

Contending without Contentiousness: A Paradigm for Polemics in Early Fundamentalism

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Synopsis: Is it possible to fervently attack opponents and still have a gracious spirit? In contending for the Faith, can a Christian leader be both sympathetic and severe, compassionate and confrontational, and retain a Christ-like witness? Early fundamentalists thought it not only possible but necessary.

Spirituality is inseparably tied to sanctification; indeed, it can be argued that they are one and the same. For example, in Romans 12:1–2 we find sanctification and spirituality intrinsically linked: the presentation of the believer’s life as a living and holy sacrifice *is* his spiritual service. Note that in order to prove the will of God, one must be transformed mentally while simultaneously refusing to be conformed to the spirit of the age. To early fundamentalists sanctification or spirituality amounted to holiness which required both godly living and condemnation of any moral or doctrinal evil that would compromise it. Fundamentalists believed this two-fold approach was essential for evangelistic integrity in order to promote and safeguard the gospel. To be devoted to the message of Jesus Christ and yet give Christian recognition to those who impugn that message by habitual worldliness or false theology was simply unconscionable for them.

My thesis is that holiness or spirituality includes two complimentary components—personal compassion and pointed criticism. If these appear to be antithetical to each other, one only need observe the ministry of Jesus Christ to note their essential compatibility. Compare for example Matthew 9:36–37 with 12:34–37. Jesus had compassion for the distressed multitudes without a spiritual shepherd, but only contempt for the Pharisees whom he calls a “brood of vipers.” We may also compare 15:32 with 16:6, where Matthew contrasts Jesus’ compassionate feeding of the four thousand with a warning against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. To be spiritual is to be Christ-like, which means exhibiting either sympathy or severity as the occasion requires. It involves a sense of pity for the pathetic sinner and a sense of indignation against the self-righteous opponents of the Truth. For the Apostles this meant evidencing the fruit of the Spirit *by* contending for the Faith without being contentious. Peter and Paul were constrained by the love of Christ to preach the gospel and concurrently defend it against those disobedient Christians and false teachers who were profaning it. Similarly, the Protestant reformers reclaimed the true gospel from a corrupt ecclesiastical system they denounced as ruinous to apostolic Christianity. In much the same way, fundamentalists believed they were called of God to do both evangelize and “apologize” in the context of a menacing liberalism.

CONTENDING VERSUS CONTENTIOUSNESS

Historian George Marsden defined a fundamentalist as an “evangelical who is angry about something.” He then went on to give a more precise meaning to that phrase: “an American fundamentalist is an evangelical who is militant in opposition to liberal theology in the churches or to changes in cultural values or mores.”¹ The first part of this definition is often the belittling stereotype of the fundamentalist by the religious and political left. Yet there is truth in the statement: fundamentalists are angry, or more appropriately, righteously indignant, over the invasion of infidelity into Christian institutions and the attack by liberal activists on Christian values and symbols. However, what has caused antipathy for fundamentalism is the failure by some fundamentalists to recognize and observe the difference between contending and contentiousness. But it also includes the failure of critics to note the difference by suggesting that militant outspoken opposition is in itself contentious. Both positions fail to distinguish New Testament distinctions.

For example, Jude makes it clear that Christians should “earnestly contend for the faith” (v. 3) against “certain persons” (apostates) who have secretly crept into the church reviling the things of God (vv. 4, 10). Indeed, Jude pronounces a curse on them (vv. 11–13)! This is very strong language, appropriate and characteristic of apostolic denunciation of evil men and false views (Acts 8:20–22; 2 Pet 2; 2 Tim 3:1–8; Gal 1:6–9; 1 Tim 1:20). “Contend” is the translation of a Greek term from the *agōn* word group and carries with it the ideas of full expenditure of energy, struggle against various adversities and antagonists, and suffering even to the point of martyrdom (see Lk 13:24; 1 Cor 9:25; 1 Thess 2:2; and 1 Tim 6:12). Originally, the word meant stadium where fights took place; it then came to denote the struggles which took place within the stadium. By extension, it included other conflicts between antagonists. Militancy, therefore, is bound up in the concept. However, a contentious spirit receives severe criticism in the NT. Contentiousness (Gk *eritheia*), which embodies the ideas of strife, rivalry, and dispute (2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:20), is most often translated by its central meaning, selfish ambition (Rom 2:8; Phil 1:17; 2:3; Ja 3:14, 16).

The differences are plain: while both words convey the idea of striving, contending has to do with fighting for a worthy cause greater than oneself; contentiousness on the other hand involves selfish quarreling for one’s own view, often at the cost of truth and unity. These two should not be confused. What is at stake is the gospel. Petty differences or personal opinions are by comparison unimportant. In the NT, whether it is a matter of reproof, rebuke, or exhortation (2 Tim 4:2), the focus is the gospel and whether it is being advanced in clarity and purity or whether it is being compromised. But when one does contend honestly and forthrightly for gospel truth, he must expect opposition from those who are not sympathetic with it. This has often been the plight of fundamentalists even as it has been the case with all defenders of the faith since the time of Christ and the Apostles. But in contending for the faith, one should rise above personal vendetta, acrimony, and distortion of the truth. The testimony of Christ is never advanced by such an approach, but is sullied when it should be sanctified. What is needed is a bold proclamation of the truth with a corresponding denunciation of error.

