



Challenging your thinking!

Addressing Ideas that Influence Revival

Saving Fundamentalism

By Rick Flanders

Over the past decade, many fundamentalist preachers and writers have expressed serious concern over what they consider the impending demise of their movement. “Fundamentalism” is a century-old Christian movement that arose to meet the challenge of liberal theology in the churches. Courageous men (such as R.A. Torrey, James M. Gray, W.B. Riley, J. Frank Norris, Carl McIntire, “Fighting” Bob Shuler, Bob Jones, John R. Rice, and Noel Smith) spoke out against liberalism as a departure from the historic Christian faith, and paid a price to stand against it. These men and their supporters recognized that Christianity is defined by certain fundamental doctrines. They opposed any message that denied any of the “fundamentals” as a false gospel. The fundamentalist movement of the twentieth century, although consistently vilified by the religious establishment in the United States, produced many significant phenomena. The Bible colleges, the great Bible conferences, several large and effective missionary programs, thousands of new local churches, more than one new church or preacher’s fellowship, the broad evangelical movement outside the mainline church bodies, a number of successful religious publications, and literally millions of converts to Christ have been produced directly or indirectly by the fundamentalist protest.

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Over the years the spiritual descendants of the first fundamentalists have tried to carry on the defense of Biblical Christianity through many confusing changes in the battle for truth. Some have taken one approach; others have chosen another. Some have gone this way; others have gone that way. Certainly at the end of the twentieth century, fundamentalism was in no sense a unified movement. As thoughtful leaders of the segments of Christendom that still claim the fundamentalist label faced the next century, many began to express concern that the heart and soul of the movement had been lost in the various internal squabbles. Now, as the twenty-first century has begun, several proposals are being made to save the fundamentalist movement.

Distinguish between issues of method and issues of doctrine.

Some of the largest “fellowships” of Baptist fundamentalists are now in the process of some kind of merger. Critics of the new network dis-

prove of the attempts that some are making to lay aside certain issues for the sake of unity. Organizers of the new Baptist network are calling for preachers and churches to tolerate differences between them in matters (they say) of method while they work together more closely on the basis of agreement in doctrine. Will the fundamentalist movement be saved by dropping the issues of method (or practice) and concentrating on mutually-accepted doctrine?

Really, this proposal is very interesting when it is analyzed. On one hand, it says that we should *minimize* methods (which are matters of Christian practice) and *maximize* doctrine. On the other hand, it says that we should *maximize* the importance of method (making it off-limits to serious criticism) and *minimize* doctrine (treating it as having little or no effect on Christian practice). Can reasonable Christians really separate doctrine from practice to such a degree? The fact is that sound doctrine always affects the practice of the churches. According to the New Testament, there are “things which become [are fitting for] sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). These “things” are matters of practice (see the rest of Titus 2). Violations of good Christian practice call for the preacher to “rebuke” the violators “sharply, that they may be sound in the faith” (Titus 1:13).

Believing the Bible obligates people to obey the Bible. Obeying the Bible calls for holiness in both manner and practice. Titus 2 tells those sound in doctrine to be “sober, grave, temperate . . . in behavior as becometh holiness . . . to be discreet, chaste . . . denying ungodliness and worldly lusts . . . zealous of good works.” The “methods” of the “contemporary church” do not reflect these qualities and do not fit with sound doctrine. And it is the worldly standards and attitudes of the contemporary church growth philosophy that the Baptist-merger men want conservatives to tolerate. But issues of modest apparel, spiritual music, and personal separation are not minor issues in God’s churches. They relate to pleasing the Lord and having His blessing. Remember that Jesus said,

Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall

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break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:18-19)

Legitimate fellowships should at least defer to their more conservative members on the conference platform. To ask Christians to tolerate evil on any level for the sake of unity is to ask too much. To save fundamentalism by extracting its passion for truth is to kill it in the process.

