

## **Church History**

### **Lesson 41 - The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy**

#### **Introduction**

- Last time we looked at the American church in the mid and late 19th century, giving special attention to the various ways American churches began to respond to modernity (the ideas, attitudes, practices, and cultural norms that arose in the wake of the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment.) We saw that the American church was later in responding to the intellectual, sociological, and political challenges posed by modernity than the Church in Europe, and that also its response was distinct from the response in Europe.
- Today we will look at the major rift that developed in the early 20th century around -issues raised by modernity. This is often referred to as the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, in reference to the two major groups and their responses to modernity.
- We will also look at the distinction between fundamentalism and evangelicalism which developed in the wake of this controversy.

#### **1. Early Struggles at Union Theological Seminary**

- 1.1. Last time we saw that many leading pastors in the late 19th century downplayed theology, and even the Gospel. Many began to focus more on Christian behavior and the social effects of Christianity than specifically Christian doctrine and theology. This led to a theological thinning in much of the American church.
- 1.2. One early controversy occurred at Union Theological Seminary, which was a Presbyterian seminary. WGT Shedd, the noted Reformed Theologian, retired in 1890 from teaching systematic and biblical theology at Union.
- 1.3. Shedd was replaced by Charles A. Briggs, an eminent Hebrew scholar who had taught Hebrew and Semitic languages at the seminary. In his inaugural lecture he speaks on “The Authority of the Holy Bible.” The address causes a huge furor because he adopted a number of higher critical approaches.
- 1.4. Briggs was eventually tried for heresy by the Presbytery of New York over the doctrines he espoused in the inaugural address. In brief, the charges were as follows (from Wikipedia):
  - that he had taught that reason and the Church are each a fountain of divine authority which apart from Holy Scripture may and does savingly enlighten men
  - that errors may have existed in the original text of the Holy Scripture
  - that many of the Old Testament predictions have been reversed by history and that the great body of Messianic prediction has not and cannot be fulfilled
  - that Moses is not the author of the Pentateuch, and that Isaiah is not the author of the second half of the book which bears his name
  - that the processes of redemption extend to the world to come (he had considered it a fault of Protestant theology that it limits redemption to this world and that sanctification is not complete at death).
- 1.5. Briggs was found guilty of heresy and defrocked and excommunicated. However, Union Theological Seminary backed Briggs, and eventually declared itself an independent seminary.
- 1.6. Briggs continued on this trajectory as may be seen by some of his writing:
  - Whither? A Theological Question for the Times (1889)

- The Authority of the Holy Scripture (1891)
  - The Bible, the Church and the Reason (1892)
  - The Higher Criticism of the Hexateuch (1893)
  - The Messiah of the Gospels (1894)
  - The Messiah of the Apostles (1894)
  - General introduction to the study of Holy Scripture (1899)
  - New Light on the Life of Jesus (1904)
  - The Ethical Teaching of Jesus (1904)
- 1.7. Briggs continued as a scholar and was ordained as a priest of the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1899.
- 1.8. Union Theological Seminary also continued and became a center of Liberal Protestantism and the modernist side of the modernist-fundamentalist divide.

## 2. The Conservative Response: The Fundamentals

- 2.1. As conservative Protestants wrestled with modernity and growing liberalism with the Protestant church in America, and especially among her ordained leaders, many thought a clear statement of essential beliefs was needed.
- 2.2. Eventually, a set of 90 essays was published between 1910 and 1915. These essays were clearly meant to be a conservative response to higher criticism and growing liberalism as represented by men like Briggs.
- 2.3. This eventually coalesced in the statement of five “fundamentals”:
- inerrancy
  - virgin birth
  - substitutionary atonement
  - bodily resurrection
  - miracles in Scripture
- 2.4. In 1910 the Presbyterian general assembly passed a resolution requiring all ministers and elders to affirm these five fundamentals. This was in addition to adhering to the Westminster Standards. Many conservative leaders thought this was necessary to make sure that church leaders were actually adhering to the historic, orthodox Christian faith.
- 2.5. However, some opposed this new effort. Of course, it was opposed by liberals who precisely wanted to question things such as miracles and inerrancy. However, it was also opposed by some conservatives who found the five fundamentals to be reductionistic, ignoring many critical elements of the faith to focus on merely these five. They also thought that the best path forward lay in adhering to the old confessional standards (the Westminster Standards).
- 2.6. At this time Union Theological Seminary is the bastion of growing liberalism, while Princeton Theological Seminary is the citadel of old school, conservative Presbyterianism, which provided an outsized influence of intellectual leadership within conservative Protestant circles. However, similar trends could be traced in other denominations as well.

