

Opening extract from  
**The Gospel of  
Risk and its  
Enemies**

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## INTRODUCTION

There has only ever been one authentic Christian gospel: the gospel of risk. First and foremost it is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the crucified and risen Saviour of the world, who as soon as he engaged on his public ministry was in danger physically, mentally and spiritually from all the evil forces of the world. Throughout Jesus of Nazareth's ministry, despite the increasing signs of mounting opposition, he never eschewed the risk-ridden pathway which always lay before him. Therefore his gospel was always the gospel of risk, for its 'enunciation' (proclaiming) and its 'doing' (works) continually invoked misunderstanding, hatred and condemnation in his enemies. The gospel of risk's great historic culmination was and is the cross; the sudden apparent ending of Christ's ministry route with his nailing to a wooden beam in a putrid place reserved for the execution of criminals outside the city walls.

All the great apostles and those like-minded spirits who followed them in the opening centuries of the early Church, maintained the authenticity of the gospel of risk. In most part they maintained it in the way of the Saviour; at the cost of their very lives. Since the 'heady' era of early Christianity the history

of Christ's church on earth has been subject to much development, fluctuation and to much internal division with resultant splintering into various segmented factions. Despite the often abandonment of the gospel of risk by various church leaders and cleric practitioners there has always been down the succeeding ages, great figures of resolute conscience who have staked all to uphold Christ's authentic gospel. This, the true gospel, not the gospel of self-satisfaction, self-congratulation or self-comfort, but the gospel enshrined in Christ's words:

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it". (1)

Take away these words and one has immediately lost the core of Christianity. And it is when the Church – or its various segments of denominations – forgets or chooses to forget these words that Christianity is manifested in a false light. The gospel of risk is a gospel which cannot bypass or evade suffering. There is indeed experience of joy and peace for those who are re-birthed in Christ, but there is also the demand for self-sacrifice, for renunciation of the old Adam-self. And this is precisely where the cost and pain lies. A Christianity without a cost to its adherents is mere chicanery. We do well to remember J.B. Phillips' warning:

"Christianity is full of joy, but it is not a joy-ride".(2)

And in fact all in the true line of great Christian reformers,

revivalists and thinkers have always insisted on this point of view. Thus we have for instance, Martin Luther's re-centring of theology on the cross, with its emphasis weighted on the costliness of the salvation wrought by Christ ; we have John Wesley often putting himself at considerable personal risk in preaching the gospel outside the relative safety of church walls; and a thinker such as Soren Kierkegaard who chose the bitter task of an isolated prophet riding against the grain of a complacent middle class Christendom.

Throughout the centuries there has always been the danger for Christians of all persuasions and de-nominations of falling into the cosy trap of conformity. What I am concerned about in this book is precisely this danger with reference to contemporary Christianity. But it is a danger which I believe is manifest on two quite different fronts. For this reason the problem is at once more exacting, requiring as it were two separate responses which deal specifically with each of these forms of Christian conformity. However, the capital difficulty lies in the fact that these two threats to the pursual of the authentic gospel, namely contemporary Christian fundamentalism and Christian liberalism, are both at loggerheads with one another. In other words, fundamentalists and liberals regard each other, if not quite as deadly foes, at least as very dangerously misguided opponents. Further, none of those who make up the members of these two ism's would regard themselves as complacent conformists. In fact they would feel absolutely insulted to be viewed in such a manner! For on the contrary, both the fundamentalists and liberals regard themselves as being radical in what they do. In most cases they genuinely

believe that they are promoting Christianity in the best possible way.

My intention in this book is to give an overview of the reasons why the fundamentalists and liberalist groupings of the western Christian Church tend to think along their respective thought lines and to put forward the case that despite having some very positive aspects, they both end up in the deadlock of complacency and conformity – albeit often unknowingly to the adherents. It must also be added here that this book is examining fundamentalism and liberalism in terms of Protestantism rather than Catholicism. Within the latter it is reasonably clear that there are movements or tendencies which to some extent mirror Protestantism's conservative and liberal extremist groups. There are Catholic lay thinkers and theologians who are liberal to the extent of adopting a more ecumenical approach; who also possess an understanding which acknowledges such fields for example, as psychoanalysis, and who evince a deeper awareness of the challenges of the post-modern age with its massive western consumerism and the appalling poverty and oppression experienced by 'third world' peoples. But on the main, most of such 'liberal' Catholics would not seriously question the central tenets of their Christian faith. It is the nature of the great difference between Catholicism and Protestantism, that generally speaking, once a Catholic reaches the point of being unable to accept the basic doctrines of Christianity (such as the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection) he or she is a Catholic no longer; whereas a Protestant who reaches the same point can still very easily continue as a Protestant by switching to another

