

# Who Needs Fundamentalism When We Have T4G and TGC? A Continuing Fundamentalist *Raison d'être*

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I am a fundamentalist. I say this without hesitation, but also with a realization that such an affirmation conveys many ideas (fair and foul) to society at large. I find this is true of nearly all the “labels” to which I ascribe—*Baptist, Dispensationalist, Calvinist, even Christian*, to name a few. Despite the abuse each label has received from both within and without its ranks, however, I am not ready to jettison these labels, because each represents an idea that is worth preserving.

The idea of fundamentalism was not new when the term was coined by Curtis Lee Laws in 1920. Throughout the history of the church there have always been those who stand ready to defend the core doctrines surrounding the intersection of Christ and Scripture with the world—the Gospel. A fundamentalist is very simply an apologist for Christian orthodoxy and he has existed since the days of the Apostles. He is not intrinsically reactionary or polemical, but his defensive posture sets him perpetually against those who oppose the core doctrines that surround the Gospel.

The manifestation of fundamentalism is not, however, as monolithic as one might suppose. The defense of the Gospel is his singular goal, but as the challenges to the Gospel change from generation to generation, so also must fundamentalism. What emerged in the 1920s as a coalition against the frontal assault of liberal modernism did not simply disintegrate when the fighting stopped and new boundary lines had been drawn (as they are in the aftermath of every war). Instead, fundamentalism adjusted its postbellum strategy to address a new and different kind of insurrection—the compromise of the “new” evangelicalism.

This new challenge did not represent, it should be stressed, a frontal assault on the Gospel. The “new” evangelicals were orthodox, and their Gospel did not immediately appear to differ substantially from that of the fundamentalist. But the fundamentalist incised, nonetheless, that the Gospel had become vulnerable in the hands of the “new” evangelicalism. This was because the “new” evangelical was guilty of diluting the Gospel by extending Christian recognition to those who denied the Gospel—with the misguided hope that mixing ink with pure water might possibly result in clean ink rather than dirty water. The lightning rod for the growing division eventually emerged in the person of Billy Graham, whose 1957 shunning of fundamentalist churches for the more attractive lure of mainline denominational ecumenical evangelism rendered a chasm between the two movements that proved too deep to heal.

The “new” evangelicalism has so evolved since 1957 that it is scarcely identifiable today. It aged ungracefully, and its disturbing legacy of apostate sons has been its great humiliation. In fact, it seems to be the newest trend among conservative evangelicals to disparage the new evangelicalism as a failed experiment, repudiate its objectives, and announce its death.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Phil Johnson, “The Demise of Evangelicalism: Why ‘Neo-Evangelicalism’ Was a Monumental Mistake,” blog entry, 4 September 2009, available at <http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2009/09/demise-of-evangelicalism.html#links>.

Perhaps now the fundamentalist may finally lower his weary defenses and drop his sword. After all, the conservative evangelical movement has finally come “together for the Gospel” to form “Gospel coalitions.” Indeed, their concern for a careful expression of the Gospel sometimes outstrips even that of the fundamentalist community. Graham has passed from the scene, and the practice of granting Christian recognition to apostates has slowed measurably (though not entirely). It would seem that many of the children of the new evangelicalism have improved upon their parents’ ways. And since the children should not be forced to suffer for the sins of their fathers (Deut 24:16), rapprochement is in the air. Fundamentalism has run its course and reunification is inevitable.

*Or is it?* It is an unfortunate reality that fundamentalism has often been defined by what it stands *against* rather than what it stands *for*. As a result, once its enemies disappear, it is easy to suggest that its *raison d’être*—its reason to exist—also disappears. But that is not true. There *is* something that fundamentalism continues to stand for, and thus there is a perpetual *raison d’être*. And while I genuinely laud the progress that we have seen in the good child of the new evangelicalism (e.g., their concern for a pure Gospel and their embrace even of secondary forms of separation) I am not entirely convinced that all is well. There are still hazards to the Gospel that linger, and we must adapt to address them.