### 3. J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)

- 3.1. Machen was born in Baltimore. His mother was from the South. This meant that old Southern Presbyterianism exerted a significant influence on Machen in his early years.
- 3.2. Machen was from an old upper-class elite family. There were friends with people like Woodrow Wilson. The family were committed Presbyterians.
- 3.3. In 1901 Machen graduated from Johns Hopkins University and began to study at Princeton Theological Seminary. Simultaneously he studied for a Master of Arts in Philosophy at Princeton University.
- 3.4. After graduating from Princeton, Machen went to Germany to round out his studies. This was a very common path for leading intellectuals (and in fact is common today as well). During this time Machen studied under some of the leading German ultra-liberal theologians such as Wilhelm Herrman. Initially, Machen became enamored with German liberal theology. As this became apparent in letters to home, his mother became very concerned. This led to a real crisis of faith for Machen.
- 3.5. In 1906 Machen began teaching New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. The President of Princeton University at the time was Francis Patton, who had urged the General Assembly to try Charles Briggs for heresy. He was a great influence on Machen, along with B.B. Warfield, the great theologian and great defender of biblical inspiration. Machen described Warfield as the greatest man he had ever met. Through their influence Machen's crisis of faith was fully and firmly resolved. His commitment to traditional Reformed theology was to grow stronger than ever, but he now understood theological liberalism and modernism very well.
- 3.6. In 1909 students at the seminary revolted, claiming the curriculum was irrelevant and needed to be more practical and less doctrinal - a typical cry for modernist liberals in the church. Machen opposed this revolt.
- 3.7. Machen was ordained in the Presbyterian church in 1914, fully consenting to the historic standards of the faith. He then became Assistant Professor of New Testament Studies.
- 3.8. When World War I broke out, Machen went to France with the YMCA to do volunteer work near the front. He continued this until shortly after the end of the war. Though he was not a combatant, Machen observed first hand the horrors of the war. He was suspicious of his family friend Woodrow Wilson's (who had also served as President of Princeton University from 1902-1910) project of spreading democracy and of imperialism. As such he was staunchly opposed to the war, and upon returning to the U.S., he saw that many of the provisions of, "the Treaty of Versailles constituted an attack upon international and interracial peace." Machen predicted "war will follow upon war in a wearisome progression."
- 3.9. When Machen returned to Princeton, he resumed his work as a New Testament scholar. During this time he gained a reputation as one of the few conservative theologians who could actually debate with modernist liberal theologians from a scholarly evangelical standpoint. During the next several years he wrote several important works:
  - *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (1921) - a critique of the liberal idea that Paul's religion was heavily influenced by Greek religions and philosophy and was quite distinct from the religion started by Jesus.

