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# The Nature of Fundamentalism\*

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Fundamentalism is one of those words which seem to have a curious charge to them—an emotional, spiritual, religious charge. Whether applied to one's self or to someone else, it usually has further implications. The word fundamentalism is similar to other "ism" words

like socialism, Calvinism, pragmatism, or idealism; people tend to use it either as a badge of pride or as an epithet to hurl at someone they don't like.

We do seem to shilly-shally around in our use of the word "fundamentalism," however. Let me illustrate. While at a philosophy conference some years ago, I was talking with a philosopher about the nature of truth. He was quite enamored with Heidegger. As I began to tell him my view of truth, that my thought was based on the Bible, he looked a little strangely at me. To help him out of his perplexity, I said, "Really, I'm a fundamentalist." I thought I,

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\* This article is a transcribed and lightly edited version of an address given April 8, 1985, at the Christian Reformed Ministers Conference, Dordt College.

might as well tell him the worst; I could always make revisions later.

Part of the motivation for occasionally identifying myself in a secular context as a fundamentalist is to stress the solidarity that I have with fundamentalists in accepting the authority of the scriptures. I think that is one reason why J.I. Packer, who wrote a book some years ago on *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God*, also was prepared to defend fundamentalism, although he did put the word in quotes in the title.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in certain situations, I am prepared to call myself a fundamentalist, because for a secular person, fine distinctions between evangelical and fundamentalist are not very significant.

On the other hand, I also resist being identified as a fundamentalist. A couple of months ago, someone gave me a clipping from *Trouw*, the Christian or erstwhile Christian daily newspaper in the Netherlands, in which two visitors from the Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands reported regarding their visit to North American Christian Reformed churches. The paper reported that the visitors had some difficulty establishing contact with people in the Christian Reformed Church because Reformed people are constantly being bombarded by fundamentalism in the surrounding American culture: fundamentalist preachers and teachers are constantly telling CRC people that they believe the same things.

While acknowledging an influence of fundamentalism in the Christian Reformed Church, we ought to try to combat it. In good Reformed fashion, I want to discuss the nature of fundamentalism using three headings: first of all, the original historical phenomenon, then some remarks about the problem of definition, and finally, fundamentalism as a worldview.

### The Original Historical Phenomenon

When we deal with "isms" like fundamentalism, the definition of the concept depends very much on the origin of the ideology or the movement in question. Take gnosticism for example. There is a great debate among historians of religion as to exactly when and from what

source gnosticism arose. One's whole characterization of what gnosticism is—whether, for example, it can be detected in the New Testament—depends very much on one's view of its origins. Something similar can be said about Thomism, Barthianism and Calvinism and other "isms." Barth is reputed to have said, "Thank God that I am not a Barthian." Hence, in trying to distinguish what an "ism" is, one must always try to go back to the origin as a movement or ideology in order to get a grip on what is essential to it. So it is with fundamentalism.

In that light, I want to mention a few things about fundamentalism in the sense in which it first arose and got its name.<sup>2</sup> I am not going to deal with fundamentalism in the broad sense in which it is often used today (for example, Muslim fundamentalism or fundamentalism among the Jews). Instead, I will focus specifically on the historical movement which was first called "fundamentalism" in the 1920's.

A Baptist theologian named Curtis Lee Laws, in the 1920's, coined the word "fundamentalist" in a Baptist paper, the *Watchman Examiner*. The reason he could use that word and be expected to be understood was that shortly before that time, between 1910 and 1915, a series of twelve booklets called *The Fundamentals* had been published and broadly distributed in the English-speaking protestant world. Those *Fundamentals* were an extensive exposition by English-speaking representatives of classical protestant orthodoxy. There was nothing very sectarian or peculiar about these booklets. In fact, although I have not read them myself, I would guess, from accounts that I have read, that most of us would probably agree with 99 percent of what was written in *The Fundamentals*. They were scholarly expositions, quite moderate in tone, and not strident in any way. A number of the authors of the booklets were dispensationalists but did not bring this to the fore. They were against such things as higher criticism, evolution, modernism, Mormonism, various kinds of sects, and Roman Catholicism. In many ways, they were relatively standard and unexceptional statements of protestant orthodoxy.

