

**MERE
FUNDAMENTALISM**

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Before the Beginning: The Triune God	9
The Beginning: Creation	21
The True Image: Mankind	35
The Image Marred: Sin	49
The Image Restored: Death and Resurrection	63
Scripture, Truth, and Knowledge	79
Humanity Reassembled: The Church	93
The Final Things	107
The Creed in a Nutshell	119

INTRODUCTION

THE WORD *FUNDAMENTALISM* ADMITS of many meanings, and I would like to begin by removing most of them from the table. Some of the outlying definitions would include descriptions of polygamous Mormons in the mountains of Utah, old guard members of the Politburo, radical Muslims with suicide vests in porous European cities, and very conservative Christians from the Bible belt who object to mixed-sex roller skating. What possible use is a word that puts on such an air of rigidity, but is so obviously flexible?

The word first arose in the modernist controversy in the mainline churches of North America in the first part of the twentieth century. The classical understanding of Christian theology had been eroded by the acids of higher criticism in Europe, and because conservative

believers were numerically stronger in America than they were in Europe, not to mention a bit more combative, those Christians who were concerned about the rising tide of unbelief decided that a fight was in order. In response to the increase of progressive or modernist influence in the mainline churches, a set of booklets were published defending the “fundamentals” of the faith.

What these booklets were seeking to do was defend essential elements of the Christian faith, and it was an impulse that was certainly praiseworthy. When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do (Ps. 11)? The apostle Paul himself did not mind marking out certain truths as being of “first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3-4, ESV), and so there is certainly a way of emphasizing the fundamentals that is biblical and right.

But there is also a way of emphasizing these things that becomes somewhat truncated. A “lowest common denominator” mentality sets in, and pretty soon you find your list of non-negotiable fundamentals has been whittled down somewhat. The choice was presented as being between narrow and faithful or broad and faithless. Left out was the option of broad and faithful. On the practical side, in the battle between modernism and fundamentalism in the first part of the twentieth century, a battle that involved the major denominations, the big Christian publishing houses, the mission boards, and the seminaries, it has to be said that the modernists

got the best of it. If we thought of it as a clash between standing armies, the armies of the fundamentalists were routed. But to simplify somewhat, after they were routed they retreated into the metaphorical hills of Kentucky and Arkansas in order to form guerrilla bands. What they retreated with—the fundamentals, a lost-cause outlook, a cultural heritage *formally* detached from Scripture, and a hardscrabble work ethic—was the raw material they used until they grew numerically strong again.

Having done so, they found themselves with a rich heritage held in a truncated way. And this is where my use of *mere* comes in. To say *mere fundamentalism* does not mean *only fundamentalism* or *just fundamentalism*. That leaves everything truncated when the need is for foundations—foundations that will eventually support a structure that is not truncated at all.

As remarked above, there are certain things in the Bible that are more important than other things. Everything in Scripture is equally *true*, but not everything is equally *important*. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead is more important than the fact that He went to Capernaum—although both are equally true.

Although it came about around 2,000 years before the phenomenon that *we* call fundamentalism, one of the best expressions of fundamentalism is found in the Apostles' Creed. There, in brief compass, we have a short statement that summarizes the glory of the

Christian gospel in a way that could be easily written on an index card, while at the same time containing vast worlds. Here it is:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the virgin, Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into Hades. On the third day He rose again from the dead, ascended into Heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Everything that matters is right here. This is because the particular truths expressed in the Creed have a universal impact and application. While this book is not, properly speaking, an exposition of the Creed, the topics addressed will have a great deal of overlap with it. And while emphasizing the importance of these crucial fundamentals, the point is not to cling to them while hiding from the forces of secularism. The Creed is not

a bunker—rather it is an imposing castle on a mountain top. Every clause in it is a huge window, and so from the Creed you can see *everywhere*. The castle can be defended if attacked, but the castle is also the place from which the country is ruled. And all of it can be seen from there.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ is inclusive in one sense, but not in another. The Lordship of Christ is inclusive in the sense that nothing is excluded from its call. But in the popular senses of “inclusive religion,” the Christian faith is not inclusive at all. All the nations are summoned to Christ, and all peoples stream to Him. But the invitation begins with the command to *repent*. In order to come, it is necessary to turn around and come. In order to come, it is necessary to drop what was in your hands and to come with empty hands.

