

## **HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK**

### **1878- 1969**

"I did not have to believe anything simply because it was in the Bible. How stunning that conclusion was, it is not easy now for an educated mind to understand." (1)

Dr. Fosdick's death of a heart ailment in a Bronxville, N.Y.- hospital marks an end of an era. He was the last of the central figures of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the 1920's. In the eyes of the fundamentalists Fosdick was the infant terrible of liberalism.

### **The person Harry Emerson Fosdick**

Fosdick had quite a scholarly background. He studied at Colgate Divinity School, Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University. While he was studying he also served as pastor. During his studies he experienced for several months a nervous disorder and spent some time in a sanatorium. He said that it took him years to get over his nervous breakdown. The time spent at Union Theological Seminary, one of the leading liberal seminaries in the United States today, seemed to have been the most important in his life. The influences received there have made a very strong impression upon him. Fosdick's first pastorate was the First Baptist Church, Montclair; N.J. (1904-1915). His decision to serve the Baptist was certainly not based on his careful study of the Scripture. Rather, when he decided to enter the ministry, he said "I was through with orthodox dogma. I had not the faintest interest in any sect or denomination." (2)

Fosdick was engaged in many activities. In 1908, he received an M.A. in Sociology and Economics, and in the same year he was appointed by Union Theological Seminary as lecturer in Baptist Principles and Polity. In 1911, he became instructor in homiletics for which task he was well qualified. He was a great preacher with a wonderful style and an amazing command of the English language. He has, been called the Minister of all America. Week by week for 20 years his voice on National Vespers was one of the most familiar in radio. In 1915, he became full-time Morris K. Jessup professor of Practical Theology, and in 1925 he received a Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) degree from the University of Glasgow, Scotland.

In 1919 in conjunction with his professorship he became stated preacher at the First Presbyterian Church, New York City. This was quite a switch but for him not very difficult. In 1925, he resigned and was invited to become minister at the Park Avenue Baptist Church. This invitation came from the well known John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Fosdick did not feel free to accept the invitation. However, with the financial help of Rockefeller the now famous Riverside Church was started. This church was interdenominational in membership but affiliated with the Northern Baptist Convention. Fosdick retired in 1946 but never withdrew completely from church activities. He has written many articles during his years of retirement, and many of these have found their way into the *Readers' Digest*. Actually throughout his ministry he has 'been very busy with his pen. One of his first books, *The Meaning of Prayer*, has sold more than a million

copies and still is in wide use. His most devastating book was *The Modern Use of the Bible*. Through this work he managed to alienate many conservative factions of the Protestant church.

One of Fosdick's major interests has been the development of personal counseling in the churches with the help of psychiatry. His work *On Being A Real Person* is a product of this particular interest.

### **Fosdick's background**

"What present-day critics of liberalism often fail to see is its absolute necessity to multitudes of us who would not have been Christians at all unless we could thus have escaped the bondage of then reigning orthodoxy." (3)

Fosdick was very influential. Anyone who studies the theological controversies which took place both in the United States and Canada does well to get acquainted with Fosdick's writings and sermons. What influenced him? Fosdick was certainly a man of great learning. He listened to many different opinions. Yet, he never seriously studied the orthodox position. He rejected orthodoxy without giving it a fair hearing. This is rather strange for a man who claimed to be so tolerant and enlightened.

For Fosdick the only tenable interpretation was the liberal one. "We could be Christians without being deaf, dumb and blind in the face of modern knowledge. All truth, we said, is God's truth, and Christian theology can take it in, rejoice in it, and incorporate it into the understanding of the gospel." (4) Fosdick's thinking has been shaped by Julius Wellhausen, William N. Clarke (Colgate Seminary Professor), Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Walter Rauschenbush, John Fiske and Rufus Jones. It will suffice to say that all these men stand outside the pale and orthodox Christianity. They have left their mark on liberal thinking. However, I will deal briefly with John Fiske and Rufus Jones as they have been unique in their influence upon Fosdick's thinking.

#### **a. John Fiske, 1842-1901**

John Fiske was a lecturer in philosophy at Harvard University. He popularized the evolutionist philosophy for the American public. He even made the findings of Darwin respectable to the clergy.

