



SOME FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS WITH FUNDAMENTALISM: A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE¹²

ALGUNS PROBLEMAS FUNDAMENTAIS DO FUNDAMENTALISMO: UMA PERSPECTIVA LUTERANA

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Resumo:

When the word fundamentalism appears in any form of written, oral, or visual media, it generally evokes negative reactions. Often associated with fanaticism, fundamentalism is known for religious commitment taken to its extreme. It is frequently stated that fundamentalists are people who resort to violence and who simply cannot appeal to reason or democratic ideas. This is an oversimplification. It is also wrongly assumed that fundamentalism is found solely in other religions, not Christianity. Fundamentalism and fundamentalist tendencies – although nuanced – are alive and thriving in Christianity as well.

Keywords: Fundamentalism, Lutheran theology, prosperity gospel, biblical interpretation, Neopentecostalism.

Abstract:

Quando a palavra fundamentalismo aparece em qualquer meio de comunicação escrita, oral ou visual, geralmente evoca reações negativas. Frequentemente associado ao fanatismo, o fundamentalismo é conhecido pelo compromisso religioso levado ao extremo. Muitas vezes se afirma que fundamentalistas são pessoas que recorrem à violência e que simplesmente não conseguem apelar para a razão ou fazer uso de ideias democráticas. Esta é uma leitura simplista. Também se supõe que o fundamentalismo é encontrado somente em outras religiões, não no Cristianismo. Esse não é o caso. O fundamentalismo e tendências fundamentalistas - embora sutis - também estão presentes e se proliferam dentro do Cristianismo.

Palavras-chave: Fundamentalismo, teologia luterana, evangelho da prosperidade, interpretação bíblica, neopentecostalismo.

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INTRODUCTION

The Fundamentalism Project, directed and edited by Martin E. Marty and Scott Appleby, points out resemblances among different kinds of fundamentalisms around the world.⁴ Fundamentalism affirms religious idealism as the basis for personal and communal identity. It operates under an insider/outsider dichotomy in which those who do not belong to the group cannot understand its language. Those in opposition are demonized because they persecute the righteous believers. Religious truth is perceived as revealed and unified, and historical events are interpreted in light of a cosmic struggle, a battle between good and evil. Fundamentalism takes its cues from a sacred text, which is above criticism. However, participants of the movement are selective in which parts of the tradition or text they enforce. Fundamentalism also has common organizational characteristics: its membership considers itself elected (or chosen); the leadership is charismatic, often authoritarian, and generally male. It establishes sharp group boundaries and has mandated behavioral requirements. To the outsiders, fundamentalists are reactionary. To the insiders, a modern cultural hegemony is understood as a threat, and any distribution of power needs to be overturned. These characteristics do not apply only to other religions. They apply also to Christianity and, to some extent, to segments of the Lutheran body.

I argue here that contemporary fundamentalism, particularly in its Christian expression, has less to do with the fundamentals of Christian faith than with the social, cultural, and political aspects that ground it. In other words, fundamentalism is not only about the meaning that the faith offers or the ethical guidelines for religious practice.⁵ Fundamentalism is not primarily about showing why and how one's own beliefs are correct, but in proving that the others are wrong. Selected biblical passages are highlighted to support certain values and mores, which are then translated into a language of salvation and damnation. The believers claim that they can actually establish who will and who will not be saved.

I frame this using the notion of power as a catalyst for self-expression, perception, and visibility.⁶ I contend that, at the foundations of fundamentalism, there is an anti-dialogical approach

⁴ The American Academy of Arts and Science funded a multiyear project that brought together scholars from around the world to study fundamentalism. The result is five volumes containing almost 8,000 pages of material known as the *Fundamentalism Project*, edited by Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby. *Fundamentalisms observed*. Volume 1 (1991); *Fundamentalisms and society*. Volume 2 (1993); *Fundamentalisms and the state*. Volume 3 (1993); *Accounting for fundamentalisms*. Volume 4 (1994); *Fundamentalisms comprehended*. Volume 5 (1995). The list of similarities listed here is found in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. "Conclusions: an interim report on a hypothetical family," Volume 1, p. 814-842.

