

9/11 and the American Evangelical Church: An Observation and Analysis¹

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SUMMARY

It is important to learn and criticize the doctrine of fundamentalism which has been easily misled to support war. However it is more important to understand the social milieu in which it has emerged lest we too be swept up into the rising tide of fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism rears its head in the midst of crumbling social order, in an age when people sense the loss of a foundation in their daily lives. There are no easy shortcuts in the defense against fundamentalism. Rather what is needed is concrete efforts to provide people with a solid foundation.

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of 9/11 it would appear that many U.S. Christians spanning across denominational boundaries have fallen into a very stereotypical fundamentalist mindset. I was living in Louisville, Kentucky from the time of 9/11 until the beginning of the war in Iraq. Based on field notes and interviews from that period and a number of reports submitted to the *Christian Shinbun* I will attempt to give a picture of how American Christians came to be in support of the war. This paper is based on what is known as qualitative research, and thus is not designed to provide a bird's-eye view of the trend in the whole American church. Rather I seek to provide a glimpse of the process by which the average Christian living in the Southern U.S. was attracted to the voice of fundamentalism in the midst of the struggle with uncertainty. Furthermore I want to look again at how the anti-war movement was effectively silenced by the voice of conservative Christians during that period and thereby reflect on the stance required of Japanese Christians in confronting the rightward trend in our own society.

I. THE IMPACT OF TERRORISM

Two weeks after 9/11 an American woman in her 60s said, "I still just don't know what to make of it all. At times I feel terribly afraid, at times I feel anger, and at times I just don't want to think about it." The reaction to the terrorist attacks among Christians didn't suddenly emerge from a fundamentalist doctrine. It is easy to see that when Americans faced the stress that resulted from experiencing an unprecedented terrorist attack, they sought some sort of foundation that would enable them to cope. In that moment, the aura of what sociologists refer to as "civil religion" came to weigh heavily on people's actions. The symbols of civil religion include national history and her heroes, and the flag, and people come to associate them with something universal and sacred. Furthermore, by mutually holding those symbols in esteem, the people come to sense a national return to traditional religious values. In a pluralistic society such as the United States, civil religion offers a common set of values and solidarity to those who feel alienated, regardless of individual

¹ In this report all names of persons and churches have been changed except the names of scholars and national Christian leaders.

creed or denominational affiliation. (McGuire 1997, pp.191-198) The church sought to offer comfort from the word of the Bible, amidst the confusion and fear of terrorism. But the symbols of civil religion were already present and in clear view. In the midst of uncertainty, the people were easily drawn toward these symbols of civil religion. In this paper I seek draw from my field notes to ascertain what was being said in American churches and how it was the people sought to overcome their uncertainties following the events of 9/11.

FIELD NOTE (1)

I attended Green Mountain Baptist Church on September 16th, the first Sunday following the terrorist attacks. Worshipers were welcomed by a sidewalk connecting the parking lot to the church entrance that was lined with small flags. The worship service began with everyone standing and singing the national anthem. To the right of the pulpit stood the stars and stripes and to the left the Christian flag adorned in red, white and blue. As we sang, images of people in prayer were projected onto the screen above the pulpit. The images were interspersed with images of the flag. Suddenly an image of the rubble of the World Trade Center was projected, followed by an image of the smoke rising above New York City. No doubt everyone including myself was gripped anew by the powerful emotions of seeing those images that we had all witnessed only days earlier. The pastor's first words were, "In this time of crisis the community of faith must stand united." Without mentioning any names, the pastor began his sermon by making reference to the claim by a fundamentalist leader, Jerry Falwell only 3 days earlier, that this event was God's judgment upon America and refuted it. "People may ask, 'Where was God on the 11th' and where is God now?" but God is asking us, 'Where are you?'"

The essence of the sermon was that in our state of moral corruption, we must respond to the crisis by returning to the house of God as did the prodigal son. In the final prayer of "God, grant wisdom to our president," I sensed that the preacher was leaving the response to this event in the hands of the president.

After the service I went to meet my children and my 10-year-old daughter reported on the contents of her Sunday school class. "All they talked about was the airplanes that crashed into the buildings. The teacher said 'Even if World War III begins you will all be okay because God is protecting us.' And we read in the Bible where it says 'God is with us.'" My 5-year-old daughter returned from her class with ribbons that they had made with red, white and blue construction paper.