¹*Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 1.

Uncompromising militancy has been the hallmark, probably *the* distinguishing characteristic, of historic fundamentalism. Early fundamentalists believed their movement was a resurgence of biblical apologetics, begun at Pentecost, renewed with the Protestant Reformation, and answering in the late nineteenth century to the new enemy of modernism. They took seriously the responsibility to be combative in the apostolic sense of contending for the faith, that is, apologetical of the truth and polemical of error. To be spiritual meant to be unequivocally militant. They took to heart the admonition of Scottish preacher and hymn writer Horatius Bonar (1808–1889) who wrote that

Christianity...does not fear to speak the stern word of condemnation against error, nor to raise its voice against surrounding evils, under the pretext it is not of this world; it does not shrink from giving honest reproof, lest it come under the charge of displaying an unchristian spirit. It calls sin *sin*, on whomsoever it is found, and would rather risk the accusation of being actuated by a bad spirit than not discharge an explicit duty.... The religion of both the Old and New Testaments is marked by fervent outspoken testimonies against evil. To speak smooth things in such a case may be sentimentalism, but it is not Christianity.²

As Bonar suggests, reproof is sometimes necessary for correction of an erring brother. The classic example is Paul's confrontation³ of Peter in Galatians 2. Peter was rebuked for conceding the Judaizers' requirement of circumcision for salvation by separating from Gentile Christians. It was clearly a matter of compromising the gospel (v. 14 ff). What's more, Peter was leading others astray by his hypocritical behavior (v. 13). Paul's confrontation was open and candid. There is not the least hint of meanness or vindictiveness, but neither was he about to soft-pedal the issue. He was contending for the Faith without being contentious.

CONTENDING AND COMPASSION⁴

It is understandable that fundamentalism would be defined by its militancy since it arose in opposition to liberalism. It was portrayed as a titanic struggle for control of Christian denominations in America in the great Fundamentalist/Modernist Controversy. But this portraiture often became a caricature, which overlooked the humanitarian side of fundamentalism, illustrated by its compassionate church and parachurch ministries, its missionary outreach, and, above all, its evangelistic zeal. A classic example of this approach to Christian spirituality, an exemplar of early fundamentalism, was A. C. Dixon, a man who held in sanctified equilibrium these two Christ-like behaviors of vehement opposition to ungodliness and

²*God's Way of Holiness* (reprint ed., Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1999), p. 114.

³Paul opposed (*antestēn*) Peter. The verb means to "set oneself against" or "to resist" (cf. Rom 9:19; 13:2; 2 Tim 4:15; Eph 6:13), and in nearly every instance in the NT it has to do with resisting evil.

⁴Notice I did not say "contending *with* compassion." It is difficult to imagine Christ expressing compassion toward the Pharisees when he called them whited sepulchers or toward the money-changers as he drove them from the temple. But yet Christ retained the quality of compassion as he did so—toward those whom these enemies of God were violating.

compassionate concern for needy souls. In his eulogy of Dixon, fundamentalist leader William Bell Riley (1861–1947) wrote, “If you followed his fifty years of ministry straight thru, you would find in him a man whose spirit was as uncompromising...as was his disposition by nature, kindly and sweet.”⁵ Riley recognized, as did many others, these two crucial expressions of spirituality cohering in Dixon—one pietistical, the other polemical.

Amzi Clarence Dixon (1854–1925), Baptist leader, pastor, author, and international Bible conference speaker, was an outstanding promoter of the fundamentalist movement during its early periods of conception (1876–1910) and denominational conflict (1910–1930).⁶ Something of a microcosm of early fundamentalism,⁷ Dixon represented the movement during its transition from militant nonconformity to ecclesiastical separatism. He modeled the fundamentalist ideals of personal piety, evangelistic zeal, and a fervent disdain for what he termed the “vagaries of modernism.”⁸

Called to the ministry under his father’s preaching near his hometown of Shelby, North

⁵“A. C. Dixon, America’s Great Minister,” *Baptist Beacon*, September 1925, p. 13.

⁶Historians have used various dates for early fundamentalism but are in general agreement that the last quarter of the nineteenth century, beginning with the Swampscott, Massachusetts Bible conference (1876), provided the theological backdrop for the subsequent period of denominational struggles over modernism. The second period culminated in the departure of fundamentalists from mainline denominations to form their own associations, such as the Independent Fundamental Churches of America in 1930, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches in 1932, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936. The intervening date of 1910 saw the inauguration of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, which clearly identified fundamentalism as an intellectual and theological, not merely a social, movement. Bruce Shelley writes, “The movement was rooted in genuine theological concern for apostolic and Reformational doctrine.... Fundamentalism should be understood primarily as an attempt to protect the essential doctrines...of the Christian faith from the eroding effects of modern thought” (*New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. s.v. “Fundamentalism,” p. 396).

