

Dead Right: The Failure of Fundamentalism

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During this hour we'll be talking about the failure of the fundamentalist movement in the twentieth century. Just from the title of this seminar—which, by the way, I did not choose; someone else made that title—I thought, *some of you are thinking I'm going to come in here so hostile to fundamentalism that I thought maybe I should wear a Kevlar vest and a plastic raincoat*. But I opted not to do that, so please don't throw anything; I'm not protected.

But it's true: you use a word like *fundamentalism* these days and immediately you're in trouble. I'm going to spend some time trying to give definition to the term in a moment, but I want to say at the very outset that the kind of fundamentalism I'm dealing with in this session is the movement that practices and insists on strict second- and third-degree separation. What I have in mind are the kind of fundamentalists who wouldn't even attend a conference like this because they consider John MacArthur and Grace Community Church as “New Evangelical.”

So that exempts most of you IFCA guys, because you've kept John MacArthur as a member in your organization. But you know that according to the rest of the fundamentalist movement, that makes you New Evangelicals rather than fundamentalists anyway. So you're permitted to consider yourselves exempt from some of my criticisms here.

I do need to acknowledge that some of what I am going to say about the fundamentalist movement doesn't necessarily apply to moderate fundamentalist groups like the IFCA and the GARB. I say that because I know some of you guys are there, and I don't want you to feel too targeted.

I do recognize that the fundamentalist movement is a large and varied movement. There is not just one fundamentalist movement, but there are many—maybe thousands—of smaller groups within fundamentalism, and most of them don't get along with each other. So fundamentalism isn't the sort of monolithic movement that you can critique fairly. I'm going to *try* to be fair, but I will admit up front that I *am* painting with a broad brush. And I'm doing it deliberately because of time constraints. I don't have the time to qualify everything and exempt the IFCA and the GARB from everything, so I'll give you *all* permission just to pick and choose as you listen to me which of my criticisms might or might not apply to the particular groups you belong to.

At the very least, I also recognize that most of the issues I'm raising are issues that groups like the IFCA and the GARB have already recognized to some degree and are trying to deal with. But at the same time, because you IFCA types tend to be willing to grapple with the kinds of issues I am going to be raising, your credentials as fundamentalists are often disputed (and you know this) by more hard-core fundamentalists who seriously regard groups like the IFCA as tainted with New Evangelicalism. It's the spirit of that hard-core fundamentalism that I'm critiquing in this session. So for those guys here who have always considered themselves fundamentalists—you don't need to feel under attack. I'm actually on your side.

In fact, let me say this: From the title of the seminar, those of you who don't know me might assume that I am someone who is hostile to the *principles* of fundamentalism. That is not the case. In the historic and classical sense of the word, I am a fundamentalist. I have never really been a member of the fundamentalist *movement*, but I have always had an interest in the movement and a deep sympathy for the true principles of historic fundamentalism.

Here's what I mean by that: I believe wholeheartedly in the authority and the inerrancy of Scripture. I'm quite willing to be militant in defense of the gospel. In fact, I believe as Christians we have a *duty* to contend earnestly for the faith whenever vital gospel truths are threatened. I recognize that there is a core of truth that is absolutely essential to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and when someone's teaching deliberately rejects or fatally compromises any of those essential truths, true Christian fellowship is impossible (and seeking spiritual fellowship with such people is absolutely out of the question). I am not willing to pretend that someone who rejects the essentials of the gospel is my brother or sister in Christ, and I would not knowingly align myself in ministry or Christian fellowship with such a person in the name of Christian unity.

The doctrines I would deem fundamental include (but are not limited to) these: 1) the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures; 2) the doctrine of Christ's virgin birth; 3) *the principle of substitutionary atonement*; 4) the bodily resurrection of Christ; and 5) the literal truth of *all* the miraculous elements of Scripture. Historically, all authentic fundamentalists have been united in their affirmation of those five doctrines as truths that are essential to the gospel. They're sometimes called "the five fundamentals." I would also insist that the doctrine of justification by faith is an essential gospel truth. In fact, I would put the doctrine of justification at the head of the list (and if time permits I'll explain why that's such an important issue for historic fundamentalism).

In other words, in the historic and original sense of the word, I am a fundamentalist at heart and always have been since the day of my conversion.

So why was I never part of the fundamentalist movement? Because it was obvious, even when I first became a Christian in 1971, that fundamentalism—

the visible, organized, identifiable movement made up of men and churches who proudly labeled *themselves* as “fundamentalists”— was seriously dysfunctional. In 1971, the most vocal and visible figures in the movement were men like Jack Hyles and John R. Rice. The house where my family lived at the time was less than a mile from the international headquarters of Billy James Hargis, a fundamentalist radio preacher who disgraced the fundamentalist cause in the mid-1970s through an appalling moral scandal. The town where I attended my first year of college had once been the hometown of Carl McIntire, and he still dominated the airwaves there—so I also became acquainted with *him* through the radio.

Frankly, the closer I got to the fundamentalist movement in the 1970s, the more it seemed to me that the movement had significant tendencies that owed more to the cults and the pharisees than to historic Christianity. So I carefully kept my distance from the movement, while affirming the principles of historic fundamentalism.

During those years I subscribed to *The Sword of the Lord* and read as much fundamentalist literature as I could find. (Of course, one of the things I noticed right away was that there wasn't a whole lot of serious fundamentalist literature to read.)

