

Fundamentalism, Freemasonry, And The Southern Baptist Convention Today

To place recent attacks on Freemasonry in perspective, it is necessary to understand fundamentalism, a mindset taking root in America and around the world.

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FUNDAMENTALISM has become a household word since the late Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power in Iran in 1979. News reports of the 444-day captivity of the American hostages and the orchestrated demonstrations with chants of "Death to America" are etched indelibly in our minds.

In the same year, 1979, fundamentalists began their successful takeover of the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention. I do not want to make a connection between Khomeini's rise to power and the dramatic change in direction in the Southern Baptist Con-

vention, except that both reflect a worldwide eruption of a fundamentalist mindset.

We can also speak of Catholic fundamentalists, Hindu fundamentalists, even Jewish fundamentalists. Within American Protestantism, one finds fundamentalist Presbyterians, Methodists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, and so forth, as well as Baptists. However, I want to limit my remarks today to the fundamentalist movement in the Southern Baptist Convention and its current attack on Freemasonry. →

Editor's Note: This article is a shortened version of a presentation given at the 1994 Scottish Rite Sectors Workshops, S.:J.:, in Baltimore, Maryland; San Antonio, Texas; and Irvine, California. The presentation, in turn, is a condensation of a chapter in Dr. Leazer's soon-to-be-published book on fundamentalism and Freemasonry.

Fundamentalism is primarily a 20th century phenomenon; it is not a return to the faith of the first Christians as fundamentalists want us to believe. Instead, it is a reaction to the dozens of critical American issues today: the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, the Civil Rights Bill, the withdrawal of our forces from Vietnam, the threat of nuclear war, the drug culture, the environmental awakening, the alleged death of God, the Beatles and Elvis Presley, immigration, television violence, the misdeeds of certain television evangelists, and the rise of movements from homosexual rights to women's rights.

Fundamentalism appeals to individuals frustrated with and alienated from society. Southern Baptist mega-churches, for instance, attract a membership dissatisfied with and frightened of the urban setting. In many ways, these mega-churches, with their sports facilities, extensive entertainment programs, family worship, and private schools function as modern monasteries where people can escape from the "Satanic" world into a "heaven on earth" and isolate themselves, even for a little while, from complex social changes.

Given this environment, fundamentalism succumbs easily and regularly to the cult of personality. Television evangelists Kenneth Copeland, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Charles Stanley promise simple solutions and have followings as dedicated

as those who follow Michael Jackson or a daytime soap opera. Consequently from the 1980s, mega-church pastors were elected to the office of the president of the Southern Baptist Convention and continually invited to speak at convention meetings to draw a crowd. This is done in spite of the fact that most Southern Baptist churches have fewer than 300 members and do not have the financial resources or talent among members to put on the more expensive and varied programs of the mega-churches.

With pastors of the mega-churches held up as the ideal, it is not surprising that some have assumed almost unquestioned authority. W. A. Criswell, pastor emeritus of the First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, recently told a group of pastors in Mississippi that "The man of God who is the pastor of the church is the ruler." He said he told the leaders of First Baptist Church that "The pulpit is mine and I preach what God puts on my mind, and the staff is mine and I run the church." He claimed the authority of God gave him authority as ruler of the church; "They can quarrel with God over that, not me." Control is an integral aspect of fundamentalism and doctrinal agreement is required. The latter is enforced by an authoritarian leadership using threats of God's judgment against all who waver from the prescribed, narrow path.

This mindset reminds me of a Mormon saying, "When the prophet

speaks, the thinking is done," or the Catholic saying, "Pray, pay and obey." It also reminds me of a bumper sticker sometimes seen on cars in the South. It reads "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it,"—as if one's head is useful only as a convenient place to carry one's hat.

The fundamentalist point of view is essentially an alien mindset which has been imported into the Southern Baptist Convention by forces outside the convention. Baptists can historically trace their origin to dissenters who separated themselves from the Church of England or Anglican Church in 1606 and fled to Holland seeking religious liberty to worship God as they pleased. Traditionally, Baptists have been strong supporters of what are also Masonic ideals: religious liberty, the separation of church and state, and the priesthood of all believers which held that each person can approach God as he or she desires.

These Baptist distinctives are the very ones attacked by Pope Leo XIII in his 1884 encyclical *Humanum Genus* attacking Freemasonry. Each of these Baptist distinctives have been publicly criticized or openly attacked by fundamentalists since 1979. The Southern Baptist Convention in 1988, for instance, approved a resolution questioning the priesthood of all believers and the autonomy of local churches.

The priesthood of all believers concept also holds that no individual speaks for all Baptists. Even when the



Dr. Gary Leazer addressed each of the 1994 Scottish Rite Sectors Workshops.

convention president makes a statement, it is not binding on any Southern Baptist.

It is strange, therefore, to hear anti-Masonic Southern Baptists argue that Albert Pike and other Masonic writers are embraced by all Masons as authorities. In my opinion, they know what they are saying is not true, but it works. Believing the end justifies the means leads some anti-Masons to change history, use literary license, and create misleading statements to arrive at their goal to condemn Masonry.