⁷See David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1986), pp. 222–25. Beale portrays Dixon as a contending fundamentalist until “the midnight hour of his life, then virtually gave up the militant stance” (p. 225). This is an understandable assumption in view of Dixon’s resignation from the Baptist Bible Union in 1925. However, evidence indicates that, although Dixon abruptly left one of fundamentalism’s most militant organizations, he did not defect from the movement. George Dollar incorrectly states that Dixon “deserted [fundamentalism] because of the stigmas and battles of separatism” (*A History of Fundamentalism in America* [Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1973], p. 317). On the contrary, Dixon maintained a strong defense of the faith until his death five months later. See my “Examination of the Apologetical Ministry of Amzi Clarence Dixon” (Ph.D. dissertation, Bob Jones University, 1988), pp. 409–29.

⁸A popular treatment of Dixon’s life and ministry may be found in Helen C. Dixon’s *A. C. Dixon: A Romance of Preaching* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1931). Dixon’s sermons and papers are found in the A. C. Dixon Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, hereafter cited as Dixon Collection.

Carolina, Dixon attended Wake Forest College where he graduated valedictorian in 1874.⁹ He then entered Southern Seminary located at the time in Greenville, South Carolina. Before assuming the senior pastorate of Moody Memorial Church in 1906, Dixon led several Baptist churches, North and South, and established a national reputation for dynamic preaching and trenchant exposés of a diversity of men and movements he considered inimical to biblical Christianity. He attacked Roman Catholicism, liquor and licentiousness, gambling, the theater, Henry Ward Beecher’s liberalism, Robert Ingersoll’s agnosticism, Christian Science, Unitarianism, and higher criticism of the Bible. Later he would level his polemical gun at probably the most despised enemy of American fundamentalism—Darwinian evolution. Dixon’s articles appeared in his own church publications and religious periodicals, such as the *Baltimore Baptist* and the *Religious Herald*. Beginning in 1908, he wrote syndicated columns appearing in a thousand newspapers across the country, including the *Baltimore Sun*, *Boston Daily Herald*, and the *Chicago Daily News*. For years Dixon’s name headlined the roster of nearly every prominent Bible conference center in America from Northfield (MA) to Ridgecrest (NC). His twenty-five books of sermons and lectures became very popular in spreading the doctrines of fundamentalism. And his influence extended internationally when he assumed the pastorate of the famous Metropolitan (Spurgeon’s) Tabernacle in London (1911–1919),¹⁰ and became editor of the controversial periodical *Sword and Trowel*. As an acknowledged evangelical leader, A. C. Dixon was well-qualified to edit what became a doctrinal landmark in fundamentalist apologetics—*The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (1910–1915).¹¹ Dixon was responsible for the first five (of twelve) booklets, the contents of which expressed his concern to defend those doctrines coming under attack by liberal professors in leading denominational seminaries, such as the University of Chicago Divinity School.¹² The articles Dixon chose to include were an attempt to give doctrinal credibility and cohesion to evangelical Christianity in its opposition to liberalism.

POLEMICS AS A FORM OF SPIRITUALITY

Dixon was a gracious Christian, but he was not a sentimentalist. The proof of his piety lay in its defense. If the faith once delivered to the saints was worth dying for, surely it must be worth fighting for. The *Baltimore Sun*, normally critical of fundamentalism, virtually described the movement when it honored Dixon as

⁹Trustees of the college invited Dixon to become president in 1882, but he opted for the pastorate of Immanuel Baptist Church in Baltimore.

¹⁰Dixon has been the only American to serve as senior pastor of this church. A. T. Pierson was interim pastor (1891–1893) during Spurgeon’s illness with Bright’s disease.

¹¹According to Baptist historian Albert H. Newman, in his day Dixon was one of the leading premillennialists for anti-higher critical views of the Bible. Newman stated that “the most eminent living Baptist representative of this type of religious thought and work in America is A. C. Dixon...who...has become widely known and highly influential throughout America and... Great Britain” (“Recent Changes in the Theology of the Baptists,” *American Journal of Theology* 10 [October 1906]: 603).

¹²See my article “A. C. Dixon, Chicago Liberals, and *The Fundamentals*, *DBSJ* (Spring 1996): 113–134.

a born fighter; he was one of the most aggressive leaders of the church militant. No passivist he in his domain. The dictionary contained for him no such word as compromise. But he did not content himself merely with standing firm on what he believed to be the unchangeable foundations of the “faith once delivered to the saints.” He sallied forth on every occasion to the attack. He was spiritually a man of war from his youth up, and he sniffed the battle from afar off. He asked and gave no quarter to those he considered the enemies of Christianity and morality. In whatever guise they came—as modernists, evolutionists,....spiritualists, or emissaries of alcohol—he was waiting for them with a battle-ax that knew no brother.¹³

Aside from a journalistic flair for the dramatic, the writer was essentially correct; Dixon was a fighter. We may evaluate Dixon’s polemical methodology in three categories to determine its consistency with spirituality.

