

THE FUNDAMENTALISM – INERRANCY PROJECT¹

Center for Hermeneutical Research, Budapest

<https://hermeneutika-btk.eu/the-foundation/>;

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The „Fundamentalism – Inerrancy Project” of the Center for Hermeneutical Research was, among others, inspired by the Fundamentalisms Project, led by the renowned North American historian of religion Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. Conducted between 1987 and 1995, their large-scale scholarly investigation examined the emergence and re-emergence of conservative religious movements worldwide, including: Islamic fundamentalism, Jewish fundamentalism, Christian fundamentalism. Their project was also motivated by the growing presence of such ideologies among university students in the United States, particularly those from non-Western cultural backgrounds. Moreover, George Marsden’s works, especially his magisterial *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, have also influenced the research.

In Hungary, debates about the nature of fundamentalism mostly occur on conservative Protestant or, conversely, progressive Christian websites. These discussions are often emotionally charged, but they do not pursue scholarly rigor and therefore cannot and do not aim to break out of their own ideological subcultures.

Our research covered two types of fundamentalism: hermeneutical and political.

1. HERMENEUTICAL FUNDAMENTALISM: A CRITIQUE OF INERRANCY

1. Origins of Inerrancy

Inerrancy is the belief in the absolute errorlessness of every word of Scripture, emerged in response to modern historical and analytical-critical methods, which challenged traditional readings of the Bible. The idea reaches back to 17th-century Protestant orthodoxy that claimed “verbal inspiration”, or even “dictation” of the text of Scripture.

¹ This is a sketch compiled by Tibor Fabiny within the framework the Research Project „A Hermeneutical and Theological Approach of Protestant Fundamentalism” (2022-2024) at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary” Project Leader: Tibor Fabiny. <https://btk.kre.hu/index.php/2015-12-05-09-31-20/kari-kutatocsoportok/887-hermeneutikai-kutatokozpont-a-protestans-fundamentalizmus-hermeneutikai-megkozelitese-kutatocsoport>. Responses either pros or cons are welcome by the author.

¹ “All fundamentalists are inerrantists, but not all inerrantists are fundamentalists.” (Email from Mark A. Noll to the author: June 1st, 2024; “You are right that advocating inerrancy correlated fairly highly with being a fundamentalist”. (Email from George M. Marsden to the author: June 1st, 2024.)

2. Literary Perspective

Inerrancy is unsustainable because it misrepresents biblical language, which is more poetic and connotative than strictly propositional, referential, or denotative. It projects a modern linguistic framework backward onto the Bible.

3. Non-Propositional Language

If Scripture is not purely propositional, it is misleading to claim simply that “the Bible affirms.” Non-propositional language needs no human verification.

4. Inspiration Versus Information

While the biblical authors were inspired (under the guidance of the Holy Spirit), they were not necessarily divinely “informed” or infallible in all matters of history, science, or incidental detail (Coleridge).

5. Truth in Theological Perspective

The truth of the Bible—ultimately Jesus Christ—cannot be equated with “truth” of mere referential language.

6. Conceptual Distinctions

It is essential to distinguish between Scripture, Word, text, language, speech, and revelation. God’s Word transcends the written text.

7. Literalism vs. Reformation Thought

Modern literalism differs significantly from the Reformation concept of *sensus literalis*. Luther suggested: The Word is in the Bible, but is not identical with it—just as the wise men worshipped Christ, not the manger.

8. Speech and Writing

God’s Word was originally spoken (*dabar*). The written text is transitional; through preaching it becomes speech again and must be heard.

9. Writing and Truth

God's Word is not true because it is written; rather, it is written because it is true (cf. John 5:39). Jesus' truth is different from scientific truth.

10. Christ and Scripture

Scripture bears witness to Christ—not the other way around. Christ is the signified, Scripture the sign. Not the other way round, nor reciprocally. (cf. John 5:39).

11. Events and Narrative Truth

Biblical events are true not merely because they happened historically, but because they continue to happen again and again as narrative and contemporary events.

12. How the Gospels Mean?

The Gospels are not myth, nor pure fiction, nor history in the modern sense, but "history-like witnesses to truths both historical and transcendent" (William C. Placher).

13. Danger of Bibliolatry

Inerrancy can lead to bibliolatry, which ultimately becomes a form of idolatry.

Publications on hermeneutical fundamentalism

Miért igaz? (Why Is It True?)

