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Fundamentalism Today: a Critical Self-Evaluation of Fundamentalism

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Recommended Citation

Hindson, Edward and Dobson, Ed, "Fundamentalism Today: a Critical Self-Evaluation of Fundamentalism" (1983). *SOR Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 142.
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FUNDAMENTALISM TODAY



A Critical Self-Evaluation of Fundamentalism

by Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson

From the book *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*. © 1981 by Jerry Falwell. Published by Doubleday and Co.

It has been well said that one's strength often becomes one's weakness. This is true of Fundamentalism, just as it is of other movements. The qualities that make Fundamentalism the dynamic and powerful religious movement that it is today may also be blown up out of proportion and thereby become its most inherent dangers as well. Ten characteristic weaknesses of Fundamentalism are evident to the unbiased observer:

1. *Little capacity for self-criticism.* Because of its strong commitment to biblical truth, Fundamentalism tends to level scathing criticisms at Liberalism and the ecumenical movement and, in general, all ecclesiastical groups and organizations that are not a part of its own movement. By contrast, however, Fundamentalism is extremely sensitive to any self-criticism, causing a tendency to become overly defensive and ingrown. Constructive self-criticism is vital in order to maintain the vitality and direction of the movement. Fundamentalism must avoid the extreme tendency to blast, label, and excommunicate anyone and everyone who raises even the slightest objection to its beliefs and methods.

2. *Overemphasis on external spirituality.* One of the great weaknesses within Fundamentalism is the tendency to overemphasize externals when dealing with spiritual issues, to the neglect of equally significant internal matters. Evangelicals are often quick to point out that spirituality is what you are, not just what you do. A proper understanding of spiritual maturity, however, cannot divorce what you do from what you are. What you do is a reflection of what you are, and Fundamentalists rightly understand that. But, in so emphasizing the significance of actions as reflective of one's belief, there is a tendency within Fundamentalism to reduce its emphasis on spirituality to only what you do and to neglect the importance of what you are. Certainly there are times when people pass all the external tests related to smoking, drinking, appearance, habits, and so on, and still remain bitter, hostile, unloving, and lustful. Fundamentalism as a movement certainly cannot argue that its strong emphasis on belief and external behavior has left it relatively free from morality crises. On the other hand, wholesale capitulation to accepting spirituality as merely an internal attitude of the mind and heart can be very destructive. One can make ethical matters so ethereal that they have no practical expression at all. Today, more than ever before, there are strong

correctives at work within Fundamentalism to keep it properly balanced in this regard.

3. *Resistance to change.* Since the basic mentality of Fundamentalism involves nonconformity to secular culture, it tends to produce resistance to change of any kind. This often results in overreaction to fads. For example, many Fundamentalists preached against sideburns, wire-rimmed glasses, and flare-bottomed pants during the early seventies, because of a supposed association with the hippies. In time,

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flare-bottomed pants became so stylish that the clothing companies were producing only that kind of pants. Some churches went to such an extreme that they provided seamstresses to ensure that flare-bottomed pants be redesigned into straight-leg pants, so as not to compromise with worldliness. However, in time, several Fundamentalist leaders began to wear flare-bottomed pants, and then flare-bottomed pants were no longer an issue for the vast majority of Fundamentalists.

4. *Elevation of minor issues.* Because of our resistance to the corrupting influence of society, we tend to elevate minor issues into a place of focus and attention that often neglects major issues. There is a strong pharisaical tendency among Fundamentalists that must be faced honestly to ensure that the "weightier matters" are not neglected. Some have battled violently over the issue of ladies wearing slacks, the inspiration of the King James Version only, and, in Holiness-fundamental circles, over whether "lifting hands" to God means that we are to lift both hands at the same time or whether everyone is to lift one hand collectively. While these issues have a place of honest concern to many sincere and well-meaning people, they must be recognized as side issues and not the central issues of Christianity. One will search in

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vain through the original editions of *The Fundamentals* to find such kind of bickering. It simply is not there. Nobody was arguing in those days about whether one should retain a moustache or beard in order to keep the dignity of the nineteenth century alive, or whether it was acceptable to be clean-shaven and thereby appear to be "modern." Every issue that arises within the movement must be evaluated on the basis of what the Bible alone teaches and not who yells the loudest.

