

What is Fundamentalism?

We often hear the word *fundamentalism* bandied about in the media. We hear the phrase “right-wing Islamic fundamentalists” used in connection with terrorism. What is disturbing is that sometimes the same adjective is used to describe Christians--“right wing Christian fundamentalists.” The tactic is simple—try to identify Islamic terrorists with Christians to make people believe they will commit the same violence. Yet, what we should ask is, What is fundamentalism? Secondly, is the OPC a fundamentalist denomination?

In the early 20th century there were many assaults upon core doctrines of the Christian faith by liberal theologians. In response to these assaults conservative theologians wrote a series of articles defending orthodox doctrines such as the Virgin Birth, substitutionary atonement, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the deity of Christ. Contributors to this collection of articles included theologians and ministers from throughout the evangelical church including Reformed theologians such as B. B. Warfield. This is where the term *fundamentalist* has its origins. During this time one was considered a fundamentalist if he affirmed these core Christian truths. In this sense, the OPC is a fundamentalist denomination. Indeed, all Christians should be fundamentalists. Notice, though, this has nothing to do with violence or terrorism. This definition, however, is not the only meaning attached to *fundamentalism*.

During the same period in the 20th century fundamentalism was also associated with “dispensationalist theology, revivalistic techniques of soul-winning, stern prohibitions against worldly entertainments, and a low view of the institutional church” (*Fighting the Good Fight*, pp. 42-43). Among those who advocated such doctrinal or behavioral distinctives, they would raise these issues to the same level of importance such as the Virgin Birth, the atonement, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the deity of Christ. In the early years of the OPC, for example, there were some ministers who “promoted a form of piety that featured abstinence from liquor, tobacco, movies, dancing, and cards” (*Good Fight*, p. 47). In fact, several ministers threatened to leave the denomination because it would not condemn the use of alcohol. In this sense of the term the OPC is not a fundamentalist denomination. It is not that the OPC is morally lax. On the contrary, it is firmly committed to the teaching of Scripture. Where Scripture speaks, the OPC must speak; where Scripture is silent, she must be silent. The Bible, for example, speaks only of the evil of drunkenness, not against the consumption of alcohol. The Bible is also silent on the use of tobacco. This is why one can see some ministers creating a cloud of smoke that would kill the heartiest mosquito by their pipe and cigar smoke at each General Assembly. To be sure, fundamentalism can come in any form and with any issue. Whenever an issue that is not addressed by Scripture is brought to the level of the explicit teaching of Scripture, this is fundamentalism in the negative sense. Once again, notice that violence or terrorist activity is not associated with this form of fundamentalism.

It is important that we understand the nature of fundamentalism so that we are familiar with a touchstone mark of the OPC. Why is this a hallmark of the OPC? Because,

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fundamentalism touches upon a cardinal doctrine of the Reformed Faith—Christian Liberty. Next month we will examine this doctrine of the Reformed Faith and see why fundamentalism can be far more dangerous than terrorist activity of Islamic terrorists.