

THE EMERGENCE OF THE EVANGELICAL MIDDLE AND EVANGELICAL
RIGHT FROM FUNDAMENTALISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

by

Jonathan Bartlett

December 3, 2008

The Emergence of the Evangelical Middle and Evangelical Right from Fundamentalism in the 20th Century

Introduction

The fundamentalist-modernist controversy began in the 19th century, and climaxed in the the early 20th century with the publication of *The Fundamentals* in 1910 and the Scopes trial in 1925. After this period, the fundamentalists, for the most part, excluded themselves from public intellectual and political society. From the fundamentalists sprang two groups, which I will call the Evangelical Right and the Evangelical Middle. Each of these groups carry the core fundamentalist principles, but they differ in their epistemological outlook. Both of these groups have renounced separatism and are now engaging the culture in the theological, political, and scientific arenas.¹

Any terminology for these groups is going to be somewhat contested. The group I am describing as the Evangelical Right sometimes self-describes themselves as “fundamentalists”. This is somewhat true, except that the Evangelical Middle also shares both a historical and intellectual heritage with the fundamentalists of the early 20th century, and in fact in many cases the Evangelical Middle is closer to the fundamentalists than the Evangelical Right. Therefore, while the terminology may not be perfect, its purpose is to show that these two groups are both distinct from the fundamentalist movement, but both emerged from it, but each with a different set of sensibilities.

¹ More space will be given to the Evangelical Right in this essay because its cohesive framework tends to produce more unified and identifiable activities. The Evangelical Middle’s (which will be discussed in due course) framework is flexible enough to allow them to operate comfortably in a number of environments, and thus have fewer unique institutions outside of theology.

The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy

During the latter half of the 19th century, the American church² became embroiled in a controversy between the “modernists” and the “fundamentalists”.³ The debate, ultimately, between fundamentalism and modernism is in the view of the God’s work in the world. The modernists, because of the enormous success of the scientific enterprise, took on a largely deistic approach to God’s work, thinking that God worked at the beginning of the universe and in the hearts of people. Therefore, miracles are to be mythologized, and scripture is believed to be inspired, but not in a way too different from other literary works. Fundamentalists believed that God intervenes in nature, and that part of that intervention included that God miraculously kept the Biblical writers “from falling into the errors that mar all other books.”⁴

The key focus in the dispute was an ontological one (the nature of reality and God’s interaction with it), but it had a heavy impact on epistemology (how we determine truth). The modernists believed that experience, especially common experience, is the key epistemological consideration.^{5 6 7} Because miracles are outside of common experience, according to modernists, they can’t be included in any reasonable epistemology. Fundamentalists believed that God could perform miracles, and that

² All subsequent references to the “church” will assume reference to the American church

³ Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 11.

⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), 74.

⁵ Ed Dobson and Ed Hinson, edited by Jerry Falwell, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: The Resurgence of Conservative Christianity* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc, 1981), 53.

⁶ Machen, 78.

⁷ It should be noted that, while inerrancy was a key component of fundamentalist belief in this time period, this was not a *defining* point as much as is commonly thought. Machen, for instance, writes that, while he believes in inerrancy, the dividing line is more of one of authority rather than inerrancy. He allows, in drawing distinctions between modernists (denoted as “liberals”) and fundamentalists (denoted as “Christians”), that one could be on the fundamentalist side so long as the assumption is that the original witnesses were trustworthy in their report, even if one does not assume any supernatural guide to the authorship of scripture (Machen, 75).

scriptures either testified to them or were themselves a product of them. Thus, God could reveal truths which could not be obtained by experience alone.

What sparked this controversy were three new ways of thinking about Christianity that were rising in the culture. One was the form-critical view of scripture, which called into question the relationship between the Biblical narratives, the history they purported to contain, and the authority of their authorship.⁸ The second was the evolutionary view of history, which directly conflicted with the received Mosaic account, especially in relationship to the origins of humans. The third was the scientific view of reality which cast doubt on any miraculous event, and called into question the reasonableness of believing the miraculous.⁹ There were many other points of contention between modernists and fundamentalists, but the conflict between the natural/supernatural ontologies and the epistemological statuses of scripture and experience were the driving forces behind most of the rest.¹⁰

Fundamentalism as a movement was primarily the result of the collaboration between conservative Calvinists (primarily Princeton-based) and the prophecy-focused dispensationalists.¹¹ These two groups were not completely compatible, but became unified in spirit based on their common belief in the inerrancy of scripture and their common foe of modernist Christianity.¹² This broadened with the publication of The

⁸ George M. Marsden, "Defining American Fundamentalism," in *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: a View from Within; a Response from Without*, ed. Norman J. Cohen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 24.

