

Fundamentalism

What is it? What is its history in connection with Christianity? Is it good or bad?

Introduction

‘Fundamental’ is an adjective relating to the vital base, or central importance, of something. It regards the essential nature of something or the crucial point about an issue; thus you can have fundamental right, fundamental issues or fundamental problems.

‘Fundamentals’ is a noun relating to a central or primary rule or principle on which something is based.

In recent years ‘Fundamentalism’ has been used to refer to the strict doctrines of any ideology, particularly Islam. However, that is best expressed by an Islamic word such as ‘Salafism’.¹

Historically, the word has been used to describe a form of Protestantism which upholds belief in the strict and literal interpretation of the Bible, including its narratives, doctrines, prophecies, and moral laws; traditional Christianity, if you will. In the Oxford dictionary this is its first definition.

Many people have identified Fundamentalism with evangelicalism but this is an error; they are not the same but do have some things in common. Thus many evangelicals have criticised Fundamentalism heavily.

So what is Christian Fundamentalism and where did it start?

History

Fundamentalism developed in the 1920s, especially in America, in opposition to modern Biblical criticism; it was especially influential among Baptist groups.

The general rise of Modernism

Modernism is a catch-all term for a number of movements from the mid-19th century onwards, that promoted doctrines which led to an attack on the authority and authenticity of the Bible and affected traditional Christian morals.

In a wider sense Modernism referred to various movements in the arts and social culture from the early 19th century into the 20th century. In art it embraced Cubism, Dada and Surrealism. In music it included the works of Stravinsky. In architecture it refers to the Modern Movement, e.g. Bauhaus. In literature it refers to a rejection of the 19th-century conventions of realism; for instance Kafka, Conrad, Proust, Faulkner, Joyce, Woolf and the avant-garde. In poetry free-verse and illogical thoughts became popular instead of

¹ The belief that the revitalisation of Islamic society can only come about through a return to the fundamental principles and practices of early Islam.

traditional metre and concepts (Pound, TS Eliot). In the theatre, Pirandello, Brecht, and Ionesco opened up new forms of abstraction. Modernist writing often expresses a sense of cultural disintegration following World War I. In English, its landmarks are Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922).

The modernist attack of Christianity

I have written many times analysing the attack on Christianity that developed in earnest after 1830. This was a concerted Satanic plan regarding the Devil's strategies for his end time assault on God and aim to dominate the earth under a totalitarian fascist government. His chief tool on Earth was, and is, the global elite, which covers a wide range of very rich, powerful operatives in politics, banking, finance and global corporations.

While Satan provided the temptation of the minds of men to develop new doctrines from hell, the global elite provided the cash and strategic plans to make these ideas successful by deceiving the world.

We could make a long list of modernistic developments that proved to be part of a war against Christianity, but I will mention the chief components.

- *Evolutionary theory*: essentially a denial of Creationism; removing God from being the cause of all things and making man his own god, or worse – just another dumb animal. This not only removes God from creation, inspiring atheism, it also takes away the need for any kind of morality to be incipient in man. Life arising from a chemical soup has no fundamental ethics.
- *Mechanism*: removing God from being intrinsically involved in all that happens in the universe and the working of physical laws established by God. Mechanistic theory is like a new form of Deism, God isn't involved in the running of the world, there is no divine providence, everything is a natural process. It is the philosophy that all natural phenomena, including life and thought, have a mechanical explanation by physics and chemistry.
- *Scientism*: the belief that modern science can provide all the answers man requires so that religion is unnecessary. [Christians are not opposed to true science, which is merely investigation, observation and testing of theories of explanation.]
- *Existentialism*: A philosophy that centred upon man and denied all absolute values. It also disparaged scientific knowledge, stressing instead the importance of human freedom. The centring upon the existence of the individual human being and his free will. Man, not God, is the starting point of epistemology.² Since individualism reigns, Existentialists come to very different conclusions; Kierkegaard was a theist, while Satre was an atheist.
- *Social Sciences*: advanced by people like Herbert Spencer.³ He was an early adherent of evolutionary theory, which informed his *Principles of Psychology* (1855). Spencer embraced Darwin's theory of natural selection (published 1859) and coined the phrase the '*survival of the fittest*' in 1864. He synthesised the natural and social sciences in the *Programme of a System of Synthetic Philosophy* (1862–96) and advocated social and economic laissez-faire. The effect of his reliance upon Darwinism meant that sociology was founded upon evolutionary theory regarding people and Biblical principles were overthrown. Sin was ignored along with the concept of absolute moral principles.
- *Liberal theology*: this is Modernism in religion. It was a concerted attack on all Biblical theological claims and the imposition of the rational ideas of men instead. The roots of this go back to Schleiermacher and beyond. The Liberal attack took many forms:

² The philosophical theory of knowledge; investigation of truth.