more accommodating grouping such as the Quakers or Unitarians. On the other hand, there are some Catholics whose fundamentalist attitude very much parallels their Protestant counterparts; they have no truck with ecumenicalism or inter-faith dialogue; they adhere to a pessimistic end-times view, and hold hard-line views on such issues as abortion, homosexuality and euthanasia. However, I would suggest that these type of attitudes are to some extent inherent in the inbuilt conservatism of Catholicism, and I do not regard them as forming – at least in the west – a movement matching the significance of the fundamentalist Protestant churches.

Granted then that this study will be concerned with Protestantism, it is now essential before one can go on any further to make at least some tentative definitions of what is meant by fundamentalism and liberalism with regard to contemporary twenty-first century western Christianity. It is not my intention here to attempt any wide-scale examination of fundamentalism as a historical-socio or psychological phenomenon. The term 'liberalism' (as I shall use it in the following pages) will be applicable and restricted to denoting liberalism's influential presence in western Protestantism. (Obviously, the wider sense of 'liberalism' would include as well as religion the fields of philosophy, economics, politics and education). I shall be looking broadly at liberal Protestantism's current basis and influence, and therefore it will not be my purpose to attempt a full-scale critique of the involved historical developments of liberal theology.

Thus, my object will be to try and evaluate what I take to be the

particularly dominating, contemporary characteristics, or better, mentalities, of fundamentalist and liberalist Christian extrapolations and to establish their relationship to what I consider to be the authentic gospel of risk.

Firstly, then, what is contemporary Christian fundamentalism? In a nutshell it is primarily a resolutely literalist belief in the Bible, which thereby downgrades God and truth into the sphere of materialism. I would submit that this unswerving, idolatrous view, which makes the Bible into a kind of cheap answer-book to all life's problems and mysteries, is the fundamentalist's bed-rock position from which all else stems. It ought perhaps be added here that Pentecostalism *per se* should not necessarily be seen as synonymous with fundamentalism as it is outlined above. Pentecostalism as a movement refers primarily not to a set of theological attitudes but rather to a particular 'releasing' way or style of worship, (being based upon a re-affirmation of the Holy Spirit's power of infusing Christians with awareness of the special charismatic gifts such as tongues and healing). As such, Pentecostal churches can, like other denominations, evince either broad-minded or more narrow-minded attitudes depending on the mentalities involved of those who lead and partake in the worship. Though it is of course true that Pentecostalism, because of its essentially vitalist approach does have strong anti-intellectual tendencies which particularly render it susceptible to the fundamentalist attitude and mentality. However, it would be both unfair and clumsy to directly equate Pentecostalism with fundamentalism as it is clear that the latter cuts across a variety of denominations which include even some episcopalian churches.

Secondly, what might serve as an initial core definition of contemporary Christian liberalism? I would suggest that the concept of human autonomy is absolutely central, and that it is autonomy with regard to the individual being absolutely free to pursue his or her own agenda in terms of interpreting and practising belief. Again, what is to be immediately noted is that by exclusively focusing on independence rather than dependence, Protestant liberalism lays itself open to self-idolatry.