After getting my diploma from Moody Bible Institute in 1975, I needed one more year of college to complete my bachelor's degree, so I attended a fundamentalist school for the 1975–76 school year. That one year in a fundamentalist school convinced me that American fundamentalism as a *movement* was already seriously and perhaps irretrievably off the rails. The movement was in serious trouble doctrinally, spiritually, and morally.

That was thirty years ago, but even then, the fundamentalist movement was dominated by personality cults, easy-believism, man-centered doctrine, an unbiblical pragmatism in their methodology, a carnal kind of superficiality in their worship, petty bickering at the highest levels of leadership, deliberate anti-intellectualism even in their so-called institutions of higher learning, and moral rot almost everywhere you looked in the movement. It seemed clear to me that the fundamentalist *movement* was doomed.

In fact, by the 1970s, American fundamentalism had already ceased to be a *theological* movement and had morphed into a cultural phenomenon—a bizarre and ingrown subculture all its own, whose public face more often than not seemed overtly hostile to everyone outside its boundaries.

Frankly, I thought that sort of fundamentalism *deserved* to die. And I knew it eventually would, because the most prominent hallmark of the visible fundamentalist movement was that its leaders loved to fight so much that they would bite and devour one another and proliferate controversies—even among

themselves—over issues that no one could ever rationally argue were essential to the truth of the gospel.

About the time I started subscribing to *the Sword of the Lord*, John R. Rice got crosswise with Bob Jones Jr. over something. Exactly where their differences lay was never really very clear to me. But for a couple of years or so, Rice refused to carry any ads for Bob Jones University in his newspaper. That war was going on when I first encountered the fundamentalist movement. These two men, each of whom wanted to be seen as the dominant voice in the fundamentalist movement, were publicly at odds with one another. My strong feeling even then was that if fundamentalists allowed their movement to continue in that direction, they would soon be so fragmented that it would soon be impossible to speak of fundamentalism as a single, coherent movement.

That is exactly what happened. And it happened sooner than I anticipated. When John Rice died in 1980, there was a war among his followers about who would become his successor and take his place as the *de facto* spokesperson and figurehead at the helm of the movement. Twenty-five years later, there is still no clear successor to John R. Rice as the leading figure of the fundamentalist movement. Today's fundamentalists are more fragmented than ever. There are no clear leaders in the movement who are recognized and affirmed as leaders by the movement as a whole. Fundamentalists are not moving together in any clear direction. The fundamentalist movement is virtually dead.

Now, I realize the fundamentalist movement has been declared dead many times before, beginning with the aftermath of the Scopes trial in the 1920s. And in the 1950s, after fundamentalists failed to recapture a single one of the mainline denominations from the liberals, and the fundamentalists responded by abandoning the denominations—lots of people were declaring the fundamentalist movement dead again. So a true fundamentalist who is aware of history is not likely to be shaken by my declaration that their movement is practically dead. Dry fundamentalist bones *do* have a way of coming to life, and that's why every die-hard fundamentalist will probably tell you my obituary for their movement is premature.

But it is clear that the more serious-minded and reflective fundamentalists are concerned about the future of their movement. Read the fundamentalist chatter on the Internet, and you'll see that in just the past month or so, a large volume of fundamentalist bandwidth has been devoted to a discussion of what fundamentalists can do to keep their brightest young minds from abandoning the movement. Look for the transcript of the address given by Dr. Kevin Bauder to the American Association of Christian Colleges and Seminaries. That is a fundamentalist group, and Dr. Bauder is the President of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Minneapolis, a fundamentalist seminary. His message is an encouraging and perceptive analysis of what's wrong with fundamentalism

from a thoughtful and articulate fundamentalist who loves the movement and wants to see it back on track.

My perspective is only slightly different. I speak as someone who loves historic fundamentalist principals, but who hates what the American fundamentalist movement became in the second half of the twentieth century. I have no sentimental, sectarian, or party attachment to the *movement*. In fact, it seems to me that any movement that could lionize Jack Hyles and produce hundreds of Hyles clones while deliberately exaggerating petty disagreements in order to portray almost every conservative evangelical outside the fundamentalist movement as a dangerous heretic really needs to die. And it would be my hope that whatever takes its place would be less superficial, more sober-minded, more doctrinally sound, and more faithful to Scripture than the party that always dutifully agreed with John R. Rice when he insisted that he was a great scholar.

The new movement needs to be ruled by truth, not by petty tyrants. It should be guided by biblical principles, not by big personalities. It has to be motivated by a passion to see Christ's kingdom expand, not driven by someone's desire to build a personal empire. It has to remain committed to separation from those who *deny* essential gospel truths. But it also has to be equally committed to spiritual unity and brotherly kindness among those who *affirm* the essential truths of the gospel. Above all, it has to keep its focus on doctrines that are truly fundamental, not get sidetracked all the time over secondary issues, petty preferences, man-made rules, or foolish questions and useless contentions over matters that are unprofitable and vain.

Let me be clear: I'm *not* arguing that it's inherently wrong to be militant. In fact, I'd like to see a new movement that is no less willing to fight than Charles Spurgeon and the rest of our fundamentalists forefathers were. But let's make sure that our militancy is genuinely motivated (as theirs was) by a love for the gospel and a passion for truth; not by a perverse enjoyment of controversy for controversy's sake.

Now, I have already hinted at some of the reasons I think the twentieth-century fundamentalist movement has failed so spectacularly. I want to explore some of these things in a little more detail.

Let me start by giving you two definitions, so that you'll know how I am employing these words. The terms I want to define for you are *fundamentalism* and *evangelicalism*. We sometimes speak of "the evangelical movement" in contrast to "the fundamentalist movement." And a lot of people therefore use the terms *fundamentalism* and *evangelicalism* as if they were virtually opposites. Historically, however, they actually have a lot in common.

