

**A Fundamentalist Sermon
By A Modernist Preacher**

BY

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

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Text: "Ask for the old paths, where is the good way; and walk therein."

—*Jeremiah 6:16*

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THIS sermon springs from conversations with two young men. In intellect and character they represent the best we have, one a Jew, the other a Christian, and in effect they said to me the same thing.

Said the young Jew, "Long ago I gave over orthodox Judaism and am a convinced liberal, but sometimes, worshiping in modernist synagogues, I feel that something is missing from our new Judaism that the old Jews had, and that in comparison with theirs our religious faith is thin and superficial."

A few days afterwards a young Christian said to me, "I am a modernist. I never could force my mind back into the narrow molds of the old theology but sometimes, especially in crises, when one wants deep rootage, the modernist soil seems thin. There was power and depth in that old-fashioned Christianity which sometimes we modernists lack."

As I listened to those two young men I thought about another Jew, also the best of his time, the record of whose forty years of undiscourageable prophethood is carved upon the capitals of this nave, who long ago in a day of crisis and moral chaos said, "Ask for the old paths, where is the good way; and walk therein."

This morning I share with you the consequence of thinking about these three young men. Let us say plainly at the start that the words of Jeremiah, "Ask for the old paths," are so fundamentalist that one wonders whether anybody except a fundamentalist has hitherto preached on them. We, of

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course, stand stoutly here for the gains of modernism. We do not run our thoughts of God into the molds of old world-views or identify our Christian life with obsolete doctrines, miracles, and Biblical inerrancies. We do not believe in the old pictures of creation behind us or of second-comings on the clouds ahead of us. We gratefully accept the new knowledge of the world and we will have our Christianity in terms of thinking that honestly belong to us as intelligent moderns or we will not have it at all. So far from singing

'Tis the old time religion,
And it's good enough for me,

we would no more join in that than in singing that the old ideas of a flat earth or old ways of getting from New York to Chicago are good enough for us. They distinctly are not. When, therefore, this morning we ask for the old paths, we are making no recantation of modernism.

Lowell is right about that :

Time makes ancient good uncouth ;
They must upward still, and onward, who would keep
abreast of Truth ;
Lo, before us gleam her camp-fires ! we ourselves
must Pilgrims be,
Launch our Mayflower, and steer boldly through the
desperate winter sea,
Nor attempt the Future's portal with the Past's blood-
rusted key.

That is true. Nevertheless, consider that James Russell Lowell wrote that. He was a very modern man, a Harvard professor, a Unitarian, an emancipated intellectual. Where, then, was he looking for the example of the kind of spirit which he did not wish his generation to lose? Of all places, in the Pilgrim forefathers! How little he would have agreed with most of their opinions! and yet he did wish that his generation might keep some-

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thing that was deep in the spirit of the Pilgrims at their best. Even he was asking for the old paths.

This, I take it, is what my two young friends meant. This is what we are driving at. Old-fashioned Christianity did have in it something deep and powerful which we modernists often miss.

What we are doing, then, this morning, might be summed up in some such way as this. Our religious modernism, standing for the right of the mind for freedom from the cramping limitations of obsolete theologies, has had to win its way against militant opposition. As always happens in such a case, we have had to show up the faults of the old-fashioned Christianity, take our stand against them, assail their obscurantisms and their appalling appeals to fear. In a word, modernism has been compelled to deal with the old-fashioned Christianity at its worst. Today we are going to take a look at it at its best.

That is fair. If we are to hold the allegiance of my two friends, we would better take a look at the old-fashioned religion at its best. They are right about it. Depth and power were sometimes there which our superficial modernism lacks.

Consider Martin Luther, for example. We could not go back to his theology even if we wanted to. To his dying day he thought the earth was stationary and he even called Copernicus "a new astrologer." He thought that demons caused thunderstorms and is reputed to have hurled his ink pot at the devil. Any modernist can have his fill of condescension, thinking how much better informed he is than Martin Luther.

