

Historical Fundamentalism Today  
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## **Introduction**

Back in January, I was working on a sermon and typed the word *judgmentalism*. Microsoft Word objected with its little red underline that *judgmentalism* is not a real word. I clicked on it to consider the alternatives it would offer me. Its options: *judgmental*, *judgmentally*, *fundamentalism*. Even Word thinks, apparently, that *judgmentalism* and *fundamentalism* are more or less interchangeable.

At that very moment, I knew I had my introduction to this session.

I want to admit the limitations of this session upfront. By its very nature, it cannot be an exposition of a text—unless I were to choose a text into which I could have eisegeted the development of American fundamentalism. Further, I am not a church historian by specialty, and so this will not be a thoroughly footnoted tour of these decades.

Instead, this is merely going to be the view of the past and present of fundamentalism from where I sit. That is the intention of the day, I suppose; the theme being to consider holiness from the perspective of “a rising generation.” So I’m laying aside pretensions of neutrality and offering my evaluation. It will be left to your judgment as to whether that evaluation has any merit. My hope, at minimum, is to set forth something worth discussing, even if we disagree at points.

It seemed to me that my assigned title also gave me my assigned outline. First, then, we must establish what we mean by “historical fundamentalism.” At that point, we can shift to ask about the status of historical fundamentalism “today.”

### **1. Historical Fundamentalism**

Defining historic fundamentalism is notoriously difficult. One’s own biases certainly factor in here. In general, those who would themselves not own the label of *fundamentalist* are more comfortable attributing to fundamentalism characteristics that they would see as negative.

On the other hand, I consider the fundamentalists my people. In my preparation for this session, then, I caught myself seeking to shoehorn my own theological and ministerial values into my definition of *historic fundamentalism*, so that, by default, I and those who agree with me become the true heirs of what is best in fundamentalism, and those who differ from me are those who had deviated from the pure form of the faith once delivered. My hope is that I can be self-conscious enough of my own biases to keep them from revising my account of fundamentalist history.

The definition of fundamentalism is also distorted by historians who refuse to take fundamentalists as serious representatives of their own position. Too many histories of fundamentalism insist on examining it through the lens of sociology: the idea that fundamentalism is *primarily* a way to express in religious terms the deeper opposition to the modernization of society. Such histories miss the point rather badly.

Instead we must understand fundamentalism as a commitment to both the *truth* of certain doctrines and also to the *importance* of those doctrines. This is a story with which I assume most of us are familiar. The late 1800s saw not only the encroachment of theological liberalism into America, but its entrenchment. (See here Jeff Straub's *The Making of a Battle Royal* for the story of the rise of liberalism among Northern Baptists.) Fundamentalism, as a self-conscious movement, was a response to the challenge presented by the liberal theology—and to the liberal *theologians*.

That last phrase is crucial. Fundamentalism is irreducibly personal. It has to do not merely with problematic theology as an abstraction, but with the people who embrace and propagate that theology. At its core, fundamentalism is the recognition that there are truths one must affirm (and other truths one cannot deny) in order to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ. A bare claim to be Christian does not justify itself, and a life of upstanding character and evident piety is irrelevant if certain fundamental doctrines are denied.

This is why fundamentalism of necessity is about both the *truth* and the *importance* of certain doctrines. It is possible to affirm the truth of the fundamentals while rejecting their status as the boundaries of the Christian faith. The latter claim—the importance of these doctrines—demands that those who reject or undermine the truth of the doctrines must not be recognized as believers. And this always has been the most contentious claim of the fundamentalists: that liberal Christianity is no Christianity at all. As Machen put it:

Modern liberalism may be criticized (1) on the ground that it is un-Christian and (2) on the ground that it is unscientific. We shall concern ourselves here chiefly with the former line of criticism; we shall be interested in showing that despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology, modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions. But in showing that the liberal attempt at rescuing Christianity is false we are not showing that there is no way of rescuing Christianity at all; on the contrary, it may appear incidentally, even in the present little book, that it is not the Christianity of the New Testament which is in conflict with science, but the supposed Christianity of the modern liberal Church, and that the real city of God, and that city alone, has defenses which are capable of warding off the assaults of modern unbelief. However, our immediate concern is with the other side of the problem; our principal concern just now is to show that the liberal attempt at reconciling Christianity with modern science has really relinquished everything distinctive of Christianity, so that what remains is in essentials only that same indefinite type of religious aspiration which was in the world before Christianity came upon the scene. In trying to remove from Christianity everything that could possibly be objected to in the name of science, in trying to bribe off the enemy by those concessions which the enemy most desires, the apologist has

really abandoned what he started out to defend. Here as in many other departments of life it appears that the things that are sometimes thought to be hardest to defend are also the things that are most worth defending.

