

March/April 2008, Volume 5, Issue 2

Editor's Note

The gospel unites and the gospel divides. Some walls it levels and others it erects. Some temples it destroys and others it builds.

But doesn't it seem like Christians often talk of just one or the other? When they do, imbalances follow. Too much talk about separation leads to strife in the church. Too much talk about unity leads to the compromise of the church. How hard it seems to talk of both gospel unity and gospel separation, each in their proper places! How much wisdom is needed!

Gearing up for [Together For The Gospel](#) in April of this year, all the writers in this issue of the 9Marks eJournal

make their attempt at striking the balance between the gospel's call to unity and its call to separation, in terms of the individual's conscience before God. If you're quick to talk about unity, maybe start with the articles on separation. If you're quick to talk about separation, maybe start with the articles on cooperation. Just a thought.

May the One who came with a sword of division but who came to break down the dividing wall of partition give wisdom to us all!

—**Jonathan Leeman**

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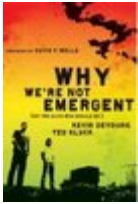
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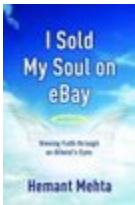
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Fellow Workers For the Truth

By Andy Johnson

A meditation on 3 John 8:

We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.

Cooperation has always been a difficult word for Protestant Christians to utter convincingly.

Given a history defined by expulsion and separation our lack of credibility in this area is understandable. If we're honest, many of us would have to admit that "competition" not "cooperation" is often the subtext in the relationships between churches. Churches compete for members, for influence, for resources.

Further complicating matters, many of the voices speaking most loudly in favor of cooperation seek to build it on shaky or even unbiblical ground—proposing superficial unity that ignores serious disagreement about the gospel itself.

To top it all off, my personal qualifications to write about the issue of cooperation, as an evangelical Baptist congregationalist, may seem triply in doubt! Nonetheless, Scripture convinces me that cooperation is a topic that all gospel-loving Christians must take seriously if we intend to take God's Word seriously. But where to begin?

A CONTRAST

The book of 3 John is one place where the value of cooperation between Christians in different local churches is especially clear. It appears that some itinerate evangelists had gone out from the church where the Apostle John lived and had come to the town where his dear friend Gaius resided. John then wrote a letter that contrasts the faithful support and cooperation these evangelists had received from Gaius with the self-centered rejection and opposition they had received from Diotrephes. In verse eight of the letter John stresses the importance of cooperation saying, "We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men *so that we may work together for the truth*" (ital mine).

We can't begin here to plumb the depths of this rich little letter, or even the eighth verse. But we can consider, in context, the challenge it presents to us and why it is important for Christian to joyfully embrace it. How should we understand this passage for us and for our churches today?

SEEK TO BLESS OTHERS

To start with, we should actively desire to cooperate with other Christians committed to the same gospel truth. Certainly we must not cooperate with or support people or churches who teach a false gospel—the book of 2 John helpfully addresses that topic. But the positive injunction of 3 John should delight us that there are other Christians with whom we share gospel truth and can cooperate.

This is why the congregation where I serve is committed to spending a significant part of its resources and time not merely on our own congregation but in blessing and partnering with other local churches.

WAYS TO PARTNER & SUPPORT

There are lots of ways churches can do this. A church can partner with other gospel-believing churches in hosting weekly lunchtime evangelistic talks at strategic downtown locations to which church members can bring their work colleagues. (Our Baptist church partners with an Anglican and a Presbyterian church in this way.)

A church can do this by hosting a pastoral internship program that supports young men for a semester or more, teaching them how to be pastors or missionaries before sending them out to bless other congregations.

A church can do this by pooling its money with other like-minded churches to send one another's members with the gospel to unreached peoples around the world.

A church can do this by supporting an organization like 9Marks, which helps other churches think through biblical church life.

And, as occasion permits, a church should certainly practice showing hospitality to members of other churches, as this verse directly instructs.

WHEN OUR LOVE FOR THE GOSPEL IS MOST CLEAR

The kind of cooperation and hospitality described in 3 John 8 is important, but it takes effort. It goes against our own self interest. That's why John is so concerned in the letter to encourage Gaius to actively love strangers, to support those from outside his own circle who are working for the truth. John says this not because the gospel work of these evangelists was more important than work done in Gaius' own town, and not because cooperation is an end in itself. John commands this because obeying John's instruction on this matter is good for Gaius' soul. John knows that one of the most reliable indicators of our love for Jesus is the degree to which we will work for the advancement of his truth when there is nothing directly in it for us.

Our love for the gospel is most clear when we delight to see it prosper—and to help it prosper—when other people will be viewed as the human agents of its success. John models this kind of love for the gospel as he delights seeing the truth honored in the lives and ministries of spiritual children who no longer have any direct connection to himself.

You see, I think even Diotrephes (whose heart was "evil") was excited about success in his own church, but I fear only because he regarded it as *his* church. Gaius was no doubt pleased to see the gospel bear fruit in his church too, but there was a critical difference. Gaius was also delighted to see the gospel bear fruit from the labors of strangers, from another church, among people he would never even meet. Gaius was willing to go to extra trouble and expense to advance their work—to *work together for the truth*.

And it's this willingness that so helpfully clarifies that a Christian is in love with the name of Jesus and not merely his own name or his ministry's name. That, my friends, is the attitude you and I should imitate.

THE BOTTOM LINE

So labor for the health of your local church, certainly. Support your local ministry, love one another, teach and train men and women to serve right where you are. But don't do even that merely for your own sake, but so that your congregation can be a blessing to your community, to churches throughout your nation, and even to the distant parts of the world. Cultivate ways to make visible your love for the gospel, and not just your love for your ministry.

But, actually, even that's not enough. Don't just labor so that your church can be a blessing to the world, labor for the sake of the Name, so that Christ will be exalted among the nations. And as you do this, as you set out to help the work of other gospel-believing Christians, you will demonstrate that you want to see Christ exalted, and not merely your church or group exalted. You will demonstrate that the gospel is much bigger than your personal sphere of work.

When you do all this, I think that you will find that both your joy in the gospel and your confidence in its world-wide triumph will only grow as you join hands with others to work together for the Truth.

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Together for What?

By Mark Dever

College freshman Bob becomes convinced of the doctrine of election and has a burning desire to convince everyone else. He's in the early "cage stage" of Calvinism.

Imagine his conversations with his friends, in his campus fellowship, in his church.

Everything becomes an illustration of God's sovereignty. It's all he wants to talk about. And if you disagree with Bob, watch out!

The question for you and me is, when we teach others the truth, do we do it with condescending pride and arrogance—we know something they don't? Or do we teach with the humility of one beggar sharing his bread with another?

Compromise is bad. Cooperation is good. But how do you tell the difference? What are the primary doctrinal positions for which we need to contend, and what are the secondary doctrinal positions about which we can disagree with charity and love?

I'd like to consider how we can encourage each other to hold the truth with humility by setting out six questions:

1. Do we follow commands to purify or to unite?
2. What are some common fights Christians have?
3. What's the specific purpose for cooperating?
4. What must Christians agree upon? (Essentials)
5. What may Christians disagree about? (Non-essentials)
6. How can Christians disagree well?

1. DO WE FOLLOW COMMANDS TO PURIFY OR TO UNITE?

First, do we follow commands to purify or to unite?

The Basic Problem

I trust most Christians recognize the problem confronting us: We live in a fallen world, where the truth will not always find a home. What's true is *not* necessarily the same as what's popular.

As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "There have been periods in history when the preservation of the very life of the Church depended upon the capacity and readiness of certain great leaders to *differentiate* truth from error and boldly to hold fast to the good and to reject the false. But our generation does not like anything of the kind. It is against any clear and precise demarcation of truth and error" (ital mine; from Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Maintaining the Evangelical Faith Today* (1952), 4-5).

We shouldn't be surprised at times such as ours, when people oppose distinguishing truth from error. In Paul's last letter, he warns, "the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Was Paul simply paranoid—overly focused on ideas of truth? I don't think so. The Lord Jesus teaches us to be on our guard. It was he who taught, "False christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect—if that were possible. So be on your guard" (Mark 13:22-23).

How do we be on our guard? We must admit that we all tend to be either too inclusive (thus slighting God's call to purity and undervaluing his truth) or too exclusive (thus slighting the width of God's love and the amazing examples of his work).

Do you see how this happens? By pitting God's Word against itself; by playing off one aspect of God's character against another—say, his holiness against his love—we actually confuse ourselves and harm others. What we should do, instead, is grow in our knowledge of God's Word and our own hearts. Then we will be more attuned to his truth as *he* has revealed it—both his call for holiness and for love.

Truth and humility shouldn't be enemies. The fact is, they're great friends, and truly growing in one should lead to growth in the other.

Too often, however, we find ourselves becoming a caricature of our tendencies. We either become a unity person or a purity person.

The Unity People

The unity people love Bible chapters like John 17. They perceive clearly that our unity with one another testifies to our unity with God in Christ, and that our love for one another shows God's love for us (as Jesus taught in John 13:34-35). They love the love passages in the Bible:

- "Make my joy complete by being like-minded" (Phil. 2:2);
- "agree with each other in the Lord" (Phil. 4:2);
- "all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor. 1:10);
- "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love" (Col. 2:2).

There have been many unity movements among professing Christians in the last few decades. There is old-line liberal ecumenism—"let's bring all the denominations together." There are the parachurch ministries which rally people from different churches to share the gospel—from Billy Graham to Campus Crusade. There is the charismatic movement, which has helped to create fellowship across old church divides. More recently there has been what we could call Great Traditionalism, which relies on an "oldest-common-denominator." You see this in the current fad among some evangelicals to use methods and objects associated with Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy as aids to piety.

The popular T-shirts among the unity crowd say things like "Doctrine divides" or "Love unites" or "Mission unites." It was from this camp that one bishop came who, not too long ago, said, "Heresy is better than schism." These doctrinal minimalists want "No creed but Christ; no law but love."

The Purity People

The opposite of the unity people are the purity people. They want purity of doctrine and purity of life. They want purity in our churches, in our Christian colleges, and in our seminaries.

These people take the Bible's command to separate seriously. They know 2 John well: "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house [church] or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (vv. 10-11).

Or John's warning from his first letter: "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (4:1).

And then there is Paul's warnings: "keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us" (2 Thes. 3:6).

And "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? . . . 'Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord'" (2 Cor. 6:14, 17).

Add to these all the passages on church discipline (e.g. 1 Cor 5.) as well as Jude's command, "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

The folks contending for the faith are the Fundamentalists and conservative Mennonites among us. These brothers and sisters will contend more quickly than they cooperate.

If you're tempted to quote Jesus in Matthew 7:1 to such contenders—"Do not judge, or you too will be judged"—you should look a little further down the same page at verse 15 of the same chapter, where Jesus taught "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (7:15). And, of course, it's Jesus in Matthew 18 who commands the church to eject unrepentant sinners from its fellowship!

The purity people seem to have a prophetic ministry of correction, just like the *Puritans* are stereotyped as having. Maybe their shoes were too tight. That made them grouchy. Their approach to everything can feel like, "Shoot first; ask questions later."

As we consider the unity people and the purity people together, the question we want to ask ourselves is, how do we take the best of both? The biblical desire for unity and cooperation as well as the biblical desire for truth and holiness?

2. WHAT ARE SOME COMMON FIGHTS CHRISTIANS HAVE?

For now, let's consider another question: what are some common fights among Christians?

There are just so many to choose from! Should we pray for the dead? Is the Protestant Reformation over? Should we support city-wide evangelistic meetings that send the reported converts to the nearest church? Does the Fourth Commandment concerning the Sabbath still apply today? Should we use hymns or choruses? Organs or guitars? Does God elect those that he foresees will believe, or does he simply elect? Are the supernatural gifts still active today? Is prophecy still happening today? Should churches accept repenting Christians who denied Christ in times of persecution back into their fellowship? Should churches be led by elders, a single pastor, a city-wide bishop? What does baptism do? Who should be baptized? Who should baptize? How should they baptize? Must baptism precede church membership? Is the Bible the church's sole authority? Is it sufficient? Is it inerrant? Are there gender roles in the Bible that we are supposed to follow today? Are women supposed to be elders in a church? What's an appropriate salary for a Christian minister? Should Christians tithe to their local churches? Should children be present throughout the whole morning service? Should Christians send their children to Christian schools or public schools; or should they homeschool them? Should ministers wear clothes that distinguish him from church members? Should church gatherings include performed music? Should churches hire non-Christian musicians to play for our public services? Should we believe before we belong, or belong before we believe? Is helping the poor a necessary part of evangelism?

Suppose you're in the midst of such a disagreement with other leaders or members in your church. What should you do? I would move on to the next question, question number 3.

3. WHAT'S THE SPECIFIC PURPOSE FOR COOPERATING?

Purpose Matters

What's the specific purpose for which you are considering cooperating with other Christians? The kind of cooperation we are aiming at determines how much agreement is necessary. I can be friends with someone whom I wouldn't marry. I can buy something from an individual I wouldn't hire. I can pray with someone whose church I wouldn't join. I can read a book by someone with whom I disagree. I can believe that someone would do a good job at some things, but not at others.

When it comes to religious questions, we must consider what the purpose is of a proposed agreement. For the purpose of salvation? For the purpose of belonging to the same church? For the purpose of attending the same conference or working together on the same project? What is the circumstance, the need, the purpose of cooperation?

Circumstances May Matter

Along these lines, Christians have found that the circumstances of the occasion matter. If you live in an area where Christians are persecuted, there is more motivation to cooperate. The number of Christians may well be small and fellowship hard to find. Christians in these circumstances may find far more encouragement in sharing and using the gifts of thirty people than in six or seven each establishing their own separate assemblies. Circumstances like these have led many Christians to work with people of other denominations more than they would have back in the United States. In other words, Baptists and Presbyterians are more likely to meet regularly together in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia than in Raleigh, North Carolina!

As Christians in America become more and more of a "cognitive minority"—a group which thinks differently than the majority culture—we, too, may find ourselves becoming more aware of our commonalities with other Christians than previous generations of American Christians have been.

Still, different kinds of cooperation require different levels of agreement. The requirements for church membership are more comprehensive than the requirements for planning an evangelistic outreach. The level of agreement needed between fellow church planters is greater than what's needed for initiating college student fellowships together. We can recognize other people as Christians, in other words, even though we might not think it wise to plant a church with them.

Conferences and one-time events can be pulled off with even less agreement, and Bible translations with perhaps even less. (I can imagine that Bible translators are able to agree in matters of translation even when they don't agree on the content of the gospel.) And, of course, Christians can practice co-belligerency with non-Christians on some public issues involving law and moral standards.

Creeds & Confessions

Throughout church history, Christians have composed written creeds like the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed in order to state clearly what beliefs they hold in common. Confessions like the Westminster Confession or the New Hampshire Confession do the same. So, too, with the statements of faith of individual churches and parachurch ministries. All such creeds, confessions, and statements express the basic level of agreement necessary for pursuing a common goal.

4. WHAT MUST CHRISTIANS AGREE UPON?

So here's the million dollar question: what must Christians agree upon?

This is a dangerous question, and we must proceed very carefully. We don't want to be like the teenager who asks, "How far can I go with my girlfriend?" which is to say, "What can I get away with?" In our case, we are not asking, "What's the *least* that I need to believe and still be considered a Christian?" True Christians will find themselves growing in the desire to pursue God's truth over every matter in which he has revealed himself in his Word.

The Apostles Teaching

To begin with, Christian fellowship can only be shared with those who share the Christian faith, that is, that body of teaching which articulates what Christians believe. In Acts 2:42, Luke describes the fellowship between the first Christians by saying, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship..." Notice that Luke says they shared the apostles' teaching before it says they shared fellowship.

Doctrinal choices that destroy and damn are called "heresies." The word "heresies" comes from the Greek word for "choice," and though we today are accustomed to using the word "choice" in a positive context, the apostle Peter showed how it can be used in just the opposite: "But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false prophets among you. They will secretly introduce *destructive heresies*, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves" (2 Peter 2:1). A doctrinal heresy or choice is a departure from the accepted rule of faith. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, is the right teaching of the Word of God.

As we're looking to cooperate with other believers, we want to make sure we share the apostles' teaching, not destructive heresies.

There is no agreed upon list of which errors should be called heretical, and it's probably not useful to refer to all errors as "heresy." Doing so just ratchets up the emotional heat without adding light to a conversation. Not all errors are the same. In fact, it's dangerous to treat all errors as the same. A misunderstanding of church membership is less important than a misunderstanding of the person of Jesus Christ! Some errors must be corrected; others can be endured for a lifetime.

Determining which errors can be borne with and which require separation requires us to understand the significance of the doctrine in which the disagreements occur, and even of the days in which a particular doctrine is in dispute. Just like some organs are more important than others, so some doctrines are more central than others. Our understanding of Christ's work on the cross is more important than our view of the Sabbath, just like our heart is more important than our appendix. A human can survive the removal of his wisdom tooth or his appendix, but not his heart!

How To Learn

How do we learn what we must agree on? Let me suggest three ways: through the Bible, through our church, and through our conscience.

We learn the truth fundamentally, supremely, finally, and mostly through the Bible. This is God's Word written. Study your Bible. Get to know God's Word well. Always be growing in your understanding and your love for it. Read Psalm 119 in your quiet times for a month in order to meditate and grow in your appreciation for the great gift to us of God's Word.

But God does not intend us to be earthly orphans, self-taught, self-regulating, self-centered. God has called us to belong to local churches that teach the Bible accurately and that are full of people whose lives show the fruit of his Spirit. Good teaching should bear good fruit. The elders in our churches should be able to teach us God's Word, which means we should submit ourselves to them and their teaching. When teachers teach as they should, Christians together in a church will have a clear grasp on the gospel that saved them. (Paul assumes in Galatians 1:8-9 that this would be the case.) Ultimately, then, it is the duty of the local church to define what we must agree upon to be a Christian, and to be a member of that congregation.

We learn also through our consciences. Each of us has a conscience. By the Fall, the conscience was radically harmed, but this important aspect of God's moral image has not been eliminated from our character. We all have an inherent sense of right and wrong. But that sense is inherent, *not inerrant*. Many people today treat their internal moral sense as their own unique god within, but the conscience must be corrected, trained, and taught, and it is our duty to do that according to the Scripture.

Clarity and Agreement

How can you tell if a doctrine is important and worth seeking agreement upon? Here are several tests for answering this question:

- How clear is the doctrine in Scripture?
- How clear do others think it is in Scripture (especially those you respect and trust as teachers of the Word)?
- How near is the doctrine (or its implications) to the gospel itself?
- What would be the practical and doctrinal effects of allowing disagreement in this area?

The people of God have always recognized that both summarizing and teaching the heart of the truth is important. So God gave his people a summary of his law in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20). Moses in Deuteronomy 6 provided another summary on how they were to teach their children. And Christians from the earliest times have used the summaries provided by catechisms to prepare individuals for baptism—which is how the Apostles' Creed was originally used. The church father Vincent of Lerins said in the fifth century that we should believe what has been believed always, everywhere, by all.

Right News, Right Views

One of the best words for Christian is "evangelical." An "evangelical" is one who is defined by certain specific *news*. "Good news" is what *evangel* means. Jesus says in the Gospel of John that the correct belief or views about his identity is necessary for someone to have eternal life; otherwise they will die in their sins (John 8:24).

Likewise, Paul tells us exactly what Christians should stand for—what is of first importance:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of *first importance*; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

Do you feel uncomfortable prioritizing some truths over others? Apparently, Paul wasn't.

Are you clear in your understanding that you must believe certain things in order to be a Christian? Paul was clear: "if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

Paul specifically urged the Romans to keep to the teaching they had already received (see Rom. 16:17). The Galatians, too: "even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal. 1:8; cf. Eph. 4:14).

He referred to "the truths of the faith" (1 Tim. 4:6) and encouraged Timothy to "devote himself to teaching" (1 Tim 4:13).

Paul warns that "if anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing" (1 Tim. 6:3-4). This is why heresies can be so destructive, because knowing and believing the truth is necessary to our salvation (see 2 Peter 2:1).

In fact, the apostle John taught that "We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood" (1 John 4:6). John also says,

Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ, as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house [meaning, I think, the local church] or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work (2 John 7-11).

Jude refers to godless men "who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our own Sovereign and Lord" (Jude 4).

In the letter of Jesus to the church at Pergamum, Jesus called those who held to a particular teaching—the teaching of the Nicolaitans—to repent (Rev. 2:15).

Do you see how often godlessness and falsehood go together? We Christians are those whose understandings and whose lives are shaped by the Good News of Jesus Christ! That's why Paul writes to the Corinthian church: "you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat" (1 Cor. 5:11).

Peter quotes Leviticus to remind Christians that "just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Throughout the Bible God declares that his people must not worship false gods or live lives devoted to them. John concludes his first epistle by writing, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). The idols he is talking about, I think, are the false gods of a christ who is not God incarnate, or a christ who tolerates immorality or a lack of love.

We are justified by faith alone, but a justifying faith produces Christians who look more and more like the God they worship.

Believe that God Is One

So what must Christians agree upon? I would say that Christians *must* agree upon God, the Bible, and the Gospel.

First, we must believe that God is one. He is triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is uncreated, self-existing. He is morally perfect. He is characterized by holy love. He is our sovereign Creator and Judge. He is the one we are called to believe in (Num. 14:11). As the LORD says to his people in Isaiah,

"You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior" (Isa. 43:10-11).

We also read in Acts 16 that the Philippian jailer's family rejoiced "because they had come to believe in God" (Acts 16:34).

And we read in Hebrews 11:6 that "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists..."

This essential belief in God is the sincere acknowledgement of a fact. But it's also more than that. James tells us, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder" (James 2:19). A *saving* belief in God transforms us increasingly into a reflection of his character. So John writes, "love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:7-8).

Believe that the Bible Is God's Truth

Second, we must believe that the Bible is how we know the truth about God. The Scriptures are God's revelation of himself and, therefore, have authority in our lives and teaching. The verse right before the one just quoted says this: "We are from

God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood" (1 John 4:6).

John's words seem to match what Jesus taught in John 10:4—that the sheep *know* the voice of the Good Shepherd. They recognize his voice and follow it.

Likewise, Paul commanded the Thessalonian Christians to follow his instructions and to ostracize those who did not (2 Thess. 3:6, cf. 14-15).

