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Harry Emerson Fosdick and the Spirit of American Liberalism

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

On May 21, 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick took to the pulpit of Old First—the historic First Presbyterian Church (est. 1716) located on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan—to deliver what would be his most famous sermon.

In this episode of Life and Books and Everything, Kevin reads from the article he wrote for the journal of Reformed Theological Seminary as part of “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” A Centennial Symposium.

Transcript

Welcome back to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung and I want to read an article for you today from Reform Theological Seminary's Journal. You may not know that they have a journal.

You can go there journal.rts.edu. And they have, in my opinion, a really interesting, fascinating journal that just, online journal, that just came out May 20th when I'm recording this. And I'm a little bit biased that I think it's interesting because I pitched one of the major ideas to the editors in this journal. On May 21st, it will be the 100th anniversary of Harry Emerson Fosdick's sermon, "Famous, Infamous," depending on your point of view, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win." And so I propose to the editors of the journal for RTS that they do a symposium of articles looking at Fosdick, the sermon, "Machin, Liberalism, What Happened Before and After?" And so I'm going to talk about the fundamentalist modernist controversy about.

So there's some really good articles, John Meether, Sean Michael Lucas, Daryl Hart, and others. And then there's other good articles on other topics in the journal. But I did an article entitled "Harry, Emerson, Fosdick, and the Spirit of American Liberalism." Here it is.

On May 21, 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick took to the pulpit of Old First, the historic first Presbyterian Church, established 1716, located on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan to deliver

what would be his most famous sermon. The American Church, broadly, and the Presbyterian Church specifically were already divided into conservative and liberal camps. Fozdic's sermon did not create the theological and ecclesiastical division, but his sermon that spring clearly exposed the division.

And more than that, it exemplified all the reasons for it. For as much as Fozdic thought of himself as ironic, moderate, and peace-loving, one does not entitle a sermon, "shall the fundamentalist win without meaning to pick a fight." A sermon for the times. The text for Fozdik's sermon that morning came from Acts 5, 38, and 39, where the esteemed Gomeliel, a leader of the Jewish Sanhedrin, counsels an angry mob to leave the apostles alone, for if their "work be of men, it will come to not, but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it." Whether Fozdic fancied himself, Gomeliel, or not, he considered the Pharisees' words from the first century to be a model for the 20th century.

What the Church needed more than ever was a spirit of liberality and tolerance. In particular, this meant a spirit of charity toward the "multitudes of reverent Christians who have been unable to keep this new knowledge about science, history, and religion in one compartment of their minds and the true Christian faith in another. In affirming the aphorism, cantankerousness is worse than heterodoxy, Fozdik argued that "the worst kind of church that can be offered to the allegiance of the new generation is an intolerant church." At the heart of the sermon was an indictment of fundamentalists and their fundamentals.

Ostensibly, Fozdik was simply making the case that no one has "a right to deny the Christian name to those who differ." On the disputed points of fundamentalism, but it was also obvious that Fozdik looked on fundamentalist doctrines within credulity. Fozdik questioned the historicity of miracles in the virgin birth. He denied the inerrancy of the scriptures and the atonement as a propitiatory sacrifice, and he did not accept the Second Coming of Christ as a literal event to be looked for in the clouds.

Keith Fozdik's theological hermeneutic was his conviction that religion was an evolutionary development, and that religious beliefs should evolve as well. Just as people in previous generations had to learn that the earth revolves around the sun, so our generation was fined away for "the new knowledge and the old faith to be blended in a new combination." In Fozdik's estimation, educated people were turned off by the "stayed doctrines of the past," and were starting to look for religious answers outside the church. If the church did not offer new ideas for a new day, it would suffer embarrassment and sink into irrelevance.

In the sermon's stirring conclusion, Fozdik stated adamantly, "I do not believe for a moment that the fundamentalists are going to succeed." Love would triumph over intolerance. That's what mattered. Picking up the quote again, "There are many opinions in the field of modern controversy, concerning which I'm not sure whether they are right

or wrong, but there's one thing I am sure of.

Courtesy and kindness, intolerance and humility and fairness are right. Opinions may be mistaken. Love never is." That last sentence perfectly captures the spirit of Fozdik's sermon and the spirit of the liberalism he did so much to promote.

