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THE INTERPRETATION OF JESUS IN THE WRITINGS  
OF HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

By

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A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF SACRED THEOLOGY  
in  
The Biblical Seminary in New York

New York, N.Y.  
April, 1951

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
A. The Problem . . . . .	2
B. The Significance of the Problem . . . . .	2
C. The Method of Procedure . . . . .	3
D. The Sources . . . . .	4
CHAPTER I: THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK . . . . .	5
A. Introduction . . . . .	6
B. Traditional Faith . . . . .	7
1. Source . . . . .	7
a. Early American Family . . . . .	7
b. Parents and Family . . . . .	8
2. Development . . . . .	8
a. Conversion . . . . .	8
b. Boyhood Church Relations . . . . .	9
C. Tragedy of Tradition . . . . .	10
1. Education Eradicates Faith . . . . .	10
2. Intellectual Recreation of Basis for Belief in God . . . . .	11
D. Finding a New Faith . . . . .	12
1. Period of Unrest . . . . .	12
2. The Breakdown at Seminary . . . . .	14
E. Proclaiming the New Faith . . . . .	15
1. Entering the Ministry . . . . .	15
2. First Presbyterian Church . . . . .	16
3. Riverside Church . . . . .	16
F. Conclusion . . . . .	16
CHAPTER II: CONFLICT BETWEEN NEW KNOWLEDGE AND TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF JESUS . . . . .	18
A. Introduction . . . . .	19
B. Traditional Interpretation of Jesus . . . . .	19
1. Birth . . . . .	19
2. Life . . . . .	20
3. Death . . . . .	21
4. Resurrection . . . . .	22
C. New Knowledge . . . . .	22
D. The Conflict . . . . .	27
E. Conclusion . . . . .	30

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May 21, 1951

Chapter	Page
CHAPTER III: DOCTOR FOSDICK'S APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF NEW KNOWLEDGE AND THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF JESUS . . . . .	31
A. Introduction . . . . .	32
B. Problems of Traditional Interpretation Removed . . . . .	32
C. Essence of Revelation about Christ Restated . . . . .	36
1. Life and Work . . . . .	36
2. The Person of Jesus . . . . .	43
D. Conclusion . . . . .	47
CHAPTER IV: THE PLACE OF DR. FOSDICK'S INTERPRETATION OF JESUS IN THE ATTAINMENT OF SALVATION . . . . .	49
A. Introduction . . . . .	50
B. Salvation Concerned with Character . . . . .	50
C. Jesus, the Criterion of Character . . . . .	51
D. Jesus in the Process of Attainment . . . . .	53
1. Sense of Need . . . . .	53
2. Personal Trust in Jesus . . . . .	54
3. Personal Experience . . . . .	55
4. Jesus and Forgiveness of Sins . . . . .	56
5. Jesus More Than an Example . . . . .	57
6. Failure of Attainment . . . . .	58
E. Conclusion . . . . .	60
CHAPTER V: SUMMARY AND EVALUATION . . . . .	61
A. Introduction . . . . .	62
B. Summary . . . . .	62
C. Evaluation . . . . .	64
D. Conclusion . . . . .	66
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	67

## INTRODUCTION

# THE INTERPRETATION OF JESUS IN THE WRITINGS OF HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

## INTRODUCTION

### A. The Problem

The problem of this paper will be to discover the interpretation of Jesus in the writings of Harry Emerson Fosdick. The person and work of Jesus will be considered with relation to the problem out of which Dr. Fosdick's interpretation arose and the goals toward which it was applied.

### B. The Significance of the Problem

The significance of the problem lies largely in the significance of the one around whom the problem centers, for Dr. Fosdick is recognized as one of the leading exponents of liberal theology. Some have considered the outcome of his theological position as the deciding factor in the rise or fall of liberalism.

In addition to being recognized as the champion of liberalism this great thinker has been considered the saviour of those whose faith has been shattered by the reign of scientific thought, which with the sword of evolution and the shield of natural law had, for many, shattered the rock of faith in a miracle-proclaiming Bible.

In this conflict between science and scripture the crucial issue arises as we come to the central figure of the Bible, Jesus Christ; for he is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, the Saviour of all mankind. When science has finished its conquest of the scripture record of Christ, what remains as the object of our faith? It was the problem of Harry Emerson Fosdick to reconstruct a Christian faith compatible with modern scientific thought, and this problem centered in an interpretation of Jesus that would not strain the modern mind to an irrational credulity.

Thus the significance can be summarized by saying that this paper deals with one of the main exponents of an answer to a basic modern religious problem as it centers in the key figure of all history.

### C. The Method of Procedure

The religious experience of Harry Emerson Fosdick in which he faced and fought out this problem of science and faith will form the background for analyzing his interpretation of Jesus.

The basic essentials of the problem as he saw it and the means whereby he overcame it will follow.

After analyzing the method whereby Dr. Fosdick made the scriptural record of Jesus compatible with his accepted norms of scientific thought, it will be seen how

he then applies and utilizes his new interpretation of Jesus as a working basis for a Christian faith.

At the close it will be well to draw together the facts and implications in summary form to see what is the essential interpretation of Jesus as found in the writings of Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick.

#### D. The Sources

The primary source material will be those works in which Dr. Fosdick sets forth his position with regard to the scriptures. From these volumes those chapters dealing specifically with the interpretation of Jesus will be our primary consideration. These books are: The Modern Use of the Bible, A Guide to Understanding the Bible. In addition to these Dr. Fosdick's latest book, The Man from Nazareth, will serve as a comparison with the earlier interpretation of Jesus.

Secondary sources will include books of his sermons, magazine articles, and devotional books in which the application of Dr. Fosdick's position to actual life situations is the major consideration.

CHAPTER I

THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

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THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

A. Introduction

In order to understand how Dr. Fosdick came to interpret Jesus as he did, an account of his religious experience will be given out of which the necessity for an attempt to make such an interpretation grew.

The basic elements of his experience are his religious heritage, the experiences and development of childhood, the effect of college education, development in seminary training and finally the outworking of his convictions in the ministry.

B. Traditional Faith of Harry Emerson Fosdick

1. Source

a. Early American Family

The Fosdick name comes from an old American family which was founded by Stephen Fosdick who came from Lincolnshire, England in 1635 and settled in Charlestown, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> As was characteristic of a great many early settlers they possessed a strong spirit of

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1. Union Theological Seminary Library, photostatic copy of a document dated 1931.

independence of which spirit Fosdick relates:

This spirit entered into their religion and made the Baptist Churches with their autonomous, independent congregations, their refusal of creedal subscription, and their insistence on the competence of the individual soul in matters of faith congenial to their temperament.<sup>1</sup>

b. Parents and Family

How this spirit was passed down from generation to generation reflecting its influence in the activities of those who possessed it is clearly revealed in the following statement:

This love of independence my father carried over into his school. He distrusted rules. He refused to govern by prohibitions. . . . he was tirelessly working to make boys and girls independent of rules; with their conduct inwardly determined, not outwardly imposed, and, knowing that, they knew they were on their honor to play fair.

This was the method which my father used in training his own children, and for it I can never be sufficiently grateful.<sup>2</sup>

The entire family life seemed to be built around this spirit of independence, for Dr. Fosdick recalls this impression from his childhood:

Few remembered impressions of my childhood are more clear than the family insistence on our individual liberty to think and to make decisions for ourselves, the whole bent of our upbringing was toward independence and training in the use of it.<sup>3</sup>

. . . . .

1. Sydney Strong: What I Owe to My Father, p. 70.
2. Ibid., p. 71.
3. Louis Finkelstein: American Spiritual Autobiographies, p. 107.

Molded into the very fibre of his being was this inherited spirit of independence which characterized his personality and governed his reaction to later life situations.

## 2. Development

### a. Conversion

The home in which Fosdick was reared was not only characterized by the freedom-loving spirit of the early American settlers but also centered around a religion that was "vital, personal, and real".<sup>1</sup> This spiritual atmosphere also was molded into his innermost being. In his own words he attributes his religious nature to the influence of his parents when he recalls:

Together my father and my mother gave me religion. I caught it from both of them, for they both were deeply religious. Their theology was by tradition evangelical, but it never was narrowly sectarian nor theologically constricted.<sup>2</sup>

The most significant year of his childhood from the standpoint of religious experience was when at the age of seven he experienced a "revolutionary religious experience". A deep sense of sin and a consequent need stimulated his conversion, and "a radiant consciousness of forgiveness and release" was the result. His grateful young heart responded with a dedication to service on the

. . . . .

