

Is Justification Enough?

Why the things of first importance
are not of only importance

By Phil Johnson

The questions we're going to explore in this hour have to do with the issue of evangelical unity across denominational lines. Is the gospel alone really a sufficient foundation for Christian unity? Are *all* the essential truths of Christian doctrine summed up in the gospel—or are there other essential doctrines besides the gospel that we need to come to full agreement on as well? Where do the authority and sufficiency of Scripture and the doctrine of the Godhead come into play? Does a correct understanding of the gospel automatically include or assume those other truths as well?

Furthermore (assuming for the moment that the gospel *does* give us sufficient common ground for true unity), who gets to determine how precise and how thorough we need to be in our definition of the gospel? *I* am convinced the principle of imputed righteousness is essential to a right understanding of the gospel. What if *you* don't? I believe (with a settled conviction) that the gospel entails the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement. What if you think that's too narrow a view? Can we still forge any kind of meaningful unity based on whatever leftover scraps of gospel truth we might still agree on? Who gets to decide what constitutes the bare minimum?

These are pressing questions.

And does the idea of gospel unity virtually sweep all secondary issues off the table? In order to maintain these bonds of unity that we have forged through our common commitment to the gospel, are we obliged to set aside all serious or passionate public debate over all secondary matters? If we agree that a point of doctrine on which we disagree is a "secondary doctrine" or a "nonessential," have we in fact relegated that truth to the category of unimportant

matters? Have we made these secondary issues off limits for as far as any candid public expression of our disagreement is concerned? Does gospel unity erect a barrier that stifles meaningful debate on such issues?

These are things I'm certain you have pondered, if you are prone to think seriously about matters like unity and purity in Christian fellowship: Do we need to lighten up on the technical precision of our doctrinal statements in order to bring as many people as possible into the circle of our fellowship? Specifically, can we set aside 1500 years of carefully-won unity on a doctrine like the Trinity for the sake of making our unity in the gospel as easy, and simple, and friendly as possible? Is there something about the historic evangelical idea of being biblically faithful, doctrinally careful, and theologically thorough that works against the goals of unity?

To cite a few concrete examples: is the charismatic question forever off the table for any kind of rigorous public debate? Is it a requirement for the sake of evangelical unity that we now need to take a more-or-less agnostic view of biblical eschatology?

And set aside all the issues we *know* we disagree on. Let me ask you this about the gospel: If someone were to select a random sampling of thirty men from the 300 best-known evangelical authors, pundits, media personalities, and megachurch pastors, do you think those 30 men would *really* agree on the substance of the gospel message?

Is it bad form even to bring up such questions in a conference such as this?

Now, I want to be clear: Despite what all those questions might make it sound like, I *love* the idea behind groups like Together for the Gospel and The Gospel Coalition. I think one of the most positive developments in the conservative wing of the evangelical movement in my lifetime has occurred over the past decade, and it is embodied in movements like those two groups. There's a healthy and growing segment of evangelical young people who recognize

the importance of biblical preaching, gospel-centered ministry, Christ-centered worship, and serious-minded church leaders. I'm encouraged by the numbers of young men in ministry and in seminary who are fed up with superficial evangelicalism, deeply concerned about the direction evangelical movement, and passionately committed to truth and sound doctrine. More and more young Christian leaders are waking up to the reality that culture and conventional wisdom *often* contradict Scripture, and "the wisdom of this world is folly with God."

"We ought to obey God rather than men" I sincerely hope that worldview continues to gain traction among the student generation, so that you guys who are just coming into ministry can help clean up the disaster zone that is left in the wake of at least forty or fifty years of evangelical fun-n-games, flirtation with the world, trite preaching, pragmatic methodologies, and doctrinal compromises.

As I said, I love the idea of unity built on a gospel foundation, but the success or failure of that idea hinges on our understanding of and commitment to a true, unadulterated, biblical understanding of the gospel. We know from both Scripture and the hard-fought lessons of church history that not everyone who *says* he is committed to the gospel really is. Not everyone who *claims* to stand with us in affirming gospel truth is *really* interested in doing the work of the Great Commission. Not everyone who signs an evangelical confession of faith actually *preaches* the gospel.

And when you have organizations as large and as successful as Together for the Gospel and The Gospel Coalition, there will always be lots of people who don't *really* agree with the original goals of the movement but who nevertheless want to identify with it so that they can influence the multitudes who are drawn to the movement. And the consequence of that reality is this: If we truly want to stand together for the gospel, we have to be willing to defend the gospel.

And therein lies a problem.

We live at a moment in history when almost no one wants to be labeled a fundamentalist. Virtually every impression the word *fundamentalist* conjures up in the popular mind is bad. And let's be honest: a lot of that ill will is richly deserved. I have never been a member in any fundamentalist denomination or group, nor do I aspire to formal membership in any fundamentalist fraternity. I have *friends* who are old-school fundamentalists. And for those of you who think all fundamentalists are crackpots and Jack Hyles clones, let me assure you that is not the case. There is a remnant of sober-minded fundamentalists who I think you would admire if you knew them, including a few of the best biblical expositors you would ever want to hear. *I* would consider them friends. (They might prefer me to call them "affable acquaintances," because you know how fundamentalists tend to be about affiliating with non-fundamentalists. And they would be quick to assure you that I am not part of their movement. And that's true. I'm not, and never have been, a card-carrying fundamentalist.)