For Fozdik, it was a penitent shame that the Christian church should be quarrelling over little matters when the world is dying of great needs. The fundamentalists were insisting on dubious theological theories and waging war for doctrinal idiosyncrasies when in Fozdik's words, so much of it does not matter. In Fozdik's mind, there was "not a single thing at stake in the controversy on which depends the salvation of human souls." The need of the hour was not theological wrangling, but laboring so that "men and their personal lives and their social relationships should know Jesus Christ." In short, Fozdik's vision for the church was the expansive charity of liberalism instead of the cramped rigidity of fundamentalism.

"God keep us," he exhorted in the last line of his sermon, "intellectually hospitable, open-minded, liberty-loving, fair, tolerant, not with the tolerance of indifference as though we did not care about the faith, but because always our major emphasis is upon the weightier matters of the law." A heretic for his generation. Harry Emerson Fozdik was born in 1878 in Buffalo, New York into a family that Fozdik later described as both "deeply Christian" and "possessing" a strong tradition of non-conformity. Although he readily embraced his parents' faith by contagion rather than coercion, he recalled, "Religion became the main source of his unhappiness as a child, and his autobiography Fozdik reflected," something more like an adult than a child, "that quote some of the most wretched hours of my boyhood were caused by the pettiness and obscurantism, the miserable legalism and terrifying appeals to fear that were associated with the religion of the churches." As a sensitive boy, deeply religious and morbidly introspective, Fozdik recalled, "weeping at night for fear of going to hell." He agonized that he had committed the unpardonable sin and that he would suffer forever in the horrors described in the book of Revelation.

It is not hard to see how the young Fozdik, or at least as he remembered himself, would grow into the adult Fozdik, an earnest man committed to the uplifting power of religion with an equal commitment to ridding religion of antiquated and unhelpful elements from the past. In 1900, Fozdik graduated from Colgate University, where his thinking was profoundly shaped by the liberal Baptist theologian William Newton Clark. At Colgate, Fozdik became a firm believer in evolution and a skeptic toward orthodox Christianity.

When he first felt a call to ministry and college, most of his classmates were surprised by his own admission as a college student, he was a better dancer than theologian. In fact, so eviscerated was his faith, Fozdik wondered whether any church would want him for a pastor. "I was through with orthodox dogma.

I had not the faintest interest in any sect or denomination. I could not have told clearly what I believed about any major Christian doctrine. I did not see how any denomination could ever accept me as its minister, but I did not care.

I wanted to make a contribution to the spiritual life of my generation." In time, however, crowds would clamor for Fozdik, the minister. After graduating with a Bachelor of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1904, Fozdik was ordained to the Baptist ministry and took the pulpit of First Baptist Church in Montclair, New Jersey. After pastoring in Montclair for more than a decade, Fozdik crossed the Hudson and served in three different churches in New York City.

First Presbyterian Church, 1918 to 1925, Park Avenue Baptist Church, 1925 to 1930, and Riverside Church, 1930 to 1946. The Interdenominational Church, whose 2500-seat Gothic cathedral was conceived and financed by John D. Rockefeller Jr. with the intention that Fozdik would be the senior pastor. Fozdik also taught homiletics at Union Theological Seminary from 1915 to 1946.

By all accounts, Fozdik was one of the most prominent preachers of the 20th century. He wrote 47 books, "Numerous articles in the well-known hymn God of Grace and God of Glory." Martin Luther King Jr. called Fozdik the greatest preacher of the century. Labeled as Modernisms Moses, Fozdik was a spiritual inspiration to some and a singular instance of spiritual declension to others.

When Ivy Lee, a leading advertising executive and a member of Fozdik's Church, saw to it that "shall the fundamentalist win" was sent to every ordained Protestant minister in the country, and that the sermon was reprinted in numerous liberal periodicals, that was bound to be a quick and vociferous response. For Orthodox Presbyterians, Fozdik was everything they had feared and everything that was wrong with their denomination. In Fozdik's telling, "shall the fundamentalist win" was a plea for tolerance, a good faith petition for the Church, "to take in both liberals and conservatives without either trying to drive the other out." And yet, even Robert Moats Miller, Fozdik's sympathetic biographer, acknowledges that Fozdik was kidding himself by characterizing the sermon in this way.

