

# Stop the Funeral—We’re Not Quite Dead Yet!

A response to Phil Johnson’s *Dead Right: The Failure of Fundamentalism*

During the 2005 Shepherd’s Conference hosted by the Grace Community Church, Phil Johnson, the executive director of *Grace to You*, presented a workshop entitled “Dead Right: The Failure of Fundamentalism.” As you can tell from the title, it is not exactly a positive assessment of the fundamentalist movement. Johnson does, however, correctly distinguish between the *idea* of fundamentalism and the movement(s) of fundamentalism. He loves the idea, but hates what the movement has become. The core of his criticism is that the movement has lacked three things: definition, doctrinal clarity, and a system of due process.

The manuscript for the presentation was quickly made available to two outlets on the web, one of which (sharperiron.org) happened to be a new blog and discussion board that immediately put the paper into the middle of the conversation about contemporary fundamentalism. This conversation has been happening for quite a while, and Johnson’s paper looks to be stirring the intensity of it somewhat. Personally, I am very much in favor of earnest, intense conversations about the beliefs and practices of fundamentalism, so I am grateful that Johnson has made the paper available for consideration.

Because I too am concerned about fundamentalism, I would like to interact with the paper in a manner similar to the paper, i.e., this is not intended to be a research paper or formal reply. My “read” on the paper is that it represented Phil Johnson’s personal reflections on the fundamentalist movement. He was not speaking for evangelicalism, and even distances himself from that movement. He correctly questions whether there really are such things as the fundamental and evangelical movements at this stage of history. He was not trying to contribute a research article, and I have no problem with that. In fact, I would like to use the same kind of conversational mode. That does not excuse either of us from the responsibility to be accurate, but it does establish a different standard of evaluation (e.g., documentation).

## *A Stilted View of Fundamentalism*

As many have already commented on the discussion boards, Johnson presents a somewhat lopsided view of fundamentalism, mainly because it is based on his experience of the movement. To be fair to him, he seems aware of this, so I don’t intend to make too much of it. But it seems a big mistake for anyone to read this as more than one man’s view of things. Actually, it is one man’s view after being jaundiced by one segment of fundamentalism.

I believe the presentation of fundamentalist history in the paper is an important part of its theme, so it is legitimate to raise questions about Johnson’s re-telling of the fundamentalist story. I was quite disappointed with how he explained this. One very telling problem was his claim that the fundamentalists gave up on driving the liberals out and eventually pulled out of their denominations in the 1940s and 1950s (p. 8). The fact is that the fundamentalists had just about all left the denominations by then, as a brief look at the founding of the separatist groups would reveal: IFCA (1923/30), GARBC (1932), OPC (1936/39), CBA (1940). Add to that the fact that the National Association of Evangelicals formed in 1942 (and was preceded by the American Council of Christian Churches). This misread of history is important for two reasons.



First, it essentially blots out the rise of the New Evangelicalism during the 1940s and 1950s. In other words, it ignores the reality that it was during that very period that a non-separatist form of fundamentalism developed (orthodox doctrine without a commitment to put out or pull out). Ignoring this historical reality allows one to obscure the difference between fundamentalism and contemporary evangelicalism. That difference, forged during 1940-1960, was over the biblical response to false teachers and false teaching. It was not over doctrine at that point—all of the early new evangelicals were clearly fundamental in doctrine. To miss or obscure this point is to distort the discussion. The fundamentalist world broke into two main camps, separatist and non-separatist. The non-separatists repudiated fundamentalism and claimed a new title for themselves, the New Evangelicals. Obviously, after a certain amount of time it becomes inappropriate to keep calling yourself “New” anything, so that part of the label has mainly been dropped with the result that you have fundamentalism (separatist orthodoxy) and evangelicalism (non-separatist orthodoxy).