The word *evangelical* first came into widespread usage at the time of the Protestant Reformation. William Tyndale used the expression "evangelical

truth” as a synonym for the gospel. An “evangelical,” then, would be someone who affirms the essence of the gospel. In its historical sense, the term is a Protestant term, describing those who see divine grace rather than good works as the whole basis of salvation. As a matter of fact, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, *evangelicalism* is “that school of Protestants which maintains that the essence of ‘the Gospel’ consists in the doctrine of salvation by faith in the atoning death of Christ, and denies that either good works or the sacraments have any saving efficacy.”

That’s a pretty good definition as far as it goes, but it leaves out one vitally important aspect of historic evangelicalism. Early in the Protestant Reformation, a heresy known as Socinianism arose. The Socinians questioned the authority of Scripture. They doubted all the miraculous elements of Scripture. They rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. In other words, they were proto-liberals. And as their heresy spread, the term *evangelical* was often used to contrast mainstream Bible-believing Protestants with the Socinians.

So the term *evangelical*, in effect, came to describe those who affirmed both the formal and material principles of the Reformation. Two principles: *sola Scriptura* (or the authority and sufficiency of Scripture) and *sola fide* (or the doctrine of justification by faith).

(By the way, in the historical sense of the word, there’s no such thing as an “evangelical Roman Catholic,” because Roman Catholics deny both *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*. Historic evangelicalism was a distinctly Protestant movement.) You could define an evangelical simply as a Bible-believing Protestant—someone who affirms both *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*.

That’s what I mean by *evangelicalism*. So what’s fundamentalism?

The word *fundamentalist* was coined by Curtis Lee Laws in 1920. In an editorial he wrote for the *Watchman-Examiner*, he proposed that the movement of men who opposed liberalism among Northern Baptists needed a name. He explained why he didn’t think it was sufficient just to label them “conservatives,” and then he said this: “We suggest that those who still cling to the great fundamentals and who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals shall be called ‘Fundamentalists.’”

Notice that two elements are expressly stated in his definition. A fundamentalist was someone who not only affirmed the essential truths of the gospel, but he was also willing to fight for those truths. So there was a strong tone of militancy built into the definition of fundamentalism from the beginning. Fundamentalists were men who “meant to do battle royal for the fundamentals.”

Historically, it didn’t become completely clear what was implied by the expression “battle royal” until the 1940s and ‘50s, when fundamentalists began to abandon the mainline denominations that proved incorrigible in their

liberalism and apostasy. The true and committed fundamentalists left the denominations. Those who were unwilling to separate from liberal denominations invariably had to tone down their militancy and find ways to accommodate the drift of their denominations. In other words, in effect, they gave up the battle and therefore they ceased being true fundamentalists.

That is how ecclesiastical separation became the third pillar of fundamentalism. A true fundamentalist was someone who affirmed the essential truths of the gospel, who was militant in his defense of those truths, and who would formally break fellowship with anyone who persisted in denying any of the fundamental doctrines.

Now, let me say that according to that definition, I am a committed, lifelong fundamentalist. So are many, if not most, of you, I would imagine—even if like me, you have never technically been part of any group or church that wears a formal imprimatur from Greenville, SC; Pensacola, FL; Murfreesboro, TN; or Hammond, IN.

Let me also point out that every true fundamentalist is also an evangelical in the historic sense of the word. But it is possible to be an evangelical without being a fundamentalist. George Marsden says “a fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something.” I suppose that’s close. There may even be a grain of truth in it. But if we want to be more serious and less derisive, it would be more accurate to say that a fundamentalist is an evangelical who is willing to contend earnestly for the faith. In other words, there’s nothing whatsoever wrong with the idea of fundamentalism. When you distill the distinctives of historic fundamentalism into its essence, it’s biblical.

But there is something seriously wrong with what most of the American fundamentalist movement has become.

Now, I recognize the modern limitations of the word *fundamentalism*. In the late 1970s, when Islamic ayatollahs took political control in Iran, the word *fundamentalism* was hijacked by the secular media and turned into a synonym for all the worst kinds of violent religious fanaticism. I suppose it was no great loss, because by then, the term *fundamentalism* was already pretty badly corrupted by self-styled fundamentalists in America—mostly Baptist ayatollahs—who had already moved far away from the spiritual principles and even the clear doctrinal position of their historic fundamentalist ancestors. So the term was beginning to lose its usefulness anyway.

Likewise, the word *evangelicalism* has come to mean something quite different from what the word ever meant historically. Thanks to a little help from *Christianity Today* magazine, the evangelical movement has become so broad and inclusive that the word *evangelical* is now as useless as the word *fundamentalist*.

Nonetheless, for the purposes of this seminar, I'm trying to employ the historic meanings of the terms *evangelical* and *fundamentalist*. If I use those expressions in any other sense, I'll try very hard to make my meaning clear. For example, if I use the expressions *fundamentalism* or *evangelicalism* without any modifier, you can safely assume I am using those terms in their historic sense. If I speak of the "fundamentalist movement" or the "evangelical movement," I'm probably speaking of the twentieth-century movements. And it's my contention that in the second half of the twentieth century, the mainstream of the "evangelical movement" abandoned *historic* evangelicalism; and the mainstream of the "fundamentalist movement" likewise abandoned historic fundamentalism. So bear that in mind.

