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A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF FUNDAMENTALISM

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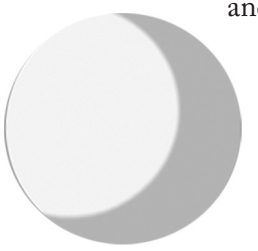
■ In the United States and Great Britain a fundamentalist response to perceived threats to orthodox Christian doctrine occurred in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. It was a reaction to something broadly known as theological modernism. Fundamentalists thought that modernism surrendered historic and essential Christian doctrines. Later, in the twentieth century, fundamentalism also confronted the challenge of secular humanism infiltrating the church and society.

In this chapter we will briefly profile fundamentalism in its American and, to some extent, British forms. This profile will provide a basis for the chapters that follow.

What Is Fundamentalism?

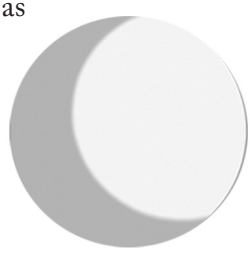
Scholars are reluctant to offer simple definitions of fundamentalism. The movement is too diverse for that. Only informally organized, the different components of fundamentalism share a common history and set of characteristics. Biblical scholar James Barr uses over three hundred pages to "define" fundamentalism. Nevertheless, he initially identifies three of the movement's most pronounced traits: (1) a very strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible, the



absence from it of any error; (2) a strong hostility to modern critical study of the Bible; and (3) an assurance that those who do not share the fundamentalists' religious viewpoint are not really "true Christians."[1] Nancy T. Ammerman discusses three deciding characteristics of fundamentalism: (1) evangelism (a kinship shared with evangelicals); (2) inerrancy of the Bible, meaning that it is free of all error of fact or principle (providing "an accurate description of science and history, as well as morality and religion"); and (3) premillennialism (true of most fundamentalists).[2] Historian George M. Marsden tentatively defines a fundamentalist as "an evangelical who is militant in opposition to liberal theology in the churches or to changes in our cultural values or mores, such as those associated with 'secular humanism.'"[3] Marsden also observes that fundamentalism is a "distinct version of evangelical Christianity uniquely shaped by the circumstances of America in the early twentieth century"; fundamentalists found "themselves living in a culture that by the 1920s was openly turning away from God."[4]

The term "fundamentalism" was coined in 1920 and derived from a series of booklets titled *The Fundamentals*. They were published in the United States between 1910 and 1915 (discussed below). The booklets used the term "fundamentals" to identify doctrines thought to be essential and nonnegotiable for orthodox Christian faith.

To preserve what it believes to be orthodox Christian theology, fundamentalism champions a view of biblical authority that emphasizes the Bible's inerrancy in matters of science and history, as well as faith and practice. Its proponents believe much of modern biblical scholarship has resulted in undercutting the Bible's authority and reducing it to a narrow historical and cultural context. This, fundamentalists believe, has fostered unbelief and moral relativity. By contrast, the Bible as written and received presents the worldview to which orthodox Christians should conform. Consequently, the Bible must not be subjected to literary and historical analysis as are other ancient documents.



Doing so only undermines the Bible as the revealed, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God. Against all perceived opponents of the Bible and Christian doctrine, fundamentalists uphold the literal meaning of Scripture. Consequently, they reject the modern theories of evolution and uphold creationism as they think Genesis teaches it.

Given what late nineteenth-century fundamentalists saw as the moral and religious disintegration of Western society, it is not surprising that they thought of Christ's return and the end times in that light. And given the unchanging character of the Bible as fundamentalists understood it, it is to be expected that they reacted negatively to some earthshaking movements such as the rise of feminism, which, they thought, jeopardized the God-given hierarchy of familial authority as taught in the Bible.