1. Finkelstein, op. cit., p. 106.

2. Strong, op. cit., p. 74.

foreign mission field in future life. To his parents this was cause for concern, for they considered him too young to understand and too immature for such deep religious feelings.<sup>1</sup> Fosdick himself in writing about his more mature thoughts and evaluations of this experience from later years believes "it may have had some individual precocity in it", however at his insistence, he was permitted to make a public profession of his faith, receive baptism, and unite with the church.<sup>2</sup>

#### b. Boyhood Church Relations

Though coming from a Baptist home, there was no Baptist church in the town "where a considerable portion of" his "formative youth was passed", so young Harry attended a Presbyterian Sunday School and a Methodist young people's meeting.<sup>3</sup> Looking back at this period of his religious experience Dr. Fosdick recalls:

. . . I confronted the petty, moralistic legalisms, the horrific appeals to fear with which traveling evangelists tried to scare us into salvation and the incredible Bibliolatry that put religion hopelessly at odds with science.<sup>4</sup>

Though his parents may have considered his early religious experience somewhat abnormal, Harry demonstrated a perfectly normal boyhood trait when with a gang of boys

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1. Howard Mingos: "Fosdick, Liberal Preacher," World's Work, October, 1925, p. 646.
2. Finkelstein, op. cit., p. 106.
3. Ibid., p. 107.
4. Ibid., p. 107.

he succeeded in climbing up through the steeple of the Methodist Church and after some difficulty managed to remove the clapper from the bell. Proceeding down the street to the Presbyterian Church, the boys were unable to remove the clapper so had to be satisfied by wrapping it with various items of clothing, leaving the bell mute.<sup>1</sup>

### C. Tragedy of Tradition

#### 1. Education Eradicates Faith

Following his graduation from Central High School in Buffalo, New York, Harry entered upon his college education at Colgate University. It was here that his religious experience was stimulated as greatly from the intellectual standpoint as it had been from an experiential standpoint at the age of seven. This intellectual stimulus developed into a serious crisis, for it seemed to be counteracting everything that took place in his childhood conversion, beginning with the very foundation of that experience, faith in the revealed truths of the Bible as visioned from a literal interpretation. The development of this crisis has been described in the following manner:

Theretofore he had taken for granted the literal interpretation of the Bible and all that it might mean. The Christian influence in his home had

. . . . .

1. Mingos, op. cit., p. 645.

not been sufficiently rigid and intolerant to arouse in him rebellion. The crash came as it invariably comes, in the adolescent period when children who have credulously accepted what they were told begin to become independent, to weigh, balance, and criticize.<sup>1</sup>

Fosdick describes this experience of crisis in these words: ". . . my mind awoke to question everything I had been taught, and a consequent spiritual upheaval shook my faith to pieces . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Fosdick goes on to describe his new found belief in evolution as "a bombshell in hand with which to blow up the household" when he returned home after his first year in college.<sup>3</sup> Though he did not show it in outward actions, Harry's inward spirit was in constant turmoil and unrest. This rebellious turmoil was not of a moral nature, but was confined to the realm of the intellect. It was when he was leaving home for college at the beginning of his junior year when the following statement was made:

I recall saying to my mother . . . that I would continue to live as though there were a God, but that in my thinking I was going to clear God out of the universe and start all over to see what I could find.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Intellectual Reconstruction of Basis for Belief in God

What he found, or began to find, and how he started on the road to recovery of faith Fosdick describes

. . . . .

1. Ibid., p. 646.
2. Finkelstein, op. cit., p. 108.
3. Strong, op. cit., p. 74.
4. Finkelstein, op. cit., p. 108.

in these words:

Toward the close of my junior year a group of us came out from a class in metaphysics talking soberly about some conclusions we were being faced with. After all, materialistic philosophy is incredible, we said, and there is a God. With that my return to religious faith began, as though in a tangled jungle one had succeeded in clearing at least a little space and trusted that, if he kept at it, he could clear more.<sup>1</sup>

"There is a God", became the simple declaration of faith to which Harry clung regardless of intellectual difficulties.

Before returning for his senior year he took a walk with his father to discuss his determination to become a minister explaining that he desired above all else "to make a spiritual contribution to his generation".<sup>2</sup>

What he was to preach, in view of intellectual difficulties, he describes in these words:

In my youth the time came when the formal creeds to me were dust and ashes. I did not believe them. How could I go into the ministry so? Yet, in the Christian gospel I did see something - only a little, to be sure, but at least that much I personally saw - and now with gratitude I look back on the day when I made the greatest venture in my life: I can preach what I see - that was the way I had to start.<sup>3</sup>

#### D. Finding a New Faith

##### 1. Period of Unrest

The troublesome intellectual cancer that was

. . . . .

1. Ibid., p. 109.

2. Mingos, op. cit., p. 648.

3. Harry Emerson Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, p. 179.

eating away Fosdick's faith was what he described as "the current Bibliolatry, the conflict between science and the anti-scientific categories in which Christian truth was commonly presented".<sup>1</sup> His procedure was "to test his religion by intellectual honesty and to keep none of it that he could not keep on mentally honorable terms".<sup>2</sup> Of great assistance to him was John Fiske of Harvard who helped him to a spiritual interpretation of evolution and a course in philosophy which enabled him to find a rational basis for faith in God -- "not the anthropomorphic deity of his childish imaginings, but the creative power from whom all things come, interpreted in spiritual, not in materialistic terms."<sup>3</sup>

After a year at Colgate Divinity School he transferred to Union Theological Seminary, "a great free school of theology where scientific method of study is encouraged".<sup>4</sup> Here he was to develop the synthesis between his childhood conversion and his collegiate loss of faith as expressed in this manner:

Far back in my youth I recall hours of mystical insight, vague but moving compulsions of the spirit, at times involuntary and surprising, at times consciously sought in solitude.<sup>5</sup>

. . . . .

1. Finkelstein, op. cit., p. 108.
2. Mingos, op. cit., p. 646.
3. Ibid., p. 646.
4. George W. Gray: "Harry Emerson Fosdick, On Tiptoe," Christian Century, August, 1923, p. 1005.
5. Finkelstein, op. cit., p. 109.

Throughout my theological training . . . I was struggling for a constructive faith to support, unfold, and direct this better part of me.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The Breakdown at Seminary

Since his battle for a personal faith had been intellectual and he thought of religion in intellectual terms, Fosdick at first considered teaching more suitable to his qualifications than preaching.<sup>2</sup> At the outset of his seminary training he was considering teaching about religion instead of preaching the gospel.<sup>3</sup> He carried a heavy load, taking philosophy at Columbia in addition to his theological studies and practical work in a mission just off the Bowery called the Mariners' Temple where he would sometimes hold as many as nine services a Sunday in the lodging houses of that district. "He was in a fair way to learn that religion is something more than its intellectual formulations."<sup>4</sup>

Not only was it the close contact with the dregs of human nature that taught him the deeper significance of religion, but also tortuous trial into which he was plunged by the strain of his heavy activity at seminary drove him into the exercise of the faith he was formulating. This experience had a profound effect upon his life and the course of his future activity as is seen when Dr. Fosdick

. . . . .

1. Ibid., p. 110.
2. Mingos, op. cit., p. 648.
3. Finkelstein, op. cit., p. 111.
4. Mingos, op. cit., p. 648.

relates:

I had a serious nervous breakdown during my post-graduate course, brought on by overwork - the most agonizing period of my life, with an idle year of sleeplessness and deep depression, four months of it spent in a sanatorium, and all of it a horror to recall. I learned more about human nature and its needs than any theological seminary can ever teach. 'The Meaning of Prayer', I think, would never have been written had not that year put into prayer a significance one does not learn from books.

It is doubtless too much to say that that agonizing experience made me a preacher, but it was the catalyst that decided the issue. Until then I had intended to teach about religion rather than to preach the gospel, but henceforth I wanted to get at people, real people, with their distracting, anxious, devastating problems.<sup>1</sup>

#### E. Proclaiming the New Faith

##### 1. Entering the Ministry

Upon the foundation of these major phases of religious experience: conversion at seven years of age, conflict of science and faith with science winning out at college, and rediscovery and reconstruction of faith during seminary days; Fosdick entered the ministry. It was a ministry of extreme popularity, for "the great mass of people . . . who belong to no church are enthusiastic about him because he preaches a practical working religion, which is none the less religious and reverent, and which everybody can understand".<sup>2</sup> Fosdick had been brought up in the "thesis" of the traditional evangelical faith, had

. . . . .