By the way, I'm not going to suggest to you that the evangelical movement has in any way succeeded where the fundamentalists failed. It would be my assessment that the evangelical movement has, if anything, melted down in an even more catastrophic way than the fundamentalist movement. It's perhaps not as obvious yet, because the broad evangelical movement has so many thriving megachurches all dutifully buying books for their forty days of purpose and eagerly awaiting the next evangelical fad. But most of those churches are no longer truly evangelical in any meaningful sense. Most of them have no discernable doctrinal position. As the erstwhile fundamentalist researcher Elmer Towns pointed out a few years ago, what defines them is their methodology, not their theology. Which is to say they are not really true evangelicals in any historic sense—and the evangelical movement in America is also as dead as a doornail; it's just not obvious right now because so many people who call themselves "evangelical" are so busy jumping on and off bandwagons. That was the point of my seminar yesterday. In many ways, these two seminars go together perfectly, and they explain why I think there's a desperate need for a new kind of movement, or a new Reformation—or better yet, a true revival.

But my subject in this hour is the failure of fundamentalism, and I want to give you three reasons why I believe the fundamentalist movement of the twentieth century went off track in such a serious and catastrophic way. For convenience's sake, and since you are mostly preachers, I've alliterated these. You can take them all three down now if you're fast enough, but leave some room to fill in the details between the points: First, fundamentalism failed because of a lack of definition. Second, it failed because of a lack of doctrinal clarity. And third, it failed because of a lack of due process. I'll explain what I mean by each of those, and I'll repeat them distinctly a point at a time as we work through what I have to say. First, fundamentalism failed because of—

A LACK OF DEFINITION

I'm convinced that the ultimate failure of the fundamentalist movement was guaranteed from its very inception, because the original fundamentalists didn't do enough to make sure that there was widespread understanding and agreement about which doctrines were truly fundamental. Of course, virtually all evangelicals agreed that certain doctrines were fundamental—like the deity of Christ and the authority and inspiration of Scripture. But what about the doctrine of eternal punishment, or the doctrine of total depravity? Are those fundamental also? How many vital doctrines are there? Is it possible to make a complete list?

Those questions were never carefully and thoroughly and thoughtfully addressed, as far as I have ever been able to ascertain, in any of the vital literature of early fundamentalism. There was general agreement that some doctrines are primary and some are secondary. At least five of the fundamentals were generally agreed upon, because they were the focus of debate between fundamentalists and modernists in the Presbyterian denominations from the very beginning of the war with modernism.

But the hard work of explaining clearly, from Scripture, how to determine whether an article of faith is essential or not was (for the most part) left undone. There was very little clarity in the distinctions that were made between primary and secondary doctrines. And frankly, unless we first agree on the question of how to decide which doctrines are fundamental, at the end of the day, it means very little to say that we “cling to the great fundamentals.”

Here's how all that came about: The debate between modernists and evangelicals first began to focus on the question of essential doctrines right at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1892, the general assembly of the Northern Presbyterian Church met for the first time West of the Rockies in Portland, Oregon. They passed a resolution known as the “Portland Deliverance,” affirming that “the inspired Word, as it came from God, is without error” and that ministers who had changed their belief on that point should withdraw from ministry. In essence, they were saying that inerrancy is a fundamental doctrine. No one realized it yet, but fundamentalism was beginning to take shape already.

But the language of the Portland Deliverance proved too weak, and the modernists were already systematically attacking other doctrines besides biblical inerrancy in their quest to undermine people's faith in Scripture. The modernist juggernaut continued to overtake the denomination. By the early 1900s, the New York Presbytery was ordaining candidates for ministry who refused to affirm the doctrine of Christ's virgin birth. So in 1910, the General Assembly passed another resolution, the Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910, also known as the “Five-Point Deliverance.” It listed five doctrines as essential.

They are the same five fundamentals I listed for you earlier—the inspiration and authority of Scripture; the virgin birth; the doctrine of penal substitution; the bodily resurrection; and the literal reality of the biblical miracles. Each of the five points in the resolution began with the words, “It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards . . .” After listing the five fundamentals, the resolution said, “These five articles of faith are essential and necessary. Others are equally so . . .” So the resolution explicitly recognized that those five fundamental doctrines did not exhaust the list of essential truths.

Nevertheless, those five doctrines were where the liberals had aimed their attack, and they continued to be the focus of intense battle for at least twenty years or more.

Therefore those same five doctrines were reaffirmed in a series of statements by various Presbyterian synods and general assemblies over the next two decades, and they became popularly known as “the five fundamentals.” To this day, there are many people who mistakenly believe that fundamentalism was based on five fundamental doctrines and no more.

Chuck Colson is apparently one who holds that opinion. In his book *The Body*, he says the five fundamentals are “the backbone of orthodox Christianity.”

Then he says this: “If a fundamentalist is a person who affirms these truths, then there are fundamentalists in every denomination—Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, Brethren, Methodist, Episcopal . . . Everyone who believes in the orthodox truths about Jesus Christ—in short, every Christian—is a fundamentalist.”

That’s frankly a pretty naive view of the history of fundamentalism. The Presbyterian “Five-point Deliverance” in 1910 was merely the opening salvo in a long discussion of fundamental doctrines. That same year (1910) saw the publication of the first articles in a twelve-volume collection known as *The Fundamentals*. It was a catalogue of about 90 articles by some 64 authors, defending a wide range of evangelical truths that were under modernist attack. The articles were published in 12 paperback books over five years’ time and distributed free of charge to thousands of pastors under the sponsorship of a couple of California oil tycoons, including Lyman Stewart who helped found Biola back when it was known as The Bible Institute of Los Angeles. His brother, Milton Stewart, was the other donor who helped fund *The Fundamentals*.

