

Being the Church in the Midst of Empire

Trinitarian Reflections

edited by Karen L. Bloomquist

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Contents

7 **Foreword**

9 **Preface: “Theology in the Life of the Church”**

Karen L. Bloomquist

13 **Introduction: Being the Church in the Midst of Empire**

Karen L. Bloomquist

Empire as Entwined in our History and Faith

25 **Empire and Its Religious Legitimation: Betrayed by a Companion**

Charles Amjad-Ali

43 **Faith and Empire: Some Biblical Perspective**

Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer

55 **The Knot: Autobiographical Reflections on Citizenship
and Faith within Empire**

William R. Strehlow

What or Where is the Church

71 **The Church as Confessing Koinonia of the Spirit**

Cheryl M. Peterson

91 **The Space in Between Spaces:
The Church as Prophetic Pest/Parasite**

Mary Philip

Criteria and Power for Confessing Today

109 **Confession and Empire: How the Gospel is at Stake**

Michael Hoy

125 **The Holy Spirit: Power for Confessing Faith in the Midst of Empire**

Cynthia Moe-Lobeda

Trinitarian Resistance to Empire

149 **Desire in Consumer Culture: Trinitarian Transformations**
John F. Hoffmeyer

163 **Mutuality, Kenosis and Spirited Hope
in the Face of Empire**
Allen G. Jorgenson

Theology of the Cross Instead of Prosperity Theology

181 **Empire's Export of Prosperity Theology: Its Impact on Africa**
Faith K. Lugazia

193 **The Cross, Friendship and Empire**
Deanna A. Thompson

The Public Vocation of the Church amid Empire

209 **An Ecclesiology of Belonging Through Otherness**
Johannes Gerhardus Jacobus Swart

223 **Ecclesial Communion, God's Publicity and Global Citizenship**
Gary M. Simpson

Fundamentalism, Democracy and Empire

241 **Some Fundamental Lutheran Problems with Fundamentalism**
Wanda Deifelt

257 **Tolerance and Democracy Instead of Fundamentalism
and Empire**
Guillermo Hansen

283 **Contributors**

Some Fundamental Lutheran Problems with Fundamentalism¹

Wanda Deifelt

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 the extreme. It is frequently stated that fundamentalists are people who resort to violence and simply cannot appeal to reason or democratic ideas. It is assumed that fundamentalism is found in other religions, not Christianity—and even less so, among Lutherans. Some of us would like to believe that the Lutheran heritage brought Christianity into modernity, in coming to terms with critical thinking by means of an educated approach to the world. This is not the case. Fundamentalist, charismatic and Neo-Pentecostal tendencies—although nuanced—are alive and thriving in Lutheran circles as well.²

The *Fundamentalism Project* identified resemblances among different kinds of fundamentalisms around the world.³ Fundamentalism affirms

¹ A portion of this article was published under the title “Fundamentalism: Controversies over what is Fundamental in Christianity,” in *Theologies and Cultures*, vol. 2, no. 2 (December 2005), pp. 15-30.

² 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 Neo-Pentecostalism) 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 on praise and spiritual renewal. Charismatic churches are frequently non-denominational and place less emphasis on traditional liturgy.

³ The American Academy of Arts and Sciences funded a multiyear project that brought scholars from around the world to study fundamentalism. The result is five volumes containing almost 8,000 pages of material. Marty Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed. The Fundamentalism Project*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); *Fundamentalisms and Society. The Fundamentalism Project*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); *Fundamentalisms and the State. The Fundamentalism Project*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); *Accounting for Fundamentalisms. The Fundamentalism Project*, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); *Fundamentalisms Comprehended. The Fundamentalism Project*, vol. 5 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). The list of similarities is found in Marty Marty and R. Scott Appleby, “Conclusion: An Interim Report on a Hypothetical Family,” in vol. 1, pp. 814-842.

religious idealism as the basis for personal and communal identity, and operates under an insider/outsider dichotomy in which those who do not belong to the insider group cannot understand its language. Those in opposition are demonized because they persecute the righteous believers. Religious truth is viewed as revealed and unified, and historical events are interpreted in light of a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Fundamentalism takes its cues from a sacred text, which is above criticism. However, adherents are selective as to which parts of the tradition or text they choose to 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 Lutheranism.

I argue here that contemporary Christian fundamentalism has less to do with the fundamentals of Christian faith than with certain social, cultural and political dynamics. It functions as ideological underpinning for the political expansion and economic hegemony of empire. Fundamentalism is not only about the meaning that the faith offers or ethical guidelines for religious practice. It is not primarily about showing why and how one's own beliefs are correct, but about proving that others are wrong. I develop my argument using the notion of power as a catalyst for self-expression, perception and visibility.⁴ I contend that at the foundations of fundamentalism is an anti-dialogical approach that is contrary to fundamental Christian teachings in general and to Lutheran teachings and hermeneutics in particular. I critique the selective use of biblical passages to uphold certain values and mores and to establish a language of salvation and damnation with personal, social and cosmic repercussions.