⁹ Dobson and Hinson, 79.

¹⁰ Machen attributed these ultimately to a difference of the doctrine of God, where liberalism denies "any entrance of the creative power of God (as distinguished from the ordinary course of nature) in connection with the origin of Christianity" (Machen, 2). The scope of this paper does not permit verification of this claim, and will instead simply treat it as the way in which fundamentalists thought of their opponents, whether correctly or incorrectly.

¹¹ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Origins of Fundamentalism: Towards a Historical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 11.

¹² Sandeen, 14, 24.

Fundamentals, in which there was a large amount of ecumenical involvement from the conservative sides of many churches.¹³

The Separation

Fundamentalism began to decline after the Scopes trial. *The Christian Century* declared that fundamentalism was disappearing, fundamentalists churches recorded large drops in giving, the World's Christian Fundamentalist Association had a large drop in attendance, and many seminaries shifted towards modernism.¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶ Even more lasting were the reports from H. L. Mencken about the trial, in which he wrote devastating critiques of the fundamentalists.¹⁷ After this, fundamentalists began to withdraw from public and intellectual life. The fundamentalists of Princeton left to found Westminster Theological Seminary, and later formed their own denomination.¹⁸ This pattern was repeated in many denominations, and soon after the major denominations were primarily modernist in outlook.¹⁹

Separatism became the mode for fundamentalism, which shifted from being a conservative ecumenical movement to a more isolated movement. Fundamentalists began seeking separation not only between themselves and the world, but also between themselves and the rest of Christianity.²⁰ This separation gave the fundamentalists time and space to think through their beliefs and ideas following the

¹³ Dobson and Hinson, 80.

¹⁴ Dobson and Hinson, 90.

¹⁵ William Martin, *With God on Our Side, The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 16.

¹⁶ Dobson and Hinson, 110.

¹⁷ Ruth Murray Brown, *For a "Christian America": A History of the Religious Right* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2002), 20.

¹⁸ Martin, 16.

¹⁹ Dobson and Hinson, 91.

²⁰ David Rausch, "Fundamentalist Origins," in *Fundamentalism Today*, ed. Marla J. Selvidge (Elgin: Brethren Press, 1984), 17.

Scopes trial. What emerged were two streams of thought guided by the core principles of fundamentalism - the Evangelical Right and the Evangelical Middle.

The Rise of the Evangelical Middle

The Evangelical Middle began its rise from the fundamentalists in the 1930s. John Ockenga coined the term “new evangelical” for someone who believed in the traditional ideas of the faith, but also valued politics and social action.²¹ Ockenga recruited and inspired a generation of evangelical scholars, including Edward Carnell, Bernard Ramm, and Carl F. H. Henry, each of which held close to fundamentalist values while repudiating the separatism that had come to define them.²² Some evangelical scholars, such as George Ladd, went off to Harvard to earn a secular imprimatur on their academic credentials.²³

Also important to the developing of the thought of the Evangelical Middle are Ned Stonehouse and Bruce Metzger. Both of these scholars took extreme care to engage the critical scholars on their own ground, and use those methodologies within an evangelical context.²⁴ They were able to open up for questioning many of the assumed conclusions of tradition, while still carrying forward the supernatural worldview which distinguished the Evangelical Middle from their modernist counterparts.

Many of the new scholars of the Evangelical Middle were able to be published because of the integration of the Dutch Reformed Church (CRC) into the wider evangelical world. The CRC already had a long academic history, and even had scholarly publishers such as William B. Eerdsman. CRC theologians began getting involved with the Evangelical movement, and CRC publishers began publishing

²¹ Noll, *Between*, 94.

²² Noll, *Between*, 94-95.

²³ Noll, *Between*, 97.

²⁴ Noll, *Between*, 107-110.