5. *The temptation to add to the gospel.* While no true Fundamentalist wants to add anything to the gospel (the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ), there is nevertheless a strong temptation to do just that. Some have the tendency to express themselves in such a manner as to imply that only their particular understanding of Christianity really represents the gospel. Preaching on Bible prophecy, the dispensations, the evils of evolution, the ecumenical movement, and rising heresies certainly have their place, but they are not the gospel. Hence it is possible to attend a Fundamentalist church and hear a great deal of preaching about and against all sorts of things, yet almost never hear the gospel. The central focus of all biblical preaching should be the Person and work of Christ. He is the topic, His

resurrection our Good News, and calling people to faith in Him for their salvation is our task. Anything other than that may be legitimate in its place, but it must never supersede the cen-

The time has come for true Fundamentalists and sincere Evangelicals to rise above the excessive labeling and listing of people, groups, and schools.

trality of proclaiming the message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

6. *Overdependence on dynamic leadership.* Within the Fundamentalist Movement there is very little concern for succession or perpetuity. Fundamentalism has been a movement of dynamic leaders committed to the task of changing their generation for the cause of Christ and providing unparalleled leadership within Christianity. It is clear, however, from the study of the history of Fundamentalism that, once these individuals have passed off the scene, their movements have usually died with them. Very few have been able to leave behind well-established

organizations to carry on the task of their ministry. If Fundamentalism is to effect a permanent change in America in the generations ahead, it must begin now to build the churches and schools that will effectively carry forth its message to the next generation.

7. *Excessive worry over labels and associations.* In the desire to be pure from the world, Fundamentalists have tended to develop a kind of paranoid mentality toward the world they are trying to reach. This has been true of the Evangelical Movement as well. One finds that evangelical literature is filled with statements about the importance of reaching racial minorities, but an investigation of evangelical churches will show that they rarely practice what they preach in this area. In fact, it is safe to say that Fundamentalist churches are actually reaching more of the minority population than the Evangelicals. For example, although the average evangelical church has fewer than two hundred members, it is safe to say that Dr. Jack Hyles's First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana, with its extensive Sunday school ministry to minority children, is reaching thousands of young people in the minority communities. It would take at least one hundred evangelical churches even to compare with what

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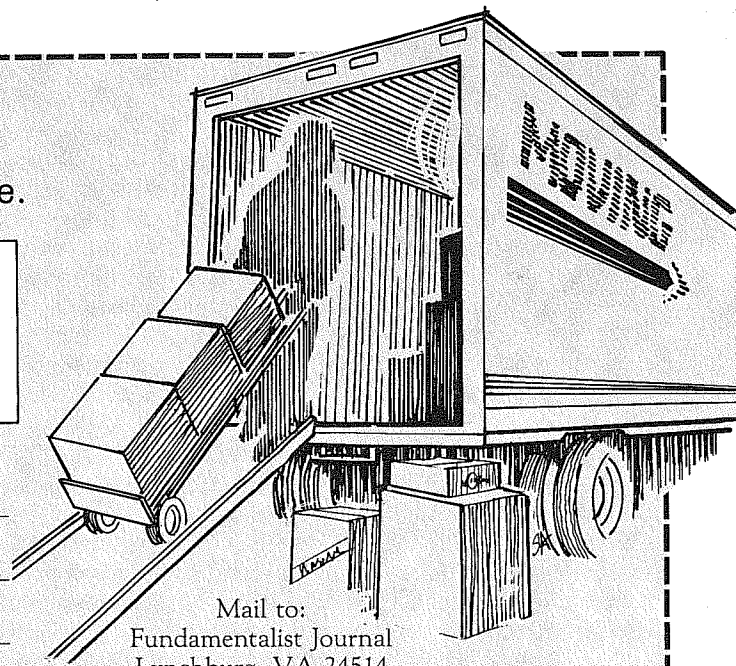
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*Self-Evaluation
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This one church has already accomplished in this area.

