

# I Used To Be A Fundamental Baptist

Thoughts about surviving the transition

-Mike Burns

## Introduction

If Jesus is who he said he was, this is good news indeed. God...manifested in the flesh...motivated by love for his creation...redeeming the world to himself. If this is true, then this “gospel” has huge implications for humanity. Jesus’ teachings were (and still are) revolutionary. His sacrifice for mankind changed the way man viewed how God operates. His way is one of love, peace and transformation. Few names are as widely known throughout history. Many who don’t even consider him the Messiah tip their hat to his approach to social injustice. Countless others see him as Savior, and give his words more weight than simply good ideas. Regardless of what you think about Jesus, I think we could agree on this..... Many people get him wrong. (If we were being honest, we’d probably admit that we all do, at times). In varying degrees, we misunderstand, misuse and manipulate his words to pass on our teachings and understandings of God. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, we paint false pictures of Jesus.

One of the strongest motivations for behavior (both good and bad) is a person’s perspective on God. People who would not be willing to do certain things in normal circumstances are much more bold when they feel like God is “on their side” or that he would be pleased with their actions. Unfortunately, many of the actions motivated by people’s perception of “God’s will” are less than helpful. In fact, many are very damaging. Some people, with a twisted view of God, do horrible things to people and even kill in his name. This is unacceptable. You and I could not even begin to imagine how people could do such things. The stories of crusades, suicide bombers and holy wars are extreme examples of where sincere misunderstandings of God can lead us. So, it’s important that we approach our understanding of God with humility. “Taking God’s name in vain” is a serious issue. It has way more significance than a few cuss words on careless lips. In my opinion, saying “Jesus Christ” or “G\_\_ D\_\_” in anger is way less harmful than being quick to say what we perceive as God’s truth (with unfounded certainty) when it’s not true. We must realize that putting words in God’s mouth has serious implications on the lives of the people that hear what we’re saying. Why? Because what they believe about God will drastically affect their behavior. I don’t want to give the impression that God is waiting to “squash” you if you say something slightly off. I don’t think that’s the case. Every single one of us can only speak of God with partial understanding. But, I do think we need to be a little more careful about what we say on God’s behalf. Let’s let our words and beliefs be our own and not try to attach deity status to them. Not because of our fear of an “angry God”, but rather because of how our words motivate others to react. (I’ll talk some more about fear later in the text).

So, why am I writing about this and why should you care? Well, my personal experience led me through a time of serious reconsideration of what I believed to be true about Jesus and the church. Over the past 7 years, I have communicated with MANY people who were involved in similar belief systems. Some of them were very encouraging to me as I realized the dysfunction in my faith and began to figure out what life would look like going forward. I want to be that help to others if I can. It's not my goal to get anyone to leave a particular faith community. No two are exactly alike. In fact, part of me would like to avoid conversations about these topics altogether because some of the people you engage can become quite nasty if you cross the wrong fundamentalists. Then, just when I think I can finally put that chapter of my life behind me, we hear of someone else from the same type of system who is scared and needs help seeing past the weirdness of their particular situation. It's then that I'm reminded that this IS part of my story and I feel a bit of an obligation to help other people in similar situations. I write these words with a desire that a few people who feel lost and hopeless, might find a little bit of hope, and, maybe, be given the strength to make the choices necessary to live a healthy life. I'm not the only person who has written about these things and I won't be the last. But I felt like I should contribute. So, wherever you are in your journey, I hope that my story and thoughts help you, in some small way, to sort through your own.

### **My Story (well, at least the applicable parts...)**

I began to realize the significance of the gospel of Jesus Christ when I was 16 years old. I'm sure I had heard the story before then, but that's when it really hit home that this was a big deal with serious implications and I needed to do something about it. I received the message as truth, and life changed pretty drastically for me at that time. A year or so later, I decided that I wanted to get involved in ministry.

Through circumstances and family connections, I ended up visiting an Independent Fundamental Baptist college. I was amazed by the passion, zeal and willingness-to-be-different that I saw during that visit. Two months later, I moved into the dorms. I spent two years at this college and some good things happened. I met my wife (that made it worth it all!). I also met some loving people who were heavily invested in helping hurting people. That was incredibly motivating to me, as I was in a pretty formative time in my adult life. Their examples helped me see the importance of not ignoring the world around you. They modeled actually doing something about the problems that we see. For that I'm grateful.