For Fiske, H. Spencer's ideas were the "gospel of good cheer." (5) According to him God could be said to have been the cause of everything, but the explanation of Nothing. (6) Fiske maintained that the church's real difficulty with Darwinism did not lay in any attack on the dignity of man or on the Biblical cosmology, but in the destruction of a natural theology built upon the harmony and the design of the world. (7)

#### **b. Rufus Jones, 1863-1948**

This American Quaker was probably the most influential upon Fosdick. Fosdick makes a reference to this in his autobiography *The Living of These Days* (p. 110) and it is obvious in his work *Rufus Jones Speaks to Our Time*. Rufus Jones was a professor in philosophy at Haverford and a minister of the Society of Friends. He expressed in his writing a glowing optimism and a deep-seated belief in the essential goodness of his fellowman. He followed the tradition of Absolute Hegelianism. He became the leading historian of mysticism. He pointed his fellowman to an inward religion which transcends all boundaries and creeds and tests its authenticity by the life it produces. He drew attention to the untapped resources which are present in the souls of men, to teach them that they are more than they know." (8)

### **The Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy**

"They call me a heretic Well, 'I am a heretic if conventional orthodoxy is the standard. I should be ashamed to live in this generation and not be a heretic." (9)

The word fundamentalism can create confusion and, therefore, I want to stress that in the context of this article the word fundamentalism is identified with conservatism. A fundamentalist is thus a Christian who holds to the orthodox Protestant position. Fosdick thought of himself as a liberal - interdenominationalist. ". . . our denominational peculiarities for the most part are caused by historic reasons only, have no contemporary excuse for existence, have no contribution to make to righteousness." (10) According to him, there are three ways a liberal can be recognized. First, through the depth of his spiritual life. Second, in liberalism there is an emphasis on positive convictions rather than on negative denials. Third, a liberal is in sacrificial earnest about the establishing of God's will on earth. (11) As all liberals, Fosdick felt that he was a very tolerant Christian gentleman. Intolerance has no place in the church; it is a sign of weakness. Of course, the fundamentalists could only see one point of view and that was their own. He said that fundamentalists tear Christianity apart, but modernism saves it. (12)

Fosdick believed that the liberals should not withdraw from the church. He influenced with his belief many fellow liberals and caused grief to many orthodox Christians. As usual, the liberals had no idea of driving the fundamentalists out of the church. They could stay until they saw the light as they considered the liberal movement to be a second Reformation.

"All the vital reformations in the Christian church have had one common element: the religion of Jesus had pushed its way up through the obscurities and formalities of an accumulated religion concerning him and has taken once more the center of the scene." (13)

The left-wing liberal felt that honesty demanded that Fosdick should leave the evangelical denomination. Of course, the "reformer" Fosdick rejected this idea.

"We, (unlike the radical liberals), - - - , were determined not to surrender to the fundamentalists the control of the great historic denominations, . . . For all the

liberals to desert them, leaving their long-accumulated prestige, their powerful influence and their multitudes of devoted Christian people in the hands of fundamentalist leadership, seemed to us an unthinkable surrender and intolerable tragedy to the Christian cause." (14)

Fosdick earnestly believed basic orthodox theology to be outmoded and outdated. The slow process of education was bound to put an end to such orthodox thinking; meanwhile, the liberals should patiently wait, claiming their liberty, and abiding their time. "For the liberals to have deserted the old lined denominations and to have surrendered them to reactionary leadership would have been a recreant and craven policy, with tragic consequences." (15) It is no wonder that, to use his own words, "by the selection of the reactionaries I have been made for the time being a symbol of liberalism." (16)

### **Fosdick's Development of Thought**

"Liberalism cannot remain as it was fifty years ago; neo-orthodoxy cannot remain as it is today; there will be a synthesis." (17) Fosdick was not an original thinker. He always borrowed ideas from others and leaned heavily on his mentors. His uniqueness and importance lie in the fact that he popularized liberalism.

