

How the Bible Came to Us - #23
Biblical Issues Among Modern Christians

1. As we near the end of our discussion about how the Bible came to us, we need to evaluate certain modern trends. In the 21st century, the Bible remains a central part of Christian worship. But at the same time, it is the basis for lively debates with severely divided opinions.
2. First of all, there continues to be the ongoing question of “reason” versus “revelation.” In general, Christians, whether they are Protestants or Catholics, are divided into two camps. There are those who are regarded as “fundamentalists,” and there are those who are regarded as “modernists.”
3. “Fundamentalists” are defined as those who believe the following:
 - 1) The verbal inerrancy of Scripture.
 - 2) The divinity of Jesus Christ.
 - 3) The reality of the virgin birth.
 - 4) The substitutionary theory of the atonement.
 - 5) The physical resurrection and bodily return of Jesus Christ.
4. These so-called “fundamentals” were first published in a series of books by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (Biola University) in 1909.
5. “Modernists,” in general, follow the *historical-critical method* of scriptural interpretation. Modernists have, by-and-large, taken control of virtually all of the seminaries in Europe and North America since the 19th century.
6. Modernism, which often claims to represent science versus theology, got a giant boost in 1925 with the Scopes trial—the so-called “monkey trial.” That trial was very incorrectly represented in the famous movie, “Inherit the Wind.” H. L. Mencken, a well-known cynic journalist, determined to make as much fun of Christianity as he possibly could.
7. The conflict has certainly not gone away. While universities and centers of higher education along with the liberal media are determined to make evolution the official doctrine of the world, Christian groups are fighting back in public schools and even in state legislatures even today.
8. We need to be honest in saying that liberals tend to identify all Christian conservatives as fundamentalists, but that is not correct. Considering at face value the five fundamentals, would you consider yourself a “fundamentalist”?
9. We need to recognize that fundamentalism is a complete framework for interpreting Scripture and Christian principles; it is a paradigm. It determines how the Bible is to be read, what can be believed, what must not be believed, and even the attitude we should take toward “scientific” discoveries.
10. Let us take an example. As Seventh-day Adventists, we have believed in a set of dietary recommendations from the early years of our church’s organization. We are inclined to say that those principles of diet were given to us by inspiration. While many Adventists no longer practice every detail of that dietary system, we are recognized almost around the world as having special dietary restrictions.
11. Now we realize that the scientific community is “discovering” through modern research virtually all of the things that we have believed for a long time. Our “dietary guidelines” suggest that we

should not eat flesh food. There have now appeared books such as *The China Study* by T. Colin Campbell that provide extensive modern research to support the same ideas. Which of these two approaches do you take most seriously: the divine revelation or the scientific evidence?

12. Many fundamentalists read what is known as the Scofield Bible. It is the *King James Version* Bible with many cross-references and explanatory notes. It also includes dates for almost all of the events throughout the Bible. To fundamentalist Christians, all of the notes and the dates are taken almost as if given by God.
13. The Scofield Bible suggests that we are moving toward a final conflict called Armageddon in which Russia—which they believe is pointed out in Ezekiel 38—will come into conflict with Western Europe and the United States in a huge world battle.
14. The conflicts between fundamentalist approaches and modernist approaches have become so stark and clear-cut that entire seminaries are oriented toward one or the other approach. Very few groups are comfortable reaching across the divide. It should be noted that virtually no seminary in America accepts the Scofield Bible as authoritative.
15. One other significant point needs to be mentioned. Both modernists and fundamentalists take a *historical approach* to the interpretation of Scripture. Modernists believe that the Bible is historically inaccurate and needs to be adjusted or corrected. Fundamentalists believe that the Bible is the final word and is historically accurate. Unfortunately, both sides tend to minimize many other important aspects of the Bible's purpose in our lives. Those two different approaches have led to many "cultural wars" in American society. They have had a great impact on events such as presidential elections.
16. A second major issue in modern Christianity is the issue of the Canon. The early Christian church fought that battle for about two centuries. Finally, they handed down to us a Bible which most of us find readable and consistent.
17. Modernists who are looking for an excuse to reinterpret large portions of Scripture now are discovering ancient documents such as the Gospel of Thomas and the book of Judas. A number of Gnostic gospels were discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. Using those other documents, modernists want to challenge the authority of the 66 books which have been accepted by "mainstream" Christians for hundreds of years.
18. In general, modernists are opposed to any kind of authority or any kind of suppression of information. They favor an anti-institutional approach which emphasizes spirituality over religion. Many of these groups are strongly feminist and wish to change the Scriptures as we have them because they view them as severely patriarchal and sexist in their tendencies. For example, they would like us to believe that the Gnostic gospels are more favorable to women than are the traditional Scriptures.
19. Interestingly enough, some modernist authors have produced books which stir up that passion. *The Da Vinci Code* is a novel which purports to uncover ancient scriptures and suppressed forms of Christianity. Such ideas get a resounding response from groups which are highly suspicious of any form of authority. Groups such as the Jesus Seminar and Revisionist Project are seeking to erode the authority of the canon of Scripture as we know it. Their main weapons are publishing and teaching. They have produced books like *The Complete Gospels*, *The Other Bible*, and even *The Lost Bible* to try to suggest that there is something important that has been left out.

