

How Can We Move Beyond Fundamentalism? Beyond Liberalism?

Sixth in the series "Questions from the Floor"

[Luke 13: 10–17](#)

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Prayer: You are the One who brought our Lord Jesus again to life from the dead. You are the One who has the will and power to begin again, to start anew. So we bid you, start again. Start here. Start now, with us and our church. Start with your mercy, with your justice, with your compassion, with your peace, all in your Word. Amen.

“Steve,” the email read, “maybe you could preach on the rampant fundamentalism of our region, and suggest ways to move beyond such narrow thinking.” Another one read “Is humankind improving or in decline? 19th century liberalism may have been naïve, but where is hope if we cannot make a difference?” And then there was an email from a very faithful member who had read Bishop John Spong’s most recent book *New Christianity for a New World* and felt liberated by it and wanted me to respond to his view of faith.

Once again, there is no way in a sermon to do justice to these questions, all asked out of a genuine desire to grow both intellectually and spiritually and all wanting Idlewild to help them in that growth. I thank God that this is a place where these questions can be raised! So how can we move beyond fundamentalism? And perhaps move beyond liberalism as well?

One of the great ironies of our age is that we live in an age that has been able to decode the DNA, to explore the outer reaches of the solar system, and to find cures for diseases that were death sentences only a few years back. And yet fundamentalism continues to grow in most of the religions of the world. We know all too well the dangers of Muslim fundamentalism run amok; Jewish fundamentalism is part of that explosive keg in the Middle East, and even Hindu fundamentalism has proven to be deadly in parts of Asia.

Here in the United States Christian fundamentalism is not only growing, but is playing an increasingly significant role in our nation’s public policy. The issue, however, is not new. In 1922 Harry Emerson Fosdick, then pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of New York City, preached what eventually became one of most famous sermons of the century, entitled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” The Presbyterian Church at that time was deeply split (Surprise! Surprise!) A mass of new knowledge had burst upon the modern world (does that sound familiar?): new knowledge about the physical universe, about its origin, its forces; new knowledge about history and the ways in which the ancient peoples used to think in matters of religion. New knowledge about how the Bible was written.

There was one group particularly threatened by this new knowledge, and they were known as Fundamentalists because they said that there were several fundamentals of the faith, and if anyone could not adhere to these four or five litmus tests, then they were to be considered

outside the bounds of truth, and outside the bounds of salvation. They drew a line in the sand. Among the fundamentals were:

- the belief in the virgin birth as a biological fact;
- the inerrancy of scripture and its verbal inspiration,
- the substitutionary understanding of the atonement wherein the death of Jesus was considered necessary to satisfy the wrath of God,
- and the belief in the literal, physical return of Jesus to set up a millennium, a kingdom on earth.

Listen to Fosdick:

“There is nothing new about the situation. It has happened again and again in history, as, for example, when the stationary earth suddenly began to move, and the universe that had been centered in this planet was centered in the sun around which the planets whirled. Whenever such a situation has arisen, there has been only one way out: the new knowledge and the old faith had to be blended in a new combination... The Fundamentalists are out on a campaign to shut the doors of Christian fellowship against [those who disagree with them]. Shall they be allowed to succeed?”¹

Had Fosdick wanted, he could have gone back further in history. Think of the number of times that the people of Galilee were confronted with something new; something that shattered their previous world of reality; something that went beyond what they knew to be true; and even went against their reading of holy scripture. And then think of the hostility that Jesus met with whenever he spoke with women, or touched them, when he ate with the unclean or took children into his lap, or healed on the Sabbath. It scared them to death, and they had to get rid of him.

Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament professor at Columbia Seminary, said recently that whenever God does something new, it scares the socks off of people! And God must enjoy scaring the socks off of people because God is always doing a new thing.² So the people react with anxiety and fear and hold on to what they know for dear life.

No, the fundamentalist movement is not new, and is grounded, almost always, then and now, in the belief that the Bible was dictated by God from above; that it is NOT to be interpreted but simply obeyed; and that no effort need to be expended in trying to understand that the world out of which a particular Biblical text might have arisen could be somewhat different from the world in which we live and struggle to be faithful. Biblical truth to fundamentalism is obvious, not debatable, and unchanging as stone.³ It is best summarized by the bumper sticker you’ve seen: “The Bible said it; I believe it; That settles it!”

