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# A SERMON

By HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

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## *The Prohibition Question*

*Delivered at the  
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# THE PROHIBITION QUESTION

Sermon by HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

**L**ET it be emphatically stated at the beginning that this is not a partisan, political address. It is to be taken for granted that conscientious wets and conscientious drys are here, that some of you will vote for Mr. Hoover, some for Mr. Smith, and some for Mr. Norman Thomas, that you all on equal terms have the liberty of this place of Christian worship, and that I am speaking without intent to change any man's vote. I abhor partisan politics in the pulpit.

Nevertheless, the church has a weighty responsibility to speak about the prohibition question, for the church largely supported the various campaigns that issued in the prohibitory laws and cannot now with a clear conscience drop the matter simply because it has grown hot. If ever there has been an institution in this country which the church as a whole heartily has hated, it has been the organized liquor traffic. Multitudes of ministers, like myself, with no special bigotry against liquor, although we did not use it ourselves, went out into

the pastorate and found that everything we worked for was fought by the saloon. The trail of that abominable institution lay everywhere. From the allurements of young boys by free drinks so that they might be future customers, to the systematic corruption of local and state governments by organized bribery, the saloon was for everything we were against and against everything we were for. We came to hate it as a monstrous evil, and this attitude, accumulating power within the churches, played no small part in making possible the prohibitory laws. We cannot sidestep the issue now. For good or ill the church helped to put us where we are and the church must help us either to stay there or to move on.

Moreover, there are some things that ought particularly to be said to a non-partisan audience like this, with conscientious wets and dries, with Republicans and Democrats. Here in New York City we are in one of the wettest areas in the nation. Our large foreign population makes it quite unrepresentative of many other areas of America. Our daily press, naturally and powerfully reflecting the prejudices of the locality, pours into our homes day after day a stream of propaganda, most of it tending one way. We are strongly tempted to forget some things we ought to remember, and here in this non-partisan place I beg leave this morning to try to state them.

In the first place, we are continually reminded that the present situation is very unsatisfactory. In any discussion, it is well to have a point of agreement from which to begin. We may well, then, agree on this: the present situation is highly unsatisfactory. Wet or dry, Republican or Democrat, we all, I suspect, will subscribe to that.

SALOON EJECTED FROM 26 STATES BY 1917

**I**NDEED, if some one wishes to go further, I will go with him. Some of us fought hard for local option and then, by means of it, fought hard against the liquor traffic, with some desirable results. By April 1917, 26 states had voted out the saloon and millions of our people were living in other localities from which they had themselves ejected the public sale of liquor. Then the war came and we went to France. One night in Gondrecourt, a few miles behind the lines, within sound of the guns, a friend of mine, newly arrived from America, told me that the eighteenth amendment to the Constitution was about to be passed. I recall his offense because I said that it would be a mistake in strategy; that such sumptuary legislation written into the Constitution at that time, with the probability that the enacting laws would make it illegal for a man to have a glass of wine with his dinner, would involve us in a reactionary movement, presenting endless difficulty. I see no reason to retract that judgment. The peremptory handling of the liquor question has

undoubtedly landed us in an unsatisfactory position.

That aspect of the matter, however, is so constantly insisted on, played up, and emphasized, that we are tempted to forget that there never was a time in the United States when the handling of the liquor question was not unsatisfactory. It always has been abominably unsatisfactory and it is open to any of us to think, as I think, that, bad as the situation is now, it is better than the pit out of which we were digged.

#### FREE DRINKS TO CREATE CUSTOMERS

**D**O YOU remember that old liquor traffic? In 1912 the Retail Liquor Dealers' Association met in Ohio. Here is an excerpt from one of the speeches:

“We must create the appetite for liquor in the growing boys. Men who drink . . . will die, and if there is no new appetite created, our counters will be empty as well as our coffers. The open field for the creation of appetite is among the boys. Nickels expended in treats to boys now, will return in dollars to your tills after the appetite has been formed.”

