

Shall the Fundamentalists Win?

From the series: Meeting God Again For the First Time

Scripture: Acts 5:27-42; Matthew 5:17-21

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It was May 21, 1922 - a Sunday morning. In the First Presbyterian Church of New York City, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached what is probably the most famous sermon ever preached in this country. I borrow his title and texts this morning.

Shall the Fundamentalists Win?

That was the question Fosdick posed. It was a gracious appeal to the fundamentalist party in American Protestantism to give room within the fellowship of the Christian church for those of more liberal views. Fosdick was gentle, in no way derogating those who held to the old doctrinal positions of Christian faith. He acknowledged the fruitfulness of sincere Christian lives that had long lived by ancient formulations of faith. But he challenged the illiberal and intolerant spirit that marked the fundamentalist parties in the respective denominations that were attempting to cast out those who were seeking to re-think Christian faith in light of the explosion of new knowledge and to understand the burst of new knowledge in terms of their Christian faith.

Fosdick based his plea for tolerance and inclusiveness on the passages read this morning. The 1920's were not the first years of religious conflict. We could point to many such crisis times, but surely the ministry of Jesus brought about a serious crisis for the established religion of Judaism. The Gospels record the conflict of Jesus with the main religious parties of the Jews. And as is the case time and again, Jesus was not about introducing a new religion, but about the renewal of the tradition within which he was born, nurtured and carried out his ministry.

Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

But, that was not how Jesus was received. Rather, he was seen as a troubler of Israel, a threat to the established religious institution and a danger to the good order of society.

Jesus was crucified by Roman power that wanted no popular uprising in the province, but certainly with the consent and to the relief of the religio-political leaders of the Temple cult.

Such use of violent force settles nothing, however; rather, it spurred his followers, convinced he was not dead but living, to take up the message and further the movement. Thus, the authorities were forced to go to round two. They now attempted forcibly to silence the disciples. That is the setting of Luke's account in Acts 5. After the apostles' imprisonment, the authorities called them in and charged them to cease and desist in their preaching, but they refused, driving the authorities to the brink of violence again. Then it was that a voice of wisdom and reason was raised.

Gamaliel, a respected Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, addressed the body. He reminded them of two recent popular uprisings that came to nothing with the death of their leaders and, he suggested, the counsel of wisdom would be to set the apostles free - have nothing to do with them, he said, for if this Jesus movement was of human origin, it would fail, and if it was of God, nothing they could do would overthrow it. Indeed, they might then be found fighting God.

Good advice.

Wise counsel.

And Gamaliel prevailed that day.

Gamaliel is Fosdick's model in his appeal to the fundamentalists of the 1920's. He raised the question I have often raised: What might have happened if Gamaliel's advice had been heeded, not only that day, but from that point on, and the Jesus movement might have been a flowering of Jewish faith, renewal and rediscovery of the spiritual depth of Israel's faith?

But, such was not to be the case. Nor was it the case in the 16th century when the Roman Church was rent asunder and the Protestant movement developed its own identity over against Rome.

Fosdick raised the question, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" and his answer was "No" because intolerance never brings a solution to conflict situations. Intolerance solves nothing. Rather, pleads Fosdick, the church must be "intellectually hospitable, tolerant, liberty-loving, open-minded and fair."

Fosdick's appeal was reprinted in three Christian journals and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. paid for the publication of 130,000 copies of the sermon for distribution across the nation. He appealed for liberals and conservatives to assume a posture of courtesy, kindness, humility and fairness, but the appeal had the opposite affect. Conservative response was swift and strong. The Presbytery of Philadelphia, led by Clarence McCartney, requested the General

Assembly to "direct the Presbytery of New York to take such action as will require the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian Church of New York to conform to the system of doctrine taught in the Confession of Faith."

The issue was joined; there was no turning back. For the next dozen General Assemblies there was serious conflict. This was the time during which G. Gresham Machos left Princeton Seminary and founded Westminster Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

As to Fosdick, he was First Presbyterian's preacher by special arrangement, being himself a Baptist. Rather than taking him on, the General Assembly voted to require him to enter the ranks of Presbyterian clergy, thinking he would have had to pass their theological requirements. The liberal element in the Presbyterian Church pleaded with him to do so, but he declined, stating,

I simply could not make the sort of even formal assent required of all candidates for your denomination's ministry. I would choke - for, rightly or wrongly, I should feel as if I were lying like a rogue.

Fosdick was out of a pulpit, but not for long. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. asked him to come to the Baptist Church in New York City that he attended. He is said to have refused, saying he would be concerned about being the pastor of the wealthiest man in the country. Rockefeller replied, "How do you think I will feel having Harry Emerson Fosdick as my pastor?" With that, Fosdick agreed and eventually Rockefeller built the great Riverside Church in New York City as the showcase for Fosdick's remarkable gift of preaching.

What was going on in the early decades of this century that came to a head in the ministry of Fosdick? In the sermon he preached on that May Sunday morning in 1922, Fosdick spoke of the new knowledge. Now the knowledge was not new in the sense of a sudden arrival of knowledge in 1922. Rather, there had been a growing body of knowledge over the past decades that simply had to be assimilated to the biblical worldview if there was to be any possibility of intellectual integrity. Fosdick declared,

A great mass of new knowledge has come into man's possession: new knowledge about the physical universe, its origin, its forces, its laws; new knowledge about human history and in particular about the ways in which the ancient peoples used to think in matters of religion and the methods by which they ... explained their spiritual experiences; and new knowledge, also, about other religions and the strangely similar ways in which men's faiths and religious practices have developed everywhere. 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 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.

This, of course, is the imperative for every generation and also the source of the tension that is always present in faith and of the conflict that has always marked institutional religion.

