

Fundamentalism & John Wesley

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Jon Johnston, are fearless leader wisely directed the planning toward the topic of fundamentalism and being politically and socially astute, connected it to John Wesley.

Of course, John Wesley was anything but fundamentalistic. Highly educated and highly spiritual directing his energies and commitments, over time, to religious reform, he moved the Church out of the buildings and into the highways and byways, alive with a concern for both personal commitment and social change, especially for the poor and marginal. He had to battle with the conservative forces in his church. But I digress. Why the topic? Why should ANSR and by association, the Nazarene Church give this topic consideration? Here are my ruminations coupled with some personal experience testimony.

First, I believe we are in a new era of international fundamentalism. It is not an issue for Christianity alone, but is a worldview that is affecting and infecting all major world religions. As American Christians, a peculiar subset of world Christians, we tie it mainly to Islam. But this worldview is rising in Judaism, Hinduism, and even Buddhism, so it is a worldwide phenomena, about which our speaker, Prof. Ableby, has studied and published.

What we may not fully grasp, as American Protestants, who view it mainly from an American historical perspective, is that the 20th Century was the age of political fundamentalism in the form of Fascism and Communism. This “political” fundamentalism led to totalitarian systems exhibiting many of the hallmarks of the fundamentalist perspective. The result was the death of tens of millions in the name of pure, political truth.

What I see is that the beginning of the 21st Century suggests we are entering into an era of widespread religious fundamentalism. I would remind you that there is no war like a religious war since the “pure truth” in the religious sphere is cast in eternal form, not just immediate temporal concerns, so that the stakes are infused with eternal significance. There is no fun in fundamentalism and the past and potential damage of its impact on the church and society is not funny.

Now that you at rest in Zion, I turn to a personal experience with the fundamentalist mindset, for that mindset to me is the key feature of the issue.

I entered my doctoral studies at Stanford University, an eager young man, excited and a bit fearful about the challenge of such a place but with a sense that what I was doing was a part of my calling to serve the church of which I was a part. The Northern California district was considered during the time that I was growing up, as the star district, in terms of growth, excitement, and a positive spirit. Arriving in California, I entered into church activities, teaching Sunday School, serving on the board, etc. But overtime, I encountered a style of leadership on the district that was troubling. Instead of the openness I had heard about and even experienced years before, there was an oppressive spirit, especially for many ministers and laity on the district, that was troubling. Instead of the openness I had heard about and even experienced years before, there was an oppressive spirit, especially for many of the younger pastors. Many of these pastors were being replaced, over time, with persons who clearly had a different style and view of religious issues. I was puzzled and troubled. During this time I came across a “Dictionary of Theology and Religion.” Looking through it I found a two page section entitled, “Fundamentalism.” As I read the statement, I realized it was presenting as clearly and succinctly as possible the situation I was encountering. I found out later, that the author of the statement had been president of Fuller Seminary but had been “pushed out” by fundamentalist advocates. He was writing from personal experience.

Here are the basic ideas he stated that so matched and explained what I was encountering.

First and foremost, fundamentalism is a mindset or worldview that essentially sees the world as a dangerous place.

Second, the major danger it sees comes from what we would term, modernity and secularity.

Third, it is strongly anti-intellectual and fearful of open dialogue.

In America, it developed a set of articles known as the five fundamentals. The most noteworthy feature is the view of inerrancy related to sacred texts.

Its main strategy is to do battle, it has no real positive project. As one leader said: The only true fundamentalist is a fighting fundamentalist.”

Its concern is the defense of doctrine, not Christianity or the particular “religion.”

Finally, I would add that one of its deep features is an underlying oppressive stance toward women.

This “chance” encounter with this statement on fundamentalism, helped me understand what I was encountering and how intractable it is.

So it is with this understanding that we need to see fundamentalism as a worldwide phenomena responding to modernity and secularity. We must develop our response to these changes in a way that reflects the spirit of Christ as he dealt with the “sacred” and “secular” and the fundamentalism of his time.