Second, it allows fundamentalism to be tarred with the accusation of being weak intellectually. By ignoring that there was a very significant part of the fundamentalist movement during the 1940-1960 era that rejected the New Evangelicalism, Johnson is able to skip over the fact that the faculties at schools like Dallas, Grace, and Westminster all stood with the fundamentalists. Say what you want about *The Sword of the Lord*, but men like John Walvoord were writing articles against New Evangelicalism in its pages. The faculties at these schools generated significant contributions in terms of commentaries, biblical studies, etc. By obscuring the history at this point, all of the writings of these men (and others) are categorized as the writings of evangelicals, but *at the time* they were clearly in the fundamentalist orbit.<sup>1</sup>

Both of these points are simply representative of the fact that Johnson has transposed the peculiarities of one segment and slice of time (70s-80s) on to the whole history of fundamentalism. My experience is quite different. I was saved and grew up in a church pastored by an expositor who had Th.D. in New Testament from Grace Theological Seminary. He brought in godly and gifted men to preach the Word, not Bible-thumpers who went on tirades over non-issues. I did not hear of Jack Hyles, that I can recall, until I went away to college. The fundamentalism that Johnson describes is not the fundamentalism I was exposed to. I would imagine that those who are sympathetic to Johnson’s portrait of fundamentalism would find mine equally dissatisfying. Johnson concludes that “men like Kevin Bauder and Dave Doran...are not really typical fundamentalists” because we don’t fit his stereotype of a fundamentalist. My contention is that there are far more men who don’t fit his stereotype than he seems to recognize. And, to be fair, I would have to admit that the ones who do fit his stereotype don’t consider me a typical fundamentalist either!

I have openly acknowledged that fundamentalism has its warts. Any movement that includes depraved sinners will have them. What shouldn’t be missed in Johnson’s analysis of fundamentalism is what he says about evangelicalism. Specifically, he concludes that “the evangelical movement has, if anything, melted down in an even more catastrophic way than the fundamentalist movement” (p. 9). The analogy that I have used elsewhere is that fundamentalism has had its warts, but evangelicalism is

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<sup>1</sup> The passing comment about the controversy between John R. Rice and Bob Jones, Jr. revealed more about Johnson’s grasp of fundamentalism than he probably intended. Anyone who has even casually investigated it would know that Rice wrote voluminously about the issue at stake (separation from disobedient brothers) and that Bob Jones wrote a booklet detailing the same point of conflict. That a major difference over whether to separate from those who sided with the New Evangelicals could be described simply as “over something” is amazing.

battling cancer. The rise of the post-conservative evangelical movement is simply a new modernism infecting the church, and contemporary evangelicalism seems unable to resist its deadly influence. This alone should cause serious fundamentalists to be very cautious about following the path that the non-separatists did 50 years ago—look where it leads.

### *Addressing His Core Complaints*

Johnson argues that the fundamentalist movement lacks: (1) definition; (2) doctrinal clarity; and (3) a system of due process. I doubt that Johnson believes this is any different than the current state of evangelicalism. The evangelical “movement” suffers from the same problems that we do in terms of definition, doctrinal clarity, and use of due process. My point is not to deny that Johnson has made *some* correct assessments, but to point out that this is hardly unique to fundamentalism.<sup>2</sup> In fact, I would suggest that his presentation confirms this since he sees the cause of the first two problems in the roots of fundamentalism. In other words, he claims that the first two problems were present from the very beginning. If this true, then his criticism applies both to fundamentalism and evangelicalism since they share a common heritage, fundamentalism being a subset of evangelicalism.

### **Lack of Definition**

I believe it is very important to understand what Johnson means when he asserts that fundamentalism is flawed due to a lack of definition. His argument is that “the original fundamentalists didn’t do enough to make sure that there was widespread understanding and agreement about which doctrines were truly fundamental” (p. 10). He is not directly saying that fundamentalism isn’t well defined—even though it seems many have interpreted him this way. The precise point is a lack of definition about what constitutes a fundamental doctrine. I agree with him about this point. I will even grant that this problem can lead to confusion about the definition of fundamentalism. But his point is foundational to that issue, so it should be understood and addressed seriously.

While I agree with Johnson’s point, I am disappointed that he casts it as such a major criticism of fundamentalism since he openly acknowledges that we can never come up with a definitive list of fundamental doctrines because we are continually facing new theological aberrations. At this point his charge against fundamentalism seems to lose much of its steam. Consider the two arguments he makes within the same presentation: (1) fundamentalism is flawed because it didn’t do a good job of defining what is a fundamental, and (2) the historical context forces us continually to define the essentials that cannot be denied.<sup>3</sup> In reality, the fundamentalist movement is being pronounced dead partly because it is being measured by a standard which is unattainable—a definitive list or full-proof mechanism for identifying essential doctrines. John MacArthur has done helpful work regarding the latter in *Reckless Faith*, but I doubt that he or Phil would argue that this constitutes the final answer in terms of a defining mechanism.