Believe in the Gospel

Third, we must believe the gospel. The Good News is that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God incarnate (see 1 John). Without understanding this, we could not uphold the truth of God's triune nature. The Trinity and the incarnation support each other. One cannot be attacked without attacking the other. As Paul said, "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 2:9).

But the gospel includes not only Christ's incarnation, it also includes his substitutionary death on the cross, his bodily resurrection, and his return in power and great glory.

Again, remember Paul's summary of what Christianity is in 1 Corinthians. The Corinthians had been dividing over all kinds of wrong things, which Paul spent fourteen chapters addressing. But now he turns finally to what they should contend *for!*

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you *as of first importance*; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

Do you see the facts here associated with the gospel? Christ has died for our sins. Christ was buried. Christ was raised. There it is! And make no mistake: clarity on the centrality of the cross will promote fellowship theologically (as the relative importance of doctrines is clarified) and experientially (as humility is encouraged in our character).

As we lift up the cross, the gospel appears. It contains the News of a Holy God. It contains the News of man made in God's own image, yet tragically fallen into terrible rebellion against God and under God's judgment (cf. Gen. 3; Rom. 3:23; 1 John 1:8-10; 5:12). It contains the News of Christ, the Son of God, who suffered for us and in whom we are to believe for eternal life (John 3:16, 18; 12:44; 17:20; 20:31; Acts 15:11; 16:31; Rom. 3:22; 10:9; Gal. 3:22; Phil. 1:29; Col. 2:9; 1 Thes. 4:14; 1 John 2:22-23; 3:23; 4:2-3, 15; 5:1, 5, 10). And it contains the News that we can be forgiven by God and reconciled to him through the gift of repenting and believing. Our repentance, moreover, will show itself in loving commitment to each other in the fellowship of the local church (Matt. 16; 18; Mark 1:15; Rom. 16:26; Heb. 10:25, 1 John 3:23; 4:19-21; 5:3, 13).

And the faith which alone justifies is faith in this God (Num. 14:11). It is trusting in his deliverance (Ps. 78:22). He has acted so that we may believe in him (Isa. 43:10). So Jesus' first words in Mark's gospel conclude with this call: "Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

John also wrote, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16; cf. 3:18; 11:26; 19:35; 20:31; Acts 16:31, 34; Rom. 3:22; 4:24; 10:9-10, 14; 16:26; 1 Cor. 1:21; Gal. 3:7, 22; Phil. 1:29; 1 Tim. 1:16; Heb. 10:39; 11:6; 1 Peter 1:21; 1 John 2:24).

We are justified only by trusting in this Jesus. Someone who doesn't believe this gospel isn't a Christian. Even people who call themselves "Christians," "church members," or "evangelicals" are *not* truly Christians if they don't believe *this* gospel! Calling yourself something doesn't make you one.

God, the Bible, the Gospel. You cannot have true Christian fellowship with someone who disagrees with you on these matters.

5. WHAT MAY CHRISTIANS DISAGREE ABOUT?

What then may Christians disagree about?

Again, I want to be very careful about this. I'm not giving you permission to not care about things that God has revealed in His Word. Nor am I trying to teach you how little you must believe and how much you can cooperate.

The answer to the question of what Christians may disagree about is best determined by the Bible and with the agreement of a Bible-preaching church.

Practical Matters

Christians can certainly have disagreements about practical matters. And some of these disagreements will, of practical necessity, cause local divisions. You cannot do something in two different ways. If *this* group of people are convinced that something should be done this way, and *that* group of people is convinced it should be done in another way, and it can't be done both ways, then the simple answer may be to work separately, but with love and cooperation.

So in Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas came to opposite conclusions about the way of wisdom in their work. Paul thought that they couldn't work with John Mark; Barnabas thought they should. Instead of fighting about it, they "parted company" (Acts 15:39). We have no reason to think that either stopped believing the other brother was a Christian; it's just that they knew they couldn't continue working together because of this practical disagreement.

True or False

As we think specifically of gatherings that claim to be a "church," we may categorize them as either "true" or "false." By this I don't mean that a "true church" never says anything false, or that a "false church" never says anything true. Rather, I mean that a "true church" preaches the true gospel, and is following Christ's commands to baptize and celebrate the Lord's Supper (including the practice of church discipline). A "false church," on the other hand, is one which has forsaken the preaching of the true gospel.

Regular or Irregular

Churches that preach the same true gospel we may classify as regular (according to the rule/Scripture) or irregular.

For example, it is my and my church's understanding that the Bible teaches that baptism is only for believers. Any church who preaches the same gospel as we do but who practices infant baptism we would call true but irregular churches (my Presbyterian brethren, of course, would return the compliment).

But the point is, if we call them true churches, we can fellowship with them in the gospel, even if we wouldn't agree with them on everything. We must have unity in the gospel to recognize each other as Christians.

Disputable Matters

But it's clear from the New Testament that there are a number of other issues that true Christians differ about. For instance, the question of eating meat sacrificed to idols was a burning issue in many of the churches. But Paul was not overly concerned about Christians disagreeing with each other over this issue because they were *not* maintaining that a certain conclusion was necessary for salvation. They could work together so long as they wouldn't be distracted by their disagreement. His sage advice? "Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God" (Rom. 14:22).

Paul also faced questions in the church about Christians regarding some days being more holy than others (see Rom. 14:6). But he called this issue a "disputable matter" (Rom. 14:1).

What are our disputable matters today? They are many. Questions about the particular practices of church membership are disputable.

Or consider the question of what the millennium is in Revelation 20. Some Christians would say we need to agree on this in order to have a church together. What do you think? Let's run this through the tests I suggested earlier:

Test 1: How clear is it in Scripture? It's mentioned in the two verses in Revelation 20 and nowhere else. And evangelical, Bible-believing commentaries are not in agreement about what John was referring to.

Test 2: How clear do others think it is in Scripture (especially those you respect and trust as teachers of the Word)? Again, I find a variety.

Test 3: How near is it (or its implications) to the gospel itself? I think it is unrelated. As long as we agree that Christ is returning, what he does during the Millennium seems to be of little significance to me right now.

Finally, test 4: What would be the doctrinal or practical effects of allowing disagreement in this area? We have not found any effects in our church—other than providing opportunities to practice charity toward each other. For that matter, the elders in my church disagree on this matter, and I cannot perceive any unfaithfulness or practical problems flowing out of these differences.

Non-Essential ≠ Unimportant

Now don't misunderstand me. Non-essential does not mean unimportant. It may sometimes; but at other times, what at first seems non-essential may prove to be important.

For instance, the question about prayers for the dead may at first seem non-essential. But as you come to recognize that this particular practice undermines justification by faith alone, you begin to see how important the topic is. Praying for the dead assumes that any decision they made in this life does not stand. It says we can directly affect the eternal states of others, when Scripture is clear that our eternal state is determined only by our faith in Christ alone.

6. HOW CAN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE WELL?

Finally, how can Christians disagree well?

Perhaps you have heard this helpful statement that came out of the German reformation: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things, charity (or love)." We must agree on the essentials in order to have unity, which we've discussed. And we allow for diversity in non-essentials, which we've also discussed. But how do we achieve that daunting command to love in all this?

Roger Nicole has suggested that we answer these two questions:

What do I owe the person who differs from me?
What can I learn from the person who differs from me?

Let's think about these questions for a moment.

What Do I Owe?

What do I owe the person who differs from me? First, I owe love. We should speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

Second, I owe respect. Do to others as you would have them do to you (Matt. 7:12). When you are in a disagreement, make it evident that you care about the person you're disagreeing with as a person, more than care about winning an argument. Listen carefully to what they're saying. Clarify anything you haven't understood. Always go for what people mean, even beyond what they've said. One of my theology professors always wrote out the pros and cons of the differing views.

The principle here is that you want to represent the opposite perspective as well as you can, so that the proponents feel satisfied with your presentation. After all, debates tend to harden proponents in their own ideas.

In all of this, consider what goals you share. Can you see what your friend is aiming at in what he's saying? One way I try to explore differences is to use what I call a "decision tree." I try to begin where we both agree, and then trace out the point at which we diverge and ask why he made one decision while I made the other. Your goal should always be to avoid alienating people, but instead to encourage them. That will usually get farther in persuading them anyway!

What Can I Learn?

The second question to ask yourself in learning to disagree well is, "What can I learn from the person who differs from me?"

After all, perhaps it's the case that I am wrong. Certainly I can learn something of my own assertiveness, and the temptations I face in discussion. Are we more interested in winning a discussion and safeguarding our reputation, or in discovering truth and leading it to triumph?

A couple of years ago I was reading a biography of John Wesley and I ran across this brief account:

It was customary for the itinerant and local preachers to take breakfast together, on Sunday mornings, at City Road. On one occasion, when Wesley was present, a young man rose and found fault with one of his seniors. The Scotch

blood of Thomas Rankin was roused, and he sharply rebuked the juvenile for his impertinence; but, in turn, was as sharply rebuked himself. Wesley instantly replied: 'I will thank the youngest man among you to tell me of any fault you see in me; in doing so, I shall consider him my best friend.'" (L. Tyerman, *Life and Times of Wesley* (Harper & Bros; 1872), III.567.)

Now that takes humility! And without humility, we can't learn. We can't learn the truth about ourselves or the truth about the Bible. According to the ancient Greeks, the opposite of a friend was not an enemy, but a flatterer. Our pride is our greatest enemy in all this.

Welcome correction as a good enemy of your pride. And appreciate the way in which those who differ with you can sometimes help to fill out or better balance the picture you're presenting. It can be good to have Christian friends that disagree with us on some things—it gives us the opportunity to learn and to exercise our love.

CONCLUSION

How can we summarize everything we've considered? Handle Scripture carefully and in context. Know the Bible well. Love God by loving his Word. Meditate on Psalm 119. As Paul told Timothy, "the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:24-25).

Put it all in perspective. If you're a Christian, you're an heir of heaven! God has called you to be a messenger of his gospel more than any other message. And what is your witness? Do people think of you as argumentative or quarrelsome? We want to be known more by what we are *for* than by what we're *against*. And we always want to be *for* the gospel, and *for* being reformed by the Word of God.

In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things love.

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A Senior Saint on Unity

By Iain H. Murray

Between 1875 and 1892 George Müller travelled the world preaching with seven objectives in view. The fourth of these was, "To promote among all true believers, brotherly love; to lead them to make less of those non-essentials in which disciples differ, and to make more of those great essential truth and foundation truths in which all true believers are united."

No real Christian could discount such an aim. Yet since these words were spoken no great advances have been made toward attaining this goal. How is that to be explained? I offer some reasons:

1. Unity has too often been pursued by those who are not advocates of the "great foundation truths." "Unity"—interpreted as organisational oneness—has been treated as a good remedy to stop the decline of Christian influence, with "fellowship" given priority over "doctrine," contrary to Acts 2:41.
2. The quest for unity around personalities and preachers (the threat in the Corinthian church) is never lasting, although it may seem to have short-lived success.
3. Müller's call "to make less of non-essentials" is not exactly straightforward, and the very phrase is liable to misinterpretation. True believers do disagree over some issues in Scripture—church government and the ordinance of baptism, for a start. Yet history has shown that all attempts to downplay these distinctives, and thus to end denominations, are going to fail. Believers are going to hold convictions on *all* that Scripture reveals. The policy of John Wesley and others to deem anything "not fundamental" as "mere opinion" is not good enough. Given the imperfect understanding of all Christians, and the need for corporate agreement on some secondary issues, denominations of one kind or another will remain. Better for us to accept this fact and, as J.C. Ryle says, keep the walls as low as possible and shake hands over them often.[1] This is not to deny that the distinction between secondary and fundamental truths, while not always easy to determine, is an important one.
4. Christians agree that unity is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:3). It follows that when believers experience more of his grace and power, the bond between them will grow. Conversely, what William Hamilton once said is true, "The more carnal a Christian is, the more sectarian he will be." An outpouring of the Spirit always brings greater unity. What Daniel Baker reported as happening in the revival at Beaufort, South Carolina, was true in many parts of the States at the time of the Second Great Awakening:

"The effect no one can conceive who was not present. Politics were laid aside; business stood still ... The union of sects produced on the occasion was not the least striking feature of the event. Distinctions were laid aside. Christians of all denominations met and worshipped together; indiscriminately in either church, and the cordiality of their mutual attachment was a living commentary on the great precept of their Teacher, 'Love one another.'"[2]

It was unity of this kind, then widely enjoyed, that gave rise to those great trans-denominational efforts of the nineteenth century which shaped the history of the world. I am thinking of missionary societies, Bible and Tract societies, in which there was wider co-operation than had been known before. Remembering this should restrain our controversies over issues which do not directly concern the gospel itself. George Whitefield would never have accomplished what he did had he not acted on the principle, "I despair of a greater union among the churches, till a greater measure of the Spirit be poured from on high. Hence, therefore, I am resolved simply to preach the gospel of Christ, and to leave others to quarrel by and with themselves."[3]

What are the needs in the contemporary scene with regard to unity?

1. In an age of doctrinal indifference, we need to be awake to the difficulty of obeying the injunction to "follow peace with all men" while contending for the faith. In that regard, we should do our utmost to avoid derogatory terms in speaking of fellow Christians. All distinctive identity labels should be used very sparingly. Christians are to love and serve one another in all circumstances.
2. We need to be alert to the threat that innocently adjusting services to the musical taste of modern culture poses to the reverent worship of God. God's powerful works have always been accompanied more by awe, penitence, and silence than by noise and "celebration." Practice, as well as faith, needs to conform to the simplicity of the New Testament. The fear of God and the comfort of the Holy Spirit belong together (Acts 9:31). True worshippers should know something of what is said of Jacob: 'He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven' (Gen 28:17)."

3. Instead of attempting to form new alliances and organizations, we need to discern what God is doing. His work will last for eternity. It is one of the brightest hopes in the United States at the present time that gospel preachers, from different denominational backgrounds, are being spontaneously drawn together in a common concern to advance the cause of Christ. This cause does not need new labels or structures; most of all it needs the anointing of the Spirit, more prayer, love, and humility. Announcements of success, or satisfaction with numbers, are to be feared rather than sought. God's work needs no publicity. A true advance and recovery will be marked by the sense of weakness and need which gives all glory to God. Let us not stop short of seeking a real spiritual awakening!

Endnotes:

1. I have written on "Church Unity and Christian Unity" in *The Old Evangelicalism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005).
2. *Making Many Glad, The Life and Labours of Daniel Baker*, W. Baker (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), p.149.
3. *Life of Whitefield*, L. Tyerman, vol.1 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876), p.552.

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Theological Triage

By R. Albert Mohler

In every generation, the church is commanded to "contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints." That is no easy task, and it is complicated by the multiple attacks upon Christian truth that mark our contemporary age. Assaults upon the Christian faith are no longer directed only at isolated doctrines. The entire structure of Christian truth is now under attack by those who would subvert Christianity's theological integrity.

Today's Christian faces the daunting task of strategizing which Christian doctrines and theological issues are to be given highest priority in terms of our contemporary context. This applies both to the public defense of Christianity in face of the secular challenge and the internal responsibility of dealing with doctrinal disagreements. Neither is an easy task, but theological seriousness and maturity demand that we consider doctrinal issues in terms of their relative importance. God's truth is to be defended at every point and in every detail, but responsible Christians must determine which issues deserve first-rank attention in a time of theological crisis.

A trip to the local hospital Emergency Room some years ago alerted me to an intellectual tool that is most helpful in fulfilling our theological responsibility. In recent years, emergency medical personnel have practiced a discipline known as triage – a process that allows trained personnel to make a quick evaluation of relative medical urgency. Given the chaos of an Emergency Room reception area, someone must be armed with the medical expertise to make an immediate determination of medical priority. Which patients should be rushed into surgery? Which patients can wait for a less urgent examination? Medical personnel cannot flinch from asking these questions, and from taking responsibility to give the patients with the most critical needs top priority in terms of treatment.

The same discipline that brings order to the hectic arena of the Emergency Room can also offer great assistance to Christians defending truth in the present age. A discipline of theological triage would require Christians to determine a scale of theological urgency that would correspond to the medical world's framework for medical priority. With this in mind, I would suggest three different levels of theological urgency, each corresponding to a set of issues and theological priorities found in current doctrinal debates.

First-level theological issues would include those doctrines most central and essential to the Christian faith. Included among these most crucial doctrines would be doctrines such as the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, justification by faith, and the authority of Scripture.

In the earliest centuries of the Christian movement, heretics directed their most dangerous attacks upon the church's understanding of who Jesus is, and in what sense He is the very Son of God. Other crucial debates concerned the question of how the Son is related to the Father and the Holy Spirit. At historic turning-points such as the councils at Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon, orthodoxy was vindicated and heresy was condemned – and these councils dealt with doctrines of unquestionable first-order importance. Christianity stands or falls on the affirmation that Jesus Christ is fully man and fully God.

The church quickly moved to affirm that the full deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ are absolutely necessary to the Christian faith. Any denial of what has become known as Nicæan-Chalcedonian Christology is, by definition, condemned as a heresy. The essential truths of the incarnation include the death, burial, and bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who deny these revealed truths are, by definition, not Christians.

The same is true with the doctrine of the Trinity. The early church clarified and codified its understanding of the one true and living God by affirming the full deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – while insisting that the Bible reveals one God in three persons.

In addition to the Christological and Trinitarian doctrines, the doctrine of justification by faith must also be included among these first-order truths. Without this doctrine, we are left with a denial of the Gospel itself, and salvation is transformed into some structure of human righteousness.

The truthfulness and authority of the Holy Scriptures must also rank as a first-order doctrine, for without an affirmation of the Bible as the very Word of God, we are left without any adequate authority for distinguishing truth from error.

These first-order doctrines represent the most fundamental truths of the Christian faith, and a denial of these doctrines represents nothing less than an eventual denial of Christianity itself.

The set of second-order doctrines is distinguished from the first-order set by the fact that believing Christians may disagree on the second-order issues, though this disagreement will create significant boundaries between believers. When Christians organize themselves into congregations and denominational forms, these boundaries become evident.

Second-order issues would include the meaning and mode of baptism. Baptists and Presbyterians, for example, fervently disagree over the most basic understanding of Christian baptism. The practice of infant baptism is inconceivable to the Baptist mind, while Presbyterians trace infant baptism to their most basic understanding of the covenant. Standing together on the first-order doctrines, Baptists and Presbyterians eagerly recognize each other as believing Christians, but recognize that disagreement on issues of this importance will prevent fellowship within the same congregation or denomination.

Christians across a vast denominational range can stand together on the first-order doctrines and recognize each other as authentic Christians, while understanding that the existence of second-order disagreements prevents the closeness of fellowship we would otherwise enjoy. A church either will recognize infant baptism, or it will not. That choice immediately creates a second-order conflict with those who take the other position by conviction.

In recent years, the issue of women serving as pastors has emerged as another second-order issue. Again, a church or denomination either will ordain women to the pastorate, or it will not. Second-order issues resist easy settlement by those who would prefer an either/or approach. Many of the most heated disagreements among serious believers take place at the second-order level, for these issues frame our understanding of the church and its ordering by the Word of God.

Third-order issues are doctrines over which Christians may disagree and remain in close fellowship, even within local congregations. I would put most of the debates over eschatology, for example, in this category. Christians who affirm the bodily, historical and victorious return of the Lord Jesus Christ may differ over timetable and sequence without rupturing the fellowship of the church. Christians may find themselves in disagreement over any number of issues related to the interpretation of difficult texts or the understanding of matters of common disagreement. Nevertheless, standing together on issues of more urgent importance, believers are able to accept one another without compromise when third-order issues are in question.

A structure of theological triage does not imply that Christians may take any biblical truth with less than full seriousness. We are charged to embrace and to teach the comprehensive truthfulness of the Christian faith as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. There are no insignificant doctrines revealed in the Bible, but there is an essential foundation of truth that undergirds the entire system of biblical truth.

This structure of theological triage may also help to explain how confusion can often occur in the midst of doctrinal debate. If the relative urgency of these truths is not taken into account, the debate can quickly become unhelpful. The error of theological liberalism is evident in a basic disrespect for biblical authority and the church's treasury of truth. The mark of true liberalism is the refusal to admit that first-order theological issues even exist. Liberals treat first-order doctrines as if they were merely third-order in importance, and doctrinal ambiguity is the inevitable result.

Fundamentalism, on the other hand, tends toward the opposite error. The misjudgment of true fundamentalism is the belief that all disagreements concern first-order doctrines. Thus, third-order issues are raised to a first-order importance, and Christians are wrongly and harmfully divided.

Living in an age of widespread doctrinal denial and intense theological confusion, thinking Christians must rise to the challenge of Christian maturity, even in the midst of a theological emergency. We must sort the issues with a trained mind and a humble heart, in order to protect what the Apostle Paul called the "treasure" that has been entrusted to us. Given the urgency of this challenge, a lesson from the Emergency Room just might help.

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When, Why & Where To Draw Boundaries

By Wayne Grudem

Christian groups usually have doctrinal statements that define the "boundaries" of their organizations. How can they know whether to add new topics to their doctrinal statements from time to time? This is the question of drawing new boundaries. Four questions come to mind:

WHY DRAW BOUNDARIES AT ALL?

Why should Christian organizations draw boundaries at all? There are several reasons.

1. False Teaching Harms the Church

False teaching harms the church. In a day marked by much pluralism and subjectivism, the destructiveness of false teaching needs to be remembered. In the epistles of the New Testament, sound doctrine is taught again and again, and error is corrected (Gal 1:12; Acts 20:29-30; 1 Tim. 6:4-5). Do any of us have the same sober apprehension of the destructiveness of false doctrine that the New Testament apostles had?

2. False Teaching Spreads

If false teaching is not stopped, it spreads and does more damage. In 2 Timothy 2:17-18, Paul pictures false teachers quietly working their influence among unsuspecting church members, spreading silently and invisibly like "gangrene." Once a church or Christian organization allows some vocal advocate of a false teaching to have a position of influence, those people become precedents by which others can be allowed in.

3. False Teaching Causes Controversy and Distracts

If false teaching is not stopped, we will waste time and energy in endless controversies rather than doing valuable kingdom work. When Paul urged his readers to "avoid controversies," he meant the fruitless, endless controversies that hinder us from doing more productive ministry. There comes a point when it is no longer wise for a church to continue arguing over certain controversies. They should come to a decision and go on to productive kingdom work.