- *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) - this is probably Machen's most well known and enduring work. In it, he critiqued Liberalism, not as a different form of Christianity, but as an entirely different religion. Echoing the emphasis of *The Fundamentals*, Machen looked at six key essentials: doctrine, God and Man, the Bible, Christ, salvation, and the Church. In every case, Machen showed that the modernist aberrations of the historic understandings on these key doctrines did not morph the faith - they killed it. To deny things like the inspiration of Scripture, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the truth of the miracles in Scripture, etc meant one was simply not a Christian. Those proposing such ideas should have the integrity to admit they were actually starting a new religion.
  - *What is Faith?* (1925) - Machen set out to do the pastoral work of anchoring the faith in the historical fact of Christ's atonement. Contrary to the modernist assertion that it did not matter if such things had actually happened, Machen shows that faith must rest upon the actual historical events.
- 3.10.** In 1922, Henry Emerson Fosdick, a Baptist liberal, was serving as Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New York. His sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win" created a huge stir. In it, he attacked fundamentalists and declared the future of Christianity depended on the Modernists winning the battle with the fundamentalists. This led to the General Assembly charging the New York Presbytery to conduct an investigation into Fosdick's views. The theological battle lines were becoming sharply drawn.
- 3.11.** In 1924, over 1,200 Presbyterian ministers signed the Auburn Affirmation (named after Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, because one of the main proponents of the Affirmation was associated with that seminary). The Auburn Affirmation challenged the right of the General Assembly to require ministers to sign the affirmation of the five fundamentals in addition to the Westminster Standards. The group behind the document were very crafty and careful in how and when they promoted the Affirmation so as to ensure its ultimate adoption by the General Assembly and the overturning of the requirement to adhere to historic understandings of the five key fundamental areas. However, it should be noted that some of the people who signed the document were actually theological conservatives. These signed it not because they doubted the historic understandings of these key doctrines, but because they believed the best way forward was simply to hold to the historic Westminster Standards and the Bible as the only binding authorities.
- 3.12.** In 1925, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church revoked Henry Emerson Fosdick's license to preach in Presbyterian churches. This created a rift as moderates and liberals threatened to withdraw from the Assembly, including the entire Presbytery of New York. Thus, the entire issue was submitted to a committee for review. However, this was of little consequence as Fosdick had already resigned from First Presbyterian and became pastor of Park Avenue Baptist, which counted Nelson Rockefeller among its members. Rockefeller later would fund the famous ecumenical Riverside Church, with Fosdick as its famous pastor.

- 3.13.** In 1925 the famous *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes* (usually known as the Scopes Monkey trial) also occurred. In this case, John T. Scopes, a substitute teacher, was brought to trial for violating the Butler Act, which forbade the teaching of evolution in Tennessee. The trial was purposefully picked to create publicity. Scopes was not even sure if he had actually ever taught evolution. During the trial, the famous ACLU lawyer Clarence Darrow spoke for Scopes, while William Jennings Bryan, a three-time presidential candidate spoke for the law. The case was seen as both a theological contest and a trial on whether "modern science" should be taught in schools. Although technically Scopes was found guilty and ordered to pay a \$100 fine, in the court of public opinion the opposite verdict came to pass. The fundamentalists appeared in the press as backward, anti-intellectual, religious bigots. Thus, the real winners were the forces of modernism, both in theological circles and the broader culture.
- 3.14.** During this time relations among the Princeton Seminary faculty began to become strained. Some began to question if there were two different parties on the faculty. Machen and others thought that most of the differences at this time were actually one of degree rather than kind. It was more a question of how combative to become over doctrinal issues and what was the best way to expand the Christian faith in the broader culture.
- 3.15.** In 1926, Princeton wanted to move Machen from teaching New Testament to teaching Apologetics (the defense of the faith). Liberals within the denomination do not like this as Machen's thought makes it clear that their faith is really a different religion. By this time it appears that the majority of delegates to the General Assembly have more affinity with the Modernists than with the Fundamentalists.
- 3.16.** In 1929, the General Assembly looked carefully at Princeton and decided the current government structure of 2 boards (trustees – president and others from outside of Princeton; directors – made up of faculty) is wrong. They decided to abolish the two boards and replace them with a new one made of 1/3 trustees; 1/3 directors; and 1/3 new members. Two of the appointed members of the trustees on the board were signatories of the Auburn Affirmation. In essence, the new board virtually guaranteed that the Modernists would win the struggle at Princeton and would eventually replace faculty with Modernists rather than those adhering to historical orthodoxy. As a result, Machen and a number of other faculty left and founded Westminster Theological Seminary, located not far across the river in greater Philadelphia. Westminster is founded as a non-denominational school, with no official ties to the Presbyterian Church, nor under any oversight from any denomination.
- 3.17.** In 1932 a report from the General Assembly (which included the novelist Pearl Buck) entitled "Rethinking missions" is issued. It claims that missionary work is too exclusivist, only focusing on the Gospel. It encourages more of a "social Gospel" approach to missions work.
- 3.18.** In 1933, Machen forms an independent board for Presbyterian foreign missions. In doing this, he violated his position within the church. Consequently, at the General Assembly it is concluded that the independent board is illegal, and Machen and all others associated with it are ordered to break their ties with it. When Machen and seven other clergy refused, they were suspended from the Presbyterian ministry.