We received a letter to parents from the Sunday school that offered suggestions of how we could help our children cope with the shock of this event. The letter concluded with the following comments. "God does not want us to be afraid. You and your children can draw comfort by reading these passages of Scripture together... The most important thing for your children right now is to know that they are safe. As parents and other adults give your time, your love and hope in Jesus Christ to your children, they will be able to recover from their fear, anger and confusion.

As I read the letter I realized that the adult worship service had been rooted in the very same context. The preacher's message to the congregation, whose daily routines had been destroyed and who were gripped by fear, was an affirmation from God and a reminder that we need to stand firm before God as a community of faith. That led to an affirmation in our faith in our political leaders and an offering of prayers on their behalf. It would seem that

this was the context that led to the social phenomena marked by phrases such as “God Bless America,” “America the Beautiful,” and “United we stand.” (September 16, 2001)

II. A THEORETICAL CONTEXT FOR THE PRO-WAR POSITION

One day after the attack the president of Southern Baptist Seminary, Albert Mohler Jr., published a statement on the school’s homepage saying that Romans Chapter 13 calls for a “response of justice.” On February 6th, 2002 he made the following statement at a symposium on war that was hosted by the seminary. “When disorder prevails, that is the very essence of evil.” In an interview with him on March 11th, 2004 he stuck to his position that the war in Iraq was an action of self defense. His typically American pride was especially evident when he commented that, “The wars of this generation are essentially police actions on an international scale.” He attempted to scripturally justify his own position with the following words. “We have been placed in this nation as the salt and light of the earth and thus have the responsibility to do what is right, and to encourage our government to act accordingly.”

One of the motifs of fundamentalism is the desire to restore social order in the wake of the instability that has resulted from modernization. The reason for fundamentalism’s hatred of abortion, feminism and homosexuality is that they are seen as agents of destruction of the traditional patriarchal social order. (Castells, 1999; p.24) While the focus of fundamentalism has expanded from the traditional focus on micro-level issues such as sexuality to the macro-level issue of war, the theme of maintaining order has remained unchanged. At this point I will introduce a sermon preached at the Blue Grass Christian Church as an interesting example of how the reasoning of the fundamentalist response to abortion has been transferred to the pro-war stance of fundamentalism.

FIELD NOTE (2)

Pastor Mark Rees began his Saturday evening sermon in typically articulate fashion. “This month we are in a series entitled ‘Politically correct, Biblically incorrect.’ Today’s sermon is entitled, ‘Life; the only correct choice.’”

In his first point he brought up the matter of abortion, which is politically acceptable but biblically unacceptable. He talked about the “Woman’s Choice Resource Center,” an organization that was supported by their church. It is a group that seeks to dissuade women who are contemplating abortion and offer support in child rearing. During the sermon several young children were brought up to stand before the pulpit. The parents of those children had all been convinced to not have abortions through the work of that organization. The preacher read the children’s names, one by one. The congregation responded with a standing ovation.

After the children and their parents were led out, the preacher continued his sermon. The second point of the sermon was euthanasia. “It is discussed as a positive thing in our society, but biblically it is unacceptable... There is meaning in the life that God gives, even when it involves suffering that is beyond human comprehension. Human beings may never take that life into their own hands.”

The third point of the sermon was human cloning. According to Rees, cloning is an act of human selfishness. He continued, “Every human is given an individual identity by God and cloning is a rejection of that truth. As Christians we must stand in opposition.”

The fourth point was capital punishment. Once again this was related to the sanctity of life. And yet it was at this point that the emphasis of the sermon completely reversed itself. Pastor Rees is a proponent of capital punishment. He continued; “Some Christians focus solely on ‘Thou shall not kill.’ But as the saying goes, ‘If you shoot a man dead, you too must be killed.’ Anyone who takes a precious life must pay with his own life.” At the end of the previous year Pastor Rees had led a newcomers class in which he made reference to Romans 13:4 which says political leaders “bear the sword” in support of his pro-capital punishment position. In deference to newcomers from various backgrounds Pastor Rees recognized that some may disagree with him on this point but went on to say that “the sword is a tool of killing and thus I believe this passage is saying that the authority to kill is placed in the hands of the nation.” In this sermon he was boldly stating that capital punishment is in accordance with God’s word.

