

DR. HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK, "SHALL THE FUNDAMENTALISTS WIN?"  
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**Abstract:** This essay considers the rhetoric of Rev. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, specifically the text of his 1922 sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" A definitive artifact of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, Fosdick's address attacked the resurgent fundamentalism that was then dividing American Protestantism, casting it opposite the generosity, tolerance, and intellectual honesty of liberal forces. Because of Fosdick's skillful deployment of *apologetic* rhetoric, the sermon serves as a primer on religious argumentation. Fosdick demonstrates how, when it comes to faith, the best offense may be a good defense.

**Keywords:** Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, fundamentalism, modernism, religious liberty

On the morning of May 21, 1922, from the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church of New York City, the Reverend Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick delivered one of the most provocative sermons of the twentieth century. Titled "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?," this sermon sought to diagnose a major fracture in American Protestantism, explaining the problem and identifying its causes. As one of the nation's most prominent liberal preachers, Fosdick placed blame squarely upon conservative forces in the church—particularly the new class of "fundamentalists" who insisted upon absolute fidelity to a set of rigid doctrines. In Fosdick's framing, American Protestantism had been infiltrated by hardline sectarians with no tolerance for freedom of thought or inquiry, placing all intellectually honest believers at risk of exclusion. He situated liberals as the protectors of openness and generosity in the Christian tradition, hoping to rally his Manhattan congregants to defend their values against the fundamentalist threat.

By all accounts, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" was well-received at the First Presbyterian Church, raising few hackles within that liberal body. Had the sermon remained confined to the sanctuary, it may well have passed quietly into history. But thanks to the efforts of Ivy Lee, a First Presbyterian member and influential advertising executive, Fosdick's message spread much further than that. Lee acquired, lightly edited, and distributed the text of the sermon in pamphlet form, prompting its subsequent publication in both the *Christian Century* and *Christian Work* magazines.<sup>1</sup> It was then read, shared, and widely critiqued, especially by the fundamentalist figures whom Fosdick had targeted. In the years that followed, Fosdick's sermon—indeed, his *career*—became the epicenter of a much larger debate about the nature of Christian identity in the United States. What was Christianity? What demands did the faith make upon its practitioners? To what degree were Christians free to adapt their beliefs to modern innovations, and to what degree must they conform to certain fundamental creeds? A

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central figure in the attendant “fundamentalist-modernist controversy,” Fosdick insisted that Christianity was broad and tolerant enough to allow for a diversity of viewpoints. In doing so, he paired his religious convictions with core American ideographs, championing a progressive orientation committed to religious and intellectual liberty.<sup>2</sup>

This essay seeks to contextualize and interpret “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” as a definitive artifact of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, situating this rhetorical moment within the larger sweep of twentieth century American religious history. After assigning careful attention, first, to Fosdick’s biography and, second, to the political-religious climate of his times, I consider the text of the sermon as a primer on how to establish a liberal commitment to innovation—such as theological modernism—within the defensible ramparts of shared traditions—such as Protestantism and Americanism. Many of the issues contested in the 1920s persist to the present day, and Fosdick’s approach to religious argumentation continues to teach us about rhetorical practice in Christian public address.

### Fosdick’s Biography

Harry Emerson Fosdick began his very long life in Buffalo, New York. Born in 1878, he would live for ninety-one years, expiring in 1969. Over the course of that time he rose to prominence as one of America’s great preachers and, indeed, perhaps the best public speaker of his day. An outstanding student, he excelled in both college and seminary before accepting appointments at four prestigious pulpits in and around New York City. He would serve for nearly four decades on the faculty at Union Theological Seminary, cultivating a scholarly ethos that defined his preaching. He was a world traveler with a broad vision for Christian social action, an advocate for the poor who rubbed elbows with the rich, by turns a booster of war and a chastened pacifist. He supported women’s suffrage and desegregation, though perhaps not with the sort of dynamism that later generations might prefer. He was a champion of Christian liberty, insisting on the right of believers to inform their beliefs with modern intellectual advancements. And, of course, he was a smiling pugilist in a number of public controversies, including the internecine feud between liberals and fundamentalists in the Presbyterian Church.

In his 1956 autobiography, *The Living of These Days*, Fosdick commented that, from childhood, he must have been “predestined to religion.” After deciding to join the church at the tender age of seven, he “took [his faith] desperately in earnest.” Though his parents had encouraged him to wait a few years and make this decision from a position of greater maturity, the young Fosdick was already heavily invested in a Christianity that brought him an even measure of joy and suffering. “The happy aspects of it I found in my family,” he wrote, “where Christianity was the natural, practical, livable spirit of the home. But 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.”<sup>3</sup> If his parents and siblings embodied a faith that Fosdick came immediately to love, the rule-bound, fire-and-brimstone preaching of the traveling revivalists repelled him from the start. When “migrant evangelists came and heated up the town for a revival,” he reflected, “all hell opened its yawning mouth to receive us.” Impressed by the mortal threat of sins such as