If the fundamentalist claim is correct, the liberals cannot be received and welcomed as fellow believers. By consequence, those who knowingly embrace liberal theology must be disfellowshipped; no relationship that definitely implies reciprocal participation in the gospel of Jesus Christ can be maintained. This implication of the fundamentalist position, though unavoidably logical, demanded action that was painful—and often more painful than some were willing to carry out. The liberals must be expelled from the seminaries, mission agencies, and ultimately the denominations and churches.

The fundamentalists pressed such decisive measures; for this reason, they were invariably regarded as the aggressors; they were the controversialists, the ones causing division and contention. This characterization is understandable, but it is nonetheless wrong: in Paul's words, "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them" (Rom 16:17). The division is *caused* by those introducing non-apostolic teaching, not those seeking to mark and avoid such men.

Nonetheless, the characterization of the fundamentalists as troublemakers stuck. Again, this is no new story to us, but the bulk of most Christian organizations are made up of folks who mostly want to preserve the organization and accomplish its stated mission. Those pressing for the expulsion of the doctrinally unsound seemed to be a source of institutional instability and distraction from the mission. Those who were accused of unorthodoxy were often active churchmen and noted for their "Christian" demeanor. And so while the "moderates," by large margins, rejected the doctrine of the liberals, they could not abide the militancy of the fundamentalists.

The indifferentists' choice—preservation of institutional stability over theological fidelity—resulted in a sequence of failed moves by the fundamentalists to expel liberalism and liberals from denominations, seminaries, and mission agencies. They simply never had the numbers to accomplish their goals. In time, as Rolland McCune has observed, fundamentalism became "the history of losing the furniture." Those with orthodox theology would found institutions for the preservation and propagation of the gospel, those institutions would be infiltrated by liberals, there would be no institutional will to expel the liberals, and so the fundamentalists would be compelled by principle to abandon those institutions and begin again.

That, in brief, is the story of the earliest fundamentalism. I remain utterly convinced that it is the outworking of a commitment to a sound and biblical idea. Machen's distinction between Christianity and liberalism—that for the liberal, Jesus is the example of faith, whereas for the Christian, he is the object of faith—marks these out as two entirely distinct religions. His plea for the liberals to be honest, not to pass themselves off as Christian, is entirely justified. So then, I see no coherent objection to the idea of fundamentalism.

And yet any idea that becomes a movement will acquire characteristics that may not be intrinsic to the idea itself. While one might justly protest that these characteristics are not essential to (in this case) “being a fundamentalist,” honesty requires us to acknowledge that they nevertheless are genuinely part of fundamentalism as a movement within history. Such characteristics must be noted in any fair description of historical fundamentalism.

Perhaps we can usefully cite two causes for these additional characteristics of historical fundamentalism. The first is the conflict out of which fundamentalism was born. The second is the fundamentalists’ desire to be biblically faithful—which could sometimes imply “not in any way resembling the liberals.”

The fundamentalist-modernist conflict was a high-stakes affair, in at least two ways. Most vitally, it was a contention about the state of men’s souls. There can be no agreement to disagree about, say, the deity of Christ, at least not within the boundaries of Christianity. The very notion of fundamentals implies that some truths are “all or nothing”; a failure to endorse unreservedly these doctrines marks one out as an unbeliever. The logic of fundamentalism demands the public assertion that, if the Bible means anything, *that man* who knowingly and publicly rejects the gospel is hell-bound. Such bold claims are not for the reticent and hesitating.

The second way in which the conflict was high-stakes was that it involved the control of significant organizations, institutions, denominations, and budgets. Because the fundamentalists could not just go along (as the moderates wished), the battle was winner-take-all. Either the liberals go, or the fundamentalists must.

