

## Important Lessons about God and Humanity from the Church's History 3: the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy

### Introduction

In 1905, the historian Henry Adams observed: “the American boy of 1854 stood nearer the year 1 than to the year 1900.”

### Changes—and the Church's Response

Basic point: America changed dramatically in these decades (from Civil War to decade after WWI)—would the church be able to respond in a meaningful way to them?

#### *Social Changes*

1. Tremendous increase in industrialization . . . and in exploitation associated with it
2. Increased immigration . . . slums, poverty
3. Move of population from rural to cities for increased work . . . slums, poverty
  - Chicago: 1833, Ft. Dearborn, a small frontier outpost of 17 houses; 1900, population of 1½ million people and the 5<sup>th</sup> largest city in the world
  - Boston: 1860, 177,000; 1900, over half a million
  - Philadelphia: 1860-1900, from half a million to well over a million
  - New York City: 1860-1900: 1 million to nearly 3.5 million

America was transformed from a predominantly agricultural to a manufacturing nation

#### *Intellectual Changes*

Geology: the age of the earth

#### Darwinism

1859: Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*

Theses

1. Each species was not created independently (the question of origins)

2. Natural selection has been the most important means of modification of species (the question of development)
  
3. “Natural Selection; or the Survival of the Fittest”

### *Theological Changes*

1. Change in Significance of Biblical Language—Horace Bushnell (1802-1876)

The father of American liberalism

*Christian Nurture* (1847)

“Dissertation on Language” (1849)

Language was inadequate to express religious truth

So, all statements of religious truth were at best approximations of reality

“The Scriptures of God, in providing a clothing for religious truth, have little to do with mere dialectics [i.e., logic], much to do with the freer creations of poetry”

“It is not that the suffering [of Christ] appeases God, but that it expresses God—displays, in open history, the unconquerable love of God’s Heart”

2. “Higher” Biblical Criticism

Crawford Howell Toy (1879)

Charles A. Briggs (1893)

### **Response 1: Protestant Modernism**

Definition: “a theological movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries which sought to save Christianity from the assault of contemporary intellectual developments by accommodating the traditional faith to modern culture” (Longfield, “Liberalism/Modernism, Protestant” in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*)

*Emphasis on immanence of God in nature and history*

*A “positive” worldview*

*Experience and feeling – not creeds or doctrine – provided the foundation of Christianity*

*Emphasis on progress and experience affected their treatment of Scripture*

*Ethics replaced doctrine as theological focus*

Their Motivation: To Save Christianity from Modern Assaults

Henry Sloane Coffin (1915): “We are first and foremost evangelicals—evangelicals to the core of our spiritual beings. We own ourselves redeemed by and we worship God in Jesus Christ.”

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969)

Fosdick’s Vision

Evangelical Liberalism

Biblical criticism

Psychologically-oriented personal religion

An inclusive, open Christianity

Result: a religion without creeds and dogma

“Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” (1922)

*“These two groups exist in the Christian churches and the question raised by the Fundamentalists is: shall one of them drive the other out? Will that get us anywhere?”*

*“Too often,” he said, “we preachers have failed to talk frankly enough about the differences of opinion which exist among evangelical Christians, although everybody knows they are there.” He criticized the Fundamentalists, saying, “If they had their way, within the church, they would set up in Protestantism a doctrinal tribunal more rigid than the Pope’s.”*

*After explaining Christian liberals’ efforts to reconcile the Bible with the new scientific knowledge, he says: “the Fundamentalists are out on a campaign to shut against them the doors of Christian fellowship. Shall they be allowed to succeed?” And at another point, after arguing the liberal interpretation on the virgin birth, he says: “the question which the Fundamentalists raise is this:*

*shall one of them throw the other one out? Has intolerance any contribution to make in this situation?"*

*Fosdick, however, differentiates between Fundamentalists and Conservatives, saying, "All Fundamentalists are conservatives, but not all Conservatives are Fundamentalists." In a further expansion to this tone of reconciliation, he later says, addressing those of the younger generation: "if some young, fresh mind here is tempted to be intolerant about old opinions, offensively to condescend to those who hold them and to be harsh in judgment on them, he may well remember that people who held these old opinions have given the world some of the noblest character and the most memorable service that it ever has been blessed with."*

*"Science treats a young person's mind as if it were really important. A scientist says to a young person: Come, study with us! See what we already have seen and then look further to see more, for science is an intellectual adventure for the truth. Can you imagine anyone who is worth while turning from that call to the church, if the church seems to say, 'Come, and we will feed you opinions from a spoon. These prescribed opinions we will give you in advance of your thinking; now think, but only so as to reach these results.' You cannot challenge the dedicated thinking of this generation to these sublime themes upon any such terms as are laid down by an intolerant church."*