Those who contributed articles to the series are a who’s who of conservative evangelicals from that era—B. B. Warfield, Sir Robert Anderson, James Orr, G. Campbell Morgan, C. I. Scofield, R. A. Torrey, and many others. They did not limit their subject matter to the five doctrines named in the Presbyterian Deliverance of 1910, but they also treated as fundamental

doctrines such things as the literal, bodily return of Christ; the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit; the personality of Satan; the doctrines of sin and judgment; and the doctrine of justification by faith.

So five years after the completion of *The Fundamentals*, in 1920, when Curtis Lee Laws coined the expression “fundamentalism,” a considerable amount of literature on the fundamentals was already available, and most of the founders of the movement therefore seemed to think the fundamental doctrines of evangelical truth had been pretty clearly defined and agreed upon already.

That, in my view, was a serious mistake that has never been remedied by any subsequent generation of fundamentalists.

I just mentioned that the doctrine of justification was one of the featured doctrines in *The Fundamentals*. But I also need to say that justification by faith was hardly given the weight such a crucial doctrine deserves. This was the doctrine both Luther and Calvin regarded as the most essential truth of the gospel. But in the twelve volumes of *The Fundamentals*, the doctrine of justification was dealt with only in one short article by Handley Moule. Meanwhile, there were several chapters on science and the Bible, including one by James Orr in which he insisted that no violence is done to the text of Genesis if we regard the days of creation as long aeons.

And if you read all twelve volumes of *The Fundamentals*, you’ll discover that the doctrine of original sin, which has always been regarded by Catholics and Protestants alike as absolutely essential to authentic Christianity, wasn’t dealt with at all.

Perhaps those deficiencies are partly understandable given the historical context. After all, justification by faith and the imputation of Adam’s sin weren’t at that moment under such direct attack by the modernists the way the inerrancy of Scripture was.

But the omissions and the misplaced priorities soon had a noticeable effect in the fundamentalist movement. No less than Billy Sunday, the quintessential fundamentalist evangelist of the early twentieth century, was wobbly on the doctrine of original sin and fuzzy on the doctrine of justification by faith. The wider fundamentalist movement throughout the twentieth century proved to be vulnerable to various kinds of pietism, perfectionism, neonomianism, and the antinomianism of the no-lordship movement. The historic principle of *sola fide* as the Reformers and Protestant leaders through the end of the nineteenth century understood it was hardly given any attention at all in the preaching and writing spun out by the fundamentalist movement in the twentieth century. That is profoundly tragic for a movement that was purportedly devoted to the defense and propagation of truth that is essential to the gospel message. No doctrine is *more* essential to the gospel than the principles of justification by faith—the imputation of righteousness to the believer, the imputation of the

believer's sin to Christ, the forensic nature of justification, and a right understanding of the principle of *sola fide*. But within the visible fundamentalist movement today, you can hardly find a pastor, much less a trained lay person, who is prepared to give an accurate account of any of those doctrines, even at the most basic level.

That, in my view, is where the seeds of disaster were first sown in the early fundamentalist movement. There was a lack of clear definition from the beginning. The distinctions between fundamental and secondary truths were never completely clear. That should have been one of the first things on the agenda for a movement that is based on the conviction that some truths are indispensable, essential—even worth dying for. How do we identify which doctrines are primary and which ones are secondary? Yet that was a question that seems never to have come to the forefront of the fundamentalist discussion.

And that lack of definition, in turn, gave rise to a second reason why the fundamentalist movement failed:

A LACK OF DOCTRINAL CLARITY

Now, you might think that a movement that was devoted to making a defense of fundamental *doctrines* would become the most biblically literate and theologically astute movement since the time of the Puritans. Fundamentalists *should* have produced the finest theologians, the most skilled Bible teachers, and the best writers. Fundamentalism *should* have been a literate movement—theological, devoted to doctrinal instruction, and (to borrow language from Titus 1:9) “able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” Fundamentalism as a movement has historically exemplified *none* of those things.

Billy Sunday, known more for his histrionics on the platform than the soundness of his doctrine, quickly became the public face of early fundamentalism. Although some of the more thoughtful early fundamentalists expressed grave concerns about Billy Sunday's style, they were in effect shouted down by the rest of the movement.

Fundamentalism has always seemed to favor men who were both doctrinally shallow and flamboyant in their personal style. J. Frank Norris and Jack Hyles are probably the two most famous examples. (Norris shot an unarmed man in the pastor's study of his church in Fort Worth. Jack Hyles, who boasted that he had the largest Sunday School in the world, was accused of keeping his secretary as a concubine. Hyles's son had repeated incidents of moral indiscretions with countless women. Jack Hyles's response to those scandals was to refuse to answer any of the charges, and he demanded that the

people of his church declare blind loyalty to him. He had little buttons made up saying “100% FOR Hyles” that his congregation wore.)

But if you want to see more ordinary examples of what I’m talking about, sit in the chapel services at almost any fundamentalist school and watch the parade of preachers that come through.

(My very first week at Tennessee Temple, they brought in a speaker who literally doused himself with lighter fluid and set himself ablaze while he preached on hell. He billed himself as “The Flaming Evangelist.” During the year I was there, our student chapels featured a nonstop parade of karate experts, gospel magicians, gospel clowns, young Jack-Hyles wannabes, and other assorted characters. The low point was one day when Robert Sumner came and in a 45-minute message attacked every one of the five points of Calvinism. He was arguing that sinners have it within their own power by a free-will decision to convert themselves—which, of course, is pure pelagianism; rank heresy. He would emphasize his weakest points by shouting louder, and that never failed to elicit a chorus of hearty amens. That kind of thing, sadly, epitomizes how most of the fundamentalist movement in America has dealt with the fundamentals of the faith.)