4. Jesus Holds Us Responsible

Jesus and the New Testament authors hold church leaders responsible for silencing false teaching within the church, and they expect that those in authority will remove the platform that these false teachers have (See Tit. 1:10-11; 2 Pet. 2:1-3). Most sobering are Jesus' rebukes against churches that tolerated the presence of false teachers. He rebuked the church at Pergamum *merely for having among them* people who held to certain false teachings. (Rev 2.14)

WHY DRAW NEW BOUNDARIES?

Why should evangelical organizations draw new boundaries? When I speak of "new boundaries," I do not mean boundaries that would make an organization fundamentally different from what it was from its beginning. Rather, I mean boundaries that for the first time state explicitly what was already believed by the vast majority of the members for many years. "New boundaries" are put into place *to keep the organization from becoming something significantly different* from what it has been.

This process may be summarized in the following principle: *False teaching changes, so old boundaries do not protect against new problems.*

In every age, the church has faced new challenges which it was forced to address. In recent years within the evangelical world, several new problems of false doctrine have arisen, and therefore old doctrinal formulations that do not address these questions are inadequate. I am convinced that Christian organizations and denominations will soon need to add new boundaries to protect against these new forms of false teaching.

WHEN SHOULD WE DRAW NEW BOUNDARIES?

When should evangelical organizations draw new boundaries? Evangelical organizations should draw new boundaries *after a false teaching has become a significant problem, but before the false teaching does great harm, and before it has a large following entrenched in the organization.*

It is impractical and impossible to rule out doctrinal errors before they appear. Problems must be dealt with after they arise, and after they have become a significant problem for the church. Yet we cannot wait too long to exclude a false teaching, for if we do, it will gain influence and may soon become entrenched in the church or organization.

HOW DO WE DISCERN WHEN NEW BOUNDARIES ARE NEEDED?

How do churches and evangelical organizations discern when new boundaries are needed in doctrinal and ethical matters? This question requires wisdom, judgment, prayer, and discussion on the part of leaders and members in churches and organizations. Here are some questions each church or organization should ask when considering whether to draw a new boundary:

1. Certainty

How sure are we that the teaching is wrong? Have the advocates of this teaching been given a fair hearing? Has there been enough time to reflect on the matter carefully? And is there a growing consensus among God's people generally that this new teaching *cannot be right*? I believe God gives to His people a generally reliable "spiritual instinct" about when a particular teaching simply cannot be consistent with Scripture.

2. Effect on Other Doctrines

Will this teaching likely lead to significant erosion in other doctrines? Some doctrines are absolutely important to maintain because of their effect on other doctrines. If we abandon the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, or the deity and humanity of Christ in one person, or the inerrancy of Scripture, or justification by faith alone, many other doctrines will be lost as well.

3. Effect on Personal and Church Life

Will this false teaching bring significant harm to people's Christian lives, or to the work of the church? The advocacy of homosexuality, for instance, brings significant destructive consequences to people's lives. Or, to take another example, inclusivism tends quickly to destroy the motivation for evangelism and missions.

4. Historical Precedent

Is this teaching contrary to what the vast majority of the Bible-believing church has held throughout history? Those who denied the inerrancy of Scripture were in the difficult position of saying that the vast majority of God's people throughout the history of the church were wrong. Open theists have a similarly huge burden, for probably 99.9% of Christian believers throughout history have believed that God knows all future events.

5. Perception of Importance Among God's People

Is there increasing consensus that this matter is important enough that the false teaching should be explicitly denied in a doctrinal statement? This consideration takes into account the deep spiritual instincts of God's people, not just regarding the rightness or wrongness of a doctrine, but regarding its importance. Often God's people will say, "Something fundamental is at stake here. The God this teaching describes is simply not the God of the Bible."

6. Purposes of the Organization

Is the teaching a significant threat to the nature and purposes of the organization? Here I am attempting to take into account the fact that God raises up different organizations for different purposes. Each evangelical organization must ask itself, what things are fundamental to preserving our purpose and identity?

7. Motivations of Advocates

Does it seem that the advocates of this teaching hold it because of a fundamental refusal to be subject to the authority of God's Word, rather than because of sincerely-held differences of interpretation based on accepted hermeneutical standards? With regard to some specific type of false teaching, after some interaction with one of its responsible advocates, we might ask ourselves, "Deep down inside, is he (or she) just embarrassed by the offense of the cross?" Or we might ask, "Deep down inside, is he embarrassed by the exclusive claims of Christ to be the only way to God?"

On the other hand, to take an example where I think the motivations are good on both sides, we could think about differences among evangelicals over the length of the days of creation in Genesis 1. I do not think that people on either side of this question have any deep refusal in their hearts to be subject to Scripture. Rather, I think people are just weighing various factors and coming to different conclusions on a complex question.

8. Methods of Advocates

Do the advocates of this teaching frequently manifest arrogance, deception, unrighteous anger, slander, and falsehood rather than humility, openness to correction and reason, kindness, and absolute truthfulness? If so, then we have a further indication that what they teach is not the "wisdom from above" that James speaks about (James 3:17-18).

SOME WRONG QUESTIONS TO ASK

There are some questions that should not be part of our consideration in deciding which doctrinal matters to exclude with new boundaries. For example:

"Are the advocates my friends?"

"Are they nice people?"

"Will we lose money or members if we exclude them?"

Such questions are grounded in a wrongful fear of man, not in a fear of God and trust in God.

CONCLUSION

We look back with admiration and thanksgiving on those from previous generations who defended many important doctrines of our faith, but with disappointment and shame on those who failed to take a clear stand. Now God has entrusted us with a stewardship in this generation. Now the choice of whether to do something or nothing about false doctrine is up to us.

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A Pastors' and Theologians' Forum on Fundamentalism

We asked a roundtable of pastors and theologians the following question:

What can we learn from the Christian Fundamentalists?

Most of the answers focus, positively, on the Fundamentalists' willingness to stand for truth and, negatively, on their tone and an inability to distinguish between primary and secondary matters. What's striking is how the respondents nuance their answers.



Answers from

- **David S. Dockery**, President, Union University
- **David M. Doran**, President, Detroit Baptist Seminary
- **Timothy George**, President, Beeson Divinity School
- **Os Guinness**, Author and Social Critic
- **Darryl G. Hart**, Elder and Author
- **Michael Haykin**, Professor, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
- **Matthew C. Hoskinson**, Pastor, Heritage Bible Church, South Carolina
- **Bob Johnson**, Pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, Michigan
- **Paul C. H. Lim**, Professor, Vanderbilt University
- **James MacDonald**, Pastor, Harvest Bible Chapel, Illinois
- **Mark A. Minnick**, Pastor, Mount Calvary Baptist Church, South Carolina
- **Phil Newton**, Pastor, South Woods Baptist Church, Tennessee
- **Mark Noll**, Professor, University of Notre Dame
- **Paige Patterson**, President, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
- **Lance Quinn**, Pastor, The Bible Church of Little Rock, Arkansas
- **Jeramie Rinne**, Pastor, South Shore Baptist Church, Massachusetts
- **Carl Trueman**, Professor, Westminster Theological Seminary
- **David Wells**, Professor, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary
- **Ben Wright**, Pastoral Assistant, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC

David S. Dockery

Having been called a fundamentalist many times by those to my left, I am aware that in the eyes of many, a fundamentalist is "anyone to my right." But, if by this term we mean those who have historically identified themselves as such since the early decades of the 20th century, then I think we can make the following observations.



We can learn both positive and negative lessons from the Fundamentalists. We can learn that the authority of Scripture is primary and the ultimate teachings of Christianity are to be heartily defended. We can learn that purity and holiness are important, even as we are reminded that the proclamation of the gospel message is imperative.

On the other hand, we can learn that a failure to distinguish primary doctrines from secondary ones brings about confusion. Carl Henry once said that Fundamentalists cannot distinguish between the important truth regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ and questionable matters like attending movies. In their attempt to defend the Bible and the gospel, Fundamentalists have often presented the truths of Christianity in a negative light. Their concerns with worldliness have resulted in a separatism that has no impact on the culture or society. The emphasis on holiness often results in an unhealthy legalism.

That being said, the reaction to Fundamentalism among some Evangelicals has resulted in a failure to draw boundaries regarding the essential teachings of the Christian Faith as well as a form of worldliness that neglects concerns for holiness. In that regard, we do well to learn both positive and negative lessons from our Fundamentalist brothers and sisters.

David S. Dockery is the president of Union University and author, most recently, of Renewing Minds: Serving Church and Society Through Christian Higher Education (B&H).

David M. Doran

In light of the subsequent doctrinal decline in Evangelicalism, it seems important to learn that granting Christian recognition and fellowship to those who deny essential Christian doctrines is not only disastrous for the health of the church, but, more fundamentally, it dishonors God by disobeying His Word. Many texts are clear that false doctrine and those who teach it must be identified and rejected (e.g., Romans 16:17), and that giving such false teachers any encouragement makes one a participant in their evil deeds (2 John 9-11). Fundamentalism's commitment to maintain the line between truth and error was the right position, and rejecting that position has yielded a harvest of heresies among professing Evangelicals.



In light of the subsequent fragmentation among Fundamentalists, it seems important to learn that separation must always be viewed in relation to the gospel. In the early stages of Fundamentalism, this was clear. Both modernism and compromise with it were genuine threats to the gospel—the former by denying essential elements of the gospel and the latter by denying that acceptance of the Christian gospel is necessary to be recognized as a Christian. Later, in the midst of the conflict between the Fundamentalists and new Evangelicals, in some ways the focus shifted off of the gospel to secondary matters. Separation, rather than serving the goal of gospel purity, sometimes came to be viewed as end in itself—separation for the sake of separation. That's a path to constant schism.

In summary, gospel believing people and churches need to recognize the biblical call to defend the gospel even to the point of separation while not getting sidetracked into divisive battles matters which are not essential to the gospel. The 21st century church needs to embrace and wisely apply biblical separation for the sake of the gospel, the health of the church, and, ultimately, for God's glory.

David M. Doran is the pastor of Inter-City Baptist Church in Allen Park, Michigan, and president of Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. He also wrote For the sake of his name: Challenging a New Generation for World Missions (Student Global Impact).

Timothy George

What can we learn from the Fundamentalists? Well, to start with, how about the fundamentals? These sturdy Christians stood courageously for crucial doctrines of faith such as the total truthfulness of Holy Scripture, the Virgin Birth of Christ, his substitutionary atoning death on the cross, etc. when these teachings were under attack by unbelieving theologians. Thank God for them and for their courage!



Another lesson: how to work together across denominational lines for the historic orthodox faith. Fundamentalism is the mother of Evangelical ecumenism at its best.

Here is a third lesson: an unstinted commitment to the cause of world missions. The Fundamentalists gave the lie to the old canard, "Doctrine divides, missions unite."

But there are negative lessons as well. The twin errors of Fundamentalism, to my mind, were reductionism and separatism. On the first, the Fundamentalists were not fundamental enough (where's the Trinity?), and on the second, they became, over time, too contentious to contend for the faith once delivered, except in their own sectarian bubble.

Still, there is much to learn here about our Christian witness today.

Timothy George is the founding dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University and a senior editor of Christianity Today.

Os Guinness

"A fundamentalist," Jerry Falwell once said to me, "is an Evangelical with guts." His point is a good one in a day when, in Peter Vierek's quip, "Anti-fundamentalism has replaced anti-Catholicism as the anti-Semitism of the intellectual." But there is more to the issue than that.



Fundamentalism began as a theological movement at the dawn of the twentieth century, and for all who love truth and orthodoxy its beginnings were praiseworthy. As every academic tutor and sports coach knows, what is more basic and productive than a "return to the fundamentals"?

But over the course of the century, Fundamentalism has morphed from its theological roots into a cultural movement, and as such it has now spread to characterize parts of all the world religions – and even secularism. Richard Dawkins, for instance, is a fundamentalist atheist just as the radical Islamists are fundamentalist Muslims. The impulses of the original theological movement are good, but those of the contemporary cultural movements are bad. For advanced modern fundamentalism is not in fact traditional; it is *a modern reaction to the modern world*.

Modern fundamentalism still has a religious identity, but it is also a social movement. What it does is reassert a lost world, a once intact but no-longer-taken-for-granted cultural reality. In doing so, it both romanticizes the past and radicalizes the present with its overlay of psychological defiance and cultural militancy. Herein lies its danger to followers of Jesus: the cultural overlay grows more and more alien to the call of Jesus to his disciples. In their zeal to resist modern culture, for example, Fundamentalists have been quick to abandon such costly teaching of Jesus as "Love your enemies" and forgive as we have been forgiven—without limits.

In my view, then, Fundamentalists demonstrate two valuable lessons to other followers of Jesus. On the one hand, they rebuke us for our lack of courage. Each of us must be prepared to take up our cross and count the cost. On the other hand, they warn us of the unintended consequences of faith in a fallen world. Declaring an aim to return to fundamentals is not enough. We have to go back again and again and again, to question our faith and our lives by the standards and teaching of Jesus himself. *Semper reformanda* is our watchword, which is why the Church is an institution that always goes forward by first going back—and keeps on doing so.

Os Guinness is an author and social critic, whose latest book is The Case for Civility – and Why Our Future Depends on It (HarperOne).

Darryl G. Hart

The Virtue of Being Suspicious.

As contrary as it runs to popular perceptions, Fundamentalists were not fools. In fact, their powers of discernment make contemporary Evangelicals, who have supposedly advanced beyond Fundamentalists' defense of simple verities, look downright gullible.

Fundamentalists knew they were in a battle, that the church is always being threatened with false teachers and members with "itching ears." They took the New Testament seriously when its writers charged the early church to be on the lookout for those who would lead God's flock astray.

Fundamentalists also knew that the greatest danger to the church invariably came from within her ranks. J. Gresham Machen was a great example of such skepticism. In 1926 he wrote,

"Last week it was reported that the churches of America increased their membership by 690,000. Are you encouraged by these figures? I for my part am not encouraged a bit. I have indeed my own grounds for encouragement. . . . But these figures have no place among them. How many of these 690,000 names do you think are really written in the Lamb's book of life? A small proportion, I fear. Church membership today often means nothing more, as has well been said, than a vague admiration for the moral character of Jesus; the Church in countless communities is little more than a Rotary Club. . . . It will be hard; it will seem impious to timid souls; many will be hurt. But in God's name let us get rid of shams and have reality at last."

In a day when Protestants seem to be as easily impressed by smooth-talking television preachers, beautiful liturgies administered by women and gays, or smart popes, we could use Fundamentalist suspicion.

Darryl G. Hart is an elder in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and co-author most recently of Seeking a Better Country: Three Hundred Years of American Presbyterianism (P&R).

Michael Haykin

The term "Fundamentalism," for many in our culture a word with exclusively negative associations, was birthed in the 1910s and 1920s in connection with a desire to affirm the Fundamentals of the Christian Faith



in the face of the 19th and early 20th century liberal denial of various orthodox doctrines. As such, Fundamentalism points us to the important task that confronts the Church in every generation, namely, the vigorous assertion without compromise of such key truths as the Trinity, the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, his bodily incarnation and resurrection from the dead. The passion for the Truth gripped the early Fundamentalists and it needs to grip us as well.

Alongside a passion for the Truth, early Fundamentalism was also shaped by a desire to know the reality of that text in Ephesians 5, where we read that Christ's great work includes the sanctification and purification of the Church (verses 25-26). Early Fundamentalists were keenly aware that purity of doctrine was a key part of our Lord's sanctifying and purifying work and that Christians cannot walk hand in hand with those who flagrantly deny the essentials of the Faith. In this connection, they were also desirous of heeding another related text, namely, that "pure and undefiled religion in the presence of God, even the Father, is this...to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27). These desires—seeking purity of doctrine and church reform as well as living holy lives—should also be central to our Christianity.

Yet, as Fundamentalism pursued these passions, all too frequently it found itself getting sidelined in debates about tertiary issues and becoming a movement that fostered schism rather than reformation. At times it seemed to forget that theological orthodoxy in and by itself cannot revitalize Christian communities: the coals of orthodoxy are vital, but there must be the life-giving flame of the Spirit as well.

Michael Haykin is a professor of church history and biblical spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky & Research Professor of Irish Baptist College, and the author of The God Who Draws Near (Evangelical Press, 2007).

Matthew C. Hoskinson

Nothing is more critical to the Fundamentalists' mindset than to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered. They take this responsibility with a laudable gravity. Doctrines are examined to see whether they are in keeping with the faith. Practices are evaluated to determine whether they reflect godliness or worldliness. Their goal in both respects is to guard the gospel from doctrinal and practical aberrations that would dilute its message and power.



Like all Christians, Fundamentalists are subject to the problem of depravity. Consequently, they themselves may deviate into aberrant doctrine (e.g., KJV-onlyism). Sometimes, their practical applications appear to be as important as (or even more important than) the gospel. At other times, they may separate from a brother or sister without taking time to understand the work of Christ in that person's heart. These errors notwithstanding, their biblically-rooted desire is to take seriously the call to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered. Broader Christianity would do well to imitate that mindset.

Matthew C. Hoskinson (Ph.D. Theology) is the pastor of ministry vision at Heritage Bible Church in Greer, South Carolina.

Bob Johnson

We can learn from the Fundamentalists to appreciate and affirm the following:

1. An emphasis upon the Scripture and Preaching
2. An emphasis upon Evangelism and Missions
3. An emphasis upon the Local Church
4. An emphasis upon authority
5. A concern for personal purity
6. A concern for ecclesiastical purity
7. A willingness to be tenacious



Many of these strengths have certainly become points of abuse and are well documented, tragically so. But Fundamentalists are not afraid to take a stand, which is refreshing. We can also learn that your strength taken to an unbiblical position will be your weakness. The emphasis upon preaching has often turned into an emphasis upon the preacher. The priority of evangelism has led to much man-centered gospel presentations, manipulation, and forced conversions. Some local churches function with cult-like symptoms, where the fear of man reigns over the fear of God. Personal purity can turn into following a list of external standards which do not always address the heart nor reflect the Scriptures. Concern for separation from the world has often resulted in a tolerance for arrogance and aberrant theology by others who are also separated (e.g. KJV only, blatant Arminianism). Some who grew up in the Fundamentalist camp (no Fun, all Damn and no Mental) have reacted to the abuses by abandoning that which is biblical and truly fundamental.

Bob Johnson is the senior pastor at the Cornerstone Baptist Church in Roseville, Michigan, and is a graduate of Bob Jones University.

Paul C. H. Lim

Allow me to re-phrase the question. Rather than answering what I can learn from the Fundamentalists, I would like to engage the question, "What I can learn from *The Fundamentals*?"



Published between 1910-1915, this twelve-volume compendium of what biblical, orthodox Christianity stood for was edited by Dr. R.A. Torrey, a Yale-educated evangelist/theologian (and founder of Biola University in Los Angeles) who was acutely aware of the corrosive impact of "higher criticism," which had a deleterious—indeed disastrous—impact on how people thought of the trustworthiness and truthfulness of the Word of God, human origin and destiny, and eventually Christianity itself. Methodically laying out the basic contours of "faith once delivered for saints," *The Fundamentals* was comprised of contributions from B.B. Warfield and Charles Erdman of Princeton Seminary; Anglican bishops such as J.C. Ryle and H.C.G. Moule; a Scottish professor of divinity, James Orr; missionary *par excellence* C.T. Studd; E.Y. Mullins, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; a celebrated preacher G. Campbell Morgan; and Mrs. Jessie Penn-Lewis who contributed a key chapter "Satan and His Kingdom."

As one can see it was both international and ecumenical, provided that the center of Christianity was found on the vicarious, penal-substitutionary redemption wrought by the work of Christ, who was sent from the Father as eternal, co-equal Son of God, and whose identity was savingly revealed through the work of the Holy Spirit in and through the Church.

In other words, the Trinitarian orthodoxy of Nicaea was recast in early twentieth-century garb in order to stake out the claims of Christianity, not merely defensively but also as an effort to re-present the "saving shape" of the Christian faith and practice.

Paul C.H. Lim is an assistant professor of the History of Christianity at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, and is the co-editor of The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism (Cambridge).

James MacDonald

I was raised in a Fundamentalistic Baptist church and attended a Fundamentalistic Bible college. In the negative I believe Christian Fundamentalism in North America during the last century became too focused on an extra biblical code of conduct as a measurement of orthodoxy. Many good people, who agreed with the doctrinal positions of Fundamentalism, left because they knew that "mixed bathing," music/movie choices, and length of hair or dresses were not accurate assessments of an individual's commitment to biblical holiness.



Worse than the legalism was the tone often expressed in enforcing these codes. Fundamentalism's angry assessment of all who disagreed led to the oft repeated axiom, "no fun, too much damn, and not enough mental." In my experience it was Fundamentalism's uncharitable attitude toward those outside their camp or even toward those inside but within a different faction, that precipitated the exodus of the past 25 years.

On the positive side fundamentalism taught us to earnestly contend for the faith. They were willing to separate from people who denied the explicit statements of Scripture. They were willing to confront error and argue for biblical fidelity. That kind of courage is hard to find in the church today. Doctrinally I would consider myself a Fundamentalist, I'm just not mad about it. □

James MacDonald is the senior pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel in Rolling Meadows, Illinois and the author of Ancient Wisdom (B&H).

Mark A. Minnick

Before suggesting an answer, I need to state two qualifiers. The first is that I'm writing of the Fundamentalism with which I'm familiar, not everything calling itself such. The second is that Fundamentalism isn't fixated on a single issue. Along with conservative Evangelicals, Fundamentalists are majoring on the core scriptural truths which comprise the Christian Faith, that is, on the fundamentals. But unfortunately there's a watershed dividing them from many Evangelicals.



It's expressed succinctly in the title of an Iain Murray booklet called *The Unresolved Controversy: Unity with*

Non-Evangelicals. The title strikes to the heart of the issue. We have an *unresolved controversy*, the scriptural rightness or wrongness of uniting in spiritual endeavor with non-Evangelicals. If I understand Murray's concern, this evidently isn't a great divide between only Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, but between Evangelicals themselves.

