

Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism by Rev. Tom Aicken

What is an evangelical?

This term evangelical comes from the root word 'evangel', meaning gospel or good news. An evangelical, then, is someone who believes in and takes a stand for the good news of Jesus Christ, as opposed to the non-evangelical, or liberal, who may in some way deny this good news, and usually he does deny it because he does not believe that men are really so bad that they even need to be saved.

An evangelical is someone who believes the whole Bible to be the inspired, and therefore inerrant, Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice; who believes that Jesus Christ is fully God, as well as fully man, and that there is no other Saviour; who believes that all men are sinners and on their way to hell, except they be converted through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word evangelical is a broad term, embracing both Reformed and Arminian, but this is someone who, in any case, holds to what he understands to be biblical, Christ-centred Christianity. The Reformers of the 16th century, the Puritans of the 17th century, and also the leaders of the 18th century Great Awakening are all considered to have been evangelicals.

The term evangelical is still in popular use today. Though its meaning is changing in some circles, and though there is a growing number of people who call themselves evangelicals who decidedly are not, it is still generally agreed that for one to be an evangelical he must believe in the full inspiration and authority of the Bible, as well as be personally committed to Christ as his Saviour and Lord.

What is a fundamentalist?

We use the term 'Christian fundamentalist' today in order to distinguish such a person from extremists of other religions – for example, 'Islamic fundamentalist' – but, originally, the term fundamentalist stood alone, and those who bore that term did not consider themselves to hold any extreme position, but merely the orthodox beliefs of a biblical Christianity.

An evangelical and a fundamentalist are really one and the same. The only difference, if we must press for one, is that an evangelical is any Bible-believing Christian, whereas a fundamentalist is an evangelical who belongs to a certain movement in the Church which began in the late 19th and early 20th century in reaction to the spreading liberalism of the day. The fundamentalists were on a particular mission, in other words, to combat theological corruption and the disintegration of biblical foundations. Though this movement has changed considerably over the years since it started, as has liberalism, fundamentalists still see this as their peculiar mission today.

Fundamentalism is, essentially, a movement that sprang up in American churches. The term “fundamentalism” has its roots in the Niagara Bible Conference (1878-97) which defined those tenets it considered fundamental to Christian belief. The term was popularized by *The Fundamentals*, a collection of 90 essays published in 12 volumes between 1910 and 1915 by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. These essays were written by some of the brightest theological minds of the day, including B.B. Warfield of Princeton Seminary and Gresham Machen who would later become the founder of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. These essays gave a brilliant defence of biblical truth, but they were never meant to steer a movement which would later define itself by degrees of separation; they

were meant, rather, simply to call the Church back to the Bible and for Christians to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

The following points came to be known as the five fundamentals:

- The inspiration and inerrancy of Holy Scripture;
- The virgin birth of Christ;
- The death of Christ as a vicarious atonement for sinners;
- The bodily resurrection of Christ; and
- The historical reality of Christ's miracles.

It was not thought by the fundamentalists that these were the only important doctrines in the Bible, but that, if one did not hold to these essential (most fundamental) teachings, he could not rightly call himself a Christian.

As commendable as these five fundamentals were, however, fundamentalism soon did take on a life of its own, and subsequent history has demonstrated that as a movement it could often be unnecessarily confrontational and even fanatical in its manner of expression. As a result, many evangelicals do not wish to be labelled as fundamentalists today. (Though a fundamentalist in the classic sense of the word, I rarely use that term in reference to myself anymore.) Leaders have included Bob Jones, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and one of its outspoken proponents in Canada in earlier days was T.T. Shields, pastor of the historic Jarvis Street Baptist Church in Toronto from 1910 to 1955. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones told Shields on one occasion that “he was doing no good by his contendings and tirades.” Shields replied that he was not about to change, that his own deacons did not want him to change, because that was what had sky-rocketed his popularity in the first place.

Christian fundamentalism still contends for the inspiration and authority of the Bible, but it does not have the scholarly leaders it once had, and it has never again produced papers of the academic excellence exhibited in *The Fundamentals* of 1910-15. It has developed a cold and confrontational “them & us” mentality, making it virtually impossible for many of them even to begin, let alone continue, a meaningful debate with others on almost any subject. This has moved several of them to retreat from the fray into their own enclaves of friends, where over time they have isolated themselves even more from other Christians around them. In a number of cases, too, this has spawned a negative and sometimes very legalistic lifestyle of separation.

Christian fundamentalism tried for a time under the Reagan administration to wield some influence in American politics. These attempts did not succeed, however, and President Reagan, though somewhat sympathetic, did not endorse even one policy of what called itself at that time “the Moral Majority.” This political movement, though, some 12 million (or so) strong, did help to strengthen pro-Israel policies in Washington in regard to Middle East diplomatic affairs. This pro-Israel stance comes out of dispensationalism, another movement spreading across America at roughly the same time as fundamentalism, and is today its closest ally.

Recommended Reading: *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, by J.I.Packer. This book is now over 50 years old, but it has some good insights and is probably still the best on this subject.