⁵ There will be some overlapping of these terms in this article. Fundamentalism refers to the religious interpretations and practices based on believers' self-understanding of correctness or righteousness, used to reclaim the truth of a particular religious tradition. Neo-Pentecostal (or Neopentecostalism) is a neologism created by sociologists of religion to describe the religious configurations that originated within the Pentecostal churches but can no longer be identified with them. The traditional Pentecostal movement is characterized by baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, whereas Neo-Pentecostals emphasize prosperity theology and the use of mass media. Charismatic refers to the type of worship and ministry focused around praise and spiritual renewal. Charismatic churches are frequently non-denominational and place less emphasis on traditional liturgy.

⁶ The notion of power, employed here, is borrowed from Michel Foucault, who sees power as intentional and non-subjective, a general matrix of force relations at any time, in a given society. Domination is not the essence of power. It is multidirectional, operating from top down and vice versa. Power also plays a directly productive role. Although relationships of power are imminent to institutions, power and institutions are not identical. Yet, Foucault's account of power is not intended as a theory. For him, the aim "is to move less toward a theory of power than toward an analytics of power: that is, toward a definition of a specific domain formed by power relations and toward a determination of the instruments that will make possible its analysis." Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 1980, p. 82.

that is contrary to fundamental Christian teachings in general and to Lutheran theology (and hermeneutics) in particular.

CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALISM

Historically, the term *Fundamentalism* has its origin in the early 20th century Protestantism in the United States. Several pamphlets published between 1910 and 1915, titled “The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth” and authored by leading evangelical church leaders, were circulated among clergy and seminarians. In 1920, Curtis Lee Laws, an editor and Baptist pastor, appropriated the term ‘fundamentalist’ as a designation for those who were ready “to do battle royal for the Fundamentals.”⁷ It was a response to the loss of influence that traditional revivalism had experienced earlier and an attempt to address the liberalizing theological trends characteristic of the period. By emphasizing the “fundamentals” of the Christian tradition, they wanted to distinguish themselves from the “liberal” Protestants who, in their views, were distorting the Christian faith.

If it is true that fundamentalism is an early 20th century American Protestant movement, it is notable that the ideas and strategies proposed by its defenders became widely known a century later. Grant Wacker points out that these beliefs spring from an antagonism to modernity.⁸ Such aversion leads to attempts to recover and publicly institutionalize aspects of the past (ideas and practices) that modern life denies or deems as outdated. Thus, for instance, any change in social stratification is inadmissible, since cultural patterns are part of the order of creation and are prescribed by the sacred texts. Fundamentalists become leery of the secular state when its emphasis on education, democratic reforms, and economic progress take priority over the preservation of the spiritual dimension of life.

Wacker accurately points out that the starting point of fundamentalism in the United States, in the 20th century, is deeply related to power struggles, as the Protestant majority sensed that it was losing terrain. A growing awareness of world religions, the teaching of human evolution in schools and the rise of biblical criticism are often mentioned as catalysts for the emergence of fundamentalism. Wacker goes further in describing the social and political environment of the time:

Drawn primarily from ranks of ‘old stock whites,’ fundamentalists felt displaced by the waves of non-Protestant immigrants from southern and eastern Europe flooding America’s cities. They believed they had been betrayed by American statesmen who led the nation into an unresolved war with Germany, the cradle of destructive biblical criticism. They deplored the teaching of evolution in public schools, which they paid for with their taxes, and resented the elitism of professional educators who seemed often to scorn the values of traditional Christian families.⁹

Christian fundamentalism presents itself as a return to the “good old values” that represent civilization itself. It defends the maintenance of time-honored social distinctions and cultural patterns both as natural and divinely ordained. The order of creation is invoked to justify social arrangements such as the stratified roles for women and men, parents and children, clergy and laity.

7 Information available at <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/fund.html>.

8 Grant Wacker. *The rise of fundamentalism*. Available at <http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us:8080/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/fundam.htm>. Wacker establishes a distinction between two types of fundamentalism: Generic (as a worldwide phenomenon) and Historical (specific to United States Protestant culture).