Then, I moved to my hometown to work with an Independent Fundamental Baptist church that had the same beliefs and practices as the college I attended (for the most part). I spent just under eight years working at this church in a variety of roles (Christian school, Youth Ministry, Associate Pastor, etc.) During my time at the college and church, I was exposed to hundreds of different pastors, evangelists, missionaries and members of like-minded IFB churches. There were good times and bad. I was an outspoken proponent of the beliefs that we promoted. I believed that we had the answers, and I wanted to tell everyone about them. Years past, and, at the end of our time there, we realized that we did not see some things the same way anymore. We decided that it was time for our family to leave that church. Unfortunately, our departure was not taken with enthusiasm and we found ourselves at odds with many of the people we had loved for so many years. It was a tough time. It was “church junk” at it’s best. Things got better, though. Over time, we have been able to mend (in part) many of the broken relationships that were caused back then.

Reading back over the last two short paragraphs is almost comical to me because those few little lines represent a decade of our life. The events that took place during that time were some of our most tumultuous, complicated years. But there were also some very good times. I kept the paragraphs short on purpose. Why? Because my point in writing this is NOT to tear down that college or that church. This text isn’t about what’s wrong with those two organizations, but, rather, to point out some faulty thinking that I bought into personally. Nobody made me believe what I believed. Many of those who taught me were only passing on what they assumed to be true. I can’t knock them for that! That’s what we all do. However, there are some things within the movement I was in that I think are harmful to those who participate, sincere or not. The things that I will reference are not just Independent Baptist problems. They are people problems and belief problems. They can be found in churches of many different labels and groupings. And, not all IFB people believe the same things. Some of them would be equally annoyed by the things we’ll discuss, to their credit. So, you can’t pin this on any particular group alone. However, I can only speak for the group I came out of and the things I perceived to be true about them (based on my personal experience and the experiences of those I’ve spoken with). So, I will work through some of the things that were typical of the groups I was involved with.

It’s up to each of us, no matter what community we find ourselves in, to pursue the truth and find out why we believe what we believe. It’s not always easy. Some people don’t like to be questioned. Some are just plain

scared to ask questions out of fear that God will come down harshly on them. Let me remind you of something you probably already know to be true: **Truth can stand scrutiny.** You don't have to be afraid to ask questions, because, if something is true, it will prove itself to be so at the end of the examination. If it is not true, then your questioning will have led you to a place of greater light and understanding. Don't you want that? I do. And that desire has led me to continuously "try the spirits", "prove all things", and question what is taught to determine whether or not it is true, as Paul commended the Bereans for doing.

## **You are not alone!**

Before I get into some of the issues that I had to work through, I wanted to try to encourage those of you who are wondering if you are the only one in your church with questions. **YOU ARE NOT ALONE!** There are hundreds of people, just like you, who are sincerely questioning what they have formerly assumed to be true. Don't be afraid to seek truth! You are not a backslider or an apostate. You have a noble heritage! ...a long line of truth-seekers who, because of their willingness to question tradition, have been able to make a positive difference in the world. If you're still involved in an oppressive group and you're wondering if you should just push your questions aside and "suck it up", please don't! There are too many people suffering under a heavy load of religious misunderstanding. If we surrender to the unhealthy systems, then we are enabling them to continue to hurt other people. We must address these issues for love's sake.

## **The "what abouts"**

I'm assuming that the people who are reading this are either:

- a) people who are involved in this type of system and are curious to see if there is, indeed, hope of another way
- or
- b) people who are involved in this type of system who want to criticize what I say. (which is totally acceptable)

So, I'm going to approach it this way:

1. I'm going to focus on the "a" group.

I want to help those who are hurting, not argue with people who think differently. Nobody has to believe the way I do. I just want to get your mind thinking in new ways. This isn't a defense of my perspective, or a "slam dunk" against fundamentalism.

2. Since you are most likely still involved, I'll do my best to use language that is familiar within IFB circles (even if I wouldn't frame things the same way, anymore). If you have never been exposed to this type of religious group, then this language and these issues may not make much sense to you. But, for those who have, I seek to communicate in ways with which you will relate.

3. I'm going to walk through a quick survey of a few of the questions I had to ask myself as I began to see things differently. My hope is that it will both encourage you (in that you're not the only one thinking about them), and help you on your journey. These aren't meant to be exhaustive, but rather a catalyst to get you thinking and searching, and a comfort that there are other perspectives. It's not a sermon, it's a collection of my thoughts. While I refer to scriptures, I'm not going to paste them.