Most anti-Masons begin with the idea that Freemasonry is an anti-Christian religion. Their arguments are made to arrive at that conclusion. Truth is important to fundamentalists

if it agrees with their understanding of what truth should be. If truth does not agree with their worldview, it cannot possibly be truth.

In my study of Freemasonry, I referred to the 1921 decision by the Supreme Court of Nebraska that Freemasonry was not a religion. Not considering that he might be wrong, John Ankerberg countered that the Supreme Court was simply wrong.

Compromise or even negotiation is not a fundamentalist characteristic. Its aim is nothing less than the unconditional surrender or total destruction of its perceived enemy. One side or the other must win. It is customary for fundamentalists to attack their opponents by casting personal aspersions, by exaggeration, and by engaging in scare tactics.

Texe Marrs claims Masons were involved in the assassination of President John Kennedy. James Larry Holly says that a Mason becomes a god as he rises through the Degrees of Freemasonry and that Masons are worshippers of Satan. Anti-Masons create Satanic figures to keep the faithful faithful. Holly, for example, says "Lucifer is the god of the Lodge and that all worship in the Lodge is the worship of Satan himself." Fundamentalists have referred to those who reject the fundamentalist mindset as liberals, infidels, and skunks.

There is a fine line between fundamentalism and toxic faith. Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, in *Toxic*

❖ *Traditionally, Baptists have been strong supporters of what are also Masonic ideals: religious liberty, the separation of church and state, and the priesthood of all believers which held that each person can approach God as he or she desires.*

Faith: Understanding and Overcoming Religious Addiction, say "faith becomes toxic when individuals use God or religion for profit, power, pleasure, and/or prestige." They argue that toxic faith is abusive and manipulative. It reduces family and friends to insignificance as the individual is himself controlled by toxic faith. Certainly, the majority of fundamentalists could not be accused of practicing a toxic faith. However, a few persons who succumb to toxic faith can hold an entire denomination hostage and terrorize individuals who become their targets.

I once heard a fundamentalist pastor brag about how many so-called liberals left his church after he came; only those who were truly committed to God remained. Another fundamentalist said it would not matter if 500,000 Southern Baptists left the de-

nomination. Holly, who believes Freemasonry is a heretical anti-Christian religion, argues that the Southern Baptist Convention will not experience revival unless it condemns the Fraternity and expels Masons from all leadership roles in Southern Baptist churches and convention agencies.

To a significant number of fundamentalists, it is necessary to accomplish this "purification" of the church, if not the whole world, as soon as possible because the Second Coming of Christ is anticipated in the very near future. Thus, biblical prophecies are marshalled to bolster millennial thinking and to prove the last days are upon us. What better place to start this purification than with Freemasonry, Satan's supposed armed camp within the church itself?

Best estimates are that 20 percent of Southern Baptists are true fundamentalists; another 20 percent are moderate conservatives, while 60 percent in the middle are classical conservatives who have always made up the largest portion of Southern Baptists. The fundamentalists were able to take over the convention because they were well-organized, made use of popular pastors to draw people to their meetings, and convinced the classical conservatives that the time was drawing short to prepare for Christ's return. To be sure, not all fundamentalists are anti-Masons, but history shows they are easily persuaded with emotionally charged rhetoric.

After twelve years of fundamentalist victories in the denomination, moderate and some conservative Southern Baptists formed their own organization, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, in 1991. The fellowship has remained within the Southern Baptist Convention and acts as an avenue through which individuals dissatisfied with the fundamentalist leadership can support mission causes defunded by the convention. Cecil Sherman, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, summarized his feelings about why the moderate movement failed:

Moderates did not have enough moral energy to win. We could not bring ourselves to use moral language to describe our cause. Truth was butchered. We said nothing. Good people were defamed. We were silent. Baptist principles were mangled and Baptist history was replaced, rewritten. All the while, teachers who could have written about the problems in calling the Bible inerrant, did not. And preachers who could have called us to arms said nothing. The want of moral energy was the undoing of the moderate movement.

People like James Larry Holly and John Ankerberg are using the same strategy to attack Freemasonry which was used in the takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. I urge you to

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study the fundamentalist mindset to learn why men like Holly and Ankerberg are intent on condemning Freemasonry. I also urge you to study the moderate response, or lack of it, over the past 15 years before the Holly-Ankerberg fundamentalist mindset succeeds in its "holy war" against Freemasonry. If Freemasons do not rise to the occasion, I believe you will end up like the moderates in my denomination. The choice is yours. ▲

Gary Leazer served over 14 years on the staff of the Interfaith Witness Department of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board before his involuntary resignation in October 1993. His primary responsibilities included research, writing, and conferencing in 40 states and 4 foreign countries on interfaith issues. Leazer conducted the primary research and wrote the original study on Freemasonry for the Southern Baptist Convention. Leazer and his wife have two children.



Freemasonry is an association for the cultivation of intellectual philosophy, for the propagation of moral and religious sentiment, and for the exercise of charity and the encouragement of human love.

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See "Perspectives on America in 1994," page 6