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Fundamentalists and Contextualization

Patterns of Avoidance and Pathways to Acceptance



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Fundamentalists and Contextualization:
Patterns of Avoidance and Pathways to Acceptance
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Evangelical Missiological Society Monograph Series

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Introduction

1.1. Background and Purpose of the Study

Missionary practice from the very beginning of the New Testament era has involved establishing local churches in regions or among peoples who received the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ from messengers from outside their culture. These bearers of the gospel story are called missionaries. Compelled by a combination of devotion to Christ and his salvation, and compassion for those who have yet to experience God's forgiving grace, they leave the familiarity of their home culture to enter another culture with the goal of sharing their experience of redemption with others.

The biblically paradigmatic missionary was Paul of Tarsus. He traveled throughout the Roman Empire in his day, proclaiming the good news that he had received. He passionately embraced the challenges of communicating across various cultural settings so that others could experience the spiritual security and joy he knew. As men and women began to respond to the invitation to repent, believe for the forgiveness of sin, and follow Jesus, they naturally gathered into visible communities of believers.[1] These local churches were hubs for community life and for teaching from God's Word so that participants could go out into their societies and enthusiastically share their experience of their relationship with God to others. Thus, the message of salvation through Christ, the gospel, has passed down through

1 Acts 1:41, 47; 4:32; 5:14; 6:7; 14:21–23; 16:5.

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generations among peoples around the world, because those who experience his grace share it with those who do not. Again and again, the gospel has transcended borders and crossed cultures through the witness of those who have accepted the mission to leave home and enculturate themselves in a new environment, thereby repeating the process of gospel proclamation begun in the first century, resulting in new followers of Jesus who, in turn, form new local churches.

In the centuries that followed the inauguration of missionary endeavor by the original apostles, a myriad of variations developed regarding the proper expression of following Jesus. In the early twentieth century, a division arose within American Christianity, which centered on the very definition of Christianity. Fundamentalists adhered to historic, orthodox Christian doctrine, while modernists questioned much of orthodox Christianity in light of what they considered a modern approach to understanding. The term fundamentalist was originally used to distinguish between those who held certain beliefs, primarily centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ as fundamental to salvation, and those whose understandings of those beliefs were conditioned by modern science and philosophy.[2] Over time, questions regarding the degree to which a fundamentalist should associate with those who held divergent positions relative to Christianity became a central component of the movement's persona. Further, biblical injunctions to remain free from worldly entanglements[3] began to be understood as requiring withdrawal from and hostility toward the surrounding culture.[4] All religious experience is influenced by, and in turn influences, culture, both the public culture of a region and the specific culture generated by any particular religious expression. As it became increasingly sectarian, American fundamentalism developed its

2 Abrams identifies the origins of fundamentalism as a conflict of beliefs, "Notably, those conservative Protestants identified as essential beliefs that modernists attacked. Liberals did not contest denominational distinctives, such as baptism, salvation, or polity, but rather did challenge the Scripture and its presentation of Christ's deity, the virgin birth, the atonement, the resurrection, as well as creation and several other points" (*Old-Time Religion Embracing Modernist Culture*, 10).

3 For example, see Philippians 2:15; 2 Timothy 4:10; James 1:27, 4:4; 2 Peter 1:4, 2:20; 1 John 2:15–17.

4 Describing the temperament of fundamentalism, Sutton explains, "Fundamentalism was never simply about theology or spirituality. It was always a perspective and an attitude toward this world, the next one, and the road between the two." Sutton, *American Apocalypse*.

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own culture. Expressing the fact that fundamentalism is as much about perspective as it is about doctrine, George Dollar explained, "Historic Fundamentalism is the literal exposition of all the affirmations and attitudes of the Bible and the militant exposure of all non-Biblical affirmations and attitudes."[5] There is, however, a danger that what constitutes non-biblical affirmations and attitudes can be determined more by consensus and peer pressure within the movement than by divine revelation.

The twentieth century also witnessed an increased emphasis on reproducing the denominational, or often in the case of fundamentalism, movement-oriented particularities among the recipients of missionary endeavor. In the case of fundamentalists, there developed an increasing focus on replicating both the doctrinal distinctives of the home culture church or missionary agency and the precise interaction with culture that characterized the missionary's experience. Missionaries from such backgrounds became notable for their resolve to recreate, in receptor cultures, the same strictures regarding Christian behavior and practice that were emphasized in their home cultures. While evangelical missionaries in general were rapidly shedding the constraints associated with the colonialist missionary era (where it was considered acceptable or presumably necessary to recreate an exact importation of Christianity from the motherland[6]), fundamentalist missionaries, to various degrees, fortified their determination to mimic on the mission field the application of their approach to culture at home in the lives of Christians on the field. The foundation of this recalcitrant approach to culture was a sincere desire to fulfill what fundamentalists believed was a biblical mandate for resistance to culture by being "separated from