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The argument that fundamentalists divide too often over minor disagreements certainly has merit. However, to classify every issue not covered in fifty-year-old doctrinal statements as unimportant or unnecessary is to give

room for evil to advance among good people. A man must either be blind or dishonest to deny the importance of issues like the changes in church music, the return of independents to the convention, the dropping of long-held standards of life, and the adoption of new Bible versions. Preachers have the right to raise these issues, and to protect their people from influences they believe are harmful. Nobody should give up truth for fellowship. Fellowship not based on agreement about the truth is weak at best and illegitimate or corrupting at worst. Fundamentalism cannot be saved by marginalizing serious discussions of current questions of concern.

Forsake the errors of the past.

Some “young fundamentalists” are voicing their dissatisfaction with the positions and dispositions of their teachers. Leaders of the movement, mostly now in Heaven, as well as the generation of lesser lights that sought to convey their principles to these younger men, have been held up to critical scrutiny and judged as failing in many areas. One of these “young” men, Jason Jantz, has enumerated the complaints of his generation in an article titled “The Future Fundamentalists.” Bro. Jantz does not agree with all of the opinions he has heard from his peers, but he seems to have accurately understood the complaints of one segment of “Gen X” fundamentalists. We may summarize what he said by listing five of these complaints in this way:

- A. Fundamentalists have unknowingly taught “a man-centered focus of the Christian life,” emphasizing what to do without teaching theology.
- B. Fundamentalists have highlighted separation, while ignoring “the inner man” and the minister’s need for “the power of God.”
- C. Fundamentalists have been shallow in their ministry, neglecting to disciple new converts and teach them Biblical principles of living.
- D. Fundamentalists have stood against certain styles of church music, but have let their own music become lifeless and unengaging.
- E. Fundamentalists have debated their issues with an unnecessarily nasty disposition.

Although some of these criticisms may have merit, those raising them have serious problems that prevent them from helping the movement. One problem with this brand of “young fundamentalists” is that they are not fully honest about their concerns. Their unhappiness with the separation of Biblical fundamentalism is only thinly veiled. In many cases, those who criticize their mentors for emphasizing separation while neglecting other things are really criticizing separatism. They don’t buy it any more. Complaints about the deadness of the music in some fundamental churches are often really just a step away from discarding high music standards. Whining about the bad disposition or shallowness of older fundamentalists sometimes masks a willingness to reject fundamentalism altogether and to join the new evangelicals.

The other problem with this kind of young fundamentalists is that their attitudes and words display their own character deficits as much as they point to the failures of their teachers. An unwillingness to have a bad disposition about some things is not always commendable, for example. The prophets and the Lord Himself (See Mark 3:5) sometimes were angry while filled with the Holy Spirit! Some of the same young men that are complaining about the past generation have serious problems with sin in their own lives. Jantz knows of “many” who “struggle with . . . laziness, indulging the flesh, sexual immorality . . . disrespect of authority, and lack of discernment.” Much of this segment of the new generation were not reared right by their Christian parents, and they are paying for this problem in their background. They not only question their fathers; to some degree they resent them. We don’t see these young men resolving in their own lives the problems they claim to see in the lives of older men. We only see them blaming their spiritual fathers for their own unhappiness. The fundamentalist movement will not be saved by them!

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Adopt stricter Calvinism.

Another approach to saving the fundamentalist movement has been proposed by the more Calvinistic among us. They argue that the whole problem of defection from the truth that provoked fundamentalism was really the departure from strict Calvinism. Their construction of history is attractive because it fits well into the way fundamentalists think. Their advice to the churches is to return to Reformed Theology as the basis of twenty-first century separatist ministry.

This approach views Puritanism as the epitome of orthodoxy. In America it was the modification and dilution of Puritan Calvinism during the great revivals that put the churches on the downward slide, they think. Eventually the salvation of souls became the passion of evangelism instead of the glory of God, and revivals were seen as answers to prayer rather than sovereign acts of God. As time went on, evangelicals were willing to displease God in order to save souls. This change was a direct result of the departure from Calvinism, and produced eventu-

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ally the abominations of the new evangelicalism and the “contemporary church.” At heart, fundamentalists are Calvinists frustrated by the advancing influence of Arminianism, they say, and the sooner they recognize this, the sooner fundamentalism will be saved.