It didn’t take much to carry this line of thought from capital punishment to the matter of war. The key tenets of the just war theory were shown on the large overhead screen, one by one. Rees explained, “The attack on 9/11 resulted in numerous civilian casualties. What they (Muslim extremists) did was not an act of just war. It was nothing more than terrorism.” He went on to emphasize that “when we Christians wage war we never do so as an act of aggression.” The American pride that insists all their wars are just was clearly evident in his words. When the sermon concluded the worship leader, Peter Perkins, asked all those in the congregation who had family members in the military to stand. He then prayed, “God, please protect those who fight to protect us.”

The image of those children who had received a standing ovation earlier in the sermon came to mind. Their lives had been saved from abortion by the faith of that congregation. But what if one of those children were to grow up and someday take the life of another. Would the members of the congregation not even hesitate in sending that individual to the death chamber? A sermon that had begun with the sanctity of life concluded with an affirmation of war. How could such a change in direction be possible? (January 18th, 2003)

III. THEOLOGICALLY UNFOUNDED GOD TALK

I participated in Blue Grass Church’s Bible study program called “Building U.” Of the 30 some classes offered on Wednesday nights, “The Bible, Islam and the Middle East Conflict” was particularly popular with over 160 in attendance every week.

FIELD NOTE (3)

In the first session the instructor (Chris West) stated that he was a Republican and got a few laughs by chiding former President Clinton. He stated that he was a freelance writer and that he had volunteered to teach this class.

The first two sessions were typical of a church sponsored Bible study class. The Old Testament was quoted frequently. The main point was that the present situation in the Middle East is a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Drawing from Genesis 17:8 where God promised to give all of Canaan to Abraham, the Father of Israel, West emphasized that the establishment of modern Israel was Scripturally founded. He spoke of Abraham’s son, Ishmael and his failure to receive God’s blessing, quoting Genesis 16:12; “He will be a wild donkey, of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.” He explained that this was the reason why “Arabs, who are

the descendants of Ishmael, are a menace to the world.” The image of people hanging on his every word and feverishly taking notes left a strong impression on me. I asked a woman in her 30s who was sitting next to me why she had chosen this class. She responded, “I want to know more about the Middle East, and I want to learn more about how everything is tied in with Scripture. As for prophesy... well, Jesus could return any day now.”

The third session dealt with Middle East history. Beginning with the Old Testament, the teacher spoke in great detail, going on to the Balfour Declaration and the Middle East War. From the fourth week the various countries of the Middle East were introduced and we had several guest speakers who shared their own experiences. The guests were quite a diverse group, including a Jew, an Iraqi, an Iranian, a pilot who worked in the Middle East, and a former Secret Service agent. They spoke of the Middle East conflict from personal experience. They all were members of the church or had close connections with it.

A 22 year old Iraqi, _____, shared his own story in fluent English. Born in Northern Iraq and having lived in Pakistan and now the U.S., he had recently been introduced to this Bible study class at Blue Grass Church. He stated that “Arabs are some of the most ignorant and hypocritical people in the world.” He explained that the Iran Iraq war and the massacre of Kurds with chemical weapons were what turned him against Arabs. His personal website included an essay entitled, “Why I am not against the war.” The essay was punctuated with numerous pictures of Kurdish women and children massacred by President Sadaam Hussein.

West gave a summary of what had been covered on March 12th, the final session. He claimed that “just like Nazi Germany, the Muslims have started a war of propaganda.” He quoted several Muslim websites stating that “Muslims seek peace” and added his criticism to each one. The class responded to each criticism with laughter. “If Islam is really about peace, why are our missionaries being killed? This is sheer nonsense!” He concluded by saying that “the real war is about to begin, and it will be a war of Islam against Christianity.” January 15th – March 12th, 2003.

