

# Fundamentals or Foundation

An Essay by Dean Summers

I was with a friend, and our conversation hit on the topic of Fundamentalism. I asked the musical question, “Who put the *fun* in Fundamentalism?” My friend answered, “Don’t you mean, who put the *duh* in Fundamentalism?”

My friend’s disparaging remark reflects an estimation of Fundamentalism shared by the majority of American movie goers ever since Spencer Tracy went up against Fredric March in *Inherit the Wind*. *Inherit the Wind* is a film from 1960 about a public school teacher who stands trial for teaching the Theory of Evolution. The film is based on an earlier stage play, which was very loosely based on an actual trial, which featured Clarence Darrow for the defense and William Jennings Bryan for the prosecution. The story of the actual trial is told by Stephen Jay Gould in his book, *Hen’s Teeth and Horse’s Toes*. The version for stage and screen is just an anti-Fundamentalist morality play. The true story is full of unexpected twists and turns.

“Fundamentalist” isn’t supposed to be a dirty word. Back at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, it referred to Christians who were holding to what they considered to be the fundamentals—the essentials—of Christian faith. Fundamentalists are in general agreement about five fundamentals: 1) Biblical Inerrancy, 2) the Deity of Christ, 3) Substitutionary Atonement, 4) the Bodily Resurrection of Christ, and 5) the Miracles of Christ.

The idea that there is such a thing as an Islamic Fundamentalist is based on a morphing of the word, “Fundamentalist.” Originally the word was only ever applied to Christians. The original Fighting Fundie was a Christian with a Bible, not a kafia-clad insurgent with a Kalashnikov.

## In the Beginning

The number of fundamentals identified by Fundamentalists isn’t always restricted to five, but the power of alliteration gives special weight to an enumeration of five fundamentals. Five is also an easy number of fundamentals to remember. You can count them on the fingers of one hand. So you often hear references to the Five Fundamentals. But, when you look for lists of the Five Fundamentals, you find different lists of five. For example, in some lists, the Imminent Return of Christ is there in place of the Miracles of Christ. Still, all of the fundamentals in all of the lists are clearly cut from the same cloth, and all the lists are clearly intended to be representative, not exhaustive. Besides, you only need three fundamentals to define a set. That means one list of five will work as well as any as a representative list of three plus two.

Fundamentalism arose as a reaction to the Modernism of the late Nineteenth Century. Back then, Modernism represented a shift in public education away from rote learning toward discovery by means of the scientific method—and the questioning of everything. And everything included long-held Christian assumptions about the Bible and Christ and Christian faith.

The questioning of those assumptions was seriously disturbing to many Christians. They knew in their blood and bones that some truths are beyond questioning. Some truths are absolute, foundational, fundamental. So they set about to pinpoint those truths and to defend those truths.

Other Christians have always wondered about the good sense of defending truth. Truth is truth. You don’t have to defend gravity, do you? You just have to pay attention to it.

## **Kinder, Gentler Fundamentalists**

“Fundamentalist” came to be a dirty word because the Fundamentalist agenda is inherently reactive and defensive, and because it so easily becomes judgmental and combative. That is why, today, most Fundamentalists don’t like to be labeled Fundamentalist. “Fundamentalist” has come to stand for a self-righteous, judgmental, belligerent approach to religion. Today, most Fundamentalists prefer to be called Evangelicals.

The word “evangelical” is borrowed from Greek and refers to the gospel. “Gospel” is an English word, an out-of-date way of saying “good news.” The very first Christians to identify as Evangelicals were the early Protestants. Over and against unquestioning compliance with a chronically corrupt church hierarchy, those early Protestants regarded the basis for Christian unity to be the evangel, the gospel, the good news pertaining to Jesus Christ. That was five hundred years ago! Those early Protestants were Evangelical before Evangelical was cool.

In recent years, the label “Evangelical” has been appropriated by a new breed of Fundamentalist: the kinder, gentler Fundamentalist. Today, the large majority of Christians who identify as Evangelicals are those who hold to the Five Fundamentals, yet who work to avoid self-righteousness and belligerence. Still, because of their Fundamentalist roots (or, more likely, because of garden-variety original sin) those Evangelicals can revert to self-righteousness and belligerence, especially in defense of their Evangelical causes. That is why the label “Evangelical” is coming more and more to stand for a self-righteous, judgmental, belligerent approach to religion. Kinder, gentler Evangelicals need a new label!

Evangelicals don’t like to be called Fundamentalists, but they are Fundamentalists to the extent that they hold to the Five Fundamentals. Evangelical churches and ministries always publish statements of faith, and those statements of faith always include, in some form, the Five Fundamentals.

Among Evangelical churches and ministries, there are Christians who value the scientific method, who are not afraid of tough questions. They remember that Jesus himself encourages people to ask tough questions. Clearly such Christians are not Fundamentalists even if they identify as Evangelicals. If they identify as Evangelicals, it is perhaps because of a bond of Christian fellowship within an Evangelical community—and perhaps because, to their way of thinking, the only alternative to Evangelical is Liberal. “Liberal” is not supposed to be a dirty word, but it is among Evangelicals. In Evangelical circles, “liberal” means “apostate.”

