



Faith Pulpit

The Rise of the Bible School Movement and Its Implications for Today

The Bible School movement began in the later 1800s as a part of American Fundamentalism and has greatly impacted Bible-believing Christians over these last one hundred or so years. Since there already were many Christian liberal arts colleges and theological seminaries in existence at that time, it is legitimate to ask why there would be a need for Bible schools. Their need, as understood by Bible school founders, is seen in the distinctive features which these schools had and ultimately in the characteristics of those early Bible school graduates. Just what are these distinctive features?

Key Features

The key features of those early Bible schools can be cataloged along three specific lines—personal qualities expected in students and alumni, doctrinal convictions which would be emphasized, and some aspects of practical application.

Personal Qualities

1. A Deepened Love for the Lord.

Whatever else might be true, the early Bible schools sought to produce in their students a deep and abiding hunger to know the Lord and walk intimately with Him. These schools wanted graduates who not only knew about the Lord but who knew Him personally and whose walk with Him was continually developing.

2. A Godly Walk.

Out from a deep love for the Lord was expected a godly walk. This is often referred to as “personal separation.” This meant that one’s lifestyle was expected to be characterized by discipline and holiness. The motto, “Others may, you may not,” reflected their thinking. And these personal standards arose out of seriousness of purpose as to what life was all about, the conviction that the things which really last are those which are centered in obeying the will of God, and a desire to please Him.

3. The Life of Faith Principle.

God has a will for each of His children. As we yield to Him and allow Him to show us what direction He wishes us to go, He will make it possible to accomplish whatever is His will.

Doctrinal Convictions

4. The Importance of Bible Doctrine.

There was the belief in the importance of doctrine generally—that is, whatever is taught in Scripture is of value. Also, there were certain doctrines which were fundamental or essential to Biblical Christianity.

5. Belief in the Bible as God’s Word.

This included several ideas. It included, for example, the concepts of verbal plenary inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture. This meant that as we study the Bible, we do so from an attitude of submission to the Bible’s teaching whereby we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us in our understanding of the text, and mere intellectual academic abilities are not enough to properly understand it. There was a deep distrust of what was happening generally in the higher educational circles of their day.

Because the Bible is God’s Word, it is to be studied completely and interpreted literally. Bible school students studied the Bible both synthetically and analytically—that is, they had classes which gave them a good overview of God’s plan for the ages, and the overall scope of both Old and New Testaments, as well as careful minute study of Bible books, paragraphs, sentences, and words. And their teachers told them that they should interpret the Bible by accepting its normal and natural meaning—without looking for some hidden meaning, unless other clear Scriptures would so indicate.

6. Recognition of Dispensational Distinctions Within a Premillennial Theological System.

Because the Bible was to be interpreted normally, its plain meaning indicated that God has worked at different times and in different ways with different groups. And God had made promises to Abraham and to his physical descendants through Isaac and Jacob?—promises that their people would continue to exist, that they would be God’s earthly people, that the land of Palestine belonged to them, and that David’s Descendant, the Messiah, would one day come and establish them in prosperity in the land.

Those promises still await their fulfillment. This dispensational approach helped them understand that things are not going to get better and better in the present age, but that apostasy, compromise, and worldliness would characterize the end of the age. The believer's goal, then, in serving the Lord was not primarily seen as that of cultural improvement, but, rather, one of fulfilling the Great Commission to evangelize, baptize, and teach God's Word.

7. Belief in the Imminent Return of Christ for His Own.

The next event on God's prophetic calendar is the return of Christ to take His own to Heaven, just as He promised in John 14:1–3, and just as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. It is not judgment upon the earth or Doom's Day for which believers look as their blessed hope. That hope is the any moment appearing of God's Son to take them Home.

8. Empowerment By the Holy Spirit.

Too many of God's people attempt to live for Him by means of their own effort, rather than by allowing the Holy Spirit of God to control and empower them to live a victorious Christian life. Such a life of victory over known sin (not sinless perfection) is possible in this life, and, in fact, is God's will.

9. Negative Attitude Toward Religious Liberalism.

Because Christianity had certain doctrines as fundamental to it, any religious system which ignored, reinterpreted, or denied those doctrines was not Christianity at all.

Practical Application

10. Cooperation Centered on Convictions.

There was an unwillingness to coexist or cooperate with religious liberalism or to compromise by joining hands in religious endeavor with those who did not share the great doctrines of the Bible. The 1878 meeting of the Niagara Bible Conference adopted a 14-point doctrinal statement which they prefaced with the following remarks: "So many in the latter times have departed from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; so many have turned away their ears from the truth, and turned unto fables; so many are busily engaged in scattering broadcast the seeds of fatal error, directly affecting the honor of our Lord and the destiny of the soul, we are constrained by fidelity to Him to make the following declaration of our doctrinal belief, and to present it as the bond of union with those who wish to be connected with the Niagara Bible Conference."

11. Training Is for Service.

The early Bible schools believed that an essential quality in their programs needed to be practical Christian service. Their very existence was due to the need for “gap men,” as D.L. Moody expressed it. There needed to be more Christian workers raised up in the last days of this present age who would be well-equipped to minister from God’s Word to the spiritual needs of those around them. Thus, street meetings, preaching in the parks, rescue mission ministry, and jail and hospital visitation were all an integral part of what Bible school education was all about.

12. The Importance of Preaching, Evangelism and Missions.

Preaching God’s Word was the God-established method for bringing people to Christ and for building up God’s people. The Great Commission is the marching orders for believers today given by our Commander, and He expects us to be ready and to obey. As a result of establishing schools with these various characteristics, a host of Christian workers have been produced who were fully dedicated and committed to doing the will of God, who were willing to spend and be spent for the cause of Christ, who understood and were committed by personal conviction to the teachings of God’s Word, and sought to serve Him in any way He chose. It is true that these schools did not advertise their programs with phrases such as “academic excellence,” nor did they speak of their graduates as “culturally relevant,” but then again, neither did their alumni—when interviewing for a position—ask among their first questions what would be the salary and fringe benefits! Perhaps we would be well-served to take a closer look at those early Bible schools to see why their graduates were often successful in their Christian service and to ask ourselves if those distinguishing characteristics are still true of Bible colleges today.

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