

Japan Evangelical Missionary Association ad hoc Theological Commission Response to the
Japan Evangelical Association Theological Commission's Pamphlet No.6, "Fundamentalism"
AFFIRMATIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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AFFIRMATIONS

1) *Significance of topic*

The pamphlet addresses the issue of how Christians should think about war, especially about the current war in Iraq initiated by America in response to 9/11. Christians all agree that war is a kind of evil. Differences among Christians usually center on whether war can ever be justly required. The pamphlet contributes to this discussion by arguing that war can never be justly required because war is not appropriate for followers of Jesus Christ. It is a presentation of Japanese evangelical pacifism. The pamphlet links what it understands to be American evangelical support of the Iraq War with what it describes as American fundamentalistic theology. Thus the title of the pamphlet, *Fundamentalism*. The pamphlet critiques this perceived American fundamentalistic theology which is understood as characteristic of American evangelicalism.

One purpose of the pamphlet in criticizing American evangelicalism is to distance Japanese evangelicals from American evangelicals so as to diffuse criticism directed against evangelicals by opponents of the Iraq War here in Japan. This criticism is perceived as harming efforts of evangelism in Japan. Therefore the pamphlet is an attempt to both encourage evangelism in Japan and to provide an apologetic for Japanese evangelical pacifism. The pamphlet plays a significant role in forming Japanese evangelical thinking. We affirm the significance of this discussion for Japanese evangelicals.

2) *Importance of publishing on the topic*

In addition, the pamphlet might also have significance outside Japan. It may well be that the present conflict in Iraq will cause American evangelicals to re-examine the biblical, theological and moral bases for war. If so, it is possible that a credible theological treatment of the issue by Japanese evangelical theologians—a publication such as this pamphlet—might act as a catalyst in such critical examination. Japan is in a unique position as the only nation which has been attacked by nuclear weaponry. Thus Japanese evangelical theologians have a distinct contribution to make in developing a theology of peace. We affirm the importance of Japanese theologians to continue publishing on this topic for an international audience.

3) *Necessity of international theological dialogue*

The Iraq War has generated polarizing responses among evangelicals even in America. Some American evangelicals are more nation-centric than others. Some American evangelicals are conservative in their theology while others are not. The American evangelical church is characterized by diversity and complexity. So when statements are made about sensitive issues within the diverse and complex American evangelical church it is inevitable that some will be offended.

We on the JEMA ad hoc Theological Commission, conscious that we represent a wide range of nationalities, recognize the value of fair criticism of the American evangelical

church offered by evangelicals who are not themselves American. This is because we understand theology to be best developed in dialogue with international partners. American evangelicals need to hear from Japanese evangelicals. Thus we respect these six Japanese evangelical theologians who have written boldly about sensitive and important issues related to war and the role of the church in peacemaking.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1) *Potentially divisive strong statements*

The pamphlet makes some strong statements regarding views held by some American evangelicals that are shared by some members of both JEMA and JEA.¹ Both JEA and JEMA reflect diverse theological positions. These kinds of strong statements have the potential to cause friction and disharmony in both organizations. Is there a way to accomplish the purpose of the pamphlet without making such strong, potentially divisive statements? Is it wise for the JEA Theological Commission to use its important position within the evangelical world of Japan for the purpose of influencing Japanese evangelicals toward theological positions it knows are not shared by all its members and are not required for membership in JEA?

¹ Sekino: “From the position of dispensationalism as described above, the establishment of Israel as a nation becomes a portent that the end of history as we know it is drawing near. A pessimistic eschatology then becomes one’s worldview. Since nothing can be done about evil in the world today, more than fulfilling our societal responsibilities, what we should do now in preparation for the end becomes only that we bring as many as we can to the feet of Christ to save them from this world engulfed in flames.” (II.A.)

Sekino: “Fundamentalists went underground, became a sect, and vanished from the public stage until the 1970’s.” (II.A.)

Sekino: “In the 1940’s fundamentalist groups split into Fundamentalism, an exclusivist, militant, separationist group and a moderating evangelicalism.” (II.B.)

