

Faith Pulpit

The Baptist Fundamentals (1920/1921) and Hermeneutics

In 1920 Curtis Lee Laws proposed that those who cling to and earnestly contend for “the great fundamentals” of the Christian faith be called “fundamentalists.”^{[1](#)} For twenty-five years, Laws served as the editor of the *Watchman Examiner*, a Baptist publication. The most commonly cited list of the “fundamentals of the faith,” however, is the *Five Point Deliverance* (1901) used in the fundamentalist-modernist debates within the Presbyterian denomination.^{[2](#)} Yet in June of 1920, conservatives within the Northern Baptist Convention hosted a “Pre-convention Conference on Fundamentals of Our Baptist Faith” in Buffalo, New York, that resulted in a volume entitled *Baptist Fundamentals* (Judson Press, 1920). The conservatives hosted a similar “pre-convention conference” the following year in Des Moines, Iowa, resulting in the publication of a second volume of *Baptist Fundamentals* (Union Gospel, 1921). Curtis Lee Laws edited the first volume and wrote the foreword for the second one.^{[3](#)}

The initial volume clearly proclaimed the purpose of the pre-convention meetings: “The design of the Conference is to furnish a forum open to all Baptists in the interests of the time-honored, historic fundamentals of our Baptist and New Testament faith” (vol. 1:3). According to the conveners, the conference was “called frankly and openly in the interest of the conservative interpretation of our historic position and principles” (vol. 1:6). Curtis Lee Laws’ introduction to the 1920 volume warned, “We view with increasing alarm the havoc which rationalism is working in our churches as evidenced by the drift upon the part of many of our ministers from the fundamentals of the faith.” Laws lamented, “Not only are we in danger of compromising our distinctive Baptist principles, we are also in danger of compromising our more fundamental Christian principles.”

Baptist Distinctives and Christian Fundamentals

The 1920 *Baptist Fundamentals* declared, “The fundamental principle of the Baptists, in common with many other evangelicals, has always been the gospel, which is the essence of all Scripture. They have through their whole history been out-and-out evangelicals” (vol. 1:15). In this context, “evangelical” pertained to the root meaning of the evangel or “gospel.” “But someone asks most fittingly, What is the gospel? The answer, which Baptists have always drawn from the New Testament, is perfectly plain. The gospel is the good news of the free forgiveness of sin and eternal life (beginning now and going on forever) through a vital union with the crucified and risen Christ, which brings men into union and communion with God” (vol. 1:15).

On the other hand, the authors claimed that being Baptist entailed a distinctive identity: “Our distinctive doctrines are being denied; our distinctive mission is being disparaged; our distinctive influence is being destroyed” (vol. 1:184). As Baptists, the authors emphasized New Testament authority for their church order and practice.⁴ The phrase “the fundamentals of our New Testament faith” appears four times within the first volume of the *Baptist Fundamentals*. For example, Laws declared, “We believe that there rests upon us as Baptists an immediate and urgent duty to restate, reaffirm, and reemphasize the fundamentals of our New Testament faith” (vol. 1: “Introduction”). On a fifth occasion, the longer phrase “historic fundamentals of our Baptist and New Testament faith” appears (vol. 1:3).

Scriptural Authority and Progressive Revelation

According to both volumes, the Old Testament Scriptures were inspired by God (vol. 2:53). Jesus’ teaching always assumed “the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament Scriptures” (vol. 2:75). Jesus believed in the value and power of the Old Testament (vol. 2:36–37). He affirmed the wonders and miracles of the Old Testament (vol. 2:43). “Jesus always treated the Hebrew Scriptures with great respect” (vol. 2:52) and gave them “unqualified endorsement” (vol. 2:38). Jesus and the apostles believed in “the divine authority of the Old Testament,” that it was “the word of God” spoken by the Holy Spirit (vol. 2:59).

