

Origins of “Fundamentalism”
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A New Christianity for a New World
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Between 1910 and 1915, in response to biblical criticism in general and to the challenge of Charles Darwin in particular, a group of conservative Christians published a series of pamphlets under the title *The Fundamentals*.¹ From those pamphlets the word fundamentalism as a description of the literal beliefs of conservative Christians entered the religious vocabulary.

The tracts defended such things as the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the Davidic authorship of the Psalms, and the accuracy of the biblical prophecy predicting specific events in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Each of these suppositions has been successfully challenged by modern scholarship. Beyond that, these tracts also defended the literal accuracy of what they called “the primary Christian themes.” In time these basic fundamentals of Christianity were said to be five in number. To question or to deny the truth of any of these five doctrines was thought to be an act not just of heresy, but of actual apostasy.

These five fundamentals were:

1. The inspiration of scripture as the literal, revealed word of God.
2. The virgin birth as the miraculous and literal means by which the divine nature of Christ has been guaranteed.
3. The substitutionary view of the atonement that was accomplished in the death of Jesus. The affirmation of the saving power of his blood and the gift of salvation that was accomplished by his death.
4. The certainty of the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The accuracy of both the empty-tomb and the appearance stories in the gospel tradition.
5. The truth of the second coming of Jesus, the reality of the Day of Judgment, which would be based on the record of one’s life, and the certainty of heaven and hell as eternal places of reward and punishment.

Today I find each of these fundamentals, as traditionally understood, to be not just naive, but eminently rejectable. Nor would any of them be supported in our generation by reputable Christian scholars.

Scripture is filled with cultural attitudes that we have long ago abandoned and with behavior that is today regarded as immoral. Concepts such as the virgin birth, the physical resurrection, and the second coming are today more often regarded as

symbols to be understood theologically than as events that occurred in literal history. The substitutionary view of the atonement has become grotesque, both in its understanding of a God who requires the shed blood of a human sacrifice as a prerequisite for salvation and in its definition of humanity as fallen and depraved.

If these things still constitute the faith of Christian people, then Christianity has become for me and for countless others hopelessly unbelievable. Surely the essence of Christianity is not found in any or all of these propositions.

—JOHN SHELBY SPONG,

from a public speech at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, 2001”