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<sup>2</sup> Recently Darrell Bock sounded the same note of concern *within* evangelicalism *about* evangelicalism: “Some are so disturbed by the lack of a definition of *evangelicalism*, the contentiousness within the movement or its lack of structure and theological accountability that they wonder if the term is even useful anymore” (*Purpose-Directed Theology* by Darrell L. Bock [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002], p. 11).

<sup>3</sup> This part of the presentation comes through more clearly in the audio version. Johnson adds comments about the denial of God’s foreknowledge as an example of new challenges.

I have already alluded to another reason why making this charge against fundamentalism is somewhat disappointing—it applies equally to fundamentalists and evangelicals. Johnson clearly and correctly identifies this as something rooted in the early history of fundamentalism, and that means it applies to historic fundamentalism (with which he identifies himself). In other words, his criticism applies as much to himself as it does to the folks he is mainly targeting in his presentation. How then does it rate being one of the pillars of his complaint *against fundamentalism*?

This really is a problem for both movements and should be viewed that way. While we have the same problem, the ramifications of it are clearly different for the two movements. Evangelicalism is losing grip on the fact that there truly are essential doctrines that cannot be denied and still meaningfully claim the name “Christian.” This is the tragic meltdown from the New Evangelical compromise—spiritual experience has virtually eclipsed doctrinal truth in terms of testing the genuineness of professed faith. Although he doesn’t say this directly (since he is addressing fundamentalism), I believe Johnson would agree with this conclusion.

Fundamentalists, at the other side of the continuum, face a different set of problems because we have failed to distinguish between fundamental truths and what Johnson calls “secondary” truths. It seems to me that our tendency has been to expand the list of fundamental doctrines beyond what can properly be done. Fundamentalism was originally about those truths one cannot deny and still rightly claim to be a genuine believer. Allowance was made for ignorance, but never for the denial of the core doctrines of the Faith. We must hold this position tenaciously, but also carefully. We have no right to elevate a matter of doctrinal debate to the level of a fundamental doctrine. Some fundamentalists have clearly done this, and it has hurt the movement.

One way in which this has been done is to include in the list of fundamentals items which can be denied without calling into question one’s regeneration and illumination. Some examples are matters of church polity, eschatology, and hermeneutics. On all of these points genuine believers have disagreed with calling into question the salvation of others.<sup>4</sup> Within the boundaries of genuine Christianity there is plenty of room for error on non-fundamentals! Fundamentalism is the broadest circle of fellowship for me, since I have other, narrower beliefs that affect fellowship for ministry purposes.

Another way that some fundamentalists have hurt the movement is by redefining some of the core doctrines in ways that actually contradict their true meaning. Some of these problems focus on essential doctrines like the inspiration of Scripture, the depravity of man, and the person and work of Jesus Christ. As I will argue below, we should not ignore these problems at all. They must be addressed if we are to remain faithful to the Lord. I believe, however, that fundamentalists need to remember that men like James White (*The King James Only Controversy*) and Dave Hunt (*What Love is This?*) were not writing for fundamentalists! Likewise, M.R. DeHaan wrote *The Chemistry of the Blood* in 1943, so it pre-dates the split between fundamentalism and new evangelicalism and, sadly, is still believed by folks in both groups.

I am writing from the perspective of one who is committed to the idea of fundamentalism, so there is no denying that I am defending it at those points where I believe Johnson’s charges miss the point. I agree with him that both the lack of a definitive list of fundamentals and of a definitive mechanism for creating that list have plagued fundamentalism *and* evangelicalism. I believe that this has resulted in *some*

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<sup>4</sup> I don’t want to introduce greater and greater complexity to this discussion, but I believe Phil would agree with me that even here there are boundaries, e.g., some eschatological issues do touch fundamental doctrines.

fundamentalists improperly adding things to the list of fundamental doctrines or redefining the doctrines in unbiblical ways.

What seems to be missed in this presentation is the fact that almost all of the enormously serious aberrations on the essential doctrines of the Faith are not within fundamentalism; they are within evangelicalism! There simply is not a big audience within fundamentalism for Open Theism, the New Perspective on Paul, Universalism, etc. Can the evangelicals say the same? No, they can't. What accounts for this difference between the two movements? I would suggest that it is the evangelical rejection of separatism in the middle of the twentieth century.

