

THE FAREWELL SERMON
of
DR. HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK
to
The First Presbyterian Church
of New York

SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 1925

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BY
DR. HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK
OF THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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“THESE are the things we have stood for: tolerance, an inclusive Church, the right to think religion through in modern terms, the social applications of the principles of Jesus, the abiding verities and experiences of the gospel. And these are right. I am not sorry we tried this experiment. It was worth trying. We have lifted a standard that no one will put down. We have stated an issue that no man or denomination is strong enough to brush aside. . . .”

INTRODUCTION

THE occasion of Dr. Fosdick's departure from the First Presbyterian Church of New York will stand as one of the most dramatic in history. For five years Dr. Fosdick had been the associate Minister of the Church, and the inspiration of his teaching had given him a pre-eminent position among the workers in religion. A Baptist by denomination, he was invited to the Presbyterian pulpit and served in complete harmony with his associates. His Church, always crowded to hear him preach, was enabled to extend its influence and multiply its contributions. The youth of the land, in particular, had come to regard him as the great apostle of a religion which they can understand.

His farewell address defines very clearly his position. There are few who will not admire the spirit in which it was given. Among the many accounts in the metropolitan press descriptive of the occasion, the following is taken from the *New York Times* of March 2d:

A great wave of religious emotion swept over the crowded congregation of the First Presbyterian

Farewell Sermon of Dr. Fosdick

Church, Fifth Avenue and Eleventh Street, yesterday morning, when the Rev. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick preached his "farewell" sermon. Most of the women in the church were in tears, and many of the men struggled to hide their feelings, when the minister who had preached to them for five and one-half years reached the end of his final sermon.

The closing hymn was "God Be With You 'Till We Meet Again." Never before, probably, had any congregation anywhere sung a hymn with more intimate personal realization of its significance. Eighteen hundred voices rose in a magnificent chorus.

No one left the church after the benediction, which closed the service. Every one remained standing in the pews or in the aisles. Dr. Fosdick started to descend from the pulpit to mingle with the congregation as has been his custom. Before he could leave the pulpit the emotion of the men and women in the front rows overcame them. They hurried forward and ascended into the pulpit, all that could get in. For fifteen minutes they stayed there, surrounding Dr. Fosdick and assuring him of their unending support.

AN HOUR IN SAYING FAREWELL

Then the preacher got down from the pulpit and a double row of people filed past him to shake his hand. He remained an hour to exchange good-byes and listen to the heartfelt words of men and women, **some with tears in their eyes, who echoed the hope that it was not farewell, but only au revoir.**

Farewell Sermon of Dr. Fosdick

DR. ALEXANDER PRAYS FOR HIS RETURN

The Rev. Dr. George Alexander, venerable pastor of the First Church, offered a prayer at yesterday's service that Dr. Fosdick be restored to the church on his return from his forthcoming trip abroad, which will include a visit to the Holy Land.

His voice breaking as he glanced first at Dr. Fosdick and then at the huge congregation of 1,800 devout men and women with heads bowed, Dr. Alexander supplicated for greater church unity, and then said:

"But do not hold us selfish, Heavenly Father, if today we pray most for a blessing upon the great ministry fulfilled in this place. We pray Thee that he who has performed this ministry, as he goes out, taking our hearts with him, after a sojourn in storied lands, mellowed by these experiences, may be restored to us in the future to declare once more to us the words of eternal life."

Dr. Alexander urged members of the congregation and others who had been aided spiritually by Dr. Fosdick's preaching to write letters to the First Church to be used by the church in its efforts to have him restored to the pulpit.

"We are continually receiving letters from all parts of the world telling of blessings received from this ministry," said Dr. Alexander. "The ministers will welcome like letters from any here present. Such letters may perhaps be used for the vindication of

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the course of this church and for the vindication of the great minister who has labored among us.”

The congregation was the largest ever admitted to First Church. Every seat was taken, and more people were allowed to stand than ever before. The church proper has pew room for 1,088, so that more than 700 either sat in the two chapels or stood. More than 500 persons were turned away from the doors, unable to get in.

HUNDREDS STAND IN RAIN

People began to gather in front of the church as early as 9 o'clock. Never since Dr. Fosdick's ministry began had there been a larger crowd in front of the church at one time. Hundreds stood patiently in the drizzle of rain waiting for the doors to open. Pew holders were admitted as usual by a side chapel door. All the front doors were unbarred at exactly 10:30 o'clock, and there was a rush to get in. The vestibule was so jammed that there was confusion for a few minutes before the doors were closed.