You can survey the landscape of the twentieth-century fundamentalist movement and look for important and influential doctrinal material produced by the movement—works where the fundamental doctrines of Scripture are clearly taught and defended—and you’re going to come up mostly dry. It’s hard to think of a single truly significant, lasting, definitive doctrinal work or biblical commentary written by anyone in the fundamentalist movement since the time of J. Gresham Machen. I suppose there are some exceptions to that rule somewhere, but I can’t think of any.

Why is that? Why is it that so many who call themselves fundamentalists seem to care so little about the actual fundamental *doctrines* of the Christian faith? Why is it that the sermons and literature of the fundamentalist movement have always favored secondary issues—like women’s clothing, men’s hair length, Bible versions, music styles, and ridiculous matters of preference?

(I listened to one sermon by a fundamentalist preacher who insisted that culottes are sinful because they were just really baggy pants and therefore fundamentalist women who wear them are sinning. He screamed and ranted about the sin of wearing culottes for nearly 15 minutes. This was at a fundamentalist college, and the students were mindlessly amening and applauding everything the guy had to say.)

Why hasn’t fundamentalism ever put that kind of energy into teaching and defending the doctrines that are truly fundamental? Have you ever wondered about that?

There is a decidedly anti-intellectual strain in American fundamentalism that has dominated the movement for the past fifty years or more. Many fundamentalists are openly wary of scholarship, suspicious of anything too academic. They dislike historical theology; they have no taste for doctrinal teaching; they prefer preachers who specialize in emotional rants against the evils of rock music or movies or some other aspect of popular culture.

Now, I know there are some blessed exceptions to that rule. Detroit Baptist Theological seminary is a fundamentalist school, and their journal is consistently superb. I recommend it to you with enthusiasm. I already mentioned Dr. Kevin Bauder, President of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Minneapolis. He's obviously a gifted writer and a capable theologian. And in April of last year, I visited the seminary at Bob Jones University and had the privilege of meeting several of their seminary faculty members, as well as some fundamentalist pastors in the area who have strong ties with Bob Jones University. BJU is well known for the high academic standards they maintain, and in my discussions with these men it was obvious that there's nothing superficial about their approach to doctrine and to Scripture.

But I have to say that in my experience, men like that are all too rare in the fundamentalist movement. The mainstream of the movement often regards them with deep suspicion, because they are too academic, too Calvinistic, not sufficiently devoted to the exclusive use of the King James Version of the Bible, not vocal enough in their criticism of John MacArthur—or whatever.

I am grateful for the influence of men like Kevin Bauder and Dave Doran in the fundamentalist movement. But they are not really typical fundamentalists. The drift of *most* of the fundamentalist movement is decidedly in the opposite direction. Anti-intellectualism has been built into the ethos and the culture of the movement since the time of Billy Sunday. And even today, the main thrust of American fundamentalism is anti-intellectual, appallingly superficial in its approach to doctrine, hopelessly pragmatic in its methodology, and thoughtlessly unconcerned with the truly *fundamental* doctrines of Scripture.

Just look at the issues that are high on the fundamentalist agenda today. The question of whether the King James Version is an inspired translation is the single issue that consumes the most fundamentalist bandwidth on the Internet. Contemporary Christian music would have to be a close second. At the moment, long debates trying to justify strict separation from John MacArthur and his associates might come in third. Then you've got a host of highly polemical but doctrinally barren treatises on fundamentalism's favorite evils—dancing, drinking, card-playing, the Beatles, the Harry Potter Books, and whatever other worldly amusements you can think of.

Now, I'm not opposed to preaching against worldliness. In fact, this is something worldly evangelicals and their worldly churches could stand a little more of. But don't give your people a steady diet of preaching about the evils of contemporary culture while neglecting the timeless truths of Scripture. That trivializes the importance of the fundamental doctrines we profess to love. It makes for shallow preaching. American fundamentalist preachers have been guilty of that sin for generations.

John Rice wrote a famous book with the title "*Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, & Women Preachers*." I think the book must date back to the 1940s or 1950s, but it's actually still in print. The ad copy starts out with the provocative question, "Should a woman cut her hair?" One of the sermon titles is "Bobbed Hair, The Sign of a Woman's Rebellion against Husband, Father, and God." Now I don't know if Dr. Rice really believed that it was as sinful for a woman to shorten the length of her hair as it would be for her to usurp authority over men in the church, but the whimsical yet authoritarian way he dealt with both issues didn't encourage his readers to be serious Bereans.

That's too typical of how fundamentalists have dealt with doctrine. They have tended to be strict and dogmatic and blunt about indifferent matters, about cultural minutiae, and about issues the Bible is completely silent on—without really being serious about *doctrine*.

For example, most fundamentalist leaders regard Charles Finney as a hero. They overlook his Pelagianism. They imitate his pragmatism. And some of them have even absorbed elements of his perfectionism. But Finney denied that the righteousness of Christ could be imputed to sinners, or that the guilt of sinners could be imputed to Christ. In other words, he denied the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. He rejected the classic Protestant understanding of justification by faith and held the view that it was the sinner's own duty to convert himself. Yet fundamentalists have made him an icon. John R. Rice called Finney one of the greatest evangelists who ever lived.