Do you remember that old liquor traffic?

This last week a friend of mine said that his boy, aged twelve, had just remarked to him, “Father, what is a saloon?”

Agreed that the present situation is unsatis-

factory—let us not forget the situation which we faced before!

This last summer in Europe I read constantly in the papers distressing reports about the disclosures in Philadelphia: corrupt collusion between bootleggers and the police force, with stipends regularly passing from the law-breakers to the city officials. Distressing, is it not? To hear some people talk about it you would suppose that this wicked bribery of civic officialdom had now for the first time been launched on us by prohibition. Do you remember that old liquor traffic when there was hardly a town in the United States that was not thoroughly honeycombed with corruption from the organized trade? In Pennsylvania in 1914, as the result of one investigation only, approximately one hundred liquor corporations and associations were indicted for violation of the conspiracy section of the federal criminal code and scarcely any of them bothered to defend the action. They cynically paid the fine.

Here in New York, we are commonly informed that prohibition does not prohibit and that we are in a bad way. I should suppose that obvious, but do you recall the old New York? Some of you should remember back to 1884, the year of the "Boodle" Board of Aldermen—12 saloon-keepers, 4 saloon-controlled politicians, 16 out of 24. That same year, out of 1,002 Democratic and Republican primaries and conventions held in this city, 633 were held in saloons and 96 in places next door to them.

This use of memory to visualize the situation before prohibition should be insisted on. Large numbers of the younger generation never saw this sort of thing, never lived, as some of us have done, in towns like Boston with one saloon license for every 310 inhabitants, where Ten Nights in a Bar Room was no fairy tale but a literal story to whose characters we, from the number of our friends, could append specific names.

This summer I met a youth returning from his first trip to Europe. He never had seen a publicly licensed saloon system in operation. He saw it in Britain—public houses with wire cages in front of them where little children, not allowed by law to be taken inside the public house, were poured and huddled to fight like cats and dogs, while their mothers were inside getting drunk. This young man said to me: "I have never been for prohibition but I am now. If that is what it means to have a publicly licensed saloon system, then this thing we have in the United States, bad as it is, is better than that."

#### LIQUOR TRADE WAS ALWAYS LAWLESS

**N**OW, many youths who have never seen this old regime, and many old folks whose memories are not in good working order, look on prohibition and say, See the bootleggers, hijackers, racketeers, and lawlessness everywhere! Agreed! But the liquor trade in the United States always has been lawless. It always has vomited criminality

across the commonwealths. It always has conspired against any government that licensed it or any laws that were supposed to control it.

It may be that some of you will not take this from me, a minister, as a fair statement of the matter. Will you, then, listen to the liquor trade itself? The *National Liquor Dealers' Journal* of September 10, 1913, said this:

“To us there is the handwriting on the wall and its interpretation spells doom. The liquor business is to blame. It seems incapable of learning any lesson of advancement or motive but profit. To perpetuate itself it has formed alliances with the slums. . . . It deliberately aids the most corrupt political powers. . . . There are billions of property involved . . . but when the people decide that the truth is being told about the alcoholic liquor traffic the money value will not count.”

We agree, then, that the present situation is not satisfactory, but let us not forget what lies behind.

In the second place, in the endeavor to make prohibition unattractive, caricature has been ingeniously employed. A hideous fanatic with a high hat, a black tie, and a rumpled umbrella has become symbolical of prohibition. This kill-joy spirit of bigoted Puritanism, we are told, wrote the prohibitory laws. That, however, is obviously an inadequate presentation of the case. That fanaticism played a part in this reform no one will doubt; every reform has its lunatic fringe. But no one can state the case fairly without noting how large a part was



played by forces not fanatical at all, such as, for example, American business. Some day I propose a sermon in this pulpit on the thesis that moral reforms do not commonly succeed until the economic motive gets behind them. That certainly was true of prohibition. All the churches, social reformers, W. C. T. U.'s and Anti-Saloon Leagues in the United States never could have put the law on the statute books, had not the business motive become involved. One of the basic facts necessary to understand the prohibitory campaign is that American business found it impossible to run modern machines with drink-befuddled brains.

