

Piper and the FBF resolution

John Piper [recently posted on his blog](#) a reply to the FBF resolution about his ministry from several years back. His comments were very gracious; even though the resolution expressed concerns about Piper's ministry, Piper took the occasion to applaud fundamentalism's commitment to defend truth as an expression of love.

As I wrote the article upon which the resolution was based, I thought it would be appropriate for me to respond to his comments. Here is what I wrote (after fixing one typo [arg!] and making the links active):

Dr. Piper,

Your post here commending fundamentalism for its adamant resistance to compromise was of interest to me for at least two reasons. First, I am a self-identified fundamentalist, and so I appreciated the kind words. It isn't terribly often that those who aren't fundamentalists write kind things about fundamentalism. Second, and more personally relevant, I am the person who wrote the longer article upon which the FBF resolution was based. Perhaps you have already read this, but the article is posted [here](#).

When the FBF decided to make some statement about its position regarding your ministry, I was asked to write the article for two reasons: I'm still relatively young (28) and thus among the generation that has most been influenced by your books, and the head of the resolutions committee knew that I was an enthusiastic supporter of your writings. While a student at Bob Jones University, I had interned at his church, and I kept pressing people to read "Future Grace" :)

I was introduced to your books during my college years by my high school Bible teacher. The first book I read of yours was "Future Grace"; I've since read most of your other major books. In all honesty, no writer has had a greater impact on my thinking than you have. In what is perhaps the most sincere modern-day method of honoring a writer, I have a number of your books listed among my favorites on my Facebook page :)

You had mentioned in your post that you agreed with two-thirds of the "charges" against you; if you believe that I misrepresented your position on Dr. Fuller, I do want to apologize to you. My highest priority in my article was to represent you accurately; if I failed to do so, I would want to attempt to clarify my comments in the forums in which I have a voice. Just as a point of clarification, I had no hand in writing the resolution; I only wrote the article I linked above. Actually, and perhaps ironically, I'm not even a member of the FBF, not out of conviction, but out of a general apathy toward para-church organizations.

In many ways, I fit the fundamentalist stereotypes. I graduated from a conservative Christian high school, received a Bible degree from BJU, got my M.Div. from Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. I haven't been to a movie theater in decades. My only experience with alcohol is in NyQuil. I don't see a legitimate place for rap in the church.

However, there are important ways in which I, as well as many other fundamentalists, break the fundamentalist mold. I am working on my Ph.D. in apologetics from Westminster in Philadelphia. I'm not KJV-only. I recognize that separation, the sine qua non of fundamentalism, is not an all-or-nothing proposition, but admits of degrees.

In fact, after my article was published in "FrontLine" magazine (the bimonthly of the FBF), I had to deal with a number of critical comments about my failure to chastise you for your Calvinistic theology. Their replies to me, and my reply to them, can be found [on my blog](#).

Another who would locate himself in the fundamentalist orbit, Bob Bixby, recently wrote an article in which he considers the likelihood that conservative evangelicals (he uses Dever and MacArthur as examples) and sane fundamentalists (he uses Dave Doran of Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary and Kevin Bauder of Central Baptist Theological Seminary [Minneapolis]) will begin to find more fellowship with one another than with the errant fringes of their respective movements. That article is [here](#).

Perhaps Bixby is right. If he is, it would in some ways be an encouragement to me; such a move would show that the gospel is the main thing. In others ways, perhaps because of my innate tendency toward conservatism, I am nervous. It is a discussion worth having, though.

I don't know that I have a single defining reason for writing to you; this letter has been more autobiographical than anything else. I suppose I just wanted to give a personal dimension to this discussion, and to take the opportunity to thank you for the impact you've made on my theology and on my Christian walk and so demonstrate that the criticism implied by the FBF resolution is not based on ill-will, but on actual differences of theology and practice.

I do not expect that we will ever see eye-to-eye on every issue, but I do thank God for gifting the Church with you, and I will continue to recommend your books to my students.

Michael Riley
mpatrickriley@gmail.com
Acting Academic Dean
International Baptist College
Tempe, AZ

ten comments:

1. November 01, 2007 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [Jon Bell](#) ([URL](#))
Very well said. Thanks for sharing this letter with all.

2. November 01, 2007 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [Ben Janssen](#) ([URL](#))

You say:

However, there are important ways in which I, as well as many other fundamentalists, break the fundamentalist mold. I am working on my Ph.D. in apologetics from Westminster in Philadelphia. I'm not KJV-only. I recognize that separation, the sine qua non of fundamentalism, is not an all-or-nothing proposition, but admits of degrees. I'm a Calvinist.

So are you sure you still "qualify" as a Fundamentalist? These things you mention would most assuredly get that label removed from you by the fundamentalists I grew up with. You say you haven't been to a movie theater in decades; I wouldn't be surprised if Piper hasn't either. You say your only experience with alcohol is in NyQuil; Piper argues for total abstinence from alcoholic beverages. Except for the fact that he had Christian rap in his church recently, you might also want to call Piper a Fundamentalist. What is it that you would say makes Piper not a fundamentalist? It seems like the term is defined in so many different ways as to have completely lost its significance.

3. November 01, 2007 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | **Albert**

Michael, I am honestly surprised to know that you are a Calvinist. Many fundamentalists today abhor the doctrines of grace without even doing serious study. Thanks.

I learned that you are studying in Westminster. Doesn't that violate the separatist position of fundamentalism since the seminary is new evangelical?

