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Fundamentalism

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Cross-Reference: Black Theology, Ethics—Christian, Feminist Theology, Liberation Theology—Latin American, Neorthodoxy, Process Theology, Social Gospel.

FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY (See DOGMATIC THEOLOGY.)

FUNDAMENTALISM

In America fundamentalism is a movement within Protestantism that was organized immediately after World War I in opposition to “modernism,” which included liberal theology primarily, and also Darwinism and secularism. A subgroup of evangelicalism, fundamentalism staunchly affirmed with evangelicals “fundamentals of the faith,” including the deity of Christ, his virgin birth, his bodily resurrection, and his substitutionary atonement. What distinguishes fundamentalists from other evangelicals is their strident opposition to modernism. They are, to quote George Marsden, “militant anti-modernist evangelicals.”

The two chief pillars of fundamentalist theology that reflect this movement’s primary concern with anti-modernism are biblical inerrancy and dispensationalism. The modern doctrine of inerrancy was most thoroughly developed by Presbyterian conservatives at Princeton Theological Seminary in the late-nineteenth century as a response to “higher criticism,” a socio-historical approach to the Bible advocated by theological liberals. Central to fundamentalist theology from the movement’s inception, inerrancy holds that the Bible is the Word of God, in the sense that it is the infallible product of the Holy Spirit’s guidance. This infallibility, or inerrancy, applies to the entire scriptural record; there are no errors of any sort in the Bible. For fundamentalists the inerrant Bible stands alone on all matters as the final authority. Fundamentalists assert that the Bible “means what it says” and must therefore be read “literally.” Strongly tied to biblical inerrancy is dispensationalism. This eschatological system was brought to America in the 1860s and 1870s by John Nelson Darby and was promoted through a series of prophecy conferences in the following decades. Out of these conferences came much of the leadership of the early fundamentalist movement, and as the years went by dispensationalism became increasingly interwoven with fundamentalism. Dispensationalism is theologically anti-modernist both in its hyperliteral approach to the Bible and in its view of history as shaped by supernatural forces, a view at odds with the tendency in liberal theology to minimize the distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Moreover, dispensationalism informs fundamentalists that the modern institutional church is increas-

ingly untrue to the Christian faith, and that modern civilization is corrupt and growing more corrupt.

But fundamentalism is not simply or strictly an anti-modernist theology. Fundamentalism in the United States is a religious movement, and what finally distinguishes fundamentalists from their fellow evangelicals (the line here is admittedly blurred) is the active and strident militancy of their anti-modernism. From the very beginning of the movement, when the World's Christian Fundamentals Association was created in 1919, this militancy has been evident. Unhappy with what they saw as apostasy in the American church and decay in American civilization, these fundamentalists organized crusades to rid Protestant denominations of modernist theology and the public schools of evolutionist teaching. It was a monumental and well-publicized campaign, led by such worthy fundamentalist combatants as William Bell Riley and J. Gresham Machen. But the crusades failed. By the end of the 1920s, fundamentalism was in retreat. Its advocates were powerless minorities in the Northern Baptist and the Northern Presbyterian denominations, where the struggle for control had been the fiercest. Moreover, the anti-evolutionist movement, though having had some successes, sputtered and stalled.

Contrary to what many observers concluded, defeat at the national level did not mean the demise of American fundamentalism. Instead, in the 1930s and 1940s fundamentalists successfully organized at the local or congregational level. The success of grassroots fundamentalism in these years was due in great measure to a rapidly expanding network of nondenominational organizations, which included publishing houses, mission boards, and radio stations. At the center of this fundamentalist support structure were the approximately seventy Bible institutes that dotted the country. These schools, the most prominent of which was Moody Bible Institute, served as denominational surrogates, providing nearby fundamentalist churches with ministers, teaching materials, Bible conferences, church secretaries, and a host of other services.