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“dancing, carding playing and theatergoing,” Fosdick once refused his father’s invitation to see Edwin Booth in *Hamlet*—a decision that he would always regret.<sup>4</sup>

Having grown up in the Chautauqua hills during the early years of the Chautauqua movement, it is perhaps not surprising that Fosdick had a natural gift for speech. When he enrolled at Colgate University in 1895, he immediately began to distinguish himself as an orator. Biographer Robert Moats Miller recounts that Fosdick excelled at public speaking and debate, eventually capturing more prizes than any other student in Colgate’s history. Indeed, “several prizes won by Harry carried purses of \$40 and \$60, sums almost exactly equal to a year’s tuition,” Miller wrote. “It is quite true, therefore, to say that Harry ‘talked’ his way through college.”<sup>5</sup> A popular student, Fosdick was recognized as a president of the student association, president of the Delta Upsilon fraternity, editor of the yearbook and editor-in-chief of the student newspaper, as well as a socialite who “danced the girls off the floor.”<sup>6</sup> Fosdick’s well-known socializing paired with a concurrent lapse in faith to make any interest in Christian ministry seem improbable. When rumors of such interest began to spread on campus, one of Fosdick’s professors posed him a pointed question. “Has it ever occurred to you,” he asked, “that a minister is supposed to be an exponent of the spiritual life?” Following this encounter, Miller writes, “he cut dancing from his social activities.”<sup>7</sup>

After an additional year of preliminary theological study at Colgate, Fosdick moved to New York City to enroll at Union Theological Seminary. Though his time there would ultimately prove productive and rewarding, it was marred by early struggles with mental health—struggles comparable to those experienced at various points by his parents as well. Overwhelmed by the excitement of the big city, his studies, the high expectations, and a variety of job and service commitments, Fosdick experienced what he would later call “days and nights of sleepless, agonizing tension” that would drive him, first, to his fiancée’s home in Massachusetts and, later, to his parent’s home outside of Buffalo, as a “humiliated and nervous wreck.”<sup>8</sup> His condition continued to worsen until a bout of suicidal thoughts prompted his stay at a sanitarium in Elmira, New York. He remained there for four months, after which his future father-in-law paid for a six-week convalescent trip to England. Although this struggle with mental illness would play a formative role in Fosdick’s young life, it was not ultimately debilitating. His strong recovery enabled an equally strong return to Union, where he graduated *summa cum laude* in 1904. His professional success as a seminarian was supplemented by the personal milestone of his marriage to Florence Whitney, who would remain his faithful wife for the rest of her days.

In 1904 Fosdick also accepted his first pastoral post at the First Baptist Church of Montclair, New Jersey. A well-to-do exurb just west of Manhattan, Montclair was home to a sizable population of upper-middle-class white people and a smaller set of black and Italian residents confined to segregated neighborhoods. The church housed a modest congregation with just over 300 members. It was here that Fosdick would establish many of his longstanding positions on religious issues, as well as hone his method as a preacher. He would set aside several hours each morning for study and writing, producing sermons in full manuscript that lent themselves to collection and publication later on. In his autobiography, Fosdick states, “Every sermon should have for its main business the head-on constructive meeting of some problem which was puzzling minds, burdening consciences, or distracting lives, and no sermon which so met a real human difficulty, with light to throw on it and help to win a victory over it,

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could possibly be futile.”<sup>9</sup> The content of those sermons was consistently ecumenical.<sup>10</sup> Though he was a Baptist minister presiding over a Baptist body, Fosdick resisted denominational labeling. He made clear from the beginning that all Christians were welcome to worship in his congregation, frequently voicing his belief that the fellowship should not be split into factions. In civic matters he was progressive, working to improve the morality of Montclair by opposing new movie houses and liquor licenses. He took an interest in local trades unions as well, inspiring the M.A. thesis that he completed at Columbia University in 1908. Eventually, Fosdick’s academic profile would earn him a promotion at Union, elevating him to a named professorship in theology and prompting his resignation from Montclair. When Fosdick finally left the church in 1915, Miller reports, “membership had more than doubled, the budget for general expenses and benevolences had quadrupled, and his salary had increased from \$2500 to \$5000—this when the average salary of Baptist pastors in New Jersey was \$600.”<sup>11</sup> The experience was an unqualified success. As he headed back to Manhattan, Fosdick must have felt the pull of his life’s own considerable momentum.