Strictly speaking, some Evangelicals are not Fundamentalists. Broadly speaking, it is fair to describe Evangelicals as kinder, gentler Fundamentalists.

## **Here I Stand**

I believe Fundamentalism to be fundamentally harmful. But I also believe that the potential for harm is often mitigated by the Holy Spirit working through the New Testament Scriptures to produce authentic Christian faith and authentic Christian action. There are faithful Christians in the Fundamentalist churches. As Jesus says, “You will know them by their fruit” (Matthew 7:16), which, according to the Apostle Paul, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23 NIV).

I am a member of a Presbyterian congregation in the Presbyterian Church USA. The very first Fundamentalists were Presbyterians, and today quite a few Presbyterians still hold to the Five Fundamentals, including Presbyterians in the PC(USA). However, the PC(USA) is not a Fundamentalist association. The PC(USA) document titled “A Brief Statement of Faith” is a comprehensive, thoroughly biblical outline of Christian teaching. It is by no means a Fundamentalist charter, which you will learn soon enough if you ever offer it to a serious Fundamentalist, with your full endorsement, as proof of your doctrinal bona fides. I tried that once. It didn’t go well.

Neither is my congregation a Fundamentalist church, despite the fact that we do partner with ministries that subscribe to Fundamentalist statements of faith, and despite the fact that many members of the congregation have definite Fundamentalist leanings. In our congregation, you can be received into full fellowship even if you are a little iffy on the Five Fundamentals. But, let me hasten to provide a disclaimer! The opinions expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of any particular congregation or those of the Presbyterian Church USA.

I, for one, am a little iffy on the Five Fundamentals. I am not iffy on the Bible or Christ or Christian faith. But I do question Fundamentalism. I like to tell people that I’m a one-fundamental Fundamentalist. Jesus is Lord! That’s my one fundamental. Any Fundamentalist who agrees that Jesus is Lord can be a one-fundamental Fundamentalist with me!

## The Five Fundamentals

Let’s take a close look at the Five Fundamentals, or more precisely, at one of the representative lists of five. (From now on, whenever I refer to the Five Fundamentals, I’ll be counting on you to remember my shorthand. What I’m calling the Five Fundamentals is a representative list of three plus two.)

### 1. *Biblical Inerrancy. The Bible is the inerrant word of God.*

I don’t know any Christian who would call the Bible errant, but there is room for discussion about which parts of the Bible are meant to be understood as straightforward, factual accounts and which parts are meant to be understood as poetry and parable. In some Fundamentalist circles, a big-gun preacher will declare the issue settled, and anybody who disagrees just isn’t a Bible-believing Christian.

Is it possible for a Bible-believing Christian to conclude that the Book of Jonah was written as satire, or that the Book of Job was written as a performance piece? I have heard Fundamentalist preachers deny the possibility.

John Alexander dedicates his book, *Your Money or Your Life*, to his father, whom John describes as “an unusual fundamentalist; for he believes that inerrancy extends to the teachings of Jesus.” *Your Money or Your Life* is the title the publisher chose. John wanted to call his book *Taking Jesus Seriously*. It is a book of essays written to encourage a radical commitment to the way of Jesus as presented in the New Testament Scriptures.

**2. *The Deity of Christ.*** *Jesus Christ is the Only Begotten Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, born of a virgin.*

That should be the same as saying Jesus is Lord. But the real point of this fundamental seems to be that Jesus was qualified to suffer the punishment of Hell as our substitute. That ties the doctrine of the Deity of Christ to the doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement. Some Fundamentalists even oppose what they call “the error of Lordship Theology,” which they say leads to seeking “salvation by works.” It doesn’t. It leads to taking Jesus seriously. Taking Jesus seriously means paying close attention to Jesus. Jesus is a savior only to those for whom Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord only to those for whom he is the final authority regarding every aspect of life (see Matthew 7:24-27).

**3. *Substitutionary Atonement.*** *All humankind deserves God’s condemnation, but God sent Jesus to suffer the punishment in our place so that anyone who receives God’s free gift of salvation in the name of Jesus will be saved.*

This doctrine is at least a thousand years old. But it’s not two thousand years old. Substitutionary Atonement is not a biblical doctrine. The Bible accounts for the death of Jesus differently. According to the Bible, Jesus, who was entirely true to God, was rejected, brutalized, and murdered by the agents of a humanity entirely hostile to God (see, for example, Acts 2:14-41; 10:34-48; 13:16-41; 17:22-31).

**4. *The Bodily Resurrection of Christ.*** *God truly raised Jesus alive from the dead.*

I’m not sure I’ve ever met a faithful Christian who doubts the bodily resurrection of Christ. It’s clearly an essential part of the story of Jesus (see, for example, Acts 2:14-41; 10:34-48; 13:16-41; 17:22-31).