Nevertheless, divine inspiration of the text and applicable authority for daily living, while complementary, are not equivalent. One can believe that a passage is divinely inspired and not believe that it is directly applicable today. One can believe that God Himself authorized the Mosaic prohibition against eating pork (Lev. 11:7) but later allowed the enjoyment of a ham sandwich (cf. Acts 10:9–16). In the explanation of the second volume, there may be different degrees of “value” in scriptural texts, although there are not different degrees of inspiration (vol. 2:58). While rooted in inspiration, the outworking of Scripture’s authority also engages a sound hermeneutic.

The *Baptist Fundamentals* spoke directly to the topic of progressive revelation. “A supreme revelation of the Father’s will was made in the life and teaching of the Son of God” (vol. 2:52). “He knew full

well that this ancient revelation was given in many parts or fragments and in many styles, and that it did not attain finality; but He also knew that God spoke to the fathers through the prophets” (vol. 2:46). As a result, “Whatever is found in the pages of the Old Testament that has been made inoperative by the example or teaching of our Lord Jesus and His apostles, is no longer to be accepted as an authoritative guide to one’s conduct” (vol. 2:52). Whether or not one personally describes the continuity-discontinuity between the Testaments in this specific manner, the relationship between the two should be addressed by one’s hermeneutical approach.

The Two Testaments and Interpretation

The *Baptist Fundamentals* insisted, “Both Testaments belong together. They form one complete unit and they stand and fall together” (vol. 2:58). “The New Testament is in the Old contained and the Old Testament is in the New explained. The Old Testament is not perfect without the New and the New Testament is incomprehensible without the Old” (vol. 2:58). Both Testaments are divinely inspired revelations from God, and the authority of both is to be defended (vol. 2:74).

The *Baptist Fundamentals* affirmed, “That the purpose of the New Testament is to present Christ to us, we do not need to have demonstrated to us” (vol. 1:69). But what about the Old Testament’s relationship to our understanding of Christ? One author cited Christ’s instruction on the Road to Emmaus: “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Jesus “was conscious of being an authoritative interpreter of the Law and the Prophets” (vol. 2:36). He especially interpreted those Scriptures which foretold His impending death and subsequent resurrection (vol. 2:37). The apostles carried forward Jesus’ interpretation of the Old Testament. “Under the influence of the Holy Spirit these men have given us, in the Gospels and the Epistles, the interpretation of the Messianic element in the Old Testament, substantially as Jesus interpreted it to them in the period between His resurrection and His ascension” (vol. 2:53). Jesus and the apostles thus modeled how to interpret the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.

New Testament Baptist Distinctives

Although both the Old and New Testaments share a divine origin, the authors of the *Baptist Fundamentals* prioritized the New Testament materials in their understanding of *church* order and practice. The first volume spoke of “the proper interpretation of New Testament ordinances” (vol. 1:184), including “the New Testament symbol of immersion” (vol. 1:25). The faith believers are to defend (Jude 3) is “a correlated system of New Testament doctrines, that is subject to neither addition, nor subtraction” (vol. 1:110). Doctrinal explanations and systematizations have developed in history, but the foundation of Christian belief found in the New Testament was a sufficient revelation. “There will and must be a fuller understanding and interpretation of many of its statements and doctrines, but

the New Testament as we now have it is a sufficient guide for the individual and the world to God and to salvation” (vol. 2:69).

In the foreword to the second volume, Laws insisted that the “doctrine of soul liberty” guaranteed to individuals “the right to worship God as they pleased,” and he emphasized that “in the Christian economy no man or group of men could exercise authority over the conscience of the humblest man on earth.” The phrase “Christian economy,” of course, speaks to the divine administration under the *oikonomia* (“dispensation”) embodied in the church age.⁵ Because of their New Testament focus, the authors opposed both infant baptism (“the forced baptism of infants”) and the union of church and state (vol. 1:17). The state “must grant, not religious toleration, but complete religious liberty to all” (vol. 1:17). Based upon the “voluntary principle,” historic Baptists repudiated “all coercive power over the consciences and actions of men with reference to their religion” (vol. 1:29).