Biblical and Moral Positions

First of all, the *positions* he attacked were, he believed, already judged false by Scripture, either in precept or principle. He censured Roman Catholicism for its doctrine of papal infallibility, because only the Bible, not the pope, is absolutely authoritative. He also objected to Petrine succession, works salvation, Mariolatry, and false miracles because these all contradict Scripture. Dixon said that the portrait of the papacy is not found in the Apostle Peter but in 2 Thessalonians 2:2–8, where Paul describes the antichrist. He strongly denounced Rome as a purveyor of doctrinal corruption and superstition:

It is difficult for me to speak coolly. Yet I confess, when I think of the seven millions of Catholics in this country...[who] are led from faith in Christ to put faith in baptism, faith in penance, in purgatory, in holy shrines and wells, in relics and in saints, my soul is stirred within me.... I plead for the honor of the Holy Spirit, who is fearfully dishonored by all this pretended wonder-working power in bones and hairs, and pieces of garments.¹⁴

What is the best way for the Christian to deal with the papacy? Dixon asked. “Consume it with the spirit of God’s mouth” [the Bible], “and wait for its complete destruction” at the coming of Christ.¹⁵

To fundamentalists, the most serious threat to biblical Christianity was evolution. This was public enemy number one. Dixon was one of the first early fundamentalists to call attention to its dangers, and frequently preached and wrote against it. He joined two early fundamentalist organizations—the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA, 1919)¹⁶ and the

¹³“The Rev. Dr. A. C. Dixon,” *Baltimore Sun*, 15 June 1925, p. 44.

¹⁴Dixon, *The True and the False* (Baltimore: Wharton, Barron & Co., 1890), p. 68.

¹⁵Dixon, “Roman Catholicism in the Light of the Bible,” *Baltimore Baptist*, 1 March 1888, p. 1.

¹⁶It was the WCFA that sponsored the prosecution at the famous Scopes Trial in the summer of 1925. See my “William Jennings Bryan and the Scopes Trial: A Fundamentalist Perspective,” *DBSJ* 4 (Fall 1999): 51–83.

Baptist Bible Union (BBU, 1923)—in order to combat Darwinism. To Dixon there was no greater menace to Christianity and to civilized society than this biological hypothesis.¹⁷ He objected to evolution on the grounds that it contradicted the scriptural account of creation and it produced a myriad of evils. The latter included the Nietzsche doctrine of “survival of the fittest,” which fundamentalists believed produced World War I, and higher criticism of the Bible, which made Scripture the product of human engineering. Evolution was not only unscriptural but unscientific, since its chief premises rest on speculation.¹⁸ Furthermore, evolution is pagan and immoral, since it suggests that man was not created in the image of God, but developed from a savage. “If man came up from the beast through the jungle,” Dixon wrote,

sin is “embryonic goodness,” “righteousness in process of formation,” even a search after good; of course, such sin has no guilt and may be condoned, if not coddled. Such a delusion makes it easy to believe that sin has no existence and all things, even theft, falsehood and murder are good, because there is no evil in the world.¹⁹

Dixon believed only one course lay open for him and other fundamentalists: “It remains for those who believe and love the Bible to mobilize and fight the battle for the truth which has given to the world its passion for liberty and humanity.”²⁰

Dixon not only criticized what he believed were false systems, but he also rebuked false teachers. When a leading Baptist periodical criticized him for using his pulpit as a forum for attacking other people,²¹ Dixon conceded that

a preacher has no right to denounce from the pulpit an individual with whom he has a mere

¹⁷Fundamentalists recognized other types of evolution, such as those proposed by Thomas H. Huxley and Herbert Spencer. Yet they believed Darwinism was basic to these others and was the most pervasive and dangerous. Fundamentalists refused to admit that evolution was even a theory, let alone a science; they preferred to call it an unprovable hypothesis. See comments of the most popular anti-evolution exponent of the 1920s, William Jennings Bryan, *Seven Questions in Dispute* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1924), pp. 153–54.

¹⁸See excerpts of an anti-evolution sermon in “Dr. Dixon Claims Evolution Started in Unscientific Age,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, 31 December 1922, p. 5. Willard B. Gatewood, Jr. published this message as an example of the fundamentalist anti-evolution campaign (*Controversy in the Twenties: Fundamentalism, Modernism, and Evolution* [Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969], pp. 117–124). The message contains all of Dixon’s basic arguments against evolution. Upon reading it, creation science expert, Henry M. Morris, replied, “While the points in the sermon could be updated to some degree and certainly could be further amplified in terms of the developments during World War II and later, the basic approach is very sound. I would find nothing significant to question nor critique in it” (Henry M Morris letter to the author, 14 October 1987).

¹⁹Dixon, “Down from God or Up From the Beast?” *Sword and the Trowel*, February 1913, pp. 113–14.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹See the *Religious Herald*, 31 March 1892, p. 2.

personal difference; but when that individual poses before the community or world as the representative of any great evil and tries to promote it as against God and the Church, and good morals, the pulpit...has a right to proclaim him a public enemy.²²

This principle Dixon followed quite consistently in attacking others, such as the liberal professors of Chicago University's divinity school for teaching higher criticism,²³ Henry Vedder (professor of Crozer Seminary) for his shallow thinking about the Bible,²⁴ John Clifford (president of the British Baptist Union) for questioning the inerrancy of Scripture,²⁵ or William Louis Poteat (president of Wake Forest College) for equivocating on orthodoxy. Some of these men were highly esteemed, but Dixon would not allow that factor to prevent him from denouncing their errors.

