to be used as an argument to deny women ordination. Anti-intellectualism affects Adventism as seen in a general disdain for reading books other than the Bible and writings of Ellen White. Consequently, there is an inability to communicate and understand contemporary concerns and perspectives impacting the world and Seventh-day Adventists. More recently, attempts to control and punish church leaders is treated as a solution to theological difference. The hardening of conservative perspectives and lines of thought aims to shut down dialogue rather than promote understanding and the ability to move forward. These contemporary expressions of anti-intellectualism and its chilling effect on Christian thinking about the world, to use Noll’s expression, places Adventists in danger of new forms of legalism, false teaching, and a paralysis for sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the contemporary world. Is Adventism currently undergoing a profound identity change? Are these attitudes by-products of a Fundamentalist narrative gripping Adventism?

When living in Long Beach, California I decided to get my languages in preparation for my Ph.D. and applied to Biola University. The application form included a page containing a statement of beliefs that I was required to mark off, before signing my name at the bottom of the page. Several of the beliefs made me recoil. One that stood out was belief in an eternally burning hellfire. There was no way I was going to tick that box or agree to any statement I believed unbiblical. I sent in my application nevertheless and thought no more of it until a few weeks later when I received a phone call. It was from a man who worked in admissions at Biola. He told me in no uncertain terms that they could not allow someone like me, who did not believe in eternally burning hellfire to attend their school and potentially influence other students. I explained that all I wanted to do was take languages. “It’s not that I don’t think you won’t be saved,” he added, “But I want you to withdraw your application.” Taken aback, I later wrote to an Adventist scholar and shared my experience. In his reply, he explained that I had encountered a Fundamentalist Bible College. I am not here to advocate liberal theologies that undermine faith in God’s inspired Word or the use of higher critical methods of Bible study. I fully support the right for people to have their positions. Upon later reflection it seemed to me that the basic intolerance shown towards me by that man demonstrated a particular mindset.

James Barr in his book, *Fundamentalism* identifies it as a worldview that continues to perpetuate itself in the twenty-first century as a basic personal religious and existential attitude. Three characteristics Fundamentalists share in common are: 1) a strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible; 2) a strong hostility to modern theology and its methods; and 3) assurance that those who do not hold their religious views are not really Christians at all.[[23]](#footnote-23) It was the latter point that particularly left a bad taste in my mouth after that phone call. What is particularly sad is that Fundamentalists have effectively placed themselves in a corner with no one to discuss their theological point of view with other than themselves. According to Barr, “The core of fundamentalism resides not in the Bible but in a particular kind of religion,” which “controls the interpretation of the Bible within fundamentalist circles.”[[24]](#footnote-24) A downside of this is that Fundamentalists cannot change their theological position or engage other Christians as equals. Is it possible that some Seventh-day Adventists may have done the same?

This one-hundred year anniversary of the 1919 Bible Conference furnishes us with an opportunity to reflect on the past and apply this lens to our current situation, to think together, to be bold and steer a course of change for the better. Are Seventh-day Adventist’s Fundamentalists? I hope that the answer to this question is no and will always be no. Seventh-day Adventism, as noted at the beginning of this paper is at an impasse. The divide between groups labeled conservative and liberal, while representing our diversity also presents a danger in making us irrelevant to our young people and to the world. Is it time to close the door on Fundamentalism and its influences, on our reading of Scripture and the writings of Ellen White? Adventist scholars must be outspoken and continue to reject anti-intellectualism wherever it may be found in our church organization. The pushing of conservative hard lines and policies is having a chilling effect on us and our ability to share the warmth of the love of Christ with one another and the world at large. We must pay attention to what is going on. As suggested by Jacob Anderson, we cannot think one thing in the back of our head and say another. We must be intelligent men and women and continue to educate in our church and our world.

Bibliography

Campbell, Michael W. *1919: The Untold Story of Adventism’s Struggle with Fundamentalism.* Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2019.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. “The 1919 Bible Conference and its Significance for Seventh-day Adventist History and Theology” (2008). Dissertations. 21. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/21>.

Couperus, Molleurus. “The Bible Conference of 1919.” *Spectrum: Journal of the Association of Adventist Forums*.March 1979.

Douglass, Herbert E. *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White*. Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing, 1998.

General Conference Ministerial Department, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*. Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2018.

Machen, J. Gresham. “Christianity and Culture.” *Princeton Theological Review*, 11, 1913.

Marsden, George M. *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Mathers, Norman W. *Battle For Orthodoxy: American Religious Thought (1870-1910)*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018.

Noll, Mark A. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind.* Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

Two Christian Laymen. *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth.* Chicago, IL: Testimony Publishing Company, 1910-1915.

White, Ellen G. *Selected Messages*, Book 1. Washington, DC: *Review & Herald*, 1958.

1. General Conference Ministerial Department, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Curtis Lee Laws coined the term fundamentalist in 1920. However, it has been argued that the ideas that developed into what was known as Liberalism and its response goes back to the seventeenth century in America. See Norman W. Mathers, *Battle For Orthodoxy: American Religious Thought (1870-1910)* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 101, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 16-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mark Noll notes that during the period of 1865 to 1900 saw an unprecedented rise in the number of people attending university, leadership changes from clergyman to industrialists and bankers as college presidents and boards of trustees; and a proliferation of new colleges and universities which accepted a new moderately liberal version of Protestantism. Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 110-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Roswell Hitchcock, “Romanism in the Light of History,” *EA 1873*, 436 quoted in Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Marsden notes that American theologians had not challenged the assumptions of scientific inquiry since the time of Jonathan Edwards, that truth was reliably discoverable by examination of the facts presented in nature free from theological assumptions, except for the idea that nature would merely confirm God’s revelation in Scripture. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture,” *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): 7, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *The Fundamentals* (Chicago, IL: Testimony Publishing Company, 1910-1915). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Over three million copies were distributed. Other important literature in the development of Fundamentalism was the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) which promoted Dispensationalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Examples of Adventists who attended the prophecy conference in New York in 1918 included Leon L. Caviness, associate editor of the *Review and Herald*, and Charles T. Emerson, an Adventist evangelist from New England. Michael W. Campbell, *1919: The Untold Story of Adventism’s Struggle with Fundamentalism* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2019), 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Molleurus Couperus, “The Bible Conference of 1919,” *Spectrum: Journal of the Association of Adventist Forums* (March, 1979): 23-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Such debates included the Eastern question and the role of modern-day Turkey in Bible prophecy as well as a debate over the Trinity. Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of* Ellen G. White, (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing, 1998), 435. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. White supported thought inspiration and not verbal inspiration: “The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God as a writer is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.” Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Book 1 (Washington, DC: *Review & Herald*, 1958), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Jacob N. Anderson, quoted in Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of* Ellen G. White, (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing, 1998), 436. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Michael W. Campbell, “The 1919 Bible Conference and its Significance for Seventh-day Adventist History and Theology” (2008). Dissertations. 21. https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/21 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, chapter 5, 109-145. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 132, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2018), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)