20. Unfortunately, both sides of the argument have taken a destructive approach. The traditional fundamentalists are quite rigid, even sexist and non-egalitarian. The modernist Gnostics have emphasized individualism, individual enlightenment, and spirituality; and thus, do not provide any real guidance to the Christian community as a group.
21. A third issue particularly facing contemporary, English-speaking Christians involves the huge proliferation of new translations of the Bible. While fundamentalists stand by the original Hebrew and Greek Scriptures—correctly translated, as they regard them, into the *King James Version*—hundreds of scholars have undertaken the task of translating the New Testament or even the entire Bible into “more-modern” English.
22. In the direct “King James” tradition, there have been the *Revised Version* of 1885, *The American Standard Version* of 1901, and *The Revised Standard Version* of 1946, 1952, and 1957. All of those remain just as close to the *King James Version* as possible while bringing into it more contemporary language and more accurate biblical scholarship.
23. *The New Revised Standard Version* published in 1978 went a step further to use gender-inclusive language. That means that in texts in which the Greek Bible might have a word such as *adelphoi*—which has been traditionally translated “brethren”—*The New Revised Standard Version* and others which follow its example say, “Brothers and Sisters.”
24. Protestants need to recognize that a couple of excellent translations have been done by Roman Catholic scholars as well. *The New American Bible* was the first Roman Catholic version translated directly from the Hebrew and Greek rather than from the Latin Vulgate. It also seeks to be gender inclusive. Another very free paraphrase of the Bible is *The Jerusalem Bible* which was first translated into French and then into English. Those are both Roman Catholic translations.
25. The two main approaches taken by translators in our day are the following: 1) Translations which follow as faithfully as possible the original wording of the Hebrew and Greek; 2) Translations that seek to give an “equivalency translation” which, in effect, tries to carry the same thought that the biblical languages carried but uses words that are spoken in the common language of today. One famous equivalency translation is *The New English Bible*, a Protestant translation from England that came out in the 1960s. It should be contrasted with *The New International Version*, another very famous translation that favors the more literal approach.
26. A few translations have gone so far as to press the gender inclusiveness even to include God Himself/Herself. In such a translation, we might have something like the Lord’s prayer saying, “Our Mother/Father God,” etc.
27. A final quite controversial issue for Christians today is the purpose and work of Bible societies.
28. No one argues that it is not an advantage to have the Bible available in one’s own language. The Bible societies have been remarkably successful at translating the Bible into many languages. In 1804 when Bible societies first began their work, the Bible was available in whole or in part in only 67 languages. By the end of 2005, it was available in 2043 of the world’s 6500 languages. In all those languages, they have produced a total of some 372 million printed copies of Scripture.
29. So, why is that controversial? Many modernists and more liberal Christians believe that

evangelization—and especially proselytizing by carrying the gospel in Christian form to other societies—is an outdated methodology. They believe that it smacks of “old-fashioned colonialism.” They believe that the Christian witness should be carried out simply by living its principles in one’s own life.

30. By contrast, many fundamentalists and conservative Christian church groups believe that it is their God-given responsibility to spread the Word of God to all people. (See Matthew 28:19,20) It is an essential part of their Christianity.
31. But when translating from one language into another, there is a constant challenge to try to carry not just the wording but the essential ideas with their implications. The Bible uses language suggesting that black is evil and white is good. Such wording is offensive in some languages. In cultures in the far north, they know nothing about lambs. In some cultures in Africa, only thieves knock. In light of those different cultural issues, translators must be very sensitive to produce culturally-appropriate renderings of Scripture.
32. So, what should be our attitude to all of these issues? The answers you give to these questions will determine, to a great extent, what Christian community you fit into.

© 2008 Kenneth Hart, MD. ***Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution is encouraged. It is our goal to see them spread as widely and freely as possible. If you would like to use them for your class or even make copies of portions of them, feel free to do so. We always enjoy hearing about how you might be using the materials and we might even want to share good ideas with others, so let us know.***

Info@theox.org

Last modified: March 12, 2008

C:\My Documents\WP\StoryofBible\23-BibletoUs-ModChristians&Bible.wpd