

Fundamentalism

“For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid which is Jesus Christ.” *1 Corinthians 3:11*

We will consider a few thoughts concerning Fundamentalism, a sector of Christianity, so-called because they hold the Bible and certain doctrines to be “fundamental”, or the foundation of their faith.

About a hundred years ago, a great revival movement swept through America which reminded people of their unworthiness before God, showed them their need for personal temperance and piety and promoted a form of literal Biblicism. Many were caused to see their poor spiritual condition, and called on God for personal salvation.

At the same time it was becoming important to people in the “Western World” to seek higher education. At the universities and colleges, students learned to be skeptical of miracles, or fulfilled prophecies, and to question almost everything. American Christianity polarized, with the intellectuals favoring what they called “higher criticism” at one end, and those of simpler faith, promoting inerrancy of the Bible and belief in miracles at the other end. So pervasive was the polarization that it seemed as if, to be a Christian, you must be either a Modernist or a Fundamentalist.

Those who chose Modernism became weakened by skepticism that they soon found themselves indistinguishable from society at large and many lost their faith in God.

In time most Fundamentalists also became indistinguishable from ungodly society. Many would support war, go to law to obtain their “rights”, divorce and re-marry, be entertained by television, and dress to identify with the world around them. They thus show by their actions that they choose the world instead of God. Jesus said, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” (*Matthew 7:20*)

But no matter what their pattern of life, their teaching remains: The various “statements of fundamentals” always begin with inerrancy and ver-

bal inspiration of Old and New Testament, creation in 6 days, virgin birth of Christ, man's sinfulness, substitutionary atonement, imminent personal (and in most cases pre-millennial) return of Christ, new birth, and bodily resurrection of the just and the unjust.

This list is not altogether bad. But neither the Bible nor any list of doctrines can be our "foundation". We find our foundation in the life and teachings of Jesus. He is our mediator when we pray. He is preparing a place for us in heaven. He "washed us from our sins in His own blood". He is our example in selflessness, poverty, and suffering. He makes the scriptures plain for us and shows us God's will in His teaching. He gives us power by His Holy Spirit to live for Him.

Fundamentalists generally see a difference between Old and New Testaments – that the Old Testament law is not valid for us, but that we live instead "by faith under God's grace". But they certainly don't see Jesus' words of any higher value than anything else written in the Bible.

Our mandate is not to defend the inerrancy of scripture, but to obey God as His will is revealed in the Scriptures. Jesus said, "Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" *Luke 6:46*

We should not read the Bible to prove that it is without error. That is not in our place. We read the Bible to find what God wants us to be and do. See Matthew 6:33.

For example, rather than spending much effort to show that the account of creation in Genesis is literally true, we should be reading the account to find our place in God's order and what our responsibility is in it. While we must not view God and His works with skepticism, we note that Jesus' emphasis was not defense of cardinal doctrine, but unselfishness, mercy toward others, love, and caring.

The key to a proper understanding of the Bible is found in Jesus' words and example as recorded in the New Testament. All other writings must be seen in light of Jesus' example and words. Even to say that "we must compare scripture with scripture" is not enough. We must always take Jesus' words in the Gospels as the "last word". He is the "Word of God".

For example, the law in Exodus 21:24 says, "...eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot...", but in Matthew 5:39, Jesus says, "...Resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." Jesus words are our authority, not because they were stated later, or in a certain time (New Testament Dispensation), but because of who Jesus is.

Fundamentalist preoccupation with defending the Bible has actually brought them to the place where they sing songs of adoration and praise to the Bible! "...This jewel, this treasure brings to us honor and saves fallen man." (Note that in John 5:39, Jesus speaks to this issue, telling us eternal life comes not from the Bible, but from Him) "Holy Bible, how I love thee." "Yes, sweet Bible, I will hide thee. Part in death, no never!" "The Bible stands as a Rock, undaunted... I will plant my feet on its firm foundation..." "Holy Bible, book divine, Precious treasure, thou art mine". This adoration and praise belong to God alone. It is as though, someone has said, "They have made the Bible the fourth member of the Trinity."

The tendency of people to worship something tangible is not new. In the Scriptures it is called idolatry. The Bible points us to God through Jesus, but it cannot save us or give us eternal life. Jesus can. He said, "All power is given unto me, in Heaven and on earth." (*Matthew 28:18*) God is a Spirit. We cannot "get our hands on Him." But he is real. All power comes from God.

Fundamentalists also emphasize the "blood atonement". "Atone" originally, in the Old Testament, meant "to cover". For example, Noah "atoned" the ark with pitch. (*Genesis 6:14*) In the New Testament the word "atonement" is used only once, and here it means "reconciliation." (*Romans 5:11*) There is certainly no "covering of sins" in the New Testament. God's people under the Old Testament complied with a sacrificial system that "covered" their sins until a promised Savior would come. "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins... Then said I, Lo I come... to do thy will, O God." (*Hebrews 10:4*) Jesus did come, and as by Adam sin entered the world, by Jesus it was overcome, for all who accepted the provision – from

Adam until the present. “Therefore as by the offense of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.” (*Romans 5:18*) When Jesus takes care of sins, He doesn't cover them. He cleans up our life and expects us to stay clean. “...Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood.” (*Revelation 1:5*) The emphasis should not be on the “atonement” (or covering), but on a cleaned up life and obedience to Jesus. Fundamentalists recognize Jesus, not as a loving master who directs us in holy living, but as the means to an end, that is the sacrifice to appease God's anger and provide us with personal salvation.

Neither Modernism nor Fundamentalism provides a model of true Christianity. Instead, we need to turn from our sin and selfishness to Jesus as our savior from sin and as the living Word of God. His words as recorded in the Bible enable us to correctly understand other parts of the Bible. As we seek to please Him, Jesus becomes not only our “one infallible rule of faith and practice”, but also our loving Master.

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