The modernists took the day in the 1920s in the Presbyterian Church, but there were still strains of this view throughout the century. As we take a look at past schisms in our own denomination, we find that two denominations, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America, came into being in the 1960’s and 1970’s as a result of the

debate over this kind of biblical interpretation and the ecclesiastical issues that resulted from that. One of the issues was race; another had to do with the ordination of women.

Take a look at Paul's letter to the church at Corinth:

“Women should be silent in the church. If there is anything they desire to know, they should ask their husbands at home. It is shameful for women to speak in the church.” (I Cor. 14: 34–35)

The fundamentalist view of that passage is...just that. That was what God's word said on the subject once and for all, for all time and all places. There's no need for any interpretation there.

But the largest problem with fundamentalism is not so much the issues; rather it is the adherence to the belief that those who disagree with them are banished to a state of apostasy; that anyone who differs from their dogma is less moral, and less precious to God. It's not just the views. Many faithful Christians have the same views as the fundamentalists, but the difference is that those faithful Christians about whom I am speaking at least *consider* the possibility that they may be wrong, or at least acknowledge the reality that good Christians can read the same bible and disagree without forever banishing them from Christian fellowship. They are not afraid of new insights. They approach scripture with humility, rather than self-righteousness. It was Reinhold Niebuhr, the Christian realist, who consistently warned against “the fanaticism of all good [people], who do not know that they are not as good as they esteem themselves to be.”⁴

Fundamentalism so easily leads to self-righteousness, because the God of fundamentalism is too small and too petty. For it just might be that the winds of the Holy Spirit are blowing us into a new day, and God just might be the author of new insights. That can scare the socks off of people!

Historically the alternative to fundamentalism was theological liberalism. It reached its hey-day right around the turn of the century, shortly before Dr. Fosdick preached his sermon that I referred to earlier. It was an exciting time for thinking Christians. It was characterized by an abiding optimism about the future. Think of what these new scientific and historical discoveries could mean to the future of humanity! They were shaped by the Enlightenment, and as people got smarter and were better educated, they would become better people; that the human capacity for cruelty, the power of self-interest would naturally diminish when people realized those things did not work well.

The problem theologically was the shift of the starting point. Rather than beginning with revelation, with God's self-disclosure, the early liberal theologians began not with God, but with the experience of God. Most of you remember by now know the answer to that first famous question of the Westminster Catechism: “What is the chief end of man?” “To glorify God and to enjoy God forever.” But now the focus shifted a bit, from God to God's most glorious creation—the human creature. And faith was placed in our capacity to learn, and through learning, our nature would improve.

But liberalism's bubble burst with something called...the Twentieth Century. World War I (the war to end wars!), World War II, the holocaust, genocide, and the very real possibility of nuclear war and the end of life as we know it. The most violent century in the history of humanity offered irrefutable evidence that human nature had not improved very much.

The liberal church, however, was determined not to be close-minded or other-worldly or irrelevant to the sophisticated and increasingly secularized society in which it found itself. And so when people came to the American mainline church in the latter half of the century, with a hunger for meaning in their lives, searching for a way to make sense of the world with all of its changes, and desperately wanting a vision to which they could dedicate their hearts and minds and energies, the church didn't have anything to offer that the world couldn't offer. The language of the church and the language of the world all sounded the same. God, instead of being cloaked in mystery and awe and holiness, became a "good buddy," or in Dolly Parton's words, "a living doll!" One theologian suggested that the hymn "Holy, holy, holy" had been replaced by "Nice, nice, nice." And along with that, it became harder and harder to tell the difference between the values of the world and the values of the church. The marks of a successful church were the same as the marks of a successful business. The church offered form, but substance was missing. Truth became more relative than not. Ethics became more individualized than not.

There was another tack taken by the more liberal wing of the liberal church. It began, rightly, with the Reformed understanding of the sovereignty of God and in the Biblical witness to the peace and justice of God. And it began, rightly, to speak out against social injustice and for civil rights and social reforms. But somehow, it forgot where its grounding was. It forgot to pay attention to the matter of Christian identity formation and Christian spirituality. Young people could be baptized into the church and nurtured in the church and years later not know much about the faith story of which the social concern of their church emerged.

Once again listen to how Walter Brueggemann described the consequences:

"When the church stops telling young people its promises, what will happen is they grow up to be adults who believe that everything must stay the way it is and this will, in turn, yield a defeated world, a world with no hope, a world driven by an economy of scarcity and greed."⁵

In short, liberalism, like fundamentalism, tends to take human ideas and actions too seriously and God not seriously enough. The God of fundamentalism is too small and too petty. The God of liberalism is too small and too weak. God's mystery and holiness are removed. Liberalism is never realistic enough about the inevitability of human frailty, the limits of human knowledge, and the seemingly unlimited capacity of evil to reassert itself in every realm.

