

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Harry Emerson Fosdick and the Emerging Theology of Early Liberalism

Scripture: Job 28:28; Psalm 38:1–3; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 9:10; Proverbs 15:33; Isaiah 8:13; Micah 6:9; Romans 11:22; Hebrews 10:31

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In the early part of the 20th century liberalism took mainline Protestant churches by storm.

In fact, it might be argued that the first half of the century ushered in the most serious spiritual decline since the Protestant Reformation. *Historic evangelicalism*,¹ which had dominated Protestant America since the days of the founding fathers, was virtually driven out of denominational schools and churches.

In a few decades, liberalism virtually destroyed the largest Protestant denominations in America and Europe.

Evangelicalism managed to survive and even seemed to thrive for awhile outside the denominations. But it never regained its influence in the mainline groups. Instead it flourished chiefly in relatively small denominations and non-denominational churches.

Sadly, the broad movement that encompassed evangelicalism in the 20th century now seems poised to follow the very same path that led the mainline churches to disaster a century ago.

One of the most popular spokesmen for liberal Christianity in its heyday was Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City. Fosdick, while remaining strongly committed to liberal theology, nevertheless acknowledged that the new theology was undermining the concept of a holy God. Contrasting his age with that of Jonathan Edwards, Fosdick wrote,

Jonathan Edwards' Enfield sermon ["Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"] pictured sinners held over the blazing abyss of hell in the hands of a wrathful deity who at any moment was likely to let go, and so terrific was that discourse in its delivery that women fainted and strong men clung in agony to the pillars of the church. Obviously, we do not believe in that kind of God any more, and as always in reaction we swing to the opposite extreme, so in the theology of these recent years we have taught a very mild, benignant sort of deity . . . Indeed, the god of the new theology has not seemed to care acutely, about sin; certainly he has not been warranted to punish heavily; he has been an indulgent parent and when we have sinned, a polite "Excuse me" has seemed more than adequate to make amends.²

Fosdick was never so right. He correctly saw that liberalism had led to a warped and imbalanced concept of God. He could even see far enough ahead to realize that liberalism was taking society into a dangerous wasteland of amorality, where "man's sin, his greed, his selfishness, his rapacity roll up across the years an accumulating mass of consequence until at last in a mad collapse the whole earth crashes into ruin."³

Writing in the wake of World War I, Fosdick suggested that "*the moral order of the world* has been dipping us in hell."⁴

Despite all that, Fosdick ultimately would not acknowledge the literal reality of God's wrath toward impenitent sinners. To him, "the wrath of God" was nothing more than a metaphor for the natural consequences of wrongdoing. His theology would not tolerate a personal God whose righteous anger burns against sin. To Fosdick, the threat of hell fire was only a relic of a barbaric age. *"Obviously, we do not believe in that kind of God any more."*

Fosdick wrote those words almost ninety years ago. Sadly, what was true of *liberalism* then is all too true in the so-called "evangelical movement" today. "Evangelicals" have to a very large degree rejected the reality of God's wrath. They have disregarded His hatred for sin. The god most evangelicals now describe is completely benevolent and not the least bit angry.

Post-modern "evangelicals" have forgotten (or simply refused to believe) that "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). These days, *they* are the ones saying, *"We do not believe in that kind of God any more."*⁵

"Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God" (Romans 11:22).

Ironically, an overemphasis on divine beneficence actually works *against* a sound understanding of God's love. It has given multitudes the disastrous impression that God is kindly but feeble, or aloof, or simply unconcerned about human wickedness. Is it any wonder that people with a such a concept of God defy His holiness, take His love for granted, and presume on His grace and mercy? Certainly no one would *fear* a deity like that.

Yet Scripture tells us repeatedly that *fear* of God is the very foundation of true wisdom (Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Micah 6:9). People often try to explain away the sense of those verses by saying that the "fear" called for is nothing more than a devout sense of awe and reverence. Certainly the fear of God *includes* awe and reverence, but it does not *exclude* literal holy terror. "It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread" (Isaiah 8:13).

We must recapture some of the holy terror that comes with a right understanding of God's righteous anger. We need to remember that God's wrath *does* burn against impenitent sinners (Psalm 38:1-3). That reality is the very thing that makes His love so wonderful. We must therefore proclaim these truths with the same sense of conviction and fervency we employ when we declare the *love* of God. It is only against the backdrop of divine wrath that the full significance of God's love can be truly understood. That is precisely the message of the cross of Jesus Christ. After all, it was on the cross that God's love and His wrath converged in all their majestic fullness.

Only those who see themselves as sinners in the hands of an angry God can fully appreciate the magnitude and wonder of His love. In this regard our generation is surely at a greater disadvantage than any previous age. We have been force-fed the doctrines of self-esteem for so long that most people don't really view themselves as sinners worthy of divine wrath. On top of that, religious liberalism, humanism, evangelical compromise, and ignorance of the Scriptures have all worked against a right understanding of who God is. Ironically, in an age that conceives of God as wholly loving, altogether devoid of wrath, most people are tragically ill-equipped to understand what God's love is all about!

The simple fact is that we cannot appreciate God's love until we have learned to fear Him. We

cannot know His love apart from some knowledge of His wrath. We cannot study the kindness of God without also encountering His severity. And if the church of our generation does not regain a healthy balance soon, the rich biblical truth of divine love is likely to be obscured behind what is essentially a liberal, humanistic concept.

1. From the time of the Protestant Reformation until fairly recently, the expression *evangelical* has referred to those who believe that the Bible is inspired and absolutely authoritative, and who therefore understand that salvation from sin is available through faith in Christ alone, not by any works or sacraments. When I speak of "historic evangelicalism," I'm using the term in *that specific and technical* sense, minus all the contemporary baggage the word *evangelical* seems to have acquired.

2. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Christianity and Progress* (New York: Revell, 1922), 173-74 (emphasis added).

3. Ibid., 174.

4. Ibid (emphasis added).

5. See Robert Brow, "Evangelical Megashift," *Christianity Today* (February 19, 1990), pp. 12-14.

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