⁴ The notion of power employed here is borrowed from Michel Foucault, who sees power as intentional and non-subjective, a general matrix of relations of force 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 (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 82.

Christian fundamentalism

Fundamentalism has its origin in early twentieth-century Protestantism in the USA. Several pamphlets published between 1910 and 1915, entitled “The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth,” 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.”⁵ 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 view, were distorting the Christian faith.

Although fundamentalism was an early twentieth-century American Protestant movement, 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 towards modernity.⁶ Such aversion leads to attempts to recover and publicly institutionalize ideas and practices of the past that modern life denies or deems as outdated. Thus, for instance, changing one’s place in the social order is ruled out, since cultural patterns are part of the order of creation and prescribed by the sacred texts. Fundamentalists become leery of the secular state when its emphasis on education, democratic reforms and economic progress takes priority over preserving the spiritual dimension of life.

Wacker accurately points out that the starting point of fundamentalism in the US was 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. 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

⁵ Information available, at <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/fund.html> (accessed 29 August 2007).

⁶ Grant Wacker, *The Rise of Fundamentalism*, at <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/fundam.htm> (accessed 29 August 2007). Wacker establishes a distinction between two types of fundamentalism: generic (as a worldwide phenomenon) and historical (specific to US Protestant culture).

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.⁷

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. To challenge this order is to question the order of creation. In addition, there is no distinction between religion and state.

[T]hat 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.⁸

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.”⁹

As faith convictions are translated into religious practices, they not only orient the spiritual life of believers but also affect polity. Of course,

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Random House, 2000), p. ix.

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. It is not surprising, therefore, that a journal such as the *Economist*, a prominent advocate for free market economics and neoliberal policies, dedicates space to address issues of religion. In a special report on the American South, it shows the importance that fundamentalism has 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.¹⁰

Fundamentalism started in the US as a reaction to what was considered a secularist, modernist hegemony. Its theological representatives feared that faith would no longer play a decisive role in world events if religion were reduced to a personal or private matter. By the twenty-first 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

¹⁰ “Doing it by the book: A special report on the American South,” in *The Economist* (3 March 2007), p. 6.

principles of modernity. A closer analysis of fundamentalist practices in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, will attest to that.

Fundamentalism in Latin America

In Latin America, fundamentalism has a different connotation than in the US, but its spread is certainly in many ways related to the expansion of US empire. Christian fundamentalism is used to maintain the Pax Americana in the same manner as Christianity was used to maintain the Pax Romana. The fundamentalist revival in early twentieth-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 of the poor, displaced and migrants. Whereas in the US 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.¹¹

The processes of urbanization resulted in social disruption. The majority of the population (almost seventy percent), who in the early twentieth century lived in rural areas, now were living 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 eighty percent of the population) stood for maintaining the *status quo*. Traditionally, it had not developed

¹¹ Pablo A. Deiros, "Protestant Fundamentalism in Latin America," in Marty and Appleby, vol. 1, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 155.

any activities for the poor, besides charity, which 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 twentieth 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, and the way conversion can transform neighborhood misfits into upright community leaders.¹²

Mainline Protestantism, such as Lutheranism, was always in a minority in Latin America. Whether through missionary initiative or immigration, this type of Protestantism found its place only among a small part of the population. Whereas through their missionary efforts some Protestant denominations, such as Methodists and Presbyterians, targeted urban settings, Lutherans (particularly in Brazil) were primarily confined to rural areas, due to the history of immigration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Protestants never enjoyed as much visibility or political influence as Roman Catholicism. Thus, evangelical proselytism, with its fundamentalist ideas, appears as a new force. The influx of televangelism and its prosperity

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 158.

theology—with Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Jimmy Swaggart as the first generation—unleashed the proliferation of Neo-Pentecostal churches, currently the fastest growing religious groups in Latin America.¹³

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, in which the church is central for salvation and for polity, but it takes on a new connotation: the ability of each individual to advance socially. Thus, it bypasses the Reformation core of justification by faith. The emphasis is on the individual's capacity to negotiate benefits with God rather than on life in community and concern for the well-being of others.

Emotional exaltation and messianic expectations are combined in local expressions of fundamentalism. Through mass media and mega church events, 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), offer miraculous healing as proof of faith. Healing is a sign that God responds to people's prayers. The pastor preaches immediate conversion and 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 effective system of communication, including dance, drama and lively music.

For Lutherans, this theology seems far removed from the core of Christian faith, rooted in justification by faith and emphasizing 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. 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

¹³ "Christianity reborn," in *The Economist* (23 December 2006), p. 49. "Renewalists [charismatic, fundamental, or Pentecostal] make up around fifty percent 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."

does not prevent these religious expressions from growing. The reasons for their growth are not primarily theological but sociological.

