

***Pastoral Statement For Catholics On Biblical Fundamentalism***

**National Conference of Catholic Bishops Ad Hoc Committee on Biblical Fundamentalism**

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This is a statement of concern to our Catholic brothers and sisters who may be attracted to biblical fundamentalism without realizing its serious weaknesses. We Catholic bishops, speaking as a special committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, desire to remind our faithful of the fullness of Christianity that God has provided in the Catholic Church.

Fundamentalism indicates a person's general approach to life which is typified by unyielding adherence to rigid doctrinal and ideological positions—an approach that affects the individual's social and political attitudes as well as religious ones. Fundamentalism in this sense is found in non-Christian religions and can be doctrinal as well as biblical. But in this statement we are speaking only of biblical fundamentalism, presently attractive to some Christians, including some Catholics.

Biblical fundamentalists are those who present the Bible, God's inspired word, as the only necessary source for teaching about Christ and Christian living. This insistence on the teaching Bible is usually accompanied by a spirit that is warm, friendly, and pious. Such a spirit attracts many (especially idealistic young) converts. With ecumenical respect for these communities, we acknowledge their proper emphasis on religion as influencing family life and workplace. The immediate attractions are the ardor of the Christian community and the promises of certitude and of a personal conversion experience to the person of Jesus Christ without the need of church. As Catholic pastors, however, we note its presentation of the Bible as a single rule for living. According to fundamentalism, the Bible alone is sufficient. There is no place for the universal teaching church—including its wisdom, its teachings, creeds, and other doctrinal formulations, its liturgical and devotional traditions. There is simply no claim to a visible, audible, living, teaching authority binding the individual or congregations.

A further characteristic of biblical fundamentalism is that it tends to interpret the Bible as being always without error or as literally true in a way quite different from the Catholic Church's teaching on the inerrancy of the Bible. For some biblical fundamentalists, inerrancy extends even to scientific and historical matters. The Bible is presented without regard for its historical context and development.

[p. 2] In 1943 Pope Pius XII encouraged the church to promote biblical study and renewal, making use of textual criticism. The Catholic Church continued to study the Bible as a valuable guide for Christian living. In 1965 the Second Vatican Council, in its Constitution on Divine Revelation, gave specific teaching on the Bible. Catholics are taught to see the Bible as God's book—and also as a collection of books written under divine inspiration by many human beings. The Bible is true—and to discover its inspired truth we should study the patterns of thinking and writing used in ancient biblical times. With Vatican II, we believe that "the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 11). We do not look upon the Bible as an authority for science or

history. We see truth in the Bible as not to be reduced solely to literal truth, but also to include salvation truths expressed in varied literary forms.

We observed in biblical fundamentalism an effort to try to find in the Bible all the direct answers for living—though the Bible itself nowhere claims such authority. The appeal of such an approach is understandable. Our world is one of war, violence, dishonesty, personal and sexual irresponsibility. It is a world in which people are frightened by the power of the nuclear bomb and the insanity of the arms race, where the only news seems to be bad news. People of all ages yearn for answers. They look for sure, definite rules for living. And they are given answers—simplistic answers to complex issues—in a confident and enthusiastic way in fundamentalist Bible groups.

The appeal is evident for the Catholic young adult or teenager—one whose family background may be troubled; who is struggling with life, morality, and religion; whose Catholic education may have been seriously inadequate in the fundamentals of doctrine, the Bible, prayer life, and sacramental living; whose catechetical formation may have been inadequate in presenting the full Catholic traditions and teaching authority. For such a person, the appeal of finding the "ANSWER" in a devout, studious, prayerful, warm, Bible-quoting class is easy to understand. But the ultimate problem with such fundamentalism is that it can give only a limited number of answers and cannot present those answers, on balance, because it does not have Christ's teaching church nor even an understanding of how the Bible originally came to be written, and collected in the sacred canon, or official list of inspired books.

Our Catholic belief is that we know God's revelation in the total Gospel. The Gospel comes to us through the Spirit-guided tradition of the Church and the inspired books: "This sacred tradition, therefore, and Sacred Scripture of both the Old and New Testament are like a mirror in which the pilgrim church on earth looks at God" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 7).

A key question for any Christian is, Does the community of faith which is the Lord's church have a living tradition which [p. 3] presents God's word across the centuries until the Lord comes again? The Catholic answer to this question is an unqualified yes. That answer was expressed most recently in the Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council. We look to both the church's official teaching and Scripture for guidance in addressing life's problems. It is the official teaching or magisterium that in a special way guides us in matters of belief and morality that have developed after the last word of Scripture was written. The church of Christ teaches in the name of Christ and teaches us concerning the Bible itself.