And yet, all was not well. Fosdick began his career at Union even as Europe was descending ever deeper into the “Great War.” The United States stayed resolutely out of the conflict in 1914-15, and in 1916 President Woodrow Wilson ran for reelection with the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War.” Popular sentiment supported Wilson’s position. But from the outset, Fosdick was a vocal proponent of US entry into the conflict. A devout Anglophile, he believed sincerely in the righteousness of England and her allies, as well as the obligation of free men to stand opposed to the evil of German imperialism.<sup>12</sup> Miller writes that “Fosdick saw no tension between true patriotism and New Testament Christianity; both demanded service to one’s fellow man, self-sacrifice, loyalty to high ideals, manly courage.”<sup>13</sup> When, in 1917, the US finally did enter the war, Fosdick was elated. He signed on to spend six months in Europe with support from the Young Men’s Christian Association, preaching to soldiers and citizens in England, Scotland, and France. His speeches, correspondence, and diary entries leave a detailed record of this period, documenting his travels, his concerns about troop morale and morality, and his assessment of conditions on the ground. The trip raised his profile both nationally and internationally, thanks in large part to articles such as “The Trenches and the Church at Home,” authored abroad and published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.<sup>14</sup> At war’s end, Fosdick remained a passionate advocate of US intervention. He praised the valor of US troops and became a vocal supporter of the League of Nations. In later years, once the full scope of the horror would be processed and understood, Fosdick would change his mind about war. But as of 1919, when he formally accepted a pastorate at the First Presbyterian Church of New York, Fosdick disclaimed pacifism.

The move to First Presbyterian was complicated by a pair of matters. First, Fosdick had teaching obligations at Union, making the full slate of pastoral responsibilities unfeasible. Second, and perhaps more importantly, he was not a Presbyterian. Fosdick was very famously a Baptist—and a liberal one at that. These issues were resolved in tandem when the recently retired Dr. George Alexander volunteered to come back as senior pastor, with Fosdick occupying an associate role focused primarily on preaching. This narrowed field of responsibility allowed Fosdick to continue his teaching at Union, and to benefit from an official decision reached by denominational leadership the previous year. “In 1918 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., had endorsed the principle of the organic union of all American

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evangelical churches,” Miller wrote. “For the pulpit of Old First to be occupied by a Baptist seemed in keeping with the spirit of this principle.”<sup>15</sup> Miller stressed that “the church leadership did not pressure Fosdick to sever his Baptist ties” and “Fosdick never gave the slightest intimation of doing so.” Further, “it was not his intent, as fundamentalists would later charge, to be a deliberate disturber of the Presbyterian peace.”<sup>16</sup> Even as he enjoyed the good will and best wishes of his new congregation, Fosdick did not swear fidelity to Presbyterian creeds. He remained committed to ecumenism and free inquiry, and his church honored those commitments. But it seems clear, in hindsight, that conditions were right for controversy.

### Fundamentalists and Modernists

Though Fosdick’s famous sermon touched off a particularly explosive fight within the Presbyterian fold, it must be understood as part of a much longer, broader set of disputes that had riled American Protestantism dating back to the Civil War. This conflict, popularly titled the *fundamentalist-modernist controversy*, is historically situated and informed by the turbulent mix of social, intellectual, and political currents that swept across and against the public square in turn-of-the-century America. It was a time of rapid change and displacement, prompting some segments of the population to call for revolutionary innovation while pushing others to retreat into the safety of firm rules and familiar traditions. Before turning to the text of “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?,” it is important to grapple with some of this context.<sup>17</sup>

Following the trauma of the Civil War, Americans sought to return to some sense of normalcy. But for the evangelical Protestants who had dominated the nation during the antebellum period, there could be no going back. Though they retained distinct advantages in social and political venues, the intellectual world had moved on as North fought South, entertaining new ideas that would challenge the old religion. For one, Charles Darwin’s explosive *On the Origin of Species* had been published in England in 1859, touting the claim that lifeforms adapt to their environments and evolve over the millennia.<sup>18</sup> For a population long-accustomed to a literal reading of the book of Genesis, the expansion and acceptance of Darwin’s idea appeared as an existential danger. A related threat, also arising in Europe, appeared in the form of German higher criticism, an approach to Bible reading that cast doubt on the historical validity of some scriptural accounts while proposing alternative readings of others. Like Darwin, the German theologians suggested that Biblical literalism could no longer be taken for granted. Individually, either idea would pose a formidable challenge to the Bible-centric Christianity of the nineteenth century United States. Together, emerging as they did through the fading fog of war, they were positively alarming.

The postwar years were further defined, not simply by new European theories, but by millions of new European immigrants. Between 1870 and 1900, upwards of twelve million people moved to the United States from the old world, bringing with them diverse ideas, beliefs, customs, and languages. Though a strong proportion of these immigrants were devoutly religious, most were not evangelical Protestants. Indeed, a great many were Catholics, swelling the local ranks of Protestantism’s closest and fiercest religious rival. Historian George Marsden notes that, while Protestant church membership tripled “from five million to sixteen million” between 1860 and 1900, Catholic membership *quadrupled* “from three million to twelve million” during those same years. Catholics, Marsden notes, “did not keep the Sabbath, they

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danced, they drank, and since they were often poor, they were regarded as a threat to the stability and moral health of the nation generally.”<sup>19</sup> Especially after 1880, an influx from southern and eastern Europe meant that the majority of these Catholic immigrants did not speak English, thus compounding their otherness. And since the vast majority of the new immigrants settled in cities such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Chicago, the US experienced a concurrent urbanization. Suffice it to say that the religious character of the nation was changing rapidly alongside of its ethnic composition as the population coalesced within major urban areas.

