The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy

JOHN R. MUETHER[1]

Modern scholars who study contemporary American Protestantism commonly divide the movement into two main groups. Mainline Protestantism is a broadly inclusive group of theologically liberal denominations such as the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Presbyterian Church (USA). "Sideline" Protestants are members of smaller, breakaway denominations or independent churches that are "Bible believing." This division is roughly a century old, and it reflects the outcome of what is commonly called the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy (modernism, in this context, is the equivalent of theological liberalism). The conflict began in the Northern Presbyterian church, officially known at the time as the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA); it was separated from Southern Presbyterians from 1861 to 1983. However, the controversy would ultimately disrupt every Protestant denomination in North America. As we survey this controversy, we will see that a proper assessment of the conflict suggests that the name of the controversy is misleading.

THE SEEDS OF DIVISION

The roots of the controversy extend at least as far back as 1869, when Old School and New School Northern Presbyterians, who had separated in 1837, reunited after the Civil War. Voices at Princeton Theological Seminary, the bastion of Old School Presbyterianism, which did not support revivalistic meetings and methods, were of two minds. A.A. Hodge was convinced of the essential orthodoxy of the New School, which supported the revivals in America, and was persuaded that Presbyterians could be a greater witness to a nation healing from the trauma of war through the strength of united numbers. His father, Charles Hodge, was skeptical, fearing that the merger would yield a "broad-churchism" that would erode the church's confessional character.

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was Charles A. Briggs. As professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Briggs actively promoted the science of higher biblical criticism (although his views were mild compared to today's expressions of higher criticism). Progress in religion lay at the heart of the Protestant Reformation, he claimed, and it is particularly demanded of a church that would witness in a scientific age. Briggs was tapping into a sentiment that sought to soften the hard edges of the Westminster Confession of Faith. In the words of one historian, "Some of the time-honored rigidity in the Westminster Confession seemed obsolete to many Presbyterians."

B.B. Warfield, Charles Hodge's successor at Princeton, refused to participate in endeavors to revise the standards of the church. "It is an inexpressible grief," he lamented, to see the church "spending its energies in a vain attempt to lower its testimony to suit the ever-changing sentiment of the world around it." In a progressive era when change was a sign of health, his dissent persuaded few. In the words of an opponent, it sounded like a call for "the harmony of standing still."

The momentum for major revision of the Westminster Confession dissipated, however, when Briggs was tried for his higher-critical views. The 1891 General Assembly voted overwhelmingly (449–60) to veto Briggs' appointment at Union, and the 1893 Assembly found him guilty of denying the authority of Scripture and removed him from the ministry. (Union refused to remove Briggs, citing academic freedom, and chose instead to withdraw from the denomination. Briggs eventually affiliated with the Episcopal Church.)

THE CONFLICT INTENSIFIES

The Northern Presbyterian Church approved modest doctrinal revisions in 1903, but this did not deter the ambition of liberal voices urging the church to adapt to modern times. Presbyterianism at its best, they argued, is malleable and capable of adjusting to new cultural and intellectual developments. One change that began to take place was the significant expansion of the bureaucracy of the church in the interests of greater organizational efficiency, especially with the growth in power of General Assembly moderators and the office of the denominational stated clerk.

Conservatives sought to reinforce denominational loyalty to the authority of the Word of God through General Assembly deliverances. The 1892 General Assembly, meeting in Portland, Ore., declared, "Our church holds that the inspired Word of God, as it came from God, is without error." The 1910 assembly in Atlantic City, N.J., affirmed five doctrines as "essential and necessary": the virgin birth of Christ, Christ's vicarious atonement, Christ's bodily resurrection, the reality of miracles, and the promise of Christ's bodily return.

About this time, from 1910 to 1915, a series of twelve books were published, each containing articles defending orthodox Christian teaching against challenges from higher biblical criticism that was increasingly skeptical of the supernatural character of Christianity. Titled *The Fundamentals*, this series recruited a diverse collection of sixty-four authors, including many dispensationalist premillennialists and other respected scholars as well, such as Warfield and the Scottish theologian James Orr. It was not until 1920 that the term *fundamentalist* was first coined. It is credited to Curtis Lee Laws, who organized the Fundamentalist Fellowship within the Northern Baptists Convention, charging that liberals were abandoning the fundamentals of the gospel.

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Progressives in the Presbyterian church (generally centered in the Presbytery of New York), while calling themselves "evangelical," expressed growing resistance to doctrinal precision. Particular theories such as the substitutionary atonement of Christ, they argued, failed to exhaust the mysteries of divine revelation, which could not be reduced to tidy theological systems. Three provocative actions by liberals quickly brought the conflict to a boil.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, a Baptist minister who had been serving for four years as pulpit supply at First Presbyterian Church in New York City, preached the sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" on May 21, 1922. He explained that the so-called fundamental articles of faith were better understood as theories and that the church was better served by toleration between those with alternative theories. Moreover, he argued that debate was compromising the church's social witness. "The present world situation smells to heaven!" he exclaimed. "And now, in the presence of colossal problems, which must be solved in Christ's name and for Christ's sake, the Fundamentalists propose to drive out from the Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration. What immeasurable folly!" Thanks to the backing of Fosdick's close friend John D. Rockefeller Jr., the sermon was widely distributed.

The following year, the New York Presbytery ordained two graduates of Union Seminary who would not affirm the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ. When other presbyteries complained to the General Assembly about this action, liberals gathered at Auburn

Theological Seminary and composed the Auburn Affirmation, which was "designed to safeguard the unity and liberty" of the PCUSA. The affirmation rightly observed that the recent General Assembly deliverances in the Presbyterian church carried no constitutional weight. But it went on to claim that doctrines plainly taught in the church's constitution, the Westminster Standards—such as the virgin birth, atoning sacrifice, and resurrection of Christ—were mere theories and not facts taught in the Bible and were therefore not binding on Presbyterian ministers. By 1924, when more than twelve hundred ministers signed the Auburn Affirmation, it was clear that the controversy was heading for a showdown.

TWO DIRECTIONS FOR CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTISM

At this time, the fundamentalist camp began to diverge into two distinct trajectories. The shock of World War I's carnage provided sobering evidence for many of the rapid decline of Western civilization. In response, some fundamentalists expanded their concerns beyond ecclesiastical debates. The revivalist preacher Billy Sunday colorfully exclaimed that if hell were turned upside down, one would find the words "Made in Germany." The Russian Revolution of 1917 fueled interest in protecting the Christian heritage of America from foreign invasion even as it increased speculation regarding the end times. The *Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in 1909, released a revised edition in 1917 that popularized the identification of Russia with Gog and Magog from the book of Ezekiel.

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The elder Hodge's fears came true soon after his death in 1878. A growing number in the church lobbied to adapt to modern times. The greatest advocate for Presbyterian progress was Charles A. Briggs. As professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Briggs actively promoted the science of higher biblical criticism (although his views were mild compared to today's expressions of higher criticism). Progress in religion lay at the heart of the Protestant Reformation, he claimed, and it is particularly demanded of a church that would witness in a scientific age. Briggs was tapping into a sentiment that sought to soften the hard edges of the Westminster Confession of Faith. In the words of one historian, "Some of the time-honored rigidity in the Westminster Confession seemed obsolete to many Presbyterians."

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Holiday Crowd at Grand Central Terminal, New York City.

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These international crises shaped the protest in a nativist and populist direction. The major spokesman was William Jennings Bryan, the popular orator and three-time Democratic candidate for U.S. president. In Bryan's judgment, the rise of Protestant liberalism and the decline in contemporary morality both owed to the same source: Darwinism. In 1925, when a Dayton, Tenn. public school teacher was charged with teaching human evolution, Bryan lent his aid in the prosecution of the Scopes Trial. Although the verdict was technically a victory for the prosecution, it prompted the media's ridicule of Bryan (who died five days later) and the discrediting of fundamentalism in the national mind-set as bigoted, uneducated, and culturally backward.

Another conservative direction found its voice in Princeton Seminary's J. Gresham Machen, who emerged as the most eloquent defender of orthodoxy after the death of Warfield in 1921. Machen himself witnessed firsthand the devastation of World War I when he took a leave from Princeton to serve in YMCA relief efforts in France. But his 1923 book *Christianity and Liberalism* was restricted to the doctrinal divide in the Presbyterian church. As the very title implied, Machen described liberalism not as a variant of Christianity but as an entirely different religion. He wrote:

> *In the present conflict, the great redemptive religion which has been always known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology.*

Machen went on to demonstrate his thesis by looking systematically at the Christian doctrines of God, humanity, Scripture, Christ, and salvation.

Machen considered the church in the book's final chapter, where he argued that since modernism was a different religion altogether, the honorable thing for modernists to do was to withdraw from the church. Knowing this to be unlikely, Machen appealed to moderates in the church: "A separation between the two parties is the crying need of the hour." To allow ministers who opposed the message of the church "is not tolerance but simple dishonesty," he explained, likely with Fosdick in mind. "Indifferentism about doctrine makes no heroes of the faith."

Machen's manifesto against modernism became a best-seller, and it was recognized by the secular newspaper journalist H.L. Mencken as "undoubtedly right." But moderates could not follow Machen in his vision, especially when his opponents in the church and seminary portrayed themselves as winsome evangelicals. A General Assembly special commission appointed to study the causes of unrest in the church turned a deaf ear to Machen's testimony to the threat of liberalism. In its 1926 report, the commission confidently commended the "evangelical unity" that lay beneath the diversity of views.

"The church has flourished best," it wrote, "and showed most clearly the good hand of God upon it, when it laid aside its tendencies to stress these differences, and to put the emphasis on the spirit of unity." This stunning conclusion served to vindicate the signers of the Auburn Affirmation. When some signers of the Auburn Affirmation were then added to the reconstituted board at Princeton Seminary in 1929, Machen left and founded Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

In the next decade, the focus turned to the scandal of foreign missions in the PCUSA, with denominational support of modernism in the mission fields of the church. When Machen cofounded the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions to support orthodox missionaries in 1933, he was tried for his disloyalty to the official mission board of the church. After he lost his appeal before the 1936 General Assembly, he was defrocked, prompting him to leave the PCUSA and form what would become the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Sadly, few followed him (barely five thousand from a two-million-member church).

Machen succumbed to a brief illness and died suddenly on New Year's Day 1937 at age 55. His small denomination was but six months old, long enough for some fundamentalists to become disaffected with its direction. In 1938, a group split off to found the Bible Presbyterian Church, an expression of separatism aligned closely with populist fundamentalism, emphasizing a premillennial interpretation of prophecy and abstinence from alcoholic beverages.

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INTERPRETING THE CONTROVERSY

The alliance formed by fundamentalism proved fragile and temporary. To be sure, conservative voices shared a strident opposition to modernism, but there were differences in their rhetoric and their remedies. Mencken described the difference in stark terms: "Machen was to Bryan as the Matterhorn is to a wart."

Was Machen himself a fundamentalist? Machen always made clear that the term was not his choosing. "I never call myself a 'Fundamentalist,' " he said, because he sought to defend not a list of essentials but rather the whole counsel of God that finds confessional expression in the Westminster Standards. Still, he added, if forced to adopt a vocabulary

not his own and to choose between fundamentalism and modernism, he was willing to call himself "a fundamentalist of the most pronounced type."

The fallout of the debates suggests that the expression Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy is inadequate to describe the struggle that played out in the PCUSA and beyond. The controversy involved not two rival tribes but several parties: confessionalists, fundamentalists, moderates, and modernists. Machen failed to persuade the moderates of the ecclesiastical consequences of the struggle, and in the end, these moderates determined that theological strife was less desirable than even the threat of liberalism. Some went so far as to imagine that the church's willingness to discipline Briggs on the left and Machen on the right proved that the church was a stable expression of moderation. For a time, that judgment seemed vindicated, as mainline Presbyterianism rose to its height of cultural influence by mid-century, buoyed by a precarious peace that would be shattered by the revolutionary politics and theologies of the 1960s.

On the other hand, mid-century conservatives sought to create distance from the caricature that had become fundamentalism, especially its perceived anti-intellectualism and legalistic practice of the Christian faith. A neoevangelical renaissance saw the flourishing of an impressive network of parachurch organizations. But that renaissance was also largely short lived, as contemporary evangelicalism flounders in its vague and uncertain theological identity.

Ironically, what many conservative descendants of the fundamentalist movement share with the mainline liberalism that was their nemesis a century ago is a similar drift toward doctrinal indifference. In emphasizing an abbreviated list of "essential" doctrines, many evangelicals themselves have developed innovative ways of defining the Christian faith, departing from a creedal-based system of doctrine found in Scripture and substituting a theological minimalism built on large but thin communal ties. If liberals had overtly jettisoned the Westminster Standards in their zeal for becoming modern, a confessional vocabulary has also slowly declined on the right. An allergy to theological precision has left many of the heirs of both liberalism and fundamentalism barren of theological boundaries. They may differ on what "unites"—whether evangelism or social action—but there is agreement that "doctrine divides."

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