Farewell Sermon of Dr. Fosdick

And Paul after this tarried there yet a good while, and then took his leave of the brethren, and sailed thence into Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquilla; having shorn his head in Cenchrea, for he had a vow.

—ACTS XVIII, 18

MY FRIENDS, we all of us have known that this Sunday was inevitable, when associations that through the years have grown affectionate and strong would be severed. For I think we would better put the matter frankly in that light. I know that there are some of you who are not yet ready to face the situation in those terms. You think that the General Assembly may yet take action that will make possible the re-establishment of these relationships. It is only just to myself, however, to say publicly that I do not share your expectations and that when I leave this pulpit today I do not expect to return. I have, therefore, the difficult task of saying to you this morning, farewell!

It is probably a preacher's mannerism that on an occasion like this, which does not require a text, I should choose one. Yet there is sense in it. Robert Louis Stevenson tells us that when he was a very little boy and suffering heavily from illness, his nurse, Alison Cunningham, used to know how to comfort him by telling him tales of brave men of old days who had suffered, too, and had come off conquerors. There is a note of universal humanity in that need of Stevenson.

The Bible "A Great Resource"

We are always supported when we know that we have the companionship of souls who have gone through a like experience, and in this respect the Bible is a great resource. It is a repository of every kind of experience that anybody on earth ever could go through. All fears and dreams and hopes and disappointments, griefs and aspirations, trials, temptations, joys and satisfactions, are in the book. So that I have found it easier this morning to deal with this farewell by not thinking directly of it, but of another farewell, where other people not ourselves, and very different from ourselves, went through a like experience long ago.

In the 18th verse of the 18th Chapter of the Book of Acts you find Paul saying good-bye to the Church in Corinth: "Paul tarried there yet a good while," we read, "and then took his leave of the brethren, and sailed thence."

If we turn back to the Bible to find how to live in other relationships, why not turn back to the Bible this morning to find out in what spirit we should say good-bye?

Paul's itinerant ministry probably had accustomed him, as far as one can be accustomed, to farewells like this, but there were special reasons why that good-bye at Corinth was significant and difficult. Corinth came as near being a settled pastorate as Paul ever had. He might stay a few weeks in this town or that, but he had settled down in Corinth, supported himself by tent making, wrought himself into the life of his community, and so far had fathered the Church that he could write to it afterwards: "In Christ I begat you through the Gospel." It was in writing to this Church that out of the depth of his heart welled up the great 13th Chapter on love. It was to this Church that he said: "Our mouth is open unto you, O Corinthians, our heart is enlarged." And

now, at last, this prolonged and happy ministry must come to its conclusion.

Paul's Farewell to His Flock

You can imagine that group down by the Corinthian seashore gathered to say good-bye. It must have been replete with many emotions, regrets, fears, happy memories, deep satisfaction, for Paul had tarried there a good while and was now taking leave of the brethren and sailing thence.

What do you suppose he said to them? Let us ask ourselves that this morning. It may help us if we try to put ourselves as well as we can into their places and guess what kind of good-bye the Apostle spoke to his friends.

In the first place, I feel sure that he talked with them awhile about the things they had been standing for in Corinth amid controversy and debate. For Paul's experience in Corinth had not been tranquil and serene. It had been a stormy time. No sooner had Christianity gotten under way than a problem arose which split the Church into two schools of thought. Must Christianity still carry along with it and insist upon the ob-

servance of the old Jewish laws? That question inevitably arose, and it precipitated an acrimonious dissension.

The first Christians had been Jews, Jews first, with their new Christianity simply an addition to their old Judaism, and it never dawned on them to abate one jot or tittle of their emphasis upon the old observances—circumcision, clean and unclean foods, Sabbath observance and the temple ritual and sacrifice. Must Christianity carry all that along?

Many of those first Christians answered, Yes. They were the first Fundamentalists of the Christian movement. They sincerely believed that these observances were part and parcel of the basic principles of Christianity.

His Clash With "Fundamentalists"

But Paul stood on the other side. He saw that Christianity never could be a universal religion on those terms. He saw that there was no use preaching Christ to Greeks and Romans all bundled up and obscured in that paraphernalia of legalism. He brushed aside those needless accumulations. He did it kindly, but he did it

firmly. Nothing mattered to him except living faith in Christ of the kind that transforms a man so that the spirit of Christ lives in him.

This firm, uncompromising stand involved Paul in controversy. He had some tempestuous times in Corinth. The Jews even mobbed him once and dragged him before the judgment seat of the Roman pro-consul, Gallio. On that day when he said good-bye I suspect not all the Christians in Corinth were sorry to see him go. Some thanked God that they had seen the last of this disturbing heretic.