These massive changes prompted serious social problems, many of which arose out of the economic divide between rich and poor. As the American industrial machine churned on, it made a select minority of the population extremely wealthy while leaving millions of others in poverty—creating a historical moment that Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner would famously label “The Gilded Age.”<sup>20</sup> Though the waves of immigration in the late nineteenth century had been inspired by hopes for a better life, the vast majority of those immigrants found themselves struggling in an unfavorable labor market. Those who did land jobs generally worked very long hours for very low pay, often in dangerous conditions. At night they went home to crowded and unsanitary tenements. Their wives and children worked too, often in comparably awful conditions. In 1890, Jacob Riis published *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, using a mix of narrative and photo-journalism to introduce middle class America to the urban squalor in which so many of the nation’s working poor were forced to abide.<sup>21</sup> Upton Sinclair would cause a similar sensation with his 1906 novel *The Jungle*, which depicted an immigrant family struggling to survive as exploited workers in “Packingtown,” a thinly disguised fictional version of the Chicago meatpacking district.<sup>22</sup> Though captains of industry such as Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, George Pullman, and John D. Rockefeller worked diligently to preserve the working poor as a source of cheap and plentiful labor, workers in many industries organized to leverage their bargaining power—often at serious personal risk. When middle class reformers intervened on behalf of the poor and downtrodden, they came to be known as “progressives.”<sup>23</sup>

This admittedly attenuated history is necessary because it helps to contextualize the rise of Fosdick’s liberal Christianity at the end of the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth. Also known as *modernism* because of its dedication to modern innovations, liberal Christianity pledged to adapt an ancient faith to contemporary times. Rather than rejecting Darwinian evolution and German higher criticism, for instance, liberal Christians embraced these ideas as part of the progressive revelation of God’s creation. Rather than focusing their energies exclusively on the salvation of the individual soul, they prized the *social* salvation of the broader community. Recognizing the many glaring social injustices that marred the American landscape in their time, they hoped to embody Christ’s concern for the poor and the oppressed. And following the lead of theologians such as the influential Walter Rauschenbusch, liberal Christians advocated a “social gospel” powerful enough to create a more just, equitable, *Christian America*.<sup>24</sup>

If liberals sought to adapt Christianity to the exigencies of modern times, however, they were countered by a rival movement bent on taking the faith back to certain core fundamentals. Though conservative, orthodox forces had been powerful in American Protestantism throughout the nation’s history, their concerted response to liberalism

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eventually coalesced around a series of articles published between 1910 and 1915. Titled *The Fundamentals*, this collection of essays identified certain foundational doctrines of Christian belief, purporting to draw a clear boundary between orthodox and unorthodox views.<sup>25</sup> Rejecting Darwin, higher criticism, and social activism, the *fundamentalists*, as they came to be called, emphasized the importance of individual fidelity to a literal, inerrant Bible. They took their cues from conservative theologians such as Princeton Theological Seminary's J. Gresham Machen. In his 1923 book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, Machen argued that liberal doctrines were so distinct from orthodox Christian doctrines that they constituted an entirely separate religion.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the theological disagreement between fundamentalists and modernists was not merely a legitimate difference of opinion; it was an irreconcilable estrangement that demanded a formal split. Though modernists tended to regard fundamentalists as an outdated but authentically Christian cousin, fundamentalists wanted the modernists out. In their view, any tolerance of liberalism was tantamount to an alliance with heresy.<sup>27</sup>

### **“Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”**

A vocal proponent of Christian unity, doctrinal ecumenism, and intellectual liberty, Fosdick looked upon the resurgent fundamentalism with sincere trepidation. By May of 1922, he felt sufficiently moved to confront the threat directly, from his pulpit, in candid and accusatory language. And yet, as Halford R. Ryan has observed, Fosdick did not structure his argument as an attack. Unwilling to play the aggressor, he instead composed the sermon as an *apologia*, a defense of liberalism against the fundamentalist assault.<sup>28</sup> From this defensive posture, Fosdick was able to portray liberals as a vulnerable subset of the Christian tradition, a segment of the faith community that fundamentalists would gleefully expel. Since fundamentalists had long cast liberals as outsiders with heretical beliefs, this rhetorical move was strategically sound. If the fundamentalists backed down from the challenge, unity may yet be restored. If they went on the attack, Fosdick's charge would be validated. His defense, couched in the aggressive terms of offense, dared the fundamentalists to prove him right.

As we will see, the argument paired a pointed defense of Christian liberalism with a detailed refutation of fundamentalist intransigence. Of the core doctrines endorsed by fundamentalism, Fosdick highlighted three for scrutiny: the virgin birth, biblical inerrancy, and the second coming. In each case, he entertained a plurality of interpretations before casting doubt on the hardline view and extolling the virtues of inclusivity. Though he discredited his foes on every point, Fosdick never called for their ouster from the faith. In the end, as throughout, he emerged as a genial critic of the narrow-minded, inviting them to hold their archaic viewpoints in continued fellowship. And because he based his case on an overt appeal to *liberty*, perhaps the most important of American ideographs, Fosdick concentrated his rhetorical force on a uniquely vulnerable point—the intersection of Christian faith and American ideology.

“Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” was an expository sermon, taking its text from the Book of Acts. Fosdick opened with reference to the fifth chapter, recounting an incident in which Peter and the apostles were brought before Jewish leaders and accused of preaching the heresy that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in the scriptures. When certain of those leaders advocated putting the apostles to death, a man named Gamaliel spoke in their defense,

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declaring, “if this counsel or this work be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God ye will not be able to overthrow them; lest haply ye be found even to be fighting against God” (1). Though Gamaliel’s wise advice did save the apostles from being killed, it did not stop the Jewish leaders from steeling themselves against the new truths of Christianity. In the same way, Fosdick implied, liberalism may constitute the progressive flowering of Christianity, scorned and rejected by those with an inordinate fondness for the past.

Fosdick developed this comparison further to align the liberal understanding of divine revelation with that of Christ and his apostles. Though Jesus “rejoiced in the glorious heritage of His people’s prophets,” he also believed in “a living God.” Indeed, “Jesus believed in the progressiveness of revelation,” by which new truths would unfold gradually as humanity rose to higher planes of knowledge and understanding (2). If this approach to revelation applied in Christ’s lifetime, there was no reason to suspect that it had altered in the centuries since, especially given the massive expansion of human knowledge across all fields. For citizens of the twentieth century to cling to truth claims advanced in the first was therefore more than foolish; it was unbiblical.

And yet, Fosdick noted, American Protestantism had been infiltrated by strict sectarians who insisted upon rigid adherence to anachronistic beliefs. Though presumably not represented in his own congregation—as evidenced by his use of *we*, *our*, and *us* in opposition—Fosdick believed these hardliners capable of doing serious damage to the larger body of the Church. “Already all of us must have heard about the people who call themselves the Fundamentalists,” he said. “Their apparent intention is to drive out of the evangelical churches men and women of liberal opinions,” and their “program is essentially illiberal and intolerant” (3). Threatened by revolutionary innovations in human knowledge, fundamentalists sought to achieve a sleight of hand that “multitudes of reverent Christians” had been unable to achieve themselves—namely, “to keep this new knowledge in one compartment of their minds and the Christian faith in another.” Liberals, “for the sake of intellectual and spiritual integrity,” had 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” (3). For this, they were branded as heretics. But on the contrary, Fosdick argued, this situation revealed liberals to be the truly honest members of the Christian community, with enough courage and integrity to accept change and development even when these were productive of anxiety. “We must be able to think our modern life clear through in Christian terms,” he declared, “and to do that we also must be able to think our Christian faith clear through in modern terms” (3). The progressive revelation of knowledge over time was a simple fact of human life, Fosdick argued. Those who challenge old beliefs with new knowledge will always be met with resistance.

Having located the broad problem of fundamentalist intolerance, Fosdick turned to the specific points of disagreement. The first of these concerned the “vexed and mooted question” of the virgin birth. For a great many Christians, he conceded, the dominant view held “that the virgin birth is to be accepted as historical fact; it actually happened; there was no other way for a personality like the Master to come into this world except by a special biological miracle.” Indeed, this was *one* viewpoint, and “many are the gracious and beautiful souls who hold it” (8). But though he clearly emphasized the acceptability of this view within the range of Christian opinion, Fosdick was not content to grant it exclusive legitimacy. It was also possible to believe that “the virgin birth is not to be accepted as an historic fact.” Fosdick observed that “stories of

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miraculous generation are among the commonest traditions of antiquity,” especially when accounting for “the founders of great religions.” Indeed, Buddha, Zoroaster, Lao-Tsze, and Mahavira were all supposed to have been supernaturally born, leaving Moses, Confucius, and Mohammed as “the only great founders of religions in history to whom miraculous birth is not attributed.” In the ancient world, Fosdick argued, great personalities were commonly explained via “miraculous birth,” so Jesus was not unique in this respect (8). Knowing this, there were many reasonable Christians who believed that the virgin birth was probably traceable to a historically situated trope, rather than to the facts of the matter. They held this belief, not because they hoped to disturb the faith, but because it appeared to them the most reasonable and intellectually satisfying view on offer. Holding it, they believed themselves qualified to remain Christians in good standing.

Having thus sketched the competing positions on this question, Fosdick moved to summarize the problem posed by fundamentalism—a move that he would repeat after each of his three main points. “Here in the Christian churches,” he declared, “are these two groups of people and the question which the Fundamentalists raise is this—Shall one of them throw the other out?” (9) With graciousness toward orthodoxy and candor toward liberalism, Fosdick argued that believers should be free to exercise their God-given intellects and follow their consciences within the bounds of Christian community. This, he lamented, the fundamentalists would not abide. His critique of the virgin birth thus constituted both a defense of free inquiry and an accusation of closed-mindedness—both a parry and a jab.

