

INTRODUCTION

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I was once a Christian absolutist. Sometimes, on lonely and hard days, I still feel the pull of certainty. You may wonder what I mean by the term "Christian absolutist." Some might use the term "fundamentalist." I do not really like that term because it carries with it quite a bit of baggage. Words evoke meanings and thoughts. I think Americans have many feelings, some of them pent-up anger, when they hear the word fundamentalist. Those so identified as fundamentalists in the Christian world once wore this label with a kind of militant pride at times.

Actually, the word has been through several incarnations in American history. It is of fairly recent usage. In the sense used here, it derives from a twelve-volume work commissioned in 1909 to combat the emergent voices of theological modernism. Its composers included a wide range of writers, including some that came from denominations now recognized as being rather liberal. The work, *The Fundamentals*, was a battle cry, a throwing down of the gauntlet in the face of higher criticism and modern scholarship. Still, in many circles, the work went largely unnoticed.

The name "fundamentalist" grew to be associated with many churches of the early twentieth century. Many were of the holiness tradition. It would be safe to say that few of these early fundamentalists had much direct knowledge of the original literature that lent its name to the movement.

Fundamentalism came to national attention largely through the *Scopes Monkey Trial*, which took place on July 10-25, 1925, in Dayton, Tennessee. The trial dealt with the teaching of evolution in Tennessee schools, which was illegal at the time. John Scopes, a substitute teacher was charged with violating the Butler Act. The prosecutor, William Jennings Bryan was a nationally known politician, local hero, and prominent fundamentalist. The trial made national headlines, but largely through Bryan's own testimony (he ended up in the witness chair himself), the nation arrived at a view of fundamentalists as ignorant, intolerant, and fanatical. Fundamentalists more or less went into seclusion, avoiding contamination from the world as much as possible.

Several decades passed, and then rehabilitation of the title came through the emerging involvement of fundamentalists in politics, beginning in earnest in the 1970's. To them, the world was "going to hell in a hand basket" and the time was ripe to begin the push to put "godly men" in positions of power. The term became a badge of honor for some, a source of irritation to many, part of an electoral strategy for more than a few, and the sound of political careers ending for yet others. Then came September 11, 2001, and the name acquired yet a different connotation.

Now, when some hear it, they think of planes flying into the World Trade Center on that fateful September day. Many folks associate the word fundamentalist with that event and pair it with the word "Islamic." They see fundamentalism as something dealing with "them" and not "us."

Of course, if one really thinks about it, s/he will soon recognize this is a misnomer. We face

an equally extreme Christian or quasi-Christian variety of fundamentalism every bit as crazy as the Islamic variety. All we must do to see the truth of this statement is to activate recent memory. Remember the Branch Davidians? Recall the shootings and attempted shootings and bombings of abortion clinics and doctors? Remember the protests against gays carried out at the funerals of dead soldiers? The problem with many Americans is they will readily see the danger of the other person's absolutism, but are slow to recognize the danger of their own. It is easy to say, "But my absolutism is based in the real truth. It is different from the garden variety of narrow-minded absolutism." Fundamentalism carries with it the connotation of violence and hate-mongering. No one wants to own up to that. In addition, to be perfectly honest, I am not at all certain it applies to most varieties of American fundamentalism. As William James so long ago pointed out, there are many varieties of religious experience (James 2007). Likewise, there are many shades and varieties of Christian fundamentalism. I am leery of using the word fundamentalism as one point on the spectrum of Christian literalism to describe the common variety of absolute truth claims we encounter day-to-day among our friends and neighbors.

There is a side to fundamentalism I prefer to call "absolutism." Many of the comments referred to in this book refer to fundamentalism. That is because, in the minds of most researchers, the absolutist belief side of fundamentalism is inseparable from the more violence-approving, militant side of the movement. That is why I prefer the word absolutist. However, faithfulness to the language of many of the sources used will necessitate using the terms interchangeably at times. However, in general this text deals with the absolutist side of the fundamentalist milieu.