Yes, but let every modernist remember that once Martin Luther stood in the presence of the Emperor Charles, surrounded by his royal court,

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and, knowing well that he was bringing down upon his head the combined wrath of Empire and Church, announced his dangerous convictions, saying, "Here stand I. God help me. I cannot otherwise." My soul, what a religion! It produced something that our modernism often does not produce, the unconsenting individual conscience.

If there is one thing that society has a right to expect from religion it is that. As a religious man society does not need me because I happen to believe in evolution or in a law-abiding cosmos. As a religious man society needs me because I am supposed to have an inner loyalty to something greater than kings, stronger than armies, more imperative than popular majorities. As a religious man society needs me because I am supposed to keep my moral watch, not by casual street clocks, but by sun time. That is why so many religious leaders in America protested against the majority decision of the judges of the Supreme Court in the *Macintosh* case. So far as legal technicalities are concerned, that is their affair—we are not competent—but when Justice Sutherland for the majority and Chief Justice Hughes for the minority say what they do say concerning the effect of that decision on religion, then we men of religion know that Chief Justice Hughes is right.

To say that no man can become a citizen of this republic unless he is willing in advance to agree to surrender to his conscience to the nation in any war that chances to come along is the same thing as saying that no man can become a citizen of this nation without agreeing to be willing in advance to give up any real religion that he has, because a real religion always erects at the center of a man's life an inner tribunal, his conscience before God, which he must obey rather than anything that any government or any majority dictates to him.

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Now, the old-fashioned Christianity at its best did often produce that unconsenting conscience. To be sure, our forefathers often put their stubborn conscientiousness in dour forms. John Bunyan would stay in jail, he said, for his convictions till the moss did grow upon his eyebrows. Who was it said of John Calvin that he feared God so much that he did not fear anything else on earth at all? Outgrow the forms if you will; nevertheless, let it be said that that old-fashioned Christianity was not emotionally sentimental and morally easy-going like much of our superficial modernism. It did at its best put granite into the characters of men, and sometimes that unconsenting conscience lifted whole groups, like the Puritans and the Pilgrims, into tremendous exploits. I suspect that one of the things which my two young friends miss in much modernism is this moral grip.

To be sure, modernists have often told them that they must clear up the social situation, rebuild the economic order, and improve international relationships. That kind of unconsenting conscience which deals with social evils in the large, modernism distinctly does possess. In that respect I suspect that we have more faith and a better kind of faith than our forefathers had. But these young people discover that in the meantime, before we have transformed the world, they have another task—to transcend the world, individually to live above it, individually to stand out from it and be superior to it, and from the low levels of its life to appeal to the inner tribunal of conscience. I call you to witness that at that point much of our broadminded, emancipated, intellectual modernism is soft.

We would better take that to heart here in this city. You say you never will go back to those old

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theologies and sectarianisms. I agree. So be it. But, my friends, they are not religion.

Remember what Myers put upon the lips of St. Paul:

Whoso has felt the Spirit of the Highest
cannot confound nor doubt Him nor deny:
yea with one voice, o world, tho' thou deniest,
Stand thou on that side, for on this am I.

That is religion and for all our new intelligence we would better ask for that old path.

Again, consider a man like St. Augustine, in the fourth and fifth centuries. His theology would be impossible to us. He was so responsible for the doctrine of predestination that if in any kingdom of heaven he knows what came of it on earth he must be penitent and ashamed. Nothing would be easier than for a modernist to condescend to Augustine. Yes, until he starts thinking about Augustine's life! Running away from his boyhood's home in North Africa to Italy to escape the influence of his Christian mother, living there with his mistress, prospering as a rhetorician at the headquarters of the Empire, there at last he fell under the spell of a great Christian, Ambrose of Milan. Walking one day in his garden at war with his own conscience he thought he heard a voice saying, "Take up and read," and turning to the New Testament his eyes fell on this verse: "Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof." That was to him what the Damascus Road was to Paul or a little Moravian prayer meeting in Old London to John Wesley. From that day his life ran out like an ever deepening river through one of the most chaotic, desperate eras in history, with the Roman Empire crashing all around him until at last he died courageously in his episcopal city of