It is in view of these hazards that I am detailing below my vision of a continuing *raison d’être* for fundamentalism—a reason for her continued existence in the face of her growing familiarity and familiarity with conservative evangelicalism. Some of these are old ideas; some of them are new. What I would like to think is that they are all issues that, left unchecked, could eventually jeopardize the faith once delivered—the Gospel.

### **The Kingdom and the Church’s Social Agenda**

A few months ago Mark Dever raised a few eyebrows when he announced in a sermon that “you are in sin if you lead your congregation to have a statement of faith that requires a particular millennial view.”<sup>2</sup> The claim was pretty incendiary and perhaps involved a bit of hyperbole—I can only hope this was the case. But as it stands, his statement is emblematic of the impulse to bully fundamentalism and conservative evangelicalism into reunification—and one that ignores the roots of the original breach.

#### *A Historical Snapshot*

One of the early precursors to the new evangelical withdrawal from her fundamentalist brothers was, of course, Carl F. H. Henry’s *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.<sup>3</sup> Henry’s argument is brief but simple: The fundamentalism of the day had lost its social conscience, largely because of its neglect of the “already” aspect of the kingdom; in brief, fundamentalism had overreacted to Modernist liberalism and its postmillennial vision of church life.

Modernist liberalism operated under the notion that the physical/material kingdom ideals of the OT were finding fulfillment through the church’s supervision and benevolent dispensation.

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<sup>2</sup>Mark Dever, “The End of Death—Revelation 20,” a sermon preached 12 July 2009, available at <http://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/audio/2009/07/12/the-end-of-death-revelation-20/>.

<sup>3</sup>Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947.

Instead of pressing the church's grim evangelistic mandate, liberal theology championed a here-and-now "kingdom" agenda with initiatives that were more significant, humanitarian, and constructive to society. And little by little the Gospel was expunged from the Church's mission—not merely by denial of its central tenets (of which liberalism was also guilty), but also by displacement: the Gospel had become irrelevant, first relatively and then entirely.

Fundamentalism denounced this strategy and thereby incurred the disapproval of a world that had come to demand open-handed liberality from the church. And just as the enthusiastic but insincere crowds evaporated when Jesus withdrew his offer of the kingdom and curtailed the attendant humanitarianism (John 6:66 cf. vv. 26–27), so also fundamentalism earned for itself the disapproval of a watching world.

A great many fundamentalists accepted these new circumstances as normal and expected—a necessary corrective that accompanied the return to orthopraxy. Not all, however, were content to accept the fact that the world now hated them, and began to look for solutions to evaporating cultural influence and, with it, evaporating opportunities for evangelism. As this undercurrent of dissent began to swell within 1940s fundamentalism, a watershed issue began to emerge as a barrier to greater evangelical influence: a prevailing fundamentalist view of the Kingdom that Carl Henry, among others, came to view as defective. If the kingdom problem could be solved, these reasoned, the church's influence in society could be restored—and C. H. Dodd's realized eschatology provided the necessary solution. The "new" evangelicals (as they chose to describe themselves) embraced this understanding of the kingdom,<sup>4</sup> and were thereby able to reinstate a social mandate for the church.

Henry explicitly disclaimed that the problem was properly about one's millennial view, allowing for broad accord between postmillennialists, amillennialists, "historic" premillennialists, and even dispensational premillennialists, and mentioned over and over again that his personal position (historic premillennialism) was irrelevant to his argument. What he did insist upon, however, was that each model find room for an already/not-yet kingdom to accommodate social action and thus soothe his uneasy conscience.

As history has unfolded, one of the hallmarks of fundamentalism has been a view of the church's Gospel mission as primarily or even exclusively proclamatory, and a corresponding concern that the expansion of this mission is a threat to the peculiar primacy and purity of a proclaimed Gospel—a hallmark that is in danger of being forgotten in the mad rush for rapprochement. Whether or not it is a "sin" to put a particular millennial position in a church's doctrinal statement may be debated. But I am deeply concerned that appeals to Christ's kingdom are still being offered as a basis for radically expanding the church's mission beyond her Great Commission, creating a social mandate for the church that, biblically, she does not have. This dilutes the Gospel.