Evangelical work.²⁵ By the 1960s, other evangelical publishers started turning out academic titles as well, and several mainstream academic publishers began publishing evangelical work.²⁶

The 1940s brought the emergence of a new preacher - Billy Graham. While not an academic, Billy Graham was a defining figure for removing many of the barriers which had been erected during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. What differed was on openness to those who disagree, and the inclusion of many activities which were often considered socially taboo by fundamentalists.²⁷ His willingness to cooperate with those whose theological views were outside of historical fundamentalism led him to be in conflict with many in the emerging Evangelical Right.²⁸ Graham understood the importance of academics within the faith, and sought to establish a more intellectual response to the culture than what was then predominant. Because of this, Graham helped establish *Christianity Today* to give evangelicalism a degree of theological respectability, and befriended and supported many evangelicals in the academic community.²⁹

The Evangelical Middle is a very diverse group which often escapes exact definition. However, this author thinks that they can be defined by a core epistemology shaped by the idea that God is the author of all of reality and is presently involved in the world. Therefore, experience of God's creation (exemplified by science) becomes is raised in importance. The Evangelical Middle often thinks of God having written two books - the Bible and nature, and frequently uses the experience of nature

²⁵ Noll, *Between*, 100-101.

²⁶ Noll, *Between*, 104.

²⁷ Noll, *American*, 18-19

²⁸ Dobson and Hinson, 129-131.

²⁹ Noll, *Between*, 95-96.

(i.e. science) to reinterpret Biblical knowledge.³⁰ In this system, science is unique and authoritative in being able to confer knowledge about the world, and the Bible is unique and authoritative in communicating spiritual values. Against the modernists, the Evangelical Middle believes that God continues to be involved in Creation, both by allowing for the miraculous as well as other forms of involvement.³¹

Some argue for a much more rigid set of beliefs to be identified with the whole of evangelicalism, including the virgin birth, the sinlessness of Jesus, and infallibility of the Bible.³² However, this is based on the statements of faith of evangelical groups which tend to represent the Evangelical Right rather than the Evangelical Middle, and while they are widely held by both groups, this author would disagree as to whether or not they are unifying characteristics of the Evangelical Middle.

The Rise of the Evangelical Right

While the Evangelical Middle moved towards a more secular scholarship in the 1930s, the Evangelical Right was more focused on training Christians in the Bible and scripture, no matter what their end occupation was. Thus, while the Evangelical Middle was focused on establishing seminaries and centers of scholarship, the Evangelical Right was focused on Bible Institutes and broad-based colleges, such as Bob Jones University.³³

The popular outbreak of the Evangelical Right occurred when the Evangelical Right found the effectiveness of new forms of communication, such as radio. These

³⁰ Noll, Scandal, 182-184, 205-208; Daniel M. Harrell, *Nature's Witness: How Evolution Can Inspire Faith* (Wheaton: Abingdon Press, 2008), 26, 46.

³¹ Harrell, 42-43.

³² Noll, American, 59-63.

³³ Dobson and Hindson, 110-111.

radio broadcasts had mass appeal, with the “Old-Fashioned Revival Hour” appearing on 456 stations in 1942.³⁴

The Evangelical Right was criticized by the Evangelical Middle for continuing in the separatism - both societally and theologically - that characterized the fundamentalist reaction to the Scopes trial in the 1920s.³⁵ Carl McIntire embodied this criticism. In the 1940s, he founded the American Council of Christian Churches to contend with the Federal Council, started Faith Theological Seminary to contend with Westminster, and founded the International Council of Christian Churches to oppose the World Council of Churches.³⁶ Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, emerged what could be known as “secondary separatists”. These separatists are members of the Evangelical Right who refuse cooperation with *both* modernists and the Evangelical Middle. Sometimes the secondary separatists have been so extreme as to refuse to cooperate even with fellow members of the Evangelical Right who cooperate with the Evangelical Middle or modernists.³⁷

Through this period, Cornelius Van Til, part of the group which separated from Princeton into Westminster, developed an approach to apologetics which included a uniquely Christian view of epistemology called presuppositionalism. This view maintained that Christianity was not simply one aspect of knowledge, but was a total truth system. This meant that scripture, not experience, provided the foundation for a Christian understanding. This was unique in that Van Til extended the application of scripture to the totality of truth, not just spiritual truths.

