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Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod:

A Historical Study of Their Interaction and Mutual Influence

MILTON L. RUDNICK

A REVIEW BY THE AUTHOR AFTER 5 YEARS

The letter requesting this article reads in part:

I would like to invite you to prepare an article in which you review your book, *Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod*. I think it would be interesting for you to reflect honestly and openly on what you might say if you were to write the book again, whether subsequent research has given you additional insights. It might also be an opportunity for you to comment on Sandeen's two latest contributions to the history of fundamentalism.

. . . I regret that as usual there is no honorarium involved, but I hope the prospects of preparing a review of your own book will be so intriguing that you will be powerless to say no.¹

Is this an invitation for me to back down gracefully from the position advanced in the book? If so, it is a model of tact and ingenuity. Almost any author would prefer to take issue with his own earlier work than to be cut down by a critic. Or is the editor making amends for failing to publish a review of the book prior to this? After all, why should the (a) major theological journal of the Missouri Synod withhold comment for 5 years on a serious scholarly study of a significant phase of the Synod's history? Having failed

¹ Herbert T. Mayer, letter to Milton L. Rudnick, dated Nov. 30, 1971, in possession of recipient.

to give the book ordinary notice reasonably soon after publication, is the *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY* now giving it extraordinary attention? Perhaps current tensions and polarization in the Synod have demonstrated the relevance of the study and desirability of updating it. On the other hand, 125th anniversary considerations may have prompted the request. Then again, since the request came rather late (only a month before the deadline), the unflattering truth may be that this article is a "filler" for other material which was cancelled at the last minute. Some questions are better left unanswered. (ED.: Ain't it the truth?)

Before getting at the outline, argument, and conclusions of *Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod* I would like to respond to the editor's inquiries in the letter quoted above.

First, what might I say if I were writing the book today? The chances are rather good that my conclusions would be different, if I began my research today, or even 2 years ago. However, and I would like to emphasize this: the difference would make them *less* valid rather than more valid. Since I began my research 10 years ago, the conviction that the Missouri Synod has succumbed to Fundamentalist influence has been growing. The "moderate" element in the Synod continually hurls the "fundamentalist" epithet at their opponents, and no one challenges this except the opponents. Since the leadership of the "moderate"

party includes men of historical competence, it would be rather natural for me to assume that their judgment in this matter is correct. Furthermore, as the controversy in the Synod rages on and the conservative element resorts increasingly to strategies reminiscent of Fundamentalism, it would be easy to confuse this superficial resemblance to Fundamentalism with significant fundamentalist influence. In other words, I fear that recent developments in the Synod might well have kept me off the trail. Written today the book probably would have been different but not better than it is.

The second question is: "Has subsequent research given you additional insights?" My continued research on the topic has not been extensive. However, two items do come to mind. One is that the discussion of theological liberalism (Chapter 1) should have been more complete, indicating more clearly the major types of liberalism.² It also should have noted the tendency of Fundamentalists to react to all liberals—even those who were moderate and restrained in their theological adjustments—as if they were soul-destroying "modernists." In addition, in Chapter 10, "Fundamentalist Influence on the Missouri Synod," there is a section on "Fundamentalist Influence at the Grass Roots." There I report an allusion by Theodore Graebner and personal impressions by other reliable observers regarding the probability of some such influence. The transition to the English language is suggested as a factor which may have opened some Missouri Synod Lutherans to fundamentalist influ-

² See Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

ence, and the preaching style of Walter A. Maier is mentioned as another possible contributing factor. Two other sources which should have been given are periodicals which, though not official organs of the Synod, were widely read by its members. They are the *Walther League Messenger* and the *American Lutheran*. Many articles in both magazines during the 1920s and 1930s reflect a sympathy toward and similarity to Fundamentalism much more pronounced than anything in the official publications of the Synod. However, neither of these insights alters the conclusions of the study.

It is a pleasure to comment on Sandeen's latest contributions to the history of Fundamentalism and to acknowledge my indebtedness to him. The first, *The Origins of Fundamentalism: Toward a Historical Interpretation*, by Ernest R. Sandeen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968) is the published version of the paper referred to in my notes and bibliography. This essay clarified my conception of Fundamentalism by alerting me to the distinctions between it and other forms of Protestant conservatism. It came to my attention almost too late to be included in the book. In fact, my own corrected manuscript was ready for the typesetter when the full implications of Sandeen's research became evident to me. My publisher graciously granted me time and opportunity to conduct additional research of my own along lines suggested by Sandeen, to completely rewrite Chapters 3 and 5, and to make necessary adjustments throughout the manuscript. Apart from this my treatment of Fundamentalism would have been out of date, distorted, and inadequate. As it is, in "Part I. The Fundamentalist Movement," I have been able to

write an accurate and balanced history of Fundamentalism. As an introduction to and overview of the movement it may be even more useful to some readers than Sandeen's major work, which is considered next.

