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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
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Fundamentalism

(Fifth in series, Contemporary Issues in religion and Morality)

Isaiah 55:8,9; Romans 14:1; II Timothy 2:14, 23-25; John 15:5 NRSV

You may have heard the term which is the title of this morning's sermon. The word is used in reference to radical Islam as well as to Christians who oppose things such as same gender marriage and who stand for things such as religious observances in public institutions. When Islamic fundamentalists cut off the hands of thieves and stone to death women who commit adultery, or become terrorists and murder innocent civilians of other nations, or when Christian fundamentalists try to gain a majority on public school boards in order to require the teaching of Bible stories in science class, or when they murder physicians who perform abortions, we might get an idea of how backward and sometimes ruthless fundamentalist thinking can be. Yet to my mind, the greatest damage fundamentalism does is to give all religion a bad name.

This past week I attended a small gathering of Rotarians in a Rotarian member's home. It was basically a social gathering intended to help us get to know each other a little better. As I have been a member of the East Hartford Rotary club for some fifteen years now, most of the people in the club know that I serve as the pastor here and I know them well enough to be somewhat at ease with them. I turned to one man who I know does not go much to church nor hold the church in high regard, although he was raised as a boy in this very congregation some sixty or so years ago. I teasingly suggested to him, and this is not his real name, and I don't think you would ever guess who it is so you need not try, I said, "Hi Walt, haven't seen you at church for a while." Now, the truth is that I have never seen him here. "You know, I said, we would have a much healthier budget if you would come around once in a while and we could loosen you up a little!" The ribbing we give and take with each other at Rotary is wonderful. He said to me, "Religion has caused enough trouble in the world. I said, well, the answer to bad religion is good religion." He said, "I prefer no religion." That, I think, is the great injury inflicted by fundamentalism.

As a theological perspective, fundamentalism was born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Church historians often point to a multi-volume group of essays published in 1910 entitled, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, edited by Reuban Torrey and distributed by two Presbyterian laymen, as the origin of the name for the movement. (Torrey) In 1920, Baptist editor Curtis Lee Laws identified as fundamentalists those who were as he put it, "ready to do battle for the fundamentals."

(Laws) The movement grew in response to what some perceived as a threat to the integrity of the historic Christian faith by the growing emphasis within society upon science in general and evolution in particular, as well as by the use of modern methods of scripture interpretation. The modern methods of scripture interpretation at issue were those developing around the turn of the last century and which are still used by biblical scholars today. These methods include:

- comparing the objective claims of Bible stories to other documentation of the period as well as to new archeological evidence
- applying linguistic analysis to determine authorship
- considering different styles of writing—such as prose or poetry or metaphor—to determine the intended meaning of passages
- considering the historic context in which a passage was written in order to determine what might have been the specific meaning of the passage for readers at the time it was written

Altogether the perceived threat to the Bible was summed up by the term modernism and the tension between the two points of view became known as the fundamentalist/modernist controversy. If you have read about the Scopes trial of 1925 you may have noted the use of these terms to identify the two sides.

Although they hold clear positions on social and theological issues, the basic defining issue for fundamentalists then and now is scripture interpretation. Their great concern is that any understanding of the Bible other than what they claim to be its traditional literal meaning revokes its authority. The thinking is that if there are inconsistencies within the Bible then it can not be trusted. If it does not have an obvious meaning then it has no reliable meaning at all. If any of it was applicable long ago but not today then all of its relevance for today is questioned. The Bible, for fundamentalists, is inerrant and infallible. Every letter, every word, every comma, is exactly as God intends it to be. When the fact is identified that there are many different scripture translations for English alone and that each one of these uses different words, the response is that the Bible is inerrant in the original manuscripts. But even if that is true it is irrelevant, because no original manuscripts exist.

On the other hand, almost all Christians believe the Bible to be divinely inspired, that God was and is behind the making of this book, and that it reveals the truth about the nature of God and humankind when reasonably interpreted. And the Bible does need to be interpreted. That is the point. No one takes the Bible literally. To suggest otherwise is an impossible idea. Everyone interprets the Bible whether they say so or not. Does anyone really think that when Jesus says, *I am the gate for the sheep* (John 10:7), that Jesus has a handle and a latch and hinges? Does anyone really think that when Jesus says, *I am the vine and you are the branches*, that he is a gnarly twisted piece of wood and we have leaves growing out of our arms? (John 15:5) Now, some may say, but those questions are silly. Yes, of course they are. But are they any more silly than to say that a male and female of absolutely every mammal and bird and insect and worm entered into Noah's Ark, or that a snake talked to Eve in the garden of Eden, or that the earth and all

its creatures was created in seven literal days when everything else we have ever learned about the earth tells us no?