When Mr. Ford says, for example, that if prohibition is given up he may have to close his factories, most people think it a joke or, at best, an ingenious piece of propaganda. Personally, I suspect that Mr. Ford is seriously in earnest and that what he has in mind are certain cold, unsentimental statistics of the sort that he is accustomed to deal with. Here is one of them: that from 1919 to 1925 the per capita productivity of the workers in the automobile business increased 100 per cent. Here is another: that from 1919 to 1925 the per capita productivity of all the workers in the rubber-tire business increased 139 per cent. All up and down the list the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports what it calls "unbelievable" increases in the per capita production of American workmen.

Let us not exaggerate the part that prohibition played in this. Undoubtedly many other

factors entered in. Write down the proportion of benefit due to prohibition to the lowest reasonable figure. No competent judge has ever failed to give the eighteenth amendment a considerable share of the credit. Mr. Herbert Hoover, when Secretary of Commerce, long before his presidential candidacy, on the basis of ascertained facts said, "There is no question that prohibition is making America more productive."

The changing attitude of American business toward the liquor trade makes a fascinating story. Originally a ration of rum was part of the stipulated wages that American employers gave to their employes. In Philadelphia, for example, part of the daily wage was 1½ pints of whiskey served in nine doses. Some of the first strikes in the United States were caused by the refusal of certain employers to continue this rum ration, and when in 1817 Mr. Thatcher Magoun, a shipbuilder of Medford, Massachusetts, broke with the old tradition, stood to his guns through a strike and won out against the rum ration, it was regarded as an extraordinary achievement. Well, the century passed. Over thirty years ago the United States Commissioner of Labor investigated 7,205 American businesses employing 1,750,000 men. Three-quarters of them reported they never hired a man without investigating his drinking habits; 700 of them reported that they absolutely forbade any drinking on the part of an employe within working hours or outside of them.

When you seek the driving power that brought the American people to prohibition, cease being obsessed with the caricature of a fanatic and remember the multitude of hard-headed American business men, both employers and employes. Among the first prohibitionists were the railroads. Long before we had national prohibition, Rule G was in operation on every Class I railroad. Here it is:

“The use of intoxicants by employes while on duty is prohibited; their use, or the frequenting of places where they are sold, is sufficient cause for dismissal.”

One could go through a long list of these prohibitory laws, written not by fanatics, but by business men. Here is one, for example, from a leading American industry:

“Any employe found using intoxicating liquor—either during or after working hours—is warned that it will not be tolerated and urged to discontinue its use completely. If the promise is given then the man is given another chance; otherwise, he is discharged at once.”

Talk about personal liberty!

In April, 1915, the organized liquor traffic issued a blacklist of 49 American firms. The idea was that all possible pressure should be brought to bear upon these firms to change their attitude toward liquor. The liquor traffic was afraid of them. Who, then, were on the blacklist of the liquor traffic? I have it here:

• The Pennsylvania Railroad Company.  
United States Steel Corporation.

Pittsburgh Coal Company.

John Wanamaker's.

Western Union Telegraph Company.

Hershey Chocolate Company.

Goodyear Rubber Company.

Reo Auto Company.

S. S. Kresge Company.

J. N. Gamble, of Procter and Gamble.

H. J. Heinz, of H. J. Heinz Company, and so on through a list of 49. They were liquor's blacklist.

#### PROHIBITION IS GOOD BUSINESS

**I** DO not see how any man can go to Europe and watch what is afoot there in industry and then come back to this country and see what is afoot here without understanding that, as usually occurs when anything significant is happening, the prohibition question has important economic aspects. Why was it that, although billions of money were invested in the traffic, and millions in taxes were annually coming in to the public exchequer, canny, shrewd business-like America, of all nations in the world, should decide to prohibit it? It is because canny, shrewd, business-like America knew that it would be a good financial bargain, and it has been. Look at the increase in productivity. Read the reports of the savings banks. Watch the access of purchasing power among the people.

