When I think of Fundamentalism…

(Vincent Sawyer, pastor of Faith Baptist Church of Queens, NY)

As an inner-city pastor in my mid-forties, when I think of Fundamentalism…

1. I am encouraged by many within the ranks of Fundamentalism who still pursue holiness. The desire of most of the fundamentalists I know and am associated with is to live and preach sanctification. The desire to be set apart from the world and worldly methodology in ministry is a position any Biblicist should admire. Perhaps one of the abiding evidences of Fundamentalism's pursuit of holiness is its continued separatist stand. Churches that still preach moral, personal, & ecclesiastical separation seem to me to exist almost exclusively within Biblical Fundamentalism. Though not always clear on where to draw the lines on separation or on the "how to" of separation at least there is still a conviction regarding the doctrine itself. For this I am grateful.

Fundamentalism's historic conviction regarding its pursuit of doctrinal purity and Biblical authority is still the conviction of most fundamental Baptist and Bible churches today. The Bible is still Fundamentalism's only authority for faith and practice. May this authority never change. I am encouraged by many fundamentalists who seek to be Biblically balanced. I see this balance when it comes to Doctrine, particularly doctrines where there are two sides to an issue. Rather than swinging to one side or the other, the Biblicist stays right where Scripture would demand. I respect Fundamentalists who maintain standards relating to areas of Christian Liberty; not out of legalism but out of a genuine desire to please God and to apply Biblical principle to specific areas of life.

I am encouraged by those within Biblical Fundamentalism who have a doxological goal in ministry. God's glory is still priority number one. Seeking to please God and not man is the goal of noble ministry. The increase of the three "B's" --Buildings, Bucks and Bodies -- is not the goal of Christ-centered churches. I appreciate those who have not given in to the allurement of trying to be so relatable to the people they are trying to reach for Christ, that they have intentionally altered their preaching content, musical standards, or worship styles, to suit the whims and wishes of the crowd they are tying to reach. Political correctness or feel-good Christianity is still not the goal of Biblical Fundamentalism.

Are there problems within our ranks? Are there Pharisees within Fundamentalism? Sure there are. But seeing problems with some within the movement does not warrant our discarding Biblical Fundamentalism as a whole. If some of the water is dirty, "you don't throw out the baby with the bathwater." If our movement was to change its name, (due to negative stigma associated with the word "Fundamentalist," for example – Islamic Fundamentalism) yet still hold to the same convictions regarding God's Truth, I would still want to be counted as one. It's not the name that matters, it's the substance of the Truth believed, lived and preached that matters.

Now on to the matters that concern me…

2. I am concerned about those who abandon the ranks of fundamentalism in pursuit of "greener pastures," bigger crowds, and social acceptance. It saddens me that some abandon a position due the failure of others in ministry who happen to hold to that position. If a position is Biblical we must hold to it, despite the failures of others to live up to it. Let's know the Fundamentals of the faith and passionately and graciously contend for them.

One concern that has always bothered me has been a lack of solid exegetically-based preaching within much of Fundamentalism. Shallow messages, trite, alliterated outlines lacking Biblical substance and messages containing the "same old stuff" week after week are not going to satisfy the great needs of our people in these last days where truth deprivation abounds.

A serious concern that I have observed in our movement is a lack of evangelistic zeal. We firmly attest to the fact that we are for "soul winning," yet it seems to me that aggressive witnesses for Christ within our movement are decreasing drastically. I find that many fundamentalist churches are dead when it comes to evangelism. Growth often comes by way of transfers from other churches or new-moves from other states and not because of evangelistic outreach. Too often fundamental churches are in a "hold the fort" posture or in a maintenance mode. We must wake up to our responsibility to passionately spread the Gospel or we will continue to decline into deadness in the not-too-distant future. One area of particular concern is our failure to reach the multi-ethnic peoples of our country, particularly the Afro-American and Hispanic communities. Biblical fundamentalism is not a "white man's religion." The spirit of Biblical Fundamentalism is for all races and cultures. It is a movement seeking to uphold Biblical truth without compromise for all people. Are we just as aggressive to reach people of different skin color as we are to reach people of our own color? If not, we have a defective anthropology and need to fall on our knees in repentance. In our multi-ethnic city of NY, Fundamentalism is a slim minority when compared to the plethora of other church ministries and movements.

My major concern regarding Fundamentalism today involves an apparent lack of prayer and power in our ministries. When you attend a typical Fundamentalist church, you will generally find a message that is doctrinally accurate. Many have an apparent "form" of Godliness but are void of the "power" of Godliness. My assessment is that as a movement, we are so confident in our position, our spiritual knowledge, and our doctrinal discernment that we have grown a bit independent of God. We do not pray as we once did as a movement. The quality of our prayer life and the quantity of time we spend with God is so often woefully lacking. Personal worship is for many fundamentalists a distant thing of the past. And yet prayer and worship is what makes any ministry truly effective and fruitful. As I see it, prayer is Fundamentalism's greatest need. Perhaps due to our lack of prayer, there exists a coldness in our ministries and sometimes a lack for a shepherd's heart for the sheep we oversee.

3. Areas we need to address, discuss or debate…

When it comes to putting our position on paper, we are squeaky clean, but when it comes to practice we are sometimes inconsistent. Why such a disparity? As a movement, we hold to truth, which in some cases we do not faithfully practice.

We believe in the inspiration of Scripture, yet fail to exegete and deliver the deep riches of God's Word. Perhaps we need to address the subject of expositional preaching.

We believe in Soul-winning, yet our evangelistic technique is often a very shallow Gospel message, even a quick "one, two, three pray after me," leaving the supposed convert with no message of Repentance and no understanding of justification or imputed righteousness. Perhaps we need to address the subject of Evangelism.

We believe in worship, yet (as a movement) our church worship is, in some cases, empty with no real connection with God. Merely reciting words from a hymnbook without engaging the heart and mind in genuine praise and worship of God is in fact uttering His holy name in vain. Even when we pray or lead in prayer, we may at times be guilty of uttering statements to God in a trite or trivial way. Perhaps we need to address this most personal of subjects –that being Prayer, Worship, & Revival.

One of Fundamentalisms greatest strengths could be its greatest weakness. This is its reluctance to change. While it is true that some things must never change, being stuck in the past on some matters that need changing is an issue we should continue to pray about and investigate.

We believe in Separation as a movement, yet we sometimes have difficulty discerning which doctrines to earnestly fight for. Which doctrines or practices do we separate over? Perhaps we need to reinvestigate the "sin-que-non" of fundamentalism. What are the fundamentals of the faith? What are the essential or cardinal doctrines over which we can allow zero accommodation? Can we fellowship with anyone that Jesus Christ would fellowship with? With whom does He fellowship?

As fundamentalists, we should never be afraid to serious look at and graciously debate issues of doctrine or practice over which we may differ. I am thankful for a forum like the National Leadership Conference in Lansdale, PA which is not afraid to talk about, wrestle with and debate issues that differ among Fundamentalists.

Augustine's maxim said it best:

In Essentials, we must have unity
In Non-essentials, we must allow liberty
But in all things, we must show charity

May Love for God, God's Truth, and God's people increase in our great movement of Fundamentalism.