³⁴ Dobson and Hindson, 118.

³⁵ Dobson and Hindson, 123.

³⁶ Dobson and Hindson, 121.

³⁷ Dobson and Hindson, 140.

Thus, while fundamentalist Christianity, and likewise the Evangelical Middle, was based on a modernist experiential epistemology coupled with allowances for the supernatural, presuppositionalism replaced experience with revelation as the starting point for epistemology. Experience was still maintained, but in a subordinate status to revelation. However, according to this system of thought, believers could still reason with the outside world because of “common grace,” in which the world’s epistemology has some amount of overlap with Christianity because of God’s providence and because humans are made in God’s image.³⁸

From this outlook came the ability for the Evangelical Right to both have an independent voice from the modernist position, as well as be engaged in the public intellectual culture. This view was popularized by Francis Schaeffer, who is cited by many on the Evangelical Right as being a foundation for their understandings of Christianity.³⁹ Schaeffer criticized the Evangelical Middle for not taking scripture seriously as a unified system of truth.⁴⁰ In return, the Evangelical Right has been criticized for decontextualizing scripture, much the same way that science attempts to decontextualize facts. As such, they have been criticized for using the scientific method on scripture where it is inappropriate, and not using it in science where it is appropriate.⁴¹

The Evangelical Right’s general view of Christian engagement was well articulated by Alvin Plantinga, who calls for an integral vision for Christianity into academics. As Plantinga states,

³⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, “A Review of a Review,” *The Bible Today* (October 1948):7-9, available online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/schaefferreview.html> .

³⁹ Martin, 194; Brown, 155. Schaeffer was not an American, though he spent much time in America encouraging political activism by the Evangelical Right.

⁴⁰ Francis A. Schaeffer, “A Step Forward,” *The Presbyterian Journal* (March 6, 1974): 7-8, available online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/stepforward.html> .

⁴¹ Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 196-202.

the Christian philosopher has a perfect right to the point of view and prephilosophical assumptions he brings to philosophic work; the fact that these are not widely shared outside the Christian or theistic community is interesting but fundamentally irrelevant... [The Christian philosopher] has a right to take the existence of God for granted and go on from there in his philosophical work - just as other philosophers take for granted the existence of the past, say, or of other persons, or the basic claims of contemporary physics ⁴²

As we will see, this worldview is important for understanding the public engagement of the Evangelical Right in recent history.

The Public Activity of the Evangelical Right

The Evangelical Middle is not a discernible entity politically. This is because the Evangelical Middle often takes modernism for a foundation in most areas of life, and then uses Christianity to enhance or critique various individual aspects. Therefore, the Evangelical Middle is usually found as a voice within other, larger movements, but not necessarily as a distinct entity.⁴³

On the other hand, because the Evangelical Right has emerged with a total worldview system rather than a simple declaration of doctrines or beliefs, the Evangelical Right has a distinct approach to nearly every aspect of public life which is especially noticeable in politics and science.

⁴² Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 1, no. 3 (1984): 253-271, available online at http://www.faihandphilosophy.com/article_advice.php.

⁴³ Sharon Linzey Georgianna, *The Moral Majority and Fundamentalism: Plausibility and Dissonance* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 17.

The Evangelical Right in Politics

It is ironic to find a movement borne out of separatism attempting to achieve so much in the public, political arena. However, the Evangelical Right has distinct historical reasons for doing so. To understand the magnitude of the change in direction, one must only read the text of Jerry Falwell's 1965 sermon "Ministers and Marchers" where he said "Preachers are not called to be politicians but to be soul winners," and compare that to his later life of political activism.⁴⁴

America, historically, has allowed groups and cultures independently to form religious communities. Some states were founded with official state religions, and often times various communities and subcultures would hold themselves - in both private and public life - to specifically religious ideals. Thus, when the fundamentalists separated in the 1920s, it was their goal to establish a fundamentalist subculture.⁴⁵

However, since the civil war, the direction that the country has moved has been towards centralization. Thus, the fundamentalist attempt to establish a religious subculture was on a collision course with the nations move towards centralized national policy.⁴⁶ In addition, the rise of national corporations and national demographic changes meant that the fundamentalist subcultures were no longer geographically isolated.⁴⁷ Thus, the fundamentalists found that they could not shield themselves off from popular culture. In addition to this, conservative politicians had been looking for untapped political resources to enhance election results. The Evangelical Right was thus able to mobilize large numbers of previously politically inactive voters, and win favor with conservative politicians looking for new voters.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 10.