Among the things presented in these *Fundamentals* were a number of doctrinal positions which came to be known as the five points of fundamentalism. The reason they were singled out was that the Presbyterian Church, in 1910, identified these five points as essential doctrines to which people had to hold. These five points, later becoming the flags or fundamentals of fundamentalism, are the following:

1. The inerrant scripture
2. The virgin birth
3. The substitutionary atonement view of Christ's death
4. Christ's bodily resurrection
5. The authenticity of Christ's miracles

In some later versions, other things were substituted. For example, the deity of Christ

of fundamentalism in its first manifestation was the holiness movement which had risen out of Methodism and which later gave rise to Pentacostalism. This movement, characterized by the doctrine of perfectionism, espoused the idea that it is possible for Christians to come to complete sanctification in this life.

The tradition of evangelistic revivalism was also a very important influence on original fundamentalism. Dwight Moody, the great evangelist of the nineteenth century, was, as it were, the incarnation of that whole tradition. In a sense, Moody was the progenitor of fundamentalism, but he lacked the one characteristic feature of later fundamentalism, its militancy. He was a man of peace who tried,

**Fundamentalism is that form of American protestantism which is most consistently anti-creational, i.e., is dominated by a number of non-integral or dualistic worldviews.**

was sometimes put in the place of the bodily resurrection. Basically, the *Fundamentals* affirmed an orthodox doctrine around which rallied the great movement of fundamentalism against modernism.

What were the roots of that fundamentalist movement and what were some of the components of its initial manifestation? According to Sandeen, the two chief sources of this movement were, first, Princeton theology and the doctrine of inerrancy, which he claims was an innovation, and, secondly, dispensationalism, which had come into the United States about the 1870's and gained a great deal of ground. Marsden adds that another important compo-

as much as possible, to work with whatever situation presented itself.

For example, Moody was initially quite active in urban relief work. He later related: "When I was at work for the City Relief Society before the fire I used to go to a poor sinner with the Bible in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other.... My idea was that I could open a poor man's heart by giving him a load of wood or a ton of coal when the winter was coming on, but I soon found out that he wasn't any more interested in the Gospel on that account. Instead of thinking how he could come to Christ, he was thinking how long it would be before he got the load of wood. If I had the Bible in one

hand and a loaf in the other the people always looked first at the loaf; and that was just the contrary of the order laid down in the Gospel."<sup>3</sup> So early in Moody's life, he turned away from a word-and-deed ministry and began to emphasize that the gospel was of exclusive importance and other things only distracted attention away from the word. This typifies the style of the revivals that Moody led, and the evangelism that he encouraged was to fire up people at the revival so they would leave eager to go out and evangelize. The top priority, the basic issue for the Christian life, was evangelism.

Marsden mentions a number of additional characteristic features of fundamentalism at that time. One was a shared belief in a kind of Baconian ideal of science, joined with a reliance on Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, which stressed that theology could be done in the same way as other sciences, by collecting and classifying objective facts. This view emphasized that human reason and man's common sense perception could lead him to truth simply through the direct apprehension of facts and through the rational organization of them.

A second characteristic feature of this early phase of the fundamentalist movement is that, in spite of what I just quoted from Moody, there was a tremendous social concern. Fundamentalists began many institutes and relief organizations for alcoholics, for fallen women, and for people in poverty. I mention this because in the early twentieth century, just before the famous fundamentalist controversies, there was a sudden drop in that emphasis. In the late nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, however, the evangelicals, the people who later became the fundamentalists, were characterized by tremendous social concern. As many scholars have pointed out, there is significantly less emphasis on helping people in need during the time just before and during the first World War. People speak of the "great reversal" in fundamentalist groups at that time. The main reason this change occurred is that fundamentalists came to associate programs of social help with the social gospel. The social gospel, of course, was

modernism and liberalism.

One final historical note to round off this sketchy picture of fundamentalism in the early twentieth century: in the public mind, and I suppose in all of our minds, fundamentalism is associated with the great Scopes Trial which took place in 1925. William Jennings Bryan was pitted against Clarence Darrow in a court battle over teaching evolution in schools. The trial basically made fundamentalism a laughing stock of the nation. It seems as though this trial symbolized the sudden demise of all respectability for fundamentalism. In years previous to 1925, fundamentalism and people who had been associated with it had considerable respect, prestige, and influence. Almost overnight, says Marsden, like a balloon that popped, fundamentalism turned from a respectable religious force to a laughing stock. And the situation by 1930, as Marsden describes it, was that people who, fifty years before, had been upstanding, solid, evangelical citizens, the pillars of society, now found themselves strangers in their own land. They were out of place in a new secularized culture.