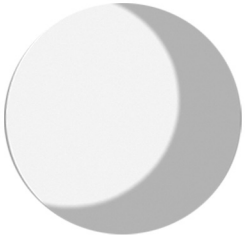
The Wesleyan response to fundamentalism was mixed, but ultimately Wesleyans recognized important differences between themselves and fundamentalists. What was of more concern to Wesleyans than defending a particular view of biblical inspiration was presenting what the Bible teaches about Christ's sanctifying work.

The Nineteenth-Century Antecedents of Fundamentalism

Influenced greatly by the holiness revivals of the mid-nineteenth century, Protestants such as Dwight L. Moody rallied around an emphasis upon regeneration and a life of Christian piety. Fundamentalism represented a narrowing of this broad nineteenth-century evangelical tradition.

Let's discuss three nineteenth-century antecedents of twentieth-century fundamentalism.

1. In the 1890s, in America and Great Britain, many evangelicals who promoted revivalism organized prophecy conferences, the most prominent of which was the Niagara Bible Conference. With the exception of 1884, the Niagara Bible Conference met annually from 1876 to 1897. In 1883 it met in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario,

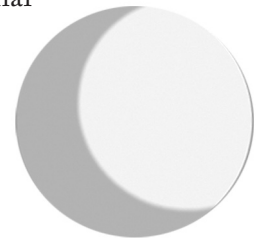


Canada, the place that gave the conference its name. The conferences built upon the assumption that recent and future events in human history were foretold in the Bible in coded form. In the prophecy conferences, nineteenth-century fundamentalism achieved its characteristic form.

A perspective known as dispensationalism became a prominent explanation of what the Bible foretells. Dispensationalism is rooted in the teaching of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), a founder of the Plymouth Brethren in Ireland and England. It is the belief that God chronologically acts in history according to distinct dispensations or periods of revelation and divine purpose. Each dispensation is marked by a fitting covenant and has its own divine goal and revelatory content. There is no uniform agreement among dispensationalists on the number or content of the dispensations.

Dispensationalism is associated with millennialism. Millennialism is the belief that Christ will reign upon the earth for one thousand years prior to the consummation of the kingdom of God and the final judgment. Millennialism rests upon Rev. 20:1-6, which speaks of the Devil being bound for one thousand years. During that time the Devil would not be able to deceive the nations. The holy martyrs would come to life and reign with Christ during the millennium (vv. 4-5). After that, the Devil would be "let out for a little while" (v. 3). There was a division of opinion among millennialists over whether Christ would return before the millennium and establish his reign or whether the kingdom of God, with Christ reigning spiritually, would progressively advance on earth until the millennium of peace would dawn, after which Christ would return. Those who held to the first interpretation were known as premillennialists. Those holding the second position were postmillennialists.

The prophecy conferences supported premillennial dispensationalism. Dispensationalists reasoned that Christ was not about to build his kingdom on earth by using human hands. So they embraced a premillennialist interpretation of Scripture. They harbored

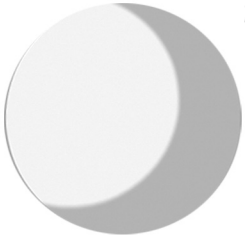


pessimistic expectations for the redemption of society and considered technological advances and social improvements to be insignificant in God's design. For them, world history confirmed that things would get worse, not better, before Christ's return. Any sign of the world's decline was looked upon eagerly as a sign of Christ's soon return.[5]

By contrast, the perfectionist ideals of the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement and postmillennialism influenced social thought from a different direction. They promoted optimistic expectations for human progress in history. It seemed to them that God was working out his will on earth, even as it was done in heaven. God was actively eradicating evil here below and building his kingdom. The side of Darwinism that suggested the evolution of humankind was from lower to higher life-forms confirmed their optimism. Postmillennialists, as they were known, rejoiced in many of the advances in industry, technology, and social progress. They saw human enterprise and reason as the means by which God was completing his kingdom. Thus many of the perfectionists who embraced the promise of Christian holiness welcomed science and history as part of humankind's great upward march.