9 Ibid.

To challenge this order is to question the so-called order of creation. In addition, there is no distinction between religion and state: “that the state should operate according to one set of publicly shared principles, while individuals should operate according to multiple sets of privately shared principles, is morally pernicious and ends up harming everyone, believers and nonbelievers alike. Religious truths are no different from the truths of medical science or aeronautical engineering: if they hold for anyone they hold for everyone.”¹⁰ Such reasoning supports the use of religious values and teachings in the public and political arenas.

Thus, it is possible for Christian fundamentalists to impose a literal interpretation of the Bible as part of the school curriculum, deeming as secondary, irrelevant, or dangerous any teaching that challenges the Scriptures. Religious texts are perceived as infallible and historically accurate. In addition, these texts present a worldview to be upheld by everyone. If modern scholarship points out contradictions or inaccuracies, fundamentalists assume a sense of embattled hostility. As summarized by Karen Armstrong, “fundamentalists have no time for democracy, pluralism, religious tolerance, peacemaking, free speech, or the separation of church and state.”¹¹

As faith convictions are translated into religious practices, they not only orient the spiritual life of the believers but also affect polity. Of course, this is true of any faith, which is why religions play such an important role in politics. Religious values can be invoked to support or challenge social arrangements. A special report on the American South, in the *Economist*, shows the importance that fundamentalism had and continues to enjoy, in spite of the rise of powerful civil-rights activists such as Martin Luther King:

During slavery and segregation most southern churches blessed the existing order. Now they are sorry they did. This about-face was traumatic for many, but easy to justify scripturally. Attempts to find biblical backing for separate lunch counters always required a bit of reading between the lines, whereas ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’ is unambiguous. So as the South has become less racist, it has lost none of its religiosity. Nearly half of the southerners believe the Bible is the literal word of God – twice the proportion in the north-east or the West. Such beliefs have political consequences. Southerners vote for politicians they judge devout. Their faith lends passion to national debates about abortion, homosexuality and bioethics. It affects foreign policy: some 56% of the southerners think God gave Israel to the Jews.¹²

Fundamentalism started in the United States as a reaction to what was sensed as a secularist, modernist hegemony. Its theological representatives feared that faith would no longer play a decisive role in world events, given the fact that religion was reduced to a personal or private matter. By the 21st century this fear was proven wrong. More than ever, perhaps due to fundamentalism itself, religion plays a decisive role in matters such as economics and world politics. In addition, if fundamentalism was originally a movement against modernity, it has since developed a symbiotic relationship with it. Even if some fundamentalist ideas are inherently conservative and represent values wedded to the past, fundamentalists have taken essentially modern approaches to communicate their ideas and implement their practices. Interestingly, today fundamentalism bridges a pre-modern rhetoric with an ultra-modern usage of media, bypassing the democratic principles of modernity. A closer analysis of fundamentalist practices in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, will attest to that.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Karen Armstrong. *The Battle for God*, 2000, p. 09.

¹² Doing it by the book: A special report on the American South,” in *The Economist* (3 March 2007), p. 6.

FUNDAMENTALISM IN LATIN AMERICA

Fundamentalism in Latin America has a different connotation than it has in the United States but its advancement is certainly related to the expansion of the American empire. In many ways, Christian fundamentalism is used to maintain the *pax Americana* in the same manner as Christianity was used, in Antiquity, to maintain the *pax Romana*. The fundamentalist revival in early 20th century American Protestantism affirmed not only the correctness of Christian beliefs but also the need to spread the message of conversion around the globe. Evangelical proselytism, especially through televised media, offered Christians in Latin America an answer to the identity questions that poor, displaced, and migrant people found. Whereas in the United States fundamentalism was a response from an educated and proselytizing type of Protestantism, in Latin America fundamentalism prospered among the less-educated and loosely Roman-Catholic population. The breeding ground was urbanization, modernity, and unequal development.