1. Finkelstein, op. cit., p. 110-111.

2. Mingos, op. cit., p. 645.

experienced the turmoil of the "anti-thesis" which science formed against traditional faith causing many collegiate youth to lose faith entirely, and had worked out intellectually and experientially a working "synthesis" which he determined to share with all who were in the same condition of mind and heart.

## 2. First Presbyterian Church

His ministry began at a small Baptist church in New Jersey. Then the broad-minded First Presbyterian Church of New York enlisted him in a unique interdenominational undertaking which ended in a doctrinal uprising which had repercussions throughout the entire Protestant Church in America.<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Riverside Church

The final and major phase of his ministry was at the great Riverside Church where he enjoyed the perfect liberty of exercising his views of interdenominational, interracial and interfaith fellowship and where he was free to test the power of his reconstructed faith.

## F. Conclusion

In this chapter the major influences out of which Dr. Fosdick's interpretation of Jesus grew have

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1. Photostatic copy of a document dated 1931, op. cit.

been considered. It is noted how important a place his heritage filled in the formation of his character and personality, giving him the strong independent spirit which governed the course he was to follow in later years. The major phases of his experience in which this heritage was reflected are his childhood conversion, the scientific destruction of his faith in the literal interpretation of the Bible in college, and finally the nervous breakdown at seminary which served as the proving ground in which his reformulated faith took root, being transformed from a mental category into a living rule of life.

## CHAPTER II

### CONFLICT BETWEEN NEW KNOWLEDGE AND THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF JESUS

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### CONFLICT BETWEEN NEW KNOWLEDGE AND THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF JESUS

#### A. Introduction

It will be the purpose of this chapter to present the aspects of the traditional interpretation of Jesus which gave rise to conflict in the light of the norms of the new knowledge which Fosdick accepted as normative.

The general characteristics of new knowledge briefly considered will lead to a clearer understanding of the nature of the conflict and its significance.

#### B. Traditional Interpretation of Jesus

##### 1. Birth

Though the actual birth of Jesus was perfectly normal (attendant events excepted), it was the result of conception in which the Holy Spirit of God replaced the agent of the human male as Luke records in the first chapter of his gospel (Revised Standard Version):

26). . . the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27) to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

31)'And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.'

34) And Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I have no husband?' 35) And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and

the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.'

This conception, traditionally speaking, was the means whereby God took upon himself a human form in the person of Jesus for the purpose of redeeming mankind, as Paul states in his letter to the Philippians in the second chapter, verses five to eight.

Thus from these facts the term descriptive of the traditional view, "the virgin birth", arose.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Life

The traditional view of the life of Jesus is that:

. . . the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him. Luke 2:40 (R.S.V.)

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. Luke 2:52 (R.S.V.)

Jesus' growth and development was normal from the physical standpoint with a proportionally increasing self-consciousness of his unique nature, which, manifesting itself first at the age of twelve (Luke 2:41-51), had come to full maturity by the time he began his ministry about the age of thirty (Matthew 3:13-17).<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the unique self-consciousness

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1. J. Gresham Machen: What Is Christianity, p. 66.
2. William Evans: Great Doctrines of the Bible, pp. 66-68.

which Jesus disclosed throughout his ministry, there are recorded many miracles that he performed in almost every realm of creation which bear witness to his deity. Demon possession was instantly cured by his word of authority, all manner of human disease and affliction disappeared at the command of his will, the elements themselves are in harmony with his purposes, and last of all he is recorded to have restored life after death had already robbed the body of its soul.<sup>1</sup>

In all his life Jesus was truly human and truly divine, "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15 Authorized Version).

### 3. Death

So far as the physical aspect is concerned, the traditional view is that Jesus actually died, crucified on a Roman cross. But the real significance of the traditional view, which is a necessary requirement of its over-all world-life view, is found in the meaning of that death. In his crucifixion, which he voluntarily allowed to take place, Jesus entered into and took upon himself the full guilt and consequence of the sin of the human race bearing it in a final, adequate, and sufficient sacrifice before his Father to the satisfaction of Divine justice and to

. . . . .

1. James Orr: The Christian View of God and the World, p. 232.

the reconciliation of sinful humanity.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. Resurrection

After three days Jesus arose bodily from the tomb. His body, though not physical, was an objective body which had identical markings and proportions to that which had been buried three days earlier. For a period of forty days on different occasions he was seen and recognized by various groups and individuals (many of whom conversed with him) after which he ascended into heaven.<sup>2</sup>

The traditional expectancy is for the bodily return of Christ as a step in the final consummation of history.<sup>3</sup>

A general presupposition of the traditional approach is that the records from which the information of the life of Jesus is drawn are to be taken at their face value as documents of actual, historic events.<sup>4</sup>

#### C. New Knowledge

New Knowledge is that source from which Fosdick draws the presuppositions which form the basis of his criticism of the traditional views and interpretations of Jesus.

. . . . .

1. Ibid., p. 318.
2. Evans, op. cit., pp. 86-90.
3. Ibid., p. 236.
4. Machen, op. cit., p. 18.

While different aspects of new knowledge are sketched here and there and its conclusions are continuously held up as the norms for judging the interpretation of Jesus in Fosdick's writings, at no time does he clearly define or critically examine the presuppositions from which he argues. Consequently it is difficult to give a full, concrete, and well defined picture of new knowledge.

Perhaps by piecing together the glimpses of new knowledge as revealed in these presuppositions from which Fosdick criticizes the opposing position, it will be possible to obtain a clearer picture of just what this new knowledge is.

As stated in Fosdick's life experience, among the other discoveries of new knowledge he made at college was the evolutionary hypothesis which undoubtedly played a part in his loss of faith.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, one of the great helps toward recovery of his faith was a spiritual interpretation of evolution to which John Fiske of Harvard led him.<sup>2</sup> Following this, Fosdick states that in the early years of his ministry he was engaged in the task of making the Christian gospel "intellectually palatable to modern minds that believed in such truths as evolution and the reign of natural law."<sup>3</sup>

. . . . .

1. Ante, p. 11.

2. Ante, p. 13.

3. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 202.

Evolution, then, is one phase of new knowledge which was prominent in Fosdick's approach.. The question may be raised as to what brand of evolution Fosdick accepted, and it is answered in part by this statement:

The hypothesis that separate species came into existence by descent, branching off from older and simpler forms so that all life, like a tree, goes back to some unicellular beginning is as much taken for granted among scientists as is the new astronomy or the law abiding nature of the universe.<sup>1</sup>

On the basis of the evolutionary presupposition Fosdick carries through what he feels are its logical implications for human society; for, as he states it, "the idea of evolution in biology has blossomed out into the idea of progress in human life".<sup>2</sup> Here are illustrated two aspects of new knowledge that Fosdick has accepted as his norm: the facts, and the deductions drawn from those facts by the modern mind.

The reign of natural law is another chief component of new knowledge. This presupposition is another conclusion drawn from scientific procedure.

. . . the modern mind finds itself in a cosmic system which is regular with a vengeance. Many of its established procedures can be put into mathematics and tested by repeated experiment. From chemistry to psychology we are living every day more confidently upon the basic idea that this is thoroughly and uninterruptedly a law-abiding universe.<sup>3</sup>

. . . . .

1. Harry Emerson Fosdick: Adventurous Religion, p. 108.
2. Harry Emerson Fosdick: The Modern Use of the Bible, p. 144.
3. Ibid., pp. 140-141.

Fosdick feels that the law-abiding processes, both of physical and human nature, as revealed by science, are final, inevitable revelations of cause and consequence which man cannot break and God does not break. This is the absolute working basis for every intelligent thought in new knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Tracing the progress of thought with regard to the view of the cosmic order as a whole, it is shown how in Biblical times (when the accounts of Jesus were being written) the earth was thought to be flat, surrounded by the sea, with a solid firmament a little way above. This concept Fosdick contrasts with new knowledge, that is, all the latest facts and theories discovered and invented by man concerning the cosmos: immeasurable distances, round earth, the centrality of the sun in our solar system, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Another realm of new knowledge that has a significant bearing on certain scriptural concepts is that of psychology and psychiatry.

