A Brief History of Bible Conferences

Acts 20:27
2 Ti 2:15

What is a Bible Conference? Is it just another name for a revival? Why should a church have one and what should it accomplish? These are valid questions that need to be answered to help people understand the value of the Bible Conference. In order to understand the importance of these conferences it is necessary to have an understanding of their history and influence in America.

I. History of Bible Conferences

Most church historians see the years after the Civil War as the foundational years for the Bible Conference movement. It is from these meetings that the independent and fundamental movements began.

"Another war was soon to break out, one which has not yet ended, a war over the Bible, one destined to do more damage, wreck more churches, erode more theological centers, and mislead more people than all our wars. The first chapter in this conflict might be dated accurately as the twenty-five years from 1875 to 1900. A massive attack was raised against the verbal, plenary, and infallible authority of the Word of God. Scholars, teachers, denominational executives, and educators joined to reject the essential truths of historic Christianity. It was a war begun without a formal resolution of hostilities, without the marching of armies and the firing of the guns; it was even more than deadly for it sliced away the spiritual foundations of our nation and our heritage. It was in the midst of such a vast deterioration that a valiant few arose to preserve the doctrines of the Word, the faith of our fathers, at any and all cost."[1]

Reasons / Subjects

Here it would be helpful to list those subjects which started this theological war: humanism, critical theology, and new studies in philosophy, science, and comparative religions—all dominated by evolutionary thinking and a widespread craving to accommodate all truth to the modern world. Christianity was told to be "progressive," "forward-looking," "tolerant," and "open-minded." It is interesting that the emergent church leadership calls for the same things today.

"To meet this threat these men set themselves apart and thus arose the Bible conference movement. The first one was very small; some six men meeting for a summer's holiday and inspiration at Swampscott, Massachusetts, in 1876 but, from such a small beginning arose the mighty and meaningful Prophetic Conference of 1878 and 1886 in New York and Chicago. These were the genesis of Bible conferences and prophecy meetings in local churches and summer vacation spots. The best known one was the Niagara Bible Conference. So they met in Bible conferences, public and private, to discuss current trends and to provide Biblical answers. They were mighty men, able pulpiteers, careful exegetes, persuasive Bible teachers, and unmovable defenders of the faith."[2]

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[1]George W. Dollar "The Early Days of American Fundamentalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123 (1966):115
[2]IBID p 116

These men were disturbed by the vast fields of neglected truth. The Bible now became an area of study and exposition. The method of interpretation (hermeneutics) was a strict literalism, "for the Book was both given and must be taken literally, or, as Dr. Gordon once wrote in his paper The Watchword, it must be taken literally or liberally. Consequently, they held it as verbally inspired and without error or lack. Such an attitude and study produced doctrines which not only did not agree with higher criticism, new sciences, and evolution, but openly espoused Biblical concepts hidden for centuries, once the deposit of apostles and believers of early Christianity. These truths were the different plans of God for Israel and the church, literal fulfillment of all prophecy, the "any-moment" coming of the Lord to rapture the church, the certainty of the thousand-year reign of Christ, the total separation of Christians from all forms of worldliness, and the urgency of soul-winning and world-wide missions before Christ comes."[3]

Along with these the historic doctrines reaffirmed were, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, and the certainty of heaven and hell, the second coming.

Since these men believed in the literal interpretation of Scripture, it was taught that prophecies made to Israel were for Israel and Israel only. At one conference it was clearly taught that "to substitute church whenever we read *Israel* in the prophets is plausible but fundamentally wrong." It was held that "not once in the Gospels, Acts, or the Epistles or Apocalypse does Israel mean the Gentile Church. Not once in the sixty times it is used in the whole New Testament does it mean aught else than Abraham's seed, believing and unbelieving." The covenants were made to Israel and must be read and taken literally and will be fulfilled literally to those to whom (Israel) they were made

As might be expected, they saw God's plan for Israel and the church as separate and they were early dispensationalists. Gordon wrote that "all dispensations [given as seven dispensations in the Prophetic Conference messages] were planned and predestined by Him."

Results of the need

1. A determination was made to teach on neglected truth
2. A wake up call was needed for Christianity in America
3. A new emphasis of spreading the gospel

This would be accomplished through expository preaching, a dispensational hermenutic, and a focus on irreducible minimums- the fundamentals. These included(but not limited to)- creation by the direct act of God, inerrancy, infallibility, and preservation of Scripture, the Virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, and 2nd coming of Christ. [4]

The results were a multi denominational movement consisting of men who were concerned about the integrity of the faith and the direction "religion" was heading. Many left denominations that were allowing liberal philosophy to take over and declared themselves to be independent. This cross section of Christianity was reflected by the speakers at many of the early Bible Conferences.

Speakers from the Farwell Hall Conference, Chicago 1886

[3]IBID 118
[4]David Beale, "In Pursuit of Purity,"7

Presbyterians

John Kendel- Sanctification, a dispensational view of sanctification

David Marquis- Eschatology as Taught by Christ, a pretrib rapture

Nathaniel West- Prophecy and Israel,differences between premillennal and postmillenal views

Baptists

F.L. Chapell- Holy Spirit in Relation to the Advent, focus on HS work and ministry

A.J. Gordon- Modern Delusions, dangers and rise of false teachings

Joseph Herr- The Importance of Prophetic Study, need for careful, rightly divided study of prophecy.

These are just a small sample of the messages and papers that were delivered during the conference. Speakers were also Methodists, Anglican, Congregationalist, Dutch Reformed, Lutheran, Swedish Covenanter, and some with no denominational affiliation. All were concerned about the huge volume of neglected truth in the churches.[5]

Need for Today

This movement was the foundation for the independent and fundamental church movement that we know today. Sadly very few in these movements know the history of the movement and many have fallen into empty, hard hearted service. In many areas the movement has been infected by a salesmanship style of gospel presentation, shallow preaching designed to bring an emotional response, and a self sanctification (Galatian) mentality.

Bible Conferences today should be concerned with the following

1. Get back to neglected truth- Positional truth, proper use of spiritual gifts, proper use of the OT, rightly dividing in prophecy, keeping the Church and Israel in their places
2. Absolute need of the Holy Spirits power in the life. How to be spiritual with out a performance, guilt driven basis.
3. A proper understanding of law and grace- understanding of grace beyond salvation, and the need for grace in daily life
4. The churches responsibility- to equip and prepare the body to serve, ministry is not done by the "professionals."
5. Re-focus missions- not just an "overseas" endeavor to understand the mission field is every where, all the time.

[5]IBID, 55-58

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