

Fundamentalism

The basic mistake of biblical fundamentalism is its failure to recognise that we do not have an unmediated experience of God. God communicates directly and personally with each one of us in the most intimate and mysterious ways, but we experience God only in and through our experience of the communication. We experience a movement of heart or mind. We experience it as gift and through faith we know that the giver of the gift is God, the source of all grace.

God, however, is transcendent, and remains beyond everything that we directly experience. These apparently simple statements are of the utmost importance. Failure to recognise their truth continues to lead to the most serious religious aberrations.

Philo (c. 25BC - 45AD) quoted by Eusebius (HE 2.17)

‘Christians expound the Sacred Scriptures figuratively by means of allegories. For the whole law seems to these men to resemble a living organism, of which the spoken words constitute the body, while the hidden sense stored up within the words constitutes the soul. This hidden meaning has first been particularly studied by this sect, which sees, revealed as in a mirror of names, the surpassing beauties of the thoughts.’

Origen (c. 185-254)

‘The reason why all those whom we have mentioned hold false opinions, and make impious or ignorant assertions about God, appears to be nothing else but this, that Scripture is not understood in its spiritual sense, but is interpreted according to the bare letter’(De Principiis 4.2).

‘How can one be said to believe the Scripture in the proper sense when one does not perceive the meaning of the Holy Spirit in it which God wants to be believed rather than the intent of the letter’(On John 10.300).

John Chrysostom (347-407)

‘If you listen to what is written in the Scripture without examining the meaning and take everything in its literal sense you will get many strange notions ... You will rid yourselves of these strange notions by examining the sense that lies deep within’(Homily 15 on John).

‘We will need God’s abundant grace lest we go no further than the bare words. It is in this way that the heretics go astray, because they seek to know neither the point of view of the speaker nor the attitude of his hearers’(Homily 40 on John).

Augustine (354-430)

‘These passages of the Old Testament had been death to me when I took them literally, but once I had heard them explained in their spiritual meaning I began to blame myself for my despair, at least in so far as it had led me to suppose that it was quite impossible to counter people who hated and derided the law and the prophets’(Confessions V. 14).

Augustine (354-430)

‘When Ambrose lifted the veil of mystery and disclosed the spiritual meaning of texts which, taken literally, appear to contain the most unlikely doctrines, I was not aggrieved by what he said, although I did not yet know whether it was true’(Confessions VI. 4).

‘We have heard what happened, let us search out the hidden meaning’(Tractate 1 on John 50. 6).

Maxentius (580-662)

‘If the letter is not understood according to the spirit, then it can be grasped only with the senses, which means that what it has to say is restricted and the force of what is written is not allowed to sink into the mind. Therefore, let us not put under a bushel the lamp (that is, the enlightening word of knowledge) which we have lit by spiritual contemplation and action. Let us not be guilty of restricting by the letter the incomprehensible force of wisdom. Let us put it on the lampstand (by which I mean the Church), where on the heights of true contemplation it may hold out to all the light of divine teaching’ (To Thalassius quaestio 63).

Geert Grote (1340-1384)

Founder of *Devotio Moderna*

‘The literal sense of poetry and of scriptural poems and figures is its figural sense, and the words are not what they first seem or sound.’

The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993)

‘When fundamentalists relegate exegetes to the role of translators only (failing to grasp that translating the Bible is already a work of exegesis) and refuse to follow them further in their studies, these same fundamentalists do not realise that, for all their very laudable concern for total fidelity to the Word of God, they proceed in fact along ways which will lead them far away from the true meaning of the biblical texts, as well as from full acceptance of the consequences of the Incarnation.

The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993)

- The eternal Word became incarnate at a precise period of history, within a clearly defined cultural and social environment. Anyone who desires to understand the Word of God should humbly seek it out there where it has made itself visible and accept to this end the necessary help of human knowledge.

Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that his word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language. Proper respect for inspired Scripture requires undertaking all the labours necessary to gain a thorough grasp of its meaning' (1993, pages 132-133).

‘The basic problem with fundamentalist interpretation is that, refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the Incarnation itself ... It refuses to admit that the inspired Word of God has been expressed in human language and that this Word has been expressed, under divine inspiration, by human authors possessed of limited capacities and resources’ (1993, page 73).

Excellent summary of the errors in Fundamentalist Interpretation (1993, pages 72-75).