So it seems to me that one critical thing Evangelicalism could learn from Fundamentalism is the necessity of coming to a verdict on this question *Scripturally*. Does Scripture, either by its directives, examples, or good and necessary inferences tolerate, let alone encourage, our uniting for spiritual endeavor with teachers of another gospel?

Mark A. Minnick (Ph.D.) is the pastor of Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina, is on the New Testament faculty at Bob Jones University, and is a contributing editor to Frontline, the magazine of the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship.

Phil Newton

Fundamentalists pose both positive and negative lessons for Evangelical believers. From the positive end, Fundamentalists exhibit high standards. They have strong convictions, so much so that they are willing to face criticism to maintain their stance on various issues. All the while, they take seriously the call to spread the gospel and to call God's people to holiness.



Negatively, Fundamentalists sometime miss the forest for the trees. While maintaining convictions, they may treat relationships lightly, neglecting the Second Great Commandment. I recall getting a visit from a local Fundamentalist shortly after I moved to a pastorate in Alabama. I smiled, welcomed his visit, and told him that I was a believer and a new pastor in the area. I assured him that I joined him in seeking to reach unbelievers in our area. I shall never forget his response, complete with a scowl on his face, "Time will tell, time will tell." So much for warmly welcoming me to the community!

I learned from this to stand firmly on truth, pursue my gospel calling, and always do so with warmhearted love for my neighbor.

Phil Newton, author of Elders in Congregation Life (Kregel, 2005), is the senior pastor of South Woods Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee.

Mark Noll

Christian believers of all types might learn much, both positively and negatively, from the history of Fundamentalism. Negatively, the most important lesson is to avoid the frequent fundamentalist mistake of treating some other practice, belief, habit, or even concept of doctrine as more important than living by God's free grace in Jesus Christ. But there are also other negative lessons to learn:



- not to misread the Scriptures with a naively literalistic hermeneutic (e.g., creation science, premillennial dispensationalism);
- not to be smarter than the Scriptures on behavioral rules (e.g., prohibition);
- not to ignore tradition and the communion of saints in time (the past) and space (other believers);
- not to neglect the sacraments; and
- not to marry Christianity to the American flag.

But there is also much to learn positively, especially the shining Fundamentalist emphasis on Scripture as *much more* than any other human book. And there are also other positive lessons:

- to insist on the importance of the substitutionary atonement;
- to preach so as to be understood by all sorts of people;
- to perceive that God is the creator of all things and that the supernatural is more real than the natural;
- to understand the force of good hymns (e.g., "Rescue the Perishing," "Great is Thy Faithfulness");
- to remember the reality of heaven and hell; and
- to evangelize.

Mark Noll is the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame and a co-editor of the recently re-released Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the Present (Oxford).

Paige Patterson

The name "Fundamentalist" essentially came out of controversies that erupted across America in the face of the ascendancy of the historical-critical method in theological studies and the theory of evolution in the sciences. Fundamentalists themselves come from various denominations with different levels of educational achievement and with a variety of spirits and attitudes. There are things to be learned from Fundamentalists—both positively and negatively.



Negatively, a believer always loses the high ground in a discussion when his spirit appears vindictive even if his thesis happens to be correct. Second, untested hypotheses may prove ultimately to be correct, but their resiliency is in question until faced with a fair and honest evaluation. Finally, from the failure of some fundamentalists, Christians should learn that at best we know very little. As a result, a profound humility is always in order. Not all Fundamentalists were guilty of violating these perspectives, but violation has been common enough that there is some truth in the accusations.

Positively, however, Fundamentalists were right first about the fact that in any enterprise there are always "fundamentals" that are foundational to meaning and success. Football coaches frequently are heard to say "we have to get back to the fundamentals." In so doing, they are simply recognizing that the team blocking, tackling, and running best will probably win. The same is true in theology. Second, verbal abuse and ridicule notwithstanding, the Fundamentalists remained faithful to their convictions. This resolution of mind and heart is worthy of imitation. Finally, Fundamentalists were crystal clear about epistemology. This is to say that unless God had spoken a sure and certain word, in the end it is impossible to have any clear knowledge of the spiritual world.

Paige Patterson is the president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and, most recently, a contributor to Daniel Akin's A Theology for the Church (B&H).

Lance Quinn

At least two important lessons can be learned from the Fundamentalists:

The Fundamentalists were protectors of the essential truths of Scripture. As the name suggests, the early Fundamentalists fought to retain the core doctrinal verities of the Christian faith. Doctrines including—but not limited to—the historicity and authority of the Bible; the deity of Jesus Christ, including belief in his virgin birth; the depravity of mankind; the vicarious, substitutionary nature of Christ's death upon the cross; salvation by grace through faith in Christ; the pursuit of holiness; and the visible return of Jesus Christ to the earth, were absolutely non-negotiable with them. If we are their heirs in any meaningful sense, we should be mindful of their battle-scarred victories as we engage in our own truth war.



The Fundamentalists often fought over matters that exceed what is written. Later Fundamentalism unfortunately became enmeshed in areas where Scripture gives greater latitude or is silent altogether. While we can appreciate the Fundamentalists' tight grip on the essential elements of Christianity, we must eschew their doctrinaire stances on issues which are much more secondary or tertiary. The Apostle Paul is thus our wiser guide in these areas (1 Corinthians 4:16; Romans 14:1—15:13).

Lance Quinn is the pastor-teacher of The Bible Church of Little Rock in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Jeramie Rinne

Today's Evangelical church can learn from the Fundamentalist call for *separation*. Twentieth century Fundamentalists saw the increasing secularization of American culture and drew a line in the sand. "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord" (2 Cor. 6:17, *KJV* of course) became a text that embodied this impulse. Fundamentalists tended to take a hard line on drinking, dancing, movies and the like, and to withdraw into separate colleges, missionary organizations and denominations.



Unfortunately, this separation too often fostered an oppressive legalism and divisive denominationalism that impeded the gospel. But could it be that the 21st century Evangelical church has begun to err in the opposite extreme? If Fundamentalists overemphasized *separation*, do we overstress *relevance*? Is there not a tendency today to uncritically adopt contemporary models of entertainment, management, therapy, marketing, and technology, all in an effort to make our churches relevant? Do Evangelicals really believe that the *gospel* is the power of God for salvation, or does the juice lie in a trendier approach? The Evangelical church needs to slow down, look again at God's Word, and think seriously about how cultural models affect the gospel. It may be time for a little separatism!

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Carl Trueman

We can learn from the Fundamentalists a number of things (depending, of course, on how you define the term). On the positive side, we see in many Fundamentalists the importance of an unapologetic emphasis on exclusivity of Christ and the centrality of a high doctrine of scripture and clear understanding of scriptural authority for the vitality of the church. We also see a zealous earnestness both for truth and for reaching out to the lost.



On the debit side, we can also see the problems involved when Christianity retreats into a siege mentality to avoid contamination by the world—a retreat which, in America at least, is as culturally conditioned as anything else; and in the proliferation of trivial taboos which distract from central Christian truths, foster legalism, and hinder a fully-orbed understanding of the Christian life. Having said that, by the definition of J I Packer (in *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*), I am a Fundamentalist!

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David Wells

We can learn three positive and three negative things from Fundamentalism.

On the positive side: first, Fundamentalists, despite derision from within academia and scorn from the mainline liberal denominations, preserved the Word of God and sought to live by it; second, though laughed at for being socially uncaring, they actually built an astonishing record of caring, missionary work overseas; third, even while huddling together against the storm on the outside, they also showed how important the church can be in people's lives.



On the negative side: first, we see how crippling can be the sense of being a minority, in this case, a cognitive minority, for Fundamentalists developed a siege mentality that was unhealthy; second, we see the price that they paid for their anti-intellectualism which issued in a lot of bizarre biblical interpretation and a worldview that was stunted and not wholesome; third, we also see how the passion for truth went astray so often and resulted in rancor, divisions, and the cult of personalities.

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Ben Wright

Fundamentalists are most often criticized for their attitude towards the world and their attitude towards other Christians, and they would certainly acknowledge their differences with broader evangelicalism on these points. That's exactly why we should examine these particular attitudes for Fundamentalists' unique contribution.

Fundamentalists are right to conclude that Christians shouldn't expect the world to like Jesus or the Bible—assuming of course, that the gospel is faithfully proclaimed as the offense Scripture describes it to be. They recognize far better than most evangelicals that organizations that call themselves Christian churches but deny the doctrines essential to the gospel are, in fact, no churches at all. They perceive, as Machen did, that these "churches" are simply temples for a different religion—just another segment of a world in rebellion against its God. Over the past century, many in the evangelical movement have glossed over these fundamental differences, believing that sincere engagement and better arguments would win hearts and minds. Despite the prevalence of revivalistic anti-Calvinism among Fundamentalists, they better understand the implications of depravity than many of their more Calvinistic evangelical brethren. They know that human effort alone cannot mitigate the effects of the Fall, and they resist any strategy that compromises the gospel in an attempt to make it more palatable to those fallen hearts and minds.

Fundamentalists also withhold fellowship and cooperation from many people whom they understand to be genuine believers. They recognize that when a genuine believer treats as a Christian brother one who professes Christianity, but denies it in doctrine or deed, that genuine believer may do harm to the gospel. Cooperation and fellowship with unbelief is unconscionable to Fundamentalists because it blurs or compromises foundational biblical truth. Though this kind of separatism has been widely disdained by evangelicals who pursue broad unity, Fundamentalists recognize the pitfalls that accompany an age of



ecumenism and mass evangelism. These evangelical efforts have created an interlocking network of alliances between people, churches, and parachurch ministries that do not always share the same set of foundational theological convictions. Fundamentalists discern how participation in this network fosters a perception of affirmation and endorsement of those who deny or marginalize crucial facets of Divine truth. Fundamentalists fear that this form of engagement compromises the non-negotiables of the gospel more than cooperation could ever advance it. Fundamentalists gladly exchange this kind of ecumenical unity for biblical fidelity and a clear conscience. In so doing, they remind evangelicals that Christian unity is only authentic when it is unashamedly and undeniably Christian in its essence.

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Potential and Pitfalls of Together For The Gospel

By David Doran

New Testament Christianity, because of the gospel itself, is separatistic. The church is no longer "of the world" and must not live like the world (John 17:14; Eph 4:17-19). It's commanded to break all ties with false religions and religious apostasy (2 Cor 6:14-7:1; 2 John 9-11). Indeed, the Lord Jesus Christ died so that he might purify a bride for himself (Eph 5:25-27), which is why the writer of Hebrews could conclude that, since Jesus "suffered outside the gate ... let us go out to him outside the camp, bearing his reproach. For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come" (Heb 13:12-14).

DOCTRINAL REDUCTIONISM

In the middle of the twentieth century, New Evangelicalism overreacted to the separatist battles of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy. At its core, New Evangelicalism abandoned what I believe is the biblical concept of separatism in favor of cooperation, infiltration, and engagement. Its members strove to build the broadest possible coalition, which meant that a reductionist approach to doctrine became the controlling mindset. As a result of this "lowest common denominator" approach, the confessional nature of Christianity began to erode, ultimately producing a debate about what the term evangelical really means and who can rightly claim to be one.

What seems obvious to an outsider—and what's becoming more obvious to many within Evangelicalism—is that not all who claim the label evangelical can do so with any biblical or historical legitimacy. The so-called post-conservative Evangelicals, for example, are radically redefining the Christian faith according to the measure of human thought rather than to divine revelation. The result is a postmodern reincarnation of the modernism that plagued the church a century ago.

Conservative Evangelicals must face the reality of this situation squarely. For six decades the non-separatist agenda of the New Evangelicalism has left the gate wide open for liberalism. Extending the Christian hand of fellowship to those who actually deny the faith causes terrible confusion about the boundaries of the faith. If the "official" strategy is to work cooperatively with theological liberals from outside evangelicalism, how can one really expect Evangelicalism to exclude theological liberals who are on the inside? If there is no confessional core to Evangelicalism, how can anyone tell who is on the outside or inside?

T4G POTENTIAL

This is where there is as tremendous opportunity for efforts like Together for the Gospel. It is essential to reaffirm the confessional nature of biblical Christianity, but it's also crucial to articulate a principled approach to the issue of separatism. Christian leaders should draw lines where the Bible does, and call people to abandon the flawed anti-separatist agenda of New Evangelicalism.

T4G PITFALLS

This strategic and timely opportunity could also be the place where T4G fails most sadly. If the net result of calling people together to stand for the gospel is a faux separatism, then it will be a feel-good rally without long-lasting impact. By faux separatism, I mean the kind that sounds nice, but is so clouded by vagueness that it does not translate into the actual practice of separation for the sake of the gospel.

This was the reason for my disappointment with the first T4G conference. In many respects, it was one of the most spiritually beneficial conferences I've attended—the message by John Piper alone was worth the time and cost of the conference. But, as a historic Fundamentalist, I came to the conference because of what I'd heard about the affirmations and denials. My understanding was that, in light of the serious doctrinal issues confronting the church, the affirmations and denials were being developed as a means to "draw a line in the sand" and call people to choose sides. In some ways this was done, but at the point of my highest hopes, they opted for generality and broadness.

Specifically, on the issue of separation itself, the only pertinent statement in the document seems to be Article XV, which affirms "that evangelical congregations are to work together in humble and voluntary cooperation and that the spiritual

fellowship of Gospel congregations bears witness to the unity of the Church and the glory of God" and denies "that loyalty to any denomination or fellowship of churches can take precedence over the claims of truth and faithfulness to the Gospel."

This leaves a lot to be defined and does not suggest much in terms of application. What does "take precedence over the claims of truth and faithfulness to the Gospel" mean and look like? Is this all attitudinal or does it have real implications for relationships? As a fundamentalist, I was hoping to see something that would help me understand whether these men were taking a different stand than the pioneers of the new Evangelical movement. This affirmation/denial is not sufficiently clear to make a distinction. Would any of the early new evangelicals not be able to make this affirmation and denial? Frankly, would anyone other than a full-blown ecumenicist not agree with it?

A PROPOSAL

I am thankful for what it does say, but so much more could be affirmed and denied on this particular point if the goal is to find out who will take a stand for the gospel and who won't. At the risk of being presumptuous, how about an article like this:

We affirm that all genuine fellowship is in the gospel and that true gospel ministers and congregations must not grant Christian recognition or assistance to those who have denied the faith or turned away from the biblical gospel. We further affirm the biblical responsibility of elders and congregations to be vigilant in watching out for those who teach false doctrine and to turn away from and have no fellowship with them.

We deny that the biblical calls for unity and separation are contrary to one another, and that refusing Christian fellowship to false teachers and false congregations is schismatic. We further deny that confessional subscription necessarily contradicts soul liberty. We also deny that the glory of God and good of the church are properly advanced through theological and ecclesiastical union with those who have denied the gospel.

Certainly not perfect, but something which I believe may be defended on biblical grounds and does actually draw a line. Of course, it is always easier to critique from the bleachers than from the playing field. But this is where I would like to have seen the statement and the conference make a clearer stand.

CONCLUSION

I sincerely applaud the vision and leadership of the T4G principals and participants. I share their burden that the contemporary church is losing sight of the gospel. We desperately need God's reviving and reforming work. I would contend that this divine work has always produced a division between truth and error. Contrary to the popular notion, the primary emphasis in the pursuit of revival is not unity; it is truth. Every great revival has drawn a line between truth and error, between the gospel and its counterfeits, and between the converted and the unconverted. Truth separates.

I'd love to see evangelicalism recover the biblical concept that you can't truly stand *for* the gospel if you won't stand *apart* from false gospels. Genuine gospel unity flows from genuine gospel separation. T4G provides a great platform to call contemporary believers and churches to "go out to him outside the camp, bearing his reproach" (Heb 3:13). If the emphasis is biblically centered on the gospel, it will be a conference that is both "Together for the Gospel" and "Separated for the Gospel."

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A Christian Fundamentalist Travel Guide

By Matthew C. Hoskinson

The term *fundamentalist* bears many different meanings. For [Seth Godin](#), it describes "a person who considers whether a fact is acceptable to their faith before they explore it." [Andrew Sullivan](#) equates it with one who holds to "Biblical fetishism" (i.e., the inerrancy of Scripture). And [Rick Warren](#) defines it as "somebody who stops listening."

Since *fundamentalist* has such negative connotations, it is a wonder that anyone would accept it as anything but an accusation. Nevertheless tens of thousands of Christians gladly adopt and defend this label. And to understand why they would, one must differentiate between fundamentalism as an *idea* and fundamentalism as a *movement*.

FUNDAMENTALISM: AN IDEA AND A MOVEMENT

The idea of Fundamentalism originated in the early twentieth century with the [Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy](#). Mainline denominations were succumbing to theological liberalism and (later) Neo-orthodoxy. With the [Scopes Trial](#) of 1925, Christians across denominational lines saw the tide turning against them. They therefore sought to unite in opposition to modernist syncretism. Their unity centered on the essential tenets of the gospel—the fundamentals of the faith—and they agreed to check denominational distinctives at the door. Consequently, early Fundamentalists included covenant theologians and dispensationalists, credobaptists and paedobaptists, and representatives of all three millennial positions. While no binding list of fundamentals was drawn up and ratified by all, among the core doctrines to which all subscribed were the inerrancy of Scripture; the biblical account of creation; and Christ's virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, and bodily resurrection. As an idea, then, Fundamentalism is the uniting of Christians around the basic tenets of the gospel in order to work together for the advancement of the Church to the glory of God.

The movement of fundamentalism began with this idea. But the nature of the movement today depends more on what happened years later. In the late 1940s, some fundamentalists began identifying problems they saw within the movement. Perhaps the most significant was the strategy of withdrawing from modern scholarship. Fundamentalists saw little need to engage unbelieving minds on matters where God had spoken. But the dissenters, calling themselves Neo-evangelicals, proposed a strategy of infiltration, arguing that non-engagement actually threatened the future of Christianity. As [Carl Henry](#) wrote, "If Protestant orthodoxy holds itself aloof from the present world predicament it is doomed to a much reduced role" ([The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism](#), 63). Fundamentalists argued that accommodating unbelief was the greatest danger to the future of Christianity. The attempt to infiltrate academia ran the risk of compromising truth. In an oft-repeated quip, fundamentalists believed that the Neo-evangelical was saying to the liberal, "I'll call you a Christian if you'll call me a scholar."

The dissension between these groups reached a breaking point in 1957 when Billy Graham included Roman Catholics in his New York City Crusade. For Fundamentalists, this was the last straw. Moved by passages such as 2 Thessalonians 3, they split from the Neo-evangelicals. Consequently, the movement that began with the goal of Christian unity became better known for its emphasis on separation.

FUNDAMENTALISM TODAY

From this brief history, one can see that the network of relationships forming the Fundamentalist movement rests on two foundations: they affirm the central tenets of the gospel, and they separate from anyone they believe has compromised that gospel. The latter, however, became paramount because of Graham. What he did threatened the very purity of the message he preached. In order to guard the gospel, Fundamentalists withdrew not only from false teachers (i.e., primary separation), but also from orthodox believers who did not withdraw from false teachers (i.e., secondary separation). On the basis of Jude 3, they reasoned that such robust militancy is the only right way to defend the gospel. Fundamentalists have [written numerous books](#) defending separatism, and they cite [some recent books](#) by broader evangelicals as additional proof that the strategy of infiltration has failed.

One might expect that, given their agreement on the gospel and separation, the movement would be monolithic. But that is hardly the case. Fundamentalists vary widely on many matters, as we shall see, sometimes even differing over what compromises the gospel. In consequence, they do occasionally separate from one another. Disagreements about Bible

translations or worship music, for example, often result in some self-identified Fundamentalists saying that other self-identified Fundamentalists are not, in fact, Fundamentalists.

Old-Time Fundamentalists

Within the movement one can easily identify a stream which might be termed **old-time Fundamentalists**. In a sense they are fighting the battles of the 1970s and 1980s. With the new Bible translations of that era, the dominance of the King James Version began to wane. Old-time fundamentalists rejected the NIV and NASB as "trash-lations" and affirmed that the KJV alone is the inspired, inerrant (or, at minimum, the preserved) word of God.

Furthermore, the cultural shift of 1960s America led old-time Fundamentalists increasingly to demand specific codes of personal conduct. Sinful taboos included women wearing pants, men wearing facial hair, and children attending public schools. Old-time Fundamentalists are concerned with evangelism, esteeming certain evangelistic activities to be vital (e.g., bus ministry, door-to-door soul-winning).

They are usually independent Baptists and exclusively dispensational. If [these websites](#) are accurate, more self-identified Fundamentalists fall into this category than into any other. While there are certainly different currents within this stream, it is represented by institutions like [Pensacola Bible Institute](#), [Hyles-Anderson College](#), [West Coast Baptist College](#), [Crown College \(TN\)](#), and [Pensacola Christian College](#).

Traditional Fundamentalists

A second stream, to the left of old-time fundamentalists, may be called **traditional Fundamentalists**. Traditional Fundamentalists are fighting the battles of the 1940s and 1950s. They have a strong sense of loyalty to their forefathers who separated from the Neo-evangelical movement. Their aversion to Billy Graham is just as strong as it was in 1957, and their commitment to separate from anyone who aligns with Graham has not diminished.

Traditional fundamentalists, however, are not obscurantist like most old-time Fundamentalists. While many might prefer the KJV, most would recommend other formal equivalence translations. Standards of personal conduct are crucial, but they recognize more liberty in application than most within the first group. They are conservative in their musical choices (both corporately and privately), and they tend to see the need for discipleship more than most old-time fundamentalists. (The latter's discipleship is often little more than soul-winning training.)

This group is largely independent Baptist, but a fair number of non-denominationalists and Presbyterians comfortably reside here as well. Among the institutions that are a part of traditional fundamentalism are [Bob Jones University](#), [Northland Baptist Bible College](#), [Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary](#), [Central Baptist Theological Seminary](#), and [Geneva Reformed Seminary](#).

Historic Fundamentalists

One other matter merits attention in this discussion of contemporary Fundamentalism. Some traditional Fundamentalists—including many in the younger generation—are rethinking the applications of separatism. Their desire to see greater unity around the gospel reflects a mindset akin to the Fundamentalists of the 1920s and 1930s. Though they are currently a subset of traditional fundamentalism, for the sake of distinction one might call them **historic fundamentalists**.

(Aside to my Fundamentalist friends: I am well aware that many traditional Fundamentalists would describe themselves as historic Fundamentalists, but would not fit into this category as I've defined it. I am not seeking to stir up a debate about labels, which are often inadequate tools for discussion. I am simply trying to describe what I see happening.)