Flourishing at the grassroots level, fundamentalism by the 1940s had reemerged on the national scene. In that decade not only did fundamentalists use radio to bring the gospel to the masses, but also they created national evangelistic organizations such as Youth for Christ, from whose ranks came Billy Graham. But this emphasis on national revival, as opposed to anti-modernist crusades, exacerbated tensions within American fundamentalism. Many fundamentalists had responded to the debacle of the 1920s by embracing the notion of "separation," adding to their doctrinal requirements a refusal to cooperate with those who did not entirely share their views. For this group of fundamentalists, militant separation was now a test of orthodoxy. But in the 1940s and 1950s a group of moderate (and often younger) fundamentalists emerged who rejected both extreme separatism and the emphasis on dispensationalism. To the militants, such compromises were anathema. When the dispute exploded into open conflict in the mid-1950s, the focal point of the fighting was Billy Graham, whose willingness to work with nonfundamentalists in organizing evangelistic crusades

represented to the separatists everything that was wrong with the moderates. By the latter half of the 1950s, the fundamentalist movement had divided into (1) those who called themselves "new evangelicals," or simply "evangelicals," and who formed associations with evangelicals outside the fundamentalist tradition, and (2) militant separatists who defiantly retained the fundamentalist label.

For the next two decades separatist fundamentalists maintained a low profile, eschewing national activities for local church-building and evangelizing. But in the late-1970s and 1980s, fundamentalism made a dramatic reappearance on the national scene. Fundamentalism had always been associated with patriotism, militarism, and free-market economics; in post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America such sentiments were definitely in vogue, and politically energized fundamentalists played an important and quite visible role in the resurgence of the religious and political right. As might be expected, fundamentalists framed their political involvement in religious and moral terms. The most prominent manifestation of fundamentalist politics was the Reverend Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. Created in 1979 with the goal of electing to public office "pro-life, pro-family, and pro-America" candidates, Moral Majority was quite active in the election and re-election of Ronald Reagan, as well as in countless congressional, state, and local races. Although Moral Majority collapsed in 1986, many fundamentalists also became involved in the 1988 presidential campaign of Pat Robertson, whose emphasis on returning America to its moral moorings permitted fundamentalists to overlook the televangelist's charismatic beliefs. Out of the ashes of Robertson's failed campaign came the Christian Coalition. With Ralph Reed as leader, this organization claimed over one million members by the mid-1990s, and it was quite active at the local and national levels in supporting conservative (primarily Republican) candidates.

Besides electoral politics, fundamentalists became involved in an array of related issues. In response to the emergent feminist and gay and lesbian movements, fundamentalists actively worked against gay rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, and, perhaps most important, abortion rights. Remarkably, the "right to life" effort led formerly inactive fundamentalists to engage in lobbying, picketing, and on occasion, civil disobedience. Fundamentalists also became involved in what they saw as the rapid and dangerous spread of secularism in the public schools. Hence, they worked on behalf of school prayer and, returning to an old issue, equal time for "creation science" in the public schools. More in keeping with the separatist side of their heritage, fundamentalists also created thousands of alternative schools for their children, schools for which they sought tax support and freedom from government regulation.

Activist fundamentalists were attacked by some of their number for violating the principle of militant separatism by cooperating with nonfundamentalists, including Catholics and evangelicals. Working together to implement a right-wing political agenda also contributed to the narrowing of the gap between moderate fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals. One clear indication that the line between the two groups was blurring was the increased emphasis among

many evangelicals on a traditional fundamentalist touchstone: the inerrancy of the Bible. In the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), for example, conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists joined to capture the levers of denominational power; controlling these, they began to purge the leadership of SBC agencies and seminaries of non-inerrantist moderates. As in the 1920s, fundamentalists have sparked controversy and schism in a leading Protestant denomination, but in this instance they have apparently won the fight.

Fundamentalists will not be disappearing from the American scene any time soon. And while nonfundamentalist theologians tend to find fundamentalist theology, particularly dispensationalism and inerrancy, to be, at best, terribly problematic, fundamentalist theology must be taken seriously, if for no other reason than its obvious popular appeal. Many believers find compelling fundamentalism's high view of Scripture and its emphasis on a clear distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Moreover, fundamentalism's anti-modernist impulse, though manifested in a questionable and inconsistent fashion, is a cogent challenge to theologies more enamored of modernity.

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Cross-Reference: Apocalyptic Theology, Atonement, Creation Science, Dispensationalism, Evangelicalism, Inerrancy, Liberalism, Miracles, Popular Theology, Resurrection.