Yet the same fundamentalists who try to make a hero out of a heretic like Charles Finney will *look* for reasons to criticize any living Bible teacher or popular speaker who is outside the boundaries of the fundamentalist movement. They *have* to do that in order to justify a cultish devotion to their unbiblical application of the principle of separation.

And that brings me to a third reason for the failure of the fundamentalist movement. There was a lack of definition, a lack of doctrinal clarity, and now third—

A LACK OF DUE PROCESS

Here, in my view, is one of the main reasons so many of the best men and brightest young minds have left the fundamentalist movement. The way second-degree separation has been implemented by fundamentalists is unseemly, ungracious, and unbiblical. The machinery of fundamentalist separatism has in effect established a form of excommunication without any due process. All someone has to do to ruin your ministry in fundamentalist circles is publish a negative story about you in one of the fundamentalist gossip rags, and if it gets enough circulation, you will be branded for life as a neo-evangelical; and anyone who has any kind of public fellowship with you will also then be tainted.

Let me explain what I mean by second-degree separation. I said at the outset that I am a separatist. I believe Scripture forbids us to have fellowship with people who deny essential gospel truths. Second John 10–11 says if someone like that comes to you, “do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for [the one] who greets him shares in his evil deeds.” I would argue that the clear teaching of Scripture commands us to abandon churches and denominations and other organizations whose leadership or membership are irreformably committed to doctrines that fatally corrupt the gospel, or foster unbelief. Second Corinthians 6:14–17:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

15 And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?

16 And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.”

17 Therefore “Come out from among them And be separate,” says the Lord. “Do not touch what is unclean.”

And I could go on quoting Scripture for some time. Ephesians 5:11: “Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.” Romans 16:17: “Note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.” Scripture repeatedly makes clear that we are not to seek fellowship with people who corrupt the essential truths of Scripture—even if they claim to be Christians, and especially when *they* demand that we compromise our convictions or tone down our message in the name of unity. Scripture gives no mandate whatsoever for that kind of false, ecumenical “unity.” We’re told to avoid people like that, not seek any kind of fellowship or unity with them.

But what is my duty to a fellow believer, someone who is fundamentally sound in his own doctrine, but who does not practice separation? What about an evangelical Anglican, who preaches the gospel himself, but is a member of a denomination that has ordained practicing homosexuals as bishops? Am I free to associate with him? Am I obliged to break fellowship with him?

If I *do* break fellowship with him, that's second-degree separation. Now, it may surprise some of you to hear me say this, but there are times when I think second-degree separation is perfectly appropriate. There are some who have tried to argue that there's no warrant in Scripture to separate from other Christians, so that in effect, if I believe a guy is a true believer, I should not separate from him ever, even if he holds a conference and turns the pulpit over to the Pope. But I think that's quite wrong. Second Thessalonians 3:14–15 says: "If anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

So there clearly *are* times when it is appropriate to refuse to keep company with someone who is a believer—especially if that person is deliberately and incorrigibly disobedient to the clear instruction of Scripture. But notice that we're explicitly instructed to admonish such a person as a brother. Separation from a brother should never be quick and easy.

What I object to in the way American fundamentalists have practiced separation is this: they are often rash and impulsive in the way they separate from other brethren without any kind of admonishment and without due process. Furthermore, they try to enforce separation to the third, fourth, fifth, and fifteenth degree.

Billy Graham refuses to practice separation from Roman Catholics and liberals. OK, we won't participate in his crusades. But Al Mohler once participated in a Billy Graham Crusade. Are we therefore obliged to separate from Al Mohler? Now you're into the third degree of separation. And since we haven't broken fellowship with Mohler, are fundamentalists required to separate from John MacArthur and everyone who associates with him? See how quickly we get to fourth- and fifth-degree separation? But that is exactly the way separation works in the modern fundamentalist movement.

Seriously, a fundamentalist pastor friend told me that the main reason he could never attend a Shepherds' Conference or have anything to do with John MacArthur is because MacArthur hasn't broken fellowship with Al Mohler, and Mohler has a connection to Billy Graham, and therefore MacArthur is not a truly separated man. How far does this go? Will every fundamentalist who attends the Shepherds' Conference be excommunicated from fundamentalism? That's what happens in some circles, and believe it or not, there are actually

some fundamentalists who come to this conference incognito, and refuse to tell anyone they have been here, lest it taint them forever in fundamentalist circles.

And you can be branded and condemned and excommunicated by the fundamentalists without due process and without any hope of remedy. That is exactly what happened to John MacArthur. Almost twenty years ago, Bob Jones Jr. ran an article in a Bob Jones University-sponsored magazine accusing John MacArthur of teaching heresy. The article accused John MacArthur of denying the efficacy and the necessity of Christ's blood.

It seemed to me that Bob Jones had misunderstood John MacArthur and misconstrued some quotations, so I personally wrote to Bob Jones Jr. for an explanation of the University's position. He refused to answer my questions and in a curt way told me it was useless to try to correspond with him.

Five years later, after the controversy had already swept through the fundamentalist movement, Bob Jones *III* finally wrote privately to John MacArthur and in essence said MacArthur's explanations of his position had satisfied BJU that MacArthur was not a heretic. But they never published any retraction. Thousands of their constituents to this day think John MacArthur is a heretic who denies the blood of Christ. I get mail virtually every week from people who have heard some fundamentalist parroting Bob Jones Jr.'s accusation that MacArthur is a heretic. Bob Jones wrote one accusatory paragraph, without seeking any kind of response or clarification from MacArthur, and it tied a tin can on John MacArthur that has rattled through the fundamentalist movement for twenty years.

