

Epiphany 1/8/06
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It was the week before Christmas and not a creature was stirring in the sleepy little town in Pennsylvania. Everyone was breathlessly awaiting the ruling of federal judge, John E. Jones III. Judge Jones was about to announce his decision regarding the local school district's policy for 9th grade biology classes. That policy was that the following statement must be read to all students. *"The Pennsylvania Academic Standards require students to learn about Darwin's Theory of Evolution and eventually to take a standardized test of which evolution is a part. Because Darwin's theory is a theory, it continues to be tested as new evidence is discovered. The Theory is not a fact. Gaps in the theory exist for which there is no evidence. A theory is defined as a well- tested explanation that unifies a broad range of observations. Intelligent design is an explanation of the origin of life that differs from Darwin's view. The reference book, Of Pandas and People, is available for students who might be interested in gaining an understanding of what Intelligent Design actually involves."*

Judge Jones ruled that this statement violated the Establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment. In other words, the policy was unconstitutional and therefore illegal. In the body of his ruling, Judge Jones, who by the way, was appointed by President Bush, said, "We have addressed the seminal question of whether Intelligent Design is a science. We have concluded that it is not, and moreover that ID cannot uncouple itself from its creationist, and thus religious, antecedents. Repeatedly in this trial, the Plaintiff's scientific experts testified that the theory of evolution represents good science, and is

overwhelmingly accepted by the scientific community, and that it in no way conflicts with, nor does it deny, the existence of a divine creator.”

The ruling led to one of the most moronic comments of 2005. It came, as they so often do, from our friend, Pat Robertson. In case you missed it, Robertson actually suggested that God just might hurl a natural disaster at Dover, Pa. Here are his exact words as expressed on his 700 Club television show, which apparently someone in this country is still watching. “I’d like to say to the good citizens of Dover, if there is a disaster in your area, don’t turn to God. You just rejected Him from your city. And don’t wonder why He hasn’t helped you when problems begin, if they begin.” Wow. What in the world would we do without the Rev. Robertson? I know I thank God for him often, because he supplies me with a seemingly endless source of ridiculously bad theology, making my job of convincing you what not to believe so much easier.

You may have heard that Robertson was at it again this week. On Thursday, as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon lay near death, Robertson actually suggested that Sharon’s stroke was God’s doing. Speaking for God, Robertson said it was, quote, “enmity against those who ‘divide my land.’” “He was dividing God’s land,” Robertson continued, “and I say woe unto any Prime Minister of Israel who takes a similar course to appease the European Union, the United Nations, or the United States of America. God says, ‘this land belongs to me.’”

Yes, he actually said that. While Robertson’s comments continue to infuriate much of the world and convince others that he has gone senile, the truth is that both of these statements represent classic fundamentalist theology.

My fundamentalist friends and relatives don’t like me using the term fundamentalist to describe them anymore, because it has taken on such negative connotations in today’s world.

They have adopted words like Evangelical and Reformed to refer to their movement. But historically, neither of these words adequately describes the theology espoused by this extreme wing of the Christian church. To understand why Robertson says what he says, we need to return to the roots of the fundamentalist movement.

Unlike what you may have been led to believe, Fundamentalism does not go back to the early church. It was in fact, invented in post-Civil War America. This was the period that has been referred to by historians as the beginning of the modern age. The Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment in Europe created a world very different than any other time. How should the church respond in this era where new technologies, archaeological techniques, and other new forms of critical study made it possible for us to put the Bible in historical, social and cultural context for the first time? What should the Christian response be to the discovery of ancient manuscripts from other cultures that told mythic stories very similar to those in the Bible, only earlier? How should a Christian adequately respond to the new science that for the first time pointed out that the world may be billions of years old instead of thousands?

Many Christians, including a deacon in the Anglican church named Charles Darwin, saw no conflict between scientific discoveries and religious beliefs. Bringing intellectual thought to religion could only enhance understanding of God and the world as they saw it. But a group in America saw these modern developments as a direct threat to religion.

The term fundamentalism was never meant to be pejorative. It was coined by the originators of it at the Niagara Falls Bible Conference, which met for the first time in 1883. They called their new theology fundamentalism because they were meeting in an effort to define those things that they believed were “fundamental” to their religion. The term was also used for

a series of religious tracts. “The Fundamentals” were a collection of twelve tracts on five subjects published in 1910 by Milton and Lyman Steward. Those five fundamentals are; 1) the literal inerrancy of the “originals” of each scriptural book; 2)the virgin birth and the Deity of Christ; (note not the humanity but only the divinity) 3) the substitutionary view of Christ’s atonement for humanity; 4) the bodily resurrection of Christ; and 5) the imminent return of Christ.

Fundamentalism was and is a revolt against the modern age. By definition, it rejects science or any other kind of thought that disagrees with a literal interpretation of the Bible. It sees the Bible not just as revelation, but as a historically and scientifically accurate account. In addition, the fundamentals, which fundamentalists still hold as true today, make it clear that Christ is revealed only to those are willing to reject modern science, technology and intellectualism.

What Rev. Robertson said to the people of Dover, Pa. may have sounded ridiculous to you and me and embarrassing to the fundamentalist Christian movement, but his theology is exactly what fundamentalism teaches, today and when it originated 120 years ago.