5 Dollar, *History of Fundamentalism in America*, xiv.

6 Robert Speer quotes Dr. George Hamilton, who argued for colonizing before evangelizing in an address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1796, "To spread abroad the knowledge of the Gospel among barbarous and heathen nations seems to me to be highly preposterous in as far as it anticipates, nay, as it even reverses the order of nature. Men must be polished and refined in their manners before they can be properly enlightened in religious truths. Philosophy and learning must, in the nature of things, take the precedence. Indeed, it should seem hardly less absurd to make revelation precede civilization in the order of time, than to pretend to unfold to a child the 'Principia' of Newton, ere he is made at all acquainted with the letters of the alphabet. These ideas seem to me alike founded in error; and, therefore, I must consider them both as equally romantic and visionary." "Foreign Missions or World-Wide Evangelism," 500.

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the world."[7] Rather than determine what being separated from the world looked like within the receptor culture, many fundamentalist missionaries have persistently imposed the schema from their home culture in their discipleship and church planting efforts. To be sure, this is often the result of ignorance rather than recalcitrance. Many missionaries from diverse backgrounds have little cross-cultural preparation before arriving on the field.[8] They are aware of differences in speech and external cultural artifacts such as food, dress, transportation, and living arrangements, but often come ill-prepared for broader cross-cultural differences in worldviews and social norms. As they begin to acclimate to their newly adopted environment, most missionaries realize that simply applying patterns from their passport culture will not achieve the goal of producing healthy, indigenous churches on the mission field. Nonetheless, in the absence of adequate instruction and perspective enrichment, missionaries may feel constrained to reproduce the patterns and mores for Christianity that were part of their church, academy, and agency culture at home. This leads to churches on the mission field that do not fit their context and are thus very difficult to grow and to reproduce. In some cases, the idea of applying appropriate, biblically nurtured contextualization for the purpose of successfully developing culturally appropriate expressions of Christianity within the target culture is even spurned by fundamentalist missionaries who view it as a deviation from biblically acceptable mission strategy and a compromise against the Christian experience, which they hold to be uniquely biblical. From this historical context emerges evidence of resistance to contextual mission activity or contextualization, that is, pursuing ministry that recognizes the need to adapt to local cultural contexts and responds with ministry approaches designed to communicate within such contexts to maximize the potential for acceptance of the gospel message.

7 Scripture has clear injunctions against forming attachments with the ways of the world around us (Rom 12:2; Jas 4:4–5; 1 John 2:15). Fundamentalists, however, have often applied these warnings by withdrawing from current cultural trends and holding as safe, or righteous, only the activities enjoined within the church or in fellowship with other believers.

8 Citing lack of intercultural preparation as a cause of missionary attrition, Taylor states, "We have statistical evidence that shows that those who have received a sound missiological component with their theological training are less likely to be an attrition statistic than those whose training is purely theological in content." Taylor, *Too Valuable to Lose*.

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1.2. Rationale and Need for Study

This study will examine the relationship between a fundamentalist approach to culture and missionaries' integration of Christianity into new receptor cultures (contextualization). It will investigate how the lifestyle, theology, and church life (worship, polity, outreach) choices in one's home culture bear on successful integration into a new culture for the sake of gospel witness. Likewise, it will study how a missionary's perspective toward culture in general shapes his or her preparedness to help converts apply the implications of the gospel in a new environment. At the same time, the study will focus on the biblical basis for appropriately contextualizing Christianity into the missionary's target culture.

I am a fundamentalist, both in terms of my personal history, education, associations, and ministry choices throughout my adult life. With a background spanning more than thirty years, including serving as a cross-cultural church planter, a mission agency administrator, and now a professor teaching missions, I have interacted with highly conservative or fundamentalist missionaries across a variety of ministry endeavors in scores of countries and cultures, and noted a propensity to introduce the conservative cultural expressions of Christianity from their home experiences into the ministries they lead abroad. Frequently, there is insufficient effort to understand the host culture and its underlying worldview. Rather, there is often an assumption that the experiences that influenced the missionary at home should be replicated for the local believers. Likewise, I have repeatedly encountered varying degrees of rejection or hostility toward local host cultures, sometimes without adequate investigation into them. Rather than intentionally seeking to plant Christianity in a new environment in ways that will nourish its development as foundationally indigenous, many fundamentalist missionaries are content with a duplication of Christianity as they experienced it in their home environment, with as little cultural adaptation as possible. Different languages and foods are permissible, but different worship, different music, different entertainment, different lifestyles, in short, different culture, is viewed as a compromise of biblical obedience. This stems from an essential misunderstanding of the nature and role of contextualization, coupled with an oversimplification of culture's impact on the appropriate expression of Christianity. For example, Alan Patterson, in his unpublished treatise "Keeping Perspective on Contextualization," states, "The fact is that idolatrous practices permeate almost every facet of the

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