For a time in the Presbyterian Church it seemed as though the Fundamentalists had won. Fosdick was out and the fundamentals of doctrine were reaffirmed. But, they did not win, for in the long run the repression of knowledge and honest inquiry can never prevail.

It is my contention that, although the mainline Protestant denominations eventually yielded to the more liberal perspective, there is much of the church that has not yet brought its faith into engagement with modern knowledge.

This I believe is the fascinating challenge and opportunity that we face at Christ Community. We have a new freedom to interpret the Christian faith for our day. We have been at this for a long time; or, at least I have, and you have been supportive of that. But, now as a people, we have been galvanized through the ordeal through which we have passed. This is one of those rare moments when a whole community is thinking, asking questions, wrestling with matters of faith.

Thus it is that we embark today on a new series of sermons under the theme, *Meeting God Again for the First Time*.

Some of you have read Marcus Borg's book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, where he relates how he moved from childhood faith to unfaith and then with a fresh spiritual experience returned to vital Christian faith. It is my hope that we as a community might come to a fresh experience of the living God Who is big enough to encompass our questions, our best knowledge, and our deep yearning for communion with the Ultimate Mystery in Whom we live and move and have our being.

Next Sunday Dr. Duncan Littlefair will preach for us. For decades in Grand Rapids at the Fountain Street Church he was known as the Voice of the Liberal, as a radical, even as one who did not believe in God. But I have gotten to know him well, to feel his passion and sense the deep spirituality of his being. He is deeply concerned for the future of the Christian tradition. I want you to meet him, to experience him as he will challenge us not to stop now, simply treading water, but to continue to wrestle with how to bring the Christian message to our society in the present context.

The following Sunday during the Perspectives hour, Dr. Littlefair will be joined by Dr. Lester DeKoster, former Librarian at Calvin College and Editor of *The*

Banner, the Christian Reformed Church publication, a stout Calvinist whose conservative credentials are impeccable. These two men, longtime friends and friendly adversaries, will dialogue on the future of religion.

In all of this I am inviting and challenging you to think deeply, to ponder the faith that has shaped us and to struggle with me to find the manner in which the faith tradition must be translated for today and tomorrow.

Bishop Krister Stendahl who preached for us last year was the moderator at the recent Jewish/Christian dialogue. On the way from the airport, he mentioned a phrase that has stuck with me since our first encounter in 1991 when he was David Hartman's dialogue partner. He said, "*Tradition is an instrument of continuity and change.*" I was struck by that when I first heard it in '91 and I have used the phrase frequently. That tradition provides continuity with the past - that was always obvious to me. But that the faith tradition is, as well, an instrument for change, I had never realized.

I suspect my too narrow sense of tradition's function stemmed from my nurture and training - always focused on relating to and being faithful to the past formulation of the faith that had come to us from our forbears. In all my theological education, the stress was on explanation of the faith as given and the defense of that faith as received. I cannot remember ever being challenged to think about the reformulation and revision of the faith tradition for fresh statement in the present, in a context dramatically different from the context in which the faith was initially formulated.

In a word, I had no sense of a living tradition, a growing, developing faith understanding that not only puts me in continuity with the past, but illumines present experience and continues to light up the path into the future. Thus, breakthroughs in knowledge impact faith's understanding and faith creates a framework within which to assimilate new knowledge.

One is open to embrace the world in all its wonder and new experience because one is rooted, one has a place to stand. But, one is not swept away on a flood of new learning, but examines new thought and experience critically with some distance and detachment because one has a trusted tradition within which to think, to reflect, to take in the new.

This is the critical issue before the Christian church today. As I stated above, much of the evangelical Protestant church, to say nothing of the Roman Catholic Church, has not yet come to terms with modern knowledge. The resurgence of fundamentalist religious mentality in our day is a flight from honest engagement with what we know about the world, the human story, history and scientific probing of our universe. We find the conservative churches that have not been traditionally fundamentalist in spirit turning to worship as entertainment and emotionalism in mass movements. And all of this, I am convinced, is an escape

from wrestling with the impact of knowledge on faith's understanding and the critique of modern knowledge and life from faith's perspective.

No one need be faulted for not engaging in this serious and taxing endeavor. No one need be condemned who is seeking simply a bit of comfort and security. But someone needs to find a way to the experience of God, the way of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit in the midst of this world, here and now.

There will always be those who will continue to parrot yesterday's answers to today's questions and with intolerant spirit seek to set outside the community of faith others who are searching for today's expression of faith in light of today. But, the fundamentalists shall not win because a fearful, rigid and intolerant spirit convinced of its own rectitude is a denial of everything Jesus incarnated.

If we dare pursue the path upon which we have embarked, we must be clear-eyed about the fact that we will be swimming against the tide of current cultural opinion as well as choosing the road less traveled by the churches as the agents of institutional Christianity.

But, we will be set free to recognize the crisis of the church at large in the present, to see the denial in which it is living and to be free of fear that drives it, whether conscious or unconscious.

Further, we will provide a place for people who value intellectual integrity and whose heart cannot find rest where their minds cannot follow. We will provide a place for those whose hearts yearn for God and whose spirits thirst for spiritual depth, but who cannot abide the narrow mind and intolerant spirit that marks so much institutional religion.

And we will revel with delight in the Presence of the Mystery that is God amidst the ambiguity of the human condition, having few answers but able with abandon to raise our questions and, in community, experience the presence of the Spirit and know the compassion of Jesus, trusting that finally all is Grace and all will be well.

And again and again we will meet God as if for the first time.

Reference:

Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?: Defending Liberal Protestantism in the 1920s," historymatters.gmu.edu