

## IN DEFENSE OF MILITANCY

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Recent proposals about the nature of fundamentalism are stirring lively debate. While I have heard of no bloodshed, I am certain that quite a few blood pressures have risen with the discussions. A key term that seems to surface regularly, at least in the discussions to which I have been privy, is “militancy.” Most see militancy as a necessary, perhaps even indispensable, facet of Fundamentalism; but blood pressures begin to rise when the concept is defined or applied.

It hardly seems possible that there would be calls for clarification regarding a concept so tightly connected to Fundamentalism, but those calls are abundant. People are raising questions about its meaning (e.g., “How do we define militancy in a less hostile environment?”) and its application (e.g., “Militant about what?”). A brief examination of the histories that have been written about Fundamentalism, by those within and without the movement, reveals fairly universal acknowledgment that militancy was the distinguishing mark of the movement. Fundamentalism’s militancy is what propelled the movement to separate from the liberals, and it was the point of disdain which prompted the departure of the New Evangelicals.

According to one standard dictionary, militancy means “fighting or warring” or “having a combative character; aggressive, especially in the service of some cause.” That is a fair summary of the idea, although we may hit our personal comfort zones at different points in that string of definitions. In terms of Fundamentalism, militancy has always been associated with the propagation and defense of God’s truth. Because the movement was galvanized by the battle with modernism, the cause about which it was combative and aggressive was orthodoxy, particularly with relation to a cluster of doctrines surrounding Jesus Christ and the Scriptures.

Fundamentalists have always been militant about articulating biblical doctrine, refuting unbiblical teachings, and refusing to cooperate with unbelief and compromise. Fundamentalist militancy has consistently been evidenced by steadfastly proclaiming God’s truth, by exposing those who deny and compromise God’s truth, and by separating from unbelief (either by removing it or removing themselves from its presence). The Fundamentalists’ compelling belief that separation was a thoroughly biblical command, coupled with a deep understanding of the sinister nature of unbelief, led to a militant commitment to separation from those who disobeyed God’s command to break with religious apostates. This commitment was militant because: 1) it was aggressive, i.e., it actively sought to break from the New Evangelical mindset, and 2) combative, i.e., it took seriously the biblical responsibility to confront error with biblical truth.

Is Fundamentalism losing its sense of militancy? This is where the debate is brewing. Allow me to offer one man’s opinion: when understood in its historic sense, the answer seems to be “yes.” Three leading indicators suggest that we may be shrinking away from maintaining our historic position on militant separatism. First, there appears to be a genuine loss of clarity among many about the very nature or meaning of Fundamentalism. Perhaps this is the result of so many people claiming the name; but it seems obvious that fuzziness about the nature of Fundamentalism must have a diminishing impact on militancy. How can one be aggressive about an unclear cause?

Second, there seems to be a loss of strong conviction among many Fundamentalists. Again, the negative impact of pastors/people who have strong convictions that are backed by non-biblical arguments (if any at all) has had its toll. But so has the generation’s worth of relativism

and pragmatism that has been pumped into our churches via our culture. Any dogmatism that claims to be biblical must certainly be backed by careful exegesis, and for this we must strive. The spirit of our age, which only raises questions and seldom provides answers, seems to be weakening our ability to exercise discernment. Even some evangelicals are beginning to admit this. This loss of conviction will have a terrible eroding effect on the practice of ecclesiastical separation. It is difficult for most of us to handle the relational pressure that comes from being a separatist without a strong, compelling belief that it is not just an option, but the right thing to do.

A third indicator that militancy seems to be waning is the subtle, and sometimes open, repudiation of speaking out about separatism. There seems to be a significant loss of voice about this matter among many Fundamentalists. The implication of some is that there are no issues to confront, therefore we can just concentrate on our local church without addressing the larger ecclesiastical context. Or, as I heard one man publicly state, the current generation of Fundamentalists lives in a less hostile environment, and the implication of this was that we need to rethink militancy. To make such a statement is to admit *ipso facto* that militancy has already been rethought! How can an environment that forges concords such as “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” be less hostile to Fundamentalism? How can an environment be more hostile to Fundamentalism than one in which a movement like Promise Keepers can thrive? How can an environment where professing Fundamentalists deny the biblical doctrine of inspiration by attributing it to a single English translation be considered less hostile? How can an environment in which the doctrine of salvation is being threatened by professing Fundamentalists who deny that a sinner must repent to be saved possibly be considered less hostile?

I have never had a conversation with a militant Fundamentalist who denies that some of us have sinned in doing what we believe is right. We have taken the right stand with the wrong spirit (cf. 2 Thess 3:15), or we have taken a stand on some issue too hastily or without solid biblical support. But these problems do not invalidate the cause of Fundamentalism or of being militant about separation. Unfortunately, those who reject our position are quick to paint caricatures of our movement. The liberals did it; the New Evangelicals followed their example; and every defector from militant Fundamentalism has used the same tactic to prove his position while rejecting militant separatism (cf. the writings of John R. Rice, Jerry Falwell, Jack Van Impe, and John MacArthur).

The tag of belligerence is no new one. Militant Fundamentalism has borne it many times before. The very nature of the combat, the very essence of being aggressive in a cause means that some will think one to be too zealous or belligerent. For those of us being tempted toward a Fundamentalism that softens its image and tones itself down, the words of George Marsden should serve as a wake-up call.

The neo-evangelicals were thus still torn internally over variations of the same issues that were dividing them from separatist fundamentalists. Their one impulse was to insist that the exact positions won in the fundamentalist stand against modernism were too important ever to abandon. At the same time, they clearly wished to purge themselves of all the unessential traits acquired during the fundamentalist era, especially the spirit of belligerence. To put their dilemma in a question, To what extent was their movement a reform of Fundamentalism and to what extent was it a break with it? The “new evangelicals” had no easy rules by which to settle these issues (*Reforming Fundamentalism* [Eerdmans, 1987], p. 170).

It seems to me that those who want to rid contemporary Fundamentalism of its alleged belligerence should watch the pathway carefully. The last group of people to take that path found it to be a winding road which ends up in a theological wasteland.