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Hippo while the barbarians were hammering at the city gates, and through it all runs the tremendous power of his prayers. "Come, O Lord, in much mercy down into my soul, and take possession and dwell there. A homely mansion, I confess, for so glorious a Majesty, but such as Thou art fitting up for the reception of Thee . . . Give me Thine own self, without which, though Thou shouldst give me all that ever Thou hast made, yet could not my desires be satisfied." What a religion!—power over tumultuous passions within and desperate circumstances without. I suspect that it is that kind of thing which my two young friends often miss in superficial modernism.

You see, modernism has stressed activity. We modernists are very busy. The gospel of modernism has largely concerned work. Admirable as that is, our forefathers understood that religion is not simply activity but receptivity. So at their best they struck their roots far down; so at their best they dug their wells deep. They did not read so many books as we do but those they did read they thought more about. They did not do so many things as we do but they understood better the uses of solitude. They did not join so many committees as we do but they understood better the meaning of prayer. Sometimes, in consequence, there emerged a personal, spiritual power that puts us to shame.

You see, my friends, the progress of spiritual life is a good deal like the advance of an army in this regard: the objectives are ahead but the provisions come from behind. Alas for an army that is all objective and no base! And in precisely that situation a good deal of our superficial modernism is today—excellent objectives, admirable objectives, but the lines of communication with the base of supplies cut so that when a crisis falls and brings

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the impact of its fear and its discouragement on all of us, modernism seems thin.

If some one here is saying that this is an old man's point of view, I protest. You are mistaken, my friend. Only this last week a young man came to see me considering the possibility of going over from Protestantism to Roman Catholicism. Why? Because, said he, in all his youth in liberal Protestant churches he never had been taught how to pray and now in a crisis, where things were hard outside and inside, he had found some Roman Catholic friends who did know how to pray and, trying it, he had found power to carry on. You see, we Protestant modernists have sometimes been so anxious to be liberal that we have forgotten to be religious.

We had better take that to ourselves here in this church. We never will go back to those old theologies and outgrown sectarianisms. Granted! But we might well go back to One who antedates those old theologies and sectarianisms and who long ago, having to face a Cross, sought the Father's help in a garden. He never would have been able to face that Cross as he did face it without his experience in that garden. As we see him coming out from under those olive trees inwardly ready now for any Calvary with which the world may face him, for all our new intelligence we would better ask for that old path.

Consider again a man like John Calvin. He is too hard and metallic a soul easily to be fond of and he did so share the intolerance of his day that some things he did, like consenting to the death of Servetus, seem to us unforgivable. As for his theology, with the damnation of non-elect infants and the rest, even fundamentalists cannot stomach that. A few years ago in this country one of our great

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denominations, I am told, in convention assembled held a debate as to whether or not they did believe in the damnation of non-elect infants, and as the vote was about to be taken a professor of Greek with a sense of humor rose and said, "Mr. Moderator, would it be possible so to phrase this motion that the effects of it would be made retroactive so that all those helpless infants which have been roasting down there for ages might be saved any further suffering?" The assembly broke down in uncontrollable hilarity. So, nothing could be easier from the standpoint of modern intelligence than to deride John Calvin.

Nevertheless, take one good look more at that terrific theology of his with predestination, election, and eternal punishment. Of course I do not believe it. But I see that at least here was an honest man who did not propose to allow himself soft deceits about the kind of universe he lived in. Go yourself and look at an imbecile child. There is predestination for you. As another said, that child was not born but damned into the world. Look all about you at children, some of them endowed with everything that heredity and early environment give to guarantee achievement and some of them endowed with little or nothing except foretokens of failure and doom. There is election for you, some chosen and some not. Or watch the law-abiding processes of this cosmos where we do reap what we sow and men and nations plunge prodigiously through evil doing into inevitable punishment. There is hell for you, observable to anyone with eyes.