### The Problem of Defining Fundamentalism

My second point deals with the problem of defining fundamentalism. What are we prepared to call fundamentalism? What are its most significant features as a continuing mindset? One might ask, "What's in a name? What does it really matter?" It matters quite a lot. As I indicated in my introductory comments, fundamentalism is a word which implies taking sides. It can either be a question of asserting your solidarity or a question of hurling epithets at someone. In current scholarly discussions about fundamentalism, defining fundamentalism is one of the bullets of contemporary spiritual warfare. It is analogous to the statement by anti-abortion groups that if you can get the opponent to the point that they use the word "baby" rather than "fetus" you know that they are coming around to your side. It is similar with fundamentalism. It depends on how people use that word.

Let me illustrate that with two recent books.

They are both by James Barr, a respected theologian and professor at Oxford University. The one is called simply, *Fundamentalism*. Fundamentalism, as he defines it, is simply orthodox protestantism, what we would call conservative evangelicalism. But Barr insists on using the label fundamentalism for that broader conception. In fact, he openly admits that he uses the term fundamentalism because it has all kinds of pejorative connotations. We read, for example: "Now fundamentalism is a bad word: the people to whom it is applied do not like to be so called. It is often felt to be a hostile and opprobrious term, suggesting narrowness, bigotry, obscurantism and sectarianism." And then later, "while the word 'fundamentalist' does carry the suggestion of narrowness, bigotry, obscurantism, and sectarianism, it remains an open question whether the suggestion, though unpleasant, is not a true and just one." Some of the people whom he discusses under this general heading are N. H. Ridderbos, Benjamin B. Warfield, Meredith Kline, J. Gersham Machen, Cornelius Van Til, and Edward Young.<sup>5</sup>

One of the unique things about *Fundamentalism* is that there is a certain plaintive tone on the part of Barr. It is not as though he is totally writing off the fundamentalists. Instead he's saying, "You have to recognize that we liberal persons are Christians, too." This book was a huge success in terms of sales, and no doubt Barr capitalized on it, since he recently published another book called *Beyond Fundamentalism*. In this book, Barr says that when fundamentalists (by which he means conservative, evangelical people with respect to scripture) begin to realize that their position on scripture is really untenable, they are usually left with nothing. He wants to show people who have seen the inherent defects of fundamentalism that they need not give up the faith if they have given up fundamentalism. And in the war of labels, he presses things a little further. Not only does he apply the word "fundamentalism" to all conservative evangelicals, but he now adopts for himself the term "evangelical." He is now a true evangelical, and the fundamentalist may not

use that term.

So one very influential contemporary definition of fundamentalism equates fundamentalism with any protestantism that has a high view of Biblical authority. It may very well be that in five years' time, we will no longer be able to speak of fundamentalism in the older sense, because influential books like these by Barr may establish a reasonable contender for a particular definition of fundamentalism. Of course, Barr's description has very little to do with the fundamentalism I described initially as that particular phenomenon in America in the early twentieth century—although there is some overlap, of course.

Another common definition of fundamentalism today is that which equates fundamentalism with protestantism in general. I came across a book not too long ago dealing with Lessing, the late eighteenth century German playwright and thinker, called *Lessing's Struggle with Fundamentalism*. I thought, "Was there fundamentalism already in Germany in the late eighteenth century?" It turns out that fundamentalism in that title means the Lutheran orthodoxy of Lessing's day.

Another use of the word fundamentalism today is to describe the extremist form of a religion, whether it is Mohommadanism, or Judaism, or the Ayatollah Khomeini. The Shiites, for example, are commonly called the Muslim Fundamentalists. Other people have even narrower definitions.

How are we going to answer this question: what is the true nature of fundamentalism? I am going to define it in a way which I think is defensible and which allows us to look at the issues a bit more sharply. I will do that by looking at fundamentalism as a worldview, which leads me to my third point.

### Fundamentalism as a Worldview

I propose to define fundamentalism as that form of American protestantism which is most consistently anti-creational, i.e., is dominated by a number of non-integral or dualistic worldviews. Now, what do I mean by that? "Worldview" is a bit of a slippery term. In

general, I mean by a worldview not only that which we have traditionally called world-and-life-view, but also, within a Christian context, the basic models or paradigms in terms of which orthodox Christendom has related the basic categories of nature and grace: defining orthodox Christendom somewhat broadly as all the traditions of Christendom that subscribe to the ecumenical creeds.

