



Understanding Fundamentalism

Mosaic Television User's Guide

Fall 2007

The influence of fundamentalist Christianity is felt in every walk of American life. Many of the nation's fastest growing churches hold to conservative Christian theologies. Conservative Christians influence the debate surrounding prayer in public schools, abortion and homosexuality. Conservative Christian authors dominate the Christian publishing industry.

The video helps viewers:

- Better understand the story behind the rise of fundamentalism
- Unpack the meaning of “evangelical” versus “fundamental”
- See examples of ELCA congregations working with fundamentalist Christians across denominational lines.

Preparation

Before watching the video

Take some time to explore what your group already knows about fundamentalism.

- On a sheet of paper, flip chart, or white board, draw two columns. In one column, write these questions: “What is a fundamentalist? What experiences or associations with fundamentalists do you have?”
- In the second column, fill in answers from the group for each question.

After watching the video

- Ask the group if the descriptions of fundamentalists already written down match those raised by guests on the video. Any differences, surprises, additions?
- Write a definition or description of the following groups mentioned in the video: fundamentalist, evangelical, conservative and mainstream Christians.

To explore fundamentalism further, see “Additional Resources.”

Christian Fundamentalism

In the video, Baptist Pastor Scott Kinney says, “a fundamentalist is someone who takes the Bible, looks at it, and interprets it literally . . . It is inerrant, infallible. When the Bible says that God created the world in six days, we believe he did it in six days.”

1. Does this approach to the Bible differ from your understanding of the Bible?
2. What do you think Lutherans say about biblical inerrancy?

Martin Marty said, “[Martin Luther] would say that the Bible is totally true when leading us to salvation. But when those old people wrote about kings and prophets they often made mistakes. He took it all as authoritative. Just different degrees of authority.” Discuss Marty’s statement.

A 2005 study comparing Southern Baptists and ELCA members by ELCA Research and Evaluation states, “Many more Southern Baptist worshipers than ELCA worshipers take the position that ‘the Bible is the word of God, to be taken literally word for word,’ (71% for the Southern Baptists compared to 24% in the ELCA).” These numbers suggest that there is a significant portion (24 percent) of ELCA members who take the Bible literally. Ask:

3. How do members of your congregation view the Bible and its interpretation?

ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson said in 2005, “Christianity is in the midst of a global identity crisis because we have not addressed ecumenically the questions of authority and interpretation of scripture.”

4. How do these questions (about authority and interpretation of scripture) affect your life of faith and your congregation?

5. How have fundamentalist Christians impacted your view of the Christian faith?

Evangelicals are not always fundamentalists.

Gregg Quiggle points out that from an outsider’s perspective, fundamentalism and evangelicalism look the same. Yet in the evangelical movement there is significant variation from theologically separatist Baptist groups to the socially progressive Sojourners community led by Jim Wallis.

6. What type of evangelical Christians have you interacted with in your community? Were those interactions positive/negative?

Quiggle characterized evangelicals as follows: “Evangelicals engage people; they don’t separate. They’re irenic as opposed to polemic. That is, they engage in conversation instead of just condemning. And they are willing to interact with and be challenged by and think through these alternative points of view.”

7. Is this statement true of the evangelical Christians you have met?

Pastor Tom Arnould commented about the Yukon (Okla.) Ministerial Alliance, “We’re not competitors; we are colleagues.”

8. Are there examples of collaboration with evangelical Christians in your community? If so, how did they come together?
If not, what barriers remain?

Global Fundamentalism

Bishop Munib Younan said, “There is no religion that has a monopoly on hate. We must stand in front of God and ask, did we promote the fundamentals of our faith, or did we promote fundamentalism? These are two different things.”

9. How would you answer Bishop Younan's question? What are the fundamentals of your faith that you promote?

Pastor Andre Allen of Second Baptist Church of Wheaton, Ill., said: "We lift up not so much that we are Baptist . . . promote Christ, we promote God, and we promote love for our brother and our sister, for our neighbor, whoever they are – whether they are African-American, Baptist, whether they are a Muslim, a Jew or a Buddhist. God has called us to love everyone." Ask:

10. How does our congregation and denomination promote love for the neighbor?

Additional Resources:

ONLINE

"Understanding Fundamentalisms," by Martin E. Marty, *The Lutheran*, May 2002 at www.the.lutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=4675. Marty makes a succinct case for considering fundamentalisms in a multifaith, global context.

"The End of the World Is Near . . . Or Is It?"

Barbara Rossing's June 4, 2006, interview on *Grace Matters*, the radio ministry of the ELCA.

Listen online, download the podcast at www.gracematters.org/2006listen.html#June

Biblical scholar and author Barbara Rossing explores the subject of her work on the rapture, and some of the dangers that accompany popular books that merge fiction with questionable biblical interpretation.

IN PRINT

The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, Beacon Press, 1992, 236 pages, paperback. This is the companion book to the three-part video documentary produced by PBS and five-part radio documentary by National Public Radio.

"A New Ecumenical Council: A Proposal," by Duane Larson, *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* Fall 2005 (Vol. 44, No. 3) calls for an ecumenical council to discuss Christian interpretation of Holy Scripture to respond to the increase in "fundamentalist-millennialist-apocalypticist" uses of the Bible.

Lutheran Questions, Lutheran Answers by Martin E. Marty, Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis, 2007. Chapters 2 "The Bible" and 12 "The Reign of God" include questions such as: "How Do Lutherans Interpret the Bible?", "Do Lutherans Have to Worry about Being 'Left Behind'?" and "What Do Lutherans Believe about the Millennium?"

VIDEO

The Glory and the Power: Fundamentalisms

Observed series, including "Remaking the World," "This Is Our Land," and "Fighting Back." 1992 three-part documentary produced by BBC Worldwide and PBS.

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