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Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

The Lives of Robert and James Haldane by Alexander Haldane (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990) first published, 1852. 706 pages, hardcover, \$34.95. Reviewed by John C. Vander Stelt, Professor of Philosophy and Theology.

In this biography of his father, James Alexander Haldane (1761-1851), and uncle, Robert Haldane (1764-1842), Alexander Haldane describes in great detail the aristocratic background, ecclesiastical context, and passion for mission and revival of these two remarkable Scottish brothers.

Both men labored feverishly as lay preachers at a time when Moderatism paralyzed churches in Scotland, Enlightenment revolutionized society in France and North America, Deism eclipsed Christ's uniqueness in England, and Socinianism undermined orthodoxy in Switzerland. The pervasive spirit of Enlightenment had given rise to a widespread liberalism based on reason-empowered optimism and the possibility of self-redemption.

The Haldane brothers focused their ministry on missions to the Orient, especially India and China, educational outreach to African children, and revival of primarily Anglican communities in Scotland. They traveled as itinerant preachers, encouraged Bible distribution, wrote numerous tracts, and published major commentaries, hefty apologetical treatises, and numerous pamphlets.

Robert Haldane's opening of Scripture, especially Romans, proved to become historically significant in the evangelical revival that swept across western parts of the European continent at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1816 in Geneva and the following year in Montauban, he explained Paul's letter to the Romans to groups of young seminarians.

Converted from liberalism to biblical faith, these seminarians in Switzerland and France became the leaders of the Reveil that moved from Switzerland to France to Belgium to the Netherlands. In the Netherlands it greatly influenced Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876), spiritual mentor of Abraham

Kuyper, by changing him from an enlightenment liberal to a radical confessor of Christ in all of life.

Although, like Groen van Prinsterer in Holland and Wilberforce in England, Robert Haldane sensed something of the decadent spirit of the French Revolution, he assumed (unlike Groen van Prinsterer) a pro-French stance during this tumultuous period in Western history. In addition, his *Evidences and Authority of Divine Revelation* clearly indicate his uncritical acceptance of Socratic thinking and rationalistic scholasticism.

Despite this compromise with ideas and policies which they sought to counteract in church life, both churchmen played a crucial role in calling numerous Christians back to the basic principles of the Christian faith. They failed to stress *all* the rudiments of the Gospel, however, and they did not relate them to the critical issues in European culture at that time, including the industrial exploitation of the masses and colonial domination of non-Western countries.

As author of this biography, Alexander Haldane was still too close to his father and uncle to sense the limitations in their views. He endorsed the well-intended but simplistic and dualistic worldview of his father and uncle.

The decision of the Banner of Truth Trust to reprint this extensive biography, nearly one hundred and forty years after its first publication in 1852, is an unfortunate one if it is intended to encourage in our post-colonial era the kind of privatistic and dualistic view of reality these men espoused. The decision is laudatory, however, if its intent is to provide us with a window through which we can obtain a good glimpse of the unique role played by these two Scotsmen in the nineteenth-century Reveil of Western Europe.

Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, by George M. Marsden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans) 1991. 201 pages, paperback, \$12.95. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

Is Reformed Christianity evangelical? It depends on whom you ask within the Reformed movement. In fact, it may depend on what time of day you ask. Within

the span of no more than two sentences I will notice myself speaking of Reformed Christianity as evangelical, and then, almost as if I have forgotten what

I just said, I will criticize the evangelical movement, and do it in such a way that I define it as distinctly non-Reformed. I hear myself saying: "Yes, we are Bible-believing Christians. We believe that salvation is based upon the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. We believe in the importance of evangelism and missions. We believe in the importance of living spiritually transformed lives. But we are not like those evangelicals."

Evangelicalism does that to you. Of course, the problem is largely one of definition. What is evangelical Christianity? Well, Marsden's little book promises to help. The book is made up of essays published during the 1980s, and has been pulled together in order to function as a college or seminary introduction to the history of fundamentalist and evangelical religion in America. While each chapter is an adaptation from other sources, they do hold together as a focused introduction to the history of evangelicalism.

The first two chapters offer a quick overview of that history. Since the first chapter ends at 1930, and the second begins there, you might think of the two chapters as a precis of Marsden's *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (1980) (which ended roughly at 1925) and its sequel, *Reforming Fundamentalism* (1987). In the years following the success of *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, Marsden was frequently asked to expand upon one aspect or another within fundamentalist or evangelical history. Chapters 3 through 7 are the products of such expansions. The subjects here range from evangelical political involvement to common sense realistic epistemology, from creation science to the legacy of J. Gresham Machen. What makes each chapter work is Marsden's careful shaping of his material in such a way that each successive subject becomes a complementary lens through which evangelicalism can be seen and understood.

So what's an evangelical? The association with fundamentalism helps here for Marsden, for he typically defines the one in terms of the other. In *Reforming Fundamentalism* he spoke of an evangelical as a fundamentalist with a college education. Here he defines a fundamentalist as an evangelical "who is angry about something" (1). Maybe that doesn't help, except to state that a college education makes one more tolerant toward cultural change and a bit more realistic about the historical possibilities within a pluralistic society. Quite frankly, defining evangelicalism is difficult. It is, after all, not a denomination or religious organization. It is more of a religious movement or, one might say, an ethos. Rather than offer static, one-dimensional definitions, Marsden prefers to look at a broad coalition of

denominations and movements and their relationship to historical situations and events.