The weakening of traditional controls, the sense of confusion and helplessness in the anonymity of city life, the shock of new social values accompanying the adaptation to industrial work, the absence of familiar community loyalties and of the encompassing paternalistic character of rural employment: all these conditions led to an acute crisis of personal identity for the migrants. Under such conditions the exchange of old religious values for new ones was likely to occur.”¹³

The process of urbanization resulted in social disruption. The majority of the population (almost 70%) who lived in rural areas at the beginning of the 20th century now resided in the cities. Such social and economic dislocation, leading to misery and exploitation, needed to be addressed, including from a religious perspective. The Christendom theology of Roman Catholicism (nearly 80% of the population) stood for maintaining the status quo. Traditionally it did not develop any activities, besides charity, for the poor. This led to a dwindling appeal of traditional Catholicism. In addition, the new urban dweller, forced to adjust to new living and working conditions, felt personally disorientated, and without pastoral support.

Liberation theology, along with Christian base communities, echoed the Second Vatican Council in its defense of a popular, democratic, and more contextual church. These were significant efforts not only to retain membership, but also to promote an alternative to the hierarchical ecclesial model. In the 1970s and 1980s, military regimes in Brazil, Argentina, and El Salvador, for instance, closely monitored these grassroots Christian communities, suspecting their involvement with Marxist ideology. However, neither liberation theology nor the Christian base communities significantly affected mainline Roman Catholicism. Not surprisingly, nondenominational fundamentalist missions grew significantly in the second half of the 20th century:

The limited number of priests, coupled with the impression that some of them appeared more interested in secular than religious pursuits, created opportunities for pastoral work by evangelical pastors. The lack of sufficient Catholic priests to serve the burgeoning population was increased by the fact that they, unlike evangelical pastors, are expected to spend long years in theological study. This experience also has alienated them culturally from their people. In contrast, poor people have been attracted by the evangelical's daily work among the people, their constant emphasis on the social benefits of strict morality,

¹³ Pablo A. Deiros. “Protestant Fundamentalism in Latin America” In: Marty and Appleby. Vol. 1, p. 155.

and the way conversion can transform neighborhood misfits into upright community leaders.¹⁴

Mainline Protestantism, such as Lutheranism, was always a minority in Latin America. Whether through missionary initiative or immigration, this type of Protestantism found its place among a restricted portion of the population. Whereas some Protestant denominations, such as Methodists and Presbyterians, targeted the urban setting through their mission efforts, Lutherans (particularly in Brazil) were primarily confined to rural areas due to the history of immigration in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Protestants never enjoyed as much visibility or political clout as Roman Catholicism. Thus, evangelical proselytism, with its fundamentalist ideas, appears as a new force. The influx of televangelism and its prosperity theology unleashed the proliferation of neo-Pentecostal churches, currently the fastest growing religious groups in Latin America.¹⁵

Prosperity and success are interpreted as external evidence of God's favor. For the millions living outside that realm, suffering is then perceived as God's punishment and can be overcome by means of merit-making efforts (which include attending worship, prayer sessions, and making financial donations). Theologically, this approach taps into the values of Roman Catholic Christendom (the centrality of the church to achieve salvation and its role in defining polity), but it takes a new connotation: the capacity of each individual to advance socially. Altogether, it bypasses the core of Protestant Reformation, namely, justification by faith. The emphasis is on the individual's capacity to negotiate benefits with God, rather than with life in community and concern for the wellbeing of others.

Emotional exaltation and messianic expectations are combined in local expressions of fundamentalism. The neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil, such as self-proclaimed bishop Edir Macedo's *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), through mass media and mega church events, offer miraculous healing as proof of faith. Healing is a sign that God responds to people's prayers. By preaching immediate conversion, the pastor also sets an ascetic way of life as a model of faithful living. The charismatic leader commands an enthusiastic group of followers and makes use of a highly significant system of communication that includes dance, drama, and lively music.