³ Spencer (1820–1903) was a British philosopher and sociologist.

Higher Criticism (e.g. the Documentary Hypothesis) was the attack on the authenticity of various Bible books, especially the Pentateuch; in other words an attack on inspiration and revelation. The attack on crucial doctrines: the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the atonement and the resurrection. The Tübingen School's attack on the authenticity of the NT. The attack on the doctrines of sin and grace, as well as the concept of hell as eternal punishment. Pushing the Social Gospel (the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man) instead of repentance and faith.

Liberalism infected most church institutions, particularly the theological seminaries. However, World War One dealt a massive blow to Liberalism since its lofty ideas about mankind gradually evolving into a better and better society were ruined. The optimism of the end of the 19th century was smashed to pieces by grim reality. This was worsened by the subsequent Bolshevik Revolution and Red Terror, multiple revolutions and terrorist attacks, the rise of fascism and WWII.

However, Liberalism tried to reassert itself later in Neo-Orthodoxy ('*The new Modernism*'⁴), religious Socialism⁵ and 'God is dead' theology.

The reaction

Gradually, as movement after movement began to attack the very basic principles of the Christian faith, a groundswell reaction occurred whereby eminent Christians and church leaders began to produce apologetics asserting the truth of the Bible. There were many localised apologetic works and many godly preachers spoke against the claims of Modernism in sermon after sermon. However, one set of works caught the public's attention in particular.

A movement developed around a series of twelve booklets published between 1910 and 1912. These were called, '*The Fundamentals: a testimony to the truth*'. I have these booklets in bound form of four volumes and they are a mixed bunch.

Booklet one consists of

- *The virgin birth of Christ* by Prof. James Orr, United Free Church college, Glasgow.
- *The deity of Christ* by Prof. Benjamin B Warfield, Princeton Theological Seminary.
- *The purpose of the incarnation* by Rev Campbell Morgan, pastor of Westminster Chapel, London.
- *The personality and deity of the Holy Spirit* by Rev RA Torrey.
- *The proof of the living God* by Rev AT Pierson.
- *History of the Higher Criticism* by Canon Dyson Hague.
- *A personal testimony* by Howard A Kelly.

The publishing was paid for by 'Two Christian men', successful businessmen, and the booklets were given to, 'every pastor, evangelist, missionary, theological professor, theological student, Sunday school superintendent, YMCA and YWCA secretary in the English speaking world'. A committee was appointed by these men to supervise the publication. By the time of the third booklet, the committee had received 10,000 letters of appreciation from all over the world. Booklet three initially went to 250,000 people.

An edited version of the booklets was published by Kregel that was edited down originally by RA Torrey and revised by Charles L Feinberg in 1958.

⁴ Cornelius Van Til.

⁵ Paul Tillich.

The aim of this interdenominational venture was laudable and it no doubt did much good; but its breadth of inclusion was wide. Contributors included great Reformed evangelicals like BB Warfield but also included: Pentecostals, Brethren, Baptists of various types, Anglicans (evangelical and non-evangelical), Congregationalists, Presbyterians and others. Theologically it included Calvinists, Arminians, Wesleyans, Amyraldians and Semi-Pelagians. While these may have agreed on cardinal points like the Trinity, they widely disagreed about grace, redemption, the work of the Spirit, sanctification and ecclesiology.

In May 1919 in Philadelphia, the World's Christian Fundamentals Association was formed with WB Riley as president. It required members to adhere to nine doctrinal points:

1. The inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.
2. The Trinity.
3. The deity and virgin birth of Christ.
4. The creation and fall of man.
5. Christ's substitutionary atonement.
6. The bodily resurrection and ascension of Christ.
7. The regeneration of believers.
8. The imminent and personal return of Christ.,
9. The resurrection: eternal blessedness for the redeemed and eternal woe for the unregenerate.

The term 'Fundamentalism' began to come into use about 1920 to describe the anti-modernist party in the US Northern Baptist Convention. It is said to have been coined by Curtis Lee Laws, Baptist editor of the *Watchman-Examiner* in 1920. Gradually it became a term to describe Christians with moderate evangelical beliefs and a militant character. This militant tendency was seen especially after the formation of the Baptist Bible Union in 1923.