## **What about...the King James Bible?**

The group of churches that I associated with were convinced that the King James Version of the Bible was the perfect (word-for-word) English translation of the Bible. We believed that all other English translations were "Satanically-motivated" attacks on the truth of God. And I was convinced! I spent significant amounts of time reading books and articles on the subject. I once wrote and designed a fairly lengthy tract intended to explain why all the other translations were "counterfeits" and to get people to stop using them. It was a serious issue for me, because, I thought: "If God is speaking to us through the Bible, and we change what God says, then we are putting words in God's mouth. We're saying that he "said" things he never "said". That didn't seem justifiable. So, I was adamantly against "changing God's words".

When I first left the IFB church, I still held these beliefs. In fact, in the middle of my confusion on so many issues, I determined to study the King James Bible issue even more deeply so I could be convinced even more of what God had revealed to us through scripture. That was something I could be sure of. I began to study the issue some more and decided to look up the sources of the information that I was taught, rather than just assuming it to be true. Long story short, much to my surprise, I found many of the arguments that were "slam-dunks" before, to be weak and sometimes totally false. This, of course, was very unsettling to me. My previous teachers led me to believe that if we didn't have a perfectly translated and preserved English version with NO variations, then we were hopeless in our attempt to know about God, because, "how could we trust it?" I didn't have any other framework but that. It felt like the rug was pulled out from under me as I realized that

there was no “pure lineage of texts”. I was shocked to hear that the underlying text for the King James, the Textus Receptus (which they claimed was the only “pure” text from which to translate) did not even exist as a single text. The TR was actually a number of various copies that were compared to do the work of translation. And those copies had variations between them! (you can find copies of a Textus Receptus today, but it only represents a combination of the various texts.) We had been taught that the translators of other versions had evil motives and wicked lifestyles. Well, true or not....it was the same way with those who participated in the translation process for the King James Version and other texts that preceded it.

As I learned more about how the text got from original writing to where it is today, I realized that it required “human fingerprints” to be all over it. And that’s okay. Throughout the history of translation and textual criticism, people have sought to better understand which parts were changed, what was added, what was taken away, etc. It is NOT an exact “science”, but it is a field of study with processes that are constantly being improved upon. I was led to believe that passages were “taken out” by people who didn’t want to “subject themselves to God’s authority”. I came to realize that there were passages that older translations had that were “taken out” of the King James Version. The truth is, none of them were “taking verses out”. Rather, based on their study of available manuscripts, they were measuring how many of the manuscripts actually had that portion in them. It was the translators’ attempt to give us the most accurate to the original text that they could, based on their understanding at that time. It’s something that the King James translators did, as well.

As I considered these things, I found myself back at my original thoughts... only on the other side. Now, I was thinking: “If God has revealed himself to us through the scriptures, and, in our past translation efforts (King James and others), we have made some mistakes, but we still say, with absolute authority, that our “mistakes” are God’s perfect word, then we are still changing what God says. We are putting words in God’s mouth. We’re saying that he “said” things he never “said”. That didn’t seem justifiable. So, again, I was adamantly against “changing God’s words”. If that passage that the newer translations “left out” was really not part of what Jesus said, then I should not be saying that he said it. Make sense? It can all be pretty confusing. Truthfully, it’s a complicated field. I’m in way over my head talking about much of this, but it’s an issue that IFB churches tend to give prominence.

You may be thinking, “then how can we know that ANY of it is true to the

original documents?” I will give some links to some books and other sources for you to investigate further in a moment, but, suffice it to say that the “problems” or “variations” exist in varying degrees. There are some areas of text where there is no variance whatsoever, while some are very problematic. I will not mislead you by saying that these variations do not have any affect on doctrine. In some places, they do. And, because of that, it’s important to be informed. But, remember, the goal is to find a more true perspective on God, not to defend our previous faulty beliefs. Still, even with all the variations, there are some things that we can be absolutely clear about. The results of many years of working through these things can be seen in some of the more modern English translations.

Letting go of the King James Only position can be a difficult task. In fact, it can feel like a big let-down initially, because you no longer can say you have a word-perfect, 100% reliable translation that communicates every letter and comma that God wanted you to have. In reality, you never had that in the first place. It just takes a little bit of study to figure that out. Don’t be disheartened! You didn’t lose your Bible! You’re just getting a clearer picture of what you actually have. We don’t worship the Bible. It isn’t God. It reveals things about God.

Here are some places to check out as you pursue this topic further:

Alpha & Omega: <http://vintage.aomin.org/kjvo.html>

Interesting article: <http://www.fredsibletalk.com/fb019.html>

Two books that helped me (I’m sure there are others): The King James Only Controversy by James White and King James Only-ism: A New Sect by James Price. Google the topic! You’ll find plenty of information.