As 1957 moves further into the past, historic Fundamentalists seem to be less inclined to see Graham as the single litmus test for fellowship. That does not mean Graham's compromise is unimportant to them. They would agree that Graham has done serious harm to the evangelical movement. But the fact that right-wing evangelicalism acknowledges the disastrous state of their movement leads historic Fundamentalists to probe whether they can and should link arms with them. Their desire is not so much to leave traditional Fundamentalism; indeed, their appreciation of men from both traditional fundamentalism (e.g., [Mark Minnick](#), [Kevin Bauder](#), [David Doran](#)) and right-wing evangelicalism (e.g., [John Piper](#), [John MacArthur](#), [D. A. Carson](#)) compels them to bridge the two. Thus, conferences like Together for the Gospel, organizations like Ligonier Ministries, and music producers like Sovereign Grace are appealing because their emphasis on the person and work of Christ has the potential for unifying the two camps.

What remains to be answered is whether the rest of traditional Fundamentalists consent. Some may be driven by conscience to disagree, seeing T4G or Ligonier as fundamentally flawed because of its ties to broader evangelicalism. Concerning music, there is significant debate today concerning whether non-traditional music should be used in corporate worship or whether this

would be in violation of the doctrine of separation, regardless of the style used. If historic Fundamentalists pursue fellowship with right-wing evangelicals, some—probably many—traditional Fundamentalists will wrestle with the question of separation. The burden resting on historic Fundamentalists is how to build a bridge to right-wing evangelicals without burning the bridge to traditional Fundamentalists. At this time, however, because of some of the conclusions that historic Fundamentalists are drawing, many traditional Fundamentalists question whether the former are Fundamentalists at all.

CONCLUSION

As Fundamentalism moves into the new century, profound disagreements over the very identity of the movement threaten its future. At its worst, Fundamentalism has the potential for an endless series of divisions that could result in unfair accusations, broken relationships, and—saddest of all—a sullied testimony before a fallen world. At its best, however, Fundamentalism reminds broader Christendom of its need to be doctrinally pure and bear the reproaches of Christ. The question is whether Fundamentalists can fulfill that mission without first caving in on itself.

Of course, whatever impact Christian Fundamentalism will have in twenty-first century America, like the rest of the world, ultimately lies in the hands of the One who knows the end from the beginning. And what he does is always better than we could imagine.

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An Evangelical-Fundamentalist Convergence?

By Ben Wright

Visiting my grandmother a couple of years ago, she asked for my help getting rid of a pesky groundhog. With no shotgun anywhere to be found, I decided to get creative. I found a hefty 2" x 8", stood over his hole, and waited.

A couple of minutes later, he started to nose his way out. I struck.

And missed. Though I'm pretty sure he was a whisker or two lighter. A little later, my grandma saw him basking in the sun.

From [Harry Emerson Fosdick](#) to [Rick Warren](#), religious leaders have wielded their own 2" x 8"s over the heads of Fundamentalists. And whether the Fundamentalist withdrawal is a function of separatist theology or a self-protective instinct, it's hardly surprising they've been largely absent from evangelical conversations in recent decades.

WHY ALL THE LUVIN'?

But recently we've seen [Rick Phillips at the Reformation21 blog say](#) that he thinks "more highly of the Fundamentalists in general than [he] used to" and has even learned to "admire them and [be] comfortable standing with them." [1]

And John Piper proclaims "[Praise God for Fundamentalists](#)," saying that Fundamentalism's "great gift to the church is precisely the backbone to resist compromise and to make standing for truth and principle a means of love rather than an alternative to it." More recently, Piper [spoke extensively about his father's complex relationship with Bob Jones University](#) and the "unbelievably, providentially, sweet" reconciliation and homecoming in the last years of his life.

So why all the luvin'? Why is anyone even interested? If Fundamentalists are marginalized neo-monastics who wouldn't engage culture if it punched their mom in the face, why would *Christianity Today's* Collin Hansen [write about a crisis in Fundamentalism](#) as younger Fundamentalists grow increasingly disillusioned with the Fundamentalist theology of separatism?

WHO ARE THE FUNDAMENTALISTS?

First of all, who are these Fundamentalists? They're the ideological descendants of the 1920s Fundamentalists in the (mostly) Northern denominations. As those denominations hurtled towards modernism, Fundamentalists defended biblical inerrancy and the historic Christian gospel. Rather than channel funds from gospel-preaching churches to modernistic seminaries and social gospel "missions," Fundamentalists withdrew and rebuilt those institutions from scratch.

These Fundamentalists were largely synonymous with evangelicalism in the North until the rise of the Neo-Evangelicalism of the 1950s, which coincided with Billy Graham's first ecumenical crusades. [2] Though Graham was not alone in his ecumenical strategy of incorporating non-evangelicals into his crusades, it was his bigger-than-life persona and ministry that split fundamentalism wide open. The people Piper and Hansen and Phillips are writing about are the theological and cultural heirs of the people who exposed and decried Graham's ecumenism. [3]

Since the 1950s, generations of Fundamentalists have invested their resources in evangelistic efforts that don't require immersion in culture and in building institutions for raising future generations of Fundamentalists. The trouble is that, as Hansen points out, these future generations aren't comfortable with everything that fundamentalism has become.

FUNDAMENTALISTIC INTROSPECTION

They are not alone. Some Fundamentalist leaders recognized the danger of the movement's trajectory. The Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Plymouth, Minnesota is one of the institutions that Fundamentalists rebuilt after leaving the denominations. In 1993, its president, Douglas McLachlan, wrote *Reclaiming Authentic Fundamentalism*, in which he defends separatism but describes how easily it degenerates into mere external morality.

Concerning such a mutated Fundamentalist separatism, he writes, "The effect was the development of a classical form of legalism (conformity to an outward code as the sign of spirituality), which corrupted true spirituality by shifting the focus from the internal to the external."

McLachlan's book was an important, early introspective work by a theologically-minded Fundamentalist on the direction of the Fundamentalist movement. Such introspection has been sparse, but McLachlan's work was not the last of its kind. McLachlan's successor to the presidency of Central Seminary, Kevin Bauder, [has expanded](#) on McLachlan's earlier work.

THE RISING STORM OF 2005

Bauder was also part of a rising storm in 2005 that provided the proximate cause for the discussion of Fundamentalism that we see today. On February 2, he delivered the provocative address "[A Fundamentalism Worth Saving](#)" to the leadership of Fundamentalist educational institutions. Bauder challenged Fundamentalism to reestablish its unique ideas through a renewed seriousness, and he stated rather directly that a frivolous, flippant fundamentalism need not survive.

Within six weeks, several other events coincided to bring sentiments to the surface in a public discussion regarding the state of fundamentalism. In March, Jason Janz launched the Fundamentalist blog and forum, [SharperIron](#), the website cited by Collin Hansen in *Christianity Today*. SharperIron splashed with results of a survey of several hundred younger Fundamentalists across the country that revealed changing attitudes towards Fundamentalism, its culture, and its separatist identity.

That same week, Phil Johnson, executive director of Grace to You, delivered a seminar at Shepherds' Conference at Grace Community Church titled, "[Dead Right: The Failure of Fundamentalism](#)." Janz obtained Johnson's manuscript and his permission to post it. Though Fundamentalists had blogged before SharperIron, a conversation now crystallized among a generation of younger Fundamentalists who had an array of questions about who they were and why.

Dave Doran, Fundamentalist pastor and president of Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, responded to Johnson with a plea to "[Stop the Funeral—We're Not Quite Dead Yet!](#)" Shortly after, Doran and Johnson engaged in a detailed, lengthy discussion at SharperIron over the ideology of this theological, separatistic Fundamentalism advocated by Doran and substantially shared by Bauder.

THE PIPER FRACAS

A few months after the developments at SharperIron, the [Fundamental Baptist Fellowship International \(FBFI\)](#) held its annual meeting in Taylors, South Carolina and adopted a series of resolutions, just as it had done almost every year since 1979.

One resolution in particular [expressed concerns about John Piper](#), which in turn caused a brief fracas among both [Evangelicals](#) and Fundamentalists. Yet the FBFI had adopted resolutions [critical of popular evangelical leaders in the past](#). If anything, the FBFI's 2005 resolutions, and the Piper resolution in particular, were noteworthy for a concerted attempt to express both concern *and* appreciation. Not only that, [a companion article](#) attempted to provide a fuller rationale for the resolution. This article acknowledged Piper's unusual influence and respect within Fundamentalist circles.

WHY THE GROWING CONVERGENCE?

The increasing familiarity between Fundamentalists and John Piper, the Reformation21 blog, and *Christianity Today* is only the tip of the iceberg. In 2002, I was more than a bit surprised to see half a wall filled with [a BJU Press publication](#) in the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary bookstore about to be used as a text in an SEBTS class. Two pastors from one of the most separatist slices of fundamentalism I've ever encountered recently spoke to me of their appreciation for Mark Dever's books and ministry.

Why is this? For one, I think this growing familiarity reveals the influence of the new media. The Internet has created new opportunities for Fundamentalists and conservative Evangelicals to gain mutual appreciation and understanding. And as both Fundamentalist bloggers and Evangelical leaders take advantage of the web to disseminate their messages, traditional gatekeepers to information are circumvented. As one of those two pastors told me, "The Internet changed everything."

But there are deeper realities in this current Evangelical-Fundamentalist convergence. Broad Evangelicalism continues its rapid devolution into another religion. Many creedal Evangelicals recognize this devolution and are adopting the conclusions and approach of Machen, which pushes them in many ways closer to the Fundamentalism of the 1930s-40s than the Neo-Evangelicalism of the 1950s-60s.

In addition, the theological Fundamentalism of Bauder and Doran represents a matured strain of Fundamentalism that intends to expose and disassociate from the atheological (sometimes called cultural) Fundamentalism that has dominated many segments of separatist Fundamentalism in recent decades.

Whether or not creedal Evangelicalism and theological Fundamentalism can recognize, appreciate, and cultivate common ground and cooperation remains to be seen. Even if they do, they'll face obstacles of no small size. But the coincidence of these developments presents an opportunity for principled leaders who haven't yet forgotten how to listen to one another.

Endnotes:

1. For the engaging repartee between Phillips and Carl Trueman on this topic, go [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).
2. For extensive documentation on why Graham's ecumenism was intolerable to Fundamentalists, see Iain Murray's *Evangelicalism Divided* and Rolland McCune's *Promise Unfulfilled: The Failed Strategy of Modern Evangelicalism*.
3. The captivating irony here is that Piper, Hansen, and Phillips are most naturally understood to be the theological and cultural heirs of the people who supported Graham. Piper's father served on the board of trustees at Bob Jones University until he could no longer support its criticism of Graham. Hansen writes for *Christianity Today*, the periodical Carl Henry founded to serve as the mouthpiece for the New Evangelicalism—in contrast to the old evangelicalism of the Fundamentalists. Phillips blogs for Reformation21, which is a ministry of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. Though the Alliance [intends to speak to the Church](#), rather than to culture, it emerges from the same stream of evangelicalism that advanced Graham's ecumenism decades ago.

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Book Review: *Promise Unfulfilled: The Failed Strategy of Modern Evangelicalism*, by Rolland D. McCune

Reviewed by Andrew David Naselli

Ambassador International, 2004, \$24.99, 398 pages

Promise Unfulfilled is the most penetrating book-length evaluation of the "new [evangelicalism](#)" (about fifty years after its genesis) by a self-identified [fundamentalist](#). [McCune](#) (b. 1934) is former president and current professor of systematic theology at [Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary](#). He testifies, "I first heard that there was such a movement called 'new evangelicalism' when I entered [Grace Theological Seminary](#) in the fall of 1957. . . . In 1967 I began teaching on the seminary level and annually lectured on the new evangelicalism. This book"—McCune's first—"is a partial harvest of all my years of research, study, and teaching on the subject" (p. xv).

SUMMARY: TRACING THE ARGUMENT

The title reflects McCune's thesis: Evangelicalism (which is now synonymous with "modern," "new," and "neo-evangelicalism") deliberately distinguished itself from fundamentalism in the 1940s and 1950s with a fresh promise and strategy, but its promise is unfulfilled and its strategy has failed. By "new evangelicalism" McCune means "a strain of conservative, traditional, Protestant, religious thought that coalesced into a movement in the mid-twentieth century, purporting to avoid the fundamentalist right and the neo-orthodox/neo-liberal left" (p. xvi). McCune argues his thesis by discussing historical and theological issues, divided into nine parts (and twenty-five chapters).

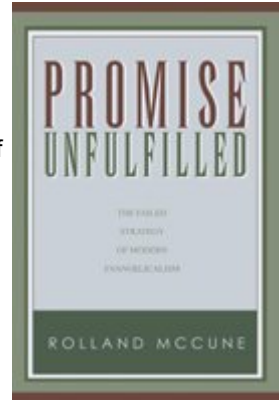
1. "Historical Antecedents" (pp. 1–26) recounts the rise of [liberal or modernist theology](#) and how that resulted in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in America. Fundamentalism's "*esprit* is principally its militant separatism. Fundamentalism is a movement, not an attitude of belligerence, ugliness, or a negative mentality as often depicted" (p. 16). The fundamentalist movement's "essence" consists of (1) "core biblical truths, principally those concerning Christ and the Scriptures," (2) "ecclesiastical separation," and (3) "militancy" (p. 16).

2. "The Formation of the New Evangelicalism" (pp. 27–63) begins with "four crucial issues": (1) Unity/separation: The [National Association of Evangelicals](#) began in 1942 and declined to merge with [Carl McIntire's American Council of Christian Churches](#). (2) Social concern: [Carl Henry's The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism](#) (1947) decried "the lack of social concern in the fundamentalist movement of which he considered himself a part" (p. 34). (3) Scholarship/ intellectualism: [Fuller Theological Seminary](#) began in 1947, partly as a reaction to fundamentalists who "simply were not up to par intellectually" (p. 38). (4) Evangelism: [Billy Graham's](#) evangelistic crusades from 1949 to 1957 came to a head at the [1957 New York Crusade](#), which "finally made the two camps irreconcilable" (p. 45) because of Graham's new and compromising policies on both sponsorship and convert referrals. "Graham brought an end to evangelical unity" (p. 55).

Eight other factors contributed to evangelicalism's formation: (1) [Vernon Grounds's](#) "The Nature of Evangelicalism" in *Eternity* (Feb. 1956); (2) [Christianity Today](#), created in 1956; (3) "Is Evangelical Theology Changing?", a symposium in *Christian Life* (March 1956); (4) [Harold Ockenga's news release](#) announcing evangelicalism's change of strategy from separation to infiltration (Dec. 8, 1957); (5) [Robert O. Ferm's](#) 100-page [Cooperative Evangelism: Is Billy Graham Right or Wrong?](#) (1958); (6) [Edward Carnell's The Case for Orthodox Theology](#) (1959); (7) [Donald Grey Barnhouse's](#) support of evangelicalism from 1953 until his death in 1960; and (8) articles by evangelicals published in the liberal [Christian Century](#).

3. "[Ecumenism](#)" (pp. 65–123) defines the term as the effort to implement a unity that ignores or greatly minimizes "doctrine, truth, and group distinctives" for "a united front," particularly "the collaboration between evangelicals and non-evangelicals in promoting various religious and spiritual projects" (p. 65). This ecumenism errantly extends to evangelism, church councils, accolades, journalism, [charismaticism](#), and [Roman Catholicism](#).

4. "Ecclesiastical Separation" (pp. 125–54) explains arguments for non-separatism ([pragmatism](#), infiltration, apostasy, and the impossibility of a pure church), refutes them, and then explains four "categories of separation":



(1) Christians must separate from *heresy*, which denies what is essential to Christianity (Acts 20:28–30; Rom 16:17–18; 2 Cor 11:4; Gal 1:8–9; Phil 1:15–18; 1 Tim 6:3–5; Titus 1:3; 2 John 9–11; Rev 2:14–15).

(2) Christians must avoid *unequal alliances* by separating from non-Christians in spheres such as worship, marriage, and ministry (2 Cor 6:14–7:1).

(3) Christians must separate from *organized apostasy*, which includes belonging to apostate denominations or associations, giving them money, speaking for them, and sponsoring them (Rev 18:4; cf. Isa 52:11; Jer 50:8; 51:6, 9, 45; 2 Cor 6:17).

(4) Christians must separate from *disobedient Christians* (2 Thess 3:6–15; cf. Matt 18:17; 1 Tim 1:20; 5:22). This fourth category is unique to fundamentalism and is known as "secondary separation," which "is the refusal to cooperate with erring and disobedient Christians who do not adhere to primary separation and other vital doctrines" (p. 146). "Ecclesiastical separation does not really admit of 'degrees.' [n. 26: "Bob Jones, "Scriptural Separation: 'First and Second Degree.'"] Separation is directed to the other person because of *his* deviations from Scripture in whatever ways he may express them. If the erring brother runs with the wrong crowd, separation at this point is from *him* as well as from the unbiblical company he is keeping. The reason for separating may well involve someone's unscriptural involvements, but in reality this is no more 'secondary' than a 'primary' separation from apostasy" (p. 147).

Separation "is not one-size-fits-all," but includes three levels that "carry their own doctrinal and practical requirements": (1) personal, (2) local church, and (3) organizational (p. 154).

5. "The Bible and Authority" (pp. 155–94) chronicles the controversy over biblical revelation, inspiration, and inerrancy. This issue arose largely because of neo-orthodoxy's influence.

6. "Apologetics" (pp. 195–228) argues that "the new evangelical view" of apologetic methodology is "semi-rationalism or semi-biblicism" (p. 198–99) and concludes that after fifty years of evangelicalism, its leaders "have abandoned the sense of an absolute and infallible religious authority, and today the evangelical movement is groping to find some kind of a basis or an authority to meet a rootless, non-absolutist, relativist culture on the culture's own terms with the claims of the living and true God" (p. 195).

7. "Social Involvement" (pp. 229–74) traces the history of evangelical social activism and contrasts it with "the biblical idea of social action," which (consistent with [Alva J. McClain's form of dispensationalism](#)) maintains "there is not presently a messianic kingdom of God in existence; there is no 'kingdom now.' The church is not the kingdom and cannot participate in any social proposals attributable to the kingdom, and for that reason there can be no tenable sociopolitical kingdom advancement by the church in the present age" (p. 264).

8. "Doctrinal Storms" (pp. 275–308) highlights three unfortunate controversies in evangelicalism: (1) the status of the unevangelized, (2) the destiny of the finally impenitent, and (3) the open view of God.

"These internal controversies have not caused groups to break away from the evangelical movement because division, schism, and separation are the scarlet sins in new evangelical thought. What happens is that the *avant garde* ideas cause internal controversy and calls then go out for more prayer, more open-mindedness, more finessing, and more effort to find some kind of tolerable middle ground. These summons may be accompanied by not-so-veiled charges of causing disorder in the body of Christ, but when the turmoil quiets down, the new element is simply absorbed into the general new evangelical movement, and life goes on in the name of Christian brotherhood. Meanwhile as the movement has become doctrinally diluted and less and less biblical there is internal debate about what an evangelical really is. In the end, no one seems to be excluded from being considered an evangelical" (p. 275).

9. The "Conclusion" (pp. 309–60) evaluates evangelicalism:

"The new evangelicalism has been slowly but decidedly moving toward neo-orthodoxy and beyond. . . .

"When ultimate religious authority cannot be successfully identified, the gospel has no sure parameters. When the gospel cannot be precisely defined, what it means to be a Christian cannot be agreed upon. If the marks of a genuine Christian cannot be construed, then the question of what the Christian church is becomes moot. In liberal Protestantism the church became everyone and, in reality, was no one and thus nondescript. If everyone is a Christian, then no one is a Christian in this amorphous blob of religion. The new evangelicalism appears to be well on its way toward becoming such a conglomerate bereft of true biblical distinctives.

"A movement that wants to be called evangelical and yet has to debate itself over what the genius of Christianity actually is, is putting the finishing touches on its own coffin. It seems certain that the new evangelicalism is incapable of self-correction" (pp. 309, 319–20).

Following this evaluation is a critical review of Robert Webber's *The Younger Evangelicals*, a time line of major events in evangelicalism from 1942 to 2003, and an informative annotated bibliography.

ANALYSIS

Strengths

In the summers of 2000 and 2001 (following my sophomore and junior years of college), I was privileged to take two seminary classes at DBTS from McCune. I stocked up on his lengthy course syllabi and devoured them (about 900 pages on systematic theology as well as lectures on hermeneutics, apologetics, and the like). I have listened to dozens of his audio lectures and sermons, read his [journal articles](#), interacted with former students (including one of my former pastors) who esteem him as their mentor, and interacted directly with him a bit (e.g., I interviewed him for my dissertation on Keswick theology). His thinking is rigidly logical, his conclusions firm, his commitment to God and His word immovable, and his character unquestionably above reproach. *Promise Unfulfilled*, which I first read when it was published in 2004 and then a second time in October 2007, evidences McCune's strengths:

1. It is well researched, which is not surprising since it is the result of nearly four decades of teaching and research on the subject. This is evident simply by scanning the footnotes, bibliography, and index.
2. It is unusually well informed. McCune has intimate, first-hand knowledge of many of the people and events he discusses.
3. It is logically and clearly organized (with some exceptions, e.g., the headings in chap. 2).
4. It is genuinely earnest and courageous. McCune did not dispassionately write this book as a mundane, scholarly exercise to climb the academic ranks or secure tenure. He is committed to obeying God by guarding the gospel. He knew that it would not be a popular book, but rather than floating along with the current, McCune addresses a controversial issue head-on, including the application of a series of Scripture passages that many others are inclined to ignore or at least not study in detail (e.g., Rom 16:17–18; 2 John 9–11; 2 Thess 3:6–15). It is disappointing that many are unaware of or perhaps have ignored his work. (To my knowledge not a single review of *Promise Unfulfilled* has been published in a theological journal, and now most journals consider the book too old for a review.)
5. It is convincing. McCune successfully proves his thesis with the vast majority of his supporting arguments. [Spurgeon's downgrade controversy](#) is an exceptionally moving illustration supporting ecclesiastical separation (pp. 126–28), and numerous evangelical analyses of evangelicalism (several of which McCune mentions in his annotated bibliography) corroborate McCune's thesis.