**5. *The Miracles of Christ.*** *All the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Scriptures are true miracles.*

I accept the New Testament stories of the miracles of Jesus as essentially straightforward, factual accounts. I say “essentially” because, now and again, there are discernable elements of poetry and parable. I say “factual” because, in the New Testament, even when the significance of an event is communicated in poetry and parable, the event itself is clearly meant to be understood as true not fictitious, real not imaginary, historical not mythical. I also accept what Jesus says about miracles in the Gospel according to John (John 10:22-42). People who follow Jesus don’t do so because they believe in miracles. They follow him because they “hear his voice.” People who refuse to follow Jesus don’t do so because they don’t believe in miracles. They refuse to follow Jesus because they are already bound to some other master. Affluence, for example.

Many Fundamentalists include under this fundamental the idea that miracles are not a present-day gift of the Holy Spirit, but they were only for the first generation of Christians until the Bible was complete. That makes this fundamental a prop for Biblical Inerrancy. I don’t think the Bible needs that kind of prop, but I do think the church needs, and can count on receiving, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including the gifts of healing and miracles and prophecy.

## The Linchpin of Fundamentalism

When I say that I'm a little iffy on the Five Fundamentals, my main concern is not with each fundamental separately, but with how all of the fundamentals work together as a system of thought. The doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement is the linchpin of Fundamentalism. The other fundamentals all function together around the idea of Substitutionary Atonement. Again, the idea is that all humankind deserves God's condemnation, but God sent Jesus to suffer the punishment in our place so that anyone who receives God's free gift of salvation in the name of Jesus will be saved.

Within the Fundamentalist system of thought, the doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy supports the doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement by allowing passages from the Bible to be quoted out of context, while they are nevertheless deemed to carry the weight of full divine authority. The doctrine of the Deity of Christ presents Jesus as the one divine/human victim suitable to satisfy a divine honor offended by human sin. The doctrine of the Miracles of Christ supports the doctrine of the Deity of Christ.

Within the Fundamentalist system of thought, the resurrection of Christ does not hold the same significance as it does in the gospel. In the gospel, the resurrection is climactic: in the words of the Easter proclamation, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" In the Fundamentalist system, the resurrection is something of an anticlimax, since all the real work was accomplished when the divine/human victim was offered up as a sacrifice to satisfy God's offended honor.

Even so, the doctrine of the Bodily Resurrection of Christ is important to the Fundamentalist system, because it holds out the promise of life beyond death. The gospel also sees in the resurrection of Christ the promise of life beyond death, but the Fundamentalist idea of life beyond death follows a line of thought that diverges from the gospel.

## Life beyond Death

Fundamentalists speak of "going to Heaven." Jesus speaks of "entering into the kingdom of heaven" (see for example, Matthew 7:21). The kingdom of heaven is not a place where some people go when they die. The kingdom of heaven is wherever God is king. Where is God king? God is king in the heart of Jesus, and in the hearts of all who pay attention to Jesus.

According to the gospel, eternal life is life together with the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. It begins already in the present for anyone who draws near to God to be reconciled to God. It looks beyond the present to a bright future, unclouded by the fear of death, with the certain knowledge that God is God and that God is good.

To identify God as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ is to distinguish a particular God from all the others. From Alcoholics Anonymous, we hear of a higher power—as though there are many higher powers to choose from. That's exactly right! There are those of us who believe with a certainty that Jesus' God is the highest of higher powers, but even to say it that way is to admit that Jesus' God is not the only higher power out there. More to the point, Jesus' God is a particular God who draws a particular following. How you feel about life together with Jesus' God depends on how you feel about life together with Jesus and the people who pay attention to him.

In the Fundamentalist system, life beyond death will be eternal bliss for a select few, and eternal torture for all others. Exactly how life for all eternity with the God and Father of Fundamentalism is supposed to be bliss is a little unclear. Nevertheless, bliss is proffered to anyone who is able to swallow the idea that God found a legal loophole that doesn't require him to send the entire human race to Hell.

It is certainly true that Jesus sees humankind as hell-bent for destruction, and in serious need of salvation. But the salvation Fundamentalism offers is nothing but a phony fire insurance policy, whereas the salvation Jesus provides is by way of a real reconciliation with the God of life and love.

### **The Gospel of the Kingdom of God**

In the early days of the Roman occupation of Judea, when Jesus proclaimed the gospel, he did so in these words: "The kingdom of God is at hand!" (Mark 1:14-15 KJV). To Jews in those days, those words of Jesus harkened back to ancient prophecies, some a thousand years old and older. When Jesus proclaimed, "The kingdom of God is at hand!" he was understood to be announcing the dawning of a long-expected age of peace, justice, and prosperity for all the nations of the earth under the reign of a Judean king who would serve as God's own regent.

That Judean king would reign as the Messiah. "Messiah" is from a Hebrew phrase that means "the Lord's Anointed." "Christ" is from the Greek translation of that Hebrew phrase. It was an ancient Jewish custom to consecrate someone to the service of God by anointing that someone. A flask of perfumed oil was poured on the person's head. The one so consecrated was known as "the Lord's Anointed." In time, what began as a descriptive phrase applicable to any servant of God became a title reserved more and more for one servant only: the one to be sent by God to rule the nations. (On anointing, see 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 133; and Matthew 26:6-13 and parallel passages in Mark and John.)