Others equally committed to holiness held an amillennialist position. They taught that the thousand-year reign is figurative rather than literal and refers to eternity. In their reading of the Bible there was no time, place, or reason for a kingdom of God on earth either preceding or following Christ's second coming.

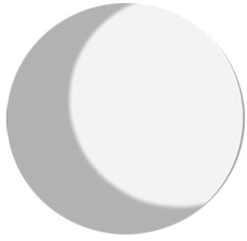
2. A second major factor in the development of fundamentalism was a type of theology known as Princeton theology. It came from Princeton Theological Seminary. The Princeton theologians, discussed in chapter 5, stood at a critical distance from much of what characterized fundamentalism. They were indebted to the teachings of John Calvin and Scottish common-sense realism. The latter taught that nature as immediately and plainly perceived conveys certain truths about itself and about God as Creator. Princeton theologians such as Charles Hodge



accepted the "givenness" or plain, "common-sense" meaning of texts such as the Bible. Historical criticism, which looked beyond plain meanings to the historical context of the text, influenced other seminaries in the late nineteenth century, but not Princeton. Its teachers presented a defense of what they considered Scripture's plain meaning and what they believed to be an accurate presentation of Calvinist theology.[6]

3. A third major factor was the challenge presented by geological and biological inquiries into the origins of the world and humankind. Darwin's 1859 *On the Origin of Species* raised the question of how literally the Bible's account of creation could be taken. Darwin's research seemed to confirm the theories of many leading American scientists who had concluded from geological evidence that the world was much older than a literal reading of the Bible indicated. At first, few clergy reacted negatively against the theory of evolution. Many theologians, including Methodists Thomas Ralston, John Miley, and Olin Curtis, were able to harmonize an ancient earth and a non-atheistic theory of evolution with Genesis and Christian principles. Other biblical scholars suggested that on such matters as the computation of dates and simple chronology biblical writers sometimes contradicted each other and were sometimes mistaken on matters of historical fact. They accepted that Hebrew writers might have adapted some of their literature from other cultures. But on matters of faith and practice, the Bible remained authoritative; it was God's faithful Word to men and women. The overriding interest was the conversion of men and women to Christ. They hoped soon to evangelize the entire world. Preaching the gospel overrode lesser interests.

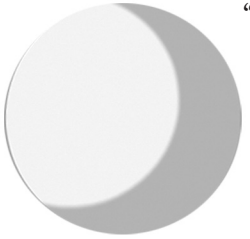
Many nineteenth-century evangelicals interpreted the Bible in a way that emphasized the Scripture's intention to speak authoritatively only on matters of faith and practice. They normally left science and history free to pursue their own goals. Because God is Truth, scientific and historic inquiries could only succeed in magnifying God's glory. These evangelicals sought to unify religion and science. When, for



example, Genesis says the world was created in six days, and Darwinists say it took several million years; many evangelicals resolved the apparent conflict by interpreting "day" (*yom*, Hebrew) as meaning an indeterminate period of time. They interpreted the remnants of animal instinct in men and women as pointing to the carnal nature about which Paul spoke. The "animal" remnants are at war with the higher, spiritual nature of God's image in humankind. Evangelicals who interpreted Genesis in this way thought that God had at some time conferred a soul upon primal beings. Through the soul, God created Adam and Eve as human beings. Evangelicals who followed this path looked to prehistory for a threshold when self-consciousness and conscience developed. They worked to harmonize science and religion.[7]

While some evangelicals could achieve reconciliation between Darwin and Genesis, others could not. Indebted to Francis Bacon and common-sense realism, Charles Hodge accepted as truth about the world only what was immediately apparent and in line with common sense. There is no immediate evidence that change of the Darwinian magnitude has occurred among plants or animals. Nature proceeds according to immutable laws that common sense can discover and confirm.

