

Fosdick *speaks*

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-) has been the most powerful Protestant preacher in the United States in the twentieth century. Through his sermons at Riverside Church in New York City, his vesper talks on Sunday afternoons to a nation-wide radio audience, and his many books, he has exerted a tremendous influence upon millions of persons.

Throughout most of his ministry he was a highly controversial figure. His belief in evolution, his attacks on the infallibility of the Bible, his pacifism, and his championship of many liberal social and economic causes made him anathema to the religious fundamentalists and the political conservatives.

Yet he stood his ground, fortifying his position with deep scholarship and interpreting his views in simple, vivid, powerful prose.

He has been much more, however, than a popular preacher. He conceived and carried out the idea of Riverside Church as an interdenominational fellowship and community center and developed there the Protestant counterpart to the Catholic Confessional, with a corps of trained counsellors. He describes his own counselling as "the creative center of my ministry and a fruitful source of my preaching."

He was born in Buffalo, took his A.B. degree at Colgate and his special training at Union Theological Seminary. After a short period as a Baptist minister in Plainfield, New Jersey, he moved to New York City. In 1915 he became the first pastor of Riverside Church, a post he retained until his retirement.

He still speaks to our condition:

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ON RELIGION . . .

“True religion is not simply an ambulance at the foot of a precipice to pick up those who have fallen over; it is a fence at the top to prevent their falling in the first place.”

“Whatever else a strong faith does, it certainly gathers up the life, pulls it together, and gives it direction.”

“It is betting one’s life on the constructive forces of goodness in this universe against all the evils that sometimes seem to win the victory.”

“It is a fire that is passed on from one life to another, not primarily by instruction, but by kindling.”

“All profound religion ministers to three basic needs: the need of a great metaphysic, a philosophy of life to put meaning into living; the need for a great morality, principles of conduct, personal and social, to ennoble living; the need of a great mysticism, profound resources of interior power by which to live. All profound religion has made to life these three great contributions: a great philosophy, a great ethic, a great resource of power.”

“Many walk down Jordan most of the way on the wrong side and then cross over after the water is deep and the current strong. . . . I celebrate another kind of experience: a youth crossing Jordan near the source, where it is so narrow that he hardly knows when he steps over, and coming down the right bank all the way.”

ON JESUS . . .

“ . . . we Christians . . . rejoice that the center of our religious life is not a proposition but a person.”

“Jesus was not primarily a teacher. He was a reformer. He came not only to *say* something but to *do* something—to call his nation to repentance, to cleanse the synagogue of its sterile conventionality and the temple of its abuses, to open the gates of salvation to folk who were forgotten or despised, to usher in a new era of righteousness. . . . He was actively proposing revolutionary changes in the religious life and practice of his people.”

“Consider the method Jesus used when he did change people. He never gave them the impression that he was importing into them something artificial and alien, but rather that he was discovering in them something they had not known was there, and was bringing it out into the open.”

ON PRAYER . . .

“ . . . the profoundest experience of the race has been that there are regenerative forces, not within our power to create, but within our power to appropriate and assimilate.”

“Prayer, when it is a caricature, is a futile retreat from reality. Prayer, when it is real, can turn the centuries into new courses.”

“ . . . prayer itself is spiritual life at its creative origin.”

ON CHRISTIANITY . . .

“Christianity is primarily something to be done. It is not first of all a finished set of propositions to be accepted. It is first of all an unfinished task to be completed. It is a way of thinking about life and living life to be wrought out personally and socially on earth.”

“Christianity essentially means winning a spiritual victory in the face of hostile circumstances; that is what being a Christian is about.”

“The most fascinating thing in Christianity has always been the cross. Why is that? Because in the long run we do not want an easy religion. We want a commanding, challenging religion that will take all we have and then call for more. That is the kind of religion we have in Christ.”

ON A CHRISTIAN WORLD . . .

“I believe in the possibility of a Christian world, not because I have been argued into it, but because I have seen Christian living done. I have seen it in persons firm as steel and beautiful as music, who poured out into this pagan world a Christlike integrity and humaneness which made spiritual life real. I have seen it in homes where what Jesus said ought to be the law of life was the actual principle of fellowship. It was not Christianity argued; it was Christianity achieved. I have seen it in social movements that leaped high barricades, belied the scoffing of cynics and the fears of friends and opened doors of new eras. It was not Christianity debated; it was Christianity done.”