Some things are shallow because they are broad, like rain water on the parking lot. Other things are deep because they are narrow, like the sliver of a crevasse that you can jump across at the top. But some things are deep because they are broad, like the roots of the Rocky Mountains.

So the title *Mere Fundamentalism* is not an attempt to whittle down the fundamentals any further. If I might speak provocatively, it is an attempt to place Christian fundamentalism in the catholic tradition. This may seem odd, but really it should be thought no more odd than placing the foundation walls under the house.

BEFORE THE BEGINNING: THE TRIUNE GOD

IN ORDER TO TALK INTELLIGENTLY about the Christian faith, we must always begin with God. But this does not mean beginning with God as we imagine Him to be. If we were to do *that*, we would be simply beginning with our own imaginations, and that is just another way of saying that we are beginning with ourselves. That way has always been fruitless, as many of us have already discovered. If we begin with the authority of our own imaginations, we have simply deified ourselves, which is just another way of saying that we are all still lost in a world of hurt. Our untethered imaginations have never been friends to us.

But neither may we begin with God as He is in Himself. God dwells in unapproachable light, and

whatever else this means, it means we cannot approach it. We do not and cannot know God as He is in Himself—we cannot know God as He knows Himself. If we knew God as He knows Himself, then we would actually be God. And if anything is true, we should know that we are not God. If we knew God as He knows Himself, we wouldn't be as lost as we are. If you knew God as He knows Himself, you certainly wouldn't have picked up this book.

Only one option remains if we are to make any true progress at all. We must know God as He *reveals* Himself to us. If there is an infinite chasm between us and God, and if the chasm is to be crossed, it will have to be crossed from His side to ours. On this side of the chasm, as already noted, we have nothing but our own imaginations. On the other side of the chasm . . . well, we can't talk about that intelligently because we are all on this side of it. If the chasm is to be crossed, then God must cross it. He must reveal Himself.

But the word *reveal* is important. When God reveals Himself, He is not casting shadows on the wall, or displaying Himself to us in a series of intricate and complicated disguises. The God who is fully known only to the Spirit of God is *the same God* as the one who is revealed to us. In the revelation of Himself, God is revealing, not hiding. He is revealing, not lying. He reveals Himself; He does not pretend to reveal Himself. A manifestation of

God that is not God Himself would be simply one more phenomenon on this side of the chasm.

And this is why we must start our discussion with Jesus Christ. The starting point must be Immanuel, which means “God with us.” God is not here with us, which is why God must come here to us.

The principal way that God reveals Himself is through Jesus of Nazareth. If we come to the Father, we must come through the Son. If we have the Son, then we have the Father also. But there is some trouble in that verb *have*—how can we “have” the Son? Jesus lived a long time ago. We don’t know what He looked like, despite valiant efforts by the makers of icons and Bible story books. None of us ever had a conversation with Jesus. How can the Son, someone we never met, bring us to the Father, also someone we never met?

In order to answer this question, we need to spend a few moments thinking about the *nature* of the chasm that separates us from God. There are two ways to understand this, and many people misunderstand the nature of our dilemma at just this point.

Some might want to say that this chasm exists between God and man simply because God is infinite and man is finite. In other words, some think we are necessarily separated from God simply because we are *created*. But when the Lord walked with Adam in the cool of the day, there was perfect fellowship between them even though Adam was

finite and God was infinite. There was no chasm. Adam did not yet have union with God, but he did have complete fellowship with God. That union will be something we discuss a bit later, but Adam's lack of it was not a problem. It was only missing because it was not time yet. In the meantime, finite Adam lived in unbroken fellowship with God.

Many do not realize that part of what it means when we are told that mankind, male and female both, is created in the image of God is the fact that we were *created* for fellowship with God. Union with Him was a design feature from the beginning. God intended to have perfect fellowship with finite creatures. Every creature is finite, by definition, and it was God's intention to be united in fellowship with us as the finite creatures that He fashioned in His own image.