How respectable heretics do grow in the retrospect of history! John Greenleaf Whittier—we call him “the good, gray poet” now, and sing his hymns in church—and young John Whittier himself, that radical abolitionist crusader, once in Philadelphia had to escape in disguise from a mob that was after him.

Henry Ward Beecher—what a name to conjure with now, but he was the best-hated heretic of his generation. Beecher spoke once in this city, and my friend heard him say: “They call me a heretic now, just as they called my father and my grandfather. But I notice that now folk

begin to speak politely about my father and grandfather, and some of you young men will yet live to hear Henry Ward Beecher spoken of as a venerable man of God.”

Heretics “Respectable in Retrospect”

So heretics grow respectable in retrospect. What pillars of orthodoxy John Knox and John Calvin seem to be. We forget that John Knox, in his fight for religious liberty, was thrust into the galleys to pull oars like a slave until, as he said, “I cried out of the prison of my dolor,” and that one of the first books John Calvin ever wrote was against intolerance, for which he was straightway put in prison.

So Paul, that haloed saint of the cathedral niches, is not the real Paul. The real Paul was a determined heretic. He cared so much for Christ, so much for the fortunes of Christ in the hearts of men, that he would not stand idly by and see vital Christianity smothered and undone. I am sure that on the farewell day he said a little to the people about the Christian liberty for which they had been standing there in Corinth.

Six years ago, in this church, we entered on an

adventurous experiment. Those were the spacious days after the war when our hearts went out to each other across all credal boundary lines. A great cause united us. Little things had seemed little in the midst of the world's tragic crisis. Those were days when, not having enough coal to go around, Presbyterian and Baptist churches actually condescended to worship God together. Those were days when we told each other with tears in our eyes of Catholic chaplains giving the last rites to Jewish soldiers, and Protestant clergymen holding the crucifix before the closing eyes of Catholic boys. In those spacious days we entered into our experiment—an interdenominational ministry to build a community church that should be in fact "a house of prayer for all people."

Now that that experiment comes to its conclusion, not because it has failed, but because ecclesiastical decree, engineered from a distance, so dictates, we may well spend a moment rehearsing what we have stood for.

We have stood for tolerance. This church is not of one theological complexion. We represent many doctrinal traditions and about as many an-

swers as you can easily imagine to any theological question, you will find somewhere in the minds of this congregation. But never in all these six years has there been a rift in the lute of our harmony. If you want to know why, let me draw you a picture. A young college graduate came before your Board of Elders asking to join this church. She said, "I do not know whether I have any right to join this church."

"Why?" said Dr. Alexander.

"Because I am not sure that I agree with you in theology," she said. "I am modern to my finger tips."

And I never shall forget Dr. Alexander, so splendidly representing the older generation, as he rose and stood beside this eager member of the new generation. "Daughter," he said, "do you believe in Jesus Christ?"

"Yes," she said.

"And taking Him as your personal Saviour and the revelation of your God, do you want to stand with us here for the things He stood for?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then," said he, "you belong with our company."

Why not? If Jesus Christ and what He stood for are not the centre of Christianity, where will you find it? Why can we not gather people around that common purpose and let them think as they will about the details of theology?

We have stood for tolerance.

"The Tragedy of Protestantism"

Again, we have stood for an inclusive Church. The tragedy of Protestantism has been this, that any time anybody got a new idea in doctrine or ecclesiastical polity, he went out, if he had power enough, and founded a new denomination to represent it. The tragedy of Protestantism has been an exclusive church to which nobody belonged except those people who had the same belief about some doctrine or ecclesiastical procedure. The lamentable effect of this historical policy of Protestantism, with each denomination representing some specialty, is with us; a hundred and more denominations in this country, competing, overlapping, each insisting on some minutia, tithing mint, anise and cummin and neglecting the weightier matters of the law. And so far has this historic

policy gone that one denomination of Mennonites is distinguished from all others by the fact that it thinks wearing buttons wrong and wears hooks and eyes instead.

Against this policy of Protestantism we have taken our stand. We have built an inclusive Church. We represent today the major communions of Christendom. If they had let us go on, we would have been more inclusive yet. Why not? Here in New York you will find around a single block under many roofs diverse denominations worshipping the same God. They have the same Lord. They share a common purpose. Why cannot they do under one roof what they do under many?