To say that the Bible needs to be interpreted does not make the Bible unreliable. Rather, it makes all readers and particularly religious leaders, people like me, careful about what we conclude from it and what we teach. If we do not always take the Bible literally we can not quite so easily isolate a verse from somewhere that seems to express an idea of our own and say simply, “see, the Bible says it!” We must prove that the point we claim the verse is making is supported by other passages, that it is true to the author’s intended meaning, that the writer meant it to be taken as a direct fact and not as poetry or allegory or metaphor. For a negative example, many of us might all know that the Bible was used by slave owners to justify slavery. We find such a use of scripture repugnant now, but that is what the idea of a literal reading of scripture can do. Paul did write to those living within a merciless heathen society two thousand years ago, *slaves obey your masters*. (Titus 2:9) Paul also wrote that women should never express their opinions in church, that they should never braid their hair, and that they would be saved through child bearing. (I Timothy 2:9,12,15) So must we now also accept for our time Paul’s condemnation of same sex relationships as being always by their nature immoral? Come on!

One more brief note about scripture interpretation. For Christians, the New Testament always trumps the Old Testament when discerning spiritual truth. We understand the Old Testament to be divinely inspired but we understand the Bible to be a progressive revelation which finishes with the gospel of Jesus Christ. If anything written anywhere else in the Bible, including even the writings of St. Paul and the other New Testament letter writers, stand in contrast to the teachings of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus always have the final word.

An overly narrow understanding of selected passages of scripture has led to other extreme positions of fundamentalism. One is an emphasis upon sudden conversion experiences based in particular on the story of Nicodemus. Jesus says to Nicodemus, *you must be born from above*, or as the old King James translation renders it, *you must be born again*. (John 3:7) There is precedent for an emphasis upon sudden conversion experiences within our own Congregational tradition. Our pilgrim forefathers who sailed with the Mayflower in 1620 and those puritans who continued to immigrate here for the next two hundred years shared the idea that unless one could verify a sudden spiritual experience with dramatic life changing results, unless one could substantiate to the church elders such an experience, one was not allowed full membership in the church.

To be born from above is really a more accurate rendering of what Jesus said to Nicodemus. The idea is that everyone needs to be touched on the inside, in our deep hearts or souls, by the Spirit of God, and so be motivated from within to love God in return and to love other people; in other words to have spiritual life as well as physical life. But this does not need to be a sudden experience. It can come gradually and for some who are reared in Christian families and the church, there may well not be a time to which they can point and say, there, right at that moment, I came to believe and before

that I did not believe. As a matter of fact, for most Christians that may be the case. A theologian of the nineteenth century whose name may be particularly recognized here in central Connecticut and who defended a more gradual process of faith development was Horace Bushnell, in whose name we have a beautiful park and a theater in Hartford. Bushnell wrote extensively in refutation of the revivalists who were insisting that every person needed to come to faith through a sudden emotional dramatic change of mind and heart in order to be a true Christian.

Another emphasis made by fundamentalists is the physical return of Christ to earth leading to an end of earth and its human history. This idea is known as the second coming and its study is called eschatology. A complex ordering of the events surrounding the second coming including the rapture, when Christians living on earth will be quickly taken up into heaven, either following or preceding a one thousand year reign of Christ on earth, is known as Dispensationalism. Dispensationalism is based primarily upon the mysterious writings of the book of Revelation. It becomes exceedingly complicated. Curiously, fundamentalists often insist on a whole lot more than the fundamentals. St. John in his third letter would teach us better. *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God*, and in another verse John writes, *God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.* (I John 5:1; 4:16) Regarding the book of Revelation, the passages which are often interpreted as referring to events somewhere in the future are actually a code language written and understood by Christians at the time they were written to be referring to ancient Rome. The Beast is Rome. The antichrist is Caesar. Sound biblical scholarship understands this and always has.

There may always be those that would like to have a simpler faith, the complications of second coming theology notwithstanding, and in the desire for simplicity and sometimes even a sense of superior knowledge and experience of spiritual things, they will claim a literal translation of scripture and require a certain set of words when speaking of faith. But let us not be fooled by them.

Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies; Paul wrote, you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly toward everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness. I hope I have been gentle.

Torrey, Rueban.ed. "The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth". *teachinghistory*. Web. 10 Oct. 2011.

Lee, Curtis. "Laws." *Wikipedia*. Web. 11 Oct. 2011.