I *did* go to a fundamentalist school for just one year during my college career, in the mid-1970s. In those days, this particular school seemed to be purposely cultivating an atmosphere that was anti-intellectual, legalistic, doctrinally shallow, and constantly quarrelsome. Most of the preaching I heard there had more showmanship than biblical content in it. And I'm not trying to be offensive or snide. But I want to give you an honest evaluation. In spite of the etymological connotations of the word "fundamentalist," I don't think I learned a single thing about the fundamentals of Christianity in an entire year on the campus of a fundamentalist university.

I *did* get a stomach full of harangues about all the typical American-fundamentalist taboos: the evils of slacks and makeup on women; the deadly error of facial hair (including sideburns) on men; the sin of syncopated music—and of course the diabolical connotations of bell-bottom jeans. Some of you remember how rigid the fundamentalist rule-

books were in the '60s and '70s. There was just nonstop emphasis on external things like that. And one semester of that was enough to inoculate me forever.

The brand of "fundamentalism" I saw close up was deliberately quarrelsome, quasi-legalistic, hypocritical, superficial, and embarrassingly small-minded. But that is (I think) the dominant imagery that comes to forefront in the average evangelical's mind when he hears the word *fundamentalism*.

All of that is to say, if the word gives you a cold chill, I feel your discomfort. No sensible Christian wants to repeat the errors or revive the extremism of that kind of fundamentalism. I certainly have no desire to perpetuate, or to defend, what 20th-century American fundamentalism turned into.

Nevertheless, the idea that originally gave birth to the fundamentalist movement was a valid principle. Perhaps it would be accurate to say it is a vital principle. It is a biblical principle. It is a principle that doesn't deserve to be written off in the sneering way some postmodern evangelicals like to do.

And this might startle you: In my judgment, the idea that gave birth to groups like Together for the Gospel and The Gospel Coalition is an echo of the same idea that originally spawned *fundamentalism*. It's a simple (and to my mind incontrovertible) principle. It's this: *If a doctrine or point of truth is essential to Christianity, then it's worth fighting for.*

If there is a doctrine or a proposition that is so indispensable to our faith that you cannot deny it without fatally undermining the foundations of biblical Christianity, then it is the bounden duty of every true believer to stand with other believers and defend that doctrine against any *idea* or *person* who attacks it. We have a responsibility that we cannot righteously shirk to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints." I think it's clear from that text and its context that what Jude expects us to defend are the core doctrines of *gospel* truth.

In other words, if the gospel is the foundation of our unity and the truth that binds all Christians together, then that very same body of truth must be defended vigorously—earnestly—when it comes under attack. And that's true whether the attack comes from overtly hostile enemies, or by subversion from within.

In other words, the gospel is not only the ground on which we unite with unbelievers, it is also ground we must earnestly defend against false teachers. You cannot achieve true unity unless you vigorously pursue both of those goals.

As I said, for those who acknowledge the authority of Scripture, that principle is incontrovertible. It's clear from numerous passages of Scripture that the central details of gospel truth do indeed rise to that level of supreme importance. The apostle John wrote his second epistle in part to deal with some sort of proto-gnostic error regarding the Incarnation of Christ—practically the first detail of the gospel story.

Specifically, someone was teaching that there is no reasonable and logical way to affirm *both* the deity *and* the humanity of Christ. This was some incipient form of Docetic gnosticism. The gurus of that idea were teaching that Christ's body could not possibly have been real. He was God, they said, but He didn't truly and literally come "in the flesh." They were denying the true humanity of Christ—denying the Incarnation.

Now, John is frequently called "The apostle of love." In fact, the first half of his second epistle is a strong exhortation to love. So it is extremely significant that the apostle had zero scruples when it came to pointing out and condemning the purveyors of a lie that undermined a fundamental doctrine like the incarnation.

Verse 7: "Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist." So it's clear (isn't it?) that the apostle John did not recognize these truth-twisting teachers as authentic Christians. Notice that

he says there were "many" of them. but the popularity of their teaching did not sway him. The fact that they *claimed* to be committed to the gospel did not sway him. They might very well have even been teaching that salvation was by grace through faith in Christ. But they denied that Christ was truly human, and their teaching therefore was a denial of a cardinal doctrine—the truth that "there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." So John says, *Don't embrace them in the circle of your fellowship. Don't pretend they are true believers. They aren't.* Verse 9, the person who "does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God" at all.

That is definitive. It could not possibly be more unequivocal. John, the apostle of love, rejects them completely. He does not want other Christians to extend any brotherly encouragement or cordial recognition to these false teachers. In fact, he goes on to say that it would be a serious sin to do that.

Understand, this is not the spirit of Boanerges speaking. This is John, the apostle of love, writing as the mature elder statesman in the church at that time. And these are "not . . . words which man's wisdom teaches but [an inspired truth] which the Holy Spirit teaches."

As devoted as the apostle John was to the principle of love and unity *IN* the faith, he emphatically did *not* believe Christians have any obligation to pursue unity everyone who *professes* to be a Christian. He doesn't tell the apostolic church to embrace everyone who comes in Jesus name. He doesn't want believers to show hospitality to these heretics under the rubric of unity, or loving one another, or fulfilling the wish Jesus prayed for in John 17:23: "so that the world may know" that we love one another. Instead, John goes on to say in 2 John 10-11: "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works."

This is the very same apostle who recorded the words of Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17. But does he leave any doubt about what he might think of, say, Mormon-evangelical dialogues? Do you think he would have welcomed a proposal to sponsor a conversation with these quasi-Trinitarian gnostics to try to find common ground or make common cause with them? *That kind of ecumenical solidarity was the last thing John wanted.* He wanted unity among those who are committed to the gospel. And one of the reasons they needed to be united was so that they could stand together and oppose every threat of twisted teaching, such as the error these early gnostics were peddling.

