



Fall 2004

Around the FIRE

The Newsletter of Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals

“I” is for Independent

by Jim Newheiser

F.I.R.E. is a Fellowship of *Independent* Reformed Evangelical churches. The word *church* is used in two different senses in the New Testament. Sometimes the Bible speaks of the universal *church* of our Lord Jesus Christ, which consists of all believers everywhere (i.e. Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 1:22, and Ephesians 5:23-24). Usually, the word *church* speaks of individual local churches (Acts 15:41, Galatians 1:2, Romans 16:4, 2 Corinthians 8:1, and Revelation 1:4). The word *church* is never used of a building in which a local church meets or in the sense in which we use it today of a denomination, which consists of many local churches.

Many attempts have been made over the years to create a structure among local churches which recognizes our unity as members of the universal church. The problem with most of these attempts is that they have created an extrabiblical authority structure above that of the local church. Episcopalians create a hierarchy in which several individual local churches are overseen by bishops, and bishops are overseen by archbishops. Presbyterians create presbyteries to which the local churches in a region send representatives. The presbyteries then oversee certain functions of the local churches, such as ordination, the appeal of cases of discipline, theological education, and missions. The presbytery can overrule the decisions of the local church, but the decisions of the presbytery can be appealed to the general assembly, to which all presbyteries send representatives. Those who support such ecclesiastical hierarchies make what seems to be a compelling argument. Local churches may stray from sound doctrine and practice; therefore, it is necessary to have older, wiser leaders (bishops) or the collective wisdom of other assemblies (presbyteries) to protect the purity of the church.



There are two fundamental problems with hierarchical systems of church government. First, such systems have no sound biblical basis, and are therefore a violation of the regulative principle in ecclesiology. The Bible, which is all-sufficient (2 Timothy 3:16-17), has already established all of the church structure we require (1 Timothy 3:15), which is the elders and the deacons in the local church (1 Timothy 3:1ff). We are not free to add other offices and structures, no matter how convenient or reasonable it may seem to us. It is ironic that some of our Reformed brothers who passionately defend the regulative principle in worship, not allowing any extra-biblical element, make major additions to the ecclesiological structure revealed in the New Testament.

Once the apostles left the scene (Ephesians 2:20), there was not any human office or authority established higher than the elders of the local church. There is no biblical basis for a distinction between bishops and elders, because the two terms are used interchangeably in the same context (Titus 1:5,7 and Acts 20:17, 28).

Bishop refers to the function of the overseer, while elder reminds us of his maturity. Christ is the only Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4).

Nor can the Jerusalem Council be used as a basis for representative (Presbyterian) hierarchical church government. The meeting in Acts 15 was not a representative assembly of elders from all the churches (Acts 14:23). It consisted of the apostles, the elders in Jerusalem, and emissaries from Antioch (Acts 15:6, 22). This council was led by the apostles who acted according to divine inspiration and sent out decrees by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:22-29). This was a unique event, foundational to the life of the early church. No modern church council or

general assembly can make such a claim.

Furthermore, there is ample evidence in the New Testament for the independence of local churches. Even when the apostles were still on the scene, local churches controlled their own finances and property (2 Corinthians 8:8-10 and Romans 15:26). Even the Apostle Paul did not use his unique authority to compel churches to give to help the saints in Judea. Disputes among Christians and matters of church discipline are to be resolved on the local level (2 Corinthians 5-6). The final stage of church discipline is to tell the sin to the church and if the brother refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a heathen and a tax gatherer (Matthew 18:17). Our Lord did not say, if the brother refuses to listen to the church, then appeal it to presbytery (or the bishop); and if he refuses even to listen to the presbytery (bishop) you may make your appeal to the general assembly (archbishop). Even the discipline of elders is to be managed at the local church level (1 Timothy 5:19-21). The work of ministry is to be carried on by local churches. While church leaders may choose to seek counsel from other churches regarding matters of discipline or ordination, the elders of local churches do not have the freedom to abdicate their responsibilities to any extra-biblical denominational authority. The Lord has given the local church all the resources it needs to carry on his work.