Weaknesses

From my young, inexperienced, limited perspective, *Promise Unfulfilled* also has some weaknesses (besides more than a handful of typos and formatting issues). Since I do not want to give the impression that I have everything worked out infallibly, I submit these suggestions [corrigibly](#) and respectfully (though not timidly).

1. It appears at times to shape fundamentalism into what McCune thinks it ought to be rather than stating what it is or presenting arguments with which most fundamentalists would agree. (1) It does not critique fundamentalism as intensely as it critiques evangelicalism. One of the fundamental rules of book reviewing is to analyze a book on its own terms rather than criticizing the author for not writing a different book, so I simply mention that a similar critique of fundamentalism could be embarrassing for fundamentalists. (2) It argues for the superiority of [Van Til's presuppositional apologetics](#), but many evangelicals are Van Tillian and many fundamentalists are not Van Tillian. (3) It rejects evangelicalism's social activism partly because it does not line up with [McClain's postponement theory of the kingdom](#), a subset of revised dispensationalism (pp. 36; 263–66), but some fundamentalists reject dispensationalism and a much larger group rejects that particular variety of dispensationalism.
2. It lacks sufficient [nuance](#), notably in the following five areas.

(1) Some of its arguments do not logically follow. For example, "Promise Keepers has many strata of belief and practice, one stratum of which is charismaticism, as seen in the charismatic conference speakers and their writings (such as Greg Laurie,

Chuck Smith, and Jack Hayford), *the conduct of the public gatherings (including the music and hand lifting/waving)*, and the composition of its governing board" (p. 108, emphasis added). Moving from such "conduct" to charismaticism is a non sequitur since many non-charismatics worship with similar music and "hand lifting/waving." That seems to be an unguarded statement that would understandably frustrate non-charismatics who worship with that kind of music and "hand lifting/waving."

(2) It employs a slippery-slope argument, namely, that evangelicalism, because it rejects at least some categories of separation, inevitably leads to doctrinal aberrations such as non-inerrancy, neo-orthodoxy, or open theism (cf. the concluding evaluation in Part 9 quoted above). It does not logically follow, however, that *all* evangelicals tolerate such error or are moving on an unavoidable trajectory in that direction. For example, Ligonier Ministries has avoided this slippery slope. Further, there are many churches (some of which I have visited) that McCune would not consider to be fundamentalist but that do separate from heresy, unequal alliances, organized apostasy, and disobedient Christians.

(3) It includes "interdenominationalism" as an objection to ecumenical evangelism since it cannot agree on "what is truly essential and what is non-essential or peripheral" (pp. 74–75), but this objection lacks sufficient qualification. No doubt his description of interdenominationalism is often—perhaps usually—the case, but this is not necessarily so. McCune acknowledges that fundamentalism itself is interdenominational (pp. 17, 20; cf. McCune's "[Doctrinal Non-Issues in Historic Fundamentalism](#)," *DBSJ* [1996]: 178–79). Furthermore, evangelicalism includes many doctrinally sound groups that are interdenominational, six of which readily come to mind: (1) [Ligonier Ministries](#) led by [R. C. Sproul](#); (2) [Desiring God Ministries](#) led by [John Piper](#); (3) [9 Marks](#) led by [Mark Dever](#); (4) [The Shepherds' Fellowship](#) led by [John MacArthur](#); (5) [Together for the Gospel](#) led by [Mark Dever](#), [Ligon Duncan](#), [Al Mohler](#), and [C. J. Mahaney](#); and (6) [The Gospel Coalition](#) led by [D. A. Carson](#) and [Tim Keller](#).

(4) Its criteria for applying "secondary" separation based on 2 Thess 3:6–15 could be clearer. McCune explains that fundamentalists sometimes tolerate "those who fellowship with new evangelicals, or those who engage in entangling unbiblical alliances of various sorts, or whose standards of personal deportment and music are intolerable. . . . If, after the passing of reasonable time, and appropriate biblical confrontation, it is apparent that the organization is unable or unwilling to put its house in order, then the Bible-believing separatist has no choice but to withdraw" (p. 148). At what point do fellow believers qualify for separation with reference to their "personal deportment and music"? How does positive Scriptural teaching on unity fit into this paradigm?

(5) It lacks nuance when distinguishing fundamentalists from evangelicals. Sometimes McCune's description of fundamentalism is unrealistically narrow:

"Broadly speaking, ecclesiastical separation is the refusal to collaborate with or the withdrawal of a working relationship from an ecclesiastical organization or religious leader that *deviates from the standard of Scripture* or that *does not believe and obey the word of God in doctrine or practice*. Separation is the refusal to join hands or make common cause with those who *deny or disobey the Scriptures*" (p. 138, emphasis added; cf. 125, 148, 151).

Based on that definition, I would have to separate from *everyone*—including myself since I often "disobey the Scriptures"! McCune obviously means that only certain types of deviation from the Scriptures (i.e., flagrant, habitual unbelief or disobedience) merit separation, but his statements lack nuance and clarity.

At other times he has an "us vs. them" mentality that seems to view all evangelicals as disobedient Christians from whom fundamentalists must equally separate. For example, while McCune greatly appreciates many aspects of their ministries, he lists the [Southern Baptist Convention](#) as an example of "organized apostasy" (p. 146) and [John Piper](#) and [John MacArthur](#) as "disobedient Christians" (pp. 151–53). Many who are intimately familiar with the SBC, Piper, and MacArthur (including some within fundamentalism) would disagree with McCune's assessment. Such people might counter that (1) efforts by men such as [Mark Dever](#), [Al Mohler](#), and [Tom Nettles](#) in the [SBC's conservative resurgence](#) are similar to what [David Beale](#) calls "nonconformist fundamentalism" (*In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* [Greenville, S.C.: Unusual Publications, 1986], pp. 3–12) and that these men are worthy of support on several levels and (2) Piper and MacArthur are militantly orthodox but *apply* the same principles of separation differently.

The issue here seems to be nuance. People have a tendency to broad-brush groups of which they are not a part, often because they fail to see distinctions from a distance. Movements are complex, and pockets of people within a particular movement are often frustrated when others critique their movement without acknowledging its complexity or diversity. For example, many [Mormons](#) are understandably frustrated when the media lumps them together with fringe Mormons who are [polygamists](#), and many fundamentalists are understandably frustrated when evangelicals lump them together with, say, the [King James Only movement](#), [anti-intellectualism](#), or [legalism](#).

At least two groups are similarly broad-brushed in *Promise Unfulfilled*. (1) Many non-cessationists (e.g., [D. A. Carson](#), [John Piper](#), or [Wayne Grudem](#)) would be understandably frustrated with McCune for how he implicitly lumps them all together with

charismatics whose "presence in the new evangelical ranks has contributed to the deterioration of evangelical theology as a whole and has fostered an experience-oriented Christianity" that gives "an enormous boost to the ecumenical movement" (pp. 108–9). (2) Many evangelicals would be understandably frustrated with McCune for how he lumps them all together as non-separatists. It seems that evangelicals and fundamentalists tend to caricature each other with the result that evangelicals have as much trouble fitting intellectually respectable fundamentalists like McCune and [Kevin Bauder](#) into their conceptual grid of fundamentalists as fundamentalists do fitting militantly orthodox men like Carson, Dever, MacArthur, Piper, and Grudem into their conceptual grid of evangelicals. (See, e.g., Bauder, "What's That You Smell? A Fundamentalist Response to *The Smell of Sawdust*," part 2 in [Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail: Evangelical Ecumenism and the Quest for Christian Identity](#), ed. Timothy George [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004] and "[A Fundamentalism Worth Saving](#)"; and Grudem "Why, When, and for What Should We Draw New Boundaries?" chap. 10 in [Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity](#), ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, Paul Kjoss Helseth [Wheaton: Crossway, 2003], pp. 339–70.) McCune seems to treat all non-fundamentalist Christians as "new evangelicals," as though the current theological milieu is the same as it was in the 1950s. The fundamentalist-evangelical landscape, however, has changed considerably.

CONCLUSION

Despite the disproportionate space given to them, the alleged weaknesses are relatively peripheral to McCune's thesis, which he argues convincingly. McCune is on the side of the angels. Evangelicalism has become increasingly diluted, and the result is that it has compromised what is most precious to Christians: the gospel. *Promise Unfulfilled* is a sober, eye-opening reminder that all believers are charged with the important and often difficult responsibility to guard the gospel.

* * * * *

Special thanks to Rolland McCune for responding to my review. His rejoinder is available at <http://andynaselli.com/theology/review-of-mccunes-promise-unfulfilled-with-a-response-from-mccune>.

* * * * *

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Video Review: The Scoop'a on NOOMA – Part 1, by Rob Bell

Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

Zondervan, \$10.98/video

Part 1 (parts 2 and 3 to follow below)

This February, Zondervan Publishers released the nineteenth in a series of videos called NOOMA. No series gets to the *nineteenth* installment unless it is extraordinarily successful, and the NOOMA videos are surely that. In churches and youth groups across the country, they have become something of a phenomenon.

All ten to fourteen minutes in length, the NOOMA videos feature Rob Bell, pastor of Michigan's Mars Hill Church, one of the fastest-growing churches in America, and a leader in the "emergent church." From a production standpoint, the NOOMA videos are excellent. Exceedingly cool staging, great music, understated but engaging drama, and an easy but earnest style from Bell make them undeniably compelling.

But it isn't just technical merit that has catapulted the NOOMA videos to such popularity. Nor is it simply Bell's natural ability to communicate and tell a story, though that may be part of it. At the end of the day people are watching these videos because they believe Rob Bell is teaching them about Christianity and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In parts [2](#) and [3](#) of my review, I'll make some comments on each of the videos, and then comment at length on some of the most theologically important ones. But here in part 1, I want to give you the gist. Watching eighteen of these videos in quick succession gives one a good idea of what Bell and NOOMA are trying to communicate overall. And, popularity aside, the result is not particularly encouraging. I have reviewed some of Rob Bell's work on this site already, and the weaknesses in his understanding of the gospel noted in those reviews trouble these NOOMA videos as well.

GIVING CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

First, though, we should give credit where it's due: Bell is an extraordinarily gifted communicator. The NOOMA marketing campaign bills him as a "storyteller," and that is a spot-on characterization. But he's not merely a storyteller. He teaches too, and in a way that is far from boring. There's a reason people fill up stadiums across the nation to hear him speak.

On top of that, the videos are pitch-perfect in their production, from camera angles to music to lighting. Part of their appeal is the way the content is woven together with the setting. In one video or another, Bell speaks to his audience from a park bench, a diner booth, an airport waiting area, a concert hall, his own living room—you name it. Every now and then he has to pause for the environment to intrude—a waitress brings coffee, a large group walks for an uncomfortably long time in between him and the camera, a plane screams as it takes off. I'm sure every second of that is scripted, but it's effective scripting. It makes you want to shoo the large group out of the way so you can hear what Bell has to say next.

SUNDAY SCHOOL WITH A DOSE OF COOL

Maybe the first thing you'll notice beyond their technical excellence is that the NOOMA videos are not highly theological. Every now and again, there is one that delves into something that approaches theology proper, but on the whole the messages are relatively simple—Sunday School lessons with an extra dose of cool. There's a video on how to deal with an anger problem; another expounding on the true meaning of sex; another explaining that God wants our hearts and not just our religion; another telling us why God doesn't always give us everything we ask for; another explaining that grief over a loved one's death is not wrong and should point us to hope in God's plan to restore the world.



All this is fine, and will no doubt be helpful to many people.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL

But Bell intends to do something more in NOOMA than provide "life lessons." He intends to preach the gospel. In fact, he says so repeatedly, with statements that run something like, "*That's* the gospel, *that's* the good news that Jesus brought us." And that's where these videos become more significant than cool youth Sunday School lessons. They become dangerous.

The gospel as Bell communicates it in NOOMA runs something like this: All of us are broken, sinful, selfish, and prideful people. We carry around the baggage of our hurts, our resentments, and our jealousies. As a result we are just a shell of the kind of people God intends us to be. But our God is a loving God who accepts us and loves us just as we are. He can comfort us, heal us, and make us whole, real, authentic, living, laughing people. Not only that, but Jesus came to show us how to live revolutionary lives of love, compassion, and acceptance. By learning from his teachings and following him, we can live the full and complete lives that God intended.

And that's about it. That's not just the introduction that leads to an explanation of the cross, atonement, the resurrection and salvation, either. So far, at least, that's what NOOMA holds out as "The Gospel." Full stop.

THE CROSS? THE RESURRECTION?

In the videos I watched, there's almost no exposition of the cross. I only remember it being mentioned twice, once to say that Caesar killed Jesus and once when Bell says, "The cross is like God saying, 'I don't hold your past against you.'" Well, kind of. But that hardly exhausts the meaning of the cross, does it? At the very least, he ought to have continued that sentence by saying something like, "I don't hold your past against you, because I held it against my Son." But then I suppose that sort of uncomfortable thought would have destroyed the smoothness of the presentation.

Even the resurrection—which usually plays an enormous role in Emergent theology—doesn't get much emphasis here. NOOMA is all about "Jesus' teachings," but only a select few of those. You won't hear Bell talking about the teachings of Jesus that focus on ransom, blood, new covenants, and rebirth—much less judgment, sheep and goats, and "Depart from me." For Bell, Jesus' teachings are apparently limited to his ethics, and Bell's gospel is evidently limited to a call for people to embrace those ethics and "live like Jesus."

I have a theory about why Emergent church types seem to be able to communicate so well with "our generation," why they're able to relate so well to people who have always been hostile to the gospel. You can chalk it up to some kind of "authentic" style if you want, but I'd contend that a big part of their ability to communicate the gospel without offense to people who have always been offended by it is that they leave out all the offensive parts!

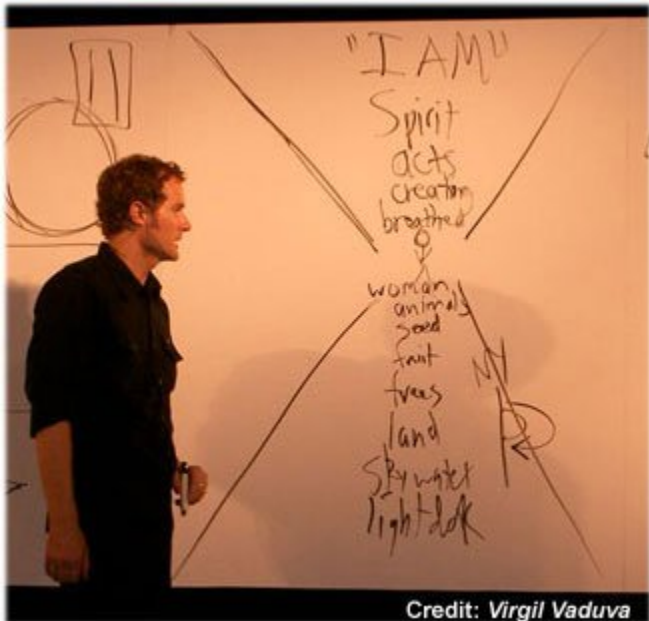
HEY ROB, TRY THIS

There's no denying that Rob Bell is a tremendous natural speaker and communicator. He's good at telling stories, using his face to emphasize a point and his eyes to arrest your attention. But before we get too far with the infatuation, somebody should point out that it's actually relatively easy to "connect" with the world when you're talking about handling anger, or the true meaning of sex, or how closely God holds you to his chest when you're facing a storm in life, or how disgusted God must be with that guy preaching the sermon about hell.

The harder thing—and the thing that would really test Bell's mettle as a communicator—would be to make a NOOMA video about substitutionary atonement, for example. Not one that re-thinks it and re-casts it for a generation that doesn't like that kind of thing, but one that addresses "He was crushed for our iniquities" with the same unflinching "honesty" and "authenticity" as it addresses "Love one another." Would that installment of NOOMA be received with the same enthusiasm the others have enjoyed? What if he made one about the final judgment, and the fact that "No one comes to the Father but by me?" How well would that be received among the audience Bell has built?

I don't think every ten-minute video needs to contain a crash course in systematic or biblical theology. Christian life and doctrine is a vast and rich universe of truth, and if Rob Bell wants to do ten minutes on sex, ten on anger, ten on this or that, that's obviously fine. It's always easy to say by way of critique, "That ten minutes should have said more than it did." So that's not where I see a problem with NOOMA.

The problem is that in the videos which aim to present the Christian gospel, the gospel presented is woefully incomplete if not outright wrong in places (which we'll discuss at more length in the [second part of this series](#)). Yes, there's sin and even grace in NOOMA; God loves us as we are, with all our junk, as Bell puts it. But beyond that there's little to no cross or resurrection,



Credit: Virgil Vaduva

no atonement, no substitution. Once we're told that God accepts us as we are, all that follows is a call to live as Jesus lived in order to make the world a better place—which if it weren't so hip would just be called "moralism," or even "Pelagianism."

WHAT'S MISSING; WHAT'S NEEDED

I have said in several places on this site that there is much about the Emergent theological storyline that I find compelling. Who wouldn't be excited by the idea of God's people—broken, sinful people accepted by him just as they are—living and working to diffuse God's grace and love throughout the whole of society? So far as it goes, that's a great and biblical vision, and there's a reason it resonates with people. But, in my opinion, where the Emergent church and these videos go wrong is in telling the world that *that . . . is . . .* the gospel.

It's not. Good as that storyline might be, it is finally too small and too colorless. For God to lovingly accept us as we are no matter how ashamed we might be of ourselves is nice and all, but it's a pretty pale gray compared to the Bible's story of a just and loving God sending his Son to take the punishment of a rebellious people so they can live with and for him forever.

If you want to engage a "new generation" looking for authenticity, honest answers, and a willingness to look unflinchingly at human sin and suffering, that's the gospel that will do it. Unfortunately, that's also the gospel that these NOOMA videos, at least so far, seem unwilling to talk about.

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Video Review: The Scoop'a on NOOMA -- Part 2, by Rob Bell

Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

Zondervan, \$10.98/video

Part 2 (Part 3 to follow below)

Rob Bell's NOOMA videos have made quite a splash in the Christian world. In some ways that's not terribly surprising. The little videos are masterpieces of technical production, and Bell has just about perfected the art of looking into a camera and making you think you're having a nice conversation over coffee, or on a subway platform, or between breaths as you plant a tree together. It's all very compelling, not at all "churchy," and so Christians look at it and think, "Wow, I could show this to the guy I buy coffee from every morning and not be embarrassed. This is great stuff!"



In some ways I don't blame them for saying that. Bell's approach is undeniably fresh, and it will communicate with people who are immediately turned off by a suited guy in a pulpit with a fake green plant in front of it. In that sense, NOOMA is good. Really good.

But that's not the end of the story. Once you get past the razzle-dazzle of the videos' style and really listen to what Bell is saying, you start to wonder if maybe they're not so good after all. Watch the videos with a discerning eye, and certain questions start nagging you: What's the cross for again? Why did Jesus die? *How* do you become a Christian? Hold on—did he just say that *everyone* has the Spirit of God living in them already? *Jesus* has faith in *me*? *I* am the gospel? What in the world does that mean?

Most of the videos in the series don't really get at the most important questions about what the gospel is. Most of them talk about practical topics like sex, anger, materialism, loving your enemies, and the like. But there are a few that really focus on the gospel itself and try to answer the question, "What does it mean to be a Christian?" The best way to get at the heart of NOOMA's presentation of the gospel, I think, is to watch the episodes titled *Trees*, *Luggage*, *Dust*, *Rhythm*, *Breathe*, and *You*. Of course there are places here and there in the other videos that speak about the gospel, but I think the crucial points are made in those six.

In part 1 of this review, I argued that, at the very least, the gospel Bell presents in NOOMA is incomplete. Essentially, it boils down to the assertion that God loves us just as we are, wants to heal us of our brokenness, and calls us to live a life of love and compassion just like Jesus did. There is very little about the cross, very little about the resurrection, and nothing about how sin separates us from God or deserves his righteous anger.

But the problem doesn't end with incompleteness; it's not just what is left unsaid. The concern is worse than that, because if you take the videos on their own terms, and if you take Bell's presentation of the gospel at face value, what you end up with is actually something very different from biblical Christianity. You end up with a "gospel" that misleads people about their relationship with God, is inexcusably unclear about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, and finally makes Christianity little more than a banal moral system that tells people to live in a certain way.

NOOMA MISLEADS LOST PEOPLE

Let me explain what I mean when I say that the gospel presented in NOOMA misleads lost people about their relationship with God. The Bible could not be clearer that the consequence of sin and rebellion against God is that we are separated from him, our relationship with him is severed, and we are brought under his judgment and condemnation. "Your sins have made a separation between you and your God," Isaiah says (Is. 59:2). And Paul writes in Romans 1 that the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

These facts—that sin separates human beings from God, and that God judges sin—constitute one of the most important themes in the entire Bible. It explains why everything else was necessary—the sacrifices, the priests, the prophets, and especially Jesus' death on the cross. It's why Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). He was separated from God so that his redeemed people would not be.

Bell doesn't say any of that in the NOOMA videos. In fact, he seems to tell lost people exactly the opposite—that they are already in relationship with God and even forgiven of sin, and that the only problem is that they just don't realize it. Whether because of shame, or embarrassment, or sheer ignorance, they're hiding under the covers (see *Lump*) when a loving, merciful God has already forgiven them, is already in relationship with them, and is just waiting for them to realize it and start acting like it.

Take the video titled *Rhythm*, for example. Bell compares God to a song that is playing throughout the universe in every heart and soul. "The song is playing all around us all the time," he says. "The song is written on our hearts. And everybody is playing a song. See, the question isn't whether or not you're playing a song, the question is 'Are you in tune?'" In other words, are you living the kind of compassionate, loving life that harmonizes with the song that's already playing in your heart? Here's the last line of that video: "May you come to see that the song is written on your heart, and as you live in tune with the song, in tune with the Creator of the universe, may you realize that you *are* in relationship with the living God."

Now, that language is bewilderingly slippery. Is everybody playing a song, or *the* song? Who is Bell talking to exactly when he hopes they realize that they *are* in relationship with the living God? The lost person who's hearing this for the first time? The person who's been living "in tune with the song" for a while? None of that's clear.