Now, remember: these gnostic guys were in error on the hypostatic union. That's a point of doctrine many people today would insist *must* be a secondary truth because it's so technical, and it requires so much mental discipline and verbal dexterity to understand and teach the doctrine of the incarnation correctly. *After all, there's mystery inherent in the biblical doctrine of the Godhead.* Is this a doctrine anyone really needs to be anathematized over? The apostle John says *emphatically*: yes it is. It is a matter of essential importance.

The apostle Paul draws an additional line in the sand when he deals with the doctrine of justification by faith. At the start of his epistle to the Galatians, before he has even begun to refute the Judaizers' errors, he issues a double curse against these legalists and anyone else like them who would tamper with the gospel message enough to change the fundamental nature of it. And get this: *No one—neither Paul himself nor the highest angel in heaven—is exempt from this curse.* Galatians 1:8-9: "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed."

Peter had similarly unfriendly words about gospel-corrupters. In 2 Peter 2:12-14, Peter called them "irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, [and he said they] will . . . be destroyed in their destruction, suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing. [He further said of them that] . . . They are blots and blemishes . . . [with] eyes full of adultery [and] hearts trained in greed. [He sums it all up with a fairly harsh epithet:] Accursed children."

So *all* the major apostles understood that there must be clear lines of demarcation between authentic biblical Christianity and the wolves and false teachers who want to be admitted into the fold. All of them recognized that certain teachers would come in the name of Christ who must not under any circumstances be welcomed by the church.

In other words, the question of who is "in" and who is "out" is a vital and legitimate question.

You could hardly state a less popular perspective in these postmodern times. The Christian blogosphere is full of people (including some fairly influential evangelical leaders) who keep urging other Christians not to concern themselves with the question of who is in and who is out. We're often told we mustn't erect "boundaries."

That word *boundaries* is supposed to have totally negative connotations. Honestly: I don't get that. I can understand how worldly people whose minds are saturated in postmodern values might think a world without any boundaries sounds great. But candidly, it's an attitude that's hard to reconcile with the whole tenor of the New Testament. *This resistance to boundaries is especially hard to reconcile with the fact that as pastors—shepherds—we are charged with guarding the flock and keeping predators out of the fold.* And there simply is no realistic way to keep sheep in the sheepfold and keep wolves out if you refuse to erect any boundaries. John 10:7: "Jesus said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep." I cannot

envision any useful purpose for having a "door [for] the sheep" if there is no sheep-pen or enclosure of some kind with well-defined, secure boundaries.

But mainstream evangelicals have been indoctrinated along with the rest of postmodern society to think the idea of boundaries is evil-sounding. We're conditioned to favor values like tolerance, diversity, mystery, indecision, broad-mindedness, and liberality. It's considered humble and generous to entertain perpetual qualms about what we believe. We're not supposed to think any single perspective can righteously claim to be true to the exclusion of all others. So let's bend over backward *not* to sound dogmatic. Because *certainty* is perceived throughout our culture as a kind of cruel arrogance. Clarity, authority, careful definitions, and firmness are likewise looked upon with suspicion. Even in conservative evangelical circles, you will be frowned upon if you state your beliefs with settled conviction. We're supposed to qualify and over-qualify everything we say in a way that practically nullifies every critique. We are told we need to look for things to commend whenever we have to criticize something, and above all, we *must* be brotherly to everyone who comes in Jesus' name.

Perhaps nothing is more politically incorrect in mainstream evangelicalism than taking seriously the duty to limit our fellowship with boundaries that are established by *doctrine*. We're constantly told we should not concern ourselves with who is "in" and who is "out." You know: *If it's not our business to pull up the tares from the wheat-field or separate the sheep from the goats, then neither should we concern ourselves with watching out for wolves who come disguised in sheep's clothing.*

Now, we don't really have time to do a full exposition of all the biblical imagery there, but let me just say: that's a very dangerous mixture of metaphors. The point of the wheat-and-tares parable and the sheep-and-goats judgment is that vengeance belongs to the Lord. We're not called to rid the world of heretics and false religions. Christians have no

warrant for jihad. The church doesn't wield the sword. The most extreme penalty the church can employ against apostates and false teachers is excommunication.

The field in the parable of tares represents the world, not the church. We cannot purge the world of heretics, and we're not even supposed to try. God will do that at the end of the age. That's the point of the parable. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." And Jesus' description of the sheep-and-goats judgment makes a similar point. It's about eschatological judgment; not discernment in the church.

But even prior to the judgment at the end of the age, we are expressly forbidden to welcome known heretics and apostates into the fellowship of the church. We are to remain separate from them, exclude them from our fellowship, and if they are already *in* the fellowship and fall away, we are supposed to excommunicate them. Romans 16:17: "Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them."

Now be honest: some of you get that same cold chill down your spine when someone starts talking about separation, because this is perhaps the one doctrine most talked about and most abused by fundamentalists over the past 75 years or so. Some fundamentalists were so enthralled with separatism that they would literally break fellowship with anyone who didn't hold to the haircut guidelines that were established by whatever fundamentalist university they attended. When they ran out of people to break fellowship with over doctrinal differences, they started anathematizing one another over differences about things like music styles, dress codes, and whatnot.