### **Lack of Doctrinal Clarity**

The second major criticism of fundamentalism is that it lacks doctrinal clarity. This is perhaps the most stinging section of the presentation, at least from my perspective. Instead of being a "literate movement...devoted to doctrinal instruction" it "as a movement historically exemplified *none* of these things" (p. 14). Further he argues that it is "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" (p. 15).

I want to be careful here because I recognize that this was a workshop presentation, not a formal paper. Such contexts, based on my own experiences, are ripe for hyperbole and generalizations. I believe that Johnson is trying to make a point, and that point is not without some merit. However, this is where his view of fundamentalism distorts his presentation. Let me suggest two basic flaws in his argument. First, by selectively defining fundamentalism in terms of the 70s and 80s, he can eliminate all of the literature produced by fundamentalists in periods prior to that. Obviously, he may not consider the work of men like Charles Feinberg, Alva McLain, Homer Kent, John Whitcomb, etc. to be definitive, but these men all wrote as fundamentalists. This represents a very prejudiced view of fundamentalism.

Second, he establishes a standard which is not truly legitimate—where is the biblical basis for evaluating a movement in terms of its literature? This is a distinctly modern standard that reflects, in my mind, more of the "peer pressure" placed on fundamentalists by the modernists and new evangelicals than it does biblical truth. In other words, these other groups have always questioned the scholarship of fundamentalists, so we have too often accepted their criticism as valid. But biblically, the focal point of teaching ministry is the local church, and the standard of evaluation for that ministry is not whether it has produced books. Fundamental schools have focused on teaching because that is what they came into existence to do—our best men spend their entire lives in the classroom, not out of it writing books. Whether this has been a wise choice or not can be debated, but it is not legitimate to question the doctrinal clarity of a movement by the number of "definitive" books it has produced. I praise God for godly and gifted men who write to the benefit of the larger community of believers, but this criticism measures our movement by a distinctly American, twentieth century standard.

Does fundamentalism struggle with doctrinal clarity? Absolutely. Is this unique to fundamentalism? Absolutely not. Are there loads of doctrinally shallow and morally misguided evangelical churches? Of course. So, if you are choosing three major criticisms against *fundamentalism*, why pick something that is simply true of American Christianity across the board since the middle of the 1800s? One way to answer this is to say simply, because it is true! I agree, and I believe that is why Johnson has said it. But, based on comments that I have heard and seen in response to the presentation, some folks seem to miss this. That is, they seem to be responding in ways that indicate that fundamentalism has a fatal flaw that evangelicalism doesn't. I do not believe that

this was Johnson's point (or his belief). He is smarter than that. Let's make sure we are too.

### **A Lack of Due Process**

I believe that Johnson also makes some valid points about the issue of what he calls due process. It is sad that unbiblical tactics have been resorted to in the supposed defense of the faith. This probably reflects more on depravity than fundamentalism *per se*, but there is no wisdom in denying its existence in our midst. And, to be frank, it may be aggravated within our movement by virtue of a fundamentalist culture formed amidst the losses to modernism and, to a lesser degree, new evangelicalism. That is, something deep within us makes us less patient about pulling the trigger precisely because we lost so much to the modernists because of patience. By the time fundamentalists started to become very vocal about Billy Graham, his popularity had already built momentum to the point that the battle was lost. The net result is that we installed hair triggers on our fundamentalist guns and many people have been shot much too quickly (some of whom did not deserve to be shot at all!).

That's the favorable interpretation. But there are parts of our reality that cannot be so favorably interpreted. There are clear cases where a fight was created simply to preserve a following. Did anybody else notice that Jack Hyles suddenly became a vehement advocate of the KJV Only position only after he was blasted by Robert Sumner for immorality? Has anybody else noticed that whenever you want to start a college or seminary, the first thing you have to do is find someone to fight with in order to make the case for your new school? Can we really deny that men like Donald Waite, Don Jasmin, and David Cloud (to name a few) thrive on finding fault and have carved their niche as the sellers of scandal? These kinds of men are a blight on biblical Christianity, not its defenders.