4. November 01, 2007 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [Brian McCrorie](#) ([URL](#))

Michael,

Your letter brought joy to my spirit. It is a fine representation of all that is right about fundamentalism, and more importantly, about Christian brotherhood.

5. November 01, 2007 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [Michael Riley](#) ([URL](#))

Ben and Albert,

You have each asked good questions, worthy of their own posts. I would promise a posted reply at some time, but I've rarely been good at keeping such promises. I will say that I do think I have answers to your questions, and that I need to write them out some time.

For the immediate present, if you haven't read Kevin Bauder's "A Fundamentalism Worth Saving," please take the time to do so. It is found here:

<http://www.centalseminary.edu/publications/AACCS.htm>

I take Dr. Bauder's paper as my definition of real fundamentalism (noting his worthy distinction between fundamentalism as an *idea* and as a *movement*). If Bauder's framework is correct, I think I have an answer for why I don't consider Piper to be a fundamentalist (at least not in exactly the same way that I would consider myself to be one) and why I don't necessarily believe

that attending WTS is a violation of biblical separatism.

I know this is an unsatisfying reply; like I said, I hope to write a more extensive post later.

6. November 02, 2007 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [CWatson](#)

Mike,

I realize what Piper says about Fuller...But I can't help remembering the words of Marsden (in *Reforming Fundamentalism*) and Lindsell (in *Battle for the Bible*). I'll quote from Marsden since I don't have Lindsell near by.

Concerning December 1, 1962: "While Ockenga, as chairman, could have left it at that, he opened the door for major debate by asking immediately, 'But why do we need a new creed?' He could see no such need. Dan Fuller, the model of candor . . . saw his chance to assume his new leadership role. He pointed to what he saw as a vital need to revise the statement on inerrancy. 'Dr. Ockenga,' he asserted before the whole faculty and board, 'there are errors which cannot be explained by the original autographs. It is simply not historically feasible to say that these errors would disappear if we had the autographs.' He went on to explain his whole theory of the nature of biblical inerrancy—essentially, that the Bible claimed inerrancy only for its 'revelational' teachings, that is, matters that make one wise unto salvation. . . ." (211)

I realize that Piper studied under him. Lindsell taught beside him. Marsden attempted to write the history...At this point, it is a "he said, she said," issue...I need to hit the library (if I ever have time) and pick up some original sources and see what he actually claimed concerning inerrancy.

7. November 03, 2007 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [Albert](#)

I think Michael does not consider Piper as a fundamentalist because the renowned Calvinist Pastor does not practice the separation as understood by fundamentalists. For instance, Piper pastors Bethlehem Baptist Church. Bethlehem is affiliated with the Baptist General Conference. The Baptist General Conference is a member of the National Association of (New) Evangelicals (NAE), and the liberal and ecumenical Baptist World Alliance. From a fundamentalist point of view, this is a violation of the doctrine of Biblical separation.

I noticed that the most Baptists today of Calvinist persuasion are coming from the New Evangelical camp. We have the SBC founders, the ARBCA, and FIRE. Are there fundamental Baptist groups today who stand firm in their commitment to the doctrines of grace?

8. November 03, 2007 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [robert.mccabe](#) ([URL](#))

Michael,

In my estimation, both your initial article in 2005 and your recent letter to Dr. Piper provide a great example for young fundamentalists. Thanks

9. November 07, 2007 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [Z. Stewart MacLean](#) ([URL](#))

Michael,

Concerning Bixby's claim, which very well might be correct, do you see the possibility of people like Piper and MacArthur eventually taking up the mantle of separation? Apart from the recent surprise move toward conservatism in the SBC, evangelical circles keep getting more and more liberal. Piper and MacArthur in many respects seem to be holding to conservative and fundamental values. Basically, will they one day become separatists? Piper, possibly alludes to this consideration in his response: "I am helped by the call for biblical separation, because almost no evangelicals even think about the doctrine."

Thanks for your thoughts.

10. November 15, 2007 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) [Kent](#)

We should be kind. Love is kind. Love rejoiceth not in iniquity. Are we commanded to separate?

John Piper's compromise has been the platform for his popularity. He wouldn't be the celebrated author without being a compromiser. And then you very likely wouldn't have read his books and liked them so much because no one would have been pushing and recommending and marketing his books. It isn't all that he writes, but it is also what he doesn't write. There is a reason that major book publishers wouldn't sniff a fundamentalist publication, even if it is well-written and a major contribution. Would we not admit that a major draw for a church like Bethlehem is its lack of separation, the confusing inclusion of the worldly? Can we separate a desire for God from an actual misrepresentation of God in the way people will learn about our God more than any other, our worship? I've read from Fourth Baptist members online that attended Bethlehem for a conference that unless you're in the room and listening carefully, you can't tell the difference between the Bethlehem choir and a rock concert. What does that say about their view of God? And then their continuationism. Jesus said that an evil and adulterous generation seeketh after signs. His lack of separation from Charismatics joins him with the evil and adulterous generation, does it not?

When Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* came out, I read the Piper book on the Passion. I liked what I read. Here's what I noticed though. He said nothing to separate the true gospel from the false gospel of Roman Catholicism. Truth is antithetical. Piper's *Passion* book used the Gibson movie to market his book, even designing the cover to associate with the film. New-evangelicalism is also a mood. Where was the clear disassociation with the false gospel of Mel Gibson?

I have no bone to pick with John Piper at all. I don't look at him much different than a lot of guys. I just don't want his kind of Christianity to be copied for certain reasons any more than I don't want people to copy Jack Hyles or Bill Hybels for other reasons.