So... what do I mean by absolutism? By the term absolutism, I refer to the belief that certain individuals possess absolute, undeniable, indisputable truth. That truth is a court from which there is no appeal. It knows with complete certainty. Of course, technically speaking, absolutism is definitely part of the larger phenomenon of fundamentalism. In fact, it arguably forms the basis for the more brazen acts of fundamentalism. This conclusion appears inescapable. For that reason, it has been necessary in researching this book to make rather heavy use of literature dealing with fundamentalism.

That being said, I return to my earlier statement. I was a Christian absolutist. As a child, my parents made little provision for my religious training. I tended to be a rather unhappy child. I was overweight, not very sharp academically, and had many irritating mannerisms. I did not discover until I was nearly twenty-three that I suffered from Tourette's Syndrome (I am fifty-one at this writing). My diagnosis was as if a miracle somehow occurred in my life. Medication all but cured me--at least if you do not count the rather annoying and frightening side effects.

However, as a kid, no one knew anything about Tourette's Syndrome. I was just the fat kid who was always jerking his body and making all the weird noises. Being the poorest child in my class did not help much either. My parents tried; they really did. Life seemed to have kicked them--especially Dad--in the teeth, and we just could not seem to make any headway. Mom stayed home, and Dad seemed to go from dead-end job to dead-end job, until his physical disabilities ended his working career when I was around twelve years old. Then our economic lot in life, already dismal, deteriorated significantly.

A woman in our neighborhood ran a children's Bible Club associated with Child Evangelism

Fellowship. Going to Bible Club was the high point of my week. We heard Bible stories, sang songs, played games, and did crafts. However, there was a darker side to the Bible Club as well. It was a part that terrified me and gave me bad dreams at night--at least after I finally swallowed my fear enough to get to sleep. Each week I endured the evangelistic appeal with all of the hellfire and brimstone the Bible Club Lady could muster, and she could muster plenty!

As time went on, I found myself more and more in need of the friendship and acceptance the Bible Club and the Bible Club Lady offered and, yet, I grew more and more terrified of this God of rage. The message was simple enough, though I think, even as a child, it did not make much sense to me. God loved me. I had sinned. I had made God very angry. Because of my sin and God's anger, I was going to hell to burn forever.

But wait! God still loved me! Yet, God had made up these rules, and the rules said I had to pay in eternal hell for every little wrong of which I was guilty. What could God do? Those were the rules. God thought about it and decided God's son, Jesus, would take care of things. Jesus would come to earth, never sin, and die and suffer hell for me. He would take the rap. I would get off the hook if I would just agree to the whole deal and ask Jesus for his help. I knew this was true because the Bible Club Lady said she could show me the verses in the Bible, and God never lied.

As I stated, the story sounded convoluted, even to my little nine-year-old mind, but I was so scared of going to hell, I "worked at it" until it began to make sense. Later, my thoughts about the system I knew as a child were to change as the message became increasingly untenable and the old doubts returned. (I have written about my views of the atonement in an article entitled, "The Nonviolent Atonement and the Centrality of the Cross." See Alexander 2005, 57-66.) Nevertheless, as a child, all I could see was a way out of eternal hell. When the Bible Club Lady made her altar call one day, I went up to "get saved." "Just believe," was all she said.

Then the Bible Club Lady took me to her church. I grew up in the poor part of Kansas City; this church was definitely in the high rent district. What a change in communities! This was a Regular Baptist Church. In those days, they readily and proudly identified themselves as fundamentalists. They lived up to it. They especially emphasized eternal damnation and the absolute inerrancy of the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, it was all true.