However, our Calvinistic friends are mistaken about history and also about their proposed solution for fundamentalism! Many of our spiritual forefathers were not Calvinists at all. The first Baptists in England and America were “General Baptists” characterized by belief in a general atonement and by their departure from “Reformed Theology.” The first fundamentalists included some strict Calvinists, but were mostly subscribers to theology that represents the middle ground between Calvinism and Arminianism. The Puritans were very un-fundamentalist in their refusal to separate from the inclusive Anglican Church and their insistence on uniting church and state. The great revivals promoted Christian orthodoxy (although not always traditional Calvinism) in America and actually generated the early fundamentalists! The issue raised by the new evangelicalism was the question of separation from evil, which is tied to the holiness of God. Fundamentalists for the most part did not condemn the new evangelicals for wanting to reach the masses for Christ, or for believing that Christ came to save “all men” (I Timothy 2:1-6). They parted company with them over doing wrong to accomplish good. The Calvinist understanding of the situation is persuasive, but it is mistaken. Theology should be adopted only if it is Biblical, and not because it fits one’s approach to the issues of the day. Many do not see strict Calvinism as Biblically correct, and the Calvinistic answer to the fundamentalist problem is not acceptable to them. This solution will serve to remake some groups of fundamentalists into new fellowships of Calvinists much like many that are already crusading under the TULIP banner. It will not rescue the fundamentalist movement as a whole because it is about Calvinism, not fundamentalism.

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Define and defend externals as essentials.

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Some of those who are alarmed at the other suggestions for reforming fundamentalism have taken a wrong position that deceptively seems to be the old and Biblical way. These folks have noticed that certain visible traits have characterized the fundamentalists of the past and that they disappear when a new approach is adopted. Their reaction is to keep these characteristic traits in place, while unfortunately neglecting the reasons behind them. As a result they think that if we can look like fundamentalists, preach like fundamentalists, do what fundamentalists do, and shun what fundamentalists have always shunned, then we must be true fundamentalists! In this way they fight to preserve what they think is real fundamentalism. But they have missed a critical point.

Fundamentalism is biblical truth more than it is a religious movement. It is the truth that Christianity is defined by certain *fundamental* doctrines. These doctrines (such as the infallibility of the Bible, the deity of Christ, His blood atonement, His bodily resurrection, and justification by faith in Him alone) are essential (fundamental) to Christianity. Without all of them, a message is not the Christian message. When any of the fundamental doctrines are denied, the preacher is not preaching the Gospel. For this reason, those true to the true Gospel must refuse to recognize as Christians those who deny any of these truths.

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. (Romans 16:17)

As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:9)

. . . Earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. (Jude 1:3)

A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject . . . (Titus 3:10)

Insisting that the *fundamentals* are fundamental to Christianity makes a fundamentalist a separatist. People who say they believe the “fundamentals” but don’t insist on them as fundamental to Christianity are “evangelicals” but not fundamentalists. They indicate their unwillingness to hold the truths of the Gospel as fundamental by refusing to separate from those who deny them. These things are what make fundamentalists different from liberals (who deny some or all of the fundamentals) and many evangelicals (who will not insist that the fundamentals are fundamental). It is true that certain standards of life, some preaching styles, and many ministerial policies have been associated with fundamentalists and that many of these things would be expected of conservative Bible-believers. But it is also true that none of the outward signs of being a fundamentalist define what a fundamentalist is.

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A pastor could keep running church buses, keep on preaching against movies and rock music, keep his standards right about dress and hair styles, keep on using the old Bible, keep giving public invitations, and keep the faith-promise missions conference without remaining a fundamentalist! Fighting for these things (which are good things) is something those who believe in them should do, but it isn’t enough. These fights are not the fundamentalist fight. Some non-fundamentalists use the King James Bible (such as the Mormons). Some have high personal standards but don’t practice doctrinal separation. Fundamentalism will not be saved by those who don’t understand it and see only certain external issues.