Fundamentalism was forged in conflict. Fundamentalism cannot abandon militancy without ceasing to be fundamentalism. And this gives rise to a kind of chicken-and-egg problem: is a man combative because he’s a fundamentalist, or does he become a fundamentalist because he’s combative? The heroes of earliest fundamentalism rose to meet the conflict of their day. In later generations, this attribute becomes self-selecting: those unwilling to contend find other churches and movements, while those who admire and aspire to such courage in conflict attach themselves to fundamentalist institutions. It is no surprise that when John Frame wrote with a measure of disdain about “Machen’s warrior children,” someone printed t-shirts. While one can be a fundamentalist and be loving and gentle, one cannot be a fundamentalist and allow personal relationships to dictate Christian loyalties. This is a rare and hard path; those who *choose* it are not infrequently curmudgeonly by nature.

Again, here, we are already familiar with the consequences of this: fundamentalists without a fight get restless. While the *idea* of fundamentalism has roots that go much further back than the late 1800s, the *practice* of fundamentalism requires a foil. And so we imagine fights: we “separate” from pastors and ministries who, let’s be honest, have never heard of us. And because we recognize that wide-scale apostasy often begins at the boundaries, fundamentalists often tend toward “everythingism”: that *every* doctrine is a fundamental of the faith, including several new doctrines I concocted just this past week. Discernment newsletters get boring with the same old false doctrines and same old targets; exposing a

new false teaching or a false teacher before anyone else can be a big boost to one's credentials—and subscribers.

This becomes the first non-essential (but true) characteristic of historical fundamentalism: its tendency toward contentiousness. There are other characteristics that fundamentalism accrued, here through a combination of a sincere desire for biblical fidelity and a sincere desire not to be liberals.

Fundamentalists have been conversionists. This, I take it, is driven primarily because they believe it to be a biblical imperative. The conflict with the liberals likely accentuated this tendency. For the liberal, salvation must be found chiefly in the reformation of individuals and in society. From a liberal perspective, a salvation that gains eternal life in the hereafter through forgiveness gained through the work of Christ is nothing more than an evasion of social and moral responsibilities we must shoulder in this life. For good reasons (not being liberal) and for better reasons (because the Bible tells me so), the fundamentalists have chosen the better part here.

Other consequences of not wanting to seem liberal have been less helpful. Fundamentalism has always had a populist, anti-elitist core. While many fundamentalist leaders were well-educated, the strong link between heady education and apostasy is one that fundamentalists have never been apt to overlook. And it's vital that we be honest here: this connection is no figment of the fundamentalist imagination. Jeff Straub's new book (mentioned earlier) that chronicles the rise of liberalism in the Northern Baptist Convention gives some attention to pastors and to the influence of the Rockefellers as donors, but the chief means by which the liberals took dominance of the NBC was the seminaries.

The populism of fundamentalism has kept it insulated from certain kinds of errors. Trends in ecclesiology and theology that might appeal to those with more urbane sensibilities rarely pass the smell test in fundamentalism. In many cases, such trends needn't be debunked directly; they simply fail to overcome the innate suspicions they raise among fundamentalists. This kind of insulation against error is useful. That said, without *reasons* for rejecting trends, fundamentalists can be prone to adopting them late, when they simply stop seeming so weird.

But populism also exposes fundamentalism to other errors. If we are going to be suspicious of an educated ministry, we are certainly going to embrace an uneducated one. While academic degrees are no guarantee of actual learning, a culture hostile to both degrees and learning is going to find itself with pastors who are flatly unable to read the Word of God with comprehension. Absent this most basic qualification for ministry, pastors will inevitably preach their own ideas passed off as having divine authority. In the guise of humility, high arrogance reigns.

Populism also creates a weakness to demagogues in leadership, and our history is littered with such men. (Principles versus populism would be a good lens through which to examine fundamentalist history.) Those with rhetorical skill in denouncing the right people have a tendency to rise to positions of authority and prominence. Critics of the demagogues, those

advocating for accuracy rather than bluster in critique of error, are distrusted. And, as is the case with demagogues in leadership, even when their flaws become overwhelmingly obvious, they remain in power with loyalty and fervent defense, because the wider situation is so fraught that we cannot hope to persevere successfully through it without the men who will fight.