The only people who don't need a history lesson to understand the meaning of the word "Christ" are Greek-speaking Jews. Greek-speaking Jews know that the Christ is the Lord's Anointed, the Messiah. And they know what a Messiah is. Everyone else needs a history lesson. Some people even have the idea that Christ is Jesus' last name. Even a translation from Greek to English isn't much help. What in the world is an "Anointed One"? Greek-speaking Gentiles have the same problem. What in the world is a "Christ"? That's why, in the early days of the Church, when addressing Gentiles, in place of "Christ," the apostles would substitute the word "Lord" (see, for example, Acts 10:36).

I've discovered that Fundamentalists have a hard time retaining information about the meaning of the word "Christ." I think that's because, in the Fundamentalist system, "Christ" means "Savior," "Savior" means "Sacrifice," and "Sacrifice" means "Substitute." To a Fundamentalist, that's all there is to know on the subject.

Jesus not only announced the coming of the Messiah, he publicly declared himself to be the Messiah (Matthew 21:1-11 and parallel passages in Mark, Luke, and John with Zechariah 9:9). Soon after that, there ensued two events of the highest consequence for all humanity. The first event: within six days of claiming the throne as Messiah, Jesus was arrested and executed under Roman authority for the crime of sedition. The second event: God raised Jesus alive from the dead.

When Jesus commenced his reign as Messiah, it was as the crucified and risen Messiah. The gospel of the kingdom of God is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. To proclaim, "The kingdom of God is at hand!" is the same as proclaiming, "Jesus is Lord!" And it is the same as proclaiming, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" (See Romans 10:8-10).

### **Getting Down to Facts**

Jesus reigns as Messiah by granting the Holy Spirit to all who turn to God in his name (Acts 2:38-39). The gospel is a call to repentance, and it is a call to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. That is how the gospel is presented in the New Testament: as a call to turn to God in the name of Jesus to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit by which Jesus reigns as God's Messiah, God's Christ.

The New Testament certainly does depict the death of Jesus as a sacrifice, an offering up. In the New Testament, Jesus is our peace offering (our propitiation, our atonement). He is our ransom and our Passover. Jesus died for us. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In the New Testament, the context for those references is the gospel of the kingdom of God, in which the gift of God's Only Begotten is always associated with the economy of grace and gratitude, never with the economy of satisfaction. The economy of grace and gratitude aims at healthy, life-giving, loving inter-personal relationships. The economy of satisfaction aims at payback. Jesus never commends payback as a remedy for any grievance. He commends a different remedy, one consistent with the character of God. Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:44 NIV).

As presented in the New Testament, the gospel is based on four purported facts: 1) Jesus publicly claimed to be the Messiah; 2) Jesus, as the Messiah, was denounced by the Judean authorities and handed over to the Romans to be brutalized and put to death in a legally-sanctioned lynching; 3) God raised Jesus alive from the dead; 4) Jesus reigns as God's Messiah by granting the Holy Spirit to all who turn to God in his name.

Of those purported facts, only the fourth can be tested experimentally. The other three pertain to once-only events that by nature cannot be replicated. They can be accepted or rejected, believed or disbelieved, regarded as true-to-life or absurd. They can neither be proven nor disproven. Even so, it is important to note that the New Testament clearly and consistently presents the purported facts of the gospel as actual factual events that took place in ordinary reality. It is also important to note that the granting of the Holy Spirit can be tested experimentally. That is why the Apostle Paul can refer to the Holy Spirit as "a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Corinthians 1:22, NIV).

### **To Receive the Holy Spirit**

To receive the Holy Spirit is to internalize the influence of the living God, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a move from will-*ful*-ness to will-*ing*-ness. Through the Holy Spirit you have special access to God, and God has special access to you. Moreover, the you is not you yourself alone. The you is you all. You do not receive the Holy Spirit as an individual in isolation, but as a person in relationship, as a member of the body of Christ, the Church.

A spirit without a body is a ghost, and a body without a spirit is a corpse. The Holy Spirit is not a ghost, and the body of Christ is not a corpse. The body of Christ is alive because of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit has hands and feet by way of us, the body of Christ.

To receive the Holy Spirit is to enter the kingdom of God, a.k.a. the kingdom of heaven (compare Mark 1:14-15 with Matthew 4:17). The kingdom of God is where God's will is done. When God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, we know God as the God of life and love; we enjoy direct open communication with God; we enjoy life together with God and with people from every nation in a community of grace and gratitude.

If you have received the Holy Spirit, you can expect to experience new depths of life and love; and you can expect to have your prayers answered with respect to guidance in the way of Jesus and for provisions in the mission of Jesus; and you can expect people to notice that you are somehow a different person—more alive, more loving, more solid. The Holy Spirit works a transformation in the lives of all who are willing.

