

## SHOULD FUNDAMENTALISTS AND EVANGELICALS SEEK CLOSER TIES?

*An evaluation of Edward Dobson's book  
In Search of Unity*

# Should Fundamentalists and Evangelicals Seek Closer Ties?

Is it time for fundamentalists and evangelicals to draw closer together and explore ways they can cooperate with one another?

Edward Dobson believes that such a time has come. His volume *In Search of Unity: An Appeal to Fundamentalists and Evangelicals* is an exhortation to fundamentalists and evangelicals to "stop fighting with the friends of the gospel" (p. 152), to reject the position of their respective "extremist fringes," and to build bridges of understanding that will result in a closer working relationship. Dobson continues the theme presented by Jerry Falwell in an earlier volume entitled *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, where he wrote:

In reality, there is little difference between Fundamentalists and Evangelicals. . . . Only the radicals among us (to the left and to the right) divide us. I say it is time we denied the "lunatic fringe" of our movements and worked for a great conservative crusade to turn America back to God. . . . We conservative Fundamentalists and Evangelicals can be used of God to bring about a great revival of true Christianity in America and the world in our lifetime (pp. 222-23).

Ernest D. Pickering, Th.D.

At the time he authored this book, Edward Dobson was associate pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, vice-president for student affairs at Liberty University, and senior editor of the *Fundamentalist Journal*. Some of his major arguments are these:

1) That the original conservatives who battled liberalism from about 1900 to 1930 set aside denominational and doctrinal differences and united together in the common cause they had.

2) That later on (1930 into the 1940s) the issue of ecclesiastical separation began to divide the conservatives into two camps: fundamentalists (those requiring complete separation from apostate groups) and evangelicals (those who permitted continued affiliation with apostate groups).

3) That gradually other issues arose on which there were differences, thus widening the gap between the two movements.

4) That both sides developed "extremist fringes" that exhibited bad attitudes.

5) That biblical separation has been carried to unwarranted extremes by fundamentalists, and that separation from those who embrace the basic fundamentals of the faith is unjustified.

6) That there is developing a "new image fundamentalism" that is more contemporary, less offensive, and whose representatives enjoy a wider sphere of fellowship.

7) That both sides now should repent of their bad attitudes, lay aside nonessential differences that divide them, and return to the type of cooperation evidenced by the earlier conservatives.

From the outset, may we note that there are many commendable things about Dobson's position as a whole. He believes in the inerrancy of Scripture, stands for the fundamentals of the faith, and opposes theological liberalism. Some of his evaluations of fundamentalism and evangelicalism are certainly worth pondering. The book itself is cleverly crafted and designed to appeal to a wide spectrum of readers of various persuasions without alienating any of them from the author's intended purpose—to bring them together. While thankful for the good points of the book, we believe some of his conclusions and, therefore, his resultant appeal are ill-founded. Because we believe this volume is a major statement of a position that conflicts with our historical position as a fellowship, we venture an investigation of it.

## Early Battles With Liberalism

Dobson joins with other contemporaries who are making much out of the fact that the "original fundamentalists" did not allow "petty differences" to divide them but joined hands in a common cause against liberalism. Such men as W. B. Riley, J. Gresham Machen, William Jennings Bryan, John Straton, and many others were of differing denominational and doctrinal persuasions, and yet they fought side by side in the war against liberalism. Because they did it, we should do it. There is a "common thread" (p. 137) that unites both fundamentalists and evangelicals. They have "more that unites them than that divides them" (p. 138). Both movements, therefore, should minimize the unessential items that divide them and "return to the historic fundamentals of the faith that were so clearly established at the beginning of this century" (p. 79).