A second matter worthy of consideration concerned “the inspiration of the Bible.” The orthodox view held that the Bible was wholly true and inerrant, “dictated by God to men.” Every story in it was to be accepted as historical fact, and nothing could be reasonably denied. Indeed, in this view, “everything there—scientific opinions, medical theories, historical judgments, as well as spiritual insight—is infallible.” Here again, though Fosdick granted legitimacy to this viewpoint and to those who sincerely held it, he observed also that it was but “one idea of the Bible’s inspiration”—one that many devout Christians could not honestly accept (10). He compared Biblical literalism to the traditional interpretation of the Koran then practiced by “Mohammedans,” an interpretation that “enshrines the theological and ethical ideas of Arabia at the time when it was written,” imagining God as “an Oriental monarch, fatalistic submission to his will as man’s chief duty,” as well as endorsing “the use of force on unbelievers, polygamy, slavery” and other practices abhorred by modern audiences. Given these stark liabilities, this traditional reading had become “a millstone about the neck of Mohammedanism” (10).

But before orthodox Christians became too strident in their critique of Muslims, Fosdick observed, they must concede that they faced the same problem with regard to their own scriptures. “All of these ideas, which we dislike in the Koran, are somewhere in the Bible,” he declared. Given the narrow proximity in space and time separating the composition of the Hebrew and Islamic scriptures, such similarity was anything but surprising. And yet, liberal theology had identified a vital distinction. Whereas the Koran declared itself the final Word of God to humanity, the Bible granted that problematic elements were transitory and subject to revision. Properly understood, Fosdick argued, Biblical scriptures were not bound by the forces of ancient history. Rather, God’s Word was always evolving, always open to the progressive nature of revelation. Indeed, “There are multitudes of Christians, then, who think, and rejoice

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as they think, of the Bible as the record of progressive unfolding of the character of God to His people from early primitive days until the great unveiling in Christ" (10). These Christians believed, contra the fundamentalists, that religious devotion was perfectly compatible with new knowledge, and that belief in an ancient deity did not require a commitment to *merely* ancient creeds.

Again, Fosdick declared, "Here in the Christian Church today are these two groups, and the question which the Fundamentalists have raised is this—Shall one of them drive the other out?" (11) In a situation where the truth cannot be known with absolute certainty, it made little sense for the proponents of one interpretation to exile those of another. Christ would not endorse it, and therefore it could not be considered a Christian act. Instead, all Christian thinkers should be permitted to explore their ideas freely, succeeding or failing on the merits and without restriction. Here Fosdick's defensive posture again enabled an offensive strike, pairing the justification of a liberal viewpoint with the corresponding critique of a fundamentalist dogma.

Finally, Fosdick turned his attention to the second coming of Christ. Here too, there were multiple interpretations. The orthodox view held that "Christ is literally coming, externally, on the clouds of heaven, to set up His kingdom here." For those who held this view, "Christ is coming!" seemed to be "the central message of the Gospel." Though many of these Christians felt inspired to do great works in anticipation of Christ's return, many others felt content to "sit still and do nothing and expect the world to grow worse and worse until He comes" (13). This posture, inspired by an ascendant premillennialism, ran directly counter to the social aspirations of liberal Christianity.<sup>29</sup> For liberal Christians, Christ's return was not to be imagined as a literal descent from the clouds. Rather, they had accepted "that development is God's way of working out His will," recognizing that "the most desirable elements in human life have come through the method of development" (14). If fundamentalists anticipated that Christ would return abruptly and dramatically, liberals believed that he was returning all along, via the gradual ascent of humanity toward higher understanding.

Thus, Fosdick concluded, a third time, "these two groups exist in the Christian churches and the question raised by the Fundamentalists is—Shall one of them drive the other out?" (15) On this point, as on the others, Fosdick found the narrowness and exclusivity of fundamentalist thought needlessly fracturing the community of the faithful and, in all likelihood, repelling the dedicated young people otherwise destined to comprise the future of the faith. In their fresh minds he glimpsed the intellectual integrity that fundamentalists hoped to forbid, thus enlisting their immense potential into a simultaneous defense of Christian liberty and a counterstrike on fundamentalist insularity. Here as throughout, Fosdick's defense of *liberty* marked a fitting response to the controversy, appealing to Christian Americans as both Christians and Americans, by way of a core value they shared.