Hodge was convinced that not only is God unchanging but so also is the natural order in its essential form; it is as God created it, not as it allegedly evolved. Though Hodge did not oppose science or reason, he was distrustful of speculative theory of the kind he believed Darwin practiced. Hypotheses such as evolution were based on unfounded and subjective interpretations of data. Human reason exercised as Darwin had employed it is too tainted by original sin to be trusted. He crafted a doctrine of inspiration that defended biblical inerrancy in all these matters.



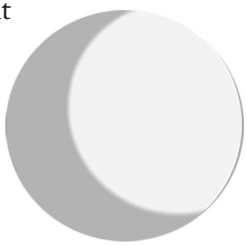
Hodge was also suspicious of evangelist Charles G. Finney's "new methods" for revivals and his promotion of the causes of women and the abolition of slaves. Both of these emphases departed from the literal and plain teaching of the inspired Scriptures, as Hodge un-

derstood it. Unlike Hodge, Finney relied upon a dynamic understanding of biblical authority, attributed to the Holy Spirit, instead of relying upon the inspired text alone.[8]

The Early Twentieth Century

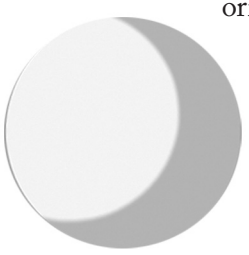
In the early decades of the twentieth century, certain evangelicals sensed deeply that modernist trends in their denominations threatened the faith. Some of these persons had been influenced by the late nineteenth-century prophecy conferences, and others by the kind of Calvinist theology Benjamin Warfield was teaching at Princeton. Although Warfield, in particular, was untroubled by the thought of humankind's evolution, he and others thought the inerrancy of the Bible was under attack from scholars who used the methods of historical criticism (analyzing the books of the Bible primarily as historical and literary documents, not primarily as bearers of revelation).[9] Related to this issue during these years were several significant matters.

1. Modernism (position that Christian beliefs must be restated in ways that comply with modern forms of understanding): enemy of the faith. Like their nineteenth-century forebears, these fundamentalists believed the plain and literal meanings of the Bible must be preserved. They were determined to safeguard its inspiration and authority and attacked modernists for rejecting the Bible's plain meanings. Those whom they called modernists found clues to the authorship of biblical texts, their period of composition, and their place of origin by using historical and literary methods. For instance, their research led them to believe that the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch), traditionally attributed to Moses, were in fact drawn from a variety of sources at different times and that close attention to the text confirms this. They thought the Pentateuch also contains contrasting theological emphases. All this unnerved many Christians and invited opposition from fundamentalists.



From the modernist perspective, if we expect contemporary persons to receive the Bible's truth, its historical roots must be taken seriously. The Bible's truth lies beneath legends and allusions woven into the biblical narrative. For modernists, close observation and examination are the criteria of authority. They could appreciate subjectively the beneficial value of biblical religion without having to accept its worldview—its claims about God and the world. Moreover, for them modern thought is more than a tool of theology; it is the final standard for religious belief. Modernists generally rejected Christ's virgin birth, deity, and resurrection in their efforts to "save" Christianity from being rejected by moderns as superstitious and unworthy of trust. They wanted to establish an intellectually acceptable way to understand the Bible and its message. For modernists, Jesus was thought to be as nearly godlike as any person might be. He was an eternal example of the religious and moral perfection for which humans long. This was modernist "gospel." Baptist Harry E. Fosdick maintained that the historical method would save the church from intellectual adolescence. He insisted that what is vital to Christianity is the "personal experience of God in Christ."[10] The heart of religion is the intuitive feelings of human beings. At the same time, religion can be adequately understood on the basis of reason alone. A proper relationship to God requires religious creativity and an expanded understanding on our part.[11]

Fundamentalists rejected modernism and refused to let the Bible be analyzed as secular documents might be. Rather, it is the Word of God and results from divine authorship. Accepting the Bible's supernatural origin is a matter of Christian faith. The Bible cannot be analyzed historically lest its divine origin and inspiration be called into question. Furthermore, men and women will never be saved if they doubt either the divine origin of the Bible or any of its teachings. Fundamentalists were certain other Christians were succumbing to the spirit of the age by accepting the conclusions of historical research—the historical method—when applied to the Bible.



