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Origins of Early 20th Century Protestant Fundamentalism:

Common Beliefs and Characteristics

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I. Introduction

In common parlance, the term fundamentalism has become a pejorative label for those viewed as religious fanatics. But this has not always been the case. As a theological category, the use of the term refers to an early 20th century movement of Christians seeking to define themselves over and against a modernizing Christianity while also distinguishing themselves from a more ambiguous tradition of American Evangelicalism. What exactly constituted Christian fundamentalism in America is difficult to define. It was not simply rural, Southern, or uneducated. The “five points” are more a historical reconstruction than a unifying statement of belief. It claimed to be against modification of historic Christian belief, but also entrenched itself in reactionary claims that were, by necessity, quite novel.¹ Thus, fundamentalism refers more to a certain common ethos found in this period. The purpose of this paper is to offer a history of American Christian fundamentalist movement, with emphasis on developments between 1910 and 1925. The objective of this paper is to define and explore the key beliefs, characteristics, and points of controversy that became important to fundamentalism.

II. Historical Background

The latter half of the 19th century saw a number of challenges to Christian theology. In 1859, Charles Darwin published The Origin of Species, and as the scientific community continued to hone Darwin’s ideas, the reaction among many Christians was a sentiment that this threatened the Bible. In the academy, significant advances on Biblical

scholarship as well as criticism of historic dogma gave birth to a movement\textsuperscript{2} that came to be known as Modernism. This movement brought historical and critical methods to bear, and much of the historicity of Bible was put into jeopardy. The growing social gospel movement was placing emphasis on progress in society and politics in a way that was foreign to much of Evangelicalism to that point.\textsuperscript{3} Along with social issues which lie beyond the scope of this study, fundamentalism emerged as a reaction to these changes in scholarship and society; respectively, it is reasonably accurate to say that Darwinism, Biblical criticism, liberalism and provided the impetus for creationism, Biblical literalism, and fundamentalism. In a matter or only a couple decades, these reactions coalesced into a distinctive brand of Christianity represented among numerous denominations.

While John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) was developing and propagating Dispensationalism and a new eschatology,\textsuperscript{4} the Presbyterian church’s Princeton Theological Seminary faculty were propagating both verbal plenary inspiration and the total inerrancy of the Bible in matters of not only faith, but also in science and history.\textsuperscript{5} By the turn of the century, the ethos which would soon be called fundamentalism was expressed widely enough that if could not be tied to a single denomination (many of which were splitting due to the fundamentalist controversy). In 1908, a group of dispensationalist evangelists founded the Bible Institute of Los Angeles and published the 

\textit{Scofield Reference Bible} in 1909 (discussed in more detail below) as well as numerous other works warning of the immanent end times. The \textit{Scofield} bible was a dramatic

\textsuperscript{3} John G. Melton "Christian Fundamentalism," 1.
\textsuperscript{4} Harvey Cox. \textit{The Future of Faith}, 147.
success, and instrumental in placing a dispensational eschatology at the forefront of the fundamentalist discussion over the next decade.\(^6\) Though soon gaining widespread acceptance among rural and Southern Baptists, the Presbyterian Church was the most visible early adopter of a positions on Biblical inspiration that would later be called fundamentalist. After terminating the careers of several theologians decrying the fundamentalist wing, the 1910 Presbyterian General Assembly adopted five fundamental doctrines: Biblical inerrancy, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, Christ’s resurrection, and the authentic historicity of Christ’s miracles.\(^7\) Each fundamental was chosen as a reactionary rejection to a specific trend in progressive Biblical and theological scholarship.

The publishing of *The Fundamentals* in twelve volumes from 1910 to 1915 solidified common characteristics of fundamentalist theology. A two brothers, California oil tycoons Milton and Lyman Stewart, largely handled the funding of The Fundamentals and garnered further support among an ambitious cadre of American businessmen. Theologians and evangelists were hired to promote what they saw as the minimum fundamental truths one must assent to in order to be Christian.\(^8\) The mass financial backing allowed the free distribution of *The Fundamentals*, as well as the subsidizing of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. They aimed to reach not only pastors, but para-church ministries, Sunday school teachers, professors, and missionaries (success among Christian missionaries has expanded American fundamentalist theology to a global

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\(^7\) George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 117.

