



Understanding Christian Fundamentalism

SESSION 1

| *What are the basic beliefs of Christian fundamentalists?*

Introduction

Christian fundamentalism is a Christian theology. While fundamentalists embrace a set of specific doctrines, many nonfundamentalist Christians also share some of these beliefs.

Fundamentalists believe themselves to be returning to past conventional standards, called orthodoxy. However, many researchers believe that fundamentalism began as a reaction against modernization or the rapidly changing Western culture of the nineteenth century, including large technical advances and societal changes. During this time many people moved from family vocations into more specialized jobs that separated families and social groups. Theological beliefs also became diversified as different groups of people came to understand and interpret Scripture differently. As technology such as irrigation and water transportation developed, people no longer felt the same immediate dependence on God. Science developed theories about the creation of the earth, and some questioned God's role in creation. Scripture, too, was studied from a sociohistoric perspective, redated, and compared to other faith traditions' stories. All of this led to a crisis in faith for some, out of which fundamentalism arose as an attempt to reground the Christian faith. The term *fundamentalism* emerged when a number of pamphlets were published in the 1910s that declared five fundamentals as foundational beliefs of Christians. Belief in these five fundamentals is necessary, fundamentalists believe, for salvation.

THE FIVE FUNDAMENTALS

1. The virgin birth
2. The satisfaction theory of the atonement
3. The bodily resurrection
4. The miracles of Jesus
5. Biblical inerrancy

The Five Fundamentals

The virgin birth refers to a belief that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb, without Mary, his mother, having engaged in sexual relations with any man before his conception or his birth.

According to *the satisfaction theory of atonement*, all humanity is sinful and deserves death as the punishment. But Jesus became the substitute for us, paying the price for our sins by dying a dreadful and painful death on the cross.

The bodily resurrection refers to a belief that Jesus was resurrected in body as well as spirit after his crucifixion. Fundamentalists also believe that all who are saved will be resurrected in body.

Fundamentalists affirm *the miracles of Jesus* as literal and historic events.

Biblical inerrancy refers to a belief that every word in the Bible is factual, historical, literal, and without question or

error God's Word. (For many fundamentalists the King James Version of the Bible is the only inerrant Word of God.) This is the most important of the fundamentalist tenets. If a person does not believe in the inerrant and literal words of the Bible, that person is not a fundamentalist, whatever else he or she may believe.

For the fundamentalist, the Bible is inerrant not just in matters of faith and how to live as Christians but in all matters of life, including geography, history, and science. There will be no new revelation, and nothing tells us about God except Scripture. In addition, every sentence and word of Scripture is believed to be prophetic, telling us what is to come.

What might appear to some as discrepancies in Scripture (for example, in Gen. 1 humans are created together at the end of creation, but in Gen. 2 the man is created before the animals and the woman is created at the end) are answered by fundamentalists in a number of ways. The mystery of God and our human limitations in understanding excuse many apparent scriptural problems. Some Scriptures (such as those that seem to condone slavery or a view of the solar system that makes the world flat and the center of the universe) are seen as irrelevant or minor Scriptures. The authority of pastors is relied upon heavily for biblical interpretation. The *Scofield Reference Bible* answers many of the questions that one might have about different passages with explanations about these apparent inconsistencies. For example, *Scofield* explains the differences in the order of events in each Gospel by saying that similar events happened several times in Jesus' ministry. The scholarly fundamentalist can also rely on the fact that multiple ancient scriptural texts have been found with many variations between them to say that the original biblical texts certainly contained no errors, though scribal error may have been introduced into the texts we now have.

What Do Other Christians Say?

The five essential tenets of fundamentalism may seem like basic Christian beliefs to many people. But within Christianity there is a wide range of theological ideas and beliefs.

The virgin birth: Many Christians, while still finding deep metaphoric meaning in the virgin birth, doubt the historicity of the virgin birth. They point out that many religious traditions throughout history have claimed a

virgin birth for their central religious figures (such as the Buddha), as a way of indicating the uniqueness, or divinity, of that leader.

Matthew and Luke are the only New Testament authors who refer to Jesus' birth from a virgin. And yet Matthew also emphasizes Jesus' blood descent through Joseph (back to David). In addition, Matthew 1:22–23 ends Jesus' birth story by referencing Isaiah 7:14: "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.'" But in the Hebrew, Isaiah 7:14 uses the word *'almah*, which means only "young woman" and has no "virgin" connotations.

