

Bringing the Bible Up to Date

Dr. Fosdick Discusses "Progressive Revelation"

IN a new book entitled "The Modern Use of the Bible" (Macmillan), the Rev. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, "guest" preacher at the First Presbyterian Church and professor in Union Theological Seminary, New York City, presents an evolutionary view of the Scriptures. This book consists of the Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching delivered at Yale University last Spring, and is being scrutinized with special interest at the present time as a considered statement of the religious attitude of the man whose conflict with Presbyterian fundamentalists since 1922 has attracted national and even international attention. By reason of his uncompromising stand in that controversy, Dr. Fosdick has often appeared to be a radical. His own description of himself, however, is summed up in the word "liberal"; and the Rev. Dr. S. Parkes Cadman, of Brooklyn, has gone so far as to describe him (in a review of the new book in the *New York Sun*) as "orthodox in the best and the permanent meaning of that sadly overworked term."

Dr. Fosdick stakes his faith in the Bible in the recognition of what he calls "progressive revelation." By this he means the gradual unfolding of a spiritual purpose. He finds the Bible crude on its scientific side. He finds it partaking, in every part, of the superstitions and cultural limitations of the periods which brought it forth. But he also finds it thoroughly up to date and intensely satisfying when he thinks of the way in which it deals with spiritual verities.

We are apt to forget that, through the ages, the basic human experiences have been the same. There are sin and its consequences, hunger and thirst after righteousness, love, hate and jealousy, heartbreak, grief and tragedy, joy, hope and the need of God. These emotions are treated by Homer, by

Shakespeare, by Goethe and, in fact, by all first-class writers. They are treated supremely in the Bible, and, as Dr. Fosdick claims, are developed progressively there with a sweep and impressiveness unparalleled in world-literature.

The evolution of the idea of God is particularly clear in the Scriptural narratives. We see, at the outset, God conceived like a man who walks in a garden in the cool of the day, or as one who comes down from the sky to confuse men's speech lest they should build their tower so high as to reach his home. But we see, later on, God revealed in Christ as the spiritual Presence in whom we live and move and have our being, whose name is love, and whose temples are human hearts.

The conception of man in Old Testament times identified soul with his physical breath, and pictured him as a being merged in his group who lacked separate rights here and immortality hereafter. This idea is superseded by a growing belief in the royal worthfulness of the individual until in the New Testament man is spirit, inwardly renewed though the outward man perish.

At the beginning of the Bible, emphasis is laid on ceremonialism and tribal custom. Ethics and rubric are jumbled together so that God equally hates David's sin with Bathsheba and David's taking of a census, or requires alike freedom from murder and refusal to seethe a kid in its mother's milk. By the time the Gospel period is reached, righteousness has been made central in the character of God, and in order to please him men must be shown to be inwardly right in thought and outwardly merciful in life.

There is something uniquely original in the Biblical development of the idea of pain. To start with, man's suffering is regarded as divine punishment or as a curse from God. In the book of Job

we see this idea being outgrown. In the end, suffering is largely redeemed from its old interpretation; is even welcomed as spiritual discipline; and is crowned in the Cross of Christ, where it actually becomes voluntary sacrifice as the means by which alone God can save the world.

All this fits into a view of the Bible which is essentially Christo-centric and is rationalistic mainly in its attitude toward miracles alleged to have taken place on the physical plane. As all roads, in the ancient saying, were supposed to lead to Rome, so all the Scriptural books, in Dr. Fosdick's interpretation, lead to Christ. Two of the lectures in the new book deal, respectively, with "Jesus, the Messiah" and "Jesus, the Son of God." Dr. Fosdick sums them up in the words: "I can think of nothing more foolish than, looking back over our race's history and discerning amid its tragedy and struggle this outstanding figure spiritually supreme, to minimize him, to tone down our thought of him, to reduce him so that we can all be like him. Rather let us exalt him! If God be not in him, God is not anywhere."

In the matter of physical miracle, Dr. Fosdick is candidly skeptical. He regards as "dangerously ridiculous" the idea that a man in order to be a loyal and devout disciple of Christ in the twentieth century A. D. must think that God in the ninth century B. C. miraculously sent bears to eat up unruly children or made an axe-head swim. He is inclined to take the view that the story of Jonah and the great fish may be parable; that the miraculous aspects of the plagues in Egypt may be legendary heightenings of historical events; and that accounts, in the New Testament, of 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. He is willing to admit that he has not made up his mind in regard to even so fundamental a problem as that involved in the physical side of Christ's resurrection.

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There are, however, certain kinds of miracles narrated in the Bible which he says that he cannot help believing. "Wherever," as he puts it, "a narrative in Scripture describes an experience in terms of miracle so that we recognize that the same kind of experience is open to us or would be open if we were receptive of God's incoming power, that narrative is fundamentally credible and useful." He continues:

"Providential guidance of men and nations, as in Israel's release from Egypt, divine calls and commissions, as when God spoke to Samuel in the temple, conversions like Paul's on the Damascus road, and endowments of the church with power as on Pentecost, answered prayers where men let in the waiting Spirit and came off more than conquerors, healings where men proved that Spirit is mightier than flesh—all through the Scripture such activity of divine power is presented in terms of miracle. Such experiences, however, are among the inevitable fruits of vital religion in any generation, and the Bible in such narratives does not so much call us to stretch our minds and believe in ancient events as to gird up our souls and reduplicate them in our own time."

Dr. Fosdick's method of Biblical interpretation has three great advantages. It saves us, in the first place, from what he regards as the old and impossible attempt to harmonize the Bible with itself, to make it speak with unanimous voice, to resolve its conflicts into a strained and artificial unity. How, he exclaims, could one suppose that such internal harmony ever could be achieved between writings so obviously contradictory as the book of Ecclesiastes and the epistles of Saint Paul. In the second place, it saves us from the necessity of apologizing for immature stages in the development of the Biblical revelation. And, above all, it restores to us the whole book seen as a unified development from early and simple beginnings to a great conclusion. "No part of it," we are told, "is without its usefulness. People to-day are living in all the stages of development which its records represent."

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