

In the decades leading up to the theological debates of the 1920's and 1930's, various social factors had a profound effect on contemporary theology. It is against the backdrop of a rapidly changing society that the corresponding shifts in theology must be understood. Massive immigration, industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratic consolidation, and technical innovation all played a role to stimulate the theological shift in both the modernist and fundamentalist camps. It is only by recognizing the sociological factors effecting American society during this period that the dilution of the gospel message by both liberals and fundamentalists can be understood.

The post-bellum period in America was one marked by consolidation and expansion of national institutions, and of the amalgamation of smaller regional or local institutions into one. Since the end of the Civil War, Americans had sought to assert their unity of values, culture, and the general homogeneity of society in the face of many developments which seemed to threaten that good-old American way. The federal government took a more active role in managing the economy through land grants, monopolies, and entitlements paid to the mass of Union war veterans. Corporations grew to a national scale and once firmly established, used shrewd tactics and political influence to eliminate the competition and gain monopolies. Technological developments like the invention of the assembly line, the telephone, and the Union-wide railroad link all increased commercial efficiency. Efficiency was the buzzword that united American institutions, although consolidation did not always bring the promised benefit in efficiency. The industrial growth of this period drew rural and immigrant populations to urbanize, creating new, diverse communities.

The growing cultural diversity that America experienced as the "land of opportunity" for the world's huddled masses threatened to undermine American society

Rylian D. Fraas

and its institutions as they had been known up until that time. In particular the *Eintritt* of millions of immigrants of Roman Catholic and non-Anglo-Saxon origin sparked new fears that America would lose (or change) its identity, defined in terms of ethnic, cultural identity and civil liberty. All of these factors combined led American Protestants to seek to consolidate a united front to preserve their civilization.

Amid Christian efforts to consolidate there were two major camps or lines of effort. The first camp, liberalism, sought the union of all American Protestants on the basis of a social gospel, endeavoring to improve man's condition through human benevolence in education, healthcare, and workers' rights. The second camp, fundamentalism, sought union on the basis of certain moral and ethical concerns like alcoholism, the deterioration of family life, and the desecration of the Sabbath day while otherwise downplaying the significance of historic confessional differences between Protestant churches. Only a tiny minority of Protestants held to the historic doctrines of the faith to the extent their forefathers had when the lines between Protestant churches had been drawn centuries before.

As a result both the liberal and fundamentalist movements supported a sort of pan-protestant ecumenism which deemphasized the historic distinctives of the Reformed, Arminian, Lutheran, Independent, Baptist, and Episcopal traditions. D. G. Hart proposes in his essay that historians ought to interpret the fundamentalist/modernist controversy along the lines of ecumenists vs. localists<sup>1</sup>. That is, the modernists and fundamentalists were both seeking greater unity on the basis of broader doctrinal latitude while the "localist" Protestants opposed both groups in deference to their confessional standards and/or doctrinal distinctives. Yet aside from a handful of separatist,

---

<sup>1</sup> D. G. Hart, "The Tie that Divides", *Orthodox Presbyterian Identity: An Anthology*, 53.

confessional Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Independent Baptists (who were far outweighed by the mainline denominations,) the “localists” Hart describes did not attract the kind of numbers to make much of a noticeable impact in the history of early-twentieth century America. This lop-sided juxtaposition does not lend itself well as a meaningful contrast to illustrate the history of the period in its broader themes.

Rather a more useful paradigm for understanding the period is that the majority of American Protestants were swept away by the tide of the times and the concerns of this world, losing their focused emphasis on that world which is to come while a tiny remnant remembered to keep central that Rock upon which the Church is built<sup>2</sup>. Faithfulness to God in this world requires that we seek first the kingdom of heaven, and take concern for the temporal needs and issues of our day only as a corollary and a means to fulfill the great and supernatural end of God’s glory revealed in Christ Jesus to every nation. The Church is called to speak out against social injustice and prevailing immorality, but these alone can never define her mission. When the church shifts her focus from the eternal to the temporal, being conformed to the world’s thinking, she becomes irrelevant, as history showed increasingly in the twentieth century. Let this danger of a worldly focus be a warning for all the Church to seek God diligently in his word, being transformed by the renewing of our minds, and to patiently and faithfully await our redemption at the great and glorious day of the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 16:16.