Because evangelicalism is an extremely diverse group of subcultures, movements, denominations, and responses—Marsden actually speaks of fourteen different varieties of evangelicalism (110). We ought not to be surprised that it is almost impossible to define without using terminology such as "coalition," "kaleidoscope," and "polychromatic." Evangelicalism includes the holiness churches, pentecostals, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, black churches of all traditions, fundamentalists, pietist groups, Reformed and Lutheran confessionalists, Anabaptists, the Bible church movement, and some Episcopalians. It has been deeply affected by American civil religion, Jacksonianism, revivalism, the holiness crusades, premillennialist dispensationalism, evolutionism, higher criticism, common sense realism, ecclesiastical separatism, the social gospel, creation science, inerrancy, televangelism, Protestant Zionism, Puritanism, and secularization.

The Reformed love-hate relationship with evangelicalism is fully understandable, given the paradoxical nature of evangelicalism. Marsden notes that evangelicalism is intensely individualistic. One of its most striking features is its "general disregard for the institutional church" (81). The evangelical view of the church is nominalistic. The church is nothing more than a voluntaristic collection of individuals, who are themselves the fundamental unity of meaning. Yet for all its emphasis upon the individual, evangelicalism can also be extremely authoritarian and tied to tradition. On the one hand, evangelicalism is primitivistically backward looking. On the other hand, it is especially well-suited to the technological strand of modern culture. Evangelicalism is often otherworldly and privatistic in its understanding of the gospel, but it can also appear intensely patriotic or show a real concern for the moral and political welfare of this world. Evangelical religion certainly has its subjectivist and anti-intellectual elements, but it is also typified by an emphasis upon right thinking and doctrinal purity (110-121). In short, evangelicalism is as hard to define as a group of friends who come from very different backgrounds, have had different life experiences, and have different interests and hobbies. Rather than seek a single key, a thread that runs throughout all its disparate parts and manifestations, we might with Marsden admit that evangelicalism is a bit unwieldy. It is always slipping away before the analyst is able to define it. Thus evangelicalism is more of a patchwork of historical responses and communities than a single mosaic of complementary parts.

Randall Balmer made a crucial mistake in his recent book *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (1989). Balmer attempted to organize and define evangelicalism under the notion of cultural retreat. He typified evangelicalism as a movement that sees the world about it as operating by different norms and working in different ways than its own. Thus, the evangelical response is to escape to some safe haven, to a monastic cocoon in which the believer is free to live out his own private vision. Marsden is certainly cognizant of that strand within evangelical piety, but he is also aware that evangelicalism has a tradition of social and political involvement, and that is a strand which gets considerable attention in the book. The reader will not get a one-dimensional or simplistic analysis from Marsden; he's too good a scholar for that.

Marsden's book should be required reading for every

student in a Christian college. The story of evangelicalism tells us about ourselves. It sheds historical light upon our responses to the culture about us. The Reformed ship sails in an evangelical sea, whether we like it or not. We would do well to have some understanding of those waters. The immigrant Reformed movement came to North America after the evangelical ethos was already firmly ensconced and had already forced its own shape upon the American Presbyterian tradition—our closest cousin in the North American context. Because we have many of the same allegiances, the Reformed tradition has joined hands with the evangelical movement at many points. But we also need to be aware that the evangelical sea has frequent storms, hidden whirlpools, and strange currents, and many of its inlets and apparently peaceful and inviting bays are far too shallow for the Reformed vessel. Is the Reformed church evangelical? Yes, and um, no.

Topical Analysis of the Bible, by Walter A. Elwell (ed.), (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1991. 894 pages. \$39.95. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

We live in an age in which computers can do truly marvelous things. The entire Bible can be entered onto a hard disk and with the touch of a button you can find every reference to Jerusalem. Unfortunately that very same technology can be used to generate products of questionable worth. You can just as easily type in "sanctification," print out the verses in which the word appears, and then believe that you have in your hand everything the Bible has to say about the life of faith. That's pretty much what you have in this work. Think of it as a doctrinalistic concordance, or better yet—a reduction of the Bible to a systematic theology generated by computer. But perhaps the best characterization is to describe the book as a list of 35,000 proof texts. This is the Bible treated as a vast, unorganized storehouse of data, eternal nuggets of truth that can be decontextualized, atomized, and placed into tidy, watertight, rationalist compartments.

The doctrinalistic agenda is clear from the start. The introduction characterizes the work as an arrangement of the "theological content of the Bible" into "a set of recognizable topics" which presents a list of "biblical passages that speak about each of those topics" (ix). If the Bible is a doctrinal textbook, it is a pretty poor one. There is nothing rationally systematic about Scripture. Does God know what he's doing? Obviously not if we think of the Bible as raw data for the development of a systematic theology, for the bone structure of Scripture is not doctrine but narrative history. At its most basic level the Bible is about

the mighty deeds of God in the history of his creation. The Bible is not a jigsaw puzzle requiring our doctrinalist reconstruction of its teachings as one might color code a file or call up references to "Hades" on a computer screen. A biblical text cannot be arbitrarily taken from its context and turned into an independent, eternal verity. Meaning and reference always go together. The form and content of Scripture are divinely intended and complementary, and therefore not to be separated. The narrative story of Scripture is not at our disposal to transform into a more rationally palatable collection of individual verses cut loose from all historical particularization and contextualization, and then reorganized under doctrinalist headings as if it sprang (or should have sprung) that way from the mind of God.

The Bible is about events, not doctrinalist categories. The gospel is that God delivered his people through the waters of the sea. The gospel is that God was in Christ—in the manger; in the temple; on the Mount; in the Garden; in the courtroom before Pilate, at Golgotha—reconciling the world to himself. The bite of the gospel is lost in the dispassionate folding, spindling, and mutilating of the Scriptures into rationalist loci.

The organization and theological headings are almost as unfortunate as the approach to Scripture found in the proof text underpinnings of the work. But to deal with the theology generated in the book would require more time and space than the work merits. Suffice it