\(^8\) *Ibid.*, 118.
phenomenon). They created both a systematic theology for the fundamentalist while also addressing points of controversy. Theologian James Orr, after admitting somewhat cautiously that faith has often been on the wrong side of science, proceeded to attack evolutionary theory in volume four. Far from being monolithic, others urged caution against literalism in the case of the days in Genesis. Criticism of philosophy and science was common, further lending themselves to charges of anti-intellectualism. Though not gaining quite as wide a reception as they had hoped for, *The Fundamentals* were successful in defining this theological movement and giving it a clear name; these volumes and their contents solidified the name fundamentalism, a name which many early fundamentalists took for themselves proudly.

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, some historians have attempted to reduce a definition of fundamentalism (derived from *The Fundamentals*, volumes I-XII) as affirmation of beliefs: 1) the total inerrancy of the Bible, 2) the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, 3) the virgin birth of Christ, 4) the resurrection of Christ, and 5) the immanent second coming of Christ, or alternately, the historical veracity of Christ’s miracles. Among others, both Sandeen and Marsden have argued that this overly simplified mischaracterization. This paper agrees with the charge of oversimplification, but nevertheless will note common point of doctrinal emphasis.

**III. Common Beliefs Characterizing Fundamentalism**

As previously noted, the late 19th century European academy sent shockwaves through the church as it began applying historical and textual criticism to the Bible.

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10 George M. Marsden. *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 121.
11 Ibid., 119.
David Friedrich Strauss published *Life of Jesus*, to be soon followed by Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* both of which critically questioned traditional dogma and hermeneutics. Harvard professor Charles Elliot’s influential 1910 address, *The Future of Religion*, advocated for a Christianity which would dissolve all doctrine into a primary focus on the love of God via rendering service to mankind.\(^\text{13}\)

While the European academy was busy with textual criticism, Princeton Theological Seminary became the *de facto* academic leader in defense of both verbal plenary inspiration and inerrancy by 1890.\(^\text{1}\) It was at this time that a number of scholars in New Jersey and New York were terminated for criticizing what they saw as a dangerously anti-intellectual direction being taken by American theology departments.\(^\text{14}\)

Before the late 18\(^{th}\) century, theologians and laity alike had the liberty of an undefined position on scripture; inerrancy or infallibility were not part of the theological vocabulary. The advent of Biblical criticism spurred the reactionary emergence of Biblical literalism and inerrancy. Inerrantist theologians, notably Princeton’s Benjamin B. Warfield, tried to combat notions of anti-intellectualism by giving some attention to textual criticism, but with additional criteria which liberal theologians criticized as nullifying any potential error *a priori*.\(^\text{15}\) J. Gresham Machen, perhaps the most significant theologian of “Old Princeton” theology, was a stalwart in the fight against modernist Biblical criticism and went on to found Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929.\(^\text{16}\) Inerrancy of the Bible was a foundation that, if breached, was feared to set off a

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\(^{13}\) *Ibid.*, 147.

\(^{14}\) Coleman, Richard J. Colman. "Biblical inerrancy: are we going anywhere?" 296.

\(^{15}\) *Ibid.*, 298.

reaction. As discussed below, inerrancy became an undertone for the battle over evolution in the 1920s.

The social gospel brought a renewed discussion on the nature of atonement. Fundamentalists defended what they saw as the historic Church’s teaching on atonement, arguing that a change in doctrine would collapse the Church. To their credit, the term substitutionary atonement had long been a part of Christian theology, dating back to the Patristic era, and is in fact the specific term listed in *The Fundamentals*. But fundamentalists mean by the term is clearly a more specific variety of definition than has been historically applied which had more in common with the modifications of St. Anselm in the 11th century and John Calvin in the 16th. In the 2nd century, Irenaeus included substitution language as part of his broader recapitulation theorem which was a far cry from Calvin’s view that later became normative for American Evangelicalism.17 Church historian Dr. James E. Bradley notes that the simplicity of the revivalsist penal substitution model, with both its ease of explanation and its dependence on a single moment of prayer for conversion, made for an apt tool for the early American revivalist preacher.18 Thus, in addition to America settlers carrying this model of atonement across the Atlantic, centuries of reinforcement in pulpits and preacher circuits made the model of atonement seem both self-evident and absolutely foundational to Christian theology. Evangelist Dwight Moody (1837-1899) later characterized the fervor with which this perspective was held when he claimed, “The Lord told me, ‘Moody, just get as many into the lifeboat as you can.’”19

