

Thou, Who a Tender Parent Art

Rowland Hill (1744–1833)

Thou, who a tender Parent art,
 Regard a parent's plea;
 Our offspring, with an anxious heart
 We now commend to Thee.

Our children are our greatest care,
 A charge which Thou hast given;
 In all Thy graces let them share,
 And all the joys of heaven.

If a centurion could succeed,
 Who for his servant cried,
 Wilt Thou refuse to hear us plead
 For those so near allied?

On us Thou has bestowed Thy grace,
 Be to our children kind;
 Among Thy saints give them a place,
 And leave not one behind.

Happy we then shall live below,
 The remnant of our days,
 And when to brighter worlds we go,
 Shall long resound Thy praise.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Growing Up Fundamentalist, Part Nine: Reflections

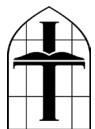
Kevin T. Bauder

Over the past several years I have read a number of books and articles about “growing up fundamentalist.” Almost without exception these works have been written by people who are trying to justify their life choices by pointing to the oppressiveness of their fundamentalist upbringing. In some cases they claim to have been abused. In other cases they dwell on the restrictiveness of the fundamentalist environment. These narratives leave the impression that growing up fundamentalist must be a horrible experience. From these stories one might infer that every fundamentalist must be corrupt and every fundamentalist authority structure—homes, churches, schools, and missions—must be abusive.

I have no doubt that some people have endured abuse by fundamentalist parents or churchmen. Indeed, I would not expect it to be otherwise. Whatever else fundamentalists are, they are first of all humans. To be human is to be a sinner, and we should plan for the effects of sin to be evident within all human populations. That is why some entertainers are abusers. Some politicians are abusers. Some journalists are abusers. Some Catholics are abusers. Some ecumenical liberals are abusers. Some evangelicals are abusers. And some fundamentalists are going to be abusers, too.

Some fundamentalists have also been guilty of covering up abuses. I have no wish to underrate the suffering of those who have been subjected to the abuse. Such things should never have happened, and they should not be tolerated when they do happen. Having said all of that, however, I can find little or nothing in my own experience that reflects those narratives—and I, too, grew up fundamentalist. My goal in this series has been to give you some sense of what that was like.

My parents came to Christ as adults. Their conversion was genuine. Their new Christianity did not make them perfect people or perfect parents, but their lives were visibly transformed. I observed their growth in grace, their maturing in the faith, and their willingness to subordinate their personal ambitions for the sake of their savior. Their faith was real, so at a time when my peers regularly accused their parents of hypocrisy, I knew that mine were genuine. Furthermore, having now borne the responsibility of rearing my own children, I find that I am little disposed to criticize whatever mis-



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takes they may have made. They did as good a job as any, and considerably better than most.

As for ministers, every pastor whom I knew was a model of dignity, propriety, and charity. Few of them were highly learned men, but they were grave, sober, and pious. They were also patient and gentle leaders, shepherds in the truest sense of that term, men who took seriously the care of souls. They cared about truth, committed themselves to expounding the whole counsel of God, and invested personally in those whom they pastored.

The professors by whom I was instructed in college and seminary encouraged the life of the mind. At least a few of them were among the best-read and most thoughtful people I've encountered. To this day I can honestly state that the smartest people I've ever known were fundamentalists. By the time I completed education in a fundamentalist college and seminary, my intellectual direction was set. This direction was tested in a variety of non-fundamentalist academic and social environments, but I discovered that the commitments I'd absorbed from fundamentalists were able to withstand the rough-and-tumble of intellectual exchange.

During my youth, fundamentalism was passing through a period of choice and definition. Like corrosive bacteria, the neoevangelical philosophy was beginning to eat away at the spiritual and ecclesiastical core of American Christianity. However vaguely, many fundamentalists perceived that something was wrong. They tried to put a barrier between themselves and the infection. In consequence, they were often blamed for manipulative tactics and uncharitable attitudes. Even if they were wrong in some of their decisions and expressions, however, they were right about the peril that they perceived. Their supposed lack of charity was often exaggerated by their opponents, who in fact manifested the same attitudes. Granted, I heard fundamentalists rail against the cooperative evangelism of Billy Graham. I also heard fundamentalists pray for Billy, sometimes even to the point of tears.

Over time I became aware that the fundamentalism in which I was reared was not the only version. I was introduced to branches of fundamentalism that demanded unquestioning loyalty, despised careful doctrinal formulation, recoiled from biblical teaching and exposition, and effectively turned Christianity into a form of entertainment. I heard preachers who did not proclaim the whole counsel of God. Some did not even really preach the gospel, but just preached an invitation for forty-five minutes. Others introduced new and unusual doctrines and practices. I discovered leaders who would stretch the truth until their pants nearly caught fire. These leaders were also willing to engage in backstabbing, vituperation, and character assassination—indeed, they seemed to think that conduct of this sort somehow made them manlier. In retrospect, I believe that those are the versions of fundamentalism in which the worst abuses occurred. At the time, how-

ever, I was surprised at how little I held in common with these so-called fundamentalists. I've never been able to get over that surprise.

In short, I am quite prepared to concede that not every form of fundamentalism is worth perpetuating. That concession, however, does not imply that no form of fundamentalism is worth perpetuating. To be sure, no form of fundamentalism will be perfect, for the simple reason that all humanly-constructed movements and organizations are constructed by sinners. Nevertheless, I have lived in a version of fundamentalism that was certainly no worse than any other variety of American Christianity, and that was actually far better than most. I would very much like to preserve—for at least another generation—a fundamentalism worth growing up in.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