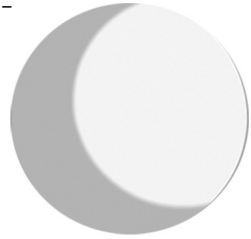
Characteristically, fundamentalism was neither irrational nor theologically untutored. The fundamentalist goal was to save Christianity from rationalism and humanism and thus to preserve both the Bible's sacredness and the deity of Christ. Saving "orthodox" Christianity was the mission. Though some fundamentalists regarded scholarship with suspicion, most of their dissatisfaction was aimed at what they judged as false pretenses to scholarship. In the name of scholarship, many universities spewed out the "putridness of infidelity upon humanity."[12]

2. *The Fundamentals*. As mentioned early in this chapter, *The Fundamentals*, a paperback twelve-volume series (published between 1910 and 1915) written by numerous American and British scholars and ministers, identified the essential Christian doctrines. They were published as *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. The volumes were widely distributed—as many as three million copies. Fundamental doctrines were also in evidence in the fourteen-point creed of the 1878 Niagara Bible Conference and the 1910 five-point statement of the Presbyterian General Assembly. Fundamentalists have never uniformly agreed on the precise number and identity of the fundamentals.

The fundamental doctrines, or beliefs, as stated in *The Fundamentals* are as follows:

1. The inerrancy and verbal inspiration of Scripture
2. The Trinity
3. The virgin birth and incarnation of Christ
4. Original sin
5. The atonement of Christ
6. The resurrection of Christ
7. A premillennial return of Christ
8. Spiritual rebirth
9. Bodily resurrection and eternal salvation or damnation

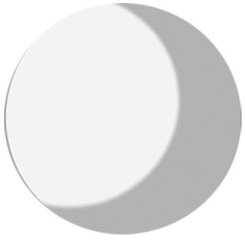
The Fundamentals also attacked evolution and the social gospel. To these nine fundamentals were added a defense of a literal reading of the Genesis account of creation.



3. In defense of formalism. Faith in progress waned as the Great War engulfed and destroyed Germany, once considered by many the finest Christian society. Not only had Germany been the author of the Great War, but, American Protestants remembered, its biblical scholars had also been the first to doubt the Bible's inerrancy. Many Americans linked German wartime atrocities to this kind of German scholarship. They believed the trail of German criticism led not only to challenging the inerrancy of the Scriptures but to eliminating all moral absolutes as well. To them, the historical method implied that what people believe to be true emerged and changed through time. Thus religious belief and morality were relative. This rejection of absolute truth was part of a broader revolt against formalism, a revolt fundamentalists opposed.

Formalism is the belief that laws are universal and unchanging, that they transcend and govern the physical and moral world. The revolt against formalism held that laws are not universal and timeless. Instead, they are limited, useful tools for certain situations and periods. Fundamentalists saw this revolt as a rejection of standards by which morality and any other worthwhile aspect of culture can be established. Moral laws, fundamentalists insisted, are directly attributable to unchanging biblical principles. Neither the Bible nor morals are historically relative.

Fundamentalists needed a religion that remains the same while the rest of life is rapidly changing. They established and attended churches that supported such sure foundations. And they focused their attention on forces that threatened religious and moral structures. Increasingly, they saw themselves as entrusted by God to defend the true biblical faith besieged by modernism and Darwinist science.