Satisfaction theory of atonement: Many note that this theory was never suggested by Jesus or the Gospel writers.

There are many theories of atonement. (See, for example, the Thoughtful Christian study "How Did Jesus' Death Save Us?") In an economic image of atonement, Jesus is the ransom payment to Satan for our lives, lives Satan claimed when we first sinned. In a military understanding of atonement, Jesus fought Satan to reclaim our souls. It appears that Satan wins with Jesus' death, but Jesus wins us back for God through his resurrection. In the sacrificial image of atonement, Jesus sacrificed himself as a lamb, offering himself up as an apology (not as a payment) for human sin. In the legal image, a price must be paid for sin, and Jesus chooses to pay the price for us with his death.¹ There are insights and problems with each of these images of atonement. While for many Christians the belief that Jesus died for our sins is central and healing, others find no merit in the idea that God is responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. For these Christians, Jesus' death was not *for* our sins but *because* of our sins. The crucifixion was inevitable because people react violently against the kind of justice and love Jesus demonstrated. The saving grace of the story, for these Christians, is in Jesus' resurrection, which tells us we have nothing to fear: God's deep love overcomes even death.

Bodily resurrection: The Luke and John accounts of Jesus' resurrection appear to challenge a belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ. In Luke, Christ appeared and disappeared out of thin air (Luke 24:15, 31). In John's account, Christ appeared to the disciples after the doors were shut (John 20:19). Both accounts describe a more

spiritual or ethereal resurrection. Belief in a physical resurrection can also raise questions. Will bodies be raised just as they are—decayed after death or with the same limitations and disabilities that many lived or at least died with?

Miracles of Jesus: Many Christians accept Jesus' miracles as literal, historic events. Some believe miracles continue today. Some see the scientific advancements of today as current manifestations of God's miracles in the world. Others choose to see the biblical miracle accounts as nonliteral stories about Jesus' ability to change people, relationships, and entire communities.

Literal, inerrant Scripture: Many Christians believe that while human words of any kind (including Scripture) may point to the truth that is God, they themselves are not the truth and cannot *contain* God. Many believe it is idolatry to say that anything other than God is without error.

In addition, some nonfundamentalist Christians point out that despite the central importance of Scripture, even fundamentalists pick and choose which Scriptures they cite, how much importance they give to various biblical texts, and even which texts should be understood literally. For example, most fundamentalists ignore the prohibitions against wearing clothing of mixed cloth (Lev. 19:19, Deut. 22:11) or against eating pork (Lev. 11:7). In contrast, fundamentalists currently focus on the creation stories and on Scriptures that condemn homosexuality. They also focus on Scriptures that are believed to point to the apocalypse and the end times.

Many would also say that Jesus modeled a nonliteral reading of many Scriptures. He challenged many Old Testament Scriptures, including the purity laws and laws such as "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Jesus (or the Gospel writers) also made occasional scriptural errors of reference. For example, in Mark 2:25–26 Jesus refers to Abiathar as the high priest present when David ate the bread of the Presence. But according to 1 Samuel 21:1–6, it was not Abiathar but Ahimelech, the father of Abiathar.

Many Christians believe that in order to fully understand Scripture, we must look at the Bible in its historical context, studying the original texts and their variations as well as the historical situations that surrounded the writing of each text. This is not to diminish the importance of the Bible but rather to recognize that there is a difference between history and truth. By letting go of an insistence



We are called to love God with our minds as well as our hearts, souls, and strength, which for many means continually exploring and even questioning biblical texts, measuring each story against the principal biblical law of love.

that all Scripture must be read as literal and inerrant, we are invited to look for truths that are deeper, multifaceted, and not limited to historical fact.

In addition, we cannot insist on a literal, inerrant reading of Scripture without remembering the history of that approach. For hundreds of years, slavery was justified by a literal reading of Paul (Col. 3:22; Eph. 6:5–8) and other biblical texts. Biblical texts by Paul and others continue in many denominations to prevent the ordination of women (1 Cor. 11:1–6; 14:33–36) and the equality of women in marriage (Eph. 5:22–24). The persecution and massacre of witches, unbelievers, heretics, Jews, Catholics, and others can also be traced back to literal biblical interpretations. Today, Planned Parenthood clinics are attacked, gay and lesbian persons are murdered, Muslims are persecuted—many with the justifications of literal biblical readings.