If we can learn a new law in the realm of psychology, we can achieve new results, curing mental diseases that our fathers in despair ascribed to demons, and opening doors of hope where no hope had ever been.<sup>3</sup>

A branch of new knowledge which Fosdick feels has disclosed the origin of miracles is the study of documentary evidence. This study has revealed that there

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1. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 124.
2. Fosdick: The Modern Use of the Bible, op. cit., p. 44.
3. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 126.

is a proportionate increase in the miraculous in each successive document written about a certain person or event.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the farther removed in time from the original scene, the easier to add on the miraculous.

It looks on the face of it as though the farther we get away from the first-hand documents the more marvelous the stories become.<sup>2</sup>

From these examples it can be seen that new knowledge in short is all the up-to-date thinking of man. It is the progress of thought to date. The two fields of intellectual procedure, scientific induction and philosophic deduction, working together have remade our cosmic outlook, restated problems, changed methods, and proceed on a new set of presuppositions and structural ideas. In short, there has been ushered in by the inductive method of scientific investigation a major intellectual revolution in man's ways of discovering and using truth.<sup>3</sup>

This revolution in the thought of man to which Fosdick refers, is that which is being built upon the foundation of the spirit of the Renaissance with its naturalistic trend and its exaltation of the human reason and the rationalistic processes of the intellect.<sup>4</sup>

The significance of this revolution lies in the fact that it has created its own over-all world-life view

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1. Fosdick: The Modern Use of the Bible, op. cit., p. 144.
2. Ibid., p. 146.
3. Ibid., pp. 43-44.
4. Carl F. H. Henry: Remaking the Modern Mind, pp. 36-41.

which becomes the norm for evaluating all truth. As new knowledge discovers more and more of the law-abiding processes whereby all creation operates, man increases in his mastery of life and its many complex problems. It would also seem that in this process man has come increasingly to trust in and rely upon only that which his scientific and philosophic endeavour has disclosed, considering that to be a revelation more significant than scripture which claims to be the revelation of God to man.

Thus new knowledge is more than recently discovered facts. It is an attitude of mind expressed in certain presuppositions, growing out of naturalistic philosophy, and exhibiting an air of independence and optimistic confidence in the ability of man's reason to cope with the complexities of life.

#### D. The Conflict

It can readily be seen that the spirit which pervades new knowledge is going to have great difficulty not only in accepting as objective historic facts the events of Jesus life as presented in scripture (for there arises conflict at almost every point of Jesus' life), but also the over-all world-life view inherent in the scriptures into which the person and work of Jesus as presented by the New Testament writers fits logically and historically. At each phase of his life there is recorded the unusual,

that which is beyond the realm of normal experience not only for his day but for ours. Accepting modern scientific thought as normative, there are many miracles which cannot be verified as actual occurrences. For example, the claim that a virgin could conceive apart from a human agency is out of the scope of modern science. The law-abiding processes in human birth are common knowledge in scientific circles and allow for no such conception. Another example would be the restoration of physical life after a body is actually dead and decay has set in. This is absolutely contrary to modern scientific knowledge which knows the breakdown of the cell structure which takes place at death making normal function of the organs beyond restoration.

Thus the very structure and content of the traditional view of Jesus is interwoven with historic facts which are not compatible with modern scientific thought. If scientific knowledge is normative, the traditional view cannot be historic fact as it claims to be. Fosdick's "intellectual honesty forbade him to accept one kind of science for the contemporaneous world and another kind for the Bible."<sup>1</sup> The result was that Fosdick pleaded "for something more intelligent than fundamentalism . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Fosdick felt that there were people all over America who felt as he did:

. . . . .

1. Gray, op. cit., p. 1005.
2. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 178.

If the majority of Christians in America would face the facts, they would have to confess that they do not believe in some of the mental frameworks in which Scriptural faith in immortality first arose. Yet for all that they do believe in life everlasting.<sup>1</sup>

. . . multitudes of people so far from being well-stabilized traditionalists, are all at sea in their religious thinking. If ever they were drilled in older uses of the Bible, they have rebelled against them. Get back to the nub of their difficulty and you find it in Biblical categories they no longer believe -- miracles, demons, fiat creation, apocalyptic hopes, eternal hell, or ethical conceptions of Jehovah in the Old Testament that shock the modern conscience. An artificial adhesion, none the less strong because it is irrational, has been set up between their deepest and most beautiful spiritual experiences on the one side and their accustomed use of scripture on the other.<sup>2</sup>

The result is that Christianity, particularly in its view of Christ, must be brought up to date and recast into "fashions of thought and action for which science stands";<sup>3</sup> and to do this it must go "through the searching criticism to which the last few generations have subjected the Scriptures and be able to understand and enter into the negations that have resulted".<sup>4</sup>

Into the conflict between the traditional interpretation of Jesus and the norms of "new knowledge" Fosdick entered, taking the side of new knowledge but seeking the compatible essence of the significance of Jesus that lay within the incompatible forms of the traditional theological interpretation.

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1. Fosdick: The Modern Use of the Bible, op. cit., p. 103.
2. Ibid., p. 5.
3. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 201.
4. Fosdick: The Modern Use of the Bible, op. cit., p. 5.

### E. Conclusion

In this chapter the attempt has been made to present a general view of the conflict that exists between new knowledge and the traditional interpretation of Jesus. The conflict was shown to lie in a question of authority, that of the modern scientific mind as over against that of the traditional view of the scriptures.

Since the conflict will be restated and expanded in the procedure of the following chapter, its elements here have been only briefly stated for the purpose of revealing the nature of its development and to form an adequate basis for understanding a consideration of Fosdick's means of resolving the problem.

### CHAPTER III

DOCTOR FOSDICK'S APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF NEW KNOWLEDGE  
AND THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF JESUS

### CHAPTER III

#### DOCTOR FOSDICK'S APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF NEW KNOWLEDGE AND THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF JESUS

##### A. Introduction

In this chapter the means whereby Doctor Fosdick resolved the conflict between the norms of new knowledge and the claims of historic Christianity will be considered.

Having stated the general approach to the problem,<sup>1</sup> it will now be seen how the traditional view of Jesus is influenced and how Fosdick restates the significance of Jesus for the modern mind. This significance will be traced with relation to the person, life and work of Jesus including his birth, life, death, resurrection and second coming.

##### B. Problems of the Traditional Interpretation Removed

The problem of the traditional interpretation of Jesus lies in the supernatural acts or events ascribed to him which transcend the natural order of events as we commonly see them and as scientific research has consistently observed them. Therefore, accepting the modern deductions from scientific observation as normative, Fosdick was confronted with the task of explaining Jesus as portrayed in the scriptures.

. . . . .

1. Ante, p. 28.

The logical explanation would most likely be found in the minds of those who were supposed to have seen and recorded these events. Fosdick makes this observation concerning doctrine in general as it appears in scripture:

Wherever in Scripture doctrines are insisted on . . . they are never doctrines for their own sakes; they are either commendatory truths about a Friend, that we may not fail to trust him, or they are ideas about life that have come to men because they did trust him. Trust in a person is either the source or the goal of every Christian doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

In this insight into the purpose of scriptural doctrine, there is a suggestion of the means whereby Fosdick found the explanation for supernatural events. They may be assigned to the category of ideas about life that have come to men because they did trust Jesus, or ideas that have been stated for the express purpose of fostering trust in him. Thus the source of the supernatural is shifted from the objective to the subjective realm.

This formula as seen by Fosdick is more clearly stated in the following:

These first disciples were vividly aware of an abysmal need, which had been met in Christ, a great peril from which through him they had escaped. . . .<sup>2</sup>

One need not read far in the New Testament to see why these first disciples so adored their Lord . . . They called him by many . . . names . . . in their endeavor to do justice to his work and character. . . .<sup>3</sup>

. . . . .

1. Harry Emerson Fosdick: The Three Meanings: Prayer, Faith, Service, p. 95.
2. Ibid., p. 248.
3. Ibid.,

Dr. Fosdick seems to feel that trust produced the events whereas the traditional view is that the events gave rise to the trust. Thus it was not observed facts which gave rise to the exalted concept of Jesus, but it was an exalted concept of Jesus which caused these supernatural events to be attributed as attendant facts in his life. This endeavor to do justice to the person and work of Jesus would naturally be expressed in the concepts (both scientific and spiritual), or "mental categories", of their day.