Now, the old theological forms in which our forefathers endeavored to put these facts I take to be as dead as Sennacherib, but I call your attention to the fact that in comparison with the candor and fearlessness with which the old-time Christianity

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faced these facts, our superficial modernism, with its sing-song from Coué about, Every day, in every way, we are getting better and better, sounds soft and lush and sentimental.

That is why scientists of an earlier day, like Thomas Huxley, or modern agnostics like Walter Lippmann, both agree in having more intellectual respect for the old Christianity than for the new, though believing in neither. Listen to Thomas Huxley:

The doctrines of predestination, of original sin, of the innate depravity of man and the evil fate of the greater part of the race, . . . faulty as they are, appear to me to be vastly nearer the truth than the "liberal" popular illusions that babies are all born good . . . ; that it is given to everybody to reach the ethical ideal if he will only try; that all partial evil is universal good, and other optimistic figments, such as that which represents "Providence" under the guise of a paternal philanthropist, and bids us believe that everything will come right (according to our notions) at last.

Indeed, in a time of storm and stress like this, we have some lamentable consequences from the soft and roseate view of the universe which too often modernism has encouraged. What a stream of individuals appear who, having maintained faith in God while everything was going well, now give it up because some things are going ill! They are fair-weather Christians, you see. They can believe in God as long as they are comfortable but if they are uncomfortable they give up God.

What kind of universe do they think they are living in anyway? This is a wild place. Our forefathers understood that. This is a world where Christs come and are crucified, where being disciples of Christ might mean being boiled in oil. This is a world where whole civilizations crumble into

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dust so that only archeologists can read the meaning of their hopes and fears. This is a universe where an entire planet, like this earth, once having been uninhabitable, will some day be uninhabitable again, and the fairest hopes that ever stretched their sails upon the human sea can be wrecked and be made hulks of by man's un wisdom and his sin. We fair-weather modernists would better salute those old-time Christians. They did not blink the facts. Instead of lying to themselves about the kind of universe this is they achieved a faith strong enough to rise above it, carry off a spiritual victory in the face of it, and in the darkest hours that ever fell on human history they lifted high an ancient song :

Therefore will we not fear, though the earth do change,
And though the mountains be shaken into the heart of
the seas ;
Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled,
Though the mountains tremble with the swelling
thereof.

•••••
The Lord of hosts is with us ;
The God of Jacob is our refuge.

I suspect that it is a realistic and courageous faith like that which my young friends too often miss in modernism, and they are right.

Fair-weather Christians are not Christians at all. Look at Christ and see. Not until a man can face, as he faced, the darkest facts of life and still keep his soul unafraid does he know what it means to be a Christian.

An unconsenting, individual conscience, the deep secrets of prayer, a courageous faith in God that rises above the darkest facts of life—there was depth and power in that old-time Christianity that our thin modernism often misses. If that be fundamentalism, make the most of it.

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You see, we modernists have often gotten at our faith by a negative process. We do not believe this. We do not believe that. We have given up this incredible idea or that obsolete doctrine. So we pare down and dim out our faith by negative abstractions until we have left only the ghostly remainder of what was once a great religion. Then seeing how few our positive convictions are and how little they matter, we grow easy-going about everybody else's convictions, and end in a mush of general concession. Then a crisis falls upon the individual soul, upon the family, upon the world at large, where a religion that is going to amount to anything must have deep conviction in it. "The rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock"— Ah, how much we need that!

Some of us have never lost that. There is no reason why a modernist should lose that. If modernism is going to make any permanent contribution to the spiritual life of man it must not lose that. Here in this church we will not stand for such thin modernism. O my soul, be broad in your sympathies but, O my soul, go deep in your convictions!

PRAYER

Eternal God, our Father, forgive us that we sometimes have thought that we were better than our fathers. Measure us, we pray Thee, against the granite strength of their characters at their best and make us today ashamed and penitent. Amen.





