

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Fundamentalism in the church

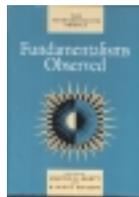
Probably few members of today's mainline U.S. churches can legitimately be called fundamentalists. An increasing number, however, share several beliefs with fundamentalists. They pose tests of faith and want to oust members who fail them. Some are using a series of novels based on the Rapture as study materials. Many are in independent Bible study programs that tell participants they're using only the "pure" Bible rather than any interpretation.



It worries me that these Christians, many of whom are in other ways up-to-date and well-informed, seem to wear blinders when they look at Christian faith. I'm afraid their growing influence is a greater threat to the church than the so-called heresies they claim to be defending it against. However, I see fundamentalist groups and others who resemble them growing while many mainline churches are declining, which makes me wonder.

An urgent task

My wondering has led me to *Fundamentalisms Observed*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (University of Chicago Press, 1991). It's the first of five volumes based on a study by The American Academy of Arts and Sciences. It doesn't cover the most recent effects of fundamentalism, but its descriptions can still help us. It deals with what the editors call "modern religious fundamentalism" as it appears in many different religions and many parts of the world. Marty and Appleby believe, as I do also, that "the task of understanding fundamentalisms is urgent for citizens at a time when these movements are so frequently catalysts in an unsettled world."



"Family"—many messages

The word "family" seems to be everywhere, and a lot of families clearly need help to survive in today's changing world. "Family," is sometimes merely a code word, however, used to assure fundamentalists and other social and religious conservatives that the speaker condones only the kind of family they see as approved by the Bible. Today's much-used phrase "family values" sometimes carries that message too.



I heard a presidential candidate use "family" in that way during last year's campaign. "I want every family to have adequate health care," he proclaimed. Why doesn't he want every *person* to have it, I wondered—why only families? He evidently was sending a message to the voters who believe our government's policies should help only the people in the kind of family those voters approve of. But to avoid arousing the ire of voters with other views, he didn't say that explicitly.



Some uses of "family" seem aimed at creating warm fuzzy feelings that will make hearers want to buy what the message-deliverers want to sell. In a store recently I heard a sales pitch on the loudspeaker, for the bank that is in the store. "Open an account at First Bank now," it urged shoppers. "Become part of the First Bank family." I don't think merely having accounts at the same bank makes people a family, so to me this use of "family" seems manipulative. Evidently it helps business, however, for advertisers use it often.



Churches sometimes use "family" in questionable ways, too. To create a feeling of belonging, they speak of "our church family." Yet calling a congregation of several hundred members a family is a stretch, and even in small churches it's often only the insiders who feel like a family. Talk about "our church family" can actually make outsiders feel further out. Also our frequent pleas to families to join our churches and attend our activities can make individuals and other kinds of groups feel unwanted, even if we add that by "family" we don't just mean married couples and their children.

We can't always take "family" at face value.

Marty and Appleby see “modern” as “a code word for the set of forces which fundamentalists perceive as the threat which inspires their reaction.” These editors assure us that fundamentalists don’t reject all features of modern culture. They readily use mass communications media and other forms of technology, for example. However, fundamentalists see individualism, secular



rationality, and religious tolerance and tendencies toward relativism as dangerous threats.

Fundamentalism resembles traditionalism and conservatism, Marty and Appleby explain, and it is to some degree a subcategory of those, but it differs from them in important ways. Above all, fundamentalists see themselves as militants.

- They fight against what they see as the harmful effects of modern secular life, and they feel their fight is rather successful. They often fight back in powerful, innovative ways. The enemy is often an insider—the friendly messenger who seeks compromise, middle ground, or an agreement to disagree. The enemy is whoever threatens what they hold dear.
- They fight for what they think should happen in society and its institutions.
- They fight with carefully chosen weapons. To find these they reach back, Marty and Appleby tell us, “to real or presumed pasts, to actual or imagined ideal original conditions and concepts,” choosing what they consider fundamental from these parts of the past. They may think they are adopting the whole, pure past, but they’re actually very selective. They choose only the features that will best reinforce their identity, keep their movement together, defend its boundaries, and keep other people at some distance.



- Fundamentalists believe they are fighting under God’s command. This makes them especially persistent and powerful.

Fundamentalism in U.S. Protestantism

In the Marty/Appleby book, Nancy Ammerman, whose specialty is the sociology of religion, points out that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many leaders in American Protestantism were ac-

tively seeking ways to adapt traditional beliefs to the realities of “modern” scholarship and sensibilities. “They were met head-on, however,” Ammerman tells us, “by people who saw the adaptations as heresy and declared that they would defend traditional beliefs from such adaptation.”



During the 1920’s, Ammerman notes, these Christians defending what they saw as fundamental for Christian faith fought against modernism in their churches and against letting evolution be taught in schools. “They lost those battles,” Ammerman finds, “but retreated and reorganized into a network of institutions that has housed much of the conservative wing of American Protestantism ever since.”