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On the other hand, the doctrines of the virgin birth of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, and the miracles of Christ demonstrate fundamentalist emphases that can be traced back to the 1st century. These emphases demonstrate that fundamentalism was not purely a reactionary movement and did indeed aim to preserve some facets of historic faith against what was perceived to be a dangerous disavowal of Christ’s deity. In short, the virgin birth, miracles, and resurrection saved Jesus from reduction to an itinerant, apocalyptic, philanthropic rabbi.\(^{20}\)

The eschatology adopted is perhaps the most interesting point of the five, both due to its rather late development and the process of its construction. Fundamentalist theology tended to be dispensational, and its eschatology subsumed the doctrine of a mass rapture of Christians from the earth before a coming tribulation period.\(^{21}\) The 18th century had no shortage of speculation on end times and anti-christs. The millenarianism movement, a popular theological conversation emphasizing a literal thousand year reign (either by Christ or by benevolent rulers), had excited the public interest in eschatological speculation.\(^{22}\) If the alternate four tenants of Fundamentalism are difficult to trace, this eschatology can be traced almost entirely to one man. Plymouth Brethren pastor John Nelson Darby is the author of dispensational theology, a school of thought that divides the Bible and history itself into eras, or dispensations. Ostensibly, this is done in order to account for apparent contradictory messages in scripture, contradictions which disappear when applying a theological grid by which certain verses apply only to the Jewish people or a to the Old Covenant, but do not apply under the New Covenant of Christ. After

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 149.
\(^{21}\) This paper recognizes that fundamentalism did not have a unified position regarding eschatology. Still, the influence of Darby became highly significant and cannot be overlooked.
ousting his one-time colleague-turned-adversary Benjamin Wills Newton during a quarrel to gain power in his Brethren congregation, Darby had a small but well-connected pulpit to promote his theology.\textsuperscript{23} The focus of their argument had been Darby’s creation of a doctrine of a rapture, a doctrine which Newton would spend the rest of his career trying, without success, to dispel. In 1840, Darby took his eschatology public and lectured on the rapture for the first time in Lausanne. To pin the creation of the Rapture to a specific year, Darby claims to have realized this doctrine in as early as 1827. Accounts on the origin of this new idea vary (one story posits Darby adopted the Rapture from another Scottish mystic), but Darby’s belief in a Rapture can be seen as a necessary consequence of his dispensational theology;\textsuperscript{24} that is, the Rapture was created to make contradictory Biblical passages on the return of Christ cohere. Darby solved these differences by dividing them into two “second comings,”[sic] one a secret rapture and the other a post-Tribulational announcement in glory.\textsuperscript{25} Darby spread dispensational theology via writings and conferences, which effectively solidified his career as a novel theologian. In fact, both Dispensationalism and the rapture might have died out completely if not for Darby’s contact with one man; Cyrus I. Scofield. In the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, a young pastor Scofield became convinced of Dispensationalism, and in 1909 the \textit{Scofield Reference Bible} was published. Using the King James Version, Scofield’s highly successful Bible included copious footnotes explaining passages via dispensational theology. For many Christians in America, these footnotes were their first exposure to the rapture doctrine. The \textit{Scofield Reference Bible}’s dispensational theology, as well as its penchant for

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 60-1. \\
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 62. \\
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 63.
literalism (Scofield introduced the date of creation as 4004 B.C.), made it a prime
candidate for adoption into fundamentalist circles.\textsuperscript{26} Over the next decade, dispensational
eschatology focusing on the rapture of the church and speculation about the end times
came to dominate conservative Reformed circles, and was canonized in \textit{The
Fundamentals}. Thus, the common belief of fundamentalism in the immanent second
coming of Christ means more than merely the belief that Christ shall return; it is most
often a specific affirmation of this pre-millennial, dispensational eschatology.