For Lutherans, this theology seems far removed from the core of Christian faith, one that preaches justification by faith and emphasizes life in communion through Word and sacrament. The cross and its consequent theology, which enables Christians to name suffering and move into hopeful solidarity, are visibly absent from the reflection described above. A theology of glory replaces the cross and is supported by merit-making efforts to attain God's favor (interpreted as success and prosperity). The cross symbolizes obedience to moral guidelines, subjection to church hierarchy, or the way to resurrection (a means to a theology of praise). Theological illiteracy prevents Christians from recognizing how key aspects of Christianity are missing or blown out of proportion in fundamentalist or charismatic theologies. But that does not prevent these religious expressions from growing. The reasons for their growth are not only theological, but also sociological.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 158.

¹⁵ "Christianity reborn." *The Economist*. December 23rd, 2006, p. 49: "renewalists [charismatic, fundamental, or pentecostal] make up around 50% of the population in Brazil and Kenya. And in Latin America Pentecostalism has shattered the Roman Catholic Church's monopoly. In Brazil – the world's largest Catholic country and one whose national identity is intertwined with the church – about a seventh of the population is now Pentecostal and a third is 'charismatic.' In Guatemala Pentecostalism is sweeping all before it."

In order to guarantee its success, a fundamentalist movement cannot simply rely on its institutional power or doctrinal purity. As Michel Foucault points out, power plays a directly productive role:

When disciplinary technologies establish links between these institutional settings, then disciplinary technology is truly effective... it is not in a position of exteriority to other types of relationships. Although relationships of power are imminent to institutions, power and institutions are not identical.¹⁶

Issues of power and control are evident in fundamentalist rhetoric: the power of salvation or damnation impacts how one lives one's life in the present. This coercive power has the capacity to control people's actions, particularly as the identification with the religious groups offers (or requires) public visibility. Whereas Lutherans, for instance, were content in affirming Luther's two kingdom theory, maintaining a (healthy) distinction between realms (spiritual and earthly, ecclesial and secular, etc), fundamentalism collapses these two spheres and urges that the secular become a religious domain, that the eschatological reality is already fulfilled by means of prosperity (or in the saying of Edir Macedo: "Stop suffering. It is in your hands!").

If, in the United States, fundamentalism is geared toward saving the souls of people around the world, with massive missionary efforts, the Latin American version of fundamentalism focuses on offering concrete results for the lives of the believers. The eschatological anticipation is translated into a theology of prosperity. Whereas in the United States fundamentalism was a response of an educated elite to the loss of power and privilege, in Latin America fundamentalism represents expectations for a better life, giving hope for health, housing, employment, etc. Both Roman Catholicism and mainline Protestantism have to acknowledge that they do not offer convincing answers to the plight of the majority of the population. A prosperity theology allows for that dream.

Conversion and discipline, regular worship attendance and generous offerings, and an exemplary Christian life (according to scriptural precepts) bring concrete results to the followers of the movement. The rituals of power are, in fact, displays of enthusiasm, exorcism, and a combination of syncretic practices (ranging from blessed salt to be placed on the television set in order to achieve a miracle to soap a woman should use when washing her husband's clothes to assure his fidelity in marriage). These rituals do not belong to fundamentalism. Yet, they are employed as mechanisms of power or control, and they do fit into the overall cosmic battles between good and evil. Religion also needs to give results here and now, and not merely in heaven.

Fundamentalism argues that the Christian faith offers a secure basis for practicing a righteous way of living. These values should be guidelines for everybody and the State should implement them. This requires that fundamentalists have a strong public voice. The impetus for the public witness of one's Christian faith is carried into party-politics, and party-politics serves as a means to divulge and implement the beliefs of the religious movement. This is a fair description of the Brazilian situation, where 35% of the representatives to Congress were voted into office due to their evangelical affiliations.¹⁷ Political participation, as a basic right of all citizens, is not at the core of such stance. Rather, it is a matter of how religion can exert its power in the public arena by using the political machine and, in turn, how public offices can serve the power interests of the religion.

¹⁶ Dreyfus and Rabinow, op. cit, p. 185.