Nature and grace, of course, are very fundamental categories in the theological tradition.

The third is *gratia iuxta naturam*—grace alongside nature. And finally we can speak of *gratia intra naturam*—grace within nature. Let me just say a word or two about each of these very briefly.<sup>7</sup>

First of all, the Christian worldview which pits grace over against nature, *gratia contra naturam*, is characteristic of the Anabaptist tradition. This view outrightly rejects the world, culture, and all things of amusement. In doing so, it establishes an antithesis between

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Nature refers to creation, including all of human life and culture, and grace refers to the new life in Jesus Christ, the salvation through recreation and redemption. Nature and grace are, of course, very often correlated with terms like "sacred" and "profane," "holy" and "secular." Therefore, in my use of the term the relationship of creation and redemption is crucial to every Christian worldview. In fact, it defines what kind of Christian worldview it is. In my opinion (based very largely on the thought of Herman Bavinck), this is perhaps the fundamental point of a general Christian outlook on the world.

I would like to distinguish with Bavinck four basic Christian worldviews, all of which occur in Christian orthodoxy in the sense that I've defined it. The first one I call *gratia contra naturam*—grace against nature. The second one is *gratia supra naturam*—grace over nature.

grace and nature, between redemption and creation. We find this emphasis in the theology of Karl Barth and his disciples. Jacques Ellul, for example, takes this approach to the relationship of nature to grace or, in his case, Christianity and technology. Creation and redemption are basically at odds with each other in this view.

The second one, *gratia supra naturam*, is the classical Roman Catholic position which looks upon grace, redemption, and the church as icing on the cake, the pinnacle of the natural life of human beings. Thomas Aquinas, for example, formulated the view that grace does not do away with nature but completes it. Grace is the capstone.

Then thirdly, the view of *gratia iuxta naturam*, grace alongside of nature, is the classical Lutheran position where nature and grace stand alongside each other, but remain

unconnected. Luther often referred to the two realms in which we live. As Christians we have one set of rules, but as political rulers, for example, we have a different set of rules to follow. By way of illustration, I would like to refer to Proverbs 31, which deals with the virtuous woman, the valiant woman. In verse 30 we read that "a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." Commentators have often asked what this religious note has to do with this "secular song." Luther, at that point in one edition of his translation, penciled in the comment, "That is to say, a woman can live with a man honorably and piously and can with a good conscience be a housewife, but she must also, in addition and next to this, fear God, have faith and pray."<sup>8</sup> This is a telling illustration of Luther's view of nature and grace; alongside each other they are equally legitimate, but there does not seem to be much connection between the two.

And finally, the fourth model or worldview which I distinguish is *gratia intra naturam* where grace actually penetrates into nature and renews it from within. This view, of course, traditionally has been associated with the Calvinist tradition. Grace is not opposed to nature, it is not even a separate realm from it, but grace is like a healing medicine. Grace is something which enters in and internally sanctifies, makes new, transforms. Of all the worldviews, on this point Calvinism has the most positive appreciation of creation, since grace serves to restore nature.

In comparing these worldviews, very briefly sketched, in the order in which I have presented them, one can note that the status of nature or creation goes from being totally illegitimate in the first one to being the goal of grace in the last one. The first position is basically the Anabaptist position: nature is completely illegitimate, grace rejects it and replaces it. In the second, the Roman Catholic one, nature is legitimate, but subordinate to grace. In the Lutheran position, nature is legitimate and even coordinate with grace, but they are not connected and have little to do with each other. And then finally, in the Calvinist perspective, nature is in fact the goal, the point of grace. Grace is given

in order to restore nature or creation.

Getting back to fundamentalism, the thing I want to point out is that all three of the first paradigms are dualistic. That is, they divide creation into two realms or provinces, variously related, but each of them has a secular-sacred split. Creation is divided into realms which correlate to some degree with nature and grace. Only the fourth one, the Calvinist one, is integral, and does not allow for this separation within creation between a sacred area and a secular area. The sacred, in fact, claims the whole. So grace enters in again to restore it to its creational design.

And now, fundamentalism. I think it is fair to say that, by and large, fundamentalism was largely untouched by the fourth paradigm. The significant exception is Machen. But if you read the accounts of the fundamentalist movement, Machen seems completely out of place. Although he was associated with people like Billy Sunday, in their attitudes toward culture, in their worldview, they were completely incompatible. Machen was very much a loner in that regard. With that one exception, virtually everything else in fundamentalism at that time seems to have been dominated by the first and third worldviews. The second, *gratia supra naturam*, is the classical model of Roman Catholicism, and since fundamentalism characteristically pulled away from Romanism, we find little influence of it in fundamentalism.