When Poteat (1856–1938) delivered a message before the North Carolina Baptist State Convention in 1922, titled, “Christianity and Enlightenment,” Dixon took issue with him. He wrote Poteat asking him to answer criticisms he had heard about liberalism in Wake Forest and to explain his rather vague statements about Christian doctrine. Where did Poteat stand on the fundamentals, such as the deity of Christ, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, and bodily resurrection?²⁶ Dixon's two-page inquiry received a two-paragraph response that hedged on Dixon's questions. Poteat wrote, “I haven't time now nor do I feel disposed to write a theological

²²Dixon, “Our Signal Station,” *Baptist*, 9 March 1892, p. 1.

²³Dixon assailed the liberal documentary hypothesis in a popular sermon titled, “Myths and Moths of Criticism.” The myths were the reasons the higher critics gave for “errors” in the Bible; the moths were the actual errors of the critics which were eating away at the fabric of inerrancy. For his refutation, Dixon relied on the work of Princeton Seminary professor William Henry Green. See Dixon, *Myths and Moths of Criticism: An Examination of the Moths and Their Doings, The Origin of the Myths* (Los Angeles: BIOLA Book Room, n.d.); and the works of Green: *Unity of the Book of Genesis* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), and *Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895). Green carried on a prolonged debate with William Rainey Harper in the pages of *Hebraica* (1888 to 1890), which Harper edited. Green called the documentary hypothesis the *reductio ad absurdum*. Cf. Norman H. Maring, “Baptist and Changing Views of the Bible, 1865–1918 (Part II),” *Foundations* 1 (October 1958): 31.

²⁴After reading Vedder's *The Fundamentals of Christianity: A Study of the Teachings of Jesus and Paul* (1922), Dixon wrote *Laws of the Watchman-Examiner* that it was one of the strongest books against Christianity that he had ever read. See Dixon, “The Fundamentals of Modernism,” *Watchman-Examiner*, 18 January 1923, pp. 77–78.

²⁵The “grand old man” of the British Baptist Union for over 65 years, Clifford posed as an evangelical. In reality he was a liberal whom Dixon exposed in the religious press as “a ‘modernist’ with a flavor of orthodoxy” (“Some English Baptists and ‘Modernism,’” *Western Recorder*, 24 November 1921, p. 1). Dixon took issue specifically with Clifford's *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (1899). For a summation of the latter's liberal theological views, see Ernest S. Owens, Jr., “The Role of John Clifford in the Life and Thought of English Baptists” (Th.D. dissertation, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1960), pp. 106–119.

²⁶Dixon letter to Poteat, 13 January 1923, Dixon Collection.

essay in answer to your specific inquiries.”²⁷ Evidence indicates that Dixon’s concerns were well-founded. A perusal of Poteat’s addresses and writings leaves the impression that he either vacillated on or denied nearly every question of orthodoxy Dixon raised.²⁸ Poteat, an avid Darwinist, dismissed the historic Christian fundamentals as “baggage” which inhibits intellectual growth.²⁹

When it came to fundamental Christian doctrine, evasion or equivocation indicated doubt or denial to Dixon. Persons of whatever rank who posed as Christian but refused to accept the claims of biblical orthodoxy were deservedly open to rebuke. Doctrinal or moral principle should always govern polemics, but it was practically impossible to divorce the criticism of error from the one making it.³⁰

Honorable Purposes

Second, in Dixon’s polemical methodology, his *purposes* appear to be honorable. He determined to assail an opponent only if he believed him to be an immediate danger to the spiritual or moral welfare of others, especially his own congregation. In order to be fair in his treatment of any false system, he would make himself thoroughly acquainted with its positions before arguing against it and rendering a judgment. If called for, he did not hesitate to use direct confrontation but without personal acrimony. For example, Dixon read that William Rainey Harper (1856–1906), president of the newly established University of Chicago (1891) and liberal advocate of higher criticism, said that the book of Isaiah contained errors. Dixon wrote him to ask his meaning. The response was evasive: “I do not care to put myself in writing on this subject, for I have found to my cost, no matter how explicit I may be, it is easily misunderstood.”³¹ Dixon admonished that it would be better for Harper to say nothing at all about “mistakes” in the Bible if he could not explain himself. Then he challenged his readers to take a clear position:

Should men who hold views of Scripture, right or wrong, which they cannot explain...be teachers of young men in our colleges? The issue has been squarely made. Are Baptists ready to accept the view that the Bible contains errors? If so, let them rally to the support of Prof. Harper. If not, let

²⁷Poteat letter to Dixon, 19 January 1923, Dixon Collection.

²⁸For evidence of this, see George McLeod Bryan, “The Educational, Religious, and Social Thought of William Louis Poteat as Expressed in His Writings, Including Unpublished Notes and Addresses” (Masters Thesis, Wake Forest College, 1944), pp. 93–95, 103–04, 109–11, 114–15, 120–21, 123, 125–33.

²⁹See “Baptist College President Attacks Fundamentalism,” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 7 May 1925, clipping in Dixon Collection.

³⁰Mrs. Helen Dixon mistakenly states that her husband “preferred to use the method of direct dealing rather than the public pillory” (*Romance of Preaching*, p. 309). Yet Dixon routinely used both.