Interestingly, Laws himself had earlier written a pamphlet on religious liberty entitled *The Fiery Furnace and Soul Liberty* (Baltimore: First Baptist Church, 1904).⁶ This is historically fascinating, because the term “fundamentalism” has been applied sociologically to movements far beyond the historic roots represented by Laws.⁷ For many today, “religious fundamentalism” signifies an attitude hostile to religious liberty.⁸ In this sociological understanding, a “fundamentalist” has become one who not only interprets a sacred text literally against the critical inroads of modernity, but who also attempts to use socio-political and even violent means to enforce personal beliefs upon society and culture at large. But this sociological understanding of “fundamentalism” stands in contrast to the views of the author who coined “fundamentalist.”⁹

Interpretation and Soul Liberty

Historic Baptists “clearly grasped the New Testament principle of the soul’s competency in religion” (vol. 1:32). Yet the *Baptist Fundamentals* castigated “theological revolutionaries” who “demand exemption from all restriction in the sacred name of Baptist ‘liberty’” (vol 2:76). The authors maintained, “No Christian, and no Baptist, has ‘liberty,’ to entertain a view of the Scriptures which is contrary to Christ” (vol. 2:76–77). The authors’ belief in “soul liberty,” therefore, did not stand in opposition to their support of confessions of faith. “Our Baptist fathers had a very clearly defined system of truth, and this was put forth in many noble confessions of faith. They knew no soul liberty which guaranteed to members of Baptist churches the right to believe what they pleased. To reject fundamental Baptist principles and practices while remaining a member of a Baptist Church and to use the doctrine of soul liberty in extenuation of such a course is to pervert the doctrine and to make it a menace to the Church of Christ” (vol. 2: “Foreword”).

How can such “soul liberty” be combined with an unrelenting emphasis upon fidelity to the core fundamentals and Baptist doctrinal distinctives? Baptist congregations are to be assemblies of

individuals who *freely* and *voluntarily* covenant together. Therefore, the authors stood for “the right of private opinion and interpretation of the Scriptures” (vol. 2:65), but also the historic right of Baptist churches and fellowships to covenant voluntarily around the fundamental doctrines and biblical interpretations embodied in their confessions of faith.

Works Cited

1. See Frederick Hale, “‘Fundamentalism’ and ‘Fundamentalist’ Semantically Considered: Their Lexical Origins, Early Polysemy, and Pejoration,” *In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* 47.1 (2013), Art. #672, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v47i1.672>.
2. David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism since 1850* (Greenville: Unusual Publications, 1986), 143–51.
3. For simplicity’s sake, quotations are referenced by the edited volume and page, without the contributor’s name. If the authors’ names are of interest, digital copies of both volumes are readily available:
https://archive.org/stream/baptistfundament00amer/baptistfundament00amer_djvu.txt and
https://archive.org/stream/baptistdoctrines00amer/baptistdoctrines00amer_djvu.txt.
4. See Kevin Bauder, *Baptist Distinctives and New Testament Church Order* (Schaumburg: Regular Baptist Press, 2012), 18–35.
5. The use of the term does not necessarily reflect a full “dispensationalist” system.
6. See Curtis W. Freeman, “Fundamentalism’s Noble Forebear: Curtis Lee Laws,” *Christian Ethics Today* 18 (1998). Available at: <http://pastarticles.christianethicstoday.com/cetart/index.cfm?fuseaction=Articles.dspArtPDF>.
7. See Matt Thompson, “The Origins of ‘Fundamentalism,’” *The Atlantic* (June 30, 2015). Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/06/the-origins-of-fundamentalism/397238/>.
8. R. Gilbert, “Back to Basics,” *Liberty Magazine* vol. 95 no. 4 (July/August 2000), 29.
9. Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12.

Dr. Paul Hartog

Chair, Systematic Theology at [Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary](#) | hartogp@faith.edu | [Other Articles](#)

Paul A. Hartog (Ph.D., Loyola University) has taught at the Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary since 2001. He is now the chair of Systematic Theology for the seminary. He is an accomplished author and scholar and presents at conferences around the world. He and his wife, Alne, have three children.