In describing the six day creation position, Sekino states: “This is a theory that has been accepted not only by American Christian fundamentalists but broadly by evangelicals. This position has the drawback of not accepting anything of evolutionary biology or of astronomical data, and does not want to dialogue with science in general.” (III)

Sekino: “There is an ideology in the claims of the Religious Right in America that labels its opponents as devils and foments anger and enmity....At the center of Christian fundamentalism is the emotion of ‘anger’...” (V.A.)

Sekino: “Hidden at the roots of both apocalyptic, sensationalist eschatology and creation science are problems with biblical interpretation. It is easy to fall into extreme claims with a literal biblical hermeneutic, lacking in covenantal and atoning consideration and which ignores the purpose for which the Bible was written or the linguistic and cultural restrictions that were upon the writers at the time. American Christian Fundamentalism, especially in the South where it has widely infiltrated its background with simple-minded (thinking), avoids intricate methods of biblical interpretation and has an abusive trend particular to evangelicalism that simplifies the reading of scripture.” (V.E.)

Okayama, in criticizing pretribulation premillennialism: “The first problem with this eschatology is that it is exceedingly this worldly, politicized, and secularized.” (II.C.1.)

Okayama, continuing to critique pretribulation premillennialism: “The emphasis on an eschatological war is also a problem. Christian fundamentalists have a great interest in Armageddon, the final world war, which according to some is identified with a nuclear war. And because the final world war will occur before the return of Christ there is a tendency to perceive war on earth positively as an eschatological sign.” (II.C.3.)

Further critique by Okayama of pretribulation premillennialism: “When Christian eschatology is secularized in such a way that the kingdom of God conquers by means of this worldly military power, various distortions are produced.” (II.C.3.)

2) *Toward a sound theology of peacemaking*

The pamphlet's concern to distance Japanese evangelicals from their American counterparts creates a theological context of negative critique. The potentially positive, constructive, and perhaps unique contribution a Japanese evangelical theology of peacemaking could make to the global evangelical movement is thus overshadowed in the pamphlet by its undertone of anti-American rhetoric.² The result seems to be a reactionary theology of peacemaking. Is it possible to publish a Japanese flavored evangelical theology of peace without building its case upon the many perceived theological mistakes of American evangelicalism?

3) *Confusion about what American fundamentalism is and who American fundamentalists are*

American evangelicalism is historically and theologically complex. Confusion is perpetrated in the pamphlet through its lack of clear definitions and consistent use of the term "fundamentalism." For example, some articles in the pamphlet exhibit an overlap in the use of the terms "Christian fundamentalism" and "evangelicalism." Christian fundamentalism is also described as conservative Christianity.³ Although among American evangelicals there is a vocal left wing, evangelicals in the United States have historically agreed on such Biblical fundamentals as one God who is Creator and Lord of the universe, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection, the literal return of Jesus Christ, and the

² Kurasawa (Foreword): "The American evangelical church's support of the Iraq War and its pro-war tendency have created a situation in which Japan's evangelical church has been questioned and criticized by those who are opposed to the Iraq War... It should be remembered that points of agreement and disagreement between American and Japanese evangelical churches regarding thinking about and responding to the Iraq War need to be examined theologically."

Okayama: "The problematic points of contemporary American Christian fundamentalism are nationalism, a simplistic dualism between good and evil, and a secularized eschatology" (Summary)

Okayama: "Why is it that American Christian fundamentalists even now continue to offer strong support for the Iraq War? Along with strong doubts about the Iraq War many Japanese Christian churches are also developing a feeling of loathing toward it so that the issue is becoming a stumbling block to evangelism in Japan." (Introduction)

Okayama, referring to America: "If a country is possessed by the wild idea of conquering the world through its military might, and if that country leads the world toward destruction, we Japanese have the responsibility to point out its foolishness." (2B)

Watanabe: "It is of crucial importance that we let our government know of our opposition to war, and we must examine and critique the theology of President Bush." (In Conclusion)

³ After describing American fundamentalists as a "sect" and as "militant", the same descriptions which are often used in the secular media, Sekino cautions against using "evangelicalism" in the way the media does (II.B.).