Or take this passage from *Breathe*:

Life is fragile, and yet at the same time we've been breathed into by the creator of the universe. And this divine breath is in every single human being ever. . . . We're these sacred, divine dirt-clods. And yet we possess untold power and strength. Your life is but a breath, and yet you were made by the creator of everything. Now for thousands of years, people have understood that this physical breath that we all possess is actually a picture of a deeper reality. In the Bible, the word for breath is the same word as the word for spirit. In the Hebrew language, it's the word "ruah," and in the Greek language, it's the word "pneuma." . . . Breath, spirit. Same word.

The divine breath is in "every single human being ever," and everyone knows that *breath* and *spirit* are the same word. Well, alright so far. Every human being has a spirit. But then:

The first Christians took hold of this idea, and they took it way farther. They actually believed that the Spirit of God resides, or can literally dwell, live in a person. One scripture in Romans 8 says that if the pneuma (Spirit of God) who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, then God will give you life. Another scripture says that what the Spirit of God does living in you is it sanctifies. Now the word sanctify, it means to, like, purge, or to clean out. What it essentially means is that when you let God in, when you breathe, what happens is you become aware of all the things you need to leave behind, everything you need to let go of. . . . Jesus said that what the Spirit of God does is it guides us into truth. Is there anything you need guidance in?

Again, who's he talking to here? It's hard to believe that he's suddenly quit talking to lost people and shifted to talking only to those who have repented and believed in Jesus. Yet he's talking about the Spirit of God dwelling in us, and what that means in our lives. Does Bell think that the Spirit of God dwells in "every single human being ever"? When he puts the phrase "when you breathe" right next to the phrase "when you let God in," is he saying that the way you let the Spirit of God into your life is just by taking a breath? When he says that the early Christians "took this idea way farther" and began to talk about the indwelling *Spirit of God*, does Bell realize that they only applied that idea to people who were Christians? Or does he still think that's true of "every single human being ever"?

Here's how it ends: "A person doesn't have to agree with this for it to already be true. God has already given us life, in the breath we just took, and the breath we took before that, and the breath we're gonna take and the breath after that." Okay, but are we back now to talking about just *breath* and just *spirit* of the kind that every human being has? Or are we still talking about the Spirit of God?

And what about this, from *Luggage*: "It's like right at the heart of [Jesus'] message is the simple claim that God has forgiven us of all of our sins, doesn't hold any of our past against us—because none of us have clean hands, do we? . . . So when I forgive somebody, I'm giving them what God has given to me. . . . May you forgive as you've been forgiven. May you give to others what's been given to you." Again, who's he talking to? Who's been forgiven? If I'm not a Christian, and I'm hearing all this for the first time, am I supposed to see myself in that statement? Am I supposed to walk away thinking I'm already forgiven?

To be fair, I wouldn't draw any hard conclusions from this on its own terms. The language is just too slippery, to the point that it almost seems *designed* for one to be able to interpret it however one wants. If you're lost, you can hear it and walk away convinced that the Spirit of God is dwelling in you, that you have life, and that you've been forgiven of all your sins. But then again, Bell could come back and say, "No, I didn't mean that at all."

Actually, I wish he would say that. Then we could chalk it all up to the consummate communicator not communicating very well. There's a passage in one of Bell's books, however, that leads me to think that Bell really is asserting that life, forgiveness, and even the Spirit of God is already possessed by every single human being ever. The only hitch is that some people don't realize it. Here's the relevant passage from *Velvet Elvis* (page 146):

The fact that we are loved and accepted and forgiven in spite of everything we have done is simply too good to be true. Our choice becomes this: We can trust his [God's] retelling of the story, or we can trust our telling of our story. It is a choice we make every day about the reality we are going to live in.

And this reality extends beyond life.

Heaven is full of forgiven people.

Hell is full of forgiven people.

Heaven is full of people God loves, whom Jesus died for.

Hell is full of forgiven people God loves, whom Jesus died for.

The difference is how we choose to live, which story we choose to live in, which version of reality we trust.

Ours or God's.

I don't know how else to understand this: What Bell is asserting here is a bizarre kind of universalism in which every human being is forgiven and yet some forgiven people end up in hell anyway. The NOOMA might be slippery, but this passage from *Velvet Elvis* isn't at all, and that may offer some insight on what he's actually saying in NOOMA. The only way I can see to understand it is that Bell is telling lost people that they are forgiven, that they are in relationship with God, even that the Spirit of God lives in them and is waiting to guide them and sanctify them if only they'd wake up and realize it.

That kind of thinking though is devastatingly misleading to lost people. To be lost is not merely to be ignorant about the fact that you are already in relationship with God, forgiven, free, and full of his Spirit. To be lost is to be separated from God and under his judgment. That's a crucial part of the gospel, not just because Bell's alternative involves the absurdity of forgiven people suffering in hell; it's crucial because, unless you understand that God hates sin and judges it, the cross doesn't make any sense. In fact, it becomes kind of superfluous. The fact is, somebody could hear Rob Bell's version of the gospel in NOOMA and walk away feeling forgiven and Spirit-filled without a single thought about Jesus' death. And at that point, what you have is something quite other than Christianity.

NOOMA IS UNCLEAR ABOUT THE MEANING OF THE CROSS

All that may actually go a long way toward explaining why the Emergent movement seems to have so much trouble with the cross: They can't really find a place for it. It doesn't fit neatly into the storyline. I've written about this in another place, with particular regard to Brian McLaren's work. But it's true of Rob Bell's material in NOOMA, too. Blood atonement just doesn't find a natural home in the Emergent story, so even though it can't be ignored entirely, the cross doesn't get mentioned very often. And when it does, it's never with any clear explanation of its meaning.

I didn't keep a count of exactly how many times the cross makes an appearance in the eighteen NOOMA videos I watched, but I am certain that it doesn't get any extended treatment, much less a video to itself. But where it is mentioned, the viewer is left utterly unclear as to what Jesus' death does, or why it matters.

Here's what Bell says about Jesus' death in *Luggage*:

It's like right at the heart of his message is the simple claim that God has forgiven us of all of our sins, doesn't hold any of our past against us—because none of us have clean hands, do we? I mean we've all wronged someone, but with Jesus there's no condemnation, there's no list of wrongs, there's no judgment. It's like the cross is God's way of saying, "I don't hold your past against you."

There's nothing necessarily *wrong* there, but then again, the whole idea of these videos is to talk to non-Christian people and tell them about Jesus Christ. Exactly what are they supposed to gain when Bell says that the cross is God's way of saying that he doesn't hold their past against them? At the very least, that's pretty thin stuff to offer up as an explanation of what most Christians consider to be the center of their faith.

There's a slightly more filled-out treatment of Jesus' death in *You*, where Bell presents the gospel as a choice between changing-the-world-by-force-and-political-coercion-like-Caesar and changing-the-world-by-love-and-compassion-like-Jesus. Here's his point about the cross:

Well, obviously the way they were living and the things they believed brought them—it raised all sorts of questions for those around them. Who do you believe: Caesar, who thinks that a new world, a better world, is made through his brute military and political power by forcing people to do what he says, or Jesus, who invites you to make a new and better world through loving acts of compassion and generosity? Caesar who killed Jesus on an execution stake, or God who raised Jesus from the dead? Whose way do you think is better? Who do you think is Lord? Jesus or Caesar? Whose kingdom do you find more compelling?

There's not much there to go on, but the point seems to be that Jesus' death was a picture of Caesar's wrath against his life of love and compassion, and the resurrection was then another picture of God vindicating Jesus' way over Caesar's way. Love conquers violence. McLaren floats a similar understanding of the cross in *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, calling it the "powerful weakness" theory of the atonement. The problem with that, however, is that it casts Jesus' death as a mere spectacle. It's just God *showing* us that he prefers Jesus' way to Caesar's. But it leaves the cross actually accomplishing nothing objective.

I've watched several hours' worth of NOOMA videos now, and I still have no idea what Bell thinks the cross was for. Somehow it has to do with God not holding our past against us, and together with the resurrection it's a powerful statement that God doesn't care for Caesar's *m.o.* But that's it. That's all Bell gives us in eighteen different videos.

So what's going on here? My guess is that it's the same impulse that would lead Bell to ignore the fact that God judges sin. Wrath is uncomfortable, and it doesn't play well in the Emergent culture. People don't want to hear about a God who could be wrathful.

Of course, that causes problems for explaining why Jesus had to die, because, like it or not, the cross is bound up with wrath. After all, that's what the word "propitiation" deals with. If you're not willing to talk about a God who has wrath and is willing to use it, you're going to be really uncomfortable explaining why the Bible says that God killed his Son. You'll probably just ignore it. And when you can't ignore it any longer, you'll say something benign and cloudy like, "It's God's way of saying that he doesn't hold our past against us." Then you'll tut-tut Caesar for killing Jesus. What you won't do is face up honestly to the fact that Scripture says, "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him."

Here's the thing: No one would say that the cross is a comfortable topic. It's not. It's a horrible moment in the history of humanity, one that embodies the most heart-wrenching truths imaginable. God the Son dies. The eternal Father forsakes the eternal Son. There's a reason God extinguished the sun and shrouded the whole thing in darkness; the universe twisted up and broke when Jesus died. The cross is not something that's fun to stare at, and it's not a crazy instinct to want, at first, to avert one's eyes from it.

Then again, it's precisely in those grotesque paradoxes of the cross that its beauty lies. Admittedly, that beauty isn't obvious at first glance. You have to stare at the cross to see its glory. You have to see *why* God the Son died, *why* the Father forsook the Son. You have to see the *meaning* of it, and not just the bare, bloody facts of the matter. Once you do that—once you've stared long enough and deeply enough—you start to see that it was exactly there, in its very ugliness, in the most horrific outpouring of wrath that the world has ever seen, there was love incomprehensible!

That's the real tragedy of Bell's approach to the cross. He's not willing to stare at it long enough to see its glory. The wrath inherent to it is so distasteful to him, so off-putting to the audience he's speaking to, that he ends up, sadly, without the resources to tell his listeners about the most profound and most beautiful love in the universe—that of Jesus laying down his life for those he loves, and absorbing the wrath of his Father in their place, as their Savior and Redeemer.

NOOMA TURNS CHRISTIANITY INTO A BANAL MORALISM

Of course, once you decide to demur from talking about the cross, you've really turned Christianity into nothing more than a banal moralism that tells people to live in a certain way. Now that's a charge that's loaded with irony, because moralism is one of the main things the Emergent movement is reacting against. But take a look at what they're saying. Take a look at how Rob Bell defines Christianity in these NOOMA videos. It's not much more than, "Live like this, not like this."

Consider the way Bell describes what it is to be a Christian in *Rhythm*. If you're living "in tune with the song," you're there. "When I'm like selfish and stingy or refuse to give," he says, "I'm essentially out of tune with the song. . . . When you see someone sacrifice themselves for another, for the well-being of somebody else, it's like they're playing in the right key. That's why it's so inspiring and powerful. They're in tune with the song." It's all about doing this, living like this, acting like that.

And it's not that Bell is saying that "living in tune with the song" is the result of God's regenerating power in the life of the believer, either. It's just a decision you make to do it. "An infinite, massive, kind of invisible God—that's hard to get our minds around. But truth, love, grace, mercy, justice, compassion...the way that Jesus lived. I can see *that*. I can understand *that*. I can relate to *that*. I can play that song!"

All you have to do is believe in yourself.

No, seriously. He says that. And really it's even worse than that, because believing in yourself is the grand finale of a whole theological argument in which Jesus is made out to have faith in *us*, rather than the other way around. Jesus has faith, Bell says, that we'll be able to live like he wants us to.

All this happens in the video entitled *Dust*. Having explained at some length how the Jewish rabbis would choose students to learn under them, Bell asks why it was that Peter, seeing Jesus walking on the water, got out of the boat to do it himself, and why it was that he started to sink. Here's how Bell answers those questions:

Why is Peter's first reaction, "If it's you, then tell me to come to you?" Because he's a disciple, he's oriented his whole life, devoted his whole life to doing what he sees his rabbi doing, learning to be like his rabbi. So he sees his rabbi walking on water, and what's the first thing he wants to do? "I wanna walk on water, too. I wanna be like my rabbi." And so Peter gets out of the boat, and he starts walking on water, and he yells out, "Jesus save me!" And the text reads that Jesus immediately caught him and said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Now, I always assumed that Peter doubts Jesus. But Jesus isn't sinking. Who does Peter doubt? He doubts himself; he loses faith in himself, that he can actually be like his rabbi.

So it's not that Peter let his fear of the waves overwhelm his faith in Jesus' power to keep him afloat. No, it's that Peter lost faith in himself. He stopped believing that he could do what Jesus did. He was, as Jesus put, a man "of little faith"—never mind that Jesus always uses that phrase to refer to someone's lack of faith in God, not lack of faith in themselves. Here's the point Bell wants to make:

I mean, all my life, I've heard people talk about believing in God. But God believes in us, in you, in me. I mean faith in Jesus is important. But what about Jesus' faith in us? . . . I mean, what if we can actually be the kinds of people that God created us to be? What if he actually believes that? I mean, what if he actually believes that we can be the kind of people who live like Jesus lived, the kinds of people who take action because we're aware of all these endless opportunities around us all the time, for good, for beauty, for truth? Jesus has faith that you can follow him and you can be like him. . . .

May you believe in God, but may you come to see that God believes in you. May you have faith in Jesus, but may you come to believe that Jesus has faith that you can be like him.

So that's it. Christianity is about living like Jesus lived—and Jesus believes we can do it if we just try hard enough.

In fact, if you take Bell seriously, "live like this" is pretty much the bottom-line of Jesus' message to the world. As he sums it up in *Trees*: "My understanding of Jesus' message is that he teaches us to live in the reality of God now—here and today. It's almost as if Jesus just keeps saying, 'Change your life. Live this way.'"

Change your life. Live this way.

That is moralism.

Sure, it's a tricked-out moralism. There's some colorless grace at the front end of it (God accepts us as we are). It also has a really great moral example in Jesus trailblazing a new way of life right under the nose of the Roman Empire, and it comes with a big story about God launching a rescue effort to put the world back together. But it's still moralism. It makes Jesus into one more philosopher/teacher telling us all to live this way, not that way. It makes Christianity a matter of Jesus trusting us to live a certain way, rather than our trusting in Christ to save us from sin.

CONCLUSION

I realize that Rob Bell is trying to communicate with people who have never given the time of day to spiritual things. He's trying to present Jesus to them in a way that will be accessible to them. I think that's a noble goal, and I don't think it's a futile one. But I also think that the way Bell has gone about it—with particular reference to these NOOMA videos—is something far smaller than and far short of biblical Christianity.

Having watched so many of these videos, it strikes me just now how seldom Bell uses the traditional Christian language to name Jesus. He doesn't call him Savior, or Redeemer, or Son of God, and only very occasionally does he call him Lord. Instead, he very much seems to prefer calling Jesus "teacher" or "rabbi." I'm sure part of that is that he wants to be fresh and edgy. But I think it also points to just how far these videos lower the meaning of Christianity.

The fact is, the NOOMA videos retell the story of Jesus in a pretty radical way. Though Jesus is certainly respected and honored, the point of the story no longer involves the divine Christ who died on the cross as a substitute for his people, rose from the dead, and is now enthroned in heaven, but rather Jesus the Nazarene who teaches people how to live and how to find God. Jesus shows the way, rather than being the Way. He is respected, honored, and heeded, rather than worshipped. He is "Rabbi," rather than "Savior." This is, as Darrell Bock and Daniel Wallace described it recently, the replacement of "Christianity" with "Jesusanity."

Bell would never use this word, but I believe what he's presented in NOOMA is really just another *religion* that's not so much different from any other religion in the world. For the gospel of NOOMA isn't finally about the Son of God who lovingly dies in his people's place to redeem them from sin and save them from God's righteous judgment. It's about the really great teacher who says, "Change your life. Live this way."

Once you're past the flashy packaging, that's not really all that inspiring, is it?

Greg Gilbert is the director of research for the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and an elder at Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

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The Scoop'a on NOOMA -- Part 3, by Rob Bell

Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

Zondervan, \$10.98/video

Here's a list of the NOOMA videos I was able to watch, with a brief comment on each:

001 | Rain

This is a really compelling message about God's love for those who are broken, sinful, ashamed and afraid. Bell tells the story of being caught in a thunderstorm with his one-year-old son. Walking toward home with the baby crying in fear, he held his son close to his chest and whispered over and over again to him, "I love you, buddy. We're gonna make it." That's what God does for us when we come to him. He holds us, comforts us, and promises us that we're going to make it. This video has a strong statement of our sinfulness and God's love, but the gospel is presented as "God loves you even with your brokenness."



002 | Flame

Bell starts a bonfire in the forest as he talks about the "flame" of love. This is one of the best of the NOOMA. Bell distinguishes between the Hebrew words *rayah* (meaning friendship), *ahavah* (meaning commitment), and *dod* (referring to sexual love). All three are necessary for the kind of love between man and woman that God intended. Bell's thoughts about what you end up with when any one of these is missing are very interesting and very true.

003 | Trees

Planting trees along a dirty-looking sidewalk in the city, Bell says that he wants a God who is interested in the here-and-now, who cares about what happens in this world and doesn't just tell his followers to look forward to the next one. This is one of the most important videos for understanding the kernel of NOOMA's version of the gospel. Being a disciple of Jesus is about being a person of peace and justice, and about joining God in his purpose to make this world a better place. To sum it up: "My understanding of Jesus' message is that he teaches us to live in the reality of God now—here and today. It's almost as if Jesus just keeps saying, "Change your life. Live this way."

004 | Sunday

Sitting in the Rainbow Café, Bell says that God is not concerned about our religious rituals. He wants our hearts. Taken alone, this is a good video, keying on Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees, and encouraging people to *live* as Christians, not just *be* Christians. Taken as part of the whole NOOMA package, you realize that the good exhortation here to live in a certain way is not well backed up by any true gospel.

005 | Noise

This one is different from the other NOOMA, because Bell doesn't say much. After introducing the video with a story about how difficult it is to find silence in our world, the screen goes black, and white text asks the viewer if there is too much noise in his or her life. Do you want to hear the voice of God? Is it possible that you don't hear because there's not enough silence in your life? Jesus had disciplines of silence and solitude, so he could hear the voice of God. As usual, the production is fantastic—the viewer is staring out of a T.V. at Bell sitting on his couch, at least until he turns the T.V. off.

006 | Kickball

Bell refuses to buy a weird toy at a mall kiosk for his young son, because he has in mind another, better gift at a different store—a kickball. This is a good meditation on a hard question: Why doesn't God always give us what we ask for? Bell gives the same answer that Lewis does in his "holiday-at-the-beach versus mudpies-in-the-slums" illustration.

007 | Luggage

Everybody has wounds, Bell says in this video. Some of them are small and petty, others are large and devastating. The message of this one is about resisting the impulse to revenge. Bell says that to forgive is simply to give to another what has already been given to us (see part 2 of this series for a discussion on why that could be confusing to non-Christians). This is where Bell says, quite off-handedly, that "The cross is like God saying, 'I don't hold your past against you.'" He also says that forgiveness is more about setting the "forgiver" free, rather than the "forgiven." The video ends shockingly with the woman we've been following through the airport getting into her car, driving out of the airport, and promptly getting crushed by a dump truck—the point being that you don't have forever to forgive someone.

008 | Dust

This is Bell's rethinking of the story of Peter walking on the water. After giving a pretty fascinating account of how the Jewish rabbi system worked, he concludes by saying that the unique thing about Rabbi Jesus was that he didn't pick "the best of the best of the best" to follow him. He picked guys who didn't make the cut. But the fact that he picked them meant that he thought they had the ability to do what he did. Peter thought so, too; so he got out on the water. The reason he sank was not that he lost faith in Jesus—it was that he lost faith in himself that he could be like Jesus. Faith in Jesus is good, Bell says, but what about Jesus' faith in us? He chose us, so obviously he has faith that we can live the kind of lives that he wants us to live. *Dust* is one of the most questionable of all the videos. Is it really a good idea to recast faith as Jesus' faith in us to be good? That's pretty kindergarten, if you ask me—banal moralism, as I called it earlier.

009 | Bullhorn

A call to love people, and a gentle shot across the bow at people who believe in the traditional Christian doctrine of hell. Bell asks what conversion and condemnation have to do with the message of Jesus, and he says that the way we usually preach the gospel makes hell sound like a threat and heaven like a carrot. In the background is a very plain man in a white, short-sleeved dress shirt making some sort of preparations. At the end of the video, he gets out of his car and starts shouting at people about hell through his bullhorn in a busy crosswalk. The point of the video is that we're to love people—disagreeing with them sometimes, yes, but always loving them. The subtext is that somehow talking about hell, judgment, and conversion is antithetical to that goal. I'll just let Bell take that up with Jesus, who didn't seem to agree.

010 | Lump

Bell's son gets caught in a lie and rushes upstairs. A few minutes later, Bell finds him hiding under the covers of his parents' bed, ashamed. What he doesn't realize is that his father is there waiting to forgive him. Bell says that given enough time, sin will always find us out, and he calls people to come out from under the covers and stop hiding in shame from God, who loves us in spite of what we've done. However, Bell gives no strong call to repentance. The focus is definitely on God's love for us regardless of our sin, and not on repentance, as it is in all the videos.

011 | Rhythm

This is one of the videos in which Bell tries to define what the gospel is. He says he doesn't particularly like thinking of God in theological categories, but rather when he thinks about God, he thinks about a song. That song is playing throughout the universe, and the question is whether we're living in tune with that song. "Living in tune" means living a life of love, justice, and compassion. He lightly shoves aside people who insist on thinking of God as immortal, invisible, omnipotent, and all the rest, saying that he finds it easier to look at how Jesus lived and then live like that. "I can play *that* song," he says. The video ends with "May you realize that you *are* in relationship with the living God."

012 | Matthew

Bell tells the story of his friend Matthew, who died in a car accident. This video is about dealing with grief. We find hope, Bell says, in God's promise that he will restore the world.

013 | Rich

Bell is waiting for his car to get an oil change. This is a fairly straightforward Sunday School lesson on materialism. Here in America, we are fantastically rich, and God has given us these things so that we can do good works and join him in repairing and restoring the world.