Populism (versus elitism) has also established much of the fundamentalist approach to liturgy and Christian affections. In the interest of full disclosure, here's where I wanted to tell a different story, and we'll come back to this point later. But while there may have been exceptions, fundamentalists have not in the main adopted expressions of "high culture" in their churches. The most successful fundamentalist evangelists were those who employed the nascent pop culture of their day for the spread of the gospel. As pop culture became increasingly debauched, fundamentalists slowed their adoption of it. Eventually, they began to condemn the employment of pop culture forms in worship and evangelism, suspending their own practice in a kind of temporal bubble. Time and familiarity have now enveloped these worship practices in sentimentality and nostalgia.

Let me make two final observations about historic fundamentalism, one theological and the other ecclesiastical. Theologically, fundamentalism came to be overwhelmingly Baptist and dispensational. Again, there are reasons for this. Both positions accord neatly with the populist impulse of fundamentalism: the advocacy of a "plain" hermeneutic in dispensationalism, and the Baptist rejection of a rigid clergy/laity distinction. And while one can be a liberal Baptist (again, Jeff Straub's work is of interest here), it is virtually impossible to be a liberal dispensationalist.

Baptist polity demands the autonomy of the local church: each congregation is governed locally, and cannot be compelled by a higher session, board, bishop, or denomination. This ecclesiology fit nicely with the fundamentalist instinct (sometimes learned through hard experience) to distrust denominations and organizations that could bend churches through control of church properties and pastoral pensions. In the absence of denominational control, the organizing centers of fundamentalism were often parachurch organizations. Most typically, Bible colleges and publications became identifying markers for the identity of the churches.

In summarizing historical fundamentalism, I want to circle back to my initial comments: the idea of fundamentalism is wholly biblical, and I find it entirely convincing. Indeed, I would contend that the idea of fundamentalism is itself a vitally important component of Christianity: those who would agree that (again, for instance) Christ is fully God, but who would extend Christian fellowship to one who denies the deity of Christ—I do not see how to avoid the conclusion that such a man has not *fully* understood the significance of the deity of Christ. It is important to come back to this point, because I do not want my other observations about the history of fundamentalism to reflect an essentially negative evaluation of it.

Rather, I am trying to make the case that a brilliant idea was weakened in practice in certain ways.

## 2. Today

When do we transition from *historical fundamentalism* to *today*? In keeping with the perspective already established—which is to say, mine—I might consider *historical fundamentalism* to be that which predates my own theological awareness, and *today* to be after. If that were my sole criterion, it would be inexcusably narcissistic. Happily, however, I think I can make a case that a substantial shift in fundamentalism occurred in the mid-1990s or thereabouts.

The story of this era is one of disintegration. And it is a disintegration that has at least four components: 1) theology, 2) the internet, 3) the colleges, and 4) the Christian affections.

In last week's Nick of Time essay, Kevin Bauder told some of the story of seminary education in fundamentalism. The fundamentalist fathers were, in the main, men with serious academic credentials. But inasmuch as fundamentalism is the history of losing the furniture, and because seminaries played such a prominent role in the introduction and establishment of liberalism in the churches, it is unsurprising that some of the ensuing generations of fundamentalist pastors were either unwilling or unable to pursue extensive theological training.

Over time, however, that situation began to be remedied, as fundamentalists eventually founded their own seminaries. This seems to have created a tension within the camp, however. Fundamentalism was always a movement that transcended certain kinds of theological distinctions (those among brothers). But within the narrower circle of Baptist fundamentalism, theological polarities became stronger. In particular, there were Calvinists and Arminians (who typically designated themselves *biblicists*); and King James Only advocates and advocates of modern versions. While not exclusively divided along educational lines, there was certainly a correlation between seminary education and the increasing acceptance of Calvinism and the new versions.

These theological distinctions often corresponded with differing approaches to ministry. Fundamentalism has historically been characterized by revivalism: the Finney-founded notion that extraordinary works of God are nothing more than the inevitable result of the proper use of God's appointed means. If one were to labor in prayer—and could hit on the proper recipe for drawing a crowd through various entertainments—and then could build the service to the proper point of crisis, conversions and revival were bound to result. The more Calvinistic brothers (no opponents of genuine revival) became increasingly uneasy with this model of ministry. Cooperative works, then, like camps and colleges became increasingly challenging for these opposing theologies and ministry philosophies. And given the genuine seriousness of these disagreements (really core issues of bibliology and soteriology) and the fundamentalist penchant for conflict, it is not surprising that the revivalist/Arminian/KJV wing and the Calvinist/modern version wing of fundamentalism began to go their own ways.