Sekino labels both Tony Evans, a frequent speaker at Promise Keepers, and Gary North of the Christian Reconstruction Movement as fundamentalists (II.C.). Actually, both would probably prefer to be called evangelicals. As a point of clarification, Tony Evans is not the founder of Promise Keepers. That distinction probably belongs to Bill McCartney.

Sekino describes Dan Quayle's wife as an "evangelical/Christian fundamentalist." (II.D.)

After describing the silence of the NAE regarding the Iraq War, Okayama asks, "Why is it that American Christian fundamentalists even now continue to offer strong support for the Iraq War?" (Introduction) In his mind, American evangelicals seem to be the same group as American fundamentalists.

Okayama classifies Jerry Jenkins, with his *Left Behind* series, as an American fundamentalist (II.C.).

authority and inerrancy of the Bible. However, evangelicals in America usually reserve the term fundamentalist for those who hold to the necessity of other doctrines, such as a literal six-day view of creation and dispensational premillennialism. But doctrinal positions in themselves do not identify a person as a Christian fundamentalist. Therefore, along with these doctrinal positions, fundamentalists have tended to socially isolate themselves from those with whom they have a disagreement on doctrinal and moral issues, including separating themselves from other evangelicals. In the American context, “Christian fundamentalists” often associate themselves with the Independent Fundamentalist Churches of America (IFCA) whereas evangelicals choose to identify with the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). Some of the writers of the “Fundamentalist” pamphlet overlook this distinction by equating evangelicalism or conservative Christianity and Christian fundamentalism in America. That is, the pamphlet tended to group together American evangelicals and American Christian fundamentalists even though that is not the self-understanding of the Americans being described. The result is that the pamphlet redefines American evangelicals in a way that is alien to them. Is this revisionism intended?

4) *Misrepresentation*

Several writers in the pamphlet describe American evangelicals as having a pro-war attitude which leads the American nation to war and that this attitude derives from their theology.⁴ It would probably be more accurate to characterize American evangelicals as reluctant to go to war. Furthermore, the aspects of conservative American evangelical

⁴ Sekino: “Christian Fundamentalism was the undercurrent for the self-righteous, warlike posture that became remarkably apparent in the United States after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, (hereafter, “9/11”).” (Introduction)

Okayama: “The seventeenth century Puritans held to a strong sense of being an elected people who were the new Israel. Because of their immigration to North America, the genocide of the indigenous ‘Indians’ occurred. The design of White Christians to destroy the pagans of colored races amounts to the indiscriminate killing of three million people: the twelfth century Crusades; the seventeenth century massive killing of the former inhabitants of Central, South, and North America; the twentieth century Philippine atrocity, the bombing of Tokyo, the killing of many Japanese civilians with atomic bombs, and the Vietnam war. The twenty-first century bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq is consistent with this.” (I.B.2.)

Okayama: “Why do present day American Christian fundamentalists unconditionally affirm their own country’s wars?” (II.A.1.)

Okayama: “In Japan it was nationalistic Shinto which was Shinto fundamentalism. Similarly, in America it was nationalistic Christianity which is Christian fundamentalism. ‘Nationalistic Shinto’ of the Meiji government was originally polytheistic Shinto, but in order to unify the nation it was monotheistically reconstructed. Similarly, ‘nationalistic Christianity’ was originally a non-violent, pacifist Christianity, but was jingoistically distorted for the sake of waging war.” (II.A.2)

Okayama: “The idea that God’s kingdom expands through the destruction of evil by the military might of the good is consistent in Western Christian society. In comprehensive terms, this is American Christian fundamentalism.” (II.B.)

Okayama: “Seventeenth century Puritans idealized a theocracy like that of Calvin’s Geneva. They had a sense of election and calling as the new Israel, and a feeling of strong continuity with Israel of the Old Testament. Therefore in the “new continent” the Puritans conquered the indigenous peoples of North America in order to build the kingdom of God, just as Israel had captured the land of Canaan.” (II.C.3.)