The ancient situation in Palestine, in whose matrix Jesus' ministry was set and whose traditions and ways of thinking conditioned the phrasing of his gospel, has long since been outgrown, but not Jesus himself.<sup>1</sup>

By this approach the conflict is resolved; for, after relegating the supernatural to the creative imagination expressed in outmoded scientific conceptions, there remains no actual anti-scientific material in the life of Jesus to be accepted by the modern mind.

Vindication of his view is found by Dr. Fosdick in the slant that modern psychological findings have thrown on the comparative study of religions. This comparative study has revealed many similarities in the miraculous claims of various faiths:

Miracles are no specialty of Christian faith. They are the psychological children of the ancient world view. . . . The same kind of miracle, such as raising

. . . . .

1. Harry Emerson Fosdick: The Man from Nazareth, p. 241.

the dead, transforming one element, like water, into another, walking on the sea, and feeding multitudes with a small food supply, is found familiarly among the records of historic faiths.<sup>1</sup>

Previously there had been attempts to explain similarities by a process of borrowing concepts shared through contacts between civilizations of differing faiths. However, Fosdick feels that these resemblances, which are many and are at the very heart of various faiths from the most primitive to the most highly developed, are explainable not by borrowing or copying but by a psychological reaction to the mystery of the world and the basic needs of human nature.<sup>2</sup> Thus human nature, a common denominator in the origin of all faiths, inherently demands by its very structure the positing of the miraculous to satisfy its needs.

Fosdick recognizes both the freedom and the danger in this new interpretation. He stresses that, though these concepts were not actual events, it does not follow that they are meaningless, for a gospel of negations leaves a vacuum. The important need is that this freedom from old superstitious incredulities be utilized in a keener application of the positive essence that remains. And the most significant of all the positive aspects of the gospel is in Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

. . . . .

1. Harry Emerson Fosdick: "What Is Christianity?", Harper's Magazine, April, 1929, p. 552.
2. Ibid., p. 553.
3. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 141.

By this means Fosdick has rescued his faith from the grasp of science by retaining the validity of abiding experiences which form the common germ of all the varying intellectual structures constructed to express them:

The abiding continuum of Christianity, we have said, lies in basic experiences which phrase and rephrase themselves in different forms of thought.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of these abiding experiences is revealed to us in the intellectual frameworks created to express them. Thus, though not scientifically accurate, they are psychologically meaningful and cannot lightly be discarded. Fosdick feels this is one of the weaknesses of the liberal approach. They have not taken Jesus seriously.

The final answer to the conflict is in the separation of the content from the structure. When this separation is made, it is seen that the Bible has not been spoiled by new knowledge but has been made far more useful; for it reveals the fundamental principles of life which furnish the best hope for our present world.<sup>2</sup>

From this general solution it will be possible to follow through its ramifications as to the specific reinterpretation of Jesus.

### C. Essence of Revelation about Christ Restated

#### 1. Life and Work

. . . . .

1. Fosdick: The Modern Use of the Bible, op. cit., p. 208.
2. Ibid., p. 5.

The application of the above-mentioned solution or formula to the virgin birth is clearly illustrated both with regard to how this concept came to be stated and what the essence of it means for today.

. . . those first disciples adored Jesus -- as we do; when they thought about his coming they were sure that he came specially from God -- as we are; this adoration and conviction they associated with God's special influence and intention in his birth -- as we do; but they phrased it in terms of a biological miracle that our modern minds cannot use.<sup>1</sup>

The two parts of the formula, the disciple's adoration and faith for Jesus and the mental categories of their day, combine in the record of the virgin birth to resolve any conflict with new knowledge, but at the same time the essence of its meaning is preserved for our time.

The recorded words and works of Jesus during his ministry as approached by Fosdick are also harmonized with modern scientific deductions.

In Jesus' words there are many direct or implied claims to actual deity, equality with God. But Fosdick's subjective approach through the minds of the disciples minimizes this potential difficulty by stating:

It is difficult to be accurately certain of Jesus' private ideas, as distinguished from the impressions of them reported by his disciples. . .<sup>2</sup>

. . . . .

1. Harry Emerson Fosdick: The New Knowledge and the Christian Faith, p. 10.
2. Harry Emerson Fosdick: A Guide to Understanding the Bible, op. cit., p. 42.

Again in addition to this subjective element is the matter of the mental categories of the day through which Jesus communicated with those he taught.

Behind the manner of Jesus' teaching was its substance. Grant the transient, contemporary elements that necessarily entered into the Master's message, from small details reflecting current customs to prevalent ideas of Gehenna and expectations of the speedy coming of the messianic age, still the profound residue remains -- truth applicable always and everywhere to man's deepest moral and spiritual needs.<sup>1</sup>

This intellectual formula has again resolved the conflict and retained the abiding experience.

In the matter of Jesus' works, which constantly reflect the supernatural, Fosdick flatly rejects some miracles, puzzles at others, and accepts many as valid.

Concerning those which he rejects he states:

In the New Testament, finding a coin in a fish's mouth to pay the temple tax, or walking on water, or blasting a tree with a curse, may be just such stories as always have been associated with an era of outstanding personalities and creative spiritual power.<sup>2</sup>

Fosdick is puzzled, not only by the resurrection accounts, but by other events.

What does the story of the miraculous draft of fishes mean? . . . Our occidental minds probably miss many symbolic literary devices in an Oriental book and this may be one of them.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the miracles which Fosdick definitely accepts are "our Lord's healing of the sick."<sup>4</sup>

. . . . .

1. Fosdick: The Man from Nazareth, op. cit., p. 243.
2. Fosdick: The Modern Use of the Bible, op. cit., p. 164.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 165.

The application of this formula to the miracles has again satisfied the modern scientific skepticism of the supernatural but has not destroyed the eternal value inherent in the miracle concept.

What, then, was the abiding conviction which our forefathers at their best were expressing when they thought and talked in terms of miracles? They were believing in the providence of God and in his immediate presence and activity in his world . . .<sup>1</sup>

They were saying that superhuman power is here, available for use, and that when men are open to its inrush and control it is not easy to set limits to the results that may ensue. Granting all the associated aberrations and credulities of the miracle-idea, it was nevertheless our forefathers' way of saying they believed in the living God, whose ways of working are not bound within the narrow limits of man's little knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Though there is nothing spectacularly supernatural in the death of Jesus itself (attendant circumstances excepted), there are supernatural implications and presuppositions underlying the New Testament interpretation of the significance of that death. The same approach relieves the situation as Fosdick observes that without exception doctrines of atonement , throughout the entire history of the church, reflect the current social structure and intellectual concepts and cannot be understood apart from this setting. The penological system, Fosdick observes, was the chief aspect of the social structure that figured in the explanation of the cross. Though the arguments were

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1. Ibid., p. 157.

2. Ibid., p. 158.

elaborate and the concept stated as dogma, Fosdick feels they were not everlasting truths but were mere transient formulations of a "great matter." These men were so conditioned by their social and intellectual environment that they invariably framed their explanation of the cross in the current penology.<sup>1</sup>

Since these formulations were not everlasting truth, Fosdick undertakes his own formulation of the everlasting truth in a category demanding no qualities of Jesus' nature that are out of harmony with scientific thought.

Theoretically we know that this is the essence of the Christian gospel -- Christ lifted up in the faith that deep in man are capacities to see his glory, respond to his quality, be moved by his self-sacrifice, until mankind is won in voluntary allegiance to his discipleship.<sup>2</sup>

'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me'. The Master, that is, trusted his cause to the power of persuasion.<sup>3</sup>

Not only the power of persuasion but lessons on forgiveness are inherent in Christ's death on the cross which Fosdick sums up in these words:

When . . . the gospel has invited men to forgiveness . . . it has called them to the cross. And they have always heard the cross saying to them that it was hard even for God to forgive. . . . It cost just what it always costs when men forgive: love putting itself in our place, bearing on its innocence the burden of our guilt.<sup>4</sup>

. . . . .

1. Finkelstein, op. cit., p. 113.
2. Fosdick: A Great Time To Be Alive, op. cit., p. 181.
3. Ibid.
4. Andrew W. Blackwood: The Protestant Pulpit, p. 196.

Fosdick states that he is not concerned over theories of the atonement but is concerned that we learn the lessons inherent in all theories of the atonement which have been formulated throughout the history of Christian thought; and one of these lessons is that "the cross means that it was not easy even for God to forgive".<sup>1</sup>

Again Fosdick has illustrated the removal of the intellectual barrier and the retention of the essential truth found in the germinal abiding experience which he separates from its outmoded category.