⁴⁵ Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 30.

⁴⁶ Bruce, 31, 38-42.

⁴⁷ Bruce, 31.

⁴⁸ Martin, 191.

The Moral Majority, led by Jerry Falwell, was the most prominent of many organizations of what has been called the New Christian Right. Many of these organizations were founded by the coordinated help of three professional organizers - Richard Viguerie, Howard Phillips, and Paul Weyrich.⁴⁹ Many believe that the Moral Majority was the directing agent for the Evangelical Right in politics. However, several studies have shown that the influence of the Moral Majority as a political action organization was miniscule in comparison with the larger self-motivation of the Evangelical Right and other conservatives.⁵⁰ The Moral Majority dissolved in 1989, paving the way for a new center for activism for the Evangelical Right.

The Christian Coalition was founded in the late 1980s around the time of Pat Robertson's failed presidential bid.⁵¹ The group was headed up by Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed. Reed's involvement in the Christian Coalition was borne from both his desire to see Christians more active in politics, as well as his perception that previous efforts along these lines were amateurish. He criticized both that the previous groups did not know the basics of how to be effective political operatives, and that they did not realize the limitations of politics as a means of transforming society.⁵²

The Evangelical Right in Science

The range of opinion within 19th and early 20th century fundamentalism is often misunderstood. Ever since the emergence of science, there had always been a range of opinion within fundamentalism about questions such as science and evolution. In fact, most fundamentalists of the 19th and 20th centuries accommodated for many

⁴⁹ Bruce, 56-57.

⁵⁰ Brown, 159.

⁵¹ Justin Watson, *The Christian Coalition: Dreams of Restoration, Demands for Recognition* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999) 52.

⁵² Watson, 44-45.

interpretations of biology and geology with regard to scripture, including theistic evolutionary positions.⁵³

However, the Evangelical Right has had a large shift towards young-earth creationism⁵⁴ over the last half-century. While not all of the Evangelical Right are young-earth creationists, it is important to understand the interaction between these two. As we have noted, the Evangelical Right is based on an epistemology which starts with revelation (specifically scripture) as the foundation of knowledge. Young-earth creationism fits within this epistemology better than other world-theories.⁵⁵

While the Evangelical Middle and Evangelical Right differ epistemologically, the issue of creation is often the specific issue that divides them publicly. The rise of young-earth creationism in the Evangelical Right has caused a flurry of books from the Evangelical Middle defending evolution as a valid, or even a more-valid position theologically, including Harrell's *Nature's Witness* and Lamoureux's *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution*.

In the early 20th century, the modernists expected that the rise of a technical culture would undercut belief in supernatural frameworks, and thus were caught completely off-guard by the rise of young-earth creationism in such a culture.⁵⁶ The Evangelical Middle regards such belief as part of an ongoing anti-intellectual scandal within evangelical culture.⁵⁷ However, anti-intellectualism cannot be invoked as the sole reason to explain the rise of young-earth creationism. At the time of the Scope's trial, Seventh Day Adventist scientists such as Frank Marsh and George Price were possibly

⁵³ Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 335.

⁵⁴ Young-earth creationism is the belief that the earth, or at least life on earth, can be traced back a few thousand years, consistent with the genealogies within Genesis.

⁵⁵ Numbers, 338.

⁵⁶ Langdon Gilkey, *Blue Twilight: Nature, Creationism, and American Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 117-118.

⁵⁷ Noll, *Scandal*, 199.

the only practicing scientists with a young-earth outlook. Following the founding of the Creation Research Society, the Institute for Creation Research, and the Geoscience Research Institute, however, the number of credentialed geologists and biologists in the Creation Science movement has grown from a handful to a number in the “hundreds or thousands”.⁵⁸

This trend is best explained, not by anti-intellectualism, but instead by the emergence of a new intellectualism by the Evangelical Right which has substituted scripture for experience as the foundation of epistemology.⁵⁹ This new tradition seeks engagement in the public academic arena, in discussion with both those who agree and disagree with their presuppositions regarding the truth system of scripture.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The Evangelical Middle and the Evangelical Right are the two main modern outgrowths of early 20th century fundamentalism. The two groups differ in their foundational epistemology - the Evangelical Middle has a more modernist epistemology with supernatural allowances, while the Evangelical Right regards Christianity as a total system of truth for every aspect of life and inquiry, public or private.