In order to guarantee its success, fundamentalism 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.¹⁴

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 becomes 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 a massive US based missionary effort, fundamentalism was geared toward saving the souls of people around the world, the Latin American version of fundamentalism is focused on offering believers concrete results. The eschatological anticipation is translated into a theology of prosperity. Whereas in the US fundamentalism was an educated élite's response 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, generous offerings and an exemplary Christian life (according to scriptural precepts)

¹⁴ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 185.

yield concrete results for the followers of the movement. The rituals of power are, in fact, displays of enthusiasm, exorcism and a combination of syncretistic practices (ranging from blessed salt to be placed on the television set in order to achieve a miracle to special laundry soap a woman should use when washing her husband's clothes to assure his fidelity). These rituals do not belong to fundamentalism. Yet, they are employed as mechanisms of power or control, and they 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 of divulging and implementing the beliefs of the religious movement. This is a fair description of the Brazilian situation, where thirty-five percent of the representatives to Congress were voted into office due to their evangelical affiliations.¹⁵ As a basic right of all citizens, political participation is not at the core of such a stance. Rather, it is a matter of how religion can exert its power in the public arena by using the political machinery and, in turn, how public offices can serve the power interests of the religion. The separation of 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 those elected (i.e., chosen) to exert authority over others.¹⁶ At the foundation of this authoritarianism lies a particular reading of the Scriptures.

The conflict of interpretation

One of the features of twentieth-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

¹⁵ 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 www.freelists.org/archives/radiolivres/12-2004/msg00037.html (accessed 29 August 2007).

¹⁶ Martin E. Marty, "Fundamentals of Fundamentalism," in Lawrence Kaplan (ed.), *Fundamentalism in Comparative Perspective* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), pp. 15-23.

faith. The objectivity of interpretation, although sought, can never be fully achieved. Realizing one's subjectivity and partiality thus prevents one from becoming a self-proclaimed master of truth and justice.¹⁷ 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, namely 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. Vítor 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.¹⁸

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 medieval hermeneutic's claim that "the text was self-explanatory."¹⁹ 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 inter-

¹⁷ Dreyfus and Rabinow, *op. cit.* (note 14), pp. 184-204.

¹⁸ Vítor Westhelle, "Symptoms of the End of Western Hegemony," in *Theologies and Cultures*, vol. 2, no. 2 (December 2005), pp. 45-46.

¹⁹ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 5.

pretation 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.²⁰ Luther was adamant that 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 establishes that fundamentalism relies on the affirmation of religious authority as absolute and unquestionable.²¹ 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 are 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. But that is not the case

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."²² The use of the Bible as the indisputable authority 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.

²⁰ 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."

²¹ Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

²² Richard T. Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism. Christian, Islamic and Jewish Movements* (Lanham: AltaMira, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), p. 39.

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 the creation of the world, the virgin birth, physical resurrection, atonement by the sacrificial death of Christ and the second coming of Christ are deemed unquestionable by Christian fundamentalism, even if the history of tradition regarding these subjects has always been controversial. Although Christians in general confess these theological truths as central to the life of faith, fundamentalists assign them a dimension of certainty, as proofs of faith. Fundamentalism accepts no such questioning because it operates with certainty and doubt is a weakness that cannot be admitted. Simply to pose a question is to undermine the religious authority's power, independent of the response one might give to the question.

One of the key markers identifying fundamentalism is the in- and outsider language. It is strange or impossible to communicate with those who have not been chosen, are undeserving, or simply unwilling to comply with the fundamentalist truth. Such persons are seen as enemies who attack those who are righteous. The Manicheistic language employed by fundamentalism allows no space for doubt or simultaneity (as in *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.²³

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 the 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

²³ Claus Offe, "Modern 'Barbarity': a Micro-State of Nature?," in Agnes Heller, Sonja Puntsher Riekmann and Ference Fehér (eds), *Biopolitics. The Politics of the Body, Race and Nature* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996), p. 21. 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.

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, including Lutherans, 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 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 McFague is correct in affirming that Luther concentrated on the literal sense of the texts instead of their allegorical interpretation (which in his opinion could lead to many misinterpretations). 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 people taught by God (*theodidacti*). Thus, this entails the wider community of readers discussing the text.

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 is the Word of God. This also became the criterion to evaluate other biblical

passages, to interpret the Bible: *was Christum treibt*. 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 fundamentalist interpretations spring. It is not sufficient to present counterarguments 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?”²⁴ 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. Ultimately, the controversy 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 what is central in 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 their own means; the sin of 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 to love God and neighbor; and active life in the body of Christ.

Although fundamentalists employ theological discourse as the ideological justification for human structures of power, it is precisely the

²⁴ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 143.

in-depth analysis of this discourse (and its inherent contradictions) that allows conversation. This includes pointing out that Luther's *sola scriptura* was a tool for empowering the community of believers, not for arbitrary leadership. Among fundamentalists, although the Bible is source of authority, it is not always read carefully. What will also 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.