On the other hand, I know evangelicals—and you probably do also—who seem to shun *any* kind of separation, church discipline, or doctrinal discernment. The type of unity they envision is a broad, visible, ecumenical homogeneity without boundaries. They seem to imagine that the best, easiest, most obvious way to achieve unity is by

shelving our doctrinal distinctives or at least refusing to make an issue of them. Any kind of common ground is good enough for them, and the more we can make common cause with people who hold differing convictions, the better that is—the more "unified" we are.

Now, from what I've said already, I hope you can see why I think both approaches are wrong. The *hyper-fundamentalist* tendency to break fellowship over every kind of disagreement has proved to be divisive, schismatic, and sinfully disruptive to true biblical unity in Christ. On the other hand, the *neo-evangelical* idea that separation is to be avoided at all costs is (if anything) even worse, because it exposes the true flock of God to vicious wolves. It also causes division rather than true unity. If you want proof of that, look at all the broken relationships and ill will left in the wake of the recent Elephant Room fiasco.

One of our main duties as pastors is to care for and guard the flock "in which the Holy Spirit has made [us] overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." That's Acts 20:28, and for a pastor to abdicate that duty is in my view the worst kind of spiritual malfeasance. But there are lots of pastors these days who are deliberately derelict in that duty. Read the letters from Christ to the church in Revelation 2 and 3, if you want to see what Jesus thinks of that kind of negligence.

You probably know that these subjects are of particular interest to me. Over the years here at the Shepherds' Conference I have done seminars on the failure of fundamentalism and the shipwreck of the contemporary evangelical movement. I have zero hope that either movement can be resurrected and restored to genuine spiritual health. In fact, I think the best solution to the mess in the church today is for a remnant of sober-minded men to recover the classic fundamentalist principle—the idea that initially gave birth to the fundamentalist movement; and at the same time, to recover a commitment to the core evangelical values (meaning the gospel—not a pared-down

minimalist summary of someone's cheesy gospel tract, but the New Testament gospel of grace). And we need to reunite those two ideas: classic evangelicalism's zeal for proclaiming the gospel, and classic fundamentalism's zeal for defending the gospel's essential doctrines.

Now I think I probably said something like this in one of my seminars in year's past—but it certainly bears repeating: In my judgment, two fatal mistakes were made in the 20th-century battle against modernism, and those two mistakes still trouble evangelicals and fundamentalists alike.

The first fatal error occurred when early fundamentalists let their movement get hijacked by men who were not really serious about the fundamentals of Christianity. The name *fundamentalist*, of course, was at least partly inspired by a series of 90 essays assembled and edited by A. C. Dixon and R. A. Torrey. Those tracts were published between 1910 and 1915 and distributed in 12 volumes titled *The Fundamentals*. (I have a reprint of the set that is reorganized and bound in 4 volumes. Most if not all of the essays are also online. You can easily find them with a Google search.) Most of the essays hold up very well after 100 years. They are rich and thought-provoking, and they're within the reach of the average lay reader. They are doctrinally and biblically sound, defending essential Christian teachings that modernists were attacking. And The list of authors is impressive. Not all of the writers had impressive academic credentials, but nearly all of them were sober-minded, doctrinally sound people.

But before even a decade passed, the fundamentalist movement was hijacked by showmen and self-promoters. Billy Sunday quickly became fundamentalism's best-known evangelist, and he turned the fundamentalist agenda away from fundamentalist doctrine to the issue of prohibition. The fundamentalist movement never fully recovered its original agenda. By 1920, William Jennings Bryan had become perhaps the second best-known fundamentalist figurehead. He was a skilled lawyer and politician, and an able debater. But he was no theologian. His bombast and fighting

disposition helped shape the culture of fundamentalism, but his leadership did nothing to deepen or further the doctrinal agenda of the original fundamentalists. He is best known for his role in the Scopes trial in 1925. (What many people forget is that William Jennings Bryan *did* persuade the jury and win the Scopes trial. But he died about a week after the trial ended, and the jury's decision was overturned on appeal.)

Bryan's death sparked the ambition of another young preacher who desperately wanted to wear the mantle of William Jennings Bryan. His name was J. Frank Norris. And if that's a new name to you, let me recommend a recent book by David Stokes. It was first published two years ago under the title *Apparent Danger*, then picked up and republished last year with a new title: *The Shooting Salvationist*. (You can get the physical book in hardcover or download it on your Kindle.) The subtitle in the original printing was "The Pastor of America's First Megachurch and the Texas Murder Trial of the Decade."

Norris was not only the father of the American megachurch, but he actually pastored two churches in two different cities concurrently. (So he was the first multisite guy, too.) He pastored First Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, TX, and Temple Baptist Church in Detroit. He would fly back and forth between them, preaching one week in Detroit and the next in Texas. And that was long before jet airplanes were commonplace.

There was no more controversial preacher in America than Norris. And he loved the controversy. At one point he shot a man to death in the pastor's study in Ft. Worth. There were no eyewitnesses, but Norris claimed self-defense. And after a highly publicized murder trial, he was ultimately acquitted. On another occasion he was arrested and put on trial for arson when his church burned. He was constantly in trouble, perpetually in the news, and frequently in court defending himself against some charge or another—and he loved the publicity.

He seemed especially drawn to cheesy gimmicks that he knew would stir controversy. When he preached on evolution for example, he brought an organ-grinder's monkey dressed in a little suit to the platform with him, and when he would make a point, he would turn to the monkey and say, "Isn't that right?" Showmanship, not seriousness, was his trademark.