Both the Evangelical Right and the Evangelical Middle have given up the possibility, and even in many cases the desirability, for the separatism that the fundamentalists engaged in, but differ in the way in which they engage modern public life. The Evangelical Middle seeks to correct the overreaches of the current culture through a more supernatural understanding of Christianity, while the Evangelical Right

⁵⁸ Numbers, 335.

⁵⁹ Numbers, 336.

⁶⁰ Kurt P. Wise, “The Evolution of Creationist Perspective on the Fossil Equid Series”, Abstracts with Programs 35, no. 6 (September 2003): 610, available online at http://gsa.confex.com/gsa/2003AM/finalprogram/abstract_66818.htm .

seeks to rebuild the foundation of culture through the lens of the revelation found in scripture.

It is possible that these two streams of evangelical thought are simply the result of a splitting up of the original two groups which merged to form fundamentalism - the conservative Calvinists and the dispensationalists. The unity of these two groups in their understanding of the supernatural elements in Christianity have persisted, as well as their overall uneasy toleration of each other's way of interpreting Christianity.

A Personal Addendum

As a card-carrying member of the Evangelical Right, I wrote this paper so that I would have a better understanding myself of the history of my understanding of Christianity, its weaknesses (both real and perceived), and its relationship to other forms of thought within Christianity. While the paper made an attempt to be neutral, this section intends to be fully personal.

First of all, let me say that as a technical person, I've never understood the position of the modernists who rule out the supernatural. In fact, most supernaturalists that I know are engineers. I do think, however, that there exists a basic distinction between scientists and engineers which is important, though. Scientists are generally committed to creating explanations for things which involve no reference to the supernatural, while engineers are committed to making things work, no matter what their frame of reference. Therefore, while a scientist *must* do his daily work (at least in the current paradigm) under the working premise that everything has a mechanical/material cause, the engineer does not. In fact, there is much in engineering that is based, not on mechanics, but on humanity. As such, engineers tend to always have the nature of man before them, while scientists can generally ignore this.

But the real question is why does one choose the epistemology of the Evangelical Right over that of the Evangelical Middle? First I must say that most criticisms that the Evangelical Middle has of the Evangelical Right is in fact true of many of us. But some of them are not so tough as they seem.

It may seem, for instance, that the Evangelical Middle is putting God first in their epistemology, and the Evangelical Right is putting the Bible first. As such, the Evangelical Right has often been accused of Bibliolatry - making the Bible an idol itself. The problem is that the Evangelical Middle does not really start with God - they start with rationalism about God. That is, they start from their own mind. Note that when I say “start from” I am not talking about chronologically. It is true that, chronologically speaking, we start from our own mind. But once we know God, there is no reason that our foundation must remain our own mind. The Evangelical Right, once God reveals Himself to us, we leave our old rationalizations behind as an old way of thinking which was useful before we knew God, but that now pales in reflection to what God has now revealed. Thus, I think that the Evangelical Right “starts from God” in a more profound way - that we start from what God has revealed about Himself first. We use reason, but we always use reason *in service to God*, and not over and above God’s revelation.

Now, having said that, there is the issue of interpretation. Noll’s criticism of the Evangelical Right overly decontextualizing⁶¹ scripture is clearly historically true. This was actually the stated method of Charles Hodge and the Princeton theologians, and is currently carried out in “inductive” Bible studies, the most popular of which is probably Precept Ministries International. Now, in comparison with the current Biblical understanding of most Church people, I think Precept and other inductive Bible studies

⁶¹ By “decontextualization” I mean treating the Bible as if it were a reference book, and each word can be defined by simply looking up all references to it, and making a theology based on the “data” of how each word is used throughout the Bible.

are wonderful things, and have done enormous amounts of good for the Church. However, the problem is that many people stop there, thinking that this is the fullness of Bible study, when in fact it is just as important to know how a document functions in relationship to its genre, the culture of the people who received it, and the life of the community which received it. However, as a student of such things, I must say that the differences in conclusion which one *must* come to upon investigation of these matters are not nearly as striking as the Evolutionary Middle presupposes.