There is a second fundamental problem with church hierarchies: they do not work. Given that they are unbiblical, it should not surprise us that such structures create problems. The hierarchy of authority is created to protect the local churches from error in doctrine and in practice. Many argue that they can prevent abuse of authority on the local level. What is to be done, however, when the hierarchy goes sour and begins to abuse its authority? The history of many denominations over the past 150 years shows that the rot often starts at the top. Often denominational unity has been purchased at the price of doctrinal purity. Formerly evangelical denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Methodists, have become bastions of theological liberalism. The local churches, in these denominations, which have tried to hold fast to the scriptural truths on which these groups were founded, often find themselves the object of extreme authoritarian pressure. Biblically qualified men cannot gain ordination if they oppose women's ordination. Many churches have faced the choice between submitting to the denominational dogma, or losing their property. One irony I have observed in the past generation is that those coming out of such denominational systems create new denominations using the same failed structures.

I believe the Lord, in his wisdom, has designed his universal church like a good ship, with many compartments. If

one compartment (an individual local church) springs a leak, the entire ship will not sink. Whereas, in a hierarchical system, when the denominational leadership hits a theological iceberg, the whole ship sinks.

While we acknowledge that local churches are independent in a hierarchical sense, we do not believe local churches should be so autonomous as to neglect the benefits of fellowship among local churches. Clearly there was interaction among local assemblies in the New Testament era, such as sharing of greetings, hospitality, resources and burdens, (2 Corinthians 8-9, Romans 15:26, Romans 16:1-2, 1 Corinthians 16:1ff, Colossians 4:7). We are to have prayerful concern for all of the saints (Ephesians 6:18). We are to be independent, but not isolationist.

An alternative to denominational hierarchies is associational fellowship, such as we are promoting in F.I.R.E. Local churches gain the benefits of one another's (non-binding) counsel in matters such as discipline and leadership recognition, without abdicating our responsibility to make decisions. We are able to voluntarily cooperate in one another's ministry projects, such as missions, education, and evangelism. Each local church can direct its own ministries, without having to gain the approval of a denominational board. Our fellowship allows us to have some recognition of the universality of Christ's church (that God is working outside of our local assembly) and provides some identity beyond that of our local churches. We believe it is good for us to express our unity in fulfillment of our Lord's prayer for his church (John 17:22-23).

We are greatly encouraged by the benefits of fellowship, mutual encouragement, and networking among independent local churches which we have enjoyed in the few years of F.I.R.E.'s existence, and look forward to how our Lord will use us in the future.



www.firefellowship.org
info@firefellowship.org
1-800-405-3788

Around the FIRE
5726 Corey Cove
Sylvania, OH 43560

Supervising Member Church:
Assembly of Christians
419-882-0424
wwithrow@aol.com
Editor: Zoe Keeran

Are We Losing the Battle for the Bible? Part 2

Are We Losing the Battle for the Bible? Part 2



by Phil Johnson

Note to the reader: In part one (available in our Fall 2003 issue) Mr. Johnson examined the first of five "sinister trends that threaten to undermine the authority of Scripture in the evangelical movement today." This article concludes that series.

IRRATIONALISM

Subjectivism and irrationalism go hand in hand. *Irrationalism* is the notion that truth need not be consistent with itself. Remember that postmodernism regards all truth as subjective. Since "truth" exists only in the mind of the individual, truth may be one thing for one person and another thing for another person. Naturally, the opposite of truth is no longer deemed false. So the only taboo left in the postmodern world is the sin of saying someone else's worldview is wrong.

That is irrational. But it is the predominant view in secular society today. And it has begun to make inroads into the thinking of modern evangelicals.

In fact, this is one of the main reasons today's evangelicals are reluctant to fight any doctrinal battles at all. Many have uncritically accepted the notion that it is inexcusably arrogant to declare contradictory points of view wrong. But that is sheer disobedience to the clear biblical command of Titus 1:9. One of the key duties of every elder and pastor is that he must "[hold] fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict."