### *Some Qualifications*

The foregoing is somewhat bold, raising questions both of historical realities and also about

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<sup>4</sup>An expression that found its best evangelical expression in the writings of George Ladd: *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); and *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). The best published rejoinder to Ladd is, I believe, Alva J. McClain's *Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959).

ecclesiastical propriety. The following is an attempt to address some of these.

- Firstly, it goes without saying that some fundamentalists have historically embraced a view of the Kingdom that is partly “already.” In fact, the early ranks of fundamentalism included a significant number of amillennialists. While I am not in agreement with this view, I am convinced that most of these held their views of the Kingdom in tension with church life, eschewing both the “Christ of culture” approach to evangelism (practiced broadly by liberalism and new evangelicalism) and also the holistic “Christ transforming culture” approach to evangelism (practiced in Kuyper-influenced Reformed circles).<sup>5</sup>

In short, I’m not convinced that this reality derails the point. My concern is not so much with one’s view of the Kingdom as it is with what one *does* with that view. Specifically, I am troubled by those who deliberately use kingdom theology to justify a social mandate for the church. And I am troubled by a fundamentalism that do not seem to be aware that this historical beachhead ever existed, and are thus drifting with the conservative evangelical current away from this fundamentalist ideal

- Secondly, my statement that the church has no *institutional* social mandate is not to say that *individual* Christians have no responsibility to be neighborly—not only to “one another” (i.e., to other believers) but also to those outside the church (Gal 6:10).<sup>6</sup> In fact, this neighborliness should be of a quantity and quality that it stands out in the community (Matt 5:16). Specters of socially withdrawn, miserly, and even hateful Christians need not apply.
- Thirdly, I would even contend that the injunction to neighborliness extends incidentally even to the institutional church. In a day when most American churches have established a permanent presence in the community (i.e., a church building), it seems that the church inherits with this presence some basic responsibility for corporate neighborliness.

Further, there seems to be no sustainable objection to the church institutionally organizing some neighborly “event” as a means to establishing goodwill and gathering an audience for the Gospel—an open house, a dinner, a musical presentation, etc. After all, *no unbeliever wants to hear the Gospel*, so it would seem that the same Christian conduct that “makes the teaching about God our Savior attractive” on an individual level, creating goodwill unto a willing hearing of the Gospel (Titus 2:10), can rightly extend to the institutional level.

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<sup>5</sup>I say they held their Kingdom views “in tension” with their ecclesiology in historical terms. I am currently fascinated by a growing movement that has begun to supply a reasoned, theological rationale for this position under the heading of “Two Kingdom Theology,” which argues for a traditionally Lutheran model of two kingdoms, one of Christ and one of this world, set in paradox (see, e.g. Jason Stellman, *Dual Citizens: Worship and Life Between the Already and the Not Yet* [Reformation Trust, 2009]; David VanDrunen, *Living in Babylon: A Two Kingdoms Vision for the Christian’s Cultural Vocation* [Crossway, forthcoming]). This is not an endorsement (I still have tensions with the amillennialism), but I am very encouraged to see a conscious effort to develop an alternative to the traditional “new” evangelical and Neo-Kuyperian models of church life.

<sup>6</sup>For some very helpful material on the distinction between institutional versus individual social engagement see, in addition to the materials in the previous note, D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 151–54, 178–79; Darryl Hart, *A Secular Faith* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006).

What I *am* saying is that the institutional church must resist adopting a programmatic social agenda as an end—organized opposition to abortion and homosexuality; operation of hospitals, orphanages, and adoption services; etc. These are not functions of the institutional church, but rather measures that have historically (1) displaced individual responsibility in evangelism (the overwhelming emphasis of evangelism in the NT), (2) evolved illegitimately into means not only of gaining a hearing for the Gospel but also of creating faith, and (3) developed into a machine so programmatic that the Gospel is diminished or lost entirely. In short, *the Gospel is at stake here*, and the fundamentalist must necessarily be concerned.

