

Publishing Editor's column

A RECENT letter in the fortnightly Israeli magazine *Jerusalem Report* commented, in relation to the activities of Jewish settlers in the Gaza Strip resisting the handing over of their settlements to the Palestinians, "Religion, in general, is good, but it can become evil if it calls itself the 'truth' that must be imposed upon everyone. Therefore some Orthodox Jews, fundamentalist Muslims and Evangelical Christians defy the basic concept of 'democracy'. The idea that 'we are right and everyone else is wrong' is a reason why people hate each other".

We might not think of ourselves as 'fundamentalists' and people who say that "we are right and everyone else is wrong", but in the world's eyes we would be classified as such. Our belief in the Bible as the infallible and inspired Word of God, our acceptance of the Biblical record of creation as opposed to evolution, and our acceptance of Biblical standards of sexual morality, are certainly regarded as fundamentalist in the eyes of the world. And the fact that we have a set of beliefs which unites us, and only accept into our community those who know and accept these beliefs, means that we are regarded as people who say that "we are right and everyone else is wrong".

Is it right that we are regarded in this way? One definition of fundamentalism is "the belief that every word of the Bible is divinely inspired and therefore true", and as this is what we believe then we are fundamentalists according to this definition. And what of the idea that "we are right and everyone else is wrong"? Unlike some sects, we make no claim to have spirit-guided leadership; our position is that we are a community of believers united by a common set of beliefs based on what we believe the Bible to teach. If this position is correct then it follows that those who do not believe the things that we believe are wrong. However, though in proclaiming Biblical truths we need to oppose corresponding errors, I do not believe that it would be right to proclaim our position as "we are right and everyone else is wrong", but rather humbly to explain our understanding of God's Word.

Despite the above dictionary definition, the term 'fundamentalism', and in particular 'fundamentalist', have gone from being statements of a theological position obscure to most people

to labels for a dangerously extremist position and for people who hold that position. These terms are particularly used of the Muslim extremists who are behind the various terrorist attacks that have caused widespread fear and outrage across the world in recent years. It is also used of the Jewish settlers in lands taken over by Israel in the Six-Day War of June 1967, and of American evangelicals with strong right-wing views. Fundamentalism has become linked with politics, and politics of an extreme kind.

We must therefore distance ourselves from what fundamentalism has become in the eyes of the world. We do not take part in the politics of this world, and we cannot have any affinity with those who use protest and even violence to oppose what they believe to be wrong, even if their stance on particular issues is one we agree with. The teaching of the Apostle Paul is that "the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves" (2 Tim. 2:24,25).

Another statement in the letter quoted at the beginning of this editorial is that "Religion, in general, is good". This reflects a modern attitude in society, the encouragement of what are often termed 'faith groups'. This attitude of tolerance comes from the modern emphasis on human rights, and it has come to be generally recognised that people are better behaved and happier for having something to believe in, whether true or not. This tolerance has been largely helpful to us, but, as discussed elsewhere in this magazine, is beginning to threaten our freedom to preach Bible truth about issues regarded as controversial.

The God of the Bible is not a God of tolerance towards wrong beliefs, however. In this present age it has pleased Him to allow mankind to believe what it likes, although He "will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). In the Kingdom age there will be no tolerating wrong beliefs and false worship; the light of God's truth will go forth to the whole world from Zion. It will not be a question of fallible and sinful men seeking to impose what they believe to be true on their fellows, but of immortal beings (Christ and the saints) providing sound instruction to meet the world's spiritual needs.

Tony Benson