

C_Fresh's thoughts:

I don't know how long it has been since I've been to an actual IFB service. I probably have not been to one since I finished doing my time at an IFB college almost nine years ago. I've been to a couple of services at my parent's church over the years but have always managed to go hang out with my brother in the radio room once the sermon actually started. I definitely haven't been to a 'revival service' since then. Why would I willingly subject myself to it again? In short, I wanted to remember what I left. I attended the service with a small group whose experiences in fundamentalism ranged from total outsider to some, like me, who spent most of our first two decades on the inside. I was most interested to see what the person from the outside would think, so her write-up will most likely be longer than mine.

I had heard John Hamblin previously speak at several Sword conferences at my college along with Shelton Smith and several other preachers who were well known in the Sword of the Lord group and whose names I have long since forgotten. I didn't remember much about his preaching other than that I thought of him as the 'bob and weave' preacher because he had a habit of gripping the pulpit and jerking back and forth when he got going. I think he's still using the same opening prayer as the bit about warm fresh bread from the oven of heaven sounded familiar. The line about a 'hedge of protection' always amuses me ever since I saw Tim Hawkins talking about it. "My greatest weakness is landscaping! How did they know?!?"

One of the things that stood out the most in his sermon on this night was how little it actually involved the text. Even the text itself was pretty small with the focus being on the last three words of Jude 22: making a difference. His sermon title was "Dynamics of a Difference Maker". Ah, yes, the alliteration starts right away. He said the contents of the book could be summed up as 'beware of heretic teachers and their dangerous doctrine' and proceeded to give an 'R' alliterated outline of the book. It was a stretch since apparently the 'Revelation' of the first two verses was what most people would just call the greeting. You can reference the sermon content outline itself for the rest of the list but I didn't really see how he came up with it except to just throw words together that might be slightly connected to something in an arbitrary group of verses.

Second, was how much he loved using alliteration. To name a few: the title; the three points; the outline of the book; the fundamentals of the faith he apparently found in verse three; how difference makers Memorized and Mirrored verse three; the things Holy Ghost prayer gives; and shaking hands of people besides a soulwinner. I wonder how long it takes to make all those alliterations. I guess it must get easier with practice.

Thirdly, was that an inordinate amount of the sermon time was filled with anecdotes. The most interesting one was the story of McAuliffe's 'Nuts' response but I already knew it thanks to the TV show 'Jericho' (which managed to tell it much more concisely). The story of his experience with meeting Rick Ross was strangely parallel to his condemnation of another who had his picture taken with a 'compromiser'. The anecdote

about reading the obituary and the woman's entire backstory about how she became a fashion designer icon added little to his point about having a life that mattered.

Fourth were the pet issues: Calvinism is for people who can't understand the Bible; women and pants; can't be a good Christian if you don't have tracts / go soulwinning; and a presumable mention of gays during the invitation. I think I probably could have won Fundy Bingo with no problems. He was heaviest on tracts and I take issue with his claim: "If your theology has a problem with passing out gospel tracts, I got a problem, and so does that Bible, with your theology." I challenge anyone to show me where the Bible says anything about tracts. Being a witness is definitely there but it comes in many forms and tracts are only one of them. The way he was going on, he apparently thought it was the only one or at least far more important than any other way. How else could you claim that a person should not sing or usher if they don't carry tracts?

I don't know what is so hard about ending services in a manner that at least hints at being reasonable. After a 52 minute 'sermon' we finally made it to the invitation which lasted for another thirteen minutes because he started on a rabbit trail about March Madness (both basketball and something unnamed -- presumably gay marriage going before the Supreme Court). After the invitation wound to a close -- and without 'Just As I Am' I might add -- we were treated to a thirteen minute infomercial for his book table which at least provided more material for 'did he really just say that?' All totaled, the invitation and infomercial lasted for half as much time as his entire sermon and contained about the same lack of scripture.

As I write this, I am reminded of Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 about itching ears and turning to fables. While Hamblin launches invectives about compromisers, he fails to notice that he's moved away from the Bible himself, just off to the right instead of the left. If you can only use three words from a verse as the basis of your entire sermon because using the surrounding text would weaken your statements, there's a serious problem. Another pastor who attended the meeting posted on Facebook that it was a powerful sermon. I'm sorry, lots of anecdotes and alliterations don't make a powerful sermon. 'Turning to fables' is also a pretty apt description for some of the things the IFBs teach as well. Revisionist views of Baptist history for one thing but the doctrinal fables are much more damaging.

While the 'itching ears' is frequently cited as people who want to hear things that make them happy, I think it can be just as applicable to fundamentalism which seems to thrive on beating down the sheep. Hamblin even joked about it when he encouraged regular folks to come to the morning pastor sessions since they would get to hear preachers beating up on preachers instead of the congregation like it usually worked. People laughed but the sad truth is that's how it works all too often. So many fundamentalists have been conditioned to have ears that itch to be told how bad they are all the time. They feel like they must not be right with God if they aren't feeling bad about something in their life. I know. I used to feel it sometimes too. Just tell me what I'm supposed to do. I'll follow the rules if it means I don't have to think about things for myself. Thinking can be dangerous and it is what eventually lead me out of fundamentalism.

I originally went to be reminded of what I had left by hearing the preaching. However, as I have been reflecting on that night while writing, I find that I am more deeply moved by the people in the pews. Alliterated sermons with little accurate scriptural content frustrate me. Preachers who feel the need to call out people during their book table infomercial (whoops, it was the church pastor – nuking aborted) irritate me. But seeing people think that this is actually good, godly behavior, since it comes from a preacher, deeply saddens me.

My heart aches for those sheep that have been sequestered in the caves of fundamentalism with shepherds who lord over them from their positions of authority. Living that way because they have been conditioned to believe that life outside is even worse than the one they have been living inside the cave. Not knowing that while sometimes the storms outside can be scary, the glorious fresh air and sunlight the rest of the time make it so worthwhile. Some of those sheep can be rescued or find their way out on their own. And when that happens, they need love and understanding. We who have already come out are in a unique position to help them as their eyes adjust to the light.

Remember that God can use all kinds of things to change a person's heart and life. My time in a fundamentalist bible college was the catalyst for opening my eyes. I had to question my beliefs and God provided me with friends that I am still close with who helped me take my first steps towards that glorious freedom. As I look back at my past and then at those still in fundamentalism I must remember: There but for the grace of God, go I.