In the issue of Young-Earth Creationism (YEC), for instance, the Evolutionary Middle has its deepest ire against the Evangelical Right. The claim of the Evangelical Middle is that Genesis 1 is not historical, and that in its cultural context it was more about setting God up as a benevolent Creator than about a specific history of Creation. However, whether or not this is true, most people don't understand that YEC is borne more out of Genesis 6-9 than Genesis 1. In fact, there are many in the YEC community who would fully agree that Genesis 1 is not historical. The question of the Noah's flood is actually the more pressing, and one which the critics of YEC nearly always ignore, with the exception of Reasons to Believe, who simply have bad arguments against the worldwide nature of the flood.

So, it is not just Genesis 1, but Genesis 1-11, which many in the Evangelical Middle still conceive as being mythological. I was once asked if God could use mythology to convey the truths of scripture. The answer is clearly *yes*, because the parables are an instance of this. However, if we don't discount the supernatural *a priori*, how should we distinguish between myth and reality? While I am not convinced of its ahistorical nature, one good possibility for the use of myth in the Old Testament is the Book of Job. Why? For the simple reason that, unlike the rest of the narratives of scripture, Job has no history, which is more in keeping with the mythology line than the

historical line of thought. Genesis 2-11, on the other hand, is deeply rooted within history, being continuously connected to the rest of the narrative. In fact, most people miss this, but the long ages of the patriarchs is referenced all the way Genesis 47:9, where Jacob said, “The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning.” The only way that this can be understood is that his years are few compared to the number of years of those in Genesis 1-11, which Jacob clearly views as historical. In addition, there is no real reason to include this here (that I can think of) for a theological point, but only really a historical point. So, to go with the “mythology” understanding, we then have to include *all* of Genesis into mythology. Some are comfortable doing this, but the writers of Genesis, while not modern historiographers, clearly intended at least most of Genesis to be read as history.

Now, many people point to the fact that YEC is “new” - thinking of it as a 20th century “innovation”. This is only true if you start with the 1800s. Cuvier and Lyell were the promoters of the idea of the Old Earth in the 1800s. Before their time, science held a view very similar to current YEC views (William Whiston, for instance, wrote “A New Theory of the Earth” where he attributes the rock record to the global flood). The fact is that the history of interpretation of Genesis as history dates back as far as we can find information (there may have been other views, too - it is unclear to me [not having studied it deeply] whether or not Philo, for instance, viewed scripture as solely metaphorical, or additionally metaphorical). Josephus clearly viewed Genesis as history. So if Genesis was intended as mythology, and was clearly identifiable as such by ancient audiences, this information seems to be completely lost on many 1st century Jews!

So, as you can see, it is not unreasonable to take Genesis as scriptural history, and in fact the text seems to be clearly communicating this. The real reasons for interpreting Genesis 1-11 as mythology is not reasoning about the nature of the literature, but rather of trying to harmonize the Bible with the “findings of science”. Answers In Genesis has a great video (I think it’s The Six Days of Creation) which goes through many theologians, and showing that the specific reason that they count Genesis 1-11 as mythology is simply to harmonize it with science.

On a more general note, somewhat in favor of decontextualization, I tend to agree with Luther over the perspicuity of scripture. That is, scripture is intended to be clear to its readers in all times. Obviously there are some people who are more dense than others, and some parts necessarily themselves more dense than others. But on the whole, the basic meaning of scripture is available to all. I believe this to be true both on theological grounds and on experiential grounds. I don’t believe that God would give us scripture that was not accessible to common people for the ages that scripture is necessary. I find this idea that God would give us scripture that could only be successfully read by theologians to be smacking of pre-Lutheran Catholicism, where the priests are in charge of interpreting scripture and Christianity for everyone else. When that kind of power is concentrated, it tends to be abused. It is apparent to me from the history of Christianity that it was not God’s intention that scripture should be only for a small class of people capable of successfully reading it.