When I hit my teen years, I found these people to be quite square and out-of-touch. The hippy movement was just making the scene in Kansas City. It appealed to me. At around age thirteen, I began to experiment with marijuana and LSD. I quit the entire church scene. Anyway, if they happened to be right, I was saved after all. I heard repeatedly that, once I had it, I could never lose it. It seemed as if I would be a winner either way. I began quitting school. In 9th grade, I only attended forty-seven days. At age fifteen, I had a terrible argument with my father and moved out of the house. I began to live by staying with friends and panhandling.

I have discovered absolutism dies a difficult death. Almost as soon as I met the hippies, I met the ex-hippy Jesus Freaks. Something began to call me back. They were every bit as absolutist as the Baptist Church, but they were more free-spirited and countercultural. Over the years, I began to sense I had found my way back home; yet, I did not have to go back to the old square

ways I had rejected. They were lighter on the hell business and heavier on the "Jesus loves you" business. This led to my "second" conversion. I moved into the Christian commune right after I turned sixteen.

Now my days consisted of street witnessing and Bible reading. As our leaders explained the Bible to me, I found fewer objections. By pure power of choice, I became an absolutist. The Bible was right from cover to cover, and I was sure I had an inside track to understanding it.

The Jesus Freaks did help. They got me back in school (for which I am eternally grateful). They helped me grow up, saw to it I got a job, and sent me off to do the Lord's work with their blessing.

I ended up in college of all places! Little did I know that, before all was said and done, I would earn graduate degrees in theology and reading education and, eventually, a Ph.D. and become a college professor! Yes, I owe them more than I can ever repay.

As time went on, I became more earnest in my absolutism. I met Irene, fellow absolutist--albeit a much gentler one--at the college. We were both elementary education majors. We married in 1977 and remain happily married today, thirty years later. After our marriage came teaching jobs, and babies, our first house, and leaving the Jesus Freaks. Why did we leave? Irene was not much for it. After all, we heard repeatedly we had it all right. Nevertheless, for some reason, from my early teens on, I always had a strong attraction to pacifism. By this time, the Jesus Freak church was strongly entrenched in the Moral Majority. Irene might not otherwise have left, except the Jesus Freak elders reminded her weekly to be obedient to her husband.

It is a long story, but in 1980, we ended up in a Mennonite church. Irene loved it. The heavy yoke of male authority was now gone. We began to grow in new ways. We discovered here questions are allowed and even encouraged. The first question I asked myself was about the story from Bible Club days that always troubled me. I began to wonder about the whole hellfire deal. Of all the parts of the story the Bible Club Lady told, this was the most troubling. There had to be another way of looking at things. I mused long and hard over it, beginning in earnest when I was in my first pastorate (See Alexander 1987, 25-32). I finally came to terms with it all some years later (See Alexander 2003, and 2005, 57-66). Little-by-little I began viewing the entire notion of eternal perdition in a completely new way.

One day I was discussing the Bible with our assistant pastor. He said, "You know, I just can't believe every word of it is true." I thought about that one for a minute.

"Neither do I," I replied.

I half-expected lightning might come out of the sky and strike me. Strangely, though it had always given me a sense of stability, I realized at that moment that I was not an absolutist. I felt light, as if I were soaring to new heights of freedom. Somehow, though, I also felt uprooted. It seemed as if I were back in elementary school. I had betrayed a sacred trust. Again, I was alone and scared.

NOTE: The term "Jesus Freak" as used throughout this book, refers to a Christian movement that attracted mostly young people from what is often termed the "hippie

counterculture." The dates of this movement are approximately 1969-1975. Many of the Jesus Freak fellowships went on to become "regular churches" in the mid to late seventies. At least one group associated with the Jesus Freaks, Calvary Chapel, has become something resembling a small denomination. Jesus Freak is not used here as a pejorative term. It was in common usage during the time period indicated. Further, adherents of the movement often used the term in self-descriptive ways. To the extent that many of my years among the Jesus Freaks were happy and helpful years, I find it an endearing term. The other alternative, "Jesus Movement," refers to a wide variety of historic movements and, therefore, lacks the specific descriptive character of the term Jesus Freak