That any portion of our movement tolerated this kind of sinful slander when it worked to our supposed advantage is a sin that should be acknowledged. That unfounded allegations were and are carelessly tossed around is a genuine shame. Too often men who have lacked solid arguments have resorted to trumped-up allegations of doctrinal deviancy or played the label game in order to discredit perceived "threats" to fundamentalism. This is wrong and should not be tolerated. Our movement is rightly accused of lacking integrity when we will not address this ungodliness.

Practically speaking, however, the whole discussion of due process is complicated because there are no formal lines of accountability outside of the local church. The absence of an ecclesiastical hierarchy means that the forums for addressing doctrinal deviancy are very loose. A lack of due process has hurt both movements. If fundamentalism has been plagued by tying tin cans to people's ankles (to use Phil's imagery), evangelicalism has been plagued by a "speak no evil" policy. Generally speaking, fundamentalism has abused the process of rebuke; evangelicalism has failed to use it sufficiently. Thankfully, biblically committed people in both groups are recognizing their own particular error and taking steps to correct it.

### *My Perspective on Some Substantive Issues Surfaced*

I hasten to underscore the fact that this is simply *my* perspective on this. I believe that Johnson's paper raises some points for discussion that are important. I am not sure who will agree or disagree with me (probably a reflection of my a-typicality!), but since I too love the *idea* of fundamentalism, I think we need to discuss some of these things.

### **The Need to Purify Fundamentalism**

Johnson boldly calls for something which I have as well, namely the consistent application of our separatist views to the doctrinal aberrations within the fundamentalist “movement.” Since I believe that genuine fundamentalism cannot tolerate heresy on the fundamental points of doctrine, I also believe that we must always be in “put out” or “pull out” mode toward those who are unrepentant about such serious error (Titus 3:10; Rom 16:17). We lack integrity when we will only apply separation when it is convenient or with regard to those whom we have labeled “neos.” I don’t think it is possible for us to dodge the bullet on this accusation—he is right. To agree with him does not mean that we need to leave fundamentalism and join some new movement. It does mean that we cannot make a false peace with those who are denying (whether deliberately or through distortion) core doctrines such as inspiration, the person of Jesus Christ, the nature and necessity of repentance, the depravity of man, the penal satisfaction of Christ’s atonement, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures, etc.

It is well past the time to have dealt with these problems. We have engaged in an unbiblical and dangerous kind of deference to error within our midst in order to avoid splitting the movement even more. In many quarters, if the response to Johnson’s article is indicative, we have already lost our credibility as defenders of sound doctrine. While it used to be common in our churches, schools, publications, and conferences for men to have freedom, for example, regarding translations, such freedom has all but vanished. Ironically, while Johnson hammers John R. Rice, Rice took a very different view on the translation question than most of those who followed in his train. He ran ads for the RSV New Testament in *The Sword of the Lord!* The fact that that entire wing of fundamentalism is virtually King James Only means it has departed from historic fundamentalism. They have no real claim to the title and are marching distinctly away from the movement’s roots and doctrines.

We definitely need to purify the movement, but I think Johnson underestimates the depth to which this is already underway. He misses this point precisely because he is preoccupied with the element that is being purged, not the ones who are consistently standing opposed to them. There is a significant, although loosely-knit, coalition of men and institutions that are committed to sound doctrine and a biblical approach to ministry *and* are committed separatists. Frankly, given the problems in the respective movements, I believe we have a better chance of success preserving biblical fundamentalism than evangelicals do of preserving evangelicalism.

### **Admitting that 2 Thessalonians 3 Applies to Separation**

Perhaps the most encouraging admission in Johnson’s paper is related to the application of 2 Thessalonians 3 to the issue of ecclesiastical separation. He writes:

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 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 (p. 20).

Why does he think this is wrong? He quotes 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15. This is, in my mind, a very big admission, and the fact that Johnson knows some of his hearers will be surprised seems to confirm that.

Obviously, Johnson qualifies his point significantly, as he ought. His main concern seems to be the way this principle has been applied, and I share some of that concern. The concept has been abused so badly for over three decades by those who deny it (beginning with John R. Rice!) that it is barely recognizable in most conversations. Johnson cautiously acknowledges what he calls second-degree separation, but then muddies the water by objecting that it can lead to additional degrees. This is a caricature used by Rice and made into a formal argument by Falwell, Dobson, and Hindson (e.g., *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, p. 129). It simply is not accurate. To use their terms, “first degree” separation is from false teachers (i.e., unbelievers) and “second degree” separation is from those believers who refuse to separate from them (i.e., disobedient believers). These are the only kinds of people that could be separated from, so there really can’t be a third, fourth, or fifteenth degree separation. People may disagree about the application of second degree separation, but it is always separation at that level. In other words, the real question is whether it should be applied or not. If people apply it excessively, then it may *appear* to be a new degree, but that isn’t an accurate assessment.