³¹Quoted by Dixon in “Our Signal Station,” *Baltimore Baptist*, 11 November 1891, p. 1.

them speak, but in no uncertain tones.³²

In another incident, Chicago professors wrote in a theological journal objecting to God's judgment of the Old Testament Canaanites. Dixon replied that God had every right to destroy them.

The trouble with the university professors is...they have ceased to believe in a God [who is]...a righteous ruler...while they think only of a God who is the creature of man's God-making capacity.... The remedy for the...professors...is a vision of a God greater than themselves who is sovereign ruler...and who does not feel compelled to give account of Himself to them, but will expect them to give account to Him.³³

Dixon's purpose in exposing these liberal critics of the Bible was to warn Baptists against sending young people to a school that would undermine their faith. One purpose for attacking the Church of Rome was to reveal her errors to Catholics themselves and admonish them to turn from superstition to the Bible: "God speaks through this inspired Book. Listen to his word, whatever others may say against it. Take the position that, while God is speaking, all councils and traditions must keep silence.... Turn from everything that is human to the Divine Word."³⁴

When Dixon arrived in Brooklyn to become pastor of the Hanson Place Baptist Church, he discovered that the liberalism of Henry Ward Beecher (1813–1887) and the agnosticism of Robert Ingersoll (1833–1899) had been undermining the beliefs of several members of his congregation. He therefore began a series of messages against their teachings, which created a storm in the East. The liberal press flayed him, Lyman Abbott, Beecher's successor at Plymouth Church (Brooklyn), labeled him an ignoramus, and even his brother Thomas attacked him for being "narrow-minded," writing that "A. C. Dixon's ignorance of Beecher is so profound it passes contempt—it is a joke. His attack, were it not ridiculous, would be a monstrosity without excuse."³⁵ As if this barrage of criticism were not enough, Ingersoll brought a \$5,000 libel suit against Dixon for accusing him of corrupting young people with obscene material.

But Dixon stayed the course, continuing to refute the false teachings of these men, such as Beecher's erroneous doctrine of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. He exclaimed, "The fatherhood of the devil needs to be emphasized," citing John 8:44. "A man cannot be a son of God and the son of the devil at the same time," he said.³⁶ Dixon's polemics took the form of lurid eloquence when he cited "Ingersollism" as

³²Dixon, "Our Signal Station," *Baltimore Baptist*, 2 July 1891, p. 1.

³³Dixon sermon, "Bible Ethics and University Professors," n.d., Dixon Collection. This message was quite probably preached at the Moody Memorial Church when Dixon was the pastor.

³⁴*The True and the False*, pp. 172–73.

³⁵Cited in the *Baltimore Baptist*, 9 July, 1891, p. 2.

³⁶Dixon, "Beecher as a Teacher," *Baltimore Baptist*, 9 July 1891, p. 2. See also, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 29 June 1891.

moral deformity covered with mental finery. It is stale hash made from putrid meat, served on a flowered dish. It is a vampire bat which fans its victim with wings of melodious words, while it sucks the life-blood from his moral and spiritual nature. It is a poisonous vine with gaudy flowers, whose odor is death.³⁷

The critics raged, but Dixon responded that there is “no reason to alter a word we said. We spoke the truth, and the God of truth will take care of it. Our greatest joy is pleasing him.... The fact that we have displeased others does not distress us. We pray for a heart as true and tender as the heart of Christ and for a skin as thick as the hide of a rhinoceros.”³⁸ This comment once again reflects the two-fold spirituality of this exemplar of early fundamentalism.

These contests, perhaps more than any other, earned Dixon the respect of conservative Christians world-wide. They realized that here is a courageous pastor who is willing to take on popular liberal icons and expose their errors without fear of recrimination. This recognition placed him at the forefront of militant fundamentalism to give impetus and direction to the movement as it later coalesced into an organized strategy to rid liberals from denominational institutions. The aggressiveness of fundamentalism is directly traceable to the polemics of early fundamentalists like A. C. Dixon.³⁹ However, he should not be blamed for the personal acrimony and unethical behavior of some fundamentalist leaders who followed him. Vindication of the truth mattered more to him than simply scoring points. Again, Dixon was concerned about contending without being contentious.

Sensible Principles

Third, the *principles* Dixon followed were a matter of common sense. For example, one technique he used was to juxtapose an ethical principle alongside a spiritual one to show how hopelessly flawed the reasoning of liberalism is. He declared,

If a man proclaims himself broad in his relation to the command, “Thou shalt not steal,” he is a thief; if broad on the command, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” he is a rake; if broad on the command, “Thou shalt not lie,” he is a liar. This is clear in relation to ethical law, but not so clear in relation to spiritual law. A man proclaims himself a broad, liberal theologian on the great fundamentals of Christianity, like the atonement, the new birth, the resurrection, retribution, and

³⁷Dixon, “Our Signal Station,” *Baptist*, 10 February 1892, p. 1.

³⁸Dixon editorial in the *Baltimore Baptist*, 16 July 1891, p. 2. Notice a common practice of using the editorial “we.”

³⁹I should add that, when the “dust” settled in Brooklyn, Thomas had to apologize for misspeaking, and Ingersoll dropped his lawsuit because of overwhelming evidence against him. For particulars see Helen Dixon, *A. C. Dixon: A Romance of Preaching*, pp. 128–30, and a firsthand newspaper account in the *New York World*, 14 February 1892.

his friends speak of him as an up-to-day thinker.⁴⁰

Many of the systems Dixon opposed he derided as irrational or pretentious. He often did this by contrasting them with the rationality of biblical truth. For example, it is quite illogical, he said, to deny miracles if one accepts certain divine premises.

