



# Faith Pulpit

## The Evangelical Drift

As a self-conscious movement, new evangelicalism has been with us almost half a century. Forty-five years have passed since the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals, forty since the opening of Fuller Seminary, and thirty-five since the shift at the Conservative Baptist Seminary. That was also the year that Billy Graham left Northwestern to go into evangelism full time. Thirty years have passed since Graham's New York campaign. Ten years have passed since Quebedeaux finished writing *The Worldly Evangelicals*, and twenty-six have passed since I first heard Charles Woodbridge deliver one of his famous lectures on new evangelicalism.

During the half century, evangelicals have taken over many institutions that fundamentalists once held. Not only that, the movement for the last decades has exerted a strong gravitational pull on the fundamentalists who did survive. Many who still call themselves fundamentalists have taken on marks that they once would have shunned. I leave it to the reader's own experience to bear out these impressions.

### 1. Pride of Intellect

Until lately we seemed secure; to look good in the eyes of the world has seemed beyond our ability, and it seems equally hard to impress the world with even our best scholarship. We often put the word "Bible" in the names of our agencies. We confess to believing in creationism. We expect Jesus to come back bodily. Such positions will get the world's contempt or at best its bemused tolerance, and we accept those attitudes as normal for a world that scorned our Lord and His apostles.

However, the flesh is always with us. I believe that on our horizon appear clouds no bigger than a man's hand, so that we can no longer say, "Pride of intellect have we none." Our names and doctrines are no final defenses against pride, name dropping, and making common cause with institutions having

more prestige than we fancy in ourselves.

## **2. Dislike of Separation**

During all their history, evangelicals have disliked separatism, whether from false religions or from the world. Fundamentalists have kept a fairly good record on the first count. We generally refuse platform cooperation with unbelievers and we debate among ourselves whether to work with believers who so cooperate.

When it comes to separating from the world, however, we have shifted ground in the last decades. Fundamentalists still condemn most outright sins, such as blasphemy, murder, theft, adultery, and drunkenness. When it comes to accepting the world's values and amusements, we have moved quite a distance. The current debate over rock and roll music reveals the syncretism that exists among us. Until a generation ago, we abominated the theater. Now we have borne out Carnell's gibe, "One of the unexpected blessings of television is that it lets the fundamentalist catch up on all the movies he missed on religious principles" (Case, p.121). With our newly accepted pleasures, we have accepted the world's materialism and self-indulgence. What our consciences used to disallow we learned to call legalism, and we learned to love what once would have grieved our souls.

## **3. Shift in Doctrine**

Until about the end of the second World War, fundamentalist literature showed a concern to link theology with Christian experience. The battle against modernism hardened our loyalty to Biblical doctrines and, I think, to the Lord who gave them. However, a discerning teacher lately told me that of the men teaching Bible in his school, not more than one of them regarded the Bible as more than a textbook. Redemption through the blood of Jesus seems to get less hearing than once. Whatever our view of divine sovereignty, I suspect our church members hear little of it. Dispensationalism used to mark us; now it is under attack in the same circles once thought to be fundamentalist.

The observable trend makes it appear that the movement has not yet lost all its defectors. In the 1940s and '50s, numbers of our schools and leaders turned evangelical, and with regret we watched them reject their own origins. But the process has not finished, and other leaders have abandoned fundamentalist doctrines without actually resigning their jobs.

## **4. A Relaxed Ethic**

As fundamentalists we might as well admit that our ethics have sometimes exceeded our practice; we had our share of proud men and greedy men, of liars and lechers. But the record also bears out that we protested and grieved over these types (see Murdock, *Portrait of Obedience*). However, with the coming of new evangelicalism, Woodbridge spoke against the new ethic he saw, a pragmatic ethic in

which the end sanctified the means, so that the hope of making contacts for the gospel justified links with the World Council.

Do we not see a similar ethical shift among fundamentalists?—For instance, a refusal to protest the above trends for fear of offending friends who embrace those trends? I have known men who professed a strong ethical position, but whose stated position did not seem to impede their ruthless campus politics. How many have made the gospel a form of show business in the hope of “reaching” people who would not attend fervent preaching?

How do you document a trend? Yet I believe that observation will verify that we fundamentalists are not where we were a generation ago, and that the drift has been down and away. For our ineffective evangelism, we trust that we do not blame others. But as we admit the pit from which we were dug and look to the Lord who redeemed us, we do well to re-examine the situation. Is it too late to turn from what we disliked in evangelicalism? Can we now so give ourselves in devotion to God that we will pour contempt on all our pride? Can we so yearn after heaven that we will the more yearn after lost men?

## **Dr. Robert Delnay**

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