## Culture

It is often suggested that there are two kinds of fundamentalism—doctrinal fundamentalism and cultural fundamentalism. The former is to be embraced as a defense of the orthodox core; the latter to be eschewed as a counter-cultural set of archaic, arcane, and even pharisaical traditions some of which are downright silly. There is some validity to this distinction. At the same time, since theology always informs our view of culture, it is impossible to completely divorce the two.

We have already noted above that in the specific issue of evangelism, fundamentalists have typically eschewed both the “Christ of culture” approach (practiced broadly by liberalism and new evangelicalism) and also the holistic “Christ transforming culture” approach (practiced in Kuyperian Reformed circles). I would suggest that this understanding has extended beyond evangelism to a whole plethora of cultural issues.

In the full interest of self-critique, I must at this point take issue with a broad swath of the fundamentalist “movement” that has adopted a radically isolationist, counter-cultural approach to life. After all, the Gospel is at stake here, too. Those taxa of fundamentalism that have developed into hermetically-sealed islands of cultural dissent so as to be neither of the world *nor in the world* have erred terribly—not by polluting or diluting the Gospel, but by withholding it from those to whom we are commissioned to give it (John 17:6–19).

Nonetheless, I think historic fundamentalism correctly discerned that the church needed to seek an alternative to the “Christ transforming culture” and “Christ of culture” paradigms. That is to say that they correctly rejected both (1) the idea that the church’s mission is to capture every area of culture/society and subdue it for Christ (the Kuyperian Reformed model), and also (2) the disturbing idea that we live in a “good” or “neutral” culture where this has already occurred (the Modernist model and, increasingly, the new evangelical model).

While I concede with chagrin that some fundamentalists have erred in adopting an unbiblical counter-cultural approach (Niebuhr’s “Christ Against Culture”), I think I can safely say that, self-consciously or no, the majority position of fundamentalism has not been the counter-cultural model, but instead a variation of Niebuhr’s “Christ and culture *in paradox*” paradigm—one that (1) takes seriously the radical depravity of the world and resists the powerful and pragmatic urge to assume the world’s cultural expressions to be good or at least “neutral” and (2) takes seriously the incorrigibility of culture and recognizes the futility of salvaging it—except, perhaps as an incidental, localized, and temporary consequence of evangelism. In short, fundamentalism has a continuing role in *identifying the radically deceptive nature of sin in establishing the need for the Gospel* and in *correctly discerning the limitations of common grace in establishing a sphere for the Gospel*.

## Transition

It is hoped that the two points above have been helpful in establishing something of a historical connection of the various “lives” of fundamentalism (its life in resisting liberalism, its life in resisting the new evangelicalism), and its present “life.” In the next two points of this defense of the continuing viability of fundamentalism, I would like to make a shift in emphasis—a shift away from *historical* fundamentalist concerns that I see as in jeopardy of being lost, and a shift to more *contemporary* threats to orthodoxy to which conservative evangelicalism as a whole seems rather ambivalent.

Some will no doubt object at this point because I have ceased defending historic fundamentalism and have begun grasping wildly at my own pet non-essentials in an effort to preserve my particular slice of fundamentalist identity. I’m prone to self-deception, so maybe this criticism is valid, but I’d like to think that this is not the case. The issues around which fundamentalism coalesced in both its previous “lives” do not comprise a comprehensive list. Instead, they are a reflection of specific, then-contemporary threats to the Gospel. Fundamentalism wages war on the fields where error is camping and defend the citadels that are under attack. But this does not mean that fundamentalism is obliged to remain static and refrain from battling elsewhere.

The theological landscape is changing, and so must the polemic. Modernist liberalism is a crippled old man, dying as much from self-inflicted wounds as by any inflicted by his foes. The “new” evangelicalism has been declared dead, too. But the fact that fundamentalism’s traditional enemies lie dead or dying does not demand that fundamentalism lie down and die with them. Satan is always adapting his assault on the Gospel, and we need to discern and address his new devices. I am convinced that at least two doctrines deemed non-essential by the conservative evangelical majority are more critical to the Gospel than at first meets the eye, *viz.*, *cessationism* and *young earth creationism*. Ambivalence to these blind spots, in my mind, does not serve Christian unity, but rather functions to erode biblical authority. And this is something for which fundamentalism most definitely must contend.