- 3.19. By 1936 Machen had completely withdrawn from the Northern Presbyterian Church and founded a new Presbyterian denomination, which eventually came to be known as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.
- 3.20. Many of these events were front-page news in the major papers of the day. This was because the events happened in the major intellectual centers of the East and because the Presbyterian Church at that time wielded outsized influence in American culture. Furthermore, the events in the Presbyterian Church mirrored events happening in the larger culture as well, so it served as a useful lens through which to view what was happening all over the country and culture.
- 3.21. Sadly, Machen died in 1937 while only 55 years old. Just before his death, he dictated a telegram to long-time friend and colleague John Murray—the content of that telegram reflected deeply his lifelong faith: "I'm so thankful for active obedience of Christ. No hope without it." He is buried in Baltimore.
- 3.22. H.L. Mencken, the famous journalist of the day who had reported on the Scopes trial, was an outspoken opponent of religion. Nevertheless, he greatly admired Machen. He wrote an obituary for Machen that was published in the Baltimore Evening Sun. While disagreeing with Machen's theology, Mencken nevertheless articulated great respect and admiration for his intellectual ability. He noted that Machen "fell out with the reformers who have been trying, in late years, to convert the Presbyterian Church into a kind of literary and social club, devoted vaguely to good works", and that "though he lost in the end and was forced out of Princeton, it must be manifest that he marched off to Philadelphia with all the honors of war." Mencken also compared Machen to William Jennings Bryan, another well-known Presbyterian, with the statement, "Dr. Machen himself was to Bryan as the Matterhorn is to a wart."
- 3.23. Machen left his estate to Westminster Seminary, which greatly assisted the fledgling institutions financial prospects and enabled it to continue to the present day.

#### **4. Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism**

- 4.1. As noted above, Machen was a towering intellect and a man of refined education and manners. For him, the issues at stake were theological and had to be kept distinct from cultural tides and questions. It was not that Machen was indifferent to the questions swirling in the culture; in fact, he testified before Congress and other bodies on a number of issues. But he did so as a private citizen, not as a church leader or theologian. He simply did not want to confuse cultural preferences and desires with theological truth.
- 4.2. However, many conservative Christian leaders were not Machen's intellectual or social equals. Furthermore, there were different currents within the conservative Christian movement. Some of these thought that fundamentalism should also include moral concerns and issues such as the temperance movement, which Machen would never join since he drank alcohol and thought Scripture did not prohibit the use of alcohol. Many also wanted to tie fundamentalism to a pre-millennial eschatology, since they suspected that amillennial theology would undermine a "literal" reading of Scripture, which would lead to Modernist/Libels Christianity. For someone like Machen, this was a hopelessly simplistic, wooden reading of Scripture that could not sustain the movement or bear closer scrutiny.