A survey about the war was distributed to the 167 participants in this Bible study class on March 5th, 2003 (2 weeks before the U.S. invasion of Iraq) and 127 valid responses were received. All responders said they were Christians and 94 percent were members of this church. 88% said they attended church at least twice a week, showing their high level of religious commitment. The breakdown by age was as follows; under 20 – 0%, 20s – 2%, over 40 – 82%. 55 responders were male, 70 were female and 2 did not state a gender. 116 were Americans and 11 did not indicate a nationality. In response to the question, “If the U.S. goes to war with Iraq, will you support it?” 121 said they would, 3 said they wouldn’t and 3 did not respond.

Responders were asked to reply in their own words to the question. “What are your reasons for supporting or opposing the war?” The answers can be divided into several general categories. The first would be answers that indicated a fear of terrorism, such as; “Hussein has weapons that enable him to threaten our (U.S.A.) peaceful democratic way of life” and “We must confront and defeat the evil of terrorism that attempts to destroy our way of life in this country” Included in this category were some answers that indicated a sense of paranoia, such as; “Saddam Hussein is an evil man who is a threat to the whole world. He is the antichrist.” and “The mad man must be stopped or he will destroy us.” The second category is those who said we should go to war to set the people of the Middle East free. Answers in this category included, “90% of Iraqi’s people want a change of regime.” and “I support

getting rid of terrorism...I support aiding freedom everywhere.” The belief that we need to protect freedom came through very strongly in this questionnaire in answers such as, “We have our freedom because of those who have fought for it” and “We need to go to war to protect the freedom of our country.” The third category was those who stated a belief in the justness of the United States. “War is justified by the ‘Just War’ doctrine even in preemptive attacks to restrain evil. Our nation has the right and duty to protect its citizens no matter what the rest of the world thinks” and “We have a moral obligation to provide leadership for the rest of the world” were some of the answers in this category.

Based on these answers it is clear that the opinions of the responders were not based on any particularly deep theological reflection. What is reflected in these answers is a defense of the concept of fighting for freedom and justice that is so deeply rooted in American culture. Another value that is strongly reflected here is the belief in the use of force to destroy evil. A self complacent worldview that assumes other countries will welcome the wars we wage is also evident in these answers.

Religious elements were most evident in the responses that dealt with feelings toward the President. The word “God” was used most often when the responders were talking about the President. Some of the following responses are examples. “I trust in our President knowing he is consulting in God and openly speaks of his religious beliefs” and “God's word needs to be spread throughout the nations. ... There are far too many unsaved in our nation, but in Iraq and the Middle East countries they have very little, if any hope of coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. ...What other nation is willing to lead this effort? God has a U.S. President in place that has a heart for Him and is willing to live by the Word of God.” The logical conclusion of these opinions can be summarized in the following response. “We must support our president and honor his decisions –He is a godly man.” It is clear that the primary reason for supporting the president is not rooted in politics or logic but rather is an emotional association with his religious posture.

The truth of the matter is that President Bush’s affirmative stance toward the American public lies at the root of his popularity. While criticized abroad for his U.S.-centric foreign policy as evidenced in the rejection of the Kyoto Protocol and his oil driven Middle East policy, domestically that policy is seen as the ultimate affirmation of the American status quo. Richard Pierard and Robert Linder state that there are two varieties of civil religion. One is prophetic in nature and the other is priestly. (Pierard and Linder; 2003, p.34) The prophet is one who speaks judgment and calls for repentance. The priest serves to affirm the people as they are, and makes offerings of appeasement on behalf of their sins. Thus, when the people are in support of a priestly president such as Bush, they are not required to repent of, or change their lifestyles. At the root of the emotional support for America’s President Bush is a subconscious desire to protect the current lifestyle of the American people. A young housewife made the following remark during a small group that I participated in on March 24th, 2003. “I see and hear on T.V. of the sad things that are happening. But I am putting my trust in God. I have put everything in God’s hands so I cannot worry about anything.” While appearing on the surface to be a deeply spiritual opinion, if in fact, such a view comes from a desire to protect one’s own lifestyle, even at the expense of the destruction by war of lifestyles of people from other nations, then one must conclude that such a worldview is born of something that has no relation whatsoever to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

IV. WHY IS THE ANTI-WAR FACTION SO WEAK?

During this time I was also following the anti-war movement. On March 20th 500 people gathered for an anti-war rally in Louisville. I conducted random interviews of the people in attendance and inquired of their religious background and their thoughts on the war. A young woman in her teens who claimed no religious affiliation responded; "Christianity is exploiting the children of third world countries. Christianity is just a tool of colonialism." A Jewish woman in her thirties replied; "Americans revere the 10 commandments even though one of them is 'Thou shalt not kill.'" A Catholic man in his seventies said; "I think American Christians are actually serving themselves." I was not able to confirm the presence of any conservative Protestants at the rally. Many were Catholic, Jewish and Quaker, as well as a good number who had no religious affiliation or said they did not attend church.