Given the seriousness of the fundamentalist threat, liberals could not content themselves with a stationary defense. A strong rejoinder was required. Even as he modeled this response personally, Fosdick explained that it must contain a pair of essential elements. The first, he said, was "a spirit of tolerance and Christian liberty" (17). Since the fundamentalists were "giving us one of the worst exhibitions of bitter intolerance that the churches of this country have ever seen," it would be necessary for liberals to overcome their own arrogant tendencies, replacing them with openness and understanding. When they found themselves in

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disagreement with the ideas of others—whether new or old—liberals must learn to engage those ideas with compassion and love. “There are many opinions in the field of modern controversy concerning which I am not sure whether they are right or wrong,” Fosdick said, “but there is one thing I am sure of: courtesy and kindness and tolerance and humility and fairness are right. Opinions may be mistaken; love never is” (18). The second element was “a clear insight into the main issues of modern Christianity,” and with it, a refusal to be “quarreling over little matters when the world is dying of great needs” (20). Toxic as fundamentalism was by its very nature, it was made more so by its rigid insistence on doctrinal conformity over Christian living. As the clergy quibbled, the world burned. “Consider all the multitudes of men who so need God,” Fosdick said, “and then think of Christian churches making of themselves a cockpit of controversy when there is not a single thing at stake in the controversy on which depends the salvation of human souls. That is the trouble with this whole business. So much of it does not matter!” Though the fundamentalists disagreed sharply on this point, Fosdick insisted that the “one thing that does matter” was that “men in their personal lives and in their social relationships should know Jesus Christ” (20). The details should be ceded to individual minds and consciences, he argued, to free inquiry and honest appraisal, to the infinite mystery of the divine.

### Conclusion

In July of 1922, just under two months after Fosdick delivered his famous sermon, fundamentalist minister Clarence E. MacCartney responded with a sermon of his own, titled “Shall Unbelief Win?” Subsequently published in the *Presbyterian* newsletter, MacCartney’s sermon defended the historicity of all the relevant doctrines, including Christ’s virgin birth, the inerrancy of scripture, and the literal second coming. Although liberals touted the virtues of tolerance, he complained, their ultimate goal was nothing less than the secularization and emasculation of the faith.<sup>30</sup> Not content merely to critique, MacCartney and his Presbytery of Philadelphia petitioned the denominational General Assembly to “require the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian Church of New York City to conform to the system of doctrine taught in the Confession of Faith.”<sup>31</sup> If Fosdick’s purpose had been to lure the fundamentalists into a more aggressive offensive posture, they seemed to have taken the bait.

What followed was the churchly equivalent of a court martial, culminating at the 1923 General Assembly meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana. There MacCartney was joined by the “Great Commoner,” William Jennings Bryan, with whom Fosdick had lately sparred in print over the question of evolution.<sup>32</sup> Bryan ran as a conservative for the moderator’s chair, but lost out to the more temperate Dr. Charles F. Wishart on the fourth ballot. Later Bryan would introduce a series of resolutions, including one demanding that all Presbyterian officials abstain from alcohol (which was approved) and another forbidding all denominational schools, colleges, and universities from teaching Darwinian evolution (which was not). In the end, Bryan and MacCartney joined the rest of the fundamentalist wing in celebrating passage of a minority report reaffirming the fundamentalist articles of faith and calling for an investigation of the First Presbyterian Church of New York.

In the twelve months that followed, the investigation proceeded apace. Fosdick submitted his resignation in deference to the well-being of his church, and his church

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unanimously rejected that resignation in a show of loyalty to their pastor. Around the country, ministers took to their pulpits by turns to attack and to defend the embattled Fosdick. Sermons and articles were written, meetings were held, and arguments were leveled as conservatives and liberals fought each other and moderates looked on in conflicted sadness. Some in the denomination sought the excision of First Presbyterian from the fold, and some at First Presbyterian desired to secede from the denomination. Ultimately, an accord was reached by which Fosdick would choose either to become a Presbyterian—and so be bound by all Presbyterian rules and creeds—or else resign his position. Sensing that his fundamentalist rivals sought his conversion only so that he could then be excommunicated according to their bylaws, Fosdick decided to resign. Another year passed as the details were debated and resolved, and he delivered his final sermon at First Presbyterian Church on March 1, 1925, only a few months before the famous Scopes “Monkey” trial in was held Dayton, Tennessee, and the subsequent death of William Jennings Bryan.<sup>33</sup>

Though his time at First Presbyterian had come to an untimely close, Fosdick’s career was still young. Due to his national reputation as an orator—and in no small part because of his close connections to members of the New York elite—the pastor had his pick of new pulpits and opportunities. Especially attractive was an offer made by his good friend John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to finance the construction of a new gothic cathedral specifically tailored to Fosdick’s preaching. Plans were made and the new Riverside Church was built in Upper Manhattan’s Morningside Heights neighborhood, just down the street from Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University. After an interim appointment at the Park Avenue Baptist Church, Fosdick occupied his new pulpit on October 5, 1930. He would preach there—in unapologetically liberal style—for the next sixteen years.