Johnson’s illustration regarding Billy Graham and Al Mohler attempts to prove his point, but I think he fails here. Because *he* sees a difference between the two, he argues that it adds a third degree to separate from Al Mohler. He also isolates on one issue (a crusade) because that makes it easier to build the caricature. I would counter, however, that: (1) being the chairman of a Billy Graham crusade is something significantly more telling than having “once participated” (and he has said he would do it again); and (2) the crusade was only representative of a belief system embraced by Mohler, namely the same position as the early New Evangelicalism, hence Mohler’s consistent praise for people like Billy Graham, Carl Henry, etc. In case someone doubts that Mohler could be parallel to that belief system, go back and read *Reforming Fundamentalism* and note the very strong anti-Catholic, pro-inerrancy beliefs of men like Carnell, Smith, Lindsell, and Ockenga. Mohler may be out of step with current evangelicalism on that issue, but not with the originators of the movement. Mohler’s continued participation in a convention that spends millions of dollars funding liberals in schools and on the mission field is the problem for most fundamentalists. To make the fundamentalist argument look like a simplistic game of “Graham touches Catholics—Mohler touches Graham—MacArthur touches Mohler” is exactly that, simplistic. Over-simplifications like this are rhetorically effective, but they are not truly legitimate since they don’t address the real issue at stake.

But, the bottom line is that Johnson acknowledged the validity of a core fundamentalist principle regarding separation. This was interesting and encouraging to me. I am prepared to let others apply it differently, so long as the applications don’t eventually reveal that the principle is not sincerely held. Most of us agree on the principle of modesty, but we don’t all apply it the same way. Most of us, however, would also have a point at which we would doubt someone’s claim to believe in modesty if the application of it continually was a flagrant violation of that principle. I believe the same holds true regarding the principle of secondary separation.

### **Questions about Separation and Its Application**

I am slightly ambivalent about this particular aspect of the discussion. On one hand, I believe that most of the questions have been answered adequately (at least within the segment of fundamentalism that I call home). But, on the other hand, two factors seem to press the matter of a fresh discussion of these issues. First, each new generation must arrive at its own convictions about these principles and how to apply them. Part of developing those convictions is personally walking through the process of

biblical investigation and then moving to apply that truth discerningly. Second-hand convictions are never strong and seldom last when confronted with tough choices. If a truly biblical, separatist movement within Christianity is to be sustained, it will only happen as men are personally convinced of its scriptural basis. If fundamentalism can't handle that kind of discussion, then it has, from my perspective, ceased to be a truly biblical, separatist movement. I believe it can handle this discussion and emerge stronger for it.

Second, we have entered a time where there are new aspects of the separation issue that have to be addressed. Specifically, the role that the matter of personal separation plays in making ecclesiastical separation decisions seems to be a looming problem. Historically, this was a dividing line between Fundamentalism and the New Evangelicals. The New Evangelicals complained that Fundamentalism was hung up on lists of do's and don'ts, so they repudiated these lists as a mark of legalistic and immature Christianity. There is no doubt that the path which evangelicalism chose is not hung up on such things, and the result has been less than pretty. The cloak of Christian liberty has been used as cover for a life lived comfortably within our decadent culture. Johnson, thankfully, recognizes that evangelicalism could use more preaching against worldliness (p. 17). He is not alone in seeing this problem (e.g., R. Kent Hughes, *Set Apart: Calling a Worldly Church to a Godly Life*). Fundamentalists are not likely to ignore the biblical and practical consequences of the New Evangelical compromise on this point.

An honest look at Fundamentalism quickly reveals that there never was a real consensus on all points of personal separation. Some were held more commonly than others, but much of it was dictated more by regional culture than universally held applications of biblical truth. Personally, I never realized that anyone had a problem with women wearing pants until I went down South for college (and I didn't even know what a pair of culottes was!). I have come to learn that some people hold such beliefs with fervent tenacity, but I never concluded that it was a benchmark of Fundamentalism to do so (or to not do so). It would be foolish, however, for me to claim that no professing Fundamentalists make this a test of Fundamentalism—obviously they do. But they belong to the group most clearly targeted by Johnson's critique, and I don't see that group as being the mainstream Fundamentalism. The mainstream has always allowed latitude on that issue.