"What were conservative Presbyterians to think when this Baptist declared himself a Presbyterian, from a Presbyterian pulpit, belief in the virgin birth non-essential, the inerrancy of the scriptures incredible, the second coming of Christ from the skies, an outmoded phrasing of hope? Myerd and denominational controversy in feeling the sting of criticism, Fozdik resigned his pastorate at Old Church in 1924. "They call me a heretic," Fozdik said in his farewell speech. "Well, I am a heretic, if conventional orthodoxy is the standard, I should be ashamed to live in this generation and not be a heretic." A champion for true liberalism.

The purpose of this article is not to evaluate Fozdik's ministry. Judge by historic Christian

orthodoxy, let alone by the confessions of the Presbyterian Church, Fozdik is a cautionary tale on how to end up on the wrong side of Maitian's Christianity in liberalism divide. Judge by the internal logic of liberalism, Fozdik is a successful example, outdated though it may be, of how one man reached out to an unbelieving world with a message of Christian spirituality to those who might not have otherwise listened.

The idea of liberal theology writes Gary Dorian, a professor at Fozdik's Alomodder Union Theological Seminary, is the 300 year old idea quote that Christian theology can be genuinely Christian without being based upon external authority. "Liberlism is the belief that, quote, religion should be modern and progressive from the standpoint of modern knowledge and experience. It is the conviction that one can be a faithful Christian without believing in hell or in a universal flood, without believing that God commanded the extermination of the Canaanites and without believing that God demanded the literal sacrifice of his son as a substitutionary legal payment for sin." That comes from Dorian.

In all of this, Fozdik was one of liberalism's most eloquent and effective spokesman of the last century. Fozdik was not as radical as some of his followers would have liked. He was not a revolutionary.

He valued the church, believed in a transforming power of Christianity as he understood it. Like most mainline Protestants of his age, Fozdik was anti-communist and an unapologetic supporter of democracy. Later in life, under the influence of Swiss theologian Karl Barth, Fozdik insisted that the church had to go beyond modernism and that the world needed to rediscover the doctrine of sin.

He was an evangelical liberal, as one author puts it, in that he took the Bible seriously, believed it contained old truths and needed to be expressed a new language, and wanted people to have a relationship with Jesus. And yet, even if Fozdik had an evangelical impulse to win the hearts of the masses, in any true theological sense of the word, he was a liberal. Indeed, Fozdik openly and unabashedly described himself as a liberal.

And rightly so. When Fozdik preached about salvation from sin, there was no clear doctrine of Christ's atonement, no mention of divine wrath, only a vague sentiment that Jesus, quote, "came to save men from that inner wrongness that curses human life." Just as important, Fozdik did not believe in the divinity of Christ in any meaningful sense. Quote, "Wherever goodness, beauty, truth, love are, there is the divine," Fozdik preached in 1933, sermon.

We can call Jesus divine if we mean, quote, "the divinity of his spiritual life." Jesus's divinity differs from ours only in degree, not in kind. In explicitly rejecting the Calcidonian definition, that Christ is the second person of the Trinity eternal God of one substance, an equal with the Father, who took upon himself a human nature so that the two distinct natures were inseparably joined together in one person. Fozdik argued that the historic

church had, quote, "garbled Jesus beyond all recognition." When Fozdik calls himself a heretic, we should take him at his word.

According to Miller, Fozdik's ministry can be summed up with a single line. Though, "astronomies change, the stars abide." This was Fozdik's conviction throughout his pastoral career. In one of his later sermons, he described religion as akin to courtesy, an inward spirit that expresses itself in many forms.

Preaching from Joshua 7-6 about Joshua falling on his face before the ark, Fozdik argued that, quote, "Arks pass away, but religion remains." For many Christians, Fozdik explains, their, quote, "Ark is a special doctrine or specific denomination, some bit of ritual, some miracle in history, a special theory of the atonement, a belief in fiat creation or the virgin birth." Such things may have been very precious in your experience, Fozdik allows, but we must not confuse keeping the faith with keeping the ark. Christians are too easily separated by creeds and rituals when we can find common ground in our prayers and hymns. That was the essence of Fozdik's message and the essence of 20th century liberal Christianity.

Quote, "If then you ask what a true liberalism is, I should say that it is one that pays little attention to the arks that divide, but cares with all its heart about the religion that unites." That's my article Harry Emerson, Fozdik in the spirit of American liberalism. In the latest RTS journal, you can check out all the other articles there online.

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