It would be nice if we could just laugh off Robertson’s ridiculous statements. But the truth is that fundamentalism is as dangerous as any philosophy professed in today’s world. We know what fundamentalism has done in the Middle East, and we know what Islamic fundamentalism did on 9/11. We have all seen and perhaps experienced the pain and damage done to those outside the circle Christian fundamentalism draws around itself. But perhaps even worse than this, I am convinced that fundamentalism takes the heart of Christianity away from us. It does this by making religion irrelevant in the world in which we live.

One of the central purposes of religion is to assist us in finding answers to the problems and dilemmas in our lives. But how can fundamentalism do that when it tells us that we must reject what science has taught us and instead believe in the biblical view that the earth is supported above the fiery below on a set of pedestals? Fundamentalist theology is why so many people in today's world have turned away from church altogether. It has nothing to say to us in a post modern world because it makes believe we are still living in the 18th century.

It seems patently obvious to me that fundamentalism is not only hurting all of us, but that it is also theologically bankrupt. But please don't take my word for that. Because of all the lucid arguments against fundamentalism, the most telling of all for me is right here. The very book that fundamentalists insist we must take literally and only literally speaks against it. If the Bible is inerrant as fundamental number one tells us, than what is a fundamentalist to do with today's readings? Because if the story of the three wise men is true as Matthew relates it, fundamentalism simply collapses. While the fundamentals tell us that the only way to God is to believe in the fundamentals, who is it that discovers God in the Gospel of Matthew? The foreigners. The non-believers. The outsiders. Three Magi from the weird land of present day Iraq. In fact, God is not made manifest to a single person in the religious establishment, only to these three intellectual leaders, wise men, from the East. Lest you think that maybe they were foreigners but they really believed, remember who they were. Magi. Magi, of course, is where we get the word magician. A Magi was a highly educated individual who was trained in astrology and dream interpretation. We have interpreted the Greek word Magi as "wise men" because these were very learned people in the culture. But whereas Magi were seen as highly

educated in the world of the day, the Jews had been forbidden to use any form of divination, astrological or otherwise. Magi were people repeatedly condemned and prohibited throughout the scriptures and were complete anathema to the people of Israel. In other words, Magi were the Charles Darwins and Albert Einsteins of their day.

If then, Scripture is literally inerrant as the first fundamental tells us, how could it be that the Bible tells us that Jesus was first discovered by unbelievers?

As we listen to our first two readings from Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72, we hear our Bible's next rejection of fundamentalism. These texts, like many others, describe the God we are to discover in royal terms, as a king. If we read these texts literally, as fundamentalism insists that we must, we would once again miss the presence of Christ in our lives. The Epiphany story makes it clear that only when we hear these Biblical texts metaphorically will we discover the Jesus who comes to us not as a king, but as a pauper.

Isaiah 60 also points to the location of this new king in Jerusalem. Once again, if the wise men had utilized only Scripture, as our fundamentalist friends insist, they would still be looking around in Jerusalem for royalty. And in fact, this is what most of the world did. They didn't recognize Jesus because they were all looking for a royal leader in the wrong place, as their Bible told them. What Christian fundamentalism teaches us to do to find Christ is the same path taken by all those people in the first century who *never* found Jesus.

How do the wise men find him? They looked beyond the Bible. And what do they use? Science. The hardest science of the day. They paid attention to the signs they had learned as astronomers. They saw a star they did not recognize and they turned from Jerusalem and headed to Bethlehem, where they found not a king, but a poor baby who will lead the world from the

bottom up.

The story of the Epiphany clearly suggests that if we are to find Christ in our lives, we will never do so by rejecting science, technology and intellectualism as fundamentalism demands. God, the Bible tells us, is made manifest to us when we understand that science and religion are intimately connected, and that the understanding of one brings more understanding of the other. What this wonderful story from the Gospel of Matthew teaches me is that our own Epiphanies of God can only occur when we are willing to move beyond the Bible itself.

Fundamentalists may find it shocking that the book they are trying so hard to protect tells us very plainly that if we are to find Christ in our own lives, we need to embrace both science and the Bible. In fact, without science, no one ever discovers Christ. There is no Epiphany. And without Epiphany, without revelation, we have no religion.

That is what Epiphany is all about. An Epiphany is defined as a “moment of sudden intuitive understanding, or a flash of insight.” Epiphanies are what bring each of us to God. Today is not just the wonderful story of manifestation of God to foreigners, which would be Good News enough. But what the author of the Gospel of Matthew is also doing is providing for us a methodology for having our own Epiphanies, for coming to those sudden realizations that change our lives. By following the example of the Magi, by utilizing our God given ability to reason, by being willing to discover how science can expand our faith rather than contract it, by paying attention to the signs we find through study and learning, we can discover Christ when those around us see nothing.

And that is perhaps the most distressing element of a theology that tells us to reject modernity. To do so means that Epiphany is dead. To do so means that what happened to the

Magi can never happen to us. That is obviously not what our God wants for any of us. My prayer on this wonderful day is that our Epiphanies will never end, that each of us will continue to have those flashes of insight that bring God to us until the day we die, when suddenly we will live in a life of constant Epiphanies. Amen.