And prohibition, not doctrine, became Norris's pet issue. He had a long-running feud with the district attorney in Ft. Worth, who was apparently secretly supportive of illegal liquor traffic during the prohibition years. This district attorney was killed when he drove his Cadillac had on into a street car. Norris came upon the scene before the wreckage was cleared away, and he found half a liquor bottle with part of a human brain in it. He carried that memento from the wreck into the pulpit the following Sunday and preached a message titled "The Wages of Sin is Death."

Lots of fundamentalists seemed enthralled with that kind of flamboyance. If you've never seen a film of Billy Sunday's gymnastic preaching style or listened to him rail against the "whiskey-soaked, sabbath-breaking, infidel, bootlegging old world" of the 1920s, do a search at YouTube for a film titled "Billy Sunday Burns Up the Backsliding World." It's an old movietone-style newsreel of Sunday preaching you can see and hear him in his classic style.

Younger preachers tried to imitate the style of these guys. Norris and Sunday both accumulated huge followings, and all the young fundamentalists aped their style. (Frank Norris was the Mark Driscoll of his generation.)

It wasn't long, naturally, until the word *fundamentalism* evoked images of theatrical religion offered with a deliberately pugnacious tone.

The irony here is that the mistake of the original fundamentalists was that after defining their agenda and establishing fairly clear doctrinal boundaries, they did not sufficiently defend those boundaries against threats from within.

Men like Sunday and Norris and their acolytes would never have denied or directly attacked any fundamental doctrine. But they diverted the agenda to other things. And the fundamentals of Christianity declined through neglect. Booze and politics and cultural standards became the main focus of fundamentalist preaching rather than doctrines like justification by faith. Big personalities and showmanship edged out the virtues Scripture says qualify a person to lead the church. In subsequent years fundamentalists did a lot of talking about soul-winning, attendance figures, Sunday-school numbers, bus-ministry outreach, and whatnot. But lots of fundamentalists (and I'm thinking about people like Jack Hyles here) seemed not to make any meaningful distinction between self-promotion and soul winning. There was lots of hype but comparatively little serious teaching about actual gospel doctrines.

Fundamentalism as a movement very early on gave up its reputation for taking doctrine seriously, and the best-known and most flamboyant leaders in the movement almost completely neglected the fundamental doctrines the movement had sworn to defend.

I should also mention that even those original essays on the fundamentals reflected an imbalance that in my opinion did not help the movement. In the entire collection, there was only one fairly minor essay on the doctrine of justification by faith. It was a short piece written by Handley Moule, who was a high-ranking Anglican, the Bishop of Durham. What he says is generally sound enough, but he leaves an awful lot unsaid. In the entire article there's not a single word about the imputation of righteousness to sinners.

The Fundamentals also included one brief article defending substitutionary atonement, written by Franklin Johnson. It is a good little tract, but in light of the scorn modernists had been heaping on the doctrine of the atonement for at least three or four decades, it seems an awfully lightweight response. There is one other article titled

"At-One-Ment by Propitiation," written by Dyson Hague, Vicar Of The Church Of The Epiphany, Toronto. There's also an article on "Grace" by C. I. Scofield (who in all candor did not have the soundest understanding of grace). And there's an article on "Salvation by Grace" written by Spurgeon's son Thomas. Those five or six articles constitute the main defense of the gospel in the whole collection of ninety articles.

On the other hand, there are more than a dozen articles answering the claims of higher critics; several dealing with the claims of evolution and other science-related issues; and five or six more making apologetical arguments or critiquing specific cults. As I said earlier, all the articles in the collection are sound enough. But my point is that there's a disproportionately small number of articles offering exposition of core gospel truths.

I wish the original authors of the fundamentals had taken a more gospel-centered approach, and I wish their immediate successors had likewise focused their energies more on the promulgation and defense of the gospel.

Now, let me be clear: there was absolutely no question about whether these men were *devoted* to the gospel. Of course they were. In fact, to a man I think they would have confessed that the gospel is at the center of everything they considered fundamental. The problem was that they tended to take the gospel for granted. They all declared their allegiance to the gospel, but they spent most of their energies elsewhere.

That same problem influenced both the fundamentalist and evangelical branches of Bible-believing Protestantism. They did not deliberately neglect gospel doctrines, but the critics were mainly attacking the authority and veracity of Scripture, not the gospel or the doctrine of justification by faith *per se*.

By the middle part of the 20th century, justification by faith seemed almost like a forgotten doctrine. In 1961, the Banner of Truth Trust published a reprint of a book that was

then 94 years old—*The Doctrine of Justification*, by James Buchanan. The original was first published in 1867. The Banner reprint 94 years later carried a Foreword by J. I. Packer in which Packer wrote this:

Buchanan's classic volume, now a century old, is the most recent full-scale study of justification by faith that English-speaking Protestantism . . . has produced. If we may judge by the size of its literary output, there has never been an age of such feverish theological activity as the past hundred years; yet amid all its multifarious theological concerns it did not produce a single book of any size on the doctrine of justification. If all we knew of the church during the past century was that it had neglected the subject of justification in this way, we should already be in a position to conclude that this has been a century of religious apostasy and decline.

That little paragraph by James Packer is itself now 51 years old, and I think it sums up what went wrong with 20th-century fundamentalism better than any other analysis I have ever read.

That was the first major disastrous mistake that was made in the 20th-century war against modernism. The fundamentalist movement took a detour away from the true fundamentals and focused instead on secondary issues—and in so doing, they did not give as much attention to the gospel as they should. They took it for granted.