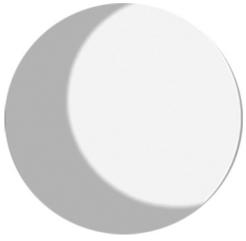
In the Bible fundamentalists found a sure foundation that could withstand the corrosive influences of modern unbelief and Darwinism. The biblical story of creation established human uniqueness as having been given in a moment of creation. Humans were created in God's image. Adam's fall explained the appearance of sin, guilt,

and the failures of the race. Darwinist theory, by contrast, debased human life as fundamentalists believed the Bible presented it. By implication Darwinism eliminated any plan for creation and redemption authored and superintended by God.[13]

4. Emergence of the evangelicals. The famous trial of John Scopes in 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee, for allegedly teaching evolution in public schools contrary to state law was a legal victory for fundamentalism. William Jennings Bryan defended the state and what was in essence the fundamentalist position on creation. Clarence Darrow, who defended Scopes, ridiculed Bryan's deficient knowledge of modern science and the Bible. Bryan won the battle, but many believed he and the fundamentalists lost the war.[14]

But fundamentalism was not driven from the field at Dayton. For a time, it lost momentum, but quickly revived. Local fundamentalist congregations experienced a few major setbacks. Attempts to assure a fundamentalist orientation for the major denominations failed. But nondenominational organizations, schools such as Dallas Theological Seminary and Wheaton College, radio broadcasts, and periodicals flourished. The *Scofield* annotated edition of the King James Version, published in 1909 by Cyrus Scofield, which linked verses together to substantiate premillennialism, remained popular. Many independent Bible schools were established. Representing the premillennialist side of fundamentalism, the Moody Bible Institute became closely identified with fundamentalism. Its president, James Gray, believed fundamentalism would bring revival to the United States.[15]

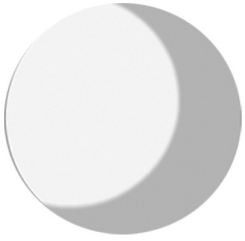
Meanwhile, at Princeton, theologian J. Gresham Machen attempted unsuccessfully to keep the seminary true to a strict interpretation of the Calvinist Westminster Confession of Faith—the 1646 doctrinal standard of Presbyterians. But he and other conservative Presbyterians could not prevent the direction their denomination was taking. Finally, in 1929, Machen, along with three other Princeton profes-



sors, formed Westminster Theological Seminary. In 1936 he founded a separate denomination (later called the Orthodox Presbyterian Church).[16]

During the 1930s, fundamentalists rallied around nondenominational organizations, such as Moody and Bob Jones University, and local leaders, such as William Bell Riley in Minnesota. Some became reactionary in politics. Fundamentalists were all but forgotten in the nationwide publicity favoring the denominations affiliated with the Federation of Christian Churches, which had been formed in 1908. Regulatory agencies even denied to fundamentalists the possibility of broadcasting on the radio. A darker side of fundamentalism showed itself in the 1930s when some leaders sympathized with Fascism and anti-Semitism.[17]

Fundamentalists led by Carl McIntire organized the American Council of Christian Churches in 1941. Not all fundamentalists followed. Fundamentalism divided between evangelicals (the self-designation of those who were open to certain literary and historical approaches to the Scriptures) and fundamentalists.[18] Evangelicals welcomed Billy Graham's campaigns, which brought together many varieties of Protestants, while fundamentalists argued for a separation from the world and so-called Christians in denominations that, by fundamentalist standards, rejected the orthodox faith. Fundamentalists adhered to the King James Version of the Bible and attributed a high level of inspiration to it.[19] Evangelicals saw the need for newer translations. They also sought to come to terms with the mounting evidence for evolution. In 1942 evangelicals under Harold John Ockenga organized the National Association of Evangelicals. The NAE and McIntire's organization intended to counteract the Federal Council of Churches and its successor, the National Council of Churches, which was organized in 1950.[20]



In the 1950s both fundamentalists and evangelicals were driven back toward the cultural center by the country's spirit of patriotism against "atheistic communism."