Fosdick claimed that his basic position had changed in the course of the years. In the beginning of this, century, he was quite optimistic. Man would move upward and forward. The future was bright and glorious. He was the typical modernist. The important sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" clearly depicts his opposition to fundamentalism. However, in the 1930's Fosdick accused modernists to be exclusively preoccupied with intellectualism. Modernism had been dangerously sentimental. His belief was "We have adapted and adjusted and accommodated and conceded long enough." (18) Though he believed that modernism needed to readjust itself, it still had fulfilled its role in the history of the church. Regarding this he said in his famous sermon "The Church Must Go Beyond Modernism", "We have already largely won the battle we started out to win; we have adjusted the Christian faith to the best intelligence of our day and have won the strongest minds and the best abilities of the churches to our side. Fundamentalism is still with us but mostly in the backwaters. The future of the churches, if we will have it so,, is in the hands of modernism." (19) About fifteen years ago, Fosdick felt again the need for a change. The liberals due to their constant adaptation and accommodation had left their independent stand-point. In the beginning of the century the modernist exalted reason, but this could no longer be done. (20)

He advocated a change in liberalism. However, in reality, he never moved from his original liberal position. Until the end, he was still optimistic, sentimental and humanistic.

### **Criticism**

"Religion is devoted and loyal to the best that reason and insight can discover. The liberal understands what loyalty to the best means as the authoritarian never can." (21)

Theological strife seems to be very much a part of our modern society. Unrest and strife in the churches started in full swing in the beginning of our century. In the 1920's, the "Gereformeerden" in the Netherlands, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the American and Canadian Baptists were faced with difficulties regarding some basic interpretations of Scripture centered around the first chapters of the Bible and the book of Jonah. The Christian Reformed Church did not have ecclesiastical peace either. In 1920, the first complaint against Prof. Dr. R. Janssen was lodged. This particular controversy dealt with the alleged tendencies in the teachings of the professor. In that era of dissension Fosdick was at the height of his career and he influenced many liberals.

Were the fundamentalists justified in opposing Fosdick? Can the liberal and the fundamentalist fellowship in the same church? It is my contention that there is no room for liberalism within the church. Liberalism and orthodoxy are two opposing trends of thought. The basic authority for the liberal is the sovereignty of autonomous reason. Reason is the judge of God's revelation. The Bible is dissected by man. If the liberal finds something in the Scripture which is not reasonable, he rejects it. Liberalism by its very nature must accommodate and adapt constantly. (22)

Fosdick's "philosophy" shows clearly that liberalism has for its "authority" subjective autonomous reason. His view can be best summed up with his own words, "The marvel is' that the idea of authority, which is one of the historic curses of religion should be regarded by so many as one of the vital necessities of the faith. The fact is that religion by its very nature is one of the realms to which external authority is least applicable . . ." (23) Our modern mind in its scientific attitude toward the Bible, as toward everything else, is largely botanical. We want to see the facts stripped bare and subjected to merciless analysis." (24)

Orthodoxy takes its stand on the authority of the Word of God. Today's modernism is not Christianity. J. Gresham Machen proved that irrefutably in his work "*Christianity and Liberalism*."

Liberalism is the product of the medieval nature and grace scheme. Nature triumphed over grace. Reason set aside revelation.

The liberal Fosdick tried to have fellowship with a God who was the product of his own intellect. His Christ was not the Christ of the Scriptures. His Christianity was a humanism influenced by Christian principles.

Rev. Johan D. Tangelder  
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#### **Bibliography**

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- (6) J. Fiske. Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy. II, p. 383.
- (7) John Dillenberger. Protestant Thought and Natural Science. p. 228.
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- (10) H. E. Fosdick. What is Vital in Religion. p. 254.
- (11) Ibid. p. 238.
- (12) Adventurous Religion. p. 284.
- (13) Ibid. p. 311.
- (14) H. E. Fosdick. The Living of These Days. p. 163.
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- (16) Ibid. p. 159.
- (17) Ibid. p. 266.
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- (19) Ibid. p. 362.
- (20) H. E. Fosdick. The Living of These Days. p. 255.
- (21) Julius S. Bixler. Conversations with an Unrepentant Liberal. p. 44.
- (22) cf. Mr. Groen Van Prinsterer, Ongeloof en Revolutie. Hoofdstuk VIII. Nieuwe Uitgave, tweede druk, 1951.
- (23) H. E. Fosdick. Christianity and Progress. p. 157.
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