## Cessationism

On March 7th of this year, David Wilkerson, a seasoned “prophet” from New York City, issued a warning that is particularly eerie in view of today’s date: “An earth-shattering calamity is about to happen. . . . It will engulf the whole [New York City] megaplex, including areas of New Jersey and Connecticut. Major cities all across America will experience riots and blazing fires.”<sup>7</sup>

Most of those who were aware of his “prophecy” reacted to it with more amusement than alarm, a decision that in the passing of time proves to have been an apt one. A few bloggers, though, responded to Wilkerson’s doomsaying remarks in an effort to calm the panicked naïve among their readership. It seems that the previously simple task of answering this kind of alarmism, however, has been rendered increasingly complex by a recent uptick in sympathy for prophecy and tongues in conservative evangelicalism today. Simple denunciation of such prophetic malarkey is apparently no longer acceptable in today’s “open but cautious” evangelical milieu. Instead it would seem that one is now obliged to give Wilkerson a studied hearing and remain

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<sup>7</sup>“An Urgent Message,” blog entry, 7 March 2009, available at <http://davidwilkersonstoday.blogspot.com/2009/03/urgent-message.html>.

cautiously open to the possibility that his prophecy just might possibly be accurate.

John Piper, for instance, denounced Wilkerson's comments, but in a strikingly anemic way: "Wilkerson's prophecy," he reassures us, "does not resonate with my spirit.... God might have said this. But it doesn't smell authentic to me."<sup>8</sup> To his credit, Piper goes on to speak of the governing authority of Scripture, and my criticism is consequently tempered, but this comment arrested me. If, in fact, God is bombarding the church today with authoritative prophecies and mysterious codes (i.e., tongues), this cannot help but mute or at best distill one's claim to two critical fundamentals of the faith, namely, biblical sufficiency and the singular authority of Scripture.<sup>9</sup> It seems to me to go without saying that if the church needs additional revelations, then the Bible does *not* give everything we need for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3) and does *not* thoroughly equip us for every good work (2 Tim 3:17). Further, if the theological landscape becomes littered with an endless corpus of private and normative revelatory material, it becomes increasingly difficult to successfully maintain the doctrine of *sola scriptura*.<sup>10</sup>

Please note that I am not suggesting here that Piper or Grudem or Carson or anyone else within conservative evangelicalism has explicitly denied the cardinal doctrines of biblical authority and *sola scriptura* that are so foundational to the Gospel. Such would be an unfair assessment. But what I am saying is that in the ambivalence, accommodation, and even embrace of non-cessationism within conservative evangelicalism lie the seeds of destruction not only for the movement, but also for the Gospel.

### Young Earth Creationism

In his fascinating 1986 work *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*<sup>11</sup> James Turner traces the rise of agnosticism/atheism in late-18th to early-20th century America, and assigns much of the blame to Christians accommodating science as an independently authoritative discipline. His thesis appears on p. xiii: "In trying to adapt their religious beliefs to socioeconomic change, to new moral challenges, to novel problems of knowledge, to the tightening standards of science, the defenders of God slowly strangled Him."

Specifically, Turner points to the Princeton School as leaders in compromising the role of

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<sup>8</sup>"Testing David Wilkerson's Prophecy," blog entry, 9 March 2009, available at [http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/1670\\_testing\\_david\\_wilkersons\\_prophecy](http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/1670_testing_david_wilkersons_prophecy).

<sup>9</sup>To be sure, my opponents are not oblivious to this criticism. Wayne Grudem, for instance, replies to this charge in his *Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), arguing that the allowance of prophesy and tongues in the church today need not conflict with "a strong affirmation of the closing of the New Testament canon (so that no new words of equal authority are given today), of the sufficiency of Scripture, and of the supremacy and unique authority of the Bible in guidance." His justification, however, is even more troubling than the problem itself: this "strong affirmation" holds because, unlike OT prophecies, "prophecy in ordinary New Testament churches was not equal to Scripture in authority but was simply a very human—and sometimes partially mistaken—report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone's mind" (p. 18). The prospect of multiplied "partially mistaken" (and thus partially authoritative?) revelations is very troubling.