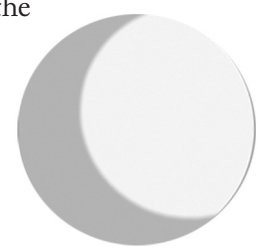
Conclusion

Denominations whose theological identity is rooted in the Wesleyan tradition, including those shaped by the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement, have given mixed responses to and appraisals of fundamentalism. Wesleyans have found it difficult to embrace fundamentalism for numerous reasons.

First, historically fundamentalism has been articulated within a predominantly Calvinist theological structure. Wesleyans have assigned prominence to the doctrine of Christian holiness in a way not normally supported by Calvinist theology. Wesleyans also have a significantly different understanding of the scope of Christ's atonement—rejecting the doctrine of predestination—and the conditions for continuing in the Christian life. The gulf between Wesleyanism and fundamentalism became more apparent when J. Gresham Machen and others defined fundamentalism strictly in the language of the Westminster Confession and strict Calvinism.

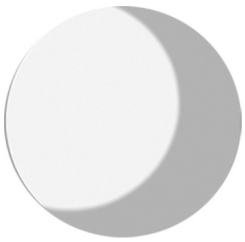
Second, Wesleyans will not commit to a single understanding of eschatology. There are two reasons for this: (1) they do not believe the New Testament treats eschatology in neat and narrow formulas, and (2) they do not believe questions about the end times are of essential theological importance. What one believes about the end times is unworthy of divisive argument. Wesleyans are far more interested in holy living than in charting God's future. They believe the most important protection against heresy is not right argument but the purity and power that proceeds from the Holy Spirit.

Third, Wesleyans simply cannot embrace fundamentalism's doctrine of the Scriptures. As subsequent chapters will show, Wesleyans are thoroughly committed to the primacy and authority of the Scriptures in all matters pertaining to doctrine and Christian practice. But for reasons that rest upon what they think constitutes the Bible's authority,



Wesleyans cannot embrace a fundamentalist doctrine of biblical inerrancy.[21]

As will be seen in chapter 5, Wesleyans are much more in line with Martin Luther and John Calvin than are fundamentalists. The most insightful and influential theologians of the Church of the Nazarene, for example, have repeatedly shown the disjunction between the two appraisals of the Bible's authority. Theologian H. Orton Wiley rejected the fundamentalists' "mechanical" view of Scripture because it excluded the role of human reason and any serious consideration of the social and historical contexts of the authors.[22] Ralph Earle, longtime New Testament professor at Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, urged the denomination to understand that its doctrine of biblical inspiration derived from John Wesley and from roots deep in the Church of England (e.g., Richard Hooker [1554–1600]).[23] Accordingly, he explained that unlike fundamentalists, Nazarenes should understand that plenary, or full, inspiration applies to the Scriptures as a whole. The Bible, Earle taught, is "infallible" in what it intends to convey: truth concerning God and salvation.[24] He also was among the team of translators for the *New International Version* of the Bible. Theologian W. T. Purkiser said the Nazarene Article of Faith on Scripture saved the denomination from "bondage to a fundamentalist literalism which affirms the dictation of each word of the original autographs, and which sometimes seems to extend the same sanctity to a certain English version."[25] In harmony with John Wesley, these and more recent Nazarene theologians stressed the primary role of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of the Bible's hearers. They have pointed out that inspiration resides with the Holy Spirit and is not the independent property of the Bible. Only the Holy Spirit can make the Bible's message of salvation a living and transforming word from God.[26]



Fourth, because of its doctrine of Scripture, Wesleyans cannot support the negative appraisal of modern biological and geological science that characterizes fundamentalism. H. Orton Wiley was typical of a Wesleyan refusal to use the book of Genesis for im-

posing limitations on what modern science can teach us about origins. Wiley said the poetic "creation hymn" of Gen. 1–3 answers the question of *who* God is, not how or when God created the universe.[27] As early as 1960, the denomination's theological textbook, *Exploring Our Christian Faith*, stated that any attempt to read modern science into the Genesis account of creation inflicts an "injustice [on] both Genesis and science."[28]