The concern of Fundamentalists to have right relationships with all people has caused an exorbitant amount of paranoia over fellowships, associations, and relationships. Not only are Fundamentalists arguing about which groups one ought to officially belong to, but now the argument has degenerated to the level of whom one has had to speak in one's church and for whom one has spoken, and in some

Fundamentalists must also recognize that a person can pass all of their outward tests for spirituality and still be lost.

cases even with whom one has eaten dinner. Perhaps more than any other weakness, this is causing some Fundamentalists to build such restrictive communities that they are in danger of reverting to an Amish-like retreat from all contact with society. Fear of being placed on someone's negative list has caused many Fundamentalists to capitulate to intimidation in order to remain "pure." Yet such capitulation is rarely satisfying to those whose tendency is to become more and more restrictive and exclusive. One list of "accepted" schools has reduced the number down to only five.

The time has come for true Fundamentalists and sincere Evangelicals to rise above the excessive labeling and listing of people, groups, and schools. If there is a lesson to be learned from the history of the early Fundamentalist Movement, it is that divergent groups of Bible-believing Christians who hold to the basic tenets of the faith can cooperate together in order to develop a broadly united front against the real enemies of true Christianity. Let us once again focus the theological guns at Liberalism, humanism, and secularism.

8. *Absolutism.* Because of the Fun-

damentalists' commitment to the truth, there is a tendency among them to overabsolutism, that is, to approaching every conceivable issue with a totally black-or-white mentality. Our tendency is to view something as either totally right or totally wrong. While this is definitely the case in many situations, becoming locked into that kind of mentality has caused overstatement and overcriticism in many unnecessary matters.

9. *Authoritarianism.* Believing oneself to be right can easily lead to an overly authoritarian approach in disciplinary matters. This is true with regard not only to church discipline but to family discipline as well. The tendency of the overly authoritarian parent is to produce rebellious children. One need not look very far to find ample witness to the fact that many good people leave Fundamentalist churches for doctrinally weaker churches because they are simply tired of all the fighting. Fundamentalism must become known for what it is for, not just for what it is against. The time has come to raise the standard for a generation of gentlemanly Fundamentalists who love equally the truth of God's Word and the people in whose lives it must be applied.

10. *Exclusivism.* Exclusivism is a characteristic of all religious cults. It is the tendency to believe that they alone are saved. Unless you belong to their group, you are looked upon as suspect. This mentality breeds the tendency to judge Christians, not by what they believe, but by the group to which they belong. While belonging to a Bible-believing, Bible-preaching church is certainly a vital expression of one's commitment to Scripture, it must not be reasoned conversely that all people who belong to questionable churches or religious organizations are therefore necessarily and automatically lost. Whether Fundamentalists like it or not, a person may belong to a church that proclaims a liberal gospel and still be a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ. We all agree that they ought to know better and should be urged to "come out from among them," but Fundamentalism must never be guilty of pronouncing them unsaved because they do not join our group. True Fundamentalism recognizes that one's personal salvation

has to do with one's belief in Jesus Christ as Savior. A person does not have to join a Fundamentalist church in order to become a true believer in Christ.

Fundamentalists must also recognize that a person can pass all of their outward tests for spirituality and still be lost. A politician may have all of the outward requirements for conservative consistency set by the minimal moral standards as defined by conservative political action groups and still be very amoral in his personal life. He needs Christ just as much as the person who is extremely liberal in his political stand. We must be reminded that even if we are successful in getting society to change its laws in favor of a more moral approach to life, that alone will not make America a moral or Christian nation. The preaching of the gospel through aggressive evangelism has always been and must always be our major priority. □

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