A second factor in the disintegration of fundamentalism was Al Gore's greatest invention: the internet. And I want to argue that, as a result, no one has done more to end the previous era of fundamentalism than Al Gore. In the beginning, the first fundamentalist pastors were getting their Juno email accounts, unaware that in so doing, they were tugging at the thread that would unravel the structure of fundamentalism. I have argued previously that the boundaries of fundamentalism (or fundamentalisms) were essentially formed by the parachurch organizations at the center of each camp—a kind of center-bounded set.

There were times, from what I've read, that the parachurch control of the boundaries of each camp was direct and heavy-handed: sending around letters, public denunciations, at times coordinating an efficient rumor mill. But an underestimated source of control, in my estimation, was the degree to which each parachurch ministry functioned as a filter for information within its camp. Not only publications (which would be obvious), but also the colleges typically made it a point to publish resources for pastors and laymen, instructing them in theology, but also functioning as a trustworthy source of information about the goings on in the broader evangelical (and sometimes political) worlds.

We should not underestimate the degree to which these parachurch publications became gatekeepers within fundamentalism. In certain extreme cases, theological slanders could be attached to evangelical pastors and propagated virtually unquestioned for years, even decades.

The invention of the internet necessarily undid the fundamentalists' model of centralization. No longer could certain centers of influence control the flow of information to their constituents. If you want to know what a particular pastor or theologian is about, access to their work is instantaneous.

In addition, the internet facilitates ad hoc fellowship, rather than formalized membership in associations and institutions. Regional and national meetings are no longer the sole means by which a pastor (say, in the remote corners of Michigan's Upper Peninsula) can remain in regular conversation with likeminded brothers. Ad hoc participation in projects can be organized apart from formal fellowships or associations.

At the same time that the Bible colleges were losing their center of gravity as both sources of information and as enforcers of boundaries, they were also becoming less essential to ordinary fundamentalism. This is the third factor in the disintegration of fundamentalism. By "less essential," I have in mind the removal of the stigma attached to fundamentalist young people who chose to go outside the camp for their undergraduate or graduate education.

A further factor here, beyond the scope of this presentation, is the increasing tendency of young people to pursue education online or through community colleges. I am here making no judgment about those choices; for my part, I'm simply observing that these tendencies have substantially weakened the influence of the Bible colleges on the churches. The colleges that once sometimes functioned as the organizing centers for the various versions of fundamentalism simply do not have that same kind of sway.



A final cause of the disintegration of fundamentalism is the changing consensus on what it means to cultivate ordinate Christian affections. Now, *affections* is not a code word for *music*; much more goes on in ministry that cultivates ordinate (or inordinate) affections. (Hilarity and terror are standard issue in fundamental pulpits, for instance, and neither are ordinate affections.) But music is likely the most *obvious* expression of one's convictions on what proper love for God is to be *like*.

Again, let's be clear: fundamentalism has, from its outset, embraced a version of popular music in ministry, and then hit the brakes when popular music became overtly offensive to Christian sensibilities. But when it hit the brakes, it became a defining characteristic of fundamentalism to be against various forms (however defined) of contemporary music in worship. In many cases, this remained the most obvious mark that distinguished fundamentalism from various forms of conservative evangelicalism.

The "modern hymns" movement has significantly eroded music as a defining feature of fundamentalism, and for that reason, has become another factor in the disintegration of fundamentalism. This is not a place for commentary on the new music itself; it is merely an observation that the adoption of these songs does serve to eliminate an element that uniquely defined a generation of fundamentalism.

## **Conclusion**

I suppose that the proper conclusion here would be a measure of foretelling: historical fundamentalism tomorrow. My reading here undoubtedly strikes some as pessimistic, but my pessimism is really only about the structures and the organizations, not about the idea.

The structures and institutions of fundamentalism are being shuffled: the idea of fundamentalism remains the vital thing. And the story keeps being retold: in every generation, for the sake of "witness," well-intentioned people propose that we modify the message of the Bible, denying (or at least muffling) the truths that will offend Christianity's cultured despisers. In every generation, the call remains for us to earnestly contend for the faith once delivered, and to mark not only those who deny the truth of the gospel, but also those who minimize its importance.