Ammerman says that in U.S. Protestantism two different movements have emerged over the last hundred years or so, to defend against modernism. One acknowledges the need to get along with outsiders. This group uses the name “evangelical.” Billy Graham is their best-known representative.

The other group, Ammerman says, felt that getting along was no virtue and that they needed to actively oppose liberalism, secularism, and communism. That group kept the name “fundamentalist,” and in Ammerman’s view their position today has several distinctive features.



- **Evangelism.** Like evangelicals, fundamentalists believe that eternal damnation in hell awaits the unsaved, so they feel they must seek and convert them.
- **Inerrancy.** Fundamentalists insist that true Christians must believe the whole Bible. If even one error in it were admitted, they say, nothing about it would be trustworthy or certain. However, Ammerman observes, holding onto this position requires careful interpretation and balancing. Consequently many of the people in the pews simply affirm that the Bible is a reliable guide for life.
- **A secret road map.** In the Bible, fundamentalists see clues to this world’s future destiny—to what will happen in the End Times. They believe Christ will return to begin the millennium, a thousand-year reign on earth. The Rapture, a time when God will suddenly



take true believers up into the sky in order to save them from the destruction that the rest of the world will experience, is a central feature of fundamentalist belief. So is an emphasis on prophecy as “a kind of secret road map to the unfolding of human history.”



• **Separatism.** Fundamentalists, says Ammerman, want to remain separate from people who fail the tests that they believe prove whether someone is a Christian, such as literal acceptance of the Bible’s creation stories and accounts of Jesus’s virgin birth and bodily resurrection. Outsiders see some of fundamentalists’ beliefs and behaviors as scandalous and extreme, but fundamentalists want the separation that those create.

A limited view of the past

Ammerman tells us that fundamentalism differs from traditionalism or orthodoxy or even a mere revivalist movement in that it is a movement that consciously and in an organized way works to keep traditions and orthodoxies intact. Ammerman observes that when today’s fundamentalists speak of tradition, orthodoxy, or what Christians have always believed, however, they often are actually referring only to ideas, images, and practices that were prevalent in the late nineteenth century.



What they call the “traditional” family is the middle-class family form that arose with nineteenth-century industrialization. And what they call “traditional” music, Ammerman points out, is likely to bear a copyright from the late nineteenth century. “Even the informal network of organizations



they prefer over formal denominational structure,” Ammerman notes, “was characteristic of most of nineteenth-century Protestantism.” And for information about the meaning of Bible passages, many fundamentalists still use the *Scofield Reference Bible*, published in 1909.

Beliefs for insiders only

It’s hard to convince fundamentalists that their views are wrong, because those views include believing that outsiders won’t understand them. Lack of understanding becomes evidence that critics aren’t true believers. If they were, claim the fundamentalists, they’d have received the insight from God that the fundamentalists have received. Apparent biblical justification for that claim is plentiful.

Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?
—1 Cor. 1:20

Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ... The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers ...
—2 Corinthians 4:3-4

Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.
—1 Corinthians 2:14-15

Similarly, when opponents are apparently defeating the fundamentalists, they see the defeat as evidence that they’re on God’s side. They see opponents’ increasing resistance as evidence that the fundamentalists are on the verge of succeeding and thus need to continue or even intensify their efforts. For this, too, there’s apparent confirmation in the Bible and later Christian history. However, I suspect that accepting it as actual confirmation overlooks important facts about the context in which it was written.

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I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

What does their success mean?



What conclusion should we draw when the viewpoints of fundamentalists and other Christians with similar viewpoints seem to be gaining strength not only in mainline churches but also in the political arena? Does this mean those views are right and other Christians' views are wrong? I don't think so. I don't think Christian fundamentalist views hold water when confronted with the fact that other religions also have creation stories and stories of gods who are born of virgins and who die and rise. I don't think we can ignore what is now known about how the Bible reached its present

form, or about how symbolic language functions. Is fundamentalism thriving because churches haven't informed people adequately about such subjects?

Is it thriving instead because the desire for certainty grows in times like ours, when change is happening fast and the future seems uncertain? Because defending long-held beliefs is more comfortable than considering others, and not thinking about beliefs is easier than thinking about them? Or is it because mainline Christians aren't doing the ministries God calls the church to do? Maybe we need to give these questions more serious consideration in our churches.

Barbara

A local, visible, supportive community in a hostile world



In the early 1900's when fundamentalism was becoming prominent in North American Protestantism, says Nancy Ammerman in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, "To become a fundamentalist was to join a group—a local, visible, supportive community. Living in a hostile world required nothing less."



I suspect that's also a big factor in the strong appeal of many of today's so-called Bible churches and other independent congregations that have many fundamentalist characteristics. I also suspect the failure to provide that kind of community is a big factor in the decline of some mainline churches today. It's at least a possibility we need to consider seriously.