Where I do believe the mainstream of Fundamentalism faces its real challenges is those points where there used to be something of a universal consensus, namely pop culture issues. When there was only one venue within which movies could be viewed, there was a fairly united front against attending movie theatres. This really was not based on the building being bad; it was about the corrupting influence of Hollywood entertainment. But now, in an age where movies are available in a multitude of formats and venues, the consensus on attending movies is breaking down (perhaps not among the pastors, but it is among the people and the next generation of pastors). When rock and roll came out, it clearly represented a shift in the culture toward ungodliness, so it was uniformly rejected. Now, after five decades of music variations and three of "Christianized" versions of it, the united front within Fundamentalism seems something less than united. When long hair was the cultural symbol of rebellion, there was a pretty clear consensus that it was not proper to follow the fad. Now, when some of the fads don't include long hair, defining a worldly hairstyle is far more difficult. I could go on, but I think you can see my point.

Some Fundamentalists are clamping down on these pop culture issues and are making the case for the same applications that worked 40-50 years ago. The net result of this is that they appear to be arguing for an Amish-like response to culture. Their goal

seems to be the preservation of a pre-60s Americana, not the production of godliness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Mistakenly arguing that “your standards can’t be too high for God” they keep staking out positions that can hardly be defended biblically. Anything that looks or sounds new is suspect for that very reason. While I agree with the desire to pursue holiness, I have serious questions about the biblical and theological orientation of this wing of Fundamentalism. There is serious confusion about the differences between biblical principles (which are timeless) and contemporary applications (which are time bound). This confusion often leads to division over differences of application, not principle.

Yet, as I have mentioned above, there is a boundary line where an application clearly contradicts the principle. This is where the discussion seems needed. Where is this boundary line on the key issues that are confronting us? Or, to put it another way, how much latitude of application is allowed before we question belief in the principle? For example, even if you and I agree on the principle that we should not use the world’s music to worship our God, that leaves a lot to be defined in terms of application. How do we recognize the world’s music? If you and I agree in large measure, but disagree about some aspect of our definition, how much freedom should I allow you before I question your belief in the principle?

The challenge that lies ahead, at least as I see it, is how we will deal with the fact that we have less agreement on personal separation applications than ever before. Should these disagreements be considered benchmarks for the identity of Fundamentalism? The day may be coming when we have pastors who will stand toe-to-toe in ecclesiastical battles with false teachers and compromising brothers, but do not hold some of the traditional fundamentalist positions on entertainment, clothing styles, and acceptable worship music. Please don’t misunderstand me. I am not advocating any position here. I am simply trying resist the ostrich-like desire to bury my head in the sand and hope the problems go away. They won’t.

It seems well past the time where we need to have serious discussion about the boundaries of biblically defined Christian liberty and their ramifications in terms of church fellowship. By avoiding this discussion, serious, theologically-oriented Fundamentalists lose the opportunity to influence the next generation and allow the cultural Fundamentalists to exert their will over the movement. I believe this is another place where we have practiced an unbiblical and unwise deference.

### **Are We at a Realignment Stage?**

The history of Fundamentalism can be viewed as a series of challenges that provoke a response from committed believers. The first challenge was modernism. This happened within the denominations and was eventually met by resistance from those who held to the fundamentals of the faith. The first step of resistance was an effort to remove the modernists. When it became clear that this effort had failed, the next step was to leave the denominations.

The second challenge was the rise of New Evangelicalism. In reality, New Evangelicalism was a reaction to Fundamentalism (not vice versa). Some orthodox believers came to the conclusion that separation was a mistake. They wanted to return to a position of fellowship with liberals in order to win back the denominations and influence the culture. They embraced forms of ecumenism that had been previously repudiated. Fuller Seminary, *Christianity Today*, and Billy Graham formed something of a New Evangelical triumvirate—a school, a publication, and a voice—that set the pace and tone for the movement. Profs at Fuller, like Carnell, turned their guns on the Fundamentalists. Graham deliberately drove away the Fundamentalists by including known apostates in his New York Crusade. *Christianity Today* tried to shape the hearts

and minds of its readers according to the new ideology. The Fundamentalist response to this new movement held pretty solidly until the 1960s and then gradually began to unravel as the new movement grew in popularity and influence. By the early 1970s the unraveling reached something of a crisis over the question of how to respond to those who reject the New Evangelical agenda, but don't break from the New Evangelicals. The movement fragmented and has never really recovered. On this point I agree with Johnson, although I believe he draws the wrong conclusion that one segment actually represents the whole.