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Seek deliverance from the Lord Himself!

The truth is that fundamentalism is a Biblical doctrine far more than it is a human movement. We can trace the various fundamentalist movements through history, and see in them failures as well as victories. Some such movements have already died. But the truth of fundamentalism can *never die* because it is eternal truth. It is God's way of dealing with false doctrine and false teachers: expose, reject, separate. We are to fight for the Faith. So the Scripture plainly says.

Since fundamentalism defined this way is eternal truth, it doesn't need saving! Surely people in the various "fundamentalist movements" will defect (or have defected) from this Biblical truth, but fundamentalism is not damaged by them. Fundamentalism does not need to be *revised* in order to survive in the twenty-first century. It needs to be taught and preached! Many in "fundamentalist" churches and schools have no idea what fundamentalism is, because preachers don't preach it any more! The problem is not with fundamentalism. The problem is with fundamentalists! They need to be *revived*.

In Romans 7:24 we read Paul's plaintive cry, which expresses the frustration and anguish many a true Christian has felt.

O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? (Romans 7:24)

He cried for deliverance—from himself! Thankfully, the chapter and the teaching does not end with verse 24. Verse 25, followed by Romans 8:1-2, answer Paul's question.

I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin. There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.

Let us recognize first that the problem is in our flesh. Our hope for deliverance is in the Triune God Himself!

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. (Romans 7:18)

Verses 21, 22, and 23 of Romans 7 explain the conflict of two laws in a believer's two natures.

I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

But then, as we saw, Romans 7:24 through 8:2 declare that we can be delivered from the law of sin in our flesh by the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus!

This teaching holds great promise for fundamentalists who are struggling today. It reveals to us at least three important things:

- A. The trouble is in our flesh. If fundamentalists or fundamentalist organizations need saving from anything, it is from their own sinful human nature, defined in the Bible as "*the flesh*." If our ministries are powerless, if our churches are lifeless, if our witness is fruitless, and if our work is dying it is because we are living and serving in the energy of our flesh. We need continual reminders that "*to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace*" (Romans 8:6). The flesh is deadly. We need daily and even constant deliverance from it.
- B. Even "good" can be performed in the flesh. A carnal fundamentalist (and there are plenty of them) can take a stand for the truth but do no real good. Jesus said, "*the flesh profiteth nothing*" (John 67:63). We must operate in the power of the Holy Spirit in order to be instruments in God's hand.
- C. Deliverance from the flesh can be found in God alone. "*Who shall deliver me from this body of this death?*" Paul asked. The answer is "*I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*" God is the answer, through Jesus Christ. Then Paul says, "*For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free [delivered me] from the law of sin and death [in my flesh].*" We can see that deliverance is in God, in the three Persons of the Trinity! The idea is that we must reject dependence on "*the arm of flesh*" (See II Chronicles 32:7-8), repent of the sins we have sustained in our lives as Christians, and turn to the Father and the Son and the Spirit for moment-by-moment deliverance, holiness, and power!

Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. (Galatians 5:16)

When believers are thus "*filled with the Spirit*," they experience revival, and this is exactly what dying fundamentalist churches, organizations, and individuals really need. And the only way to get revival is to seek it from God!

Isn't it sad and strange that we have looked elsewhere for our deliverance? Men seek solutions from disobedient evangelicals, in sensual entertainment, and by changing to conform to this present evil world. Why will they not seek the victory they say they crave from the One Who gives us the victory through the Lord Jesus?

Fundamentalist gatherings today ought to be characterized by praying for revival. The God of the Bible does revive His people in response to their faith and submission, and He will hear the cries of surrendered, believing fundamentalists today. Indeed He is our Hope and our Deliverer!



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