So how can we move beyond both fundamentalism and liberalism in this post-modern world? I can only offer a few suggestions.

First, the church is called not to be an optimistic church, but a *hopeful* church. Optimism is based upon human capacity to do good. Hope is based in God; and not that God will do what we want God to do, but that God will continue to surprise and amaze us. A hopeful church is a church that grounds its actions, not in wishful thinking, not in a belief that we are the ones who can bring in the kingdom, but grounds its thinking in the promises of God and in the sure conviction that God is bringing a new reality into the world. We don't bring the kingdom in. God does. And because God is good, God lets us participate in the building of the kingdom. What a joy! What an honor! The church of the future is a hopeful church.

The faithful church takes as its starting point that particular, peculiar story of the God whom we have come to know in Jesus Christ and in the testimony of the faith community across the ages.

Secondly, we move beyond fundamentalism and liberalism by being an “intellectually hospitable and tolerant” church. That was the term used by Dr. Fosdick. You have heard me talk before about the biblical witness of hospitality and how in being hospitable to the stranger, we might be welcoming God. We need to be hospitable not only to new people, but to new ideas. We can maintain our distinctive Christian identity while at the same time co-existing with people of other faiths in an atmosphere of kindness and respect and appreciation for those differences. We should welcome the new insights of science and history and psychology and anthropology, not as ends in and of themselves, not with the idea that they will provide our salvation, but as gifts that can stir the imagination as we then let that imagination be shaped by the story of God's revelation in Jesus Christ who is our salvation.

Young people today are looking to the church once again for answers to life's ultimate questions. They are looking for a vision by which they can live, one that is big enough for all their hopes and dreams. A narrow, pre-fabricated bunch of pat answers simply won't do.

Last year Anne Apple helped us re-form our entire confirmation process for young people. They were stretched spiritually, intellectually, and even physically as never before, having to get up to come to Sunday School every Sunday. And at the end of the year, they gave their faith journeys. On one extreme you had a young person to say that the most meaningful moment of her life was when she accepted Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior.” On the other extreme you had a young person who really didn't know at this point what he believed about Jesus Christ. Idlewild needs to be a place for both young people in their very different faith pilgrimages. An intellectually hospitable and tolerant church.

Finally, the church of the future that goes beyond fundamentalism and liberal is one that must pay attention to that which is important. Dr. Fosdick said that in the face of that great war which had just ended, people in churches all too often played with “the tiddlywinks and peccadilloes of religion.”⁶ He paraphrased the prophets of the Old Testament, and said that it is almost unforgivable that people should tithe mint and anise and cumin and quarrel over them, when the world is perishing for the lack of the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faith.

I am convinced that young people have left the church over the past generation not because the church meddled in things it shouldn't have, but because the church never said or did anything that mattered. The things that matter to God ought to matter to the church.

Beyond fundamentalism and liberalism lies the possibility of the faithful church of the future: a church that is hopeful, whose hope is grounded in God; a church that is hospitable and tolerant of new ideas, under-girded by the old story of Jesus and his love; and a church that is attentive to what matters to God.

In the end fundamentalists do not stand on high moral ground. Liberals do not stand on high moral ground. Rather, all gather before the same sovereign, holy, and loving God who might scare our socks off, but only because God is doing a new thing, and doing it out of love.

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- ¹ Fosdick, Harry Emerson, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" *The Riverside Preachers*. Pilgrim Press, New York, 1978. p. 29.
 - ² He said this in a remarkable new video produced by the Covenant Network of Presbyterians entitled "Turning Points: Stories of Life and Change in the Church." 2004
 - ³ Joanna Adams, "What's Wrong with Fundamentalism?" Trinity Presbyterian Church, January 3, 1993.
 - ⁴ Niebuhr, Reinhold, as quoted by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. "The Opening of the American Mind,": a lecture at Brown University.
 - ⁵ Brueggemann, Walter, "Transforming the Imagination," *B. & R.*, Spring, 1992, p. 35.
 - ⁶ Fosdick, op. cit., p. 37.

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Luke 13: 10–17 NRS

10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. **11** And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. **12** When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." **13** When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. **14** But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." **15** But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? **16** And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" **17** When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

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