## **What about...listening to people who disagree with your church?**

I don’t know about you, but in our church, people were encouraged to read only books written by people who already believed like we believed. The purpose of that reading was only to reinforce what we already assumed to be true to and stop people from “wandering” into other ways of thinking. The reasoning was: *“We have the truth. Everything else is error. Satan is a master-deceiver. If we expose ourselves to the error, it might ‘get us’!”* In a way, it sounds sincere (albeit naïve). There are many problems with this way of thinking. I will only make a few comments.

First of all, as I mentioned earlier, truth can stand scrutiny. If something IS, then you can poke around on it and it will prove itself to be true. If it isn’t,

then your poking will create obvious holes. Then, you're that much closer to truth. If you don't read broadly and study, you will never know the truth. When you only expose yourself to your church's "brand" of thinking, you are limiting the potential for you to understand God more fully. If your church or leadership has nothing to hide, then they should be glad to receive honest questions. They should not be afraid for people to read and seek God on their own. In fact, they should promote it (in my opinion).

Another problem with this thinking is that it assumes that people are stupid. Some of the pastors I was around seemed to think of people as "dumb sheep" that needed to be guided plainly because they couldn't possibly figure things out on their own. The assumption is that people are generally incapable of making good decisions and determining what is right. So, it's important that the "really smart people" (that particular leader) decides all that for them and limits their intake of material. You must not delegate your spiritual development and truth investigation to others. It's your responsibility. Sure, others can help you and influence you, but you must figure things out for yourself. You must own your own faith. There are those who preach twisted concepts about "Pastoral Authority" and act as if God gave them special insight into people's lives because of their title. Many people have suffered from bully pastors who use manipulation to control them. The behaviors considered acceptable by many of them are abusive and destructive. It is unacceptable.

Our churches often talked about how "*the independent Baptists were the true church that could be traced back to the apostles, and those who didn't call themselves Baptist REALLY WERE,..... etc.*" I'm not going to spend much time sugar coating this. It's bologna. There is no pure line of churches. It's not even worth debating. Your church name or denomination name does not determine the value of the gathering or the content that is taught. God works in people in all kinds of groupings....even IFB churches. So, don't believe the hype about how only Baptists "have it right"(or any other group, for that matter). It just isn't true.

### **What about...Contemporary vs. Traditional issues?**

One of the things I had to deal with was my feelings about the Contemporary vs. Traditional debate. In our old church, we criticized "contemporary" or modern approaches to ministry. We could not listen to current styles of music or dress in modern clothing. The idea was that "*God never changes, so we should not change as the world around us changes.*" There was always preaching about how we needed to "get back to the way they used to

do church”, yet, ironically, we sat on 17th century chairs (pews), sang 18th century songs (hymns), and played a 19th century instrument (pipe organ), while claiming to be doing church like they did in the first century. None of it really made any sense. We acted as though pulpits, pews, pianos and steeples had been handed to us by the apostles themselves with instructions to make sure that we always did it “like we used to do it.” It was okay to wear clothing styles appropriate for the 80s, but not current to today. It was weird, to be honest....and terribly inconsistent. The preaching made you think that a departure from “traditional” ways was a departure from the scriptures. There is no evidence for this. We were told that if you listen to a song with a driving beat, you may be tempted to run out and engage in adulterous activity. (I’m only slightly exaggerating.) Women were not allowed to wear pants because that was “man’s clothing” and an obscure passage in Deuteronomy 22, among some other pretty strange guidelines, said that men and women should not wear each other’s clothing.

This is not a polar issue. It’s not like you either choose to go with all new things or the old paths. The scripture does not dictate a particular style of music, an approved list of instruments, or instruction on how old your clothing styles have to be....neither does it command you to always do something new. It is NOT true that everyone who is involved in current styles of music are also “deceived” and being consumed by their passions. The songs that Fundamental Baptists sing in their services were “new songs” with “new styles” at some point in history. The clothes they wear today were “the new thing” years ago. That hairstyle was what “all the cool kids were wearing” 20 years ago. I’m poking fun a little, but I don’t mean to be condescending. I used to take this stuff very seriously. I preached it loud. But, now, it all seems very silly. Arguing about how old something has to be before you use it is a waste of time.