Irrationalism is a particularly dangerous trend, because it strikes at the very heart of God's character and his Word's authority. After all, God *is* truth, and he cannot deny himself (2 Timothy 2:13). So whatever contradicts his revealed truth is by definition false. We who believe every word of God is true should oppose irrationality with every fiber of our being. Abandon that principle, and you have fatally compromised the authority of Scripture.

SUPERFICIALISM

Superficialism may be the most immediate and destructive threat to the evangelical movement today. Virtually all the fads and movements that are currently in vogue among evangelicals have this in common: they promote a deliberately superficial approach to the truth.

Evangelicals today are captivated by style over substance. Preachers are employing gimmicks to draw people. They

are allowing drama, music, and other amusements to crowd out the preaching ministry *because they don't really believe the authority is in the Word*. They have lost confidence in the power of Scripture to transform lives. They have lost the will to study and preach the word in depth. They have lost the courage to preach the whole counsel of God boldly. And as a result, they are employing every other gimmick they can think of to try to hold everyone's attention.



The faithful pastor's main calling is to *preach the Word* boldly, clearly, accurately, with heartfelt conviction and courage, and not to cave into the pressure to tickle itching ears.

There is no room for superficiality. The pastor whose ministry is shallow, whose sermons are trifling or ill-prepared, or who never gets to the meat of the Word, is not faithfully discharging his duty to proclaim the whole counsel of God. That undermines people's faith in the authority of Scripture.

Timid and shallow preachers are the bane of the modern evangelical movement. Virtually every problem in the movement today can be traced to a steady diet of superficial, watered-down preaching. The typical evangelical today is severely malnourished. And the problem stems from the pulpit.

In the evangelical movement today, neither flocks nor shepherds are prepared to face and deal with the theological aberrations that continually assault the church. Wolves in sheep's clothing are often able to walk in and tear the sheep to shreds, unmolested by the shepherds who ought to be guarding their flocks. Why are we in such a state? Because the shepherds have forgotten how to identify the enemies of the flock. The preachers are not doing their job well.

Does this stem from a conscious contempt for sound doctrine among evangelicals? I don't think so. It stems from carelessness, laziness, negligence, and other fruits of superficiality. But it undermines the truth in a way that is worse than a frontal attack on the truth, because it

Educational Resources from Christian Communicators Worldwide

For free bulletin inserts ready to download and print (and other articles, books, and audio resources), visit www.CCWonline.org.

Christian Communicators Worldwide is the teaching and writing ministry of FIRE member Jim Elliff.

201 Main Street, Suite #3
Parkville, MO 64152
816-584-8601
www.BulletinInserts.org

suggests that sound doctrine really doesn't matter; what matters is that people like themselves, and have good relationships, and feel good. It denigrates the truth by neglect. And it undermines everything we fought for in the inerrancy debate.

All of this undermines the doctrinal foundations of our movement by neglect.

INCLUSIVISM

Survey the landscape of modern evangelicalism carefully, and you will see a creeping tendency toward inclusivism: an erosion of confidence in the truth that explicit faith in Jesus Christ is the *only* way to heaven.

The editorial policy of *Christianity Today* has undergone a subtle but significant shift toward inclusivism in recent years. Their web site recently featured an article where Roman Catholic apologist Peter Kreeft answered common questions about heaven. Kreeft openly defended his well-known opinion that heaven will be populated with many non-Christians. Apparently, the editors of *Christianity Today* no longer believe that to be without Christ is to be without hope.

Even Moody Press recently published a book arguing that it's possible to get to heaven without an explicit knowledge of Christ. That is a deadly error, and it strikes at the heart of what makes us evangelicals.

ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

The twin sister of superficiality is anti-intellectualism. This is the notion that there is something inherently unspiritual about the human intellect. The anti-intellectual believes spirituality is something that operates through the feelings and emotions while bypassing the mind.