The second major disaster took place mid-century when some leading evangelicals decided to court the favor of the secular academy. They called themselves *neo-evangelicals*, and they formally broke with their fundamentalist brethren. They renounced separatism altogether. They actively sought dialogue with theological liberals and modernists. Billy Graham, who was an ardent proponent of this movement, began to practice "cooperative evangelism," meaning he solicited the participation of liberals, Roman Catholics, and other non-evangelical in his crusades.

Meanwhile, the major seminaries that were committed to this neo-evangelical agenda began a steady move toward neo-orthodoxy (and worse). Their commitment to the authority of Scripture eroded. If you have never read George Marsden's *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism*, you should. Marsden, who is by no means hostile to neo-evangelicalism, gives a surprisingly candid, dispassionate account of the decline that occurred at Fuller Seminary under the influence of neo-evangelical leadership. The story of Fuller seminary's move away from evangelical principles reveals in microcosm what has happened in every institution that ever embraced the neo-evangelical idea.

Neo-evangelicalism and cooperative evangelism *undermine the gospel by minimalizing its content*. You can't give an explicit and thorough account of the doctrine of justification by faith if your goal is to have the participation of Roman Catholic church leaders on your evangelistic team. Instead of teaching justification by faith, evangelicals began to talk about "inviting Jesus into your heart," "Accepting Jesus as Savior," "Making a decision for Jesus." They divested the gospel of doctrine and treated it as a purely relational issue. "You need a relationship with Jesus."

The atonement was deemed too technical and too difficult for modern minds to comprehend. The idea that people are sinners was thought to be too negative—almost medieval-sounding. So instead, evangelicals began telling people, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." And the gospel presentations got more and more superficial as they were systematically divested of doctrinal content. What we were left with was no gospel at all, but a message of self-esteem and self-fulfillment. Evangelicalism became man-centered, entertainment oriented, and pathologically shallow. Many evangelical churches, like the fundamentalists before them, turned to showmanship and hype. Others, the more serious-minded ones, turned from doctrine (like the

prohibitionists of the 1920s) to politics: anti-abortion protests, boycotts, and the culture wars.

By the 1990s, evangelicals were struggling to define their movement, because the word *evangelical* signifies a gospel-centered worldview, and there simply was not enough gospel left in the evangelical movement to justify that definition. Even *Christianity Today* magazine, ostensibly the house organ of the evangelical movement, admitted a few years ago that they don't quite know how to define evangelicalism any more, but they said they are pretty sure it has something to do with diversity.

Then just before the start of a new century the Emergent Church began to form. This was a new expression of religion, birthed mainly out of the evangelical community. But the evangelical movement had so long neglected or abandoned evangelical principles, so the children of that movement were uniquely susceptible to postmodernism's twisted notion of tolerance. They easily imbibed secular culture's contempt for authority, adopted politically-correct values like diversity, and embraced doubt-as-the-true humility. Bewilderment and even rank unbelief were labeled "mystery" and celebrated as positive virtues.

And with no sense of historical context, postmodern emergents began to parrot all the favorite classic *modernist* skepticisms: they questioned the authority of Scripture; they attacked substitutionary atonement; they scoffed at the exclusivity of Christ. Between the start of the new century and about 2008, at one point or another every Protestant and evangelical distinctive I can think of came under attack by leaders in the Emergent Community. *The emergent meltdown happened with more speed, more intensity, and more braggadocio than any of the corresponding apostasies in the history of the church.*

And it was at the very peak of that movement's influence that opposing movements began to form as if in response to Emergent influences. Groups like Together for the Gospel and The Gospel Coalition were named accordingly. Young

church leaders began to talk about recovering the gospel and putting it back in the center of the message we proclaim to the world.

It was the perfect response at the perfect time. Together for the Gospel and The Gospel Coalition and still are the two most visible and influential movements among younger American evangelicals, and the names of both movements reflect the idea that led to their founding.

To state it as concisely as I know how, both groups stand for the belief that the essential tenets of Christianity are summed up in the gospel message. And that means *the gospel is a large enough and firm enough foundation for Christian unity*. If you and I both truly believe the gospel, then we *are* in union with Christ—and therefore we are in union with one another. We have already entered into the kind of unity Christ prayed for in John 17. Christ binds us together through joint our union with Him, and union with him hinges believing the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation. And therefore the best way to deepen and cultivate our unity is to pursue a better, deeper understanding of the gospel and its implications. (Hang onto that word *implications*. I'll come back to it, because the *implications* of the gospel are just as important as the points of doctrinal truth that may be enumerated in your doctrinal statement.) But as we affirm, proclaim, and defend gospel truth together, we manifest and strengthen our unity.

And once you realize that the only true unity we share is rooted in a common commitment to these core truths which are embodied in the gospel, you'll see that the common notion of unity is exactly backward. We don't achieve unity by setting aside doctrine—we achieve unity by striving for a common understanding of truth, starting with the things Scripture tells us are "of first importance."

Paul urged the Philippians to pursue unity by "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel." That's Philippians 1:27, and it sounds

very much like a fitting manifesto for movements like Together for the Gospel or The Gospel Coalition.

Here's my point: for more than a century now, evangelicals and fundamentalists alike have neglected the gospel, toned it down, taken it for granted, or handled it in such a superficial way that today multitudes who call themselves Christians know next to nothing about the gospel. The people in most evangelical churches are pretty sure the gospel has something to do with asking Jesus to come into your heart, but when they hear expressions like *atonement*, or *repentance*, or *depravity*, or even *justification*, they think those things are advanced theology. They write off those things as mere technicalities that can't possibly be important because the churches they grew up in never used such terminology, and in all their circle of Christian fellowship, they don't know anyone who uses terms like those.