Here a word of warning is in order. Don't be suckered into a vague spirituality. There are spirits other than the Holy Spirit. Yielding to the Holy Spirit is one thing. A naïve openness to any and every spirit is foolhardy. The Apostle John says to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1 NIV). To test for the Spirit of the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, measure any influence in your life against the way of Jesus as presented in the New Testament Scriptures. According to those Scriptures, the way of Jesus is total surrender to the God of life and love, whose Spirit nurtures compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, generosity, and truth telling, extending even to outsiders, even to the enemy, even in the face of violent opposition (see especially Matthew, Chapters 5, 6 & 7). Any other way of life is a life lived in submission to some spirit other than the Holy Spirit.

## Harsh Words

The New Testament presents a straightforward, factual gospel: this happened, then this happened, then this happened, therefore! In contrast, the doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement is shrouded in a fog of mythical thinking: don't think too hard about this, don't think too hard about that, and presto!

The doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement is so common among Christians, it is taken for granted and is rarely compared to the teachings of Jesus and his apostles according to the New Testament Scriptures. But, whenever the New Testament is opened and the comparison is made, the doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement begins to lose force, is called into question, is found to be unsubstantiated, is found to be false, is found to be harmful.

The harm is this: a mythical reworking of the gospel has been substituted for a straightforward call to follow Jesus. The gospel has been abandoned for a myth. A passage of Scripture oft-quoted by Fundamentalists against others should be applied by Fundamentalists to themselves: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8, KJV).

Those are harsh words. But, when you understand the harm of mythical thinking, you will see that harsh words are appropriate.

## That Old Time Religion

The word “myth” means “hush.” It is related to the word “mute” (Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, p. 33). The function of myth is to divert group attention away from the arbitrary, scapegoating violence that works unconsciously, but effectively, in shame-based societies to maintain social cohesion. Consider the pogroms in Europe and the lynchings in Mississippi. In times of social crisis, people who bore no responsibility for the conditions that precipitated the troubles were singled out, demonized, and murdered at the hands of a few, but with the full complicity of the dominant society that, by a collective mental trick, was able to turn the innocent into the Enemy and the guilty into avenging angels. That process was at work during the Salem witch trials in 1692. It was at work during the American bombing of Bagdad in 2003. It was at work when Jesus was condemned. That awful process is at work whenever Fundamentalist preachers rail against the wicked.

Growing up, the church I belonged to wasn't exactly a Fundamentalist church, but it was as doctrinaire and as sectarian as any Fundamentalist church. I learned from the preacher that we were against Catholics and Presbyterians and Baptists and Pentecostals and Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh-Day Adventists, and Communists. I was never really clear on who or what we were for.

Scapegoating is the default human response to the threat of social disintegration. The process is described by René Girard in *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* and by Gil Bailie in *Violence Unveiled*. Scapegoating is the default human response, because it works. That is, it works to maintain social cohesion. But at what price? We preserve our society—and we lose our humanity. In a time of social crisis, to remain human, we must act courageously in the face of grave danger. That is why Jesus says, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:34-35 NIV).

The default human response to social disintegration is a regression to a pre-Christian, shame-based society. Mythical thinking works unconsciously, but effectively, in shame-based societies to induce protective stupidity. “Protective stupidity” is an expression coined by George Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is a theme explored in depth by Barbara Tuchman in *The March of Folly*. Protective stupidity is my unconscious refusal to draw a reasonable conclusion when to do so threatens my wellbeing or social standing. Instead of drawing a conclusion, I draw a blank. I might also draw a gun. That is, I might also become agitated and abusive and violent. According to Barbara Tuchman, protective stupidity explains how the Roman Catholic Church lost Northern Europe, how the British Empire lost the American colonies, and how the United States lost the war in Vietnam.

Without protective stupidity, scapegoating can't maintain social cohesion, and there is the imminent danger of social chaos and collapse—a bad thing for any particular shame-based society, a good thing for humanity, provided enough people are ready to take the risk of behaving like human beings.

That very real threat of catastrophe is why dialog with Fundamentalists about Fundamentalism is never a risk-free proposition. Any questioning of Fundamentalist assumptions is sure to trigger in the Fundamentalist an urgent, contagious sense of danger.

## The Emperor's New Clothes

In turbulent times throughout two thousand years of history, there have been Christians who have courageously followed Jesus through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and there have been Christians who have opted for the default human response. The year 325 was a particularly tough year to be a courageous Christian. In that year, the Emperor of Rome made the Christian Church an offer it couldn't refuse.

For nearly three hundred years, Christians subject to Roman authority suffered persecution for their faith. The persecution was not always sanctioned by Roman authority, but it was generally tolerated by Roman authority. That's because the way of Jesus was generally viewed with hostility by the Romans. You can't build an empire on love. Eventually, the way of Jesus was outlawed by Rome. Then things changed.

A Roman emperor decriminalized the Christian faith, and made himself the benefactor of the Christian Church. In so doing, he did not become a Christian. Rather, he continued to serve as High Priest of Apollo. He did, however, presume to convene a council of Christian leaders to define the bounds of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. That was in the year 325.

Under the circumstances, it was difficult to say "No" to the Emperor. After that, to confess the Christian faith, as defined by the Emperor's men, was tantamount to swearing an oath of allegiance to the Emperor, and to be accused of heresy was tantamount to being accused of treason. A brilliant move on the part of that emperor to silence dissent from a growing faction known to breed subversives! "Subversive" is what the builders of empire call someone who tells the truth about government corruption and the abuse of power.