In my mind, this was the third distinct challenge and the movement stumbled. I don't know that it could have been avoided, and I certainly believe that God is in control of even this. I wonder, and it really is an unsettled point for me, if the coming battles within evangelicalism and fundamentalism don't present a new challenge to biblical separatists. I believe there is a growing awareness that evangelicalism suffers from the very problems that Johnson has pointed out in Fundamentalism, namely the lack of definition, doctrinal clarity, and any clear system of due process. Open Theists are claiming the label of evangelical, so how can that movement be well-defined or have any doctrinal clarity? And they can't figure out what to do with these non-evangelical evangelicals within groups like the Baptist General Conference and the Evangelical Theological Society (to name only two). When I read what Phil Johnson writes, I hear the growing realization that evangelicalism cannot exist for long like this (if it still does even now). The concept of separation is showing up in the writings of men like MacArthur, Grudem, Bock, and Carson. They are not all agreed with each other, but all seem to be realizing that the idea of separation from unbelief is a biblical subject and must be addressed. This is a good thing. I believe they find themselves in the midst of a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the modernist controversy. If they do not drive it out or pull out of it, their whole movement will be lost.

A growing number of Fundamentalists who occupy the historic mainstream also realize that certain segments of professing Fundamentalism have soiled the name and have abandoned some of its truths. The time of toleration has past for these men simply because the Truth is at stake. Johnson is correct to call us to consistent application of our separatist principles, and to point out that such consistency demands some housecleaning of the kind described in 2 Timothy 2:20-21. It is time to get this done. We need a fresh articulation of the fundamental doctrines, clearly identifying what these do and do not mean. Biblical truth must lead the way and set the standard.

Would these simultaneous developments produce a new movement that is united on the fundamentals and a common commitment to separation from unbelief? Possibly, but it is not probable. There are still too many unresolved issues, some of which I have already alluded to. The historical reality is that there are no clear lines of separation anymore because both movements are something less of a movement than they were when Fundamentalists pulled out, for example, of the Northern Baptist Convention to form the GARBC. The day of associations is probably past. We have entered into an era that values networking, not formal organizations. I agree with Johnson on this point— independence is good. My local church beliefs lead me to conclude it is even more than good; it is the best option.

What this new development may mean, practically speaking, is that the standard labels could lose some of their significance. If some of the conservative evangelicals become committed separatists (i.e. in belief and practice), repudiating the position of the old New Evangelicalism, then we may need to view them differently than we have. Likewise, if some of the currently professing Fundamentalists continue on as they have been, then that label will mean nothing in terms of whether fellowship with them is proper. I recognize that the prospect of either of these is unsettling to folks across the

board, but changing times demand discerning application of timeless biblical truth. If neither group recognizes this, both seem headed for serious trouble.

### *Conclusion*

I would expect that my response to Phil Johnson's article is going to be met with some negative reactions from all sides. I hope not, but it really doesn't matter. He has thrown down a gauntlet that needs to be picked up. We certainly are right to challenge the inaccuracies, but we are foolish if we don't listen to what he has said. He is not alone in his assessment, and some of those who agree with him still want to be Fundamentalists. The test here is not who is saying it, but whether the complaints against contemporary Fundamentalism are legitimate. Some of them are. That means we need to acknowledge them and make biblical corrections.

My purpose in responding to his critique of Fundamentalism is not to call for a new movement. It is to call for biblical changes within the existing one. We must reclaim our heritage as a theologically sound, biblically driven movement that exists for God's glory, not the perpetuation of our institutions. Let's stand firmly against apostasy and any compromise with it, but let's get rid of the personal quirks and theological quacks that have made their nest in Fundamentalism. May God be pleased to do so in my life time so that my four sons inherit a stronger, more vibrant Fundamentalism!