But now, suddenly, we are confronted with an amazing opportunity: large numbers of Young, Restless, Reformed people who are talking about the gospel and gospel-centered ministry, and they are interested in recovering a better understanding of the gospel from the dustbin of evangelical and Reformation history. We must not squander this opportunity. We must not make the mistake again of taking the gospel for granted or making it into a minimalist sculpture that is more pleasing to worldly aesthetics. We must begin to think more seriously about the gospel, study it more intently, and truly make it the heart of our theological world, especially if we want to forge a new movement that is truly unified and doctrinally robust.

And we need to embrace the *implications* of the gospel as well. There's that word I asked you to hang onto a few minutes ago. The evangelical movement is full of people who sign orthodox doctrinal statements but ignore the *implications* of the gospel: preachers who talk about missional ministry but never actually preach the gospel; whole churches that give lip service to outreach and say they

want to reach unchurched people—but the gospel is never mentioned in their midst. Churches are filled with members (and even some church leaders) who say they believe the four spiritual laws or have followed the five steps to God, or have invited Jesus Christ into their hearts—but they live wantonly ungodly lives. You simply *cannot* have true gospel unity with someone like that.

But let's get back to the questions suggested by the title of this seminar: *Is Justification Enough?*

Now, you can probably discern from things I have said already that I believe the doctrine of justification by faith is the heart of the gospel. Calvin referred to that doctrine as the principle hinge of all religion. Luther called it the article by which the church stands or falls. I'm convinced it's the key to a right understanding of gospel truth, and I am prepared to argue that both Scripture and church history support that assessment of the importance of this one doctrine.

I've said for years that a thorough understanding of and commitment to the classic Protestant understanding of justification by faith has a tendency to keep us sound on most of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. For example, if you have a right understanding of justification, you can't deny either the deity or the humanity of Christ, because He must be both in order to provide the perfect righteousness and be the perfect sacrifice for sin.

Nevertheless, justification by faith is not all there is to the gospel, so the question they assigned me as a title for this seminar ("Is Justification Enough?") is actually *different* from the question of whether the gospel is a sufficient foundation for Christian unity.

"Is Justification Enough?" *No.*

"Is the gospel a sufficient foundation for Christian unity?"
Yes, but that assumes a thorough, accurate, biblical understanding of the gospel and its implications, and a wholehearted commitment (not merely intellectual assent) to the truths of the gospel. We can say we're committed to the same gospel, but without a clear understanding of what the

gospel is, that statement is meaningless. If your view of the gospel is so broad that a prosperity preacher qualifies as someone whom you will publicly join hands with and declare yourself one in Christ with him, then I question whether you have a sound enough grasp of the gospel to begin with.

What is the gospel? the Gospel is an announcement that Christ has triumphed over sin and Satan. It includes everything the Scriptures declare essential, including the truth that Christ is God in human flesh (2 John) and the doctrine of justification by faith (Galatians 1). The gospel includes all the historical facts and doctrinal principles Paul named and said are "of first importance" in 1 Corinthians 15—including the death, burial, and bodily resurrection of Christ, his substitutionary death "for our sins according to the [Old Testament] Scriptures," and the promise of our physical resurrection. The gospel also includes these truths:

- ! All three Persons of the Trinity are involved in the outworking of the gospel. In the words of Hebrews 9:14, we are redeemed and sanctified through "the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God"
- ! The gospel furthermore teaches that Christ has turned justice in our favor. First John 1:9: "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins."
- ! So at the heart of the message is the truth that Christ has redeemed us from sin—not merely the penalty of sin, but the bondage and corruption of it as well. Romans 8:21: "The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."
- ! Christ accomplished all this by acting as our proxy. First Peter 3:18: "Christ . . . suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God."
- ! His one-time sacrifice is sufficient for all who believe. Hebrews 10:12: He "offered for all time a single

sacrifice for sins, [and then] sat down at the right hand of God."

- ! His righteousness is the sole ground of our justification and the only merit we need for a right standing with God. Second Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."
- ! He is coming again to bring us to glory. Hebrews 9:28: "Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."
- ! In short, the gospel is "the good news about salvation"; and more than that, it is a declaration that evil is overthrown (in the words of Hebrews 2:14-15) because Christ partook of flesh and blood so "that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

And I could probably go on for hours in the same vein, because the gospel is full of important truths and implications like that.

A question I'm often asked is this: Is it possible to make a complete and exhaustive list of doctrines that are *essential*? I don't believe it is, because truth itself is not a finite commodity, and the minute you think you have nailed down a simple list of all the essentials, the powers of darkness will challenge some underlying point of doctrine you never imagined would be controversial, and then you'll have to add a new item to your list. Also, the wish for a finite list is itself exactly the kind of minimalist approach to truth that has got us into the mess we are in today anyway. It's like asking: "What's the least I can believe and still go to heaven?"