014 | Breathe

Set in a subway terminal, this one is a fascinating meditation on breathing, the spirit, and the name of God. God's revealed name YHWH, Bell says, is believed by some rabbis to be the sound of breathing. When we're born, the first thing we do is say the name of God, and when we can no longer say the name of God, we die. This video contains some confusing theology about the words "breath" and "spirit" being the same. Bell rightly says that every human being has breath and a spirit, but he seems to equate all that with the Spirit of God in the New Testament. I'm not positive, but it sounds to me like he is saying that every human being possesses the Spirit of God, who sanctifies and leads into truth.

015 | You

This video starts out by showing how many of the central facts of Christianity—Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, and divinity—were already being used by mystery religions in the Roman Empire. Those things wouldn't have been too surprising to people, and wouldn't have caused much of a ripple in the Roman Empire. What would have been surprising and controversial was Jesus' call to live a life of love and compassion. The point isn't made very strongly, but one wonders: is Bell really saying that the focus of Christianity ought to be Jesus' ethical teachings, and not his death, resurrection, and identity? The gospel is about making a better world, he says. It's the good news that God hasn't given up on the world. God heals broken people so they can join him in healing the world. The cross was about Caesar reacting to Jesus' life of love, and the resurrection overturning Caesar's hostility. The video ends with "May you realize that you are the gospel." Here is the gospel according to Bell, in all its moralistic incompleteness. 'Live like this. That's what's important.'

016 | Store

Bell talks about dealing with anger as a man encounters frustration after frustration in a grocery store. Straightforward, well-done message on handling anger and frustration, and redirecting that energy toward being angry at the injustice and suffering in the world.

017 | Today

This video includes more about Jesus' resurrection than any other, but it focuses on Jesus telling Mary Magdalene not to hold on to him when she sees him. Bell's message is that people tend to get hung up on the past—either celebrating or mourning it—but that God wants us to let go of the past and live in Today. He says at the end, "May you receive from God a new spirit, one for here, now, today." It makes one wonder: does Bell *know* he's using biblical language in a thoroughly unbiblical way?

018 | Name

This is easily the weirdest of the NOOMA videos. It's a series of shots of different people taking off one t-shirt to reveal another and another, with a word on the back of each that presumably describes the person—"lonely," "stylish," "envious," "listener," "anorexic," "GED," "HIV+," and on and on. There's no discernible progression; the words seem mostly random to me. At the end, all the people take off the last t-shirt, and the word "name" is stenciled on each of their backs. Over all this, Bell is telling the viewer to learn to be comfortable with who God made them to be, to be comfortable in their own skin. Really? Comfortable with envy? Comfortable being jaded? What does that mean? And what does it mean to have "name" stenciled on your back when you get all your shirts off? And what on earth does Bell mean when he says at the end, "May you do the hard work of the soul to discover your true self?"

019 | Open

This video is about the role of prayer in our lives. Why does God answer some prayers "Yes" and some prayers "No"? Why does God perform a miracle in this situation and not in that situation? In the end, Bell doesn't answer those questions, rightly saying "I don't know why." Using Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane as his model, Bell understands prayer to be neither a passive "whatever" to the will of God, nor an active rebellion against what God is doing. Rather, prayer is a means of being "brutally honest with your Maker," telling God honestly how you feel, what you're thinking, and then being open to what God is accomplishing in the world. Moreover, prayer leads us to understand that we ourselves are a part of God's work. "Don't pray for God to feed the hungry," Bell says, "unless you're willing to go feed them yourself." The theological basis of the video is that God "left creation unfinished" and is now engaged in the "ongoing creation of the world," of which we can be a part. Lots of things to wonder about there: Doesn't God's declaration of "very good" and his rest on the seventh day belie the idea that his work of creation was "unfinished?" Most troublesome is when Bell says that God "takes a great risk in creating," because

things might have "veered off course" and not turned out like he intended. Does Bell know that's how the, well, Open Theists talk?

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Book Review: *Why We're Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)*, By Kevin DeYoung & Ted Kluck

Reviewed by Jonathan Leeman

Foreword by David F. Wells

Moody Press, 2008, 256 pp, \$14.99

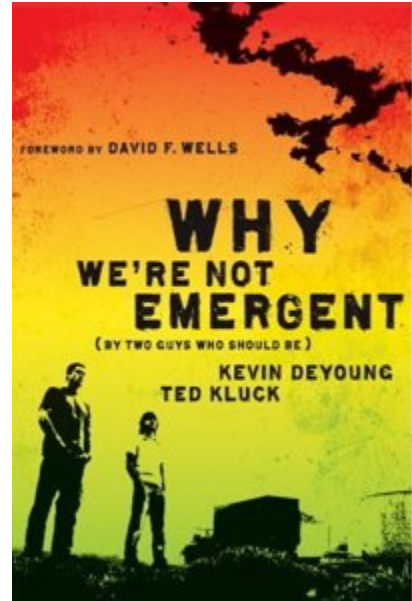
"They just don't get it."

I predict that's what the naysayers of Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck's new book *Why We're Not Emergent* will say.

"They don't *understand* me" is one of the slogans of post-moderns, Emergents, and teenagers everywhere. It's built into their philosophical system. It may be the only solid plank their doctrinal platform has.

In one sense, of course, it's true. No one but God *understands* all the way into the depths of every person's heart (e.g. Prov. 20:24).

And in another sense it's helpful. For instance, my wife, recognizing that my experience and brain-wiring are quite different than hers, loves and serves obtuse and arrogant me when she says in exasperation, "You're not *understanding* me!" When she says this, she's not referring so much to logical differences as to categorical or perspectival differences, as if a cat were trying to explain its view of the world to a dog. So it is with the Emergents. They are potentially serving and loving non-Emergent evangelicals by insisting, "You're not getting it," because it forces us non-Emergents to work harder at getting outside of ourselves and seeking to understand.



CONVERSATION STOPPER

The problem is that this same phrase "You don't understand me" can be used dismissively, immaturely, impudently. It can be thrown out as a conversation-stopper in order to avoid correction. And it's my impression that *some* Emergents, like some teenagers, do just this.

Michigan pastor DeYoung and his church member Kluck, who write alternating chapters in this excellent book, are under no illusions that *Why We're Not Emergent* won't run into these kinds of conversation stoppers. The last page of the penultimate chapter reads, "Those who aren't inclined to the emergent/emerging thing will probably support most of what we've written, and those who call themselves emergent will find a million reasons to find fault with it. The idea that people read much of anything and have their minds changed by it is less and less realistic to me. People, usually, just dig in" (235).

I hope they are wrong. I hope my snarky teenager comparisons are wrong. I hope that those inclined to the "emergent/emerging thing" will themselves at least try to *understand* what these two men are saying, because it's the closest thing that I've read so far that both "gets" where the Emergents are coming from while at the same time offering a very good critique of the movement's deficiencies.

PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN

In fact, that's probably the book's greatest strength. In addition to describing some of the philosophical and doctrinal deficiencies of the movement, they capture something of its cultural flavor, aroma, texture. DeYoung and Kluck pull the emerging curtain back and point out, "Look, a lot of what you guys are doing is dressing up your cultural preferences with highfalutin language. C'mon."

Here's their reaction to pastor and Emergent leader Dan Kimball's side-by-side comparison charts of the modern church and postmodern church:

Kimball says that preaching in the emerging church "teaches how the ancient wisdom of Scripture applies to kingdom living as a disciple of Christ" while the modern preacher "serves as a dispenser of biblical truths to help solve personal problems in modern life." Those two sentences would say the same thing if not for Kimball's choice of language, employing uninspiring words like "dispenser," and "solve" for the modern church instead of cool words like "ancient wisdom" and "kingdom living." Similarly, in the modern church "the Bible is a book to help solve problems and a means to know God," and "discipleship is based on modern methodology and helps." Conversely, in the emerging church, "The Bible is a compass for direction and means to experience God," and "Discipleship is based on ancient disciplines." Well, who wants problem solving and methodology when you can experience God and use ancient disciplines?

DeYoung and Kluck don't mean to suggest that the differences between Emergents and non-Emergents is merely terminological. In fact, every other chapter, authored by Pastor DeYoung, is devoted to explaining the significant philosophical and doctrinal differences behind the word groups contrasted in the quote above (to be fair, Dan Kimball describes himself as "Emerging" not "Emergent," meaning that he doesn't embrace all those doctrinal differences). Still, non-Emergent readers like me will probably find themselves grateful that these two authors finally return the stereotyping favor that Emergents have used to bless us non-Emergents from the get-go. As they put it, "the emergent critique of the modern church suffers from an overpopulation of straw men."

And Emergents, well, I hope that the ever-earnest Emergents will receive the stereotyping—accurate, in my opinion—with good humor, with the ability to not take themselves so seriously, and with the gentle correction that, yes, some of their sacred cows like "authenticity," "sincerity," "inconsistency," "spiritual journey," and "idiosyncrasy" are cultural clichés, too. Like all of us, Emergents have their own set of culturally conforming non-conformities.

REAL AUTHENTICITY

By seeking to *understand* several of *Why Were Not Emergent's* critiques, Emergents might even gain some of what they're after—like authenticity—as illustrated in a story Kluck tells about attending a funeral at his old church. He describes the building as a place with "folding tables, a drop ceiling, bad carpet, and a potluck lunch" which would "give Dan Kimball a heart attack." Kluck writes,

This church, like many in America, has survived a great deal. Car wrecks, cancer, extramarital affairs, some bad theology, and the like. But, much like the small town that it's in, it has taken care of its own. It has mourned with those who mourn. It has delivered meals. It has made countless hospital visits. It has, for the most part, spoken truth and preached the gospel of Christ crucified...Those here [for the funeral] today came to honor the life of a man who lived largely because of a proposition—that sometimes outmoded belief that Christ paid the penalty for our sins, and that we are, because of that, compelled to live for Him, and like Him.

Reflecting on this experience, Kluck continues,

I am reminded that there are still churches and places in this country where one doesn't have to work at being "authentic." Authentic isn't a look you put on in the morning, or a new and snappy way to bathe the sanctuary in "mystery" through the strategic arrangement of candles and projected images. Authentic is bearing one another's burdens. Authentic is people coming to a funeral in their work clothes—Carhartts, hospital scrubs, etc.—on a Friday morning.

One of the most downright beautiful aspects of this book is its repeated presentations of this kind of *authentic* church life together (see especially the chapter "Why I Don't Want a Cool Pastor").

NO, WE DON'T GET IT

The trouble with teenagers, of course, is that they think they know it all already. And the trouble with reform movements like the Emergent church is that they assume, by their very nature, they "get" whatever they are trying to reform. They have a "been there, done that" attitude that permeates every conversation. Which makes them somewhat impervious to counter-correction. In their very passion to reform, they can become unreformable.

Emergents might be right about some of the things they want to reform; and they might be right about the majority's inability to *understand*. No matter how many times my wife explains to me what it's like to be my wife, there's a sense in which I just don't

get it. And sometimes I think that I never will. So let me say to the Emergents, "On behalf of all non-Emergent evangelicals everywhere, no, we don't understand. We don't get it."

That's unofficial, of course. No ETS or SBC or PCA or CT or DG or T4G or TGC or DAC signature at the bottom of that. Take it for what it's worth.

So one weakness of DeYoung and Kluck's book is that there's a sense in which they may not get it. I don't say that because I do get it. I already told you that I don't. But I think that I get what I don't get which, if you get, you're getting it just enough to say what you're not getting. Get it? And I think that DeYoung and Kluck just might back me up on this. But I'm not sure. Also, both of my parents are professional musicians and I grew up surrounded by musicians. If you did as well, you'll know what I mean in a second.

So with these impressive credentials, let me propose that there's something of a nineteenth century Romantic impulse dwelling in the heart of the Emergent church—a drive to experience mystery, beauty, majesty, and the heroism that can only follow a profound grappling with all that's dark in the world. This impulse can never be satisfied with just rational formulations.

There's also a deep-in-the-gut dissatisfaction with the world as it now is, a dissatisfaction so viscerally intense that it can easily overwhelm one's better theological judgment and yield a kind of utopianism.

Now I think, although I'm not certain, that DeYoung and Kluck understand all this, but I'm not sure they *understand* it as well as Emergents want to be understood. And that's understandable. I don't understand either. Their ability to write well demonstrates that they are creative men, Kluck especially. But the book still reads like two men who think with their heads. Again, me too. Like all Romantics, Emergents think—and I can only put this vaguely—with their guts, or maybe it's their hearts. And praise God that some people in this world think with their guts or hearts! I'm grateful that some people don't want to simply work out mathematical physics equations in classrooms but want to escape into the night and *feel* the grandeur of the stars. I'm grateful that some people aren't content only with books of theology but want to *enjoy* and *live* even the slightest hints of God's transformative compassion in song and service. I'm grateful that the injustices of this world *weigh* more heavily on some than they do on the rest of us.

In short, I believe us proposition-loving types could do a better job of listening to the heart passions of the Emergent church (and if your response to words like "heart passions" is anything like mine, then you and me are the ones who could do a little more listening).

Of course, right now any Emergents who made it through the last four paragraphs are probably thinking that I don't get it at all. What can you do.

BUT PLEASE DON'T JUST SAY...

But even if they—or we—don't understand you entirely, Emergents, please don't just say, "These guys don't get it" and chuck the book on the pile. That's a conversation stopper; and these two authors get a lot. I'm vain enough to wish I had written their book!

DeYoung and Kluck's arguments, I believe, are compelling, and their cultural characterizations are revealing. Emergents, I plead with you, please read those aspects of the book carefully and with open hearts. Yes, the Phariseism that can afflict proposition-loving personalities like mine can send people to hell. But wrong propositions will also send people to hell.

Finally, Emergents and non-Emergents alike should be convicted by DeYoung's remarkable epilogue, which meditates on Jesus' words to several of the churches in John's Revelation. Jesus has words for the doctrinally sound but loveless Ephesians. Jesus has words for the faithful but doctrinally undiscerning Pergamums. Jesus has words for the loving but overly tolerant Thyatirans. Jesus has words for each of us, and *Why We're Not Emergent* concludes by wonderfully reminding us of that fact.

Jonathan Leeman is the director of communications for 9Marks and is grateful for both of his Romantic and doctrinally discerning parents.

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Book Review: *I Sold My Soul On eBay: Viewing Faith Through an Atheist's Eyes*, by Hemant Mehta

Reviewed by Michael McKinley

Waterbrook Press, 2007, 224 pages, \$13.99

THE SETTING

Atheists are all the rage these days. Sam Harris followed up his 2004 book *The End of Faith* with 2006's *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Later that year, Richard Dawkins made a splash with his *The God Delusion*. In 2007, Christopher Hitchens did the talk show circuit in order to promote his *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Each of these three books were written by highly intelligent men who were clearly happy to position themselves as the enemies of organized religion.

In response, evangelical Christianity unleashed it's most devastating intellectual weapon: a YouTube [video](#) by a former child television star about the banana (take that, Richard Dawkins, with all your memes and phenotypes and your fancy book learning!). In short, the state of theist-atheist relations was not good.

Enter Hemant Mehta. Mehta is a committed atheist (he's the current chair of the Secular Student Alliance), but he's not a Hitchens-Dawkins-Harris kind of atheist. Instead, he is a friendly atheist (his website is friendlyatheist.com!). In fact, he's so friendly that he wants to help Christian churches do a better job of reaching and attracting people like him.

THE OFFER

In early 2006 the 22 year old Mehta began an unusual eBay auction. He offered to attend church for one hour for every ten dollars in the winning bid. The winning bidder would be allowed to choose the church. His intention was to explore the Christian faith in the interests of intellectual honesty. He was raised as a Jain but deconverted (his word) to atheism at age 14. He did not have any experience with Christianity and so he felt that he should at least go to a church once or twice if he was to be a respectable atheist.

THE BID

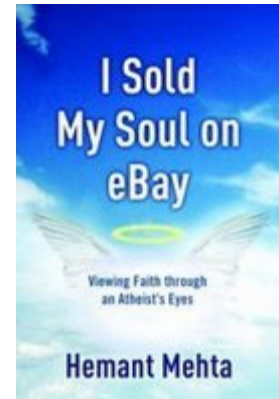
The winning bidder was Jim Henderson, an author and former pastor who arranged for Mehta to travel to different Protestant churches and write a review of each one from an unchurched perspective. The result is *I Sold My Soul on eBay: Viewing Faith Through an Atheist's Eyes*. It has been hailed by some Christian leaders as an invaluable resource, a priceless look at how the church seems to outsiders.

In short, Mehta visited fifteen churches: some small churches, some large churches, some gigantic churches led by super-star pastors like Rob Bell, Joel Osteen, and Bill Hybels. The book contains a brief review of each service and then offers some concluding recommendations.

THE FINDINGS

His findings range from the obvious to the dubious. He found that small churches are not necessarily friendlier than larger churches and large church pastors tend to be more dynamic communicators than their small church colleagues. But mostly, he just records the things that he saw and how he felt about them as an atheist. For example:

As the message went on, I found I wasn't enjoying myself in the way I had in the other churches. And it wasn't because I preferred sermons that were sugar-coated. Instead, I was put off by the lack of humor and the formality of



Pastor Brad's presentation... at the Evangelical Free Church, many people in the audience weren't laughing. They seemed to be as uncomfortable as I was. (73)

THE STRENGTHS

Now, I don't know if this article is so much an official review of the book. But let me go ahead and mention some of the book's strength and weaknesses, at least as it's been pitched as something of interest to church leaders.

First, Mehta is very winsome. He seems to be very kind and likeable, the sort of person that you'd like to have lunch with. He's a committed atheist, but he seems to be genuinely interested in helping Christians to see themselves as outsiders see them. He is respectful to the churches, pastors, and believers with whom he interacts. Unlike Hitchens et al, the author wants atheists to see ways that the church can be helpful in things that atheists approve of, like relief for the poor and education initiatives.

Second, there is value in his observations about the church. Some of the things that he saw are absolutely true and should be rectified.

- He's annoyed by Christians who come late to gatherings and pay little attention while they are there. He rightly points out that such behavior is disrespectful and is a poor example to our children.
- He finds many aspects of the church service distracting. He doesn't like the omnipresent video cameras and projection screens. He finds fill-in-the-blank sermon outlines in the bulletin to be insulting.
- He gently pokes fun at the "Christian mosh pit" in one church and describes the varieties of the "Christian dance" on display there.
- He thinks it is wrong the way most large churches put attractive singers front and center while they hide less attractive singers in the back.
- He is a fairly good sermon critic. He particularly dislikes sermons that make logical leaps in order to make their point. If you preach regularly, you would benefit from reading this honest account of how your words might sound to a friendly, intelligent, careful non-believer.

Third, the book serves as a good reminder that the church must be sensitive to the presence of non-believers in its gatherings. Certainly the truth should not be compromised, but there is no excuse to give needless offense. Churches should be friendly, winsome, and warm to non-believers.

Fourth, the things that Mehta didn't see or learn in the churches he attended should serve as a caution to us. I didn't observe any mention of the cross in the book, which is not to say that it wasn't mentioned in any of the services he attended, but it probably does indicate that it wasn't inescapably at the center of those services. There was no indication that he heard or understood the gospel. In fact, at one place he complains about the fact that Christians think that he's lost: "What exactly do Christians think they are saving me *from*?" (148, emph orig). It is sad that an intelligent man can spend dozens of hours in Christian gatherings and not know what Christians mean when they say that he is lost.

THE WEAKNESSES

And weaknesses? Again, from the standpoint of a church leader looking here for guidance? First, the beginning quarter of the book is pretty boring and feels like filler. He describes his Jain convictions as a child, his journey to atheism, and his auction on eBay. The problem is that there's nothing really interesting about his story. The case he makes for his atheism is pretty flimsy, you'd be much better off reading something like Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian* (I prefer my cantankerous British atheists old skool). You won't miss much if you skip to chapter 5, where Mehta begins to review the churches.

Second, his complete lack of knowledge about Christianity sometimes creates unnecessary problems. For example, he is concerned and offended by the fact that most pastors are men. After writing for a while about why this is a bad thing, he says "I can only wonder why" (172). It wouldn't have taken much effort to find out that there is a good reason why. I don't expect that he would agree with those reasons, but they do exist.

Third, and most importantly, the book is of limited value for Christians because ultimately Mehta only likes the things about Christianity that are not unique to Christianity.

That is to say, he likes the things like social justice initiatives, sermons with a "secular message" embedded with them (133), and churches that help you "have a better day, and maybe even a better life...[because] all people are looking for a better life, whether they believe in God or not" (128). He is perplexed by the fact that churches don't invite atheists and gay rights activists in to their services to have an open dialogue.

In short, what he doesn't like are things that are particularly Christian: he finds Christian ethics to be uncharitable (93-94); Christian singing to be tiresome (he suggests a separate event if churches want to sing for a long time; 150- 151); and the insinuation that he is "lost" to be offensive (148).

THE QUESTION

Which brings me to my question: why would the church scramble to take advice from someone who does not share its faith? Why would an organization committed to worshipping the risen Christ and spreading the message of his gospel to all lands take cues from someone who does not love Jesus or his gospel? (Maybe the better question is, why did 9Marks ask me to review this book? I'm happy to do it for the cash, of course. But you know, from their standpoint, why?)

At one point, Mehta declares "Remember, I am at the center of your target audience" (139). Really? The center? I mean, kind of, but not really. For example, there is almost nothing you could do to make me watch a NASCAR race. So if I wrote a book about what NASCAR should do, my recommendations would basically be that NASCAR should ditch the cars, put on helmets, and play football. Why? Because I like football and I don't like car racing. Obviously, it would be insanity for NASCAR to build its business model around my opinions. I'm just not interested in the thing that defines them: toothless people inhaling exhaust as cars-cum-billboards drive in a circle.

So if we're going to be true to our message, if our churches are honestly preaching the cross of Christ, we should be prepared for the fact that people will be offended. A committed atheist is going to find most of what a Christian church does—at least of those things that the Bible tells the church to do—to be absurd. The cross is foolishness and a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23). The eyes of unbelievers have been blinded to the beauty of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4). Our churches will be the stench of death to the perishing (2 Cor. 2:16).

To the extent that our churches put up needless offense and stumbling blocks for outsiders, we should remove them. We should be kind and clear and simple and accessible and winsome. But we must never step back from knowing Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2), even if it doesn't appeal to friendly atheists.

Michael McKinley is the pastor of Guilford Baptist Church in Sterling, Virginia, and the author of Things I Need to Do Today: The Post-It Note on My Desk (Old Skool).

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