

Fundamentalism

by Jim Seghers

History

Fundamentalism is a late 19th-20th century Protestant movement. It was a reaction against the assault of rationalist criticism initially launched by German scholars whose intent was to undermine the Christian belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. Some Protestant denominations sought refuge in a *semantic literalism* that appeared to shelter the Bible from this onslaught from agnostic scholars. The simplicity and apparent clarity of this approach has recently appealed to many Catholics, who had almost no understanding of the biblical basis of Catholic beliefs. They were seeking order amid the doctrinal and moral chaos of heterodox theologians bent on deconstructing the Christian faith. In many areas of the U.S. the two largest denominations are Catholics and ex-Catholics!

Biblical Fundamentalism, today, refers to interpreting the Bible with a *rigid literalism that wrenches a text from the context of the passage, the whole of Scripture, and the living Tradition of the Church*. This method of literalistic interpretation, literalism, should not be confused with the literal meaning of Scripture, which the Church has always affirmed. An example of literalism is the misuse of Ephesians 2:8-9. “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works lest any man should boast.”

Fundamentalists often cite this passage as a proof-text that one is saved by *faith alone*, thus rejecting the necessity of good works. However, the verse never asserts that one is saved by faith alone. That false idea is explicitly rejected in James 2:24: “You see that a man is justified by works and **not by faith alone**.” What St. Paul teaches is that we are saved by grace through faith, which is exactly what the Catholic Church teaches.¹ Concerning the misuse of Ephesians to reject the necessity of good works, that interpretation falls apart once verse 10 is considered. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for** [purpose clause] **good works**” (Eph 2:10).

This is one of many examples that show how Fundamentalists read their preconceived theology into Sacred Scripture. They then cite the passage out of its context to buttress their position, which is contrary to the literal meaning of the sacred text. Another example of this slanted biblical interpretation is the rejection of the overwhelming evidence that Jesus is referring to his body and blood during the Eucharistic Discourse (Jn 6:25-71). Starting from a theological point of view, which holds that the text can’t mean what it says, the passage is twisted to give Jesus’ words a figurative meaning. However, the deeper one objectively studies the passage the more persuasive it becomes that Jesus is not speaking metaphorically.

Biblical fundamentalism also creates a false tension between the truth of divine revelation and scientific truth. The [Catechism](#) declares that “there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason” provided, of course, that reason “is carried out in a truly scientific manner,”

¹ [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), #'s [154](#), [161](#), [1996](#).

and does not attempt to override moral laws.² Thus, when Jesus stated that the mustard seed is “the smallest of all seeds” (Mt 13:31), he wasn’t giving a science lesson. Therefore, the inerrancy of Scripture is not challenged when we learn from botanists that there are smaller seeds. Similarly, it is a blunder to attempt to defend the truth that God created the world by arguing that Genesis teaches that God created the world in six days. He may have, and he may not have. The Bible doesn’t discuss the matter and science only offers speculations or theories. In other words, *how* God created is irrelevant to creation account in Genesis. *That* God created and *God’s relationship with mankind* is the focus of the creation narrative, not science.

Biblical Inerrancy

The Catholic Church teaches that Sacred Scripture is the word of God in which we encounter the Word who is God.³ The inerrancy of the Bible derives from the fact that God is its primary author. He can neither deceive nor be deceived. Through his inspiration the Holy Spirit preserved the human authors from error in the composition of the books of the Bible.⁴

Every part of the Bible is without error. This truth was taught by Pope Leo XIII in his 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, emphasized by Pope Benedict XV in *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920), and reaffirmed by Pope Pius XII in his 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. The *Catechism*⁵ quoting the Second Vatican Council makes the following statement. “Since therefore **all** that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and **without error** teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures”(emphasis added).⁶

The **literal sense** of Scripture, as opposed to the literalistic interpretation, is “that which has been expressed directly by the inspired authors.”⁷ For example, when Jesus warns, “if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out” (Mk 9:47), the literal sense would take into consideration that the Lord is using a figure of speech called hyperbole. Proper literal interpretations must take into consideration the literary conventions of the time, the author’s intention, literary genre, and historical context. A literalistic interpretation ignores these considerations.

Are there difficulties in the Bible? Yes. In grappling with them there is no better advice than to follow the example of the St. Augustine. “I have learned to hold those books alone of the Scriptures that are now called canonical in such reverence and honor that I do most firmly believe that none of their authors has erred in anything that he has written therein. If I find anything in those writings which seems to be contrary to truth, I presume that either the codex

² Ibid., #159.

³ Ibid., #'s [101](#), [102](#), [103](#), [104](#).

⁴ Ibid., #'s [105](#), [107](#).

⁵ Ibid., #107.

⁶ *Dei Verbum*, # 11.

⁷ Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.

is inaccurate, or the translator has not followed what was said, or I have not properly understood it."⁸

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⁸ *Letter to St. Jerome.*