<sup>10</sup>For a helpful book-length treatise that interacts carefully with the newer arguments raised by evangelical charismatics (esp. the "third-wave" variety), see Sam Waldron, *To Be Continued?* (Merrick, NY: Calvary Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup>Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.

Christian theology as queen of the sciences. Little by little, he argues, they surrendered bits and pieces of the plain truth of Genesis 1–11 in an effort to accommodate uniformitarian science, abandoning the flood and adopting geological evolution and even biological evolution. But then, in Dayton, Tennessee, to the guffaws of the scientific world, they finally took a stand, resisting human evolution in a heroic bid to save Adam—and with him the Second Adam so very necessary to the Gospel.

And only then did Christianity realize that, due to their inconsistency and compromise, they had lost their distinctive voice in the world. Theology had been dethroned as the queen of the sciences. Agnosticism and atheism had taken firm root. All because “the defenders of God had slowly strangled Him.”

One would think that the fundamentalism that emerged from the ensuing malaise would have immediately addressed the problem, but it was not until the 1961 release of Whitcomb and Morris’s *The Genesis Flood*<sup>12</sup> that young earth creationism finally recovered its voice. Happily, the next few decades saw fundamentalism accept the biblical demands set out in this and succeeding books and adopt young earth creationism with near unanimity.

Young earth creationism has emerged, however, as a non-issue in conservative evangelicalism—and one need not look far to find evidence of the Gospel-wrenching devastation that this ambivalence is producing. Just a few short weeks ago Tremper Longman used a short web video to demonstrate by means of genre criticism that the existence of a historical Adam of Genesis was not only unnecessary, but unlikely<sup>13</sup>—and seems to be wholly unperturbed by the implications that this announcement has for the doctrines of original sin, the solidarity of the human race, the second Adam, imputation, etc.

This is a serious *Gospel* issue, and I must confess great perplexity why it is not seen as such. Surely the fundamentalist community has little to gain and much to lose by merging with those who are, however unintentionally, slowly strangling God!

### Summary and Conclusion

Fundamentalism is not fundamentally a reactionary movement, but a movement that stands ready to defend something, namely the core doctrines surrounding the intersection of Christ and the Scriptures with the world—the *Gospel*. The idea is not a new but an ancient one. It has persisted against obstacles of every kind, ranging from the outright assaults of liberalist modernism to the more subtle compromises of the “new” evangelicalism.

Now, it seems, many of the descendants of the new evangelicalism are abandoning that movement as dead and are returning home to embrace their fundamentalist brothers. There is much to celebrate in this development, and we dare not respond as the disgruntled son who refused to embrace the prodigal (Luke 15). At the same time, I find myself beset with the uneasy thought that this particular prodigal still retains some affinity for the “distant country” from which he has come—and he’s even brought home a sack of corn husks to share.

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<sup>12</sup>Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1961.

<sup>13</sup>“Is There a Historical Adam?” web video, 9 September 2009, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8Pk1vXL1WE>.

I remain concerned that the prevailing conservative evangelical view of the kingdom and its continuing fascination with non-Christian culture will *pollute* the Gospel. I remain concerned that the conservative evangelical accommodation of continuing tongues and prophecies will *dilute* the Gospel, ceding the Bible's exclusive authority to the unstable authority of existentialism. And finally, I remain concerned that conservative evangelical ambivalence toward aberrant interpretations of Genesis 1–11 will potentially *confute* the Gospel, ceding the Bible's exclusive authority to the false authority of uniformitarian science.

I am *not* saying that the “new” fundamentals of 21st-century fundamentalism are a future view of the Kingdom, cultural conservatism, cessationism, and young earth creationism. These are not of themselves fundamental, Gospel issues. But they have implications that are. And they represent four serious blind spots in conservative evangelicalism, peculiar areas where the Gospel is vulnerable. They represent, in short, a fundamentalist *raison d'être*—a continuing reason for fundamentalism to persist in an increasingly conservative evangelical world.