¹⁷ The fact that fundamentalist groups, in particular the Neo-Pentecostal church *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, own several major television and radio networks gives them the visibility and power to maneuver the population. See <http://www.freelists.org/archives/radiolivres/12-2004/msg00037.html>

The separation between Church and State is minimized and the value of democracy overlooked. The distinction between the chosen – or those who made the choice – and the rest enables the elected ones to exert authority over others.¹⁸ At the foundation of this authoritarianism lies a particular reading of the Scriptures.

THE CONFLICT OF INTERPRETATION

One of the features of 20th century theology was the realization that truth cannot be identified objectively. Believers are not distanced from what they are interpreting because they stand in a relationship of faith. The objectivity of interpretation, although sought after, can never be truly achieved. Realizing one's subjectivity and partiality prevents one from becoming a self-proclaimed master of truth and justice.¹⁹ To acknowledge partiality is to recognize the impossibility of universal claims, as if one could be outside of partisan interest. This humbleness leads one to be open to dialogue, criticism, and correction.

Fundamentalism is adamantly opposed to this. To recognize partiality or the impossibility of truth is perceived as relativism. Such relativism obfuscates the universality of divine truth and the imperative of its proclamation to the whole world. Relativism gives in to the powers of this world, when, in fact, the divine truth demands the opposite, that an antagonistic relation be established between believers and their contexts. In addition, fundamentalism is based on the need to proclaim and convince others of the truth conveyed by the faith. It invokes powers from above to establish and maintain powers below.

These two apparently opposing stances – absolutism and relativism – seem to be in an epistemological battle. Vitor Westhelle writes: “we often find ourselves polarized between a radical commitment to certainty (be it in a faith, in scriptures, in a political system, in science, and so forth), on the one hand, and the eroding sense of any foundation that leads to nihilism, on the other, the apocalyptic being the impossibility to hold the middle.”²⁰ Is there any possibility for a negotiated solution or mediation between these two positions? Is it possible to be at the same time faithful and maintain an openness to doubt?

In her book *Metaphorical Theology*, Sallie McFague affirms that Protestantism inaugurates literalism because it gets rid of the medieval hermeneutics claim that “the text was self-explanatory.”²¹ The emphasis on *sola scriptura* as the source of authority removed the allegorical or typological, the moral or tropological, and the eschatological or anagogical meanings. Luther witnessed many abuses in biblical interpretation through the customary distinction between the literal and spiritual sense. For McFague, however, the abandonment of the four hermeneutical levels in the Reformation opened the gates for biblical literalism. Thomas Aquinas had defined the *quadriga* (the four senses) and conceived them as complementary.²² But Luther was adamant that

¹⁸ Martin E. Marty. “Fundamentals of Fundamentalism.” In: Lawrence KAPLAN (Ed.). *Fundamentalism in Comparative Perspective*, 1992, p. 15-23.

¹⁹ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 1982, p. 184-204.

²⁰ Vitor Westhelle. “Symptoms of the end of western hegemony.” *Theologies and Cultures*, Vol. 2, No. 2, December 2005, p. 45-46.

²¹ Sallie McFague. *Metaphorical theology: models of God in religious language*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982, p. 5.

²² A rhyme that circulated widely in the medieval period put the system into popular form: “The letter shows us what God and our fathers did; The allegory shows us where our faith is hid; The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life; The analogy shows us where we end our strife.”

the literal sense should prevail. But did he imply literalism? A comparison between current fundamentalist readings and Luther's own hermeneutics will prove otherwise.

Bruce Lawrence, in his book *Defenders of God*, establishes that fundamentalism relies on the affirmation of religious authority as absolute and unquestionable.²³ A complete acceptance of the teachings and practices of the movement admits no criticism. It demands that the creeds and practices safeguarded by the religion be publicly recognized and accepted. The source of such authority is derived from the sacred text, the Bible. Biblical teachings must be defended and enforced, also legally. A literal interpretation of the Bible, as practiced by fundamentalism, not only disregards biblical criticism but perceives it as a threat to the integrity and continuity of the movement. Stated this way, it seems plausible that the Reformation simply substituted the authority of the ecclesial *magisterium* for the letter of the Scripture.