The basic characteristic of biblical fundamentalism is that it eliminates from Christianity the church as the Lord Jesus founded it. That church is a community of faith, worldwide, with pastoral and teaching authority. This non-church characteristic of biblical fundamentalism, which sees the church as only spiritual, may not at first be clear to some Catholics. From some fundamentalists they will hear nothing offensive to their beliefs, and much of what they hear seems compatible with Catholic Christianity. The difference is often not in what is said—but in what is not said. There is no mention of the historic, authoritative church in continuity with Peter and the other apostles. There is no vision of the church as

our mother—a mother who is not just spiritual, but who is visibly ours to teach and guide us in the way of Christ.

Unfortunately, a minority of fundamentalist churches and sects not only put down the Catholic Church as a "man-made organization" with "man-made rules," but indulge in crude antiCatholic bigotry with which Catholics have long been familiar.

We believe that no Catholic properly catechized in the faith can long live the Christian life without those elements that are had only in the fullness of Christianity: the eucharist and the other six sacraments, the celebration of the word in the liturgical cycle, the veneration of the Blessed Mother and the saints, teaching authority and history linked to Christ, and the demanding social doctrine of the church based on the sacredness of all human life.

It is important for every Catholic to realize that the church produced the New Testament, not vice versa. The Bible did not come down from heaven, whole and intact, given by the Holy Spirit. Just as the experience and faith of Israel developed its sacred books, so was the early Christian Church the matrix of the New Testament. The Catholic Church has authoritatively told us which books are inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore canonical. The Bible, then, is the church's book. The New Testament did not come before the church, but from the church. Peter and the other apostles were given special authority to teach and govern before the New Testament was written. The first generation of Christians had no New Testament at all—but they were the church then, must as we are the church today.

A study of the New Testament, in fact, shows that discipleship is to be a community experience with liturgy and headship and demonstrates the importance of belonging to the [p. 4] church started by Jesus Christ. Christ chose Peter and the other apostles as foundations of his Church, made Simon Peter its rock foundation and gave a teaching authority to Peter and the other apostles. This is most clear in the Gospel of Matthew, the only Gospel to use the word "church." The history of 20 Christian centuries confirms our belief that Peter and the other apostles have been succeeded by the bishop of Rome and the other bishops, and that the flock of Christ still has, under Christ, a universal shepherd.

For historical reasons the Catholic Church in the past did not encourage Bible studies as much as she could have. True, printing (the Latin Bible was the first work printed) was not invented until the mid-15th century, and few people were literate during the first 16 centuries of Christianity. But in the scriptural renewal the church strongly encourages her sons and daughters to read, study and live the Bible. The proclamation of the Scriptures in the liturgical assembly is to be prepared for by private Bible study and prayer. At the present time, two decades after Vatican II, we Catholics have all the tools needed to become Christians who know, love and live the Holy Bible. We have a well-ordered Lectionary that opens for us the treasures of all the books of the Bible in a three-year cycle for Sunday and holy day Masses, and a more complete two-year cycle for weekday Masses. Through the Lectionary the Catholic becomes familiar with the Bible according to the rhythm of the liturgical seasons and the church's experience and use of the Bible at Mass. We have excellent translations (with notes) in the New American Bible and the Jerusalem Bible. We have other accurate translations with an imprimatur. We have an abundance of commentaries, charts, tapes, and Bible societies.

We Catholics have excellent Bible resources and scholars of international repute. Our challenge now is to get this knowledge into the minds, hearts, and lives of all our Catholic people. We need a pastoral plan for the word of God that will place the Sacred Scriptures at the heart of the parish and individual life. Pastoral creativity can develop approaches such as weekly Bible study groups and yearly Bible schools in every parish. We need to have the introduction to each Bible reading prepared and presented by the lector in a way that shows familiarity with and love for the sacred text (cf. *Foreword to the Lectionary*, Introduction, #15, 155, 313, 320). In areas where there is a special problem with fundamentalism, the pastor may consider a Mass to which people bring their own Bibles and in which qualified lectors present a carefully prepared introduction and read the text—without, however, making the Liturgy of the Word a Bible study class. We need a familiar quoting of the Bible by every catechist, lector, and minister. We have not done enough in this area. The neglect of parents in catechetics and the weakness of our adult education efforts are now producing a grim harvest. We need to educate—to re-educate—our people knowingly in the Bible so as to counteract the simplicities of biblical fundamentalism.

In addition to that, we Catholics need to redouble our efforts to make our parish Masses an expression of worship in [p. 5] which all—parishioners, visitors, and strangers—feel the warmth and the welcome and know that here the Bible is clearly revered and preached. The current trend toward smaller faithsharing and Bible-studying groups within a parish family is strongly to be encouraged.

We call for further research on this entire question. We note that the U.S. Center for the Catholic Biblical Apostolate (1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W./Washington DC/20005) will maintain an updated listing of available resources for Catholic Bible study. Any individual Catholic parish representative may write to learn the many available helps for developing Bible study and Bible teaching in accord with our long and rich Catholic tradition.