One particularly unifying fundamental, but one which is rarely included in any list
of fundamentalist beliefs, is the denial of evolution. This is most likely due to evolution
(though discussed at length in \textit{The Fundamentals}) not reaching its climax in controversy
until the 1920s during Scopes trial (The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes). In
1925, William Jennings Bryan prosecuted Dayton high school teacher John Scopes for
violating a Tennessee statute prohibiting teaching evolution.\textsuperscript{27} Developing a
correspondence with Bryan, Los Angeles evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson used her
political clout to campaign in favor of Proposition 17, which one editorialist described as
“a referendum measure prohibiting the teaching of evolution in the public schools, and
thus put California on an intellectual parity with Mississippi and Tennessee.”\textsuperscript{28} Though
controversial ever since the publication of \textit{The Origin of Species} in 1859, there had been
some amount of leeway in Christian posture toward evolution. While Charles Hodged
dismissed evolution outright, saying “It is atheism,”\textsuperscript{29} other early fundamentalists had

\textsuperscript{26} John G. Melton "Christian Fundamentalism," 1.
\textsuperscript{27} Matthew A. Sutton. \textit{Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America} (United States:
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{29} George M. Marsden. “The post-Darwinian controversies: a study of the Protestant struggle to come to
terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900”, 25.
openly wondered whether the days of Genesis must been read literally. Where many saw cynical brutality in evolution, Calvinist apologists Asa Gray and George Frederick Wright saw evidence of God’s sovereignty.\textsuperscript{30} The Scopes trial, while hardly settling the issue for the nation, certainly drew the battle lines for fundamentalist Christianity and provided an impetus for its political activism.

\textbf{IV. Separationism and a New Evangelicalism}

The most defining characteristic of fundamentalism in the 1910s and 1920s was not a belief but a \textit{modus operandi}: separation. By the end of the Scopes trial, theological infighting had escalated far beyond the termination of a few scholars and pastors seen in the previous decade. The 1920s was a decade of separationism, with several prominent fundamentalist leaders calling for the wholesale abandonment of congregations and denominations which were unwilling to promote fundamentalist theology.\textsuperscript{31} Strain with the theological academy continued due to perceptions of anti-intellectualism and anticlericalism, and in response fundamentalist and dispensationalist leaders founded an impressive number of Bible schools for the training of pastors. Fundamentalism had been largely a northern and urban movement among the theological elite, but the culture war signified by the Scopes trial and success of \textit{The Fundamentals} pushed the demographic profile south.\textsuperscript{32} In 1924, dispensationalist theologian Dr. Sperry Chafer founded Dallas Theological Seminary, which would become one of the most well respected schools of dispensational and post-fundamentalist, evangelical theology. Reacting against separatism, the late 1920’s through the post-World War II years saw renewed interest in such a new Evangelicalism as a way between Modernism and

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}, 26.

\textsuperscript{31} George M. Marsden. \textit{Fundamentalism and American Culture}, 233.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid.}, 233.
fundamentalism. Though retaining many of the same doctrinal points of emphasis, the new Evangelicals desired to engage Christians outside their theological fold. As part of this movement towards a more moderate Evangelicalism, Fuller Theological Seminary was founded 1947. This new Evangelicalism would continue to reflect much of its fundamentalist theological heritage, to degrees that varied widely between persons, schools, and denominations, but it was nevertheless a hopeful step forward in a post-fundamentalist era.

V. Conclusion

Fundamentalism emerged with all the reactionary force of one who feels marginalized, and its doctrine has had staying power far outlasting all predictions. Many of fundamentalist points of debate (i.e. evolutionary theory, Biblical scholarship, atonement, and end times) live on. But in an ironic twist, many of the very items it arose to protest (scholarship and science, ecumenicism and globalization) are the very things that coded its perspective to become obsolete. Dwindling though it may be from broader cultural significance, much of the base ideology and significant theology of fundamentalism lives on, both in marginalized rural separationist churches and in southern Evangelical churches. In the opening of his book The Roots of Fundamentalism, historian Ernest R. Sandeen opines that the obituary of Fundamentalism has not been written yet:

“Ever since its rise to notoriety in the 1920s, scholars have predicted the imminent demise of the movement. The Fundamentalists, to return the favor, have

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33 Ibid., 184.
predicted the speedy end of the world. Neither prophecy has so far been fulfilled.”34
Bibliography


The original understanding of fundamentalism, however, took shape in an American Protestant context—a context that initially informed popular and scholarly notions of fundamentalism and sometimes led to simplistic comparative interpretations. For this reason, among others, critics have questioned the viability of fundamentalism as a universal religious category, especially when applied to non-Western societies; and comparative studies of fundamentalism have been marked by self-conscious attempts to prove the existence of the phenomenon that they are presumably examining. Origins. As a movement