

24
Best Sermons
1924

Edited with Introduction and Biographical Notes by

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New York
Harcourt, Brace and Company
L. B. B.

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Published, September, 1924
Second printing, November, 1924

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A. BY
THE QUINN & BODEN COMPANY
RAHWAY, N. J.

BELIEF IN CHRIST

In these agitated days to be a heretic is to be a hero, and such a fortune—or fate—has befallen Dr. Fosdick, making him the center of a theological thunder-storm, much to his own regret. Happily, it was a tempest in a tea-pot, since the rumpus ended by inviting the “heretic” to enter the fold in full fellowship. With these things I have not to do, having little interest and no concern, but it is a pity to have so extraordinary a ministry marred, or at least interrupted, by such a debate. Dr. Fosdick was born in Buffalo forty-six years ago, graduated from Colgate University, Union Seminary, and Columbia University, and after nine happy years in the First Baptist Church of Montclair became first an instructor in homiletics and then professor of Practical Theology in Union Seminary; and special preacher at the First Presbyterian Church of New York. His little books for group study, *The Meaning of Prayer*, *The Meaning of Faith*, and the rest, have had a vast reading in more than one language, while his Cole lectures, *Christianity and Progress*, and his essay on *The Assurance of Immortality*, have helped many a troubled mind. The sermon here given shows a brilliant, driving intellect—I had almost used the word “clever,” but that would not be exact—dealing with *Belief* in Christ, not *Faith*; and it reveals the qualities which make him so captivating a preacher to young people—his radiance of personality, his dash and verve of thought, his facility of phrase, his aptness of illustration, his uncanny skill in making an abstruse matter as lucid as light. If one misses the deep, brooding, wooing note, mayhap it will be heard later when time and sorrow make the intellectual difficulties of belief seem like summer manœuvres alongside the tragic warfare of faith with fact.

BELIEF IN CHRIST

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“Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we have believed and know that thou art the Holy One of God.” John 6: 68, 69.

We raised the question last week as to whether it matters that a man believe in God or not. To-day we press a further question: what difference does it make whether or not a man believe in Christ, regard Him as indispensable, and set Him at the center of his thought of God and his interpretation of life? Long ago, as the Fourth Gospel tells us in the sixth chapter, the first disciples faced that question. The crowds that had followed Jesus, disturbed by the loftiness and severity of His demands, were dispersing. “