

Lecture Twenty-Three

Contemporary Christians and Their Bibles

Scope: This lecture discusses four contested aspects of the Bible's story among contemporary Christians. First is the longstanding conflict between Modernist and Fundamentalist concerning the authority of the Bible and the right way to read it. Second is the debate over the "true Bible" and "true Christianity." Third is the proliferation of and competition among contemporary translations of the Bible. Fourth is the way in which Bible translation and Christian missionary endeavors continue to flourish in the work of Bible societies.

Outline

- I. Among contemporary Christians, the Bible remains central to worship and theology but is also the arena for lively disputes. This lecture considers four aspects of the Christian Bible's continuing story.
 - A. Christians are divided over the authority of the Bible and the proper perspective from which to read it.
 - B. Christians continue to debate the issue of canon: What is the "true Bible" and how does it measure "true Christianity"?
 - C. Christians carry internal conflicts over into competitive translations of the Bible.
 - D. Christians use the Bible in missionary work and engage in the effort to translate the Bible into every human language.
- II. The effects of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy of the late 19th and early 20th centuries continue to divide Christians.
 - A. The term *Modernism* refers to Christians (both Protestant and Catholic) who enthusiastically subscribe to the historical-critical approach to the Bible, as well as the Enlightenment premises inherent in the approach. This perspective has been standard in most seminaries since 1900.
 - B. The term *Fundamentalism* in the strict sense refers to the reaction to Modernism among conservative Protestants, beginning in 1895 with a statement of "five fundamentals": verbal inerrancy of

Scripture, divinity of Jesus Christ, the virgin birth, the substitutionary theory of atonement, and the physical resurrection and bodily return of Christ.

1. The most famous moment in the controversy came in the Scopes trial in 1925, but the conflict between evolution and biblicism continues.
2. The term *Fundamentalist* unfairly tends to get applied to all conservative and evangelical Christians.

C. Sociologically, the debate concerns the place of the academy in the Church and the Church in the academy. A chief battleground for the conflict has been the seminaries where future Christian ministers are educated.

1. The religious/political controversies obscure the way in which the extremes actually share basic (distorting) perspectives.
2. A literalistic focus on the Bible (from either side) also tends to obscure the proper place of the Bible within Christianity.

III. Another dimension of conflict involving the Bible emerged in the second half of the 20th century, in a renewed battle over the canon of Scripture that mirrors the identity debates of the 2nd century.

A. The challenge to the traditional canon has emerged from a combination of two factors.

1. Archaeological discoveries—above all, that at Nag Hammadi—are used to challenge canonical decisions in the 2nd through 4th centuries.
2. The discovery of old documents combines with ideological tendencies (feminist, anti-institutional religion).
3. The basic proposal is to “open the canon” to include a variety of ancient compositions that were once “suppressed.”

B. The revisionist project seeks to reform traditional Christianity (regarded as defective) on the basis of an enlightened reading of alternative compositions.

1. The battle is carried out primarily through publishing and teaching, the instruments of the academy.
2. The power of the Bible is suggested by its use in such titles as *The Complete Gospels*, *The Other Bible*, and *The Lost Bible*.

IV. Conflict and competition is also a feature of the proliferation of new translations of the Bible.

- A. For some Fundamentalists, fidelity to the KJV is understood as biblical fidelity.
 - B. Others felt the need for revising the KJV, which led to the Revised Version (1885), the American Standard Version (1901), and the Revised Standard Version (1946, 1952, 1957), all of which remained faithful to the KJV but brought it in line with modern language usage. The New Revised Standard Version sought to improve that tradition through the elimination of gender-exclusive language. The New American Bible and the Jerusalem Bible are completely fresh translations by Roman Catholic scholars.
 - C. A variety of other translations tend toward a “literal” or “equivalent” rendering of the ancient languages, privileging either fidelity to the originals (New International Version) or contemporary intelligibility (The New English Bible).
 - D. Theological concerns appear also in translations and the debates over them, as in debates over the translation of *pistis Christou* or efforts to construct a completely gender-inclusive Bible (*The New Testament and the Psalms: An Inclusive Translation*, 1995).
- V. The effort to spread the Word “to all the nations” continues in the work of the United Bible Societies.
- A. The British and Foreign Bible Society began in 1804 and now includes groups from more than 141 countries dedicated to biblical renewal and diffusion. The society organizes the worldwide efforts of translators and consultants and provides scholarly resources (including critical texts) to them.
 - B. The efforts have yielded impressive results. In 1804, the Bible, in part or whole, had been translated into 67 languages. At the end of 2005, the Bible had been translated into 2,043 of the world’s 6,500 languages, and the United Bible Societies has distributed, in whole or part, more than 372 million Scriptures.

Essential Reading:

J. A. Carpenter, ed., *The Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict: Opposing Views on Three Major Issues*.

Supplementary Reading:

P. Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What do the conflicts over the Bible suggest about the state of the Christian religion in the 21st century?
2. Is there a connection between the geographical location of disputes concerning the Bible and the disparity between the growth of Christianity in the First World and in developing countries?