To the world, that shrewd emperor is known as Constantine the Great. To the Greek Orthodox, he is known as *Saint* Constantine. Could there be a more spectacular display of protective stupidity?

## The Sin of the World

The default human response to social disintegration is murderous. Our instinct is toward self-preservation. But, in grasping for self-preservation, we reject love and we destroy life. That's why you should never yell "Fire!" in a crowded theater. You might get trampled as people push their way to the exits. Ultimately, we reject the God of life and love. If given the opportunity and the means, we might even reach out to destroy God. According to the New Testament, that is precisely what happened: we humans were given the opportunity and the means, and we opted for murder.

In his life, Jesus revealed God. In his death, he exposed sin. If we can believe the New Testament Scriptures, Jesus' words and actions are so completely infused with the Spirit of Israel's God, the living God, it can be said without blasphemy that Jesus is the flesh-and-blood image of God. As the story goes, in Jesus, we humans came face to face with God—and we hung him on a cross, as if hanging meat on a meat hook. To put it bluntly, the sin of the world is decide.

Nobody's perfect, but you and I culpable for the murder of God? Yes, though we might have found any number of strategies for avoiding that level of self-awareness. If my lack of perfection is my passionate plea of innocence, it is also my secret shame, and it indicts me for my

rivalry with God. Fundamentalists get it backwards. They'll tell you that God is ready to send you to Hell because you're not perfect. That's not how it is. God created you and me to need one another. By design, each of us is an un-self-sufficient, limited, vulnerable human being. The problem is that we keep grasping after godlike perfection, and that puts us in rivalry with God, particularly with respect to the job of judging others. When we fail to live up to our self-imposed standard of deity, we experience shame, and we go into hiding (see Genesis 3:1-19). Grasping at godhood is what's called "original sin"—the mother of all sins. Can you honestly plead, "Not guilty"?

By the way, when Jesus says, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect," the "you" is not you yourself alone. The "you" is you all (or "ye" in the King James Version). And the particular kind of perfection Jesus has in mind is not flawlessness, but inclusiveness: be as all-inclusive as your Father in heaven (see Matthew 5:48, note the context, and compare Luke 6:36).

We human beings express our hatred for God in ways that are subtle and not so subtle: through atheism, through one kind of idolatry or another, including ego-centrism and ethno-centrism, or through world-weary lives lived without passion or compassion. Our hatred for God is often passive, but it can flare into violence. Whether violent or passive, it is always deadly. Just ask the people who have to live with you.

### **Forgiveness & Reconciliation**

When the New Testament writers proclaim forgiveness of sin, it is important to remember who is doing the forgiving, who is being forgiven, and for what. The one who is doing the forgiving is God, our creator. We human beings, who were created by God, are the ones being forgiven. We are not being forgiven for our humanity. The creation of humanity was God's choice, not ours. We are being forgiven for our hatred of God. The nursing of hatred is our choice, not God's.

When the New Testament writers proclaim forgiveness of sin, it is important to remember that genuine forgiveness is costly, costly to the one who forgives and costly to the one who is forgiven. Anyone who says otherwise has never forgiven and has never been forgiven. Forgiveness never overlooks wrongdoing. Indeed, forgiveness requires an open acknowledgment of wrongdoing. It demands of the one who forgives a courageous decision to give up any demand for recompense, and it offers the one who is forgiven an opportunity to courageously receive the forgiveness of a debt that can never be repaid. True forgiveness is very much like dying. It is like dying, whether you are the one who is doing the forgiving or the one who is being forgiven.

But forgiveness opens the way to reconciliation, to the healing of a broken relationship. It cannot guarantee reconciliation, but forgiveness is essential to reconciliation, essential to a restoration of life and love. And it is the only way to escape the vortex of offense, hatred, retaliation, offense, hatred, retaliation. If forgiveness is like dying, reconciliation is a resurrection from the dead!

In the New Testament Scriptures, forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit are closely associated with Christian baptism, a ritual bath in the name of Jesus. Indeed, baptism is described as an expression of solidarity with Jesus Christ in death and in resurrection (see Romans 6:1-4).

## Valentine Cards & Easter Eggs

As Christian assumptions, the Five Fundamentals are much older than Fundamentalism. Fundamentalism, properly so called, goes back only a little more than a hundred years. The assumptions behind the Five Fundamentals can be traced all the way back to the Second Century of the Christian Era, to Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon. The Five Fundamentals represent a development of what Christians were calling “the plan of salvation” and “the rule of faith” (see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV:14:2 and Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, Chapter 12 with Irenaeus I:10:1). Irenaeus worked out the basics. Along the way, subtle modifications were made by Augustine, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, and others.

In kindergarten, in preparation for Valentine’s Day, we all learned the importance of a pattern. When we were cutting out those red construction-paper hearts for our Valentine’s Day cards, we learned that, if you wanted to end up with two dozen heart-shaped hearts, you needed to cut every heart from the same pattern. If you used each heart as the pattern for the next, before long your hearts were looking like Easter eggs! The pattern for Christian faith and practice is the way of Jesus according to the New Testament Scriptures, not according to Irenaeus, according to Augustine, according to Anselm...