And so this leads us to face up to the true nature of the chasm between God and man. The name of that chasm is sin. Our problem is not that we are finite, but rather that we are rebellious. If finitude were the problem, then clearly the problem is someone else's fault. We clearly had nothing to do with the fact that we are a teeny little bit of matter on the face of the cosmos. We can't help being *small*.

But the problem is not that we are small. The problem is that such small beings have such a large view of themselves. We think that we have the right to be our own gods, our own law, our own standard. We are

rebels. The ocean of all that exists is immense, massive, astonishingly large, and we are small flecks of foam on one part of one wave of that great ocean, and we have had the conceit to declare our independence. It is not sinful to be small, but it is very sinful to be this small and to think you are all that big.

Because God made us, and because we have sought to deny His resultant authority over us, we have thereby created the chasm that exists between God and us. The name of the chasm is impudence and folly. Another way of saying this is that the chasm is moral and ethical, not (as the philosophers might put it) ontological. The problem is not with what we are physically, but rather with the way we act morally. The problem is in our heart, not in the limited number of our molecules.

And so we should come back to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. We should do so with this understanding of the moral nature of our rebellion in the forefront of our minds. The first thing that confronts us in any real encounter with Jesus is that He was like no other man that ever lived. He alone is good. Not only is He good, but He is good all the way through, all the way down. We encounter in Him something we have never encountered in a pure form anywhere else in the world. What we encounter in Him is holiness.

And we are simultaneously attracted to it, and repelled by it.

THE TRUE IMAGE: MANKIND

MAN WAS CREATED IN ORDER TO FUNCTION as God's steward on earth. In the previous chapter we were considering the raw fact of creation. Now we may turn to the *way* in which the heavens and earth were called into existence, and how they were set in order once they had their being.

In the beginning, famously, God created the heavens and earth. He spoke and the world *became*. He said the word, and the world took shape. In the first moments after matter and energy were created, the world was shapeless, and needed to be molded, carved, and then sandpapered.

God shaped by dividing. He divided the heavens and earth. He divided the evening and morning. He divided the sun and moon. He divided the land and sea. He divided man and woman. Underneath it all, like

a rhythmic bass line, the evenings and mornings kept recurring, marking each day. His image was fully manifested to us in this final division: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Gen. 1:27).

So we begin with the fact that He is the one who made us, and we did not make ourselves. We did not fashion ourselves. We did not invent ourselves. We also begin with the recognition that He created us *ex nihilo*, from nothing, which means that creation, by its very nature, must be *sudden*. It means that God created from scratch—more than from scratch. From nothing. This means that creation is utterly contingent. It means that the world is God’s “spoken world,” resting for its continued existence entirely on the sustaining word of the one who brought it into existence in the first place.

The pattern that God followed was creation, division, then reunion in a higher form, followed by yet another division. When He brought our race into being, God created Adam—which is the Hebrew word for *mankind*. When God was looking at the man He had just created, He was looking at a solitary bachelor, and alone among all the things He had fashioned, He said that this masterpiece was “not good” (Gen. 2:18). It was *not good* . . . that man should be alone. The *not good* here in this place doesn’t mean defective, but rather lacking. The *not good* here means *not quite done*.

And so Adam was put into a deep sleep, into a death-like coma, and God operated on him. One was broken into two, and the bloody rib was transformed into a woman. One was made into two in order that those two could, in a different manner, become one again. And after they became one flesh, one of them, the woman, would conceive and *she* was the one who would become two. For this cause, it says, a man will leave his father and mother, cleave to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. Two become one, and then one of them becomes two. And then the cycle repeats, as it has down to the present.

As God placed the man and woman alongside one another, He was showing us an icon, or an image, of Himself. When Jesus taught on divorce, He argued from the realities displayed by the first couple, and set them forth as a paradigmatic example for all human couples to follow. This is the template that must be followed until the end of the world. With regard to divorce, the Lord said from the beginning it was not so. There was no divorce in the Garden, He taught, and so we should fight against divorce among His followers—those who are engaged in the task of re-cultivating the Garden.