Throughout his career, Harry Emerson Fosdick advocated an intellectually respectable faith defined by a passionate commitment to Christian liberty. In his autobiography, he traced this motivation back to a fellow son of western New York, the “Great Agnostic” Robert Ingersoll.<sup>34</sup> Recalling his commitment to free thought and to humane causes, Fosdick declared that “Ingersoll represents a tragedy, repeated innumerable times in my day.” Namely, “a man with the makings of a good Christian, in some of his attitudes and activities displaying a more Christian spirit than the average run of churchmen, turned into an atheist by the honest necessity of rebelling against a crude, incredible orthodoxy.” Much like many great and noble spirits before and since, Fosdick suggested, Ingersoll was repelled by “defenders of the faith presenting the faith in indefensible terms, and so alienating the minds they might have won.”<sup>35</sup>

Throughout his own ministry, Fosdick would work tirelessly to avoid that mistake. In May of 1922, this mission found its most cogent expression in his great missive against the fundamentalists. For all of its provocation, the sermon stood proudly in defense of tolerance, generosity, honesty, and liberty. Asked years later whether he ever regretted his decision to preach it, Fosdick demurred. “I am profoundly sorry that the sermon has been misinterpreted;” he wrote. “I am profoundly sorry that it has caused a disturbance; but I cannot be sorry at all that I preached that sermon. When I get to heaven I expect it to be one of the stars in my crown.”<sup>36</sup> From a fundamentalist perspective, it is perhaps controversial to suggest that Fosdick ever made it to heaven. For his many liberal supporters, however, it is satisfying to imagine the preacher bejeweled with stars.

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**Author's Note:** Eric C. Miller is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. He would like to thank J. Michael Hogan, Lauren Hunter, and an anonymous reviewer for their help with this essay.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" *The Christian Century* 39 (June 8, 1922): 713-717; "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" *The Christian Work* 102 (June 10, 1922): 716-722.

<sup>2</sup> Michael C. McGee coined the term *ideograph* to refer to ideological terms to which "human beings will react predictably and automatically." In America, *liberty* is one such term, and indeed may be *the* prime example. See Michael C. McGee, "The 'Ideograph': A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980): 1-16.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days* (New York: Harper & Sons, 1956), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet*, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 72.

<sup>9</sup> Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 94.

<sup>10</sup> The term *ecumenism* refers to an impulse, arising at various points in Church history, to unite the various Christian factions into one family, regardless of doctrinal differences.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Fosdick's devotion to England and subsequent call for US entry into the war put him at odds with certain other liberal clergymen, notably including the German-American social gospel architect Walter Rauschenbusch. See, for example, Christopher H. Evans, *The Kingdom is Always But Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet*, 77.

<sup>14</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, "The Trenches and the Church at Home," *Atlantic Monthly*, January, 1919.

<sup>15</sup> Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet*, 94.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet*, 94.

<sup>17</sup> Though this essay deals with *some* of the context attendant to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, far more is available elsewhere. See, for starters, Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (New York: Penguin, 1985); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); and Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (New York: Signet, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Though Twain and Warner's collaboration has never been widely praised as a great novel, its title did succinctly capture the spirit of the era. See Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age: A Story of Today* (Chicago: American Publishing Company, 1873; New York: Penguin Classics, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> For a complete history of the "Progressive Era" in American life, see Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> For the definitive text of the social gospel, see Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: HarperOne, 2007). For a more complete history, see Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2016). And for an excellent history of the social gospel's role in the labor movement, see Heath W. Carter, *Union Made: Working People and the Rise of Social Christianity in Chicago* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Originally published in four volumes, the essays were reprinted as a two-volume set in 2003. See R. A. Torrey and A. C. Dixon, eds, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> For a thorough history of the controversy as it existed specifically within the Presbyterian denomination, see Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). In her treatment of popular preacher Aimee Semple McPherson, Kristy Maddux offers an alternate view that fundamentalism and modernism may be better understood as "rhetorical styles" than rival factions. See Kristy Maddux, "The Foursquare Gospel of Aimee Semple McPherson," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 291-326.

<sup>28</sup> Halford R. Ryan, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Persuasive Preacher* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989), 16-19.

<sup>29</sup> Premillennial dispensationalism is an end times theology suggesting that the world will proceed through a series of ages (dispensations), falling ever deeper into sin and destruction, eventually prompting the return of Christ. Most liberal Christians are de facto postmillennialists in that they hope to improve the world until it embodies a properly Christian spirit. One historian has argued that premillennialism is perhaps the central tenet of fundamentalism. See Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Clarence E. MacCartney, "Shall Unbelief Win? An Answer to Dr. Fosdick," *Presbyterian*, July 13, 1922.

<sup>31</sup> Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 119.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 115. Bryan's contribution to the public debate over creationism and evolution has been examined by several rhetorical scholars. See, for example, Michael J. Hostetler, "William Jennings Bryan as Demosthenes: The Scopes Trial and the Undelivered Oration," *On Evolution*, *Western Journal of Communication* 62 (1998): 165-180; and Kristy Maddux, "Fundamentalist Fool or Populist Paragon? William Jennings Bryan and the Campaign Against Evolutionary Theory," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 16 (2013): 489-520.

<sup>33</sup> For the definitive history of the Scopes trial and the creation-evolution controversy more broadly, see Edward Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> Ingersoll's most recent biography comes from Susan Jacoby. See *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>35</sup> Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 21-22.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 117.