The next phase of the life of Jesus poses one of the most significant and incredulous miracles of all.

. . . what shall we say about the physical aspects of the resurrection of Christ? We believe that he is not dead but is risen; that we have a living Lord. And yet we may not know what to make of narratives about his eating fish after his resurrection, passing through closed doors, and offering his hands and feet to the inquiring touch of Thomas. Is it the Hebrew necessity of associating continued life with a physical resurrection that made these stories . . .<sup>2</sup>

The suggested solution to the problem lies in the same subjective mold as in every other phase of the life of Jesus; this time it is the "Hebrew necessity of associating continued life with a physical resurrection". Fosdick has stated his view of the resurrection in a more concise manner when he declares:

I believe in the persistence of personality through

. . . . .

1. Ibid.

2. Fosdick: The Modern Use of the Bible, op. cit., p. 164.

death, but I do not believe in the resurrection of the flesh.<sup>1</sup>

Fosdick believes the problem of the resurrection to be so complex that no dogmatic position can be taken as to whether its origin came from the empty tomb or from the religious experience of Paul.<sup>2</sup> He closes a section in which he deals with the many theories and problems with these words:

Fortunately, the sharing of this faith that Jesus is not dead, but alive, does not depend on any hypothesis as to its origin in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup>

Fosdick finds no disturbing elements in Jesus' teaching concerning the last judgment, for in this teaching he was a child of his times.

The framework of the Last Judgment, as Jesus pictured it, -- the Son of Man sitting on his glorious throne and, like a shepherd, parting sheep from goats -- is local and contemporary but its ethical gist is permanent: mercy to the needy as God's central requirement and love as the fulfilling of the law.<sup>4</sup>

This consistent removal of the intellectual barrier and retention of the essence of truth has been accomplished in every phase of the life of Jesus by assigning all problem facts to one of two subjective origins: either the psychologically conditioned minds of the writers, or the prevailing mental categories of the day which are transient and scientifically inaccurate.

. . . . .

1. Ibid., p. 98.
2. Fosdick: A Guide to Understanding the Bible, op. cit., p. 295.
3. Ibid.
4. Fosdick: The Man From Nazareth, op. cit., p. 245.

## 2. The Person of Jesus

The question now arises, if all these events are not facts, Just who is Jesus?

In search for the answer to this question Fosdick has spent much research and study in an attempt to re-discover the historic Jesus, the Jesus who actually walked this earth, the Jesus who is uncolored by the gross distortions built about him by the human mind.

Jesus, as his contemporaries saw him, cannot be thought of . . . in his stark historicity as an uninterpreted person.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus has been grossly mistreated by theology and often put into terms incredible to minds like ours.<sup>2</sup>

Having attributed the pre-existent and everlasting Son of God, the third person of the Trinity, who worked miracles even to the extent of raising the dead, to a subjective origin in the human mind, Fosdick is faced with the necessity of stating the person and nature of the actual Jesus.

It is our business in this modern age to recover the concrete, historic figure of the Master; it is our business to exalt his ethical teaching, without which there is no ethical hope for the world . . . Without something more we have only hero-worship of Jesus . . . Those first disciples, indeed, started that way . . . But evermore as they lived with him they saw something else: his real significance lay in what he revealed.<sup>3</sup>

In this statement Fosdick shows two ways in which he prepared for his restatement of Jesus: one is

. . . . .

1. Ibid., p. 247.
2. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 75.
3. Harry Emerson Fosdick: "Jesus, the Revelation of God", Homiletical Review, January, 1923, p. 68.

the process whereby he came to be acclaimed as Son of God, his deification, the other is the transferring of attention and significance from the person of Jesus to that which he revealed.

The deification of Jesus was a natural consequence of what he accomplished for those in need as Fosdick sees it.

By various paths those first followers came to him, wanting renewed faith, forgiveness of sin, healing of body and spirit, a leader to follow, a cause to serve, a hope to give them courage; and, finding these timeless needs supplied by Jesus, they began asking, Who is he? and answering in terms of mental categories they had inherited.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless this mental process was not sudden but rather grew as a snowball, picking up more and greater concepts from the surroundings in which it took place. According to Fosdick, "Jesus was progressively reinterpreted in new patterns of thought"<sup>2</sup> as the message concerning him was proclaimed in different situations and to people of different backgrounds. "In this process . . . it is customary to see the gradual elevation of a man to the divine realm".<sup>3</sup>

The result of this process, according to Fosdick, is:

That this led Christian thinking far beyond the original historical facts concerning his life,

. . . . .

1. Fosdick: The Man From Nazareth, op. cit., p. 247.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

teaching, and ministry . . .<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Fosdick sees a two-way development in the deification of Christ in the minds of the early disciples:

As New Testament thinking developed not only did Christ become more and more identified with the divine world but the divine world became more and more identified with Christ.<sup>2</sup>

When the early Christians thought of the divine, therefore, they thought of Jesus, so that while their theological reinterpretations of him, often in contravention of historical accuracy, changed their ideas of his earthly life and ministry, his earthly life and ministry still exercised a profound influence on their theology.<sup>3</sup>

The result of such a process seems to lie in a balance between fact-motivated deductions and deduction-created facts all blended into a single concept of Jesus. Even though this objective-subjective blend may place the real Jesus out of touch, it assures us that it is not necessary to stumble over supernatural elements that contradict the modern mind.

Having thus reduced the reliability of the deity of Jesus, Fosdick finds his significance not in who he was but what he revealed.

The universe with its everlasting laws was here first -- we must adjust ourselves to that. Christ, the revelation of the everlasting right, antedates us, overarches us; Alpha and Omega, he was here first and will be here last -- not ours to use and fit into our ways but ours to follow and obey.<sup>4</sup>

. . . . .

1. Fosdick: A Guide to Understanding the Bible, op. cit., p. 46.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 47.
4. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 208.

By way of illustration on this point Fosdick uses the hypothetical case of Michael Faraday disclosing the power of electricity, which he discovered was available, to a small group of friends. But now years later, neglecting the electricity, we try to visualize Faraday, to make real his life and tell what he said and did, thus missing the significance of Faraday which lies in something he revealed that was eternal and existed before him and which he merely discovered.<sup>1</sup>

The same point is illustrated by likening the person of Jesus to the supreme artist who according to Ruskin cannot be proud because greatness is not in him but through him.<sup>2</sup>

As Jesus saw the matter, it was not himself but God who was good, and who was using him in every good work he did. But while thus humble about himself, he was uncompromising in affirming and defending the truth he stood for and in asserting his supreme authority as its representative.<sup>3</sup>

Because of this emphasis away from the person of Jesus to what he revealed, he is described by such terms as "the revelation of the Eternal",<sup>4</sup> "a revealer of everlasting laws",<sup>5</sup> "the best personal life we know",<sup>6</sup> "a transcendent personality",<sup>7</sup> or "revealer of the

. . . . .

1. Fosdick: "Jesus the Revelation of God", op. cit., p. 66.
2. Fosdick: The Man From Nazareth, op. cit., p. 246.
3. Ibid.
4. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 74.
5. Ibid., p. 25.
6. Harry Emerson Fosdick: "Personality as the Genius of Christianity", Reader's Digest, June 25, 1932, p. 19.
7. Harry Emerson Fosdick: "The Re-discovery of Jesus", Christian Century, June 12, 1924, p. 756.

Eternal Spirit".<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the great significance and elevated position Fosdick gives to Jesus, he is unwilling in the final analysis to say whether he is God or man. By way of explanation he uses the analogy of electricity of which no one knows the real essence, yet one can know what it does; so with Christ, Fosdick claims, you may not know who he is but you have historic evidence of what he has done, and he "has been the kind of person who could do what he has done".<sup>2</sup>

In the light of this interpretation of Jesus, Fosdick quotes the gist of what the Church has tried to convey in claiming the Divinity of Jesus.

The gist of what the Church has meant by the Divinity of Jesus . . . lies in the idea that, if God is to be symbolized by personal life, He should be symbolized by the best personal life we know. The interpretation of the Spiritual World in terms of personality and the interpretation of personality in terms of Christ -- that is in brief the summary of Christian theology.<sup>3</sup>

#### D. Conclusion

In this chapter the approach or intellectual formula whereby Fosdick resolved the conflict between new knowledge and the traditional interpretation of Jesus was presented. The application of this formula to the major phases of Jesus' life was given as the background

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1. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 75.
2. Fosdick: "The Re-discovery of Jesus", op. cit., p. 756.
3. Fosdick: "Personality as the Genius of Christianity", op. cit., p. 19.

and basis for understanding Fosdick's interpretation of the person of Jesus.