The idea that grace and nature are at odds with each other is evident with fundamentalism. We see a tremendous emphasis on evangelism in the sense of rescuing people from this world and then of training them to do further evangelism. The whole point and burden of the Christian life is to save other people from this world, with no regard whatever for trying to influence this world in some cultural, political sense for Christ's kingdom. Under the influence of dispensationalism the kingdom of God had very little, in fact nothing, to do with the present age. The kingdom is something that comes with the millennium. This exclusive emphasis on evangelism with very little emphasis on the Lordship of Christ over the broad terrain of culture, except for "moral" issues, of course,



is one indication of grace against nature. Premillennialism by itself is another indication of that. In the premillennialist view, this whole world is going to be burned up, scrapped, junked. Christ's kingdom, when it does come, will be a new kingdom which has no continuity with the world in which we live.

Within that general context of a basically negative attitude toward this world, natural life, and culture, there is a strong anti-intellectual attitude on the part of many, although certainly not all, fundamentalists. Billy Sunday, who had a gift for graphic imagery, can serve as an excellent example. Marsden relates, "At his ordination examination for the Presbyterian ministry in 1903, [Sunday's] characteristic response to questions on theology and history was 'That's too deep for me,' or 'I'll have to pass that up.' 'I don't know any more about theology,' he once said with some accuracy, 'than a jack-rabbit knows about ping-pong, but I'm on my way to glory.'"<sup>9</sup> I guess that can stand as a testimony to anti-intellectualism. It does fundamentalism a disservice to characterize it by this kind of attitude, but there definitely was such a strand within fundamentalism, a strand which became more evident after the Scopes Trial.

Secondly, as evidence of a *gratia iuxta naturam* view, is the Baptist view of the separation of state and church. Baptist denominations were very prominent in the fundamentalist debates of the 1920's and before, and one of their cardinal articles was keeping the sphere of the church separate from that of the state, keeping religion separate from politics.

Another way in which this *iuxta* view manifested itself was in the view of the scientific enterprise of scholarship. As was noted, adherents relied on a Baconian idea of science which in the early phases of the movement meant an allegiance to Scottish Common Sense Philosophy. In modern versions, I think fundamentalism often becomes a version of positivism, an emphasis on scholarship and reason as a neutral affair, belonging to a different realm alongside of faith. I might mention as one further indication of this kind of "alongside" position, the strong emphasis in

much of fundamentalism on Armenianism, the view that the human will is basically uncorrupted and stands in its own autonomy and integrity alongside, almost as a judging agency, to one's faith.

By way of summary, I will conclude by simply stating the following thesis: fundamentalism is an extreme form of nature-grace protestantism which on the worldview level—please note that qualification—stands almost everywhere opposed to authentic Calvinism.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>J.I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958).

<sup>2</sup>For the following I have drawn especially on George Marsden's book *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), as well as a book by Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>3</sup>Quoted by Marsden, pp.36-37.

<sup>4</sup>James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), pp. 2 and 3.

<sup>5</sup>Barr even has the audacity to mention Herman Dooyeweerd under this heading. Talking about interest shown by fundamentalists in philosophy, he writes: "Similarly, a good deal of interest is shown in the 'Christian philosophy' of Herman Dooyeweerd. Where this will lead one cannot say. It suggests that this highly Protestant form of religion is, through its aversion to modern theology and modern biblical studies, hankering after some sort of restored medieval situation" (p.276). Barr appears actually to have looked at his *magnum opus*, for he writes, "Dooyeweerd, a Dutch scholar, has produced a massive work, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*.... This turgid work seems to aim at a sort of 'philosophy' incorporating biblical and Reformational insights." (p.360). So Saul, too, is among the prophets, and Dooyeweerd is among the fundamentalists.

<sup>6</sup>James Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

<sup>7</sup>I would refer the reader to my *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) and my "Nature and Grace in the Interpretation of Proverbs 31:1-31," *Calvin Theological Journal* 19, nr. 2 (November, 1984) 153-166. What follows parallels the discussion in these two publications.

<sup>8</sup>Martin Luthers Werke, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Die Deutsche Bibel*, Band 10 (Weimar: Boehlau, 1957), p.103.

<sup>9</sup>Marsden, p.130.