ON SPIRITUAL POWER . . .

“There are two aspects to every strong life—rootage and fruitage, receptivity and activity, relaxation and tension, resting back and working hard. He who cannot rest, cannot work; he who cannot let go, cannot hold on; he who cannot find footing, cannot go forward—never!”

“We are channels of power,—not closed reservoirs,—open channels of power, and at the fountainheads of our being it is possible to release power, set it flowing, so that one may not easily put limits around the quantity of power that might conceivably be let loose, even through a simple life.”

ON FRIENDSHIP . . .

“Friends are necessary to a happy life. When friendship deserts us we are as lonely and helpless as a ship, left by the tide high upon the shore; when friendship returns to us, it is as though the tide came back, gave us buoyancy and freedom, and opened to us the wide places of the world.”

ON SERENITY AND STAYING POWER . . .

“Serenity is the basis of powerful activity. There is no art, no creativeness, no release of moral power even to rebuild society without it.”

“. . . staying power is commonly associated with profound resources of interior strength replenished by great faiths.”

“. . . staying power is always associated with the experience of being captured by a cause.”

ON THE SOCIAL GOSPEL . . .

"The Christian social gospel is in the very heart of the New Testament—set, to be sure, in mental frameworks appropriate to the first century and different from ours but indubitably there."

"There is a strange prejudice in some quarters that Christianity ought not to concern itself with economic questions at all. One would suppose that any system of faith and conduct, if it is to be good for anything, must concern itself with the most absorbing portion of man's life, his toil for sustenance. It certainly is clear that Jesus had more to say about money, its making and its spending, its perils and its uses, than about any subject whatsoever."

"I suspect that this is the outstanding challenge to us in the churches—our attitude not on theological questions but on the practical, ethical, social questions."

ON SERVICE . . .

"We are not here simply to save people out of the world but to save the world."

"The Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea are made of the same water. It flows down, clear and cool, from the heights of Hermon and the roots of the cedars of Lebanon. The Sea of Galilee has an outlet. It gets to give. It gathers in its riches that it may pour them out again to fertilize the Jordan plain. But the Dead Sea with the same water makes horror. For the Dead Sea has no outlet. It gets to keep. That is the radical difference between selfish and unselfish men."

". . . the inevitable expression of real Christianity is a life of sacrificial service."

ON LIVES WORTH LIVING . . .

“. . . life is an entrustment.”

“. . . very few persons have a chance to live their lives on the basis of their first choice. We all have to live upon the basis of our second and third choices.”

“Have you found something worth living for, some beauty to create, some goodness to achieve, some truth to discover, some spiritual aim to give yourself to? If not you are not happy and not all the accumulation of the means of life can make you happy. What profit, even in happiness, if a man gain this whole modern world of means and lose his soul? The discovery of that fact means a revival of spiritual life.”

“That is about the hardest thing some of us have to do; to take a situation we hate, and say, I am not going to let you be my spiritual enemy; you shall not scare me nor intimidate me nor embitter me nor crush me.”

“The older a man grows the more mysterious life becomes to him.”

“. . . in between birth and death, how the loveliness of life snuggles close to its tragedy.”

“To be carried out of yourself by something that you serve, so that you forget yourself in something other than yourself and so enlarge yourself—that is the secret of a healthy and a happy life.”

“. . . however beautiful one's start, nothing matters much in human life without a good ending.”

ON WAR . . .

"O war, I hate you most of all for this, that you do lay your hands on the noblest elements in human character, with which we might make a heaven on earth, and you use them to make a hell on earth instead. You take even our science, the fruit of our dedicated intelligence by means of which we might build here a City of God, and, using it, you fill the earth instead with new ways of slaughtering men. You take our loyalty, our unselfishness, with which we might make the earth beautiful, and, using these our finest qualities, you make death fall from the sky and burst up from the sea and hurtle from unseen ambuscades sixty miles away; you blast fathers in trenches while you are starving their children at home by blockades If war were fought simply with evil things, like hate, it would be bad enough, but when one sees the deeds of war done with the loveliest faculties of the human spirit, he looks into the very pit of hell!"

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