The above are of course both merely basic preliminary definitions which in the following chapters I will be attempting to substantially enlarge upon. I have entitled this book: *The Gospel of Risk and its Enemies*, and have perceived the foremost enemies as being what I have just now roughly defined as Christian fundamentalism and Christian liberalism. However, I must again stress that these isms are very broad umbrellas indeed. What I do not want to suggest is that fundamentalism *per se* or liberalism *per se* are both totally flawed extrapolations of Christianity. It is all too easy to condemn in a cavalier, absolutist way, and this book is not intended as merely a kind of double witch hunt. For a start, the complexity of human beings, their motivations and thought-patterns does not warrant any such easy blanket dismissals. Just as the generally used political and cultural terms, "conservative" and "liberal," are tended to be used in a rather simplistic either-or way to imply on the one hand narrowness of outlook and on the other, width of outlook, so too can fundamentalism and liberalism be crudely invoked in the same reductive fashion. I must repeat that it is not my intention to

merely condemn. There is no reason why one should not try and discover and appreciate what is valuable and significant within these 'isms. Why does one in fact become critical of such movements? The answer must be that because of their extremist tendencies one feels that such movements are either veering into heresy (liberalism) or into a regressive attitude of anti-intellectualism (fundamentalism).

One becomes critical of these movements not necessarily because of their starting points, but rather because they invariably go beyond a certain point – they pass the twin points of balanced judgement and religious humility. That is to say they go too far; the proponents of these 'isms reach the point where they make all sorts of overblown and wholly opinionated statements. The extreme liberalist will assert that all western Christian theology is nothing but the remnants of some outmoded form of religious colonialism and the extreme fundamentalist will declare that if you don't believe in the literal Garden of Eden with its talking snake, you can't be a true Christian.

But aside from these gross statements which cannot possibly be substantiated in any meaningful way, there are still certain aspects within both fundamentalist and liberalist Christianity which are worth taking note of. Why in fact does any movement obtain a significant degree of popularity? Why, for instance were the Gnostic and Arian heresies such dominating episodes in the history of Christianity? Why, because as in any significant heresy, there is contained within it a powerful element of Christian truth. Thus the positive aspect of Gnosticism centres on the striking contrast between the

completeness – fullness – of God and the incompleteness, the deficiency of humankind. In the case of Arianism, the positive motivating force centred on preserving the unity and divine uniqueness of God. In both examples, we thus find the expression of valuable Christian truth. No orthodox Christian would deny these basic truths, that God, in contrast to his creatures, is both absolute plenitude and undivided divinity. However, the point is that both Gnosticism and Arianism went on far beyond these admissible Christian positions. For instance, the Gnostic denial of God becoming incarnate in human flesh and the Arian denial of Christ's divine equality with God both fall into the categories of heresy because they have moved into unbiblical positions. Thus, what contains much good is spoilt by being mixed up with the application of extremist logic. Heresy is the going too far, not necessarily the initial starting point. Given such examples, it thus becomes more evident why people are drawn into the fundamentalist and liberalist extrapolations of Christianity. The initial starting points may well be very attractive and inviting, but it is what is added onto them and the direction to where they lead which constitutes the problem. Those who get involved in the ultra fundamentalist and liberalist Christian groupings usually fail to distinguish between the wholesome and extremist elements which make up such approaches. Once one uncritically goes down these 'ism pathways everything becomes more extreme; either all who don't think in a narrow, literalistic way are 'faithless', or all who accept the central church doctrines, are out of date, bigoted puritans.

It will be my purpose in the following chapters to isolate out the

good from the bad characteristics in both contemporary Christian fundamentalism and liberalism. Modern human life with all its social interactions is increasingly complex. To state this is an obvious truism. However, it needs to be often restated, precisely because the tendency of people who go down extremist religious avenues is to adopt simplistic outlooks on life. And the obvious resulting danger is a Manichaeian outlook on life; truth is either-or, with no gradients in between. Just as the fundamentalist brands all those who believe in evolution as heretics, so too, does the liberalist scoff at those who believe in the doctrine of Original Sin. In the one case the fundamentalist, just because he or she doesn't understand the concept of evolution, assumes it is heretical and accordingly labels all who adhere to it as liberal (e.g. heretic). In the other case the liberalist is content to assume that all Christians who believe in the doctrine of the Fall are childish literalists. And here the corresponding failure is one of not being able to accept or realize that such a key church doctrine can be understood by enlightened non-literalist approaches.