When surveys of religious affiliation are carried out in the U.S., those who say they don't attend church are referred to as "unchurched." It is a documented fact in the U.S. that as social rank and level of education increase, people move toward increasingly liberal churches. Those who end up leaving the church altogether then become the unchurched. It is not necessarily the case that these unchurched people have no faith in Christianity, but rather that they have ceased to trust the church. In many cases even the conservative churches, let alone the liberal ones, are unable to get these unchurched people back into the churches. (Roof and McKinney; 1987, p.241)

I attended a prayer vigil for peace at the Smoky Hills Baptist Church in Louisville on March 16th. It was not officially sponsored by the church. Including myself, the vigil was attended by 16 people, most of whom were unchurched. They turned not to the Bible, but rather to an anti-war pamphlet authored by Mark Twain entitled *The War Prayer*, reading it aloud in unison. A middle aged, unchurched man shared his reflection on what we had read, saying, "Society just goes crazy when war starts." He continued, "I'm really struggling with this. I just don't know how we can communicate the peace of God with people right now. The world around us is so insane that it just gets harder and harder. I am praying that God will sustain my optimism but..."

That small gathering was such a contrast to the large meeting at Blue Grass Church just days earlier. This was the dividing line in the struggle between the pro-war conservative Christians and the anti-war liberals. The liberals didn't even have their own churches where they could gather. The conservative Christians, on the other hand, had a place where they gathered regularly to exchange ideas and confirm the correctness of their opinions. Sociologists refer to the places of communication in which people can receive ongoing confirmation of their beliefs as "plausibility structures" (Berger; 1967, p.20)

During the latter half of the 20th century conservative churches in the U.S. experienced growth by focusing on and responding to people's personal problems such as family issues. Meanwhile, liberal churches neglected the personal needs of people and chose rather to focus on the Bible as a work of literary interest and issues of global social justice, and subsequently declined in numbers. One could say that the loss of power within the anti-war movement is the result of liberals letting go of the church as a plausibility structure.

IN CONCLUSION, GLEANINGS FOR JAPANESE CHRISTIANS:

The liberal democratic party won a landslide victory in the lower house election of September, 2005. In spite of the many frightening signs of a shift to the right, as marked by Prime Minister Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and his strong support of the deployment of National Defense troops to Iraq, the parties that work to protect the Constitution, such as the Socialist Democratic Party and the Communist Party were not able to show any significant gains. It is said that the reason for the Liberal Democrat's victory was Prime Minister Koizumi's singular focus on the privatization of the postal system. He was able to reduce his campaign issues to a simple "for or against" question with regard to his proposed postal reform and many voters found his masterful and zealous performance on this issue very appealing.

There is a parallel with President Bush's singular insistence several years ago, that society's greatest issue is the war on terrorism. He strong armed other nations into choosing to be for or against the U.S. in this war and he subsequently won the overwhelming approval of the American public. In last September's election the opposition parties attempted to speak with reason about the numerous political issues at hand, and even appealed to the constitution but they were not able to capture the hearts of the masses. Are not the Christians of Japan following in the same footsteps as the opposition parties in the world of politics? 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. At the same time, we must make our greatest effort to capture the hearts of the masses that are sensing a loss of foundation amidst the instability of this postmodern age and the subsequent perversion of value systems.

If the church of Japan truly desires to continue speaking the truth, we must come face to face with the reality of the thirty some thousand people who take their own lives every year and not turn a deaf ear to those who are hurting and seeking comfort amidst their personal problems. We must provide a place where people can form bonds of trust with others that allow totally honest conversation. Such efforts are not some form of populism or a detour in the efforts to build a world that is free of war. Japan, just like the U.S. is becoming increasingly conservative and moving toward the right. In our fight against that trend we must never let go of the church.

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