Edited by Tibor Fabiny

The publication *Miért igaz? (Why Is It True?)* - 2023) presents university students' pro and contra reflections on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), a document still considered normative by several Protestant communities in Hungary. Analysis of these reflections revealed that several students evaluate the Chicago Statement more positively than the editor. The editor's own hermeneutical introduction adopts a more critical and open stance. The editor argues that the essence of hermeneutical thinking is dialogue—thinking together with others, even across disagreement. (See the 13 points above.)

Fundamentalizmus, protestantizmus, modernitás (Fundamentalism, Protestantism, Modernity)

Edited by Tibor Fabiny, Orsolya Horváth, and Tibor M. Pintér

This book of essays is the product of a research group that consisted of philosophers, theologians, biblical scholars, literary scholars, linguists, historians, and political scientists affiliated with several higher education institutions; among them were not only researchers and instructors but also students who actively participated in the research.

II. POLITICAL FUNDAMENTALISM

Originally religious in nature, fundamentalism often manifests as a social and political force, even as an ideology. This includes the blending of religion and politics in various global contexts (Middle East, United States, Hungary). The emergence of political Christianity, which appropriates or exploits Christian ideals, is theologically dangerous and undermines the integrity of both politics/politics as well. Political fundamentalism is the object of critique in public theology. The Hungarian translations of these books were published by the Center.

Gregory A. Boyd – *The Myth of a Christian Nation*

Explores whether the Church should exercise political power, whether a just war exists, and whether a nation can be considered Christian. It critically examines the entanglement of church and politics in American history.

Eric W. Gritsch – *Toxic Spirituality*

Addresses both non-believers and believers, examining harmful forms of spirituality such as antisemitism, fundamentalism, triumphalism, and moralism.

Péter Buda's: "Political Fundamentalism in Hungary"² critiques the sacralization of politics and the instrumentalization of religion.

² <https://hungarianspectrum.wordpress.com/2009/07/22/political-fundamentalism-in-hungary/>

FUNDAMENTALISM VS. EVANGELICALISM

It is significant to clarify the difference between fundamentalism and evangelicalism. The American church historian Gerald T. McDermott offers a helpful distinction.³

1. Interpretation of Scripture

Fundamentalism: Interprets the Bible literally (word-for-word). Meaning is seen as obvious: “it is written.” Example: Creation in Genesis understood as six literal 24-hour days.

Evangelicalism: Considers literary genres and historical context. Recognizes multiple layers of meaning. Views creation narratives as theological stories, not scientific accounts.

2. The Question of Culture

Fundamentalism: Often skeptical of human culture. Tends toward anti-intellectualism.

Evangelicalism: Sees culture as a reflection of God’s grace; appreciates art, music, and literature—even from imperfect creators. Believes culture can glorify God.

3. Social Engagement

Fundamentalism: Limited social involvement. Focus often on issues like opposing abortion. Views broader social justice concerns with suspicion.

Evangelicalism: Actively engages in social issues. Historically involved in fighting slavery, racism, sexism, and poverty. Values humanitarian responsibility (though less progressive than liberal Christianity).

4. Separatism vs. Cooperation

Fundamentalism: Strong emphasis on separation. Avoids association with liberals and even some conservatives. Example: criticism of Billy Graham’s inclusive approach.

Evangelicalism: Open to cooperation across denominations. Encourages unity among Christians.

5. Dialogue with Liberal Christians

Fundamentalism: Often rejects liberal Christians as not truly Christian. Emphasizes doctrinal boundaries.

Evangelicalism: Open to dialogue and learning. Example: John Stott and David L. Edwards’ theological exchange. Values both persuasion and mutual understanding.

6. The Nature of Christianity

Fundamentalism: Emphasizes rules, moralism, and legalism; Scripture-centered.

Evangelicalism: Focuses on Jesus Christ—His person and work; Christ-centered faith. Emphasizes grace over rules.

THE GOAL OF INTERPRETATION OF A BIBLICAL TEXT

„The interpretation of a biblical text exists for the understanding of the Word of God; the understanding of the Word of God exists for proclamation; proclamation, like the sowing of seed, serves the conception of faith in the human heart; the conceived faith exists to be passed on; the transmitted faith gives birth to the community of the Church; and incorporation into the Church, as the Body of Christ, serves our being received back into the holy communion of the Trinity. We may call this salvation, heaven, the Kingdom of God, or perhaps most fittingly, eternal life. This is what everything is for. Everything is for our salvation, for our eternal life. This is why God became human: so that we might once again partake in the blessed communion of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.” (From Tibor Fabiny, “*Beyond Literalism and Liberalism*”—not yet published in English.)

³ Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?*, New York, InterVarsity Press, 2000, 35-37.