I have already drawn attention to the broad cultural terms of conservatism and liberalism as often being used as derisory labels to be stuck on opponents. But the truth in fact is that the complexity of human social life is posited on apparently conflicting and indeed, contradictory elements. Thus there are both conservative and liberal elements mixed up in most human personalities. No one is hundred per cent conservative or liberal in their personality characteristics. There are always some areas of apparent contradiction. But further, it is appropriate that at certain times one should evince a liberal

attitude, for instance, forgiveness for some personal hurt or toleration of a potentially annoying disturbance. Also, it is equally appropriate at other times to hold a conservative attitude in terms of perhaps the natural environment or defending established values which have a proven quality against dubious, new ideas and approaches. In the Christian pilgrimage, just as in all human life, there are times to be conservative just as there are times to be liberal. It is merely a question of context, as Ecclesiastes says, there is “a time to embrace and a time to refrain”(3). Human life is the interplay of various responses to the existential situation. But it is clearly extremism when one remains entrenched in absolute conservative and liberalist viewpoints. The right response at the right time makes for effective and creative human living and of course this applies to both Christians and non-Christians. Therefore in a properly balanced human life there should be a creative interaction of both conservative and liberal elements. The radicalism of the gospel is posited upon a new dynamic relationship between conservative and liberal elements juxtaposed with the truly revolutionary element of incarnate grace.

A primary aim of this book will be to make it clear why Christian fundamentalism and liberalism, in their extreme, totalistic forms, are imbalances which woefully fail to adhere to the model for fruitful human interaction set by the Saviour, Jesus Christ. I will attempt to highlight the gospel of risk's radical and authentic difference from such extrapolations. But I hope in the course of this analysis to make clear that fundamentalist and liberalist elements are not in themselves in opposition to the true gospel

of risk. On the contrary, I will attempt to show how such elements are in their proper context key to Christ's gospel. What I believe needs to be brought out is on the one hand the difference between a creative rather than a destructive usage of Christian fundamentals and on the other hand the difference between a creative rather than merely a *laissez-faire* usage of Christianity's great liberalistic features. The Christian gospel – Christ's authentic gospel of risk – is primarily a gospel of creative action rather than of cut and dried theory. There is of course a rich strata of theology within it, for Christ is, after all, the supreme revelation of God, but the gospel is much more concerned about 'doing' and the quality of the act of 'living'.

Authentic Christianity is first and foremost a religion of praxis; it is about boldly proclaiming the 'good news' of God's forgiveness, and about the effectual healing of all who experience lostness in terms of body, mind and spirit. Above all, the gospel is about saving what is lost; about the salvation of men and women of all races. It is about the salvation available to be freely given to those who have lost their way. And this salvation constitutes the new 'way' which is Jesus Christ, himself. What Christ's gospel is not about is extremism, fanaticism and reductionism. Rather, his gospel is concerned with human bridge-making, wholeness and harmony; the cutting free from bondage to reductive, partisan approaches to life's rich tapestry. We cannot but not remember St. John's remembrance of Christ's wonderful statement: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full". (4)

And to bring in the kingdom of more abundant living, one

needs a new creative orientation towards the various modes of life. It is not a case of discarding one element for another; that is, either jettisoning beliefs in key fundamentals or beliefs in key liberalistic areas. Rather, it is a case of enlarging one's perspective and this involves a new, radical re-integration of Christian elements. One can only move nearer to any great human or spiritual truth by means of a new radical re-integration of perception. But the tragedy lies in that most men and women are inherently entrenched in their orientations and prefer to carry on as they are. History for instance, proves how hard it has been to bring in new ideas concerning science and the arts and how hard it has been to effect improvements in terms of social and political justice.

Christ's gospel is the gospel of risk because Jesus came to effect the greatest revolution of all. He came incarnate, as the Son of God, in order to show humankind the way to find forgiveness, wholeness and harmony; the way out of fear, hatred, selfishness and unforgiveness. This is truly the gospel of risk. A gospel where God in Christ is prepared to voluntarily dismantle his own divine privileges and instead to mantle himself in vulnerable human flesh; prepared even to be rejected as he comes to offer men and women entrance into his glorious kingdom:

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him”. (5)

Somewhere in-between the literalist reductionism of

fundamentalism and the clinical scepticism of liberalism is the pure gospel of risk; a gospel which preserves both the polar qualities of fervour and balanced judgement, but which also adds the sheer force of God's grace in its unrelenting work of offering healing and renewing love.