The difference between reason and rationalism is, that reason minds its own business, and rationalism does not. Reason is the handmaid of faith.... We must accept the axioms of religion as we accept axioms in everything else, by faith. Given a God, given omnipotence, given the Holy Spirit, it is irrational not to believe in miracles or any manifestation of divine power. But reason is not God.⁴¹

Liberals, said Dixon, live in a fogbank of rationalistic doubt. They pretend to be spiritual but deny the essentials of spirituality, such as the new birth. They doubt the reality of the negative aspects of Christianity, such as sin and hell, and so avoid them. Dixon responded that, in their attempt to be compassionate, they were actually unkind. For example, peaching on hell, was not only a matter of affirming a fact, but of noting a practical necessity. Dixon explained,

A sight of future fires makes men seek to quench the present fires of sin that may be consuming them in soul and body. To suppress these severe truths in deference to the soft sentimentalism of liberal minds that reject the Bible and the facts of sin about them is not only unfaithfulness to God, but unkindness to the multitude, who need the restraining influence of fear.⁴²

Finally, it was a matter of common sense to demand that liberal professors leave Christian colleges founded by evangelicals. Dixon said, "The churches whose sons and daughters are being taught in these institutions have the right to demand that they go out."⁴³

Thus, in opposing theological and moral evils Dixon often relied on the power of logic to make his case. He trumpeted abstinence and prohibition along with other fundamentalist preachers, such as Billy Sunday, whose persuasive messages helped garner enough popular support to convince Congress to pass the Prohibition Amendment in 1919. Dixon stood firmly against the consumption and traffic of liquor for what he considered quite sensible reasons: (1) it destroys life and property, (2) it deprives communities of the labor of drunken husbands, and (3) it promotes criminal behavior. He wrote, "To say that well-nigh all crimes, most of the

⁴⁰Dixon, "The Bible in the Light of the Bible," *Bulletin of the Bible Union of China*, October 1922, p. 41.

⁴¹Dixon, "Remedy for Worldliness," *Proceedings of the Second Annual Baptist Autumnal Conference for the Discussion of Current Questions, The First Baptist Church, Boston, Mass., November 13, 14, 15, 1883* (Boston: Baptist Missionary Rooms, 1883), p. 96.

⁴²Dixon, "The Doctrine of Heaven and Hell," *Record of Christian Work*, 1906, p. 365.

⁴³Dixon sermon in *Winona Echoes: Winona Bible Conference Addresses 1921, Including Dr. Sol C. Dickey Memorial* (Warsaw, IN: Winona Publishing Society, Press of Reub. Williams and Sons, 1921), p. 86.

poverty,...and many diseases are caused by strong drink is to repeat what every man of ordinary intelligence knows. Now who are responsible for the ravages of this raging liquor traffic?...the drinkers.”⁴⁴ The saloon keeper should also be faulted, because he “takes the people’s money, and makes no return except in poverty, disease, and crime.”⁴⁵

In the context of another local church ministry in Boston, Dixon had to contend with two resident adversaries—Christian Science and Unitarianism. His first objection is that they were an obstacle to evangelism. He further argued that they are false to Scripture, and are grossly irrational systems. In a published sermon drawn from 1 Timothy 6:21, “Christian Science is an Apostacy [sic] from Science,” Dixon argued that the cult was neither Christian nor scientific. It is a two-fold apostasy because it denies the five senses which God has given to verify knowledge, and it degrades the Christ of the Bible by denying his deity and atoning work.⁴⁶ Unitarianism is likewise nonsensical for calling itself Christian when it denies an essential distinctive of Christianity—the deity of Christ. “The trouble with Unitarianism,” Dixon argued, “is that it has exalted reason without following the dictates of reason.” If Christ is only a good moral man, but not God, as the Unitarians claim, then they are “in the position of having to prove that a good man can at the same time be a deceiver—a most unreasonable thing!”⁴⁷ Dixon concluded that both Christian Science and Unitarianism are a revolt against the fundamentals of Christianity.⁴⁸ We may note from his argumentation that for Dixon to be spiritual-minded was to be sensible, that is, to understand the significance of truth in contrast to falsehood and be able to make a proper evaluation of them. This would be in perfect keeping with the process Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 2:10–16. The error Dixon made, however, was in assuming that most people would have the spiritual faculties to grasp and accept the truth while rejecting the error. Spiritual truth can only be properly processed by the spiritual-minded.

If, as Dixon and his fellow fundamentalists believed, the majority of Christians in America and Baptist missionaries on foreign fields were sensible Bible-believers, how is it that liberals were winning the battles? Dixon had a plausible answer for this:

Ninety per cent of the Baptists of the world, I verily believe, reject the myths of Modernism, which make man, the home, the state, the church, the Bible and even Christ mere evolutions from the beast through the Jungle, rather than creations and revelations from God. But

⁴⁴Dixon, “Who Are Responsible?” *Baltimore Baptist*, 20 October 1887, p. 1.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶Dixon, *The Christian Science Delusion* (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Assn., 1903), pp. 8, 9, 17. Of the several cults Dixon addressed, Christian Science received his strongest and most elaborate criticism. Among other books and articles he published against it are *Is Christian Science Humbug?* (Boston: James H. Earle, 1901), *How Christian Science Contradicts the Bible* (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Assn., 1903), and “Christian Science,” *Sword and the Trowel*, May 1912, p. 204.