But I will say this: There are two competing wrong tendencies that undermine our evangelical consensus when it comes to the gospel. And both of these tendencies operate even within communities that would affirm the founding principles of groups like T4G and The Gospel Coalition. One

is that minimalistic tendency: a push to pare the gospel down and reduce it to the barest list of essentials, in order to make our consensus seem broader and more influential than at really is. The gospel ends up so small and insignificant that it's really no gospel at all. D. L. Moody famously said, "*I could write the gospel on a dime.*" I think I know what he was trying to say: You don't have to be an advanced theologian to believe the gospel and be saved. Yet the gospel itself is deep and wide and not a postage-stamp-sized truth. The kind of thinking Moody's statement suggests has been a bad influence on the evangelical movement ever since Moody's time (and before).

It's not just that we tend to fall back on canned, abbreviated gospel presentations, or that we tend to generate shallow, unbiblical, decisionalistic false conversions. Those trends would be bad enough by themselves—certainly reason enough to reject evangelical minimalism. But this is also the trend that opens the door for someone like T. D. Jakes to be welcomed into the circle of evangelical unity, even though in his best moments Jakes seems not to understand and clearly doesn't really embrace biblical Trinitarianism. And in his *worst* moments, he actually seems to reject it.

Besides, regardless of Jakes's position on the Trinity, he relentlessly preaches a prosperity message instead of the biblical gospel. If he is not a classic example of the kind of false teacher Paul was condemning in Galatians 1, it would be pretty hard to think of a better example in the public eye today. Who's next? Joel Osteen? Why not Benny Hinn, if the criterion is anyone with a large following.

The second wrong tendency operating in the evangelical community today is a push to define the gospel in the widest, most expansive terms you can think of, so that basically any cause you want to champion can fit under the rubric of gospel truth: social justice, the redistribution of wealth, or even gay rights.

That is the approach the classic modernists took. Reimagining the gospel was one of the favorite activities of

modernist and liberal religion, and the effects were disastrous. The World Council of Churches became a left-wing political advocacy fraternity. Liberation theology is a direct fruit of this kind of thinking. It has always left wreckage and decline—not unity—in its wake, and invariably, the true gospel gets eclipsed.

But at the beginning of this century, the Emergents adopted the same approach to reworking the gospel in order to make it broad and inclusive as possible. The same approach it has been applied in varying degrees by people from Ron Sider to Scot Mcknight. The argument typically goes like this: *The gospel is not primarily about personal salvation from the guilt and bondage of sin.* [Scot Mcknight dismisses the classic Protestant emphasis on the doctrine of justification by faith by labeling it "the soterian gospel." It's selfish, and short-sighted, and deficient, he says. The gospel is MUCH bigger than that. McKnight says that] *Jesus preached "the gospel of the kingdom," and since he is Lord of all, the kingdom includes all that ever has been, all that is, and all that ever will be. The gospel is the weeping story of everything.*

Ok, there's a germ of truth in that. I've already said that gospel truth is not finite. The drama of redemption does extend from eternity past to eternity future, and in one way or another, there's not a molecule or even an isolated quark anywhere in the universe that is not in some way affected by the gospel.

But Scripture shows with undeniable clarity that the gospel has a distinct focus, and it's the story of redemption. The gospel *does* touch each of us at a very individual level. It *also* does define the church corporately. But the gospel message is first and foremost good news about the finished work of Christ in gaining atonement and redemption for everyone who believes. In Acts 20:24, Paul called it "the gospel of the grace of God." In 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul gives that short list of things that he says are "of first importance," he makes it clear that the heart of the gospel is

the atonement Christ offered on the cross. He told the Corinthians "We preach Christ crucified." "When I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." And the central meaning of the cross is likewise clear: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I [an individual] am the foremost." First Peter 1:9: "the outcome of your faith [is] the salvation of your souls." Peter goes on to say that "this salvation [is what] the prophets . . . prophesied about[. They were writing about] the grace that was to be yours[. And Peter says they] searched and inquired carefully, [seeking to understand what] the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories." *Atonement. Grace. The salvation of your souls. The suffering of Christ and the glory that follows.* Those things are the proper focus of the gospel.

If you supplant the nucleus of that message with a lot of politically-correct values like a socialist notion of "economic justice," or a campaign to stop human trafficking, or boycotts of Disney, or anti-abortion lobbying, or "God Hates Fags" posters (or anything else, whether you are crusading for legitimate virtues or twisted ones)—if you supplant the proper focus of the gospel with any other agenda, you have twisted and corrupted the gospel just as surely as the Judaizers and gnostics did, and your efforts *will* undermine true unity in the visible church, whether that is what you intend or not. History is full of proof of that assessment, and recent history alone bears it out. (I'm thinking especially of just the past decade, looking at the wreckage in the church left by the Emerging Church movement.

Now I have to wrap this up. I wanted to talk about the distinction D. A. Carson likes to make between center-set thinking and boundary-set thinking when it comes to guarding our understanding of the gospel. I don't like to disagree with Don Carson, but I do disagree with his

thinking on that. We need to guard the boundaries as well as the center. It is frankly very easy to lead lambs into the fold. Jesus' sheep hear his voice, and they will follow. But you have got to have some boundaries as well, to keep the wolves and hirelings out. When it comes to defending the gospel, we need to think both . . . and instead of either . . . or. Let's keep close as close as possible to the center, but let's erect some clear and effective boundaries as well.

In short, when we affirm that the gospel, properly understood, is a sufficient ground for unity, that doesn't mean you can automatically forge bonds of fellowship with everyone who puts his signature on a sound and biblical statement of evangelical conviction. We must not only affirm the truth but also proclaim it. And we must not only proclaim it but also defend it. That is the true, biblical prescription for unity. In the shorthand language of that 2nd epistle of John, our unity is the fruit of "love in truth, . . . [and it extends to] all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever."