

American Presbyterian History

Week 10 – The Modernist Controversy, Pt. 1

Trinity Presbyterian Church

1. The Modernist – Fundamentalist Controversy of the Early 1900s

- a. The pressures of secularism and science began wandering from Europe into the US.
 - i. The Enlightenment had begun to unravel the moral fabric of society.
 - ii. Science began to be seen as an enemy of the Bible. Many of the divine events in the Bible were attempted to be explained away by science.
- b. An increasing concern arose among Protestant conservatives to defend orthodoxy.
 - i. Certain core beliefs were challenged by this new scientific approach to religion.
 - ii. Although this took place over the whole American Protestant landscape, the Presbyterian church was not immune to its infiltration.
- c. Two sides emerged in the PCUSA: the Modernists (or Liberals) and the Fundamentalists.
 - i. The Fundamentalists came down to defending five fundamental doctrines, while the Modernists saw them as unnecessary.
 - ii. The authority of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, the physical resurrection of Christ, the reality of Christ's miracles, and penal substitutionary atonement.

2. Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878 – 1969)

- a. “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” – May 21, 1922 at First Presbyterian Church in NYC.
 - i. “...the new knowledge and the old faith had to be blended in a new combination.”
 - ii. (in reference to the fundamental doctrines) “The question is—Has anybody a right to deny the Christian name to those who differ with him on such points and to shut against them the doors of the Christian fellowship?”
 - iii. “The second element which is needed...is a clear insight into the main issues of modern Christianity and a sense of penitent shame that the Christian Church should be quarreling over little matters when the world is dying of great needs.”
- b. Issues of inerrancy should be set aside in favor of solving the world’s societal problems.



3. William Jennings Bryan (1860 – 1925)

- a. Bryan was a Cumberland Presbyterian in the PCUSA who represented a large segment of the Fundamentalists.

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- b. His concern against the liberal tide was not as much over doctrine as it was over evolution and the threat to moralism (especially alcohol).
 - c. Bryan willingly took part in the Scopes Monkey Trial over teaching evolution in 1925, where he was publically humiliated and ridiculed by the press.



4. J. Gresham Machen (1881 – 1937)

- a. Born a Southern Presbyterian in the PCUS, Machen joined the PCUSA because he wanted to take part in the battles going on.
- b. Machen represented a different kind of Fundamentalist than most were used to.
 - i. Especially after Bryan, many of the Fundamentalists were seen publically as anti-intellectual.
 - ii. But Machen was educated and intelligent, and he became known for defending orthodox Christianity cogently and with eloquence on the public stage.
 - iii. In a way, he didn't exactly fit with some of the other Fundamentalists, especially because he never took up the moral or social causes that others like Bryan did.



- c. *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923)
 - i. In this benchmark book, Machen argued that liberalism and the Modernists were actually a different religion from Christianity because they were rejecting sin and the work of Jesus which is vital to the gospel.
 - ii. Machen's drive against liberalism was over salvation, not social reform/morals.
 - iii. "Here is found the most fundamental difference between liberalism and Christianity—liberalism is altogether in the imperative mood, while Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative; liberalism appeals to man's will, while Christianity announces, first, a gracious act of God."
 - iv. "'Christ died'—that is history; 'Christ died for our sins'—that is doctrine. Without these two elements, joined in an absolutely indissoluble union, there is no Christianity."

Next Week...*The Modernist Controversy, Pt. 2*