In *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800—1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) Sandeen does a masterful job of describing Fundamentalism in its larger context. On the basis of primary sources, many of which are extremely difficult to obtain, he has demonstrated that dispensationalist millenarianism is the basic distinguishing element of Fundamentalism. Both the theology and strategy of Fundamentalism were shaped largely by this chiliastic movement. Fundamentalists allied themselves with non-millenarian conservative Protestants in the contest against liberalism and were even willing to deemphasize millenarianism in the interest of these alliances. However, this doctrine continued to be integral to the movement and was never discarded. Sandeen's analysis of millenarianism in general and Fundamentalism in particular is detailed and penetrating. He is a historian's historian. Some persons, events, and relationships touched on only lightly in my book are sketched by him with completeness and perceptiveness. How much easier my work would have been if I had had this book to consult. I have no critical comments to make about *The Roots of Fundamentalism*. It is a splendid and definitive study. It is technical, detailed, and heavily weighted in the direction of the larger millenarian context. The social, cultural, and psychological contexts are virtually ignored. Consequently, the reader who is attempting to gain a

rounded view of Fundamentalism might well begin by reading Part I of my book and then turning to Sandeen for the fuller theological background. An excellent and recent treatment of the broader social, cultural, and psychological background is Willard B. Gatewood Jr., ed., *Controversy in the Twenties: Fundamentalism, Modernism, and Evolution* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969).

A challenge to every commentator on "Fundamentalism" is that of trying to define the term. From the very beginning it has been used in a variety of ways and often very loosely. Some classify Fundamentalism primarily as a *mind-set*, e.g. militant, anti-intellectual, religious conservatism; or traditionalism, which resists all theological and ethical change on doctrinal grounds; or fanatical devotion to premodern views of Christ, the Bible, and creation. Others classify it primarily as a *movement* — (an) identifiable group(s) of people with belief and value systems, organizations, causes, literature, and a history of encounters with others of opposing views. Among those who define Fundamentalism in this way are some who are very inclusive in their use of the term and apply it to all Protestant conservatives who contend vigorously against theological liberalism. The early standard works on Fundamentalism³ took this position. Others as

³ Stewart G[rant] Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1931; unaltered reprint, Hamden, Conn. [and] London: Archon Books, 1963), and Norman F[rancis] Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918—1931*, Yale Historical Publications, ed. Lewis P. Curtis, Miscellany, No. 59 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954; Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press: unaltered reprint, Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1963).

well as Sandeen, and I was one of them, realized that, as a movement, Fundamentalism would have to be defined more narrowly. However, Sandeen must be credited with isolating the theological uniqueness and determining the precise ecclesiastical location of Fundamentalism.

My definition of Fundamentalism, essentially following Sandeen, describes it as a historical movement, narrowly defined, rather than as a mind-set.

. . . Fundamentalism was one of several types of Protestant conservatism. Its distinctive characteristics have been noted. The theology was that of 19th-century Presbyterian or Baptist orthodoxy modified by the inclusion of dispensationalism, with special emphasis on premillennialism. The key organization was the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, which united Presbyterians and Baptists of this theological bent and provided them with motivation and strategy for the war against liberalism. The basic purpose was to affirm and defend the fundamental doctrines of Biblical authority and the deity of Christ. To this end Fundamentalists sought the support of conventional conservatives and deliberately relegated their cherished doctrine of premillennialism to the background in the interest of that alliance. These dispensationalist Presbyterians and Baptists who united to defend the fundamentals and oppose liberalism were the people who, from the very beginning, were proud to be called Fundamentalists. They are the only people whom the name really fits. To use the term Fundamentalism in any other way is either to turn it into an abstraction, a catch-all category for assorted but unrelated conservative religious reactions, or to im-

ply relations between conservative groups that did not actually exist. (Page 54)

In Part I (Chapters 1—5) I review and interpret the history of the Fundamentalist movement. This discussion opens with an analysis of the theological liberalism against which the Fundamentalists set themselves. Next, the nontheological factors which precipitated the movement are considered: the secularization of society for which Fundamentalists blamed liberalism; World War I, which apparently injected vehemence and fanaticism into the movement; and the distinctive personalities of Fundamentalist leaders. Pre-Fundamentalist reactions—the parent movements of Fundamentalism—are the subject of Chapter 3, both those related to dispensationalist millenarianism (Bible and prophetic conferences and the literature which grew out of them, as well as the many Bible institutes which were founded), and those related to conventional Protestant conservatism (heresy trials in Methodist, Presbyterian, Disciples, and Baptist denominations). Chapter 4 examines the history and contents of *The Fundamentals*, a series of 12 books which were widely circulated from 1909 to 1915. "The Fundamentalist Crusade" is covered in Chapter 5. Major interdenominational aspects are viewed primarily through the World's Christian Fundamentals Association. Denominational controversies of the Northern Baptists and Presbyterians are reported and interpreted. The chapter concludes with a study of the political battles over evolution, culminating in the Scopes trial. By the end of the 1930s the Fundamentalist movement was largely spent, having failed to achieve its goals of driving liberals from the churches and eliminating evolution from the public schools.