Evangelicals have historically been known for their love of the Word of God and sound doctrine. The issues that stirred our spiritual ancestors' passions were the great doctrinal themes of the Bible: justification by faith, the authority and inspiration of Scripture, substitutionary atonement, the grace of God, the depravity of fallen humanity, and above all, the superiority, exclusivity, and centrality of Christ.

But modern evangelicals are obsessed with matters of *style* rather than *substance*. Across the spectrum of evangelicalism you find people who are not concerned about doctrine because they think it's too academic, not practical enough. Church-growth experts caution preachers not to dwell on doctrinal themes, but to aim at people's "felt needs."

Evangelical intellectuals are starved because of this obsession with what people "feel." People demand to have their emotions stroked and their ears tickled, and too many evangelical preachers have been willing to oblige. The evil fruits of this unhealthy addiction include the cheesy fiction that Christian publishers are cranking out on a monthly basis, and the corresponding dearth of substantial books dealing with serious spiritual issues. Musical fads among evangelicals have likewise gravitated to everything that is worldly and trivial. Christian radio stations are systematically eliminating teaching from their lineup, replacing it with frivolous talk and mediocre music.

"The Bible is the only light shining in a dark place. We need to recover our confidence in that truth, and get back to preaching the Word of God with clarity and conviction."

Twenty years ago there was complete consensus among evangelicals on this issue. "One way" was a slogan during the Jesus movement of the 1970s that all evangelicals agreed on. Sadly, that is no longer true.

But inclusivism is a direct attack on the authority of Scripture. In essence it reduces Scripture to an irrelevancy. If people don't need to know about Christ in order to be saved, if as one evangelical leader recently claimed, the only way to be excluded from heaven is by explicitly

rejecting Christ, then the best thing we could do is stop preaching, burn all the Bibles, and protect people from hearing the only truth they might be condemned for rejecting.

Obviously, though, that would damn the world without hope and without remedy. People *do* need to hear about Christ. And Scripture is God's only message about him. The Bible is the only light shining in a dark place. We need to recover our confidence in that truth, and get back to preaching the Word of God with clarity and conviction.

If we won't do that, we will have lost the battle for the Bible because we will have surrendered to the enemy.

Phil Johnson is executive director of Grace to You, the audio ministry of John MacArthur, and an elder at Grace Community Church in Panorama City, CA.

O Sacred Word Now Wounded



by Reid Ferguson, Senior Pastor
Evangelical Church of Fairport

What is the importance of expositional preaching? It's a topic that has invited the most powerful persuasions from the pens and pulpits of the giants of the faith in all ages. Calvin, Spurgeon, Luther, Machen, Lloyd-Jones and a panoply of Gospel luminaries both modern and ancient, could all be called forward to give witness to the burning need they saw in this regard. Hence, I tremble to contemplate adding a single stitch to this richest of historical and theological tapestries. But it must be done because the need remains the same in every generation.

Typically, we consider this topic in terms of why it is so important to our individual listeners, the world around us, or to the church at large. But, I would like you to consider with me why expositional preaching is of the utmost importance for us as preachers. Consider the personal import rather than the professional. Consider the spiritual impact of it upon our own souls. Let's look together at four considerations.

First, we must always remember that not only as preachers, but also as men, we exist for God's glory. Now God is most glorified where God is most revealed. God is most revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-3). The expository preaching of God's Word is in its very essence the revealing of the person and the work of Jesus Christ. "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me" (John 5:39). The grand aim of the Bible is to reveal Jesus Christ. If we do not expound the Scriptures so as to make him known—if we do not mine out what is already there rather than pouring into them something of ourselves or our own invention—we fail not only as preachers, but as human beings. As men we were made expressly to communicate the image of God. As redeemed men and especially as preachers we are to recover that divine vocation once again. "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).



Secondly, expositional preaching is important to us because apart from it, neither we nor our people will be truly, spiritually changed. One cannot help but call to mind Paul's cry in 1 Corinthians 9:27 as he sounds the warning about not keeping his body under subjection, lest having preached to others, he should be proved to be a castaway. Can you imagine the danger if even our preaching itself never brings us face to face with the transforming revelation of Christ's divine glory? 2

Corinthians 3:18 cites the essential dynamic: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." If then, we are *not* beholding him because our preaching does nothing to expose him, no one will be changed. Our preaching will be in vain—even in respect to our own souls. Brethren, having preached Christ to others will we at last be found to have nothing of his transforming grace about us ourselves? May it never be! But unless he is ever before us, that will be precisely the case.

