

How do Fundamentalist Christians view and interpret the Bible and Creation?

Instructions: Read the following excerpts and summaries provided. Make notes of questions or interesting information in the margins. Highlight any terms that you do not understand. After all in your group have finished reading please share with your group your questions, interesting information and unknown information. Finally as a group develop a summary that you are going to present in a 2 minute presentation to the class. You need to be the experts on your information and make sure you convey the most important information.

Summaries from:

THE BOISI CENTER PAPERS ON RELIGION IN THE UNITED STATES

An Introduction to Christian Theology

Christians and their beliefs are often described as “evangelical,” “fundamentalist,” “liberal,” or “conservative,” or some combination of these terms. This section begins to unpack these descriptions.

Evangelical Christianity American Protestantism:

Often associated with a movement known as evangelicalism. The meaning of the term “evangelical” is commonly used to describe Protestant churches that stress evangelization, or converting non-Christians to faith in Jesus. As a general rule, evangelicals stress three core beliefs: Christianity requires conversion or “rebirth” through a personal spiritual encounter with Jesus Christ; Christians must witness their faith to or “evangelize” Christians and non-Christians alike; the Bible is directly inspired by God. Many other Christians, such as Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Catholics, also share these three beliefs; thus, evangelicals can be members of almost any denomination. However, some denominations, such as Baptists and Wesleyans, are more evangelical than others, such as Catholics and Lutherans. One major distinction is that the less evangelical denominations tend to emphasize formal doctrine as similar in importance to the three core beliefs, while the more evangelical denominations do not.

Fundamentalist Christianity:

Another term sometimes used to describe certain Christians—and people of other faiths, including Muslims—is fundamentalist. This term refers to people who maintain a literalist interpretation of their religious faith. Within American Christianity, fundamentalist Protestants share the evangelical emphasis on Jesus Christ but shun participation in American politics and culture. Also, they often insist upon a literal interpretation of the Bible, whereas other Christians understand some parts of the Bible

to be symbolic or metaphorical. Not all Christian evangelicals are fundamentalists, but all Christian fundamentalists are evangelicals insofar as they embrace the three foundational beliefs described above. In the United States today, Christian fundamentalists constitute a small but vocal minority of the Christian population.

Liberal and Conservative Christianity:

Various Christian denominations are also sometimes characterized as liberal or conservative. Some denominations even contain both liberal and conservative groups. Generally speaking, liberal Christians accept historical and scientific information that calls into question the literal truth of some biblical stories, while conservatives are typically less convinced that such knowledge is relevant to faith. For example, liberals typically acknowledge the theory of evolution as a credible explanation of life's origins, while conservatives adhere to a literal interpretation of the biblical account of creation. In contrast to conservatives, liberals also tend to display more openness toward 7 cultural attitudes about social problems and hold a more positive view of human nature.

American Christianity contains many denominations that can be grouped according to evangelical, fundamentalist, liberal, and conservative tendencies. Clearly, the distinctions go far beyond the simple division between Catholic and Protestant. Nevertheless, basic similarities in theology and practice remain.

Excerpts from

FUNDAMENTALISM, LIBERAL BELIEF AND HUMANISM*This article, by William Hagan, appeared in The American Rationalist (Sept. & Oct. 1976)*

The biblical fundamentalist sees the Bible as written by God in such a way as to be removed from and having no relation to any other kind of written communication. It is to be taken not as your ordinary product written by humans which requires some discernment and judgment, but strictly literally.

Was Jonah really in the belly on the whale? The two or three pages in the Bible called the Book of Jonah relate that God called a man to go preach to the city of Nineveh. This city was the Assyrian capital in the 8th and 9th centuries B.C. Jonah balked, but after he had accepted the mission was very angry with God because God did not destroy Nineveh. "God relented to the evil which he said he would do to them." (3:10) The main point is that God said that to wish the destruction of non-believers is wrong. God

rebukes Jonah for grieving over the death of a plant yet not being sensitive to the lives and worth of the Ninevites. A fundamentalist takes the story of Jonah as literally true as if it were television eyewitness reporting of God and Jonah having words. This includes the detail that when Jonah first tried to evade the call by taking a sea voyage and was tossed overboard in a storm, God caused him to spend three days in the belly of a large fish while being returned to shore.

To illustrate further, I would like to offer a flying exegesis of one passage from the so-called Old Testament and one from that called by Christians the New. It is related in Genesis, Chapter 22, that the patriarch Abraham was tested by God by being directed to make a ritual sacrifice of his son. Abraham made all the preparations and at the last moment, at the make-shift altar on the hilltop with a knife at the boy's throat, was stopped by an angel who directed him to sacrifice instead a sheep trapped in a nearby bush. A fundamentalist sees this as an actual happening in which God severely tested the faith and loyalty of Abraham, then miraculously intervened. Because the Bible states it in such words, they picture God as someone who would do something like this and the faithful follower as someone who should respond as did Abraham. Many preachers and many Bible classes continue to cite this as a classic example of faith and obedience to the will of God, implying that for God one should be ready to kill even one's own loved ones.