New Evangelicalism

Some evangelicals withstood the militant tendencies of Fundamentalism and developed New Evangelicalism, beginning with Harold J Ockenga in 1947 but looking back to James Orr. These repudiated confrontation and separation in the church but celebrated inclusivism. They claimed to be orthodox but gave ground to science and rationalism in an emphasis upon scholarship, including adopting evolutionary theory (theistic evolution). Their inclusivist attitude in time led to them adopting ecumenism, even with Liberals and Roman Catholics. Their softness on doctrine led to them being involved with unsuitable social projects with unbelievers.

Fundamentalists charged New Evangelicals as being Neo-Modernists. Essentially New Evangelicalism was a movement of compromise and worldliness. Thus even the Bible was compromised with new definitions about inspiration ('modified inerrancy', 'limited infallibility') which they affirmed included legends, historical mistakes, factual errors and doctrinal mistakes.

Fundamentalism as a pejorative term

Within a short period from the beginnings of Fundamentalism, the term began to be used pejoratively. It was used to describe religious people who were conservative, militant, unscholarly and reactionary but fervent in criticism. Fundamentalists were portrayed like

the proverbial Irishman who didn't know what he believed in but was willing to fight for it.⁶

Over time it began to be applied to ideologies and religions that were not Christian, especially Islamic Fundamentalism. Thus most secular people view Fundamentalism negatively.

Positive aspects of traditional Fundamentalism

- Defence of Biblical inspiration.
- Defence of Biblical supernaturalism (e.g. miracles or the virgin birth).
- Defence of the Trinity.
- Defence of the deity of Christ.
- Defence of substitutionary atonement.
- Defence of the person of the Holy Spirit.
- Affirmation of the doctrine of sin and original sin.
- Affirmation of the importance of conversion.
- Affirmation of a personal Devil.
- Opposition to evolutionary theory.
- Opposition to Modernism.

Negative aspects of traditional Fundamentalism

Promotion of Premillennialism and often Dispensationalism

In America Premillennialism is equated with doctrinal orthodoxy and Amillennialism is heavily criticised due to Fundamentalism.

Most historic Reformed have been Amillennial. In fact Premillennialism ('chiliasm') was a small minority view throughout most of church history until the 19th century.⁷

A broad platform leading to ecumenism

This begins with acceptance of Arminians, Pentecostals, Charismatics and others and ends up with associations with Roman Catholics and other religions. In America today Fundamentalism is mostly connected to Charismatics, a very broad church.

An Amyraldian / Arminian Gospel

Most Fundamentalists are Arminians but some who consider themselves to be Calvinists are actually Amyraldians. In addition many are Wesleyan Arminians and perfectionists.

Thus the Biblical Gospel and the Doctrines of Grace are denied by most American Fundamentalists. Many Fundamentalists would deny: unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, the final perseverance of the saints, and justification by the gift of faith alone. Some deny progressive sanctification and have a faulty view of

⁶ No, I am not racist. My surname is Irish and my paternal grandfather was born in Belfast.

⁷ There were some Premillennialists, influenced by Jewish ideas, at the beginning of church history, then it faded away. In the Reformation chiliasm was considered irrelevant. It began to resurface during the prophetic millennial fervour of the mid-19th century and was accelerated by the Dispensational variety.

regeneration (making it by human choice). For example, a Fundamentalist Free Church pastor I once had dealings with called the doctrine of election, ‘*a serious heresy*’.

Clearly, ‘Fundamentalist’ does not adequately describe a historic Reformed believer.

Prominent US Fundamentalists

To give examples of leading American Fundamentalists, we can note: Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Tim LaHaye. None of these would inspire Reformed evangelicals.

Conclusion

If Christians require a descriptive term then it should be ‘Evangelical’. Evangelical means being founded upon the Biblical Gospel (*euaggelion*)⁸, which in turn means being founded upon what the Bible teaches and nothing else. No other descriptive term is necessary. However, to identify theological persuasion, that is interpretation of the Bible as God’s word, the best descriptive term is ‘Reformed’. This means being true to the Reformation principles that re-established Biblical orthodoxy. Chief among these would be the solas⁹ and the Doctrines of Grace.¹⁰

Using ‘Fundamentalist’ to describe Christians is problematic because while it includes many good things, it also includes several bad things, such as an Arminian Gospel.

I have never described myself as a ‘Fundamentalist’. In fact, I usually describe myself simply as a ‘Christian’. If necessary I then define that simply.

The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. Acts 11:26 (cf. Acts 26:28; 1 Pt 4:16.)

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⁸ This transliterates into English as *evangelion*.

⁹ *Sola Gratia*: grace alone, *Sola Fide*: faith alone, *Solus Christus*: Christ alone, *Sola scriptura*: Scripture alone, *Soli Deo gloria*: glory to God alone.

¹⁰ The Calvinistic TULIP: (Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the saints).