On the experiential grounds, while I know many people (including myself) who take a historical view of Genesis, I have never run into anyone who was doggedly insistent on the historical view of the parables. Thus, I think that people, all on their own, tend to be mindful genre and its associated intentions. This is not only available to

scholars and the like, but the notions of the differences between parable and history are not lost on average people.

Therefore, while I do think there is a lot to be gained from studying scripture in context, and reject the view of many in the Evangelical Right who ignore context completely, I don't think that it is quite the intellectual travesty that the Evangelical Middle insists. Contextualizing scripture adds nuance - it doesn't fundamentally alter the meaning of scripture, unless you are using contextualization as an *excuse* to ignore the basic meaning of scripture. I have seen this happen time and time again (and sometimes we inherit these contextual excuses and use them unintentionally). Scholarship is important precisely because it can help us determine where our understandings have been improperly colored, and where they need to be recolored by a better understanding of context. But the Evangelical Middle has certainly over-exaggerated how far this goes, and in some cases has mis-contextualized scripture to support their own personal theologies.

One thing that seems clear to me from history is that God does not want us to be separate and ghetto-ized, but wants us engaged. Every attempt at self-ghetto-ization by Christianity has been an abject failure. It is clear to me that God is trying to communicate to us historically that this is a bad idea. God wants us engaged, not disengaged, and, while the disengagement of the 1920s certainly yielded some benefit in terms of reformulating our views more clearly, disengagement does not seem to be the practice that God wants for us.

As far as politics goes, I'm still not completely sure of the right role of Christianity. However, we should never be under the illusion that we can solve the world's or country's problems politically. Many of our problems are deep, spiritual problems, which can only be solved by Christ.

So, in the end, I think that the “total worldview” approach of the Evangelical Right is the best way to understand Christianity. I don’t think that it is normative in the sense that it is required for salvation or that those who disagree are liberal communists out to destroy us, but I do think that the message of Christianity is that God’s revelation is the foundation for everything, and that it is our job to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. That means using our mind *in obedience* to God’s revelation, not to our own rationalizations about God and the world.

Bibliography

- Brown, Ruth Murray. *For a "Christian America": A History of the Religious Right*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2002.
- Bruce, Steve. *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
- Dobson, Ed, and Ed Hinson, edited by Jerry Falwell. *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: The Resurgence of Conservative Christianity*. Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc, 1981.
- Georgianna, Sharon Linzey. *The Moral Majority and Fundamentalism: Plausibility and Dissonance*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989.
- Gilkey, Langdon. *Blue Twilight: Nature, Creationism, and American Religion*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Harrell, Daniel M. *Nature's Witness: How Evolution Can Inspire Faith*. Wheaton: Abingdon Press, 2008.
- Machen, J. Gresham. *Christianity and Liberalism*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924.
- Marsden, George M. "Defining American Fundamentalism." In *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: a View from Within; a Response from Without*, edited by Norman J. Cohen, 22-37. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990.
- Martin, William. *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*. New York: Broadway Books, 1996.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984.

- Noll, Mark A. *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2001.
- Noll, Mark A. *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America, 2nd edition*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986.
- Noll, Mark A. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994.
- Numbers, Ronald L. *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Plantinga, Alvin. "Advice to Christian Philosophers." *Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 1, no. 3 (1984): 253-271. Available online at http://www.faithandphilosophy.com/article_advice.php .
- Rausch, David. "Fundamentalist Origins." In *Fundamentalism Today*, edited by Marla J. Selvidge. Elgin: Brethren Press, 1984.
- Sandeen, Ernest R. *The Origins of Fundamentalism: Towards a Historical Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968.
- Schaeffer, Francis A. "A Review of a Review," *The Bible Today* (October 1948):7-9. Available online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/schaefferreview.html> .
- Schaeffer, Francis A. "A Step Forward," *The Presbyterian Journal* (March 6, 1974):7-8. Available online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/stepforward.html> .
- Watson, Justin. *The Christian Coalition: Dreams of Restoration, Demands for Recognition*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999.
- Wise, Kurt P. "The Evolution of Creationist Perspective on the Fossil Equid Series," *Abstracts with Programs* 35, no. 6 (September 2003): 610. Geological Society of America. Available online at http://gsa.confex.com/gsa/2003AM/finalprogram/abstract_66818.htm .