As for labor, the most thrilling speech I ever heard on behalf of prohibition was not by a

fanatic, but by Mr. Warren S. Stone, chief of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers.

The pith of this point can be briefly put. You say our present situation is unsatisfactory. Granted! You say the law may have to be altered! Granted! But do not be fooled by the kind of propaganda that is broadcast. It was not fanatics primarily who wrote this law. Very unemotional considerations on the part of millions of both employers and employes entered effectively into the case. As one industrial executive put it:

*"Maybe some people drink more under prohibition than before there was prohibition—maybe some persons drink now who never drank before prohibition, but there is no maybe about the fact of there being more non-drinking men today than ever before, and in non-drinking persons you find the great economic values."*

In the third place, we commonly forget that we are the victims of newspaper headlines and that in consequence many superstitions are afoot about prohibition. For example, this last week in New York City we have been greatly stirred by 33 deaths from alcoholic poisons and pathetic cries have been lifted against any system that involves such cruel results from denatured alcohol. What are the cold facts? We do not get the cold facts in newspaper headlines. If we really want them we would better consider an investigation made last year by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company covering from 1911 to 1926 the millions of its industrial policy holders—workers in thousands

of American businesses and industries. The fact is that deaths from alcoholism are less than they were before the passage of the Volstead Act. When the new regime began, such deaths took a sudden drop to an unprecedentedly low figure, and while from 1920 to 1926 there was a mounting percentage, the highest figure since prohibition is well below the pre-prohibition level. So far as available statistics can throw light on the matter, the worst years on record are 1912, 1913, and 1916. One need not be dogmatic. Absolutely conclusive figures are difficult to attain. The mounting percentage since 1920 is not encouraging. But obviously the anti-prohibition press, which is often wildly dogmatic in its charges and recriminations, is indulging in unjustified statements. If one really is sorry for people who are killed by alcohol, one should not at this stage of the game curse prohibition. More people died so under the old regime than are dying now.

#### DRUG ADDICTION NOT INCREASED

**H**ERE is another superstition: that taking drink away from people or making it dangerous or expensive, has driven them to drugs. Alas, the lamentable increase in drug addiction since prohibition!—how often we hear that. What are the facts? The facts apparently are, as Professor Feldman of Dartmouth makes clear after a searching investigation, that all authoritative reports say one of two things: the majority say that there is a positive decrease in drug addiction since pro-

hibition; the rest say that there is absolutely no evidence of an increase. The Foreign Policy Association of New York City also made an investigation, writing to all the known authorities in the United States and, as well, to settlement workers, prison wardens, and anybody who might know anything about the matter, and the report is unanimous: no increase in drug addiction since prohibition. Upon the contrary, the evidence indicates that even before prohibition the heaviest drug addiction was associated with the heaviest liquor consumption.

#### LESS INTOXICATION IN COLLEGES

**H**ERE is another superstition: that drinking in the colleges has greatly increased. Anybody who knows history knows that after a war a period of moral laxness is due, so that, whatever kind of liquor system we had, we were in for trouble from 1918 on. If we had had the old system we should have had a wild time with our youth. As it is, we have had a fairly wild time. Some bad things have been afoot, such as the hip-flask habit, that for a time seemed so alluring, but the idea that drinking in the colleges has greatly increased is, I suspect, a superstition.

That idea has in the main been engendered by the young people themselves. They have rather liked seeming dreadful. They have wanted on the whole the reputation of being wild and dangerous. It is they who have informed us how bad they are. But they lacked

the background to judge by: they did not know how bad we were.