In looking at the prophetic nature of Scripture, Scripture itself tells us that we do not know and are not to try to work out the exact hour or time of coming events (Matt. 24:36, Mark 13:32, Acts 1:7). In addition, many Christians believe the prophets (and all Scriptures) were not attempting to predict the future but were making important social criticism against unjust actions and behaviors in their own times.

Other Fundamentalist Beliefs

Besides these essential fundamentalist tenets, there are other beliefs inherent to fundamentalism. Fundamentalists believe fundamentalism is a returning recommitment to a perfect Christianity. Doubt is considered a sin. Life on earth is for the sole purpose of determining one's eternal abode. All that a fundamentalist does, therefore, must be for the purpose of working toward salvation. For the fundamentalist, people who are not fundamentalists and are not therefore "saved" are considered enemies on the side of Satan; they are tempters who may corrupt not only individuals but entire societies. While conversion

and saving souls is an important work of the fundamentalist, it is more important that they not risk corruption of their own soul by being too close to outsiders. Even nonfundamentalist family members may be rejected.

Fundamentalists believe that all humanity is born sinful and damned. But through belief in Jesus, Christians are given a second chance. Still they must obey the rules of Scripture. If they follow the rules, God will reward them. Everything that happens is part of God's plan. While each person either accepts or rejects salvation through faith, God has elected from the beginning of time those people who will be saved.

Fundamentalists believe that creation was literally completed in seven days, and humans are to have dominion over the earth. Woman is less than man, first because she was made from the rib of Adam, and second because she succumbed to the snake's temptation and caused the fall of humanity and our slavery to sin. Therefore women must obey their husbands. Children must be strictly disciplined. A few appointed male people have been given the ability and authority to understand and interpret Scripture. Fundamentalists must follow their pastors closely and obey all the rules of the faith with the strictest adherence.

The Second Coming

While almost all Christian fundamentalists believe that the end times are now, there are two current groups of fundamentalists who understand the order of the end time events differently: premillennialists and postmillennialists.

Premillennialists are the original fundamentalists. They believe that personal salvation must occur before the rapture. Life on earth will continue to deteriorate until the day of judgment. On the day of judgment (the rapture), the righteous (the saved) will be lifted off the earth, disappearing suddenly. After the saved have ascended, a seven-year period of tribulation will begin, ruled by Satan. Jesus will then return, tossing the lost into everlasting fire and leading from Jerusalem a thousand-year reign of righteousness on earth. The saved will rule with him. After these thousand years, Satan will break free and make war on Jerusalem. But God will execute his wrath and Satan will be banished to hell. Then all those who had been with Satan in hell will come before God for judgment. No matter how they lived their lives, because they did not accept

Christ, they will be cast into the eternal fire. The saved will then live with God for eternity in Jerusalem.

Premillennialists strive to separate themselves from the damned, and they do so by creating a separate world within society with its own schools, radio stations, and the like.

In contrast, postmillennialists are working to turn society around to prepare it for Jesus' arrival. According to postmillennialism, Jesus will return only after "Bible-based" Christians prepare the way for Jesus by ushering in the era of righteousness. One of the signs of the coming of this age is the return of control over Jerusalem to Israel, hence fundamentalists' great concern about Israel securing the land in the Middle East. According to the postmillennialist model, Christ's thousand-year reign of righteousness will come before the judgment day. Postmillennialists are very politically active, hoping to bring in Christ's rule through the government as well as by any other means.

What Do Other Christians Believe?

Many nonfundamentalist Christians expect Jesus to return at an unknown time. For other Christians, the second coming is a current and constant event: Christ returns whenever people of faith are doing the work of faith together.

Nonfundamentalist Christians believe a variety of things when it comes to heaven and hell. Some Christians believe the afterlife is not clearly described in Scripture. For many "heaven" is not a place, and "eternal life" is beyond time: both describe an experience of oneness with God. Similarly, hell is life without God, a place in our hearts during or after life that is without love. Some Christians believe that hell existed but that Jesus destroyed it. The Apostles' Creed states, "Jesus descended into hell." Therefore there is no place God has not been or is not. If God is there, it is no longer hell.

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. See Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1968).