That's what I mean about a lack of due process. In effect you can excommunicate or blackball someone for the rest of his earthly life simply by accusing him in one of the ubiquitous gossip rags. You don't have to demonstrate any thorough understanding of the issue you raise. You can take quotes out of context if you like. *Or not*. The charges don't necessarily have to be documented. They don't even have to be true, if you are a fundamentalist with sufficient clout or your very own gossip rag.

Meanwhile, the public face of the fundamentalist movement is dominated by too many petty men with big egos who think "earnestly contend[ing] for the faith" means backstabbing one another or sniping at other Christian leaders who come too close to the fundamentalist movement without actually being in the right "camp." That's cultish. It's wicked. It's carnal and it's fleshly. It's not righteous behavior. But it happens every week in the fundamentalist movement. The culture of American fundamentalism seems to thrive on it. I have a book in my library by a fundamentalist who was fed up with that kind of fundamentalist treachery, documenting cases where fundamentalists had deliberately destroyed one another by spreading rumor and innuendo. He titled the book, *Dear Abner, I Love You, Joab*.

Let me wrap up with this. As I said, I don't hold out any hope whatsoever that the fundamentalist movement as it now exists is salvageable. Those men in the fundamentalist movement who truly love Christ and love His Word ought to practice what they preach and separate from their disobedient brethren. Cut the ties with heretics who claim a seventeenth-century English translation of the Bible is inspired and inerrant. Break fellowship with your fellow fundamentalists who refuse to practice biblical church discipline but like to destroy good men's lives and ministries by spreading rumors and innuendo. Come out from among those who ignore the Word of God and don't care about good theology, and whose preaching consists of pulpit-pounding histrionics with no biblical substance. Renounce those who like to regulate people's lives with man-made rules, binding heavy burdens on people's backs like the Pharisees did. "Come out from among them, and be ye separate." Practice *real* biblical separation and stop just pretending to be separatists.

One of the really good things about *historic* fundamentalism was that it created an environment where independency flourished. I've never been fond of denominationalism, and I think the fundamentalist exodus from the denominations was a wonderful, triumphant thing—not at all a defeat, the way many chroniclers of the fundamentalist movement have suggested. It was the early fundamentalists who left the denominations to form hundreds, perhaps thousands, of independent churches that kept the gospel witness alive and thriving while the mainline denominations all basically crumbled under the weight of their liberal unbelief.

It's my conviction that *independency* is the biblical pattern. There's no evidence of any denominational-type hierarchy in the Bible.

Earlier this month I was in London at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. While I was sitting in the pastor's office waiting to pray with the elders before the Sunday service, it occurred to me that this church was already some 200 years old when Charles Spurgeon came there to pastor. He was barely out of his teens at the time. The church had already had three very famous pastors—Benjamin Keach, John Gill, and John Rippon. Today that church is more than 350 years old, and they still preach the same gospel and are faithful to the very same principles as the day the church was founded in 1650. I asked Peter Masters if he knew of any other church that old and still faithful, and he said, "Oh, yes. There are at least fifty—and some of them are older than 350 years." He said a study had been done on the subject and of the fifty churches at least 350 years old and still evangelical, virtually all of them are independent, Reformed, and Baptist.

I like that statistic. It's affirming to me. I have always preferred independency. I consider myself an independent in every sense. I'm not looking

for a movement to join. I belong to this church. That's enough for me. And I'm willing to work alongside anyone and everyone who shares my essential biblical convictions, whether the label they would slap on themselves is "fundamentalist," "evangelical," "strict and particular Baptist," or just plain old "Christian."

Think about the fruits of the various twentieth-century movements. Liberals and theological radicals never did anything but kill churches and turn denominations into spiritual wastelands.

"Fundamentalists" who tied themselves to the *movement* got sidetracked into fighting and dividing into ever-smaller and less significant factions. They managed to start with the all the right ideas, all the right enemies, and all the best men—and reduce their movement to virtual insignificance in less than a hundred years.

"Moderates" never did anything, period, except gum up the works of denominational discipline, while compromising and clouding everything that ought to be kept crystal-clear.

If you think about it, the twentieth century saw the same pattern repeated that you see throughout all of church history. The true vitality of the church is traceable through the nonconformists, the independents, the true biblical separatists. The true secret of their power is not—and never has been—in earthly organizations, political clout, or visible movements of any kind. Their power is derived from the biblical truth they preach. And the influence of that kind of power has always been what determines the relative health and spiritual vigor of the church.

In fact, if you want to see a who's who of influential people in British church history, visit the nonconformist burial ground at Bunhill Fields in London. These are the people whose influence has done the most good for the church throughout her history. They are the ones that were ejected from the established church for refusing to conform to the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. They built independent churches, and they were devoted to the truth and opposed to every kind of spiritual compromise. They were militant in defense of the truth. And they will stand alone if necessary. That's the spirit fundamentalism ought to have cultivated, but it forfeited that spirit by becoming a movement ruled by politics and parties and petty tyrants.

When the spirit of independency flourishes, the church thrives. When simple gospel truth is proclaimed and human hierarchies are kept to a minimum, the church flourishes. When organizations, hierarchies, and human clout comes to the forefront, the church's power wanes. That's why I don't care if the fundamentalist movement dies as a movement. I think it would untie the hands of a lot of godly men who are currently in bondage to other people's opinions, and that would be a good thing.

I have a thousand more things I wish I could say, but no time left to say them all. I hope you find this helpful and somewhat encouraging, and I hope it gives you something to think about.