⁴⁷Dixon letter to the *Boston Daily Herald*, 17 October 1905, p. 1 (typescript in Dixon Collection).

⁴⁸*Christian Science Delusion*, p. 9.

the minority of the ten per cent have somehow captured so many of our institutions of learning, founded by the ninety per cent and gained such positions of influence, that by diplomacy and strategy, they can often make it appear that they are in the majority. The members of our churches have been overawed into silence by the glamour of so-called modern scholarship and high position, so that they hold their peace, though they are startled, offended and outraged by the apostasies which pass for the “assured results of learning.”⁴⁹

But for fundamentalists, regardless of who would win the ideological battles, failing to expose and repudiate blatant and ruinous falsehood amounted to capitulation of the truth to God’s enemies. This Dixon would not do.

The last words of Dixon just before his death on 14 June 1925, were “I have to preach in Boston tomorrow.”⁵⁰ This compulsion to preach the unsearchable riches of the gospel of Christ and to defend it with all his might was a final and fitting testimony to his spirituality. Shortly afterwards, his Baltimore church, passed a unanimous resolution remembering his bold stand for the truth. It stated that he

believed in the whole Bible. Against the modernistic trend of many who sought to emasculate the Bible or to interpret it falsely he was an unswerving, undaunted opponent. With the deepest conviction that the Bible is the inspired word of God, he gained a world-wide reputation for his superb work in defense of the truth. With him there was no half-way ground.⁵¹

CONCLUSION

A. C. Dixon proved that compassion and contempt, piety and polemics, can co-exist in the minister of Christ without rancor or resorting to unethical tactics. If the honor of God’s truth was at stake then theological battles must be waged honorably. This is evidence of spiritual-mindedness. Dixon was one of the founders of the BBU and helped write its constitution. He was by then the “grand old warrior” to whom the younger generation looked for guidance and encouragement as they prepared for what Curtis Lee Laws called the “battle royal” to rescue the Northern Baptist Convention from the liberals. Dixon willingly and sacrificially devoted himself to the cause. However, when it became obvious to him that certain leaders began using sensationalist gimmickry and unethical tactics in the battle, Dixon resigned his membership in the BBU a few months before his death. By doing so, he incurred the disfavor of several fundamentalists, but he preserved his integrity as an honorable defender of the Faith.

It has been fairly easy to cloak unbelief under the guise of pietism. Many an unsuspecting student has been deceived by the winsome charm of a theological heretic. But I verily believe that Dixon was sincerely spiritual. I would venture to say that he was probably more fitted for

⁴⁹Dixon, “The Stockholm Incident,” n.d., typescript in the Dixon Collection.

⁵⁰Hand-written notes of Nurse Starkey, 14 June 1925, Dixon Collection.

⁵¹“In Memory of Rev. A. C. Dixon, Pastor of the University Baptist Church from March 1922 to date of his death,” 12 October 1925, typescript in Dixon Collection.

heaven than many evangelicals today who would find it difficult to imagine life without cell phones, PCs, and HD television. But perhaps a more sure test of spirituality is an outspoken defense of the truth, which has a way of defining sides and proving genuine devotion. In my study of Dixon I found a remarkable consistency in him. From the very beginning of his ministry to its end he always wanted to please God by being on the side of gospel truth. He seemed to genuinely love it, and was an uncompromising adversary of anyone who would denigrate it.

Dixon's last ministry was the pastorate of University Baptist Church in Baltimore. His letter of acceptance sums up well the aspects of spirituality that governed his life and bore the fruit of Christian conversion and character in thousands of others.

I have had two quiet days of prayer and thought over the Baltimore proposition; and I must confess that it appeals to me more and more strongly. I am taking these things for granted: (1) That the University church will adopt a confession of faith in harmony with the fundamentals of our historic Baptist faith without a particle of sympathy with the rationalistic modernism which discredits the Bible, denies the virgin birth of Christ, eliminates the supernatural,...[and] takes from out Lord Jesus Christ the crown of preeminence in the realm of knowledge. (2) That the University church will seek to be a soul-winning institution, its field that part of the city, all of Baltimore, Maryland, the United States and the world. (3) That the University church will welcome to its membership with equal cordiality the rich and the poor, the one and only one prerequisite being good proof that he or she is a genuine child of God. (4) That the University church will have free seats and practice Christian stewardship by giving as God has prospered. (5) That the University church, in a word, will have for its high and holy ambition to become in creed, character and conduct such a spiritual body as will please him who said, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."⁵²

Dixon proved himself a worthy steward of the gospel of Christ in contending for its truth without being contentious. He provides an excellent model for us to emulate.

⁵²Editorial, "Dr. Dixon Returns to Baltimore," *Watchman-Examiner*, 27 October, p. 1359.