Thirdly, expositional preaching alone is authoritative. We are ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20), not screen writers. We speak in Christ's stead, not out of our own passions, imaginations, or even convictions. May God be pleased to make our passions and convictions the same as his own. This is a divine aide of immeasurable blessing, but preaching itself must go beyond this. It is to be as close as possible to Jesus himself addressing his people. It must be his Word. If not, it is nothing more than your opinion or mine, and there is no authority in that—none. Paul writes to Titus, "Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you" (Titus 2:15). On what basis? "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). We have no authority to call sin *sin*—except that God names it as such. We have no authority to tell men their sins are forgiven except it is as Christ has said. We have no authority to bind men's consciences

except it is God himself doing so through his Word. Rhetoricians are a dime a dozen, but that is not our call. Ours is to call men to Christ with the very voice of Christ—with his word. We cannot speak authoritatively into any man's life apart from it being God speaking. Acts 17:30 commands all men everywhere to repent. This is done through the preaching of his authoritative Word.

Lastly and perhaps most solemnly, expositional preaching is important because as God's ambassadors, we dare not misrepresent him. Moses learns this in Numbers 20. At Kadesh God tells him to speak to the rock, bringing water out of it for the people. Miriam has just died. The people are complaining. Moses' fuse gets short. Instead of speaking to the rock, he scolds the people and says, "Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" Then he strikes the rock, and water does come out for them, but God is not pleased with Moses. "Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes

of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them." Moses failed to differentiate between his own emotions, anger, and frustration, and God's. He made it sound as though God was angry with them when he was not. And for this, Moses was forbidden to enter the promised land. We dare not superimpose ourselves upon God or his message. Expository preaching is the means to protect ourselves from confounding our thoughts, ideas, feelings, and aims with God's. The only sure method is to find out what God has said, and meant, and communicate that and that alone.

Expositional preaching is important because as both men and preachers we are called to reveal God. It is his means to true spiritual change. Apart from it, we speak only as every other man. If we are not scrupulous to make his voice heard, we will be heard. But we can save no one—not even ourselves.

New FIRE Churches

The Bible Church of Little Rock

Pastor Lance Quinn

Evangelical Church of Fairport

Pastor Reid Ferguson

Church of the Redeemer

Pastor Bryan Maes

Grace Fellowship

Pastor Keith Doster

New FIRE Individual Members

Mr John Seyboth

Evangelical Church of Fairport

Rev David Meade

Propempo International

Pastor Jeff Gregory

Faith Community Church

Pastor Tony Bartolucci

Clarkson Community Church

Pastor Rob Davis

Grace Community Bible Church

Rev Bill Dorman

Dayspring Fellowship

Milton Almeida

Embassy of Grace

Pastor Kirk Wetsell

Jacksonville Christian Fellowship

Pastor Clay Miller

Bethel Baptist Church

Rev Jay Wegter

Frontline Ministries

For more details see the website at www.firefellowship.org.

The FIRE National Conference

LOCATION

Estes Park, Colorado

DATE

April 25-27, 2005

TOPIC

The Minister's Balanced Life

SPEAKERS

Michael Phillips, John Sale,
Richard Belcher, Rick Anderson,
and Greg Withrow

CONTACT

Rick Wilson
Pastor/Elder, Southside Bible Church
Office 303-932-9711
Church 720-244-7772
wilsonr5.rick@earthlink.net



Meet a FIRE Sister Church

by Pastor Ned Barnes

Assembly of Christians Church, Fremont

1005 East State Street
Fremont, OH 43420
www.assemblyofchristians.com

It was Rutherford B. Hayes, America's 19th president (1877 – 1881), who first brought notoriety to what is now Fremont, Ohio. Spiegel Grove, Hayes' estate, is home to the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center, our nation's first presidential center. President Hayes and his wife Lucy (the first wife of an American president ever to be called "First Lady") were particularly known for their high moral standards and Christian conduct while in the White House, and throughout their personal lives after the presidency.