This sounds very appealing to those weary of a lot of battles, and it seems to breathe a welcome and magnanimous spirit. We must remember, however, that we cannot return to the beginning of this century. These fundamentalists had one issue to face—the issue of modernism (liberalism). We have many more issues to face. The issues have proliferated since those earlier days. We face more questions of ecumenical evangelism, new evangelicalism and its offshoots, and the pervasive influences of the charismatic movement, to name a few. The greats of a bygone day did not have to wrestle with these matters. We understand that some believe these issues have been "created" by obstreperous and unloving fundamentalists, but we do not believe this is a fair or valid charge. We are not facing merely the issue of the apostasy but many other issues that have surfaced in the past thirty years or so, many of which impinge in some way upon the doctrine of ecclesiastical separation.

## Division Over Questions of Ecclesiastical Separation

Fundamentalism and evangelicalism "represent different approaches to the issue of separation" (p. 55). We think this is a fair and accurate statement. The question is: Are those differences critical to cooperative fellowship or are they merely peripheral? Dobson pictures

two divergent streams—fundamentalism and evangelicalism—in a chart (p. 65). At the point where they part, two opposite views of separation are noted. The fundamentalists (separatists) believed that Scripture demanded complete separation from all apostate groups. On the other hand, the evangelicals allowed for continuation within apostate groups as long as the individuals (or churches) were evangelical in their own persuasion. These two positions were institutionalized in the National Association of Evangelicals and its opposite, the American Council of Christian Churches, though larger numbers of those of both persuasions had no organizational ties with either.

Which of the above positions is correct? Does it make any difference? Dobson says our convictions regarding this issue should now influence our fellowship with other believers. "Second degree separation was separation from another evangelical who may have been tolerant of liberals by staying in a mainline denomination" (p. 63). It is not right for fundamentalists to sit in judgment on such matters (p. 64).

If we follow this line of reasoning, such bodies as the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, the Baptist Bible Fellowship, the New Testament Association of Regular Baptist Churches, and the Independent Fundamental Churches of America have a lot of "repenting" to do. These groups (and others), as well as many unaffiliated individuals and churches, have contended over the years that it is a violation of the principles of Scripture for a true believer to remain within an apostate denomination. Now we are told to ignore this principle in order to enjoy unity with all our brethren. It is too big a price for some of us to pay.

### **An Appeal for a New and Enlarged Cooperation**

If we heed the invitation of this book, what would be the basis for cooperation between fundamentalists and evangelicals?

In answering this question the author reviews the historical rise of fundamentalism (p. 37ff.), emphasizing the famous "five fundamentals" around which early contenders for the faith rallied: (1) the full inspiration of

the Bible; (2) the deity of Christ; (3) the substitutionary atonement; (4) the resurrection of Christ; and (5) the second coming of Christ. He calls for a return to these "fundamentals of the faith" (p. 79) as a basis of fellowship.

To summarize his position, we believe it is fair to say it is virtually identical with that adopted by the National Association of Evangelicals at its founding in the 1940s. That this is a correct conclusion is supported by the fact that Dobson issued an appeal to the constituency of the NAE entitled "Standing Together on the Absolutes," which was published in the official periodical of that body (*Action*, Sept.-Oct., 1985). Following Dobson's article, the editorial staff of the paper concludes that "this matter of separation is basically all that divides fundamentalists and many, or most, evangelicals" (p. 7).

When the NAE was started, it adopted a doctrinal statement that is limited basically to the "five fundamentals." The constituency of the NAE is very broad, including Baptist groups (such as the Baptist General Conference), holiness groups (such as the Wesleyan Church), and Pentecostal bodies (such as the Assemblies of God). It also has in its membership churches that are in various oldline, apostate denominations, as well as many contemporary charismatics. It is a theological hodgepodge. Many years ago founders of the GARBC (as well as leaders in other separatist bodies) took a long, hard look at the position of the NAE and rejected it as too broad, accommodating, and loose. Now we are asked to reconsider this position in a quest for unity. Many fundamental separatists decline to do so. There were important and scriptural reasons why we rejected it initially. We believe these are still valid.

### **The Presence of Extremists**

Dobson believes that the presence of extremists among both evangelicals and fundamentalists has hindered the move toward more cooperation between the two. We acknowledge that there are extremists in almost any movement. Yes, there are "kooks," "nuts," and "screwballs" who call

themselves fundamentalists. Many of us who are separatists often cringe at the language used and attitudes displayed by some of our brethren. We do not condone character assassination and the wild statements made by some while supposedly "defending the faith." Years ago, however, many of us determined not to "throw out the baby with the bathwater." Because some unwise people muddy the water on occasion does not mean we should forsake the precious truths that are in the "tub." We also should beware of the appeal that the "middle ground" is holy ground. It may be only "compromising ground."

What has happened is this. Many of our younger separatist pastors and leaders are not schooled in the biblical principles and historic context of our separatist movement. Dobson, we believe, is largely correct in his following observations:

Mainstream, or "new image fundamentalism," the kind that we know in 1985, is far removed from the original battles and wars, some of which were purely personality conflicts. The younger fundamentalists who did not fight those battles don't have the personal and emotional involvement in them and are looking sincerely at what it means to be a Christian, not merely a fundamentalist, in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Action*, Sept.-Oct., 1985, p. 5).

In many cases our separatist churches and schools have failed to give our youth a structured, scriptural, and historical defense of our position. We have failed to show how the principles for which we stood then are applicable today in a different context and with different issues. As a result, many young people see us as fighting a war that is over and has no contemporary significance. They view certain fundamentalist figures with distaste, note that many of the "name" churches and popular, growing organizations are headed by persons who are not separatists, conclude that the practice of separation is an obstacle to growth and reaching of people, and so are edging (some are running) toward a more liberalized stance.

## Pointing out the Road to Unity

Dobson expresses optimism that his dream for increased unity between fundamentalists and evangelicals may be becoming a reality. In his chapter entitled "The Road Back" he cites some encouraging signs that the evangelicals may be drawing closer to the fundamentalists: namely, (1) the prominence of contenders for biblical inerrancy; (2) the challenge of Southern Baptist conservatives to the liberalism of their denomination; and (3) the influence and direction offered by Francis Schaeffer. For fundamentalists he sees as hopeful signs of a newfound "togetherness" such things as (1) Jerry Falwell's appeal for unity; (2) the convening of Baptist Fundamentalism 84; (3) the published apology of Jack Van Impe for his past "exclusivism"; and (4) the rise of "new image" fundamentalists.

What would be involved if fundamental separatists were to travel the "road back" outlined in this volume? Most certainly it would mean cooperation with those who accept some form of "inclusivism," the principle that both Bible believers and apostates can exist within the same organization or denomination without violating scriptural principles. Many separatists would be forced to ask: If it was wrong to adopt this principle thirty or forty years ago, what makes it right today?

To travel the road back certainly would mean cooperation with those who favor the philosophy of ecumenical evangelism popularized by Billy Graham. Dobson certainly is correct in noting that the practice of Billy Graham in fraternizing with Bible-denying liberals "became an issue of great debate" and that this issue is "the watershed that divides fundamentalism from evangelicalism even today" (p. 124). But if we heed the plea of Dobson, it will divide us no longer. Interestingly enough, *Dobson never positions himself in his book as to whether Graham was right or wrong in the position he took*. Is this only a minor issue that can be "swept under the rug" in favor of a more cooperative spirit? While Graham himself is probably in the sunset of his ministry, the seed he has sown has resulted in a frightful harvest of confusion

and compromise. "Shouldst thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord?" (2 Chron. 19:2). Heretofore separatists have answered "no." Were they wrong in so doing? Should they now link arms with those who say "yes" to this unbiblical practice?

Certainly if we fundamental separatists travel the road back, we will be obliged to become involved in fellowship at some level with those of Pentecostal, holiness, and charismatic persuasion, since these comprise a considerable percentage of the "evangelical" movement. They probably represent, for instance, a numerical majority of the groups that are part of the NAE. Fundamentalists steadfastly have refused to become involved with these groups. As an example, charismatics are "evangelicals" believing in the "five fundamentals," but they are an increasing problem for Bible-preaching churches.

At the conclusion of the book is a strong appeal for revival. Many of us share the author's concern for revival. We need it in our own lives, and we certainly need it in our churches. Many of our fundamental, separatist churches are dry and dead and need the outpouring of power from the Lord. Let us not be misled, however. Revival does not render obsolete and unimportant deep differences of doctrine and practice that touch on the holiness of God and affect vitally the life of His churches. To experience true revival is to be drawn more closely and to be bound more tightly to the truth of God as contained in the holy Scripture. No amount of revival, if scriptural revival, could clear the way for us to approve, for instance, the program of uniting believers and unbelievers in evangelistic crusades. This would be a revival that contradicts God's Word, an unthinkable anomaly indeed! True revival cannot result in the compromise of truths that cannot be compromised.

### **A Personal Word**

Permit me a personal word in conclusion. I have been involved in places of leadership in the separatist movement for over thirty years. I have been editor of a leading separatist magazine, dean of a

separatist seminary, president of two separatist schools, pastor of some great separatist churches, and served as chairman of the executive body of a separatist association of churches. I have enjoyed fellowship with hundreds of separatists belonging to various bodies (and some to none). Their lives and ministry have touched my own, and I have benefited thereby. While not pretending to speak officially for them, I believe I know many of them well enough to be their spokesman on this occasion.

Dr. Dobson, we want to say that we love you and those who espouse your position as brothers in Christ. We are not "haterongers." We do not view ourselves as "extremists." Our hearts ache as does yours for the fractured state of the visible Body of Christ. We desire growing and vital churches. We are concerned for the lost souls of men. We are not sour, dour, pugnacious persons who are always looking for someone to attack.

Many of our friends probably would number themselves among those "new image fundamentalists." While not agreeing with their position, we, nevertheless, seek to maintain our friendship and respect them as Christian brothers. Many of them pastor sizable churches, head Christian schools or organizations, and are articulate, winsome, and influential. We thank God for all the good things about them. It is hard for us to disagree with them, to take an opposite position, and to risk lifelong friendships and much misunderstanding by doing so. We do not enjoy it. We shrink from it. But we must be true to the Word of God and to our own consciences. We do not take our stand against you or other of our Christian brethren carelessly or with a frivolous spirit. We do it with grief and struggle and, yes, even tears.

I, with others, was involved in the original conflicts over ecumenical evangelism. Some of us raised the first cries against the principles of the "new evangelicalism." We have labored for years to defend our young people, our churches, and our educational institutions against the watered-down theology and middle-of-the-road philosophy held by many of those with whom you would have us unite. The arguments we hear now we recall very vividly hearing thirty years ago from those who wanted us to move "beyond the fundamentalist-modernist controversy" to a more "centrist"

position. The new evangelical movement began years ago with what one astute observer aptly called a "mood." Moods are difficult to define sometimes, but they, nonetheless, can be real and potent forces. There was a mood of toleration, an acceptance of widely varying theological concepts—a mood of "broadmindedness." We fear such moods since we have seen within our lifetime their final outcome—a full-blown movement steeped in compromise. We believe we sense such a mood abroad today among those who, no doubt, in all sincerity think we should broaden our bases and reshape our image.

What we say, Brother Dobson, to you and others of your viewpoint is this: We cannot walk the "road back" with you. Our refusal arises out of no personal animosity or out of a desire to have a "good fight." Many of us fervently wish we could quit the battle, but we dare not. We want to be loyal to God, to His Word, and to His standard of holiness. Painfully conscious of our many shortcomings, nevertheless, it is our aim to imitate the balanced life of our Lord, Who was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). We want to be "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). We have tried to do it here. Pray God we have succeeded.

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