It was noted that there was a vagueness in stating just who Jesus was, the final conclusion being that he was great enough to do what he did.

CHAPTER IV

THE PLACE OF DR. FOSDICK'S INTERPRETATION OF JESUS  
IN THE ATTAINMENT OF SALVATION

CHAPTER IV  
THE PLACE OF DR. FOSDICK'S INTERPRETATION OF JESUS  
IN THE ATTAINMENT OF SALVATION

A. Introduction

Having resolved the conflict and discarded the extraneous negations of the traditional view of Jesus that resulted, Fosdick, being primarily a minister and not an abstract thinker, was basically concerned with a practical working faith. In this chapter Fosdick's concept of salvation and the place of Jesus in the attainment of this goal will be considered.

B. Salvation Concerned with Character

Fosdick's main concern was for the upbuilding of individual character. Any sort of theological endeavor was useless unless it resulted ultimately in the upbuilding of character. Fosdick felt that theological controversy was vain because whichever side won, it made no difference to character.<sup>1</sup> He also realized that superficial belief in Jesus had little effect on character as the history of the Christian Church has often revealed.<sup>2</sup>

The significance of Fosdick's emphasis on

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1. Gray, op. cit., p. 1004.
2. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 174.

character is explained by the place he ascribes to personality. It is the very essence of Christianity; so, naturally, character which is quality of personality, is a primary consideration in salvation.

Personality, the most valuable thing in the universe, revealing the real nature of the Creative Power and the ultimate meaning of creation, the only eternal element in the world of change, the one thing worth investing everything in, and in terms of service to which all else must be judged -- that is the essential Christian creed.<sup>1</sup>

This emphasis on character suggests that Fosdick's main concern is centered in this life. Even though personality is eternal, salvation centers in character, the quality of personality as it is seen in action in every day life.

#### C. Jesus, the Criterion of Character

The place of Jesus in the attainment of this salvation of character is an indispensable one, for Christ-likeness is the criterion of Christianity for which there can be no substitute.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously knowledge alone cannot save us. Something else altogether is the abiding standard to whose arbitrament knowledge itself must be brought if it is not to ruin us. The eternal right -- Christ, his faith, his basic principles, his character, his way of life -- that is the standard.<sup>3</sup>

. . . . .

1. Fosdick: "Personality as the Genius of Christianity", op. cit., p. 19.
2. Mingos, op. cit., p. 645.
3. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 205.

Jesus is the great goal, for it was he who discovered for the world the principles of life, the sustaining faiths, the goals of endeavor, and the kind of character that scientifically and educationally maturing society critically needs.<sup>1</sup>

Here is reflected the consistent and direct consequence of the shift in emphasis from the person of Jesus to what he revealed. Now, in presenting the goal toward which character is to strive, the emphasis is on the application of those qualities and ways of living Jesus revealed. Jesus is important only as the agent through which these qualities of life have been disclosed to man. He made explicit the implicit and eternal laws of life.

In accordance with this view of salvation, Fosdick believes the primary task of the minister is to win his people "to a new kind of living whose norms he finds in the New Testament and whose incarnation he finds in Christ."<sup>2</sup>

Christian preaching primarily consists in the presentation of the personality, the spirit, the purpose, principles, life, faith and saviorhood of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Repeatedly Fosdick states that the only hope for the salvation of individuals, society, and the entire world lies in those qualities of spirit that Christ incarnated

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1. Ibid., p. 8.

2. Fosdick: The Modern Use of the Bible, op. cit., p. 209.

3. Ibid.

and pleaded for.<sup>1</sup> "All the homely, decent, ordinary, day by day things we want most depend on our putting Christ's way of life first."<sup>2</sup>

The nature and significance of Fosdick's concept of salvation as presented in its criterion, the laws and principles that Jesus revealed, continues to apply to life in this world. Hope seems to be embodied in this life and human society.

#### D. Jesus in the Process of Attainment

##### 1. Sense of Need

Before the necessary commitment will be made to achieve this high ideal of salvation, Fosdick feels there must be a real sense of need. Vital need is "the exhaustless source of mankind's desire for assurance about God."<sup>3</sup> Mankind desires assurance about God because of vital need, but what is this need? Involved in it is the necessity that man must see how urgently his highest life reaches out toward God.<sup>4</sup> Fosdick suggests that the process whereby we come to a sense of need is through the accumulative experience of the human race, trial and error, until the most satisfactory type of life is found, the life in which unique values are seen to abide. When these

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1. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 49.
2. Ibid., p. 208.
3. Fosdick: The Three Meanings: Prayer, Faith, Service, op. cit., p. 116.
4. Ibid.

values are realized, felt and proclaimed by those who have discovered them, a sense of need is realized by those who have not experienced these values.<sup>1</sup> It is out of such need and desire that true sincerity of action must come.

## 2. Personal Trust in Jesus

This self-commitment to Christ is not primarily an acceptance or rejection of the orthodox creeds but is the acceptance or rejection of Jesus' attitude toward personality. This, Fosdick asserts, is the final criterion of a Christian.<sup>2</sup>

Orthodox creeds hold an insignificant place in Fosdick's attainment of character, not only because they contain that which is incompatible with new knowledge, but also because he feels that many accept creeds as an automatic formula to salvation without any change of life.

The peril of religion is that vital experience shall be resolved into a formula of explanation, and that men, grasping the formula, shall suppose themselves thereby to possess the experience.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, some belief is necessary; for trust is not exercised in an intellectual vacuum. Nevertheless, Fosdick realizes that one "who does not vitally trust the Person whom those doctrines represent, has missed the heart of faith's meaning".<sup>4</sup> So in addition to a sense of

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1. Ibid.

2. Fosdick: "Personality as the Genius of Christianity", op. cit., p. 18.

3. Fosdick: The Three Meanings: Prayer, Faith, Service, op. cit., p. 101.

4. Ibid., p. 94.

need, there is required a personal trust in Jesus as the revealer of the laws through which salvation is achieved.

### 3. Personal Experience

This transaction of trust in Jesus, Fosdick maintains, "must be an individual, psychological experience."<sup>1</sup>

Christianity becomes a dynamic reality in life not only when we wake up to our need of it and discover in it a resource of personal power but when we are convinced that its basic faiths are everlastingly true.<sup>2</sup>

The essence of these basic faiths is the conviction "that no salvation is possible on earth save in goodwill -- intelligent, constructive, creative goodwill."<sup>3</sup>

. . . despite the failure of our little, partial hesitant experimentations with organized goodwill, the abiding, long-range truth is that man's salvation lies there alone where the Master says it lies -- in the increase of patient, persistent, undiscourageable, intelligent, organized goodwill.<sup>4</sup>

The development of the process of salvation, then, follows this pattern. First there must come the sense of need, for until there is a realization of a need for these laws, there will be no interest in application. When there is interest, there will come no application apart from a personal trust in the one who revealed the laws and consequently in the laws themselves. But finally, until this trust is exercised in application and realization in

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1. Fosdick: "Personality as the Genius of Christianity", op. cit., p. 18.
2. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 94.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 95.

experience of the validity of these laws, the Christian experience, there can be no attainment of the life.

Salvation as conceived by Fosdick is increasingly clarified as an earthly-dimensional process primarily involved in human relationships and basically achieved through the efforts of the human will to apply the laws of life as revealed by Jesus.

#### 4. Jesus and Forgiveness of Sins

In keeping with this social emphasis, Fosdick approaches the matter of sin by an emphasis on what it does to one in this life especially as revealed by modern psychiatry. Psychiatrists recognize "that most cases of mental derangement of a functional type are due to a sense of guilt."<sup>1</sup> This sense of guilt can only be overcome by a sense of forgiveness. Therefore, forgiveness of sin becomes another crucial remedial step in the attainment of character salvation.

Take out that unforgiven sin. For your soul's sake, get rid of it! But there is only one way. Whatever theology you hold, it is the way of the cross -- penitence, confession, restitution, pardon.<sup>2</sup>

Fosdick clearly lays down four steps necessary for the attainment of this forgiveness, two of which reflect the attitude and action of the one in whom the sin abides: penitence and confession, and two that reflect the result

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1. Blackwood, op. cit., p. 196.