If therefore, you wish to know the facts, you would better consult people who have lived in the colleges with both generations. Here, for example, is President Wilbur of Leland Stanford University in California. All of us who know him know that he is no saint with blind eyes and wool in his ears. What he says is:

“There is no doubt that there has been a marked decrease in the use of alcoholic beverages among the college students with whom I come in contact. Compared with the period before the present laws were put into effect, I should say that we have only one-tenth of the problem we had at that time in connection with liquor.”

Jump the continent and come to Yale. Here is Professor Charles C. Clark of the Disciplinary Committee of Yale speaking under oath:

“I am not a prohibitionist, and have never been. I will admit to you, however, that the effect of prohibition at Yale University has been good. I know whereof I speak, for I have been a member of the Committee on Discipline from a time dating back many years before prohibition. I know conditions intimately, I do not pretend that the students are prohibitionists or are not drinking, but the change has been simply revolutionary. In the old days our Committee was constantly busy with



cases involving intoxication and the disorders originating from it. Now we have practically no business of the kind at all to transact. Moreover, this is in spite of the fact that in the old days we rarely troubled ourselves about a case of mere intoxication if it had not resulted in some kind of public disorder, whereas now intoxication of itself is regarded as calling for the severest penalty."

If you are thinking of the academies, listen to Principal Stearns of Phillips, Andover, as he sums up a nation-wide investigation of the secondary schools.

"The schools reporting," he says, "are practically unanimous in their testimony that drinking among undergraduates is steadily on the wane, while a number emphasize the fact that the past year has proved the best on record."

#### REPRESENTS MAJORITY VIEWPOINT

**I** DO not mean that you cannot get contrary evidence on this point. You can get contrary evidence on any point. But I am certain that this represents the overwhelming majority of those who speak with authoritative knowledge about colleges and schools. As for the nation as a whole, as unprejudiced an investigation as I know reports that we are using about one-quarter as much liquor as we used before prohibition.

In this regard, as in others, it would be advantageous if the American people did not be-

lieve so thoroughly in the infallibility of headlines.

I have not been presenting a legislative program to cure our present tangled situation. That is not my forte. But if you wish my personal judgment as to the sort of program that the Christian church as a whole will stand behind and should stand behind in dealing with this prohibition question, I can put it in a few sentences :

First, we will fight to the last ditch any step that looks like going back to the saloon. We know well that we have an unsatisfactory situation on our hands. We are not for a moment content with it, but we know it is better than the thing we got rid of.

Second, so long as the present laws are on the books we will stand for their observance and enforcement. We will no more supinely surrender to the lawlessness of bootlegging than we supinely surrendered to the even more extensive and financially powerful lawlessness of the old saloon regime.

Third, there are some types of solution to which we never will consent, and one is putting the government, state or national, into the liquor business. We have refused so far to entrust the ownership and management of railroads to the government, although theoretical arguments make government ownership and management of railroads altogether reasonable. We have seen clearly that the government is not yet fit to handle that immense accession of economic power. Far less safe is it to make

our national and state capitols the headquarters of the most corrupting business this country has ever seen.

Fourth, as to any alterations in the law, we will trust them to those whom we know to be friendly to the law's major intent. There may well come a time when the law should be changed. No law is infallible. But whoever proposes to construct and carry through such alterations would better first of all persuade the people of the church that he is sympathetic with the major aim for which the law originally was framed.

At the heart of the Christian conscience of this country there is a conviction—make up your mind to it—that the liquor traffic and the Christian Gospel stand for two diverse and contradictory conceptions of personal and social life.

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#### PRAYER

**E**TERNAL GOD, our Father, we beseech Thee that in facing any question of conscience for ourselves or for society we may act without fear or favor of the crowd. From all partiality of opinion, from all mere partisanship of spirit, good Lord, deliver us! Grant that we may see straight, think clearly, decide firmly. Give us the courage of our convictions and give us the intelligence to make our convictions true. For every word spoken amiss this morning, we pray pardon. For every word truly spoken, we pray for the persuasion of the people. Amen.

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