Here is where context is important. From its outset, Christian fundamentalism was a response to the so-called liberalizing trends of German biblical criticism and to the questioning of biblical creation accounts in light of advancing Darwinian theories regarding the origin of the universe. In Latin America, on the other hand, fundamentalism was not a counter argument to the secular and scientific arguments. It simply was continuous with a worldview that had never been challenged, given the fact that most of the people had no access to formal or higher education. If American Protestant fundamentalism presupposed education and critical thinking, Latin American fundamentalism operated under its absence.

For fundamentalists, the infallibility of the Bible refers not only to matters of faith and morals, but is also understood as a literal historical record. Furthermore, it is not the authority of the Bible as a whole but the weight of certain passages that seems to be the point of contention. "Particular verses of scripture serve as proof-texts for fundamentalists. That is, verses are recited in the middle of the flow of everyday life or in the midst of a discussion or debate and used to justify certain beliefs and practices."²⁴ The use of the Bible as undisputable authority, however, prevents any type of challenging or questioning of the authority of the leader who invokes scriptural power. There is confusion between the interpreter and the text being interpreted, between the authority of the Scripture and the authority of the religious leader.

By pointing out internal contradictions, textual discrepancies, and historical stratification within Scriptures, biblical criticism undermines the foundation of fundamentalism. It removes its source of religious authority. Theological content, such as creation of the world, the virgin birth, physical resurrection, atonement by the sacrificial death of Christ, and the second coming of Christ are deemed as unquestionable by Christian fundamentalism, even if the history of tradition on these subjects has always been controversial. Although Christians in general confess these theological truths as central to the life of faith, fundamentalists allocate to them a dimension of certainty (as proofs of faith) that not all Christians share. Fundamentalism accepts no questioning because it operates with certainty, and doubt is a weakness that cannot be admitted. To simply pose a question is to undermine the power of the religious authority, independent of the response one might give to the question.

One of the key points in identifying fundamentalism is the language of the *insider* and *outsider*. It is strange or impossible to communicate with those who have not been chosen, are undeserving, or simply are unwilling to comply with the fundamentalist truth. The negative judgment is not subtle: they are enemies who attack the righteous. The Manicheistic language

²³ Bruce Lawrence. *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age*.1995.

²⁴ Richard T. Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism*, 2001, p. 39.

employed by fundamentalism allows no space for doubt or simultaneity (as in the formula *simul iustus et peccator*). There is only good and bad. The principles of good are divine, referring to the soul and salvation. Everything that is evil relates to Satan, sin, and the body. It is not only possible, but ultimately necessary, to wage war against the powers of evil:

“Our” civil norms do not prohibit us from annihilating them militarily and physically, precisely because the victims of annihilation do not share these norms and hence are outside the realm protected by our norms.²⁵

Fundamentalism reduces faith to certainty, to effective results in the form of healing, prosperity, or political and military success. It confuses divine power with the power of this world. Fundamentalism becomes idolatrous when the divine is reduced to temporal, the infinite to finite issues, and faith itself to deeds. The Christian notions of utter dependence on God, justification by God’s grace, and salvation by faith become blurred in fundamentalism. It presupposes that human beings are actually capable of achieving moral perfection, and such moral standards are expected of all believers. Faith, however, needs to have an element of doubt and uncertainty. In fundamentalism, the content of faith is no longer love, justice, and peace. Rather, the Reign of God is reduced to a heavenly reward for righteous living in this life. To other Christians, Lutherans included, this teaching is opposed to the message of love and mercy contained in the Bible itself.

This is the key of Luther’s hermeneutics. For Luther, the importance of the Bible lies in its use and not in its mere possession. It is *the living Word* when it is the object of study and when there is a living out of the Word of God. But that does not apply in fundamentalism. By affirming that neither the tradition of the Church, nor its Councils, but that the Bible alone has authority, Luther was not advocating an arbitrary reading of biblical texts. The Bible is the good news when it conveys the Evangel, the Gospel, and proclaims Christ. Thus, the principle of *Sola Scriptura* must be employed under the guidance of another principle: *Solus Christus*.