When these discussions arise, Fundamental Baptists often refer to the things discussed above (current music, modern clothing, etc.) as “worldly”. This is a mistake. Not only do they end up wasting time fighting the wrong things, they also create a false perspective on what it actually means to fight “worldliness”. The point is that we are supposed to be different than those who live unruly, selfish lives. Rather than going with the flow, we should pursue opportunities to live for others and love in ways that most don’t consider. When you make hairstyles, clothing styles and a drum kit the enemy, and avoiding them becomes the goal, you miss out on the opportunity to really be a force for good and avoid the true “worldly” things like pride and selfishness and the “me-over-you” attitudes that are so prevalent. You only have so much time and energy. Don’t spend them fighting about stupid things.

## **Should I stay or should I go?**

So, what should you do? Should you stay or should you go? It depends on your situation. If you are involved in a group that uses manipulation and borders on "spiritual abuse", then, I recommend you leave. It's important that these types of behaviors are not enabled by our continuous support. You don't have to suffer under the direction of immature (if not devious) leadership. Your continued attendance and financial assistance will keep alive a system that will go on to hurt others. These unhealthy organizations have to own their dysfunction and deal with it. However, if you are involved in a group that has some issues but not hasn't crossed over into the "unhealthy" category, you may be the one to help things turn around. You have to make that call. If you're not sure, one question that may be helpful for you to ask yourself is this, "Am I motivated by fear or love?" Are you scared to leave? If so, why? That's not a good thing. YOU should not be scared to make your own decisions about your faith and how to live it out in the world. Sure, we all need other people to help us at times in life, but you should not be in bondage to a religious organization. If you decide to leave, people may or may not be nice to you. I had both. Some decided not to even associate with us anymore. Others loved us even though they didn't understand. Regardless of how people respond, I recommend you walk in love. Don't play the game. It's not fruitful. Let people think what they think, and act how they act, but don't allow them to suck you into hatefulness or bitterness.

## **Good News**

I don't want to end this on a negative note. I'll repeat some of what I said at the beginning of this text... If Jesus is who he said he was, this is good news indeed. God...manifested in the flesh...motivated by love for his creation...redeeming the world to himself. If this is true, then this "gospel" has huge implications for humanity. Jesus' teachings were (and still are) revolutionary. His sacrifice for mankind changed the way man viewed how God operates. His way is one of love, peace and transformation. That is a message that needs to be properly represented in this world. We can't afford to continue on in a system that hurts the message of the gospel of Christ and misrepresents it's nature just because it would be inconvenient for us to make a change....either in our own personal beliefs, or in the very communities in which we engage. We must seek to change the existing systems, or flee them for something better. Life is too short to live it all in chains. Bondage hinders gospel representation.

If you have been wondering what to do about your doubts in the Fundamental Baptist movement, know this.... There IS life after fundamentalism! If you are feeling lonely because the Christians around you are treating you "less than kindly", know this.... there really ARE some great people out there who will help you walk through this transition and love you in spite of the weirdness you've experienced. When you're in a particular religious segment, you can be led to believe that "all good Christians believe this way". Not so. If you allow yourself to really look for the truth (and not just the opinions of a few), I think that you will be pleasantly surprised to find that there are many good people who follow Jesus and make a difference in this world, though they would be considered "rebels" in many Fundamental churches.

**So be it.** In love, and guided by the example of Jesus, let's rebel against the false religious systems that develop over time. In love, let's rebel against those systems that hurt SO many people while claiming Jesus' authority. If, with a humble attitude, you begin to live with the freedom you truly have (freedom to pursue God), you will be surprised at how many people are also having the same thoughts you're having. You may be an encouragement to them, and, over time, many others through them. Even the pastors who propagate the weirdness we experience are victims themselves. They aren't all bad guys....just sincere people who want to do right, but they bought into a dysfunctional ecclesiology.

As I said at the beginning, this text isn't meant to be a condemnation of all Fundamental Baptist churches. In all movements and churches, there are positive and negative elements. I just wanted to share some of the things that I had to work through as I transitioned out of the group I was involved in, in hopes that it provokes you to thought, and encourages you to truly seek the truth. You are not a "dumb sheep". If the scriptures are correct, then you are loved of God, made in the image of God, created for a purpose, and free to represent Jesus in this world.

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I'm done...but one last recommendation....read the book "Churched: One Kid's Journey Toward God Despite a Holy Mess" by Matthew Paul Turner. You may even find the audio version for free if you search online. This book will provide some pressure-relieving humor about Independent Fundamental Baptist churches while he walks you through his experiences. This book is great for pointing out the weirdness that we put up with when we don't know what to do.