Ishihara: The American fundamentalism that is currently at issue is thought to result from a hermeneutic that superimposes on each other ethnic Israel’s Exodus from Egypt and America’s nation-building. That is to say, Israel’s election and mission are taken to be America’s election and mission, and can be seen as guiding the nation toward “wars of aggression”... (Abstract)

theology which the pamphlet criticizes (see next point) do not necessarily result in American evangelicals applauding war. The rhetoric which this kind of misrepresentation generates might convince Japanese evangelicals that there is a distinction between Japanese and American evangelicals. That is, American evangelicals love war and Japanese evangelicals love peace. But the rhetoric also has the potential to unnecessarily antagonize many American evangelicals. Does the JEA Theological Commission place value on accurate representation of American evangelicals so that healthy dialogue is encouraged?

5) *Theological reductionism*

Watanabe seems to understand that historical events play an important role in the formation of public opinion, including the opinions of evangelicals. However some other contributors assert a causal relationship between certain theological positions held by many American evangelicals and support for American militarism.⁵ The cause of American evangelical support of the Iraq War is thus reduced to theology. The suspect theological positions include premillennialism, dispensational eschatology, and the young earth theory which is dependent upon a literal interpretation of the Bible (absolute inerrancy?). Doubtless, many American evangelicals and Christian fundamentalists who hold these theological views do indeed also support the American war effort in Iraq. However, there are many other American evangelicals, and perhaps even American Christian fundamentalists, who hold these same theological convictions but are opposed to the Iraq War. Among American evangelicals, theology does not conclusively determine one's political stance, including one's position on any given war. Does the JEA Theological Commission recognize this variation among American evangelicals who might hold to the same theological positions?

6) *Bibliology*

One article encourages Japanese evangelicals to shift from absolute inerrancy to full inerrancy in order to arrive at a moderate understanding of inerrancy and in order to avoid the American fundamentalistic extreme of literally interpreting the Bible.⁶ This implies that Japanese and American evangelicals generally hold to absolute inerrancy. However, most American evangelicals actually hold to full inerrancy. If the typical American evangelical position has been full inerrancy, how would the shift from absolute to full inerrancy among Japanese evangelicals help achieve a Japanese theology of peacemaking? Full inerrancy has not apparently accomplished this feat in America. Or does the suggestion to move toward a more moderate view of inerrancy actually mean that a broader view than full inerrancy is being suggested (e.g., limited inerrancy, inerrancy of purpose, accommodated revelation, or

⁵ Okayama: "The third reason Christian fundamentalism spurs the church on toward war is eschatology. According to the right wing of American religion, before the eschatological tribulation Jesus will return in the sky to gather Christians together." (II.C.)

Okayama: "Christian fundamentalists have a great interest in Armageddon, the final world war, which according to some is identified with a nuclear war. And because the final world war will occur before the return of Christ there is a tendency to perceive war on earth positively as an eschatological sign." (II.C.3.)

⁶ See Sekino (V.B.). It is interesting to note that theologians generally refer to both absolute and full inerrancy as a literal hermeneutic, whereas Sekino thinks only absolute inerrancy can be called a literal hermeneutic. His repeated criticisms of a literal hermeneutic should therefore be understood as directed against absolute inerrancy rather than full inerrancy.

nonpropositional revelation)? What is the JEA Theological Commission's understanding of its own stated position on inerrancy?

7) *JEA Theological Commission exclusivism?*

Fujimoto shows how an “us versus them” mentality results in the confrontational posture often associated with fundamentalism. At least one of the articles in the pamphlet creates just such a posture of exclusion in order to distance Japanese evangelicals from their American counterparts.⁷ Does the JEA Theological Commission see the irony of identifying this exclusive mentality in what it has described as American Christian fundamentalism but not recognizing this tendency within its own commission?

⁷ Okayama implies that Japanese churches should not cooperate with any overseas churches other than pacifist churches: “The Japanese church should continue to cooperate with historically pacifist churches...” (Summary, and III.A.)

Note Fujimoto's warning about this possible exclusive mentality in the JEA: “...as an evangelical association positioned within a larger church, we ought to ask ourselves if we have fallen into exclusivism, or, in maintaining our own distinctives, whether we are judging others.” (Conclusion)