- 4.3. Some of these men left Westminster and founded their own seminary (Biblical Theological Seminary) and denomination (Bible Presbyterian Church).
- 4.4. Over time, fundamentalism begins to split into two distinct groups: fundamentalists and evangelicals.
  - 4.4.1. Fundamentalists
    - 4.4.1.1. In general, fundamentalists tended to be more anti-intellectual, viewing higher education with suspicion.
    - 4.4.1.2. Fundamentalists were isolationist. They wanted to simply form their own institutions and avoid any contact with modernists and often even the culture at large. This included the formation of Christian elementary and high schools, Bible institutes, colleges, and seminaries. A key point is the separatist nature of these institutions. In the terms of Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture* categories, these institutions viewed themselves and acted within a "Christ against culture" paradigm.
    - 4.4.1.3. Eventually, the isolationist tendencies became even a more extreme double separation: you must separate from modernists, but also from those Christians who refuse to separate from modernists.
    - 4.4.1.4. The fundamentalists also tended to adopt a dispensational, pre-millennial eschatology and hermeneutic.
    - 4.4.1.5. There came a strong emphasis on do's and don'ts, all of which were external. Worldliness became defined in strongly external, behavioral terms. These people were seen by the culture at large as withdrawn, uneducated, and easily manipulated people.
    - 4.4.1.6. Some of the key leaders in the fundamentalist movement include Charles McIntyre, J.O. Buswell, Allen McCrae.
  - 4.4.2. Evangelicals
    - 4.4.2.1. In general, evangelicals hold similar theological positions to fundamentalists on the five fundamentals and in their opposition to modernist tendencies in the church.
    - 4.4.2.2. However, evangelicals tend to stress education and cultural engagement.
    - 4.4.2.3. Evangelicals also contain a much broader spectrum of belief on eschatology and moral questions such as alcohol.
    - 4.4.2.4. Evangelicalism especially grew in the wake of World War II. A group of young, gifted leaders become increasingly dissatisfied with the direction of fundamentalist separation. This group includes men like Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry and Billy Graham. They lead a call for evangelicalism to return to its 19th-century roots. The NAE is formed as a counterpart to the liberal NCC. In 1947 Fuller Seminary is formed. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association is formed in the late 1940's. Christianity Today is created. Many Christian colleges, seminaries, publishing houses and para-church ministries begin during this time. Many of these things come out of Wheaton Illinois. This period concludes with Billy Graham's crusade in New York City in 1957, in which Graham allows a moderately liberal group of churches to participate. The fundamentalists, led by McIntire, declare Graham to

be apostate, and the evangelicalism and fundamentalism are permanently separated.

- 4.5. Thus, the conservative opposition to the Modernist/Liberal growth was eventually splintered into distinct groups. They were united in their opposition to the Modernist movement but differed in how to best fight it, and also in their approaches to the broader culture.

## **5. Conclusion and Summary**

- 5.1. The groups embracing the Modernist approach have generally become known as the mainline churches. These churches believed that in order to survive the onslaught of modernity the church must embrace modernity. The church must change many of its most basic beliefs and practices. They believe that if they do this the church will survive, but if they do not, the church will eventually die. However, history has actually proved otherwise. Instead of thriving in the modern world, it is precisely these churches that have lost members, while churches that continued to hold to historic orthodoxy have continued to be vibrant and to grow. Nonetheless, these groups have continued a march into Modernist/liberal beliefs and tendencies. Such groups tend to deny the historical, orthodox understanding of the truths of Scripture and embrace extremely liberal (or “progressivist”) political positions on a wide variety of issues such as abortion, human sexuality, and how to understand the separation of church and state.
- 5.2. The groups embracing the fundamentalist position tended to either start new denominations or become independent churches. These churches and institutions grew and thrived in seclusion from the broader culture. Many of their educational institutions are not accredited, which is often a source of pride. They also tended to be very politically disengaged until the 1970’s and the rise of the Moral Majority and the Christian Right, when they re-entered politics in a major way.
- 5.3. The groups identified as evangelical tended to either form new forms of the historic denominations or create non-denominational churches and para-church ministries. The institutions they founded do tend to be accredited, and they tend to be much more open to methods of study which are acceptable to the broader culture. Evangelicals always remained involved in the culture to a far greater degree than fundamentalists. However, they have tended to join with fundamentalists on many more issues since the emergence of the Christian right in the 1970’s. This has led to a situation where many evangelicals are distinct from fundamentalists in theology and church practice, but their political and social positions are often very similar.
- 5.4. The trends we discussed above can be seen to continue right up to the present. The question of how they will resolve in America will only be known in the future.