Already with Irenaeus, there is an important departure from the New Testament pattern. Earlier, I referred to his treatise, *Against Heresies* and Tertullian’s *Prescription against Heretics*. Think about those titles, and consider this: whatever gets your attention gets you. The writers of the New Testament were captivated by the kingdom of God, the righteousness of God, the grace of God. A hundred years later, Irenaeus and Tertullian were preoccupied with heresy.

The Five Fundamentals represent long-standing, generally accepted Christian assumptions about the Bible and Christ and Christian faith. However, they do not represent a rigorous adherence to the way of Jesus as presented in the New Testament Scriptures. On the contrary, the Five Fundamentals represent a radical narrowing of scope with respect to Christian faith and practice, with an emphasis on an approved system of “God talk” over and against a proper emphasis on following Jesus. When the New Testament Scriptures are accepted as “the plan of salvation” and “the rule of faith,” the Five Fundamentals are called into question.

## How Fundamentalism Measures Up (Sort Of)

According to the New Testament Scriptures, the Five Fundamentals are upheld with respect to the following:

1. In ancient Israel, there were prophets who truly spoke for the living God. They anticipated the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, the one sent by God to rule the nations (nations as in people groups, not nation states). The Bible contains messages from God received by some of those prophets and includes other material essential for understanding those messages. In that sense, the Bible is the word of God. Moreover, you can’t go wrong taking to heart a word that is entirely consistent with the entire Bible. In that sense, the Bible is the inerrant word of God. (But that’s not what Fundamentalists are getting at.)
2. Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is Lord. (But *that’s* not what Fundamentalists are getting at.)
3. Jesus Christ surrendered himself up to be hanged as a criminal according to the will of God for our salvation. (But, according to the New Testament, salvation is in drawing near to God

through faith in Jesus Christ to receive forgiveness of sin, whereas Fundamentalism offers salvation to anyone who believes that, at the cross, the blood of Jesus somehow paid the price for sin.)

4. God raised Jesus Christ alive from the dead. (But as a validation of the way of Jesus! An important point in the gospel, never mentioned by Fundamentalists.)

5. God is the living God who takes an active interest in human affairs. (But Fundamentalism settles for suspended disbelief, for make believe, whereas the gospel is a call to follow Jesus.)

### How Fundamentalism Falls Short

According to the New Testament Scriptures the Five Fundamentals are refuted with respect to the following:

1. The Fundamentalist doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy is wrong about the Bible, because it confuses a love story with a law book. The Bible is not a single, homogenous work. It is a collection that includes stories, laws, songs, prophecies, sermons, and mail, compiled across a span of a thousand years or more. It comprises two closely related, yet distinct, sets of documents: 1) there is a set that pertains to the story of God and Israel when Israel was bound by an old covenant and governed by the Law of Moses in those days—*prior to the coming of the Messiah*; and 2) there is a set that pertains to the story of God and a people gathered from every nation bound by a new covenant and governed by the Holy Spirit in these days—*subsequent to the coming of the Messiah*.

2. The Fundamentalist doctrine of the Deity of Christ is wrong about Christ, because it confuses divine authority with magic blood. According to the old Revivalist song, “There is wonder-working power in the blood!” According to the gospel, the power is in Christ’s authority to speak for God the word of forgiveness that opens the way to a genuine reconciliation with God (see Luke 5:17-26 and parallels in Matthew and Mark; see also Luke 7:36-50; compare Luke 15:11-32).

In the Bible, a reference to the blood of Jesus is often a reference to Jesus yielding his life as an offering to God, as in 1 John 1:7. It is never a reference to magic blood or to God’s exacting of blood in order to satisfy the divine wrath. In passages such as Acts 5:27-28, the reference to the blood of Jesus is a reference to the violent death of Jesus—just as, in Luke 11:47-51, the “blood of Abel” refers to the violent death of Abel, and “the blood of Zechariah” refers to the violent death of Zechariah. Even where the reference is to Jesus yielding his life as an offering to God, the full story includes the violent death of Jesus and the blood guilt of you and me.

3. The Fundamentalist doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement is wrong about salvation, because it confuses forgiveness with a loophole. The essence of faith in Jesus Christ is commitment to the way of Jesus. It is not embracing the notion that Jesus took your place in Hell. The way of Jesus is total surrender to the God of life and love, whose Spirit nurtures compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, generosity, and truth telling, extending even to outsiders, even to the enemy, even in the face of violent opposition (see especially Matthew, Chapters 5, 6 & 7).

As the Christ, Jesus was rejected by humankind and, *by our hands*, suffered brutal humiliation and death. Judean culpability in the death of Jesus is on record in the New Testament, because the events of Christ’s advent and passion are once-only events in time and space. The time was the early days of the Roman Empire. The space was Judea. That said, it is clear that the

New Testament writers understood Judean culpability in the death of Jesus in terms of *the human predisposition to deicide*, not in terms of Jewishness.