*"Now, there are multitudes of reverent Christians who have been unable to keep this new knowledge in one compartment of their minds and the Christian faith in another. They have been sure that all truth comes from the one God and is His revelation. Not, therefore, from irreverence or caprice or destructive zeal but for the sake of intellectual and spiritual integrity, that they might really love the Lord their God, not only with all their heart and soul and strength but with all their mind, they have been trying to see this new knowledge in terms of the Christian faith and to see the Christian faith in terms of this new knowledge."*

*"Consider another matter on which there is a sincere difference of opinion between evangelical Christians: the inspiration of the Bible. One point of view is that the original documents of the Scripture were inerrantly dictated by God to men. Whether we deal with the story of creation or the list of the dukes of Edom or the narratives of Solomon's reign or the Sermon on the Mount or the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, they all came in the same way, and they all came as no other book ever came. They were inerrantly dictated; everything there—scientific opinions, medical theories, historical judgments, as well as spiritual insight—is infallible. That is one idea of the Bible's inspiration. But side by side with those who hold it, lovers of the Book as much as they, are multitudes of people who never think about the Bible so. Indeed, that static and mechanical theory of inspiration seems to them a positive peril to the spiritual life."*

#### Shailer Mathews

*The Faith of Modernism, (1924): "Modernists are thus evangelical Christians who use modern methods to meet modern needs."*

The basic Christian convictions were:

Humanity's need for salvation from sin and death

The love, fatherliness, and forgiving nature of God the creator

Christ as "the revelation in human experience of God effecting salvation"

Good will as essential to the nature of God and as the foundation for human betterment

The persistence of individual human lives after death

The centrality of the Bible as the record of God's revelation and as a guide for the religious life  
 The "governing method" of Christianity has been a spirit of cultural awareness  
 Modernism was simply the most recent heir of this

## Response 2: Fundamentalism

Central tenets were a response to modernist denials:

- Inspiration and inerrancy of scripture
- The reality of Biblical miracles
- The Virgin Birth
- Penal, substitutionary atonement
- The physical resurrection of Jesus in history
- The literal second coming of Christ

*The Fundamentals*: 1910-1915

J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)

*Christianity and Liberalism* (1923)

*Thesis: Christianity and Liberalism are two different religions. Liberalism's claim to be just a different "take" on Christianity is disingenuous. Every teaching which is of importance to Christianity has been modified by Liberalism; thus it is not a heretical position on a few scattered points of doctrine, but a totally new and different religion. Christianity and Liberalism must be separated from each other so that it will be clear to all that they are not the same religions.*

Ch. 1: Introduction

Thesis: Redemptive religion of Christianity is battling against a foe which claims to be Christian, but which denies everything distinctively Christian. World and cultural events make Liberalism more palatable, but in order for grace to be made known, Christianity must be defended.

Ch. 2: Doctrine

Thesis: Liberals claim religion is merely a feeling, but want to get rid of doctrine. Christianity, though, is built on doctrine (which must lead to experience); doctrine of who Christ is & what he did by redeeming sinners is the only thing that can bring about the experience Liberalism looks for.

Though Liberalism says it's against doctrine, they actually hold to rigid doctrines: the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man

Liberalism argues that Christianity is not doctrine, but a way of life

It is wrong, then, “to speak of reposing trust in the Person without believing the message. For trust involves a personal relation between the one who trusts and him in whom the trust is reposed. And in this case the personal relation is set up by the blessed theology of the Cross.”

In rejecting doctrine, Liberalism “is really rejecting the whole basis of Christianity, which is a religion founded not on aspirations, but on facts.”

Liberalism “is altogether in the imperative mood, while Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative; liberalism appeals to man’s will, while Christianity announces, first, a glorious act of God.”

“The Church of Rome may represent a perversion of the Christian religion; but naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all.”

### Ch. 3: God and Man

Thesis: Christianity is centered around the doctrines of God and man (since the gospel is dependent on these), but it is very different in its conceptions from Liberalism. In Liberalism God is immanent; in Christianity, transcendent. In Liberalism, man is good and needs to develop fully; in Christianity, man is a sinner in need of grace, and only after receiving grace can he reach his full potential.

“The doctrine of God and the doctrine of man are the two great presuppositions of the gospel. With regard to these presuppositions, as with regard to the gospel itself, modern liberalism is diametrically opposed to Christianity.”

Liberalism’s hallmark is belief in the Fatherhood of God

But Jesus didn’t teach a universal fatherhood of God, nor does the rest of the New Testament

Liberalism misses fundamental attribute of God: his transcendence

Even more important is the doctrine of man

“According to the Bible, man is a sinner under the just condemnation of God; according to modern liberalism, there is really no such thing as sin. At the very root of the modern liberal movement is the loss of the consciousness of sin.”

This is a remarkable change, “nothing less than the substitution of paganism for Christianity as the dominant view of life” because paganism is “view which finds the highest goal of human existence in the healthy and harmonious and joyous development of existing human faculties”

## Results

### Lessons for us to Learn