The second half of the book deals with Missouri Synod relations with Fundamentalism. The Synod was and remained thoroughly conservative during the decades of the Fundamentalist controversies. However, this conservatism was distinct from and even at odds with Fundamentalism. Four doctrinal authorities (Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, the writings of Martin Luther, and the theology of 17th-century Lutheran Orthodoxy) were the sources of the Synod's conservatism and little, if any, reliance on Fundamentalist theology is evident. The Missouri Synod was aware of Fundamentalism and generally sympathetic to it. However, there was no interest in joining the Fundamentalist ranks. There was no need for an alliance with Fundamentalism, for no liberalism had invaded the Synod. Furthermore, Missouri Synod Lutherans were very sensitive to non-Lutheran features of Fundamentalism: unionism, Reformed orientation, and premillennialism. Although the Missouri Synod was not inclined to move toward Fundamentalism, it did extend invitations to defeated and disillusioned Fundamentalists to find refuge in its midst. Walter A. Maier's Lutheran Hour messages were the chief medium of these overtures. His condemnation of liberalism and emphasis on the fundamental doctrines of Biblical authority and the deity of Christ endeared him to Fundamentalists and made his fellow Missouri Synod Lutherans more aware and appreciative of those crusading conservatives. However, no influx of Fundamentalists into the Synod as a result of these overtures can be documented. The influence of Fundamentalist theology on the Missouri Synod was slight and temporary. A traditional aversion to the non-Lutheran aspects of Funda-

mentalism and the controls against theological deviation built into the synodical system prevented more significant impact. The official literature of the Synod, which was examined thoroughly in connection with this study, is remarkably free of Fundamentalist taint. At the grass roots, however, there was some absorption. The Synod made the English language transition during the Fundamentalist era, and, lacking an adequate English literature of their own, some Missouri Synod Lutherans used the biblicistic writings of Fundamentalists. Frequently the Synod's doctrine of Biblical inerrancy is cited as evidence of Fundamentalist influence. However, the actual source of this doctrine is the theology of 17th-century Lutheran Orthodoxy.

My conclusion, which, to my knowledge, has been challenged in print by no one, is best stated and explained from the book itself.

The title originally chosen for this study was "Fundamentalism *in* the Missouri Synod." The word *in* grew out of my feeling—like that of so many others—that the Missouri Synod had been noticeably and even profoundly affected as a result of its interaction with Fundamentalism. However, as I became more fully acquainted with Fundamentalism and examined the literature of the Missouri Synod more closely, I arrived at a different conclusion.

The conclusion is that Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod were not related closely enough for either one to exert major and lasting influence on the other. Their backgrounds included incompatible and conflicting elements as well as some similar and even common ones. They showed a considerable amount of interest

in one another as well as warm mutual sympathies, but they never actually joined forces or even came close to this. Although they both fought doggedly and fiercely against liberalism, their circumstances and strategies were by no means identical, and they remained in separate camps. Consequently, neither group was significantly altered by the existence or actions of the other. Whatever impressions may have been exchanged were faint to begin with and then destined to be obliterated by the subsequent assertion of each group's distinctive characteristics. Those who see a closer relationship between them have not, in my judgment, adequately understood either Fundamentalism or the Missouri Synod. So the word *in* was changed to *and* — "Fundamentalism *and* the Missouri Synod" — indicating the revised view of at least one student of the movement. (Page 115)

My critical comments are brief. The work is based on thorough research and reads well. The conclusion, I am convinced, is valid. There are limitations, of course. It is not a brilliant book. In historical learning, scholarship, and craftsmanship it is not the equal of Sandeen's book or Gatewood's. My refusal to deal with the "mind-set" of Fundamentalism, if there is such a thing, will disappoint many who have no other conception of Fundamentalism. However, a mind-set is a notoriously elusive subject of historical investigation, and in the case of Fundamentalism is at most incidental rather than essential.

Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod speaks very directly to the present situation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. It should be read by people on both sides of the conflict in order to un-

derstand their opponents and the nature of the conflict. What is happening all too often is that each party attempts by the process of mislabeling to read the other out of Lutheranism. If my study accomplished anything, it is the discreditation of that move. The conservative wing of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is certainly *not* Fundamentalist in its theology. That is, they are not unionistic, Reformed, premillennialists. They are Lutheran traditionalists, strongly influenced by 17th-century Orthodoxy and committed to some very respectable Lutheran assumptions about Scripture, Confessions, and doctrinal uniformity. In their affirmations and aggressions they are responding to elements in their Lutheran heritage, not to sub-Lutheran or extra-Lutheran influences. Their strategies do resemble Fundamentalism, but that is as far as the resemblance goes. On the other hand, the label "liberal" does not rest well on the other side. They are far from being deniers of Biblical authority or the deity of Christ, two basic checkpoints of liberalism in its classic forms. They may understand and apply these doctrines somewhat differently than do the conservatives, but their essential faithfulness to these teachings is beyond dispute. They are not liberals; they are Lutherans, drawing on still other vital and valid elements of their heritage: Luther, the freedom of the Gospel, etc. The conflict is an expression of tensions long present in Lutheranism, not the result of apostasy or the intrusion of foreign elements. This observation and opinion does not resolve the conflict, obviously, but should put it in perspective and, perhaps, improve the climate.

St. Paul, Minn.