4. The Fundamentalist doctrine of the Bodily Resurrection of Christ is wrong about God, because it confuses a father's love with a tyrant's demands. In Fundamentalism, the God who raised Jesus alive from the dead is the God who demanded the death of Jesus in the first place—as satisfaction for an offense against the divine honor. According to the gospel, the God who raised Jesus alive from the dead is the God who says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6, NIV). Jesus is known to have quoted that passage from Hosea more than once. In doing so, Jesus would contrast God's heart for mercy with the human demand for satisfaction (see Matthew 9:9-13 and 12:1-8; and compare Luke 15:11-32).

5. The Fundamentalist doctrine of the Miracles of Christ is wrong about faith, because it confuses credulity with loyalty. Jesus certainly performed many miracles. Even so, the way of Jesus does not depend upon miracles for authentication. The way of Jesus is self-authenticating. Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice” (John 10:27 KJV).

### Last Words

Fundamentalism works against the gospel. The gospel is a call to face facts. Fundamentalism is a reversion to make-believe. The gospel is a call to action. Fundamentalism is a reversion to talk. The gospel is a call to follow Jesus. Fundamentalism is a reversion to protective stupidity. The gospel is a call to receive forgiveness of sin. Fundamentalism is a reversion to scapegoating. The gospel is a call to receive the Holy Spirit. Fundamentalism is a reversion to legalism whereby salvation is understood as a loophole for a lucky few. The gospel is a call to draw near to the God of life and love. Fundamentalism is a reversion to an arrangement for keeping God off your back.

For all that, there are Fundamentalists who take Jesus seriously, who have drawn near to God to receive forgiveness, whose lives evidence the fruit of the Holy Spirit. They are my dear sisters and brothers in Christ. They are a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They are the salt of the earth and the light of the world! But all that is so in spite of their Fundamentalism, not because of it. The only time Fundamentalism doesn't cause confusion and grief is when it can be ignored. Otherwise it gets in the way of anyone who seeks to follow Jesus. Some Fundamentalists actually oppose the way of Jesus, some with outright malice.

The alternative I propose to Fundamentalism is not Liberalism. Even though “liberal” is not supposed to be a dirty word, much that passes for Liberalism is only a reaction against Fundamentalism. As with Fundamentalism, a reactive, defensive Liberalism is prone to be judgmental and combative. It can be every bit as doctrinaire, as enmeshed in protective stupidity, as mean-spirited, and as oppressive as Fundamentalism. I am thinking of the influence of the high-profile champions of anti-Fundamentalist Liberalism in entertainment and journalism, literature and education, politics and law, science and religion.

What I find especially distressing is that anti-Fundamentalist Liberalism does nothing whatsoever to correct the fallacies of Fundamentalism. On the contrary it works tirelessly to perpetuate the fallacies. Anti-Fundamentalist Liberalism seems perfectly content to play Tweedledum to the Fundamentalist Tweedledee. To rephrase an insight from Garrison Keillor: even the atheists are Fundamentalists; the God they don't believe in is a Fundamentalist God.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, there is a consortium of colleges that promotes international studies. As I write, the consortium is preparing a workshop on world religions. The keynote address is “Islam across the Disciplines.” Other topics include “Crossing Spiritual Traditions in the Helping Professions” and “Religious Pluralism and Global Education.” I might be wrong, but I’m not expecting a fair and impartial treatment of the way of Jesus. I do expect all of us who identify with Jesus to be the focus of attention during one session: “Fundamentalism and the Classroom.”

No, the alternative I propose to Fundamentalism is not Liberalism. Neither am I proposing a New Age spirituality, a return to one of the old-time religions, or a world-weary disengagement. I am certainly not proposing the Woody Allen option: in one of his movies, Woody Allen says, “I was born of the Hebrew persuasion, but I converted to narcissism.”

The alternative I propose is the way of Jesus according to the New Testament Scriptures. I propose that we take Jesus seriously. If he is the Messiah, to take Jesus seriously is to build your life on a solid foundation (Matthew 7:24-27). Anything else is building on sand.

If you are a Fundamentalist who is already a disciple of Jesus, all you have to do is drop your Fundamentalism. You will find that following Jesus becomes much easier. If you are a Fundamentalist who is not already a disciple of Jesus, it’s time to come to Jesus.

### Bible References

Genesis	Matthew	Mark	John	Romans
3:1-19	4:17	1:14-15	10:22-42	6:1-4
1 Samuel	5:1-7:29	2:1-12	10:27	10:8-10
16:1-13	5:44	8:34-35	11:55-12:8	2 Corinthians
	5:48	11:1-11	12:12-19	1:22
Psalms	7:16	14:3-9		
133:1-3	7:21		Acts	Galatians
	7:24-27	Luke	2:14-41	1:8
Hosea	9:1-8	6:36	2:38-39	5:22-23
6:6	9:9-13	5:17-26	5:27-28	
	12:1-8	7:36-50	10:34-48	1 John
Zechariah	21:1-11	11:47-51	10:36	1:7
9:9	26:6-13	15:11-32	13:16-41	4:1
		19:29-44	17:22-31	

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