The example from the Gospels is the baptism of Jesus. Told by all four gospels the incident is well known, a favorite subject of religious art. To quote the gospel attributed to Mark in the Jerusalem Bible translation: "Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized in the Jordan by John. No sooner had he come up out of the water than he (that is, Jesus) saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on him. And a voice came from heaven, "'You are my Son, the Beloved, my favor rests on you.'" (Mk 1:9-11) In the version published some seventy years later attributed to the apostle John, the John who baptized Jesus is quoted as saying he also saw the Spirit like a dove (John 1:32). No mention is made of his hearing a voice.

A fundamentalist typically will not compare the different versions in the four gospels. For he or she takes every detail equally as gospel truth. For the fundamentalist the heavens really opened, the Spirit-dove appeared, God's voice was heard. John the Baptist's role was just as the Gospels proclaim, that of one meant only to introduce and then to be succeeded by the Messiah. The liberal believer can judge that these miraculous details are an externalization of inner beliefs of Jesus about himself or of a mystical experience claimed by Jesus, or the faith of later followers regarding him or all three. It happens also to be the faith of the liberal believer but a faith which is not dependent on taking

every detail of the Gospel as though it actually happened. For liberal believers the Gospels contain, besides actual events, the beliefs and dramatizations of what the writers believed was the meaning of those events.

Article

Christian Fundamentalism and Science

Liz Shields (c) 1998

<http://www.mesacc.edu/~thogh49081/StudentPapers/fund-science.html>

Since Christian fundamentalists are active in the American political system and social issues, perhaps it is wise to examine the historical background that has shaped the beliefs of this powerful minority group.

The first major dispute between science and Christianity involved the shape of the earth ([Godfrey 289](#)). Flat-earthers, through their interpretation of the bible, believe that the earth is indeed flat and not spherical or elliptical. They hold true that the known world is a circular plane, with the north poles at the center and ice walls standing at the southern boundaries ([Godfrey 290](#)). According to the flat-earthers, the sun, moon, and planets circle above the earth at an altitude of six hundred miles (290). Thus the rising and setting is just an optical illusion caused by "atmospheric refraction and zetetic law of perspective" (290). All of these hypotheses have since been scientifically demonstrated as false. Although there are very few that still belong to the Flat Earth Society, the idea for the most part died in ancient Greece as a result of the calculations of Eratosthenes and Hipparchus.

Geocentrists and creationists do not agree with flat-earthers about the nature of the earth even though they believe in the inerrancy of the bible. It is a source of great amusement to those outside of Christian fundamentalism that geocentrists and creationists view flat-earthers as ultra-conservative and do not want to be associated with them in any way.

In contrast, geocentrists are viewed by other fundamentalists as relatively moderate. Their literal interpretation of the bible leads them to believe that the earth is at the center of the universe and everything revolves around it ([Godfrey 291](#)). However, Copernicus and later Galileo discovered that this was not the case. Eventually the Copernican system was accepted into scientific thought. Geocentrism has lost its appeal in the face of overwhelming evidence, but is still regarded by some pockets of fundamentalists as truth according to the bible. Modern geocentrists are "hovering" on the edge of

respectability among creationists (292). But, for the most part, they are in disagreement with one another's views on biblical scripture.

Creationists, who often call themselves "creation scientists", are considered the most liberal and modernist of the three fundamentalist groups. Their literal interpretation of the bible leads them to believe that the bible is not only a valid scientific document, but the only valid scientific document. According to creationists, all true science must conform to their interpretations of the King James Version of the bible ([Godfrey 294](#)). Creationists do not believe the earth is flat, nor do they hold that it is at the center of the universe. They do however, believe in the inerrancy of the bible on matters of a special creation, a relatively young earth, and the Noachian flood ([Godfrey 294](#)). Like geocentrism and flat-earth ideology, creationism should have died out as well. However, creationists have taken up pseudoscientific principles to claim scientific status for their beliefs. At the same time, creationists denounce all scientific findings that conflict with scripture as "demonic inventions".

All Christian fundamentalists harbor extreme mistrust for the scientific establishment and modernism in general. Hence, flat-earthers, geocentrists and creationists have been labeled "Fundamentalists" by themselves as well as others. Their shared views on the inerrancy of the bible, special creation, young earth, and Noachian flood were all galvanized by Charles Darwin's publication of the "Origin of the Species" in 1859 ([Godfrey 287](#)). Since that time, they have banded together into discrete camps: Flat-earthers, Geocentrists, and Creationists. The success of modern scientific theories have largely relegated all but the creationists to the status of mere oddities, but creationists have managed to survive by pretending to take up the standard of science. Historically and in the present their rigid dogmatic view that the evidence of science must conform to holy scripture places them at odds with the scientific community. Furthermore, their view of science, the bible, and earth history have placed them in conflict with even the views of mainstream Christianity ([Godfrey 293](#)).

It is ironic that all three seek the comfort of a literal interpretation of the bible, yet they all interpret the scripture differently. But because Christian fundamentalists cannot stray from their black and white view of the universe, they continue to see science and progress as a mere illusion.