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Reformation
& REVIVAL
JOURNAL

**THE OBEDIENCE
OF FAITH**

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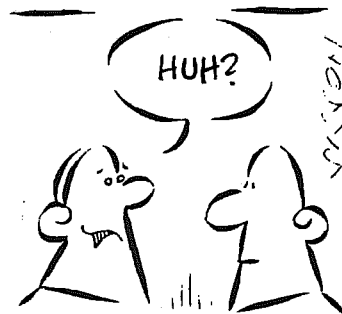
FINAL THOUGHTS

John H. Armstrong

HEY - YOU OUGHTA COME
CHECK OUT MY CHURCH -
IT'S A BLAST - THERE'S
ALL KINDS OF COOL
STUFF GOING ON THERE.



MAYBE LATER, BUT
RIGHT NOW I'M IN A
CLASS AT MY CHURCH
ON HOW GENUINE FAITH
MANIFESTS ITSELF IN
GOOD WORKS AND OBEDIENCE.



Professor George Marsden is one of the more respected historians of modern American evangelicalism. In defining this movement he has written: "The term *evangelicalism* usually refers to a largely Protestant movement that emphasizes (1) the Bible as authoritative and reliable; (2) eternal salvation as possible only by regeneration (being 'born again'), involving personal trust in Christ and in his atoning work; and (3) a spiritually transformed life marked by moral conduct, personal devotion such as Bible reading and prayer, and zeal for evangelism and missions" ("Evangelical and Fundamental Christianity," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1987, Mircea Eliade, general editor). Lutherans have historically used the word to describe the Protestant Reformation; thus you see the word "evangelical" in the name of many Lutheran bodies and congregations. And certain European neo-orthodox theologians used the word more generally to refer to "gospel-believer" in a broader sense.

Regardless of how you define the term, most that use it know what they mean by the word. The problem arises, however, when we use the term and those who hear us understand something far different. Fundamentalism, suggests Marsden, is a "subspecies of evangelicalism" that originated in the 1920s in America and refers to those evangelicals who combated "modernist" theology and other secularizing trends. Says Marsden again, "Organized militancy is the feature that most clearly distinguishes fundamentalists from other evangelicals."

So, are the Southern Baptist conservatives who organized a massive political effort to oust "moderates" from power in the SBC agencies fundamentalists, as has been often charged?

The answer depends entirely upon how you apply the term *militancy* to the SBC struggle over the last two decades. It also depends on how you define the actual "issues" that made up the content of this battle. Is "inerrancy" (as one example) the position of fundamentalism and not evangelicalism? The answer will depend upon who is defining the terms. Most evangelicals are inerrantists, but most evangelicals do not go so far as to argue that people who do not use the word "inerrancy" are non-evangelicals. (This battle was fought in the 1970s and has died down lately.) Note that in Marsden's definition evangelicals believe "the Bible [is] authoritative and reliable." Many who are not inerrantists do believe the Bible is both reliable and authoritative. Personally, I believe Marsden is correct in his definition but in the end the word is a label. Labels are useful but they also are used to divide and oppose. This is especially the case when people use the word "fundamentalist" today. (In our present public setting, evangelicals are "fundamentalists" to most people.)

Reformation & Revival Journal is unashamedly evangelical in the way defined above. In fact, the longer I have personally critiqued evangelicalism the more I respect what is right in our churches and movement. We are "gospel people" (i.e., evangel people) and we believe in the new birth by the Holy Spirit and the transformation of lives by the power of the Word and the Spirit. We are also people of the Book. We read our Bibles, we discuss its meaning, and some of us really do believe it has authority over all our ethical and moral choices in life. And we are zealous to make converts to Christ through evangelism and missions.

This is precisely why we, as a journal of Christian opinion, believe that "the obedience of faith" issue addressed in this issue is important for our time in history. We believe this subject has the great potential to be used by God to renew the Church to bring about a fresh wind of real revival. It has also created some measure of conflict. People who believe that their theology is a finished work, and not a living system that can be altered by the word of Scripture, feel very uncomfortable with this discussion.

The doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, often ignored, frequently misused, and almost always misunderstood, is alive and well in evangelicalism in the twenty-first century. I for one am very grateful.



The flagship evangelical magazine, *Christianity Today*, recently ran a cover story titled, "Turning the Mainline Around: Renewal Groups Are Changing the Course of Wayward Protestantism" (August 2003). The authors expressed great hope regarding the future of grass-roots renewal among congregations still in the older Protestant denominations (Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Reformed Church in America, etc.). Having witnessed a great deal of this effort for congregational renewal first-hand, I am in much agreement with the story. It underscores the observable fact that God often sends revival to churches in the most morally and doctrinally corrupt settings. We should never give up on the Church, even when it leans so heavily into the culture that its distinctively Christian beliefs seem gone. The Lord has frequently resurrected the churches of decline. But there is something sanguine about all this as well. We do not know the future and we can not be sure God will revive whole denominations at all. For this reason, all who pray for reformation and revival must focus their energies on local congregations and key leaders who still love the gospel.



Comedian Mort Sahl once said, "Liberals are people who do the right things for the wrong reasons so that they can feel good for ten minutes." How much better to do the right thing for the right reasons; thus "to glorify God and enjoy him forever," and to enjoy God's grace in the process.



The gospel message never changes. It is a message based upon a "once for all" event that demonstrates God's love and ongoing reconciliation of the cosmos in the man Christ Jesus. What does change is culture. How does the eternal gospel impact our society and daily lives? How does it speak to the issues of our time? These questions are never finally settled but the place to start and end the discussion, at least for Christians, will always be the gospel message. There are dangers on two sides of the road. On the left we move toward allowing the gospel to be defined by "cultured despisers" while on the right we fail to listen, learn and understand our culture. We settle for preaching our message as if it had little to say to the culture and was only meant for saving individual souls from a sinking ship. This tendency leans toward the ancient and perennial error of Gnosticism. When mission and ethical imperatives are divorced, the result is a Church without conviction and a Christianity without power.