In September 1998, a small group of Reformed believers who also purposed to honor God by living in accordance to his Word officially began to meet in an elementary school gymnasium in Fremont. Planted by the Assembly of Christians Church in Toledo, Ohio, the Assembly Fremont was founded with the same vision of being a local body of Christ, built upon God's Word, in God's timing, for God's glory. And with both Assemblies doctrinally based upon the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, the Toledo and Fremont elders also remain close in function by meeting together monthly.

Since 1998, God has blessed the Fremont Assembly with a solid core of families who are growing spiritually by the hearing and applying of God's Word to their lives. In addition, God has blessed the Assembly with the acquisition of an old military armory building in the heart of Fremont. When renovated, the armory will serve as home base from which the Assembly will reach out to the Fremont area for Christ.

Support of a missionary family in India is also important to the Assembly Fremont, for, through the ministry of this Reformed missionary, many pastors in India and surrounding countries are receiving solid theological instruction, and becoming better equipped to shepherd local churches in these pagan areas.

Committed to a multiple eldership, Pastor Lee Winkle and I have served together since the inception of the Assembly Fremont, and are now prayerfully encouraging the congregation in seeking out deacons from among them.

FIRE Regional Conferences

Deep South

Date: September 24-25, 2004

Location: Cross Roads Baptist Church,
Wiggins, MS

Topic: The Pastoral Ministry

Speakers: John Sale and Rick Anderson

Contact Information:

Pastor Clark Lowery

Cell 228-669-9440

www.clowery@datasync.com

Northeast

Date: October 11-13, 2004

Location: Rutland, VT

Speakers: Wayne Mack, John Crotts, Chris Hough,
Jerry Marcellino, and Rich Goswiler

Topic: Biblical Authority

Contact Information:

Pastor Hugh Diggins Sr.

Reformed Bible Church

802-483-6975

HDigginsr@aol.com

Indianapolis

Date: November 8-10, 2004

Location: First Baptist Church, Carmel, IN

Topic: Man the Image of God: Implications for the Church

Speakers: Jim Grier, Steve Krogh, and Steve Best

Contact Information:

Steve Link

317-846-1343

www.fbccarmel.com



Around the FIRE
5726 Corey Cove
Sylvania, OH 43560

www.firefellowship.org
info@firefellowship.org
1-800-405-3788

NONPROFIT
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
LAUREL, MS
PERMIT NO. 617
RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

FIRE BOARD MEMBERS

Jerry Marcellino,
Moderator, pro-tem 2004-2006
601-649-8570
pastorjerry@audubonchurch.org

Jim Newheiser, 2002-2004
760-747-9252
jnewheiser@grcbible.org

Bruce Ray,
Secretary, 2003-2005
425-821-8444
revcop@juno.com

Steve Krogh, 2003-2005
616-669-6507
stevekrogh@hotmail.com

Greg Withrow, 2003-2005
419-882-0424
wwithrow@aol.com

Rick Anderson, 2004-2006
805-486-2676
randfcc@aol.com

Lance Quinn,
Moderator, 2004-2006
501-227-4980
lance.quinn@bclr.org

John Sale, 2004-2006
760-749-5151
pastorsale@aol.com

Jim Elliff, 2004-2006
(816) 584-8600
Jim@ccwonline.org

Wayne Mack, 2004-2006
(610) 282-8066
pastorwayne@gracelehigh.org

About FIRE

FIRE seeks to assist local churches in projects and activities such as:

- sending full-time missionaries
- short-term missions projects
- church planting
- caring for the needs of the poor
- publishing books, pamphlets, tapes and educational materials
- family camps and conferences
- pulpit exchanges
- regional and national conferences

To request an application form or for more information, call 1-800-405-3788 or visit us online at www.firefellowship.org.