2. Ibid., p. 197.

and the response on the part of the one offended: restitution and pardon. Whether this encounter takes place merely on the human level, or in the human-Divine relationship, or both is clarified some by the fact that Fosdick has previously stated that because of the cross we know that it cost God to forgive, just as it always costs man to forgive.<sup>1</sup> The place of God and Jesus in forgiveness is suggested when Fosdick reveals that the relationship between personal trust in Jesus and forgiveness is that somehow by laying hold on Christ as the goal and Master of life through faith, we open the door to God's forgiveness.<sup>2</sup> The grounds for that "somehow" Fosdick does not make clear.

##### 5. Jesus More Than an Example

Though the person of Jesus is not important except with relation to the laws he revealed and our connection with God through him in forgiveness is a vague "somehow", Fosdick believes and tries to demonstrate that Jesus is more than a mere example. As a matter of fact, if Jesus is only an individual man whom man must copy, then man had better give up. But if, on the other hand, "he is the revelation of the Eternal Spirit, opening up a realm of Divine life and power, into which we, too, can

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1. Ante, p. 40.

2. Fosdick: The Three Meanings: Prayer, Faith, Service, op. cit., p. 259.

enter," that is gospel.<sup>1</sup> It was in this sense that Christ was the Messiah, that is, a pioneer in a new realm of living before whom man is not only humbled by his greatness but challenged to attain.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is man's Savior in that by God's grace transforming powers are released through him that can remake human lives. This is man's hope.<sup>3</sup>

It is in this fact that Jesus becomes more than an example. By God's grace there are inherent in the laws which Jesus reveals "transforming powers". If it were not for this fact man would be hopelessly faced with a goal beyond his ability to attain.

#### 6. Failure of Attainment

In a law-abiding salvation, there are natural consequences for breaking or rejecting the laws that Jesus revealed, and the evidence of such rejection of the principles of Jesus is all about us in society today.<sup>4</sup> This again is the emphasis on this life. The consequences are simply the same as in any other walk of life, you reap just what you sow.

Since Fosdick has emphasized that personality is eternal, it remains that there must be eternal implications

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1. Fosdick: A Great Time to Be Alive, op. cit., p. 76.
2. Ibid., p. 77.
3. Ibid., p. 79.
4. Ibid., p. 114.

for rejection of Jesus' laws. As to the eternal aspects Gray evaluates Fosdick in these words:

This God, Dr. Fosdick teaches, dwells even in people who do not believe in him, and is not dependent upon their confessedly receiving him. The stars guided man's wanderings and the sun warmed him through many generations when mankind utterly misconceived the real nature of the physical universe. So God comes, not waiting to be asked or delaying until he is consciously recognized -- a flame in the heart of man that will not go out, 'the light which lighteth every man coming into the world'.<sup>1</sup>

This evaluation, if accurate -- and it seems consistent with salvation as Fosdick has outlined it, -- would clearly remove any eternal significance from the acceptance or rejection of the laws of Christ other than a mere continuence of our personality beyond death.

From this fact it would follow that the significance of Jesus is that he somehow made a great spiritual discovery, he revealed the everlasting, absolute laws of life. This discovery has now been made known to all mankind to apply in faith, the ultimate goal being that all mankind will come to their senses, apply the laws, and usher in a harmonious world-society. Those who reject or those who accept are basically the same, children of God in whom he abides, though some have not as yet come to the realization of the necessity of applying Jesus' discovery. These all alike pass into eternity, for the personality is everlasting and God abides in every heart.

. . . . .

1. Gray, op. cit., p. 1005.

### E. Conclusion

In this chapter the problem has been to discover how Dr. Fosdick applied his re-interpreted Jesus to life.

Fosdick's salvation was seen to center in character with the character of Jesus as the goal of salvation. The laws whereby Jesus lived and which he revealed are the means whereby such a goal is attained. Jesus was seen to be central in salvation not merely as an example to which man must attain, but as an applier of laws which man can also apply thereby releasing spiritual power in his life, this spiritual power being released by the grace of God.

Fosdick's concept of salvation was seen to have significance only as a proposed remedy for the ills of this life with regard to human relationships. Man's relationship with God and the questions of eternity are vague facts that exist, but cannot logically be given any place of importance or concern to one who is primarily occupied with applying laws of life in an effort to attain the character of Christ for the betterment of human relationships.

CHAPTER V  
SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

#### A. Introduction

The burden of this chapter will be to review the key points involved in Fosdick's interpretation of Jesus for the purpose of examining the validity of his position and the effectiveness of his application.

These key points are: Dr. Fosdick's problem, approach, and application.

The conclusion will briefly state the implications of the interpretation of Jesus in the writings of Harry Emerson Fosdick.

#### B. Summary

A contribution of science to the problem which Fosdick repeatedly stressed is its disclosure of the regular, unchanging, law-abiding processes of the universe, from which observation is drawn the conclusion that there is a reign of natural law. That is, there exists a fixed, rigid, and unchanging relationship of cause and effect in all events that, when discovered, can be calculated in mathematical precision and predicted with unerring accuracy.

The problem arises when scripture is viewed in the light of this conclusion. The irregularity of

recorded events which are called miracles conflicts with the law-abiding processes that science has revealed. The entire concept of the person and work of Jesus as interpreted by the New Testament writers is effected by this conflict.

Fosdick's approach to this problem was to assign all the supernatural facts either to the creative imagination of those who recorded Jesus' life or to the fact that these truths were being expressed in terms of the outdated knowledge of the day.

Since so much of revelation is mixed with subjective inaccuracies, Fosdick found it necessary to choose and separate in each case what was the abiding truth inherent in the subjective mold.

The abiding truth about Jesus was that he was the revealer of the laws of life, the laws being more important than the one discovering them.

This led to a denouncement of all creeds which were formed upon the presupposition that the truths were inseparably related to the intellectual structure which gave voice to them.

Fosdick in applying these essential truths to life presents the way of salvation for man. This salvation is to be attained by application of the laws which Jesus revealed wherein, by God's grace, there is released spiritual power in our lives, the ultimate goal being a society of goodwill among all men.

### C. Evaluation

A structure is no stronger than its foundation. Fosdick's foundation was what he termed "new knowledge" which gained its authority from science.

Science is merely a method of inductive procedure to gain facts, which say nothing in themselves apart from the interpretations or deductions drawn from them. Consequently the authority of science is the product of man's deductive reasoning.

It becomes the task of man's reason to relate the facts disclosed by science to the over-all world-life view into which they must fit. This is the realm of philosophy.

Construction of such a world-life view requires knowledge of certain areas not within the scope of the scientific method such as the nature of God, the origin of the universe, the nature and destiny of man, and man's relationship to God. There remain two means of obtaining these basic facts underlying every world-life view: speculation or revelation.

Historically, modern science had its birth in the period of the Great Enlightenment and became related to revelation through certain philosophies which cast scientific findings into the mold of a world-life view whose presuppositions were formed independently of revelation and in contradiction to it.

Fosdick did not separate science from its philosophic mold with the result that to him scientific facts generally substantiated and confirmed the presuppositions of the world-life view created by human reason and contradicted some presuppositions of revelation.

The process commenced by Fosdick's solution to the conflict beginning with the rejection of objective, historic facts was forced to carry this rejection to the logical deductions made from those facts. The end result was not a re-statement of theology, but the creation of a new theology.

This new theology, tailored to fit new knowledge, is sufficient for man as pictured in its own presuppositions, but is it sufficient for man as he actually is; and God as He is? The only authoritative source from which to answer this question is revelation. Revelation presents man as hopelessly separated by his own rebellious sin from a loving God. Reconciliation and restoration are achieved only by God entering human history in Jesus, fulfilling the law, suffering and overcoming both the full guilt and penalty of sin, and making this victorious life available to man through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit given only to those who turn from sin, trust Christ's sacrifice, and give themselves wholly back to their Creator.

#### D. Conclusion

If it is valid to press a man to the logical conclusion of his statements, it may be said that Jesus is for Fosdick a great man, the greatest history has ever seen. He is to us a pioneer in a new way of living, our example and ideal to which we must conform by applying the laws of living he revealed. By God's grace our lives through this process are changed.

This is the essence of the interpretation of Jesus in the writings of Harry Emerson Fosdick.

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