God did not create two men, and so homosexuality is excluded. He did not create Adam and three women, and so polygamy is excluded. A helper suitable to Adam was not found among the beasts, and so bestiality is

excluded. He did not create two women, which rules out lesbianism. All such images would be caricatures of God, and not, as He intended, the image of God Himself. In the image of God He created them, male and female created He them.

As mentioned earlier, the notion has gotten around that the image of God in man consists simply of man's reason—as though it were a simple matter of smarts. But there are many creatures that are reasonable, intelligent, smart, and not created in the image of God. There is no reason to believe that the celestial beings that inhabit the heavenly places have a low IQ. But they were not created in the image of God. God is fully capable of creating sentient beings who are a thousand times smarter than we are, and who yet do not bear the image of God. Reason is *part* of the image of God in us, but that is not what the image consists of.

We are given an indication of what is meant by the image of God in Ephesians, where the apostle Paul talks about the restoration of the image of God that is being accomplished in Christ. If the fall of man into sin had accomplished the wreckage of that image, then the restoration project that God undertook in and through Christ had to be a restoration. And that meant—if the restoration was to be conformity to Christ—that the original fall had been away from the pattern that was Christ.

We know that man and woman together constituted the image of God. When they fell, that image was damaged and vandalized, but not annihilated. After the Flood, when God required capital punishment for murder, He did so because man was created in the image of God. This meant that the image was still there to be respected, however damaged it had been by the fall into sin. So when God undertook the restoration of that image, He was not doing so from scratch. This was a remodel project, not a complete do-over.

So then we can tell something of what the original design was from the direction that the remodeling project took. One of the questions that theologians like to ask is whether the Incarnation of the Son of God would have taken place if Adam and Eve had not fallen into sin. This is not the trifling question that it might appear to be at first glance. It has to do with the definition of true mankind. We know, since the momentous events of what happened at Bethlehem, that the true definition of mankind is found in Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate and final man. The difficulty is found in supposing that another definition, a definition other than Christ, would have been ultimately possible had Adam not sinned.

Now of course, an Incarnation in a sinless world would be hard to envisage. There would have been no cross, no burial, no resurrection. Death for *sin* would have been entirely unnecessary. There would be no need

for forgiveness and consequently there would be no need for the excruciating death that was the atoning basis for all forgiveness. So the Incarnation is the basis for our understanding of gospel, and gospel presupposes a fallen race. But just because the *gospel* would be unnecessary in an unfallen world does not mean that an Incarnation would also have been unnecessary in an unfallen world. Christ is the end of the law for all who believe. He is the end of the gospel as well. Why wouldn't He be the end of all *life*, regardless of what happened at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?

I mentioned a moment ago that this work of salvation was a remodel project, and not a new project starting from scratch. And this means that the original blueprints were never scrapped. The point was to reverse the damage that had been caused by sin, the effects of the vandalism, and then to resume the project. We have some indication of some of the elements of the original when we look at what God is after in the restoration. In Ephesians, Paul says this: "And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. 4:24). The process of sanctification is the process of putting on the new man, who is Christ, thus abandoning the ruin created by the old man, who is Adam. When Paul notes the template being used here, he mentions two words—righteousness and holiness.

The meaning of history can be summed up with this one question—"What shall man be like?" The Fall was a rejection of the original plan, an attempt on our part to strike out on our own. The attempts to create a superman have not been few. We see it in the attempt by the antediluvians to breed immortals (Gen. 6), we see it in the ravings of Nietzsche, and we see it with modern unbelievers tinkering around with the human genome. In reply, God says—God has always said—that mankind shall be like Christ.

The creation of man was the creation of mankind in embryo. It did not yet appear what we would be like. The Fall into sin was an alternative proposal—as though a human child in the womb had the suggestion made to it that he try to grow into a penguin instead. The results were appalling, neither one nor the other. The results were a wreckage. God promised very early on that He would intervene at some point in the future, and that He would intervene in such a way as to put us back on the original plan. The coming of Christ accomplished two things therefore—it dealt with the rubble of the ruined first cathedral that was lying all around, cleaning up the mess, and it got the construction of the cathedral back on track. This was to be the same cathedral in the foundational ways, but it was also to be a far more glorious cathedral.