Sallie Mc Fague is correct in affirming that Luther concentrated on the literal sense of the texts instead of allegorical interpretation (which could lead to many misinterpretations, in Luther’s opinion). He placed emphasis on translating texts from the original biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek) into the vernacular. The authority of the Scripture, however, does not justify arbitrary biblical interpretation. Luther opposed the monopoly of the ecclesiastical authority (*magisterium*) and wanted all Christians to be able to read the Bible in order to become *Theodidacti* (people taught by God). Ultimately, this proposal entailed the discussion of the text by a wider community of readers.

Luther’s method had little in common with literalism or fundamentalism. His approach was to pay attention to the meaning of the text. This meaning cannot be reduced to the letter of the Scripture, but carries within it spiritual, parenetic (ethical exhortation), or eschatological overtones. Even if Luther emphasized the literal sense, he never absolutized the letter of the Scripture. The whole Bible was to preach Jesus Christ, who operates as a canon within the canon (a criterion for evaluation of all texts). The evangelical center of the Scripture, the Good News, is the message of Jesus Christ (*Solus Christus*). It is the good news of the grace of God (*Sola Gratia*) in Jesus Christ, received in faith (*Sola Fide*). The centrality of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the Word of God. This also became the criterion to evaluate other biblical passages, to interpret the

²⁵ The principle of the just, holy war employed by fundamentalism follows the same rationale as any other war, as this quote referring to barbarism shows. Claus Offe. “Modern ‘barbarity’: a Micro-State of Nature? In: Agnes Heller and Sonja Riekmann (eds). *Biopolitics. The politics of the Body, Race and Nature*, 1996, p. 21.

Bible: *was Christum treibt* (what preaches Christ). With this perspective Luther also gained freedom in relation to biblical texts.

It is obvious that Lutheran hermeneutics and fundamentalism are not on the same page. Ultimately, however, the question is not only one of accurate or inaccurate interpretation of Scripture. This problem could potentially be solved through dialogue if one believed in the legitimacy of such critical community. The issue is not only one of conflicting interpretations, but of the epistemological ground from whence the fundamentalist interpretations spring. It is not sufficient to present counter-arguments based on critical reasoning, contextual reflection, or historical data to dismantle a literalistic reading of the Bible. The foundations of fundamentalism cannot be challenged from the perspective of modernity. Modern frameworks that presuppose critique, discernment, and agency are unacceptable for those who do not share these notions. How can one be dialogical with those who are openly against dialogue?

Paul Tillich once posed the question: “Must the encounter of faith with faith lead either to a tolerance without criteria or to an intolerance without self-criticism?”²⁶ The encounter with the faith of fundamentalism needs to be met with criticism, considering matters of interpreting and deviating from the Christian message. If this criticism uses the language of modernity, however, it will miss the point. The criticism of fundamentalism needs to draw from what is fundamental in Christianity. It needs to define the criteria of what is essential and what is secondary in Christian teachings. There is a conflict of interpretations, but this conflict will not be resolved with an anti-dialogical approach. The controversy, ultimately, resides in what is fundamental in Christianity.

For Lutherans, the dialogue with fundamentalists cannot emphasize the advances of Enlightenment or academic research. It must focus on

- the centrality of the Christian faith
- the scandal of the cross
- the affirmation of human dependence on God’s grace
- the incapacity of humans to attain righteousness by our own means
- the sin in trying to overcome vulnerability by erecting structures of power
- the eschatological anticipation that can only be a foretaste, experienced in Word and sacrament
- the ethical commitment hinged on the love of God and neighbor, and the active life in the body of Christ.

Although fundamentalists employ theological discourse as ideological justification for human structures of power, it is precisely the in-depth analysis of this discourse (and its inherent contradictions) that will allow for conversation. This includes pointing out that Luther’s *Sola Scriptura* was a tool for the empowerment of the community of believers, not for arbitrary leadership. Among fundamentalists, even though the Bible is source of authority, it is not always read carefully. What also will be revealed are the shortcomings of the Lutheran heritage in addressing the poignant challenges of our time and our lack of convincing theological answers to the struggles of everyday life.

²⁶ Paul TILLICH. *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 143.

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