Why should things like baptism divide? If I had my way baptism would be altogether an individual affair. Any one who wanted to be immersed I would gladly immerse. Any one who wanted to be sprinkled I would gladly sprinkle. If anybody was a Quaker and had conscientious scruples against any ritual, I would gladly without baptism welcome him on confession of his faith. Why not?

A Service for All

I have a Puritan tradition. I like congregational worship and preaching. But I dream of a Church where those who are liturgically minded may have a service where they may have all the symbolism they crave, where those that are congregationally minded may hear the preaching of God's Word, and where the Quakers, who like a reposeful silence where the whisper of the Divine is heard in stillness, may have their form of worship too. Why not?

We have stood here for an inclusive Church.

And this other thing that we have stood for: the right of people to think the abiding verities of Christianity through in modern terms. We have looked with sympathy and solicitude upon this younger generation. They are going out into a new day with new ways of thinking. There is no use in trying to turn back the clock. Ideas like scientific law and evolution are here to stay. Discipline of modern study, like archæology, history, comparative religion, literary criticism, are here to stay. You would not send your children to school where those are not known and familiarly taken for granted, and the day is past when you

can ask thoughtful men to hold religion in one compartment of their minds and their modern world view in another.

We have tried here to help young people to think through their religion in terms that will not do violence to their knowledge. We have lifted up here the command of Jesus as though it were a sacred thing: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy mind." And rich has been our reward in scores of youths who have come back from wondering uncertainty to say what one wrote to us this last week: "You brought me back to Christ."

"Christianity Not a Turnstile"

Moreover, we have stood here for the social applications of the principles of Jesus. Christianity has not been to us a narrowly individual affair, a turnstile through which one by one we escaped from a naughty world into a heavenly security. We believe in service. We have tried to practice it. We have believed that the principles of Jesus ought to be applied to the social order. And since the tragedy of the great war, that conviction ever more deeply has been burned into our hearts.

I thank you for the liberty you have given me

in this realm. I do not believe that our present economic system, as it is run and ordered, is Christian, and I have said so. I do not believe that our international life is Christian, and I have said so. I abhor the cruelties of our modern industrialism. I hate war and I never expect to bless another. For these things I have stood in this pulpit as a Christian minister and no one of you ever tried to lay a finger on my lips.

Here, too, we have stood for the abiding verities and experiences of the Gospel. Show me any one whose faith has been upset in this church. Folk at a distance may say that we have betrayed the Lord, but those of you who have walked with us in this sanctuary know with what reverence we have adored Him, with what eagerness we have sought to know His will, with what earnestness we have commended Him to this young generation. We have proclaimed the reality of the living God and the Saviourhood of Christ and the available energies of the Spirit.

They say that Brittany fisher-folk have a legend that off their coast, deep-buried in the seas is the ideal City of Atlantis, and from it on quiet nights, when the winds are still, if a man's heart is right

he can hear the pealing of the bells. Such is the soul of man with sacred things deep sunken, which life's storm makes us forget, and here, oftentimes on a Sunday morning, we have been quieted in worship until we heard the pealing of the bells.

Recounts What "We Have Stood For"

These are the things we have stood for: tolerance, an inclusive Church, the right to think religion through in modern terms, the social applications of the principles of Jesus, the abiding verities and experiences of the gospel. And these are right. I am not sorry we tried this experiment. It was worth trying. We have lifted a standard that no one will put down. We have stated an issue that no man nor denomination is strong enough to brush aside.

The future belongs to these things we have been standing for. Some day the whole Church will swing round to them, take them for granted, wonder why they ever seemed new or strange, and what is the heresy of one generation will become the orthodoxy of the next. We say farewell to each other, but let no man say farewell to the things we have been standing for!

Once more will you return to the Corinthian seashore? Paul, I think, would have talked thus with his people about what they had been standing for in Corinth, but surely that would not be all. I am certain that he would have thought about some in that company who were not yet Christian, some who, through all his ministry, had resisted his appeals.

We are right this morning to subdue some of our deeper feelings, easing the heart by lightening the word, yet, after all, there is an obvious seriousness in a farewell like this. I mean that our life falls into stints like a journey from a hilltop, through a valley, to a hilltop, so that ever again coming to another crest one, looking back, says: Well, that part of the journey is over. And when the stint has been as long and as significant as these last six years one cannot help pausing thoughtfully before he says good-bye.

A Word to Non-Christians

Only God knows how many of us will ever meet again. How can I stand here this morning and think of some of you who have companied with us

for months, perhaps for years, and never have committed yourself to the Christian life? Surely, Paul would have said a word to such before he left.

Indeed, I can imagine that Paul planned to leave Corinth a good many times before he went. He would get ready to leave Corinth and then he would think of that youth—what a Christian he would make. What a new crusader of the cross, if Christ could get His hands on him. So he would wait until that youth came in. How many times Paul postponed going, who can tell? And when at last he had to go, cannot you imagine him looking over that group and among all the faces there that he recognized as disciples of the Lord, committed to the Christian life and rich in faith, this boy who had not come over, this man who had resisted his appeals, this woman who had preferred self-love to a dedicated life? I think he thought most about them. I am sure he spoke a word of farewell appeal to them for Christ.

I do not see how a minister can serve in New York City and deal, as I have dealt these years past, with hundreds of individuals in the confessional without feeling with ever deepening poign-

ancy the terrible criticalness of the decisions which youth makes in the direction of its life.

Some of you have stood on the Bernina Pass in Switzerland with the long stretches of the Engadine on the one side and the far look to Italy on the other. You will remember those two small lakes upon the height. They are hardly a hundred feet apart—so close together at the beginning, who could guess how far severed their destinies. For one empties into the Adriatic and the other into the Black Sea. You can hardly see the watershed between them. You never could guess the eventual significance of so slight a thing.

An Appeal to Youth

Such is youth, so close the dividing line whose issues are the Adriatic or the Black Sea. Before I go, I am burdened about some of you. On which side of the watershed are you?

I am not thinking simply of your happiness and good fortune when I plead so for your better against your worse part, although I am thinking of that. Two letters came recently to me out of a

western trip. One was from a youth who wanted to snap his fingers at goodness and do as he pleased. Why not? he said. The other was from a youth who had snapped his fingers at goodness and done what he pleased. "A thousand, thousand times," he wrote, "I have paid in full for those few hours."

I am thinking of your personal welfare, but not only that. I am thinking of this generation. It is a great time to be alive. The world is breaking up. In all our social relationships and institutions Winter is past; Spring has come; the thaw is on. We are going out into a new generation, plastic, pliable, fluid. What takes possession of it, what directs its course, what spirit informs it, will determine human destiny for generations. It is no time for a young man to waste his life.

You remember what Sir Philip Sidney, the flower of chivalry, wrote to his nephew. "If you see a good fight anywhere, you had best get into it." A farewell message to you young men and women of this congregation: If you see a good fight anywhere, you had best get into it. And there is no fight that compares in importance with the

contest for the principles of Jesus against the paganism of the world.

Proud of Being Called a Heretic

They called me a heretic. I am proud of it. I wouldn't live in a generation like this and be anything but a heretic. But I carry some of you on my heart in ways that heretics are not popularly supposed to do. I want you to be Christians. I want your lives for Christ. Always before this there has been a next Sunday when I could say that again. Now there isn't any next Sunday. I want you for Christ now. For your sakes I wish I were Paul. For your sakes I wish I were anything like Paul. For I am sure that at that farewell service he won some lives for his Lord.

Finally and very briefly, whatever Paul may have said about the things they had been standing for, or said by way of final farewell and appeal to those not yet committed to the Christian life, you may be sure that he said a very grateful and affectionate farewell to his friends. In the first letter he wrote back to them after he went away he had not got through the second sentence before he said, "I thank my God always concerning you."

Let me say that to you about my fellowship with this church. These have been stormy times, but the storm has been at a distance. It did not invade our sanctuary. It did not disturb our comradeship. No unpleasant thing that I can think of has happened here in all these six years.

A great Scotch churchman once went through a time of controversy and bitter attack and kept his own spirit tranquil and serene through it all. Said a friend to him, "How do you do it?" and he answered, "I am very happy at home." May I apply that to my life with you? These have been stormy times, but not within this church. I have been very happy here at home.

And now, without enlarging on it, you know the burden on my heart as I go. I do not want to leave any personal partisans behind me. Leadership is not true leadership that draws people to the leader only. It must draw them past the leader to the cause. I do not want to leave any personal partisans behind me. Never mind about me. All my enemies have done to me is to build a sounding board behind me so that my message reaches further than I ever dreamed it could. Never mind about me. Stand by the church. Within the

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church work for a better day, and may the God of all grace keep you every one in His sustaining hands.

O spirit of the living God, baptize this people. Thou knowest the possibilities of Christian service in this people. Be to them a God. Keep them from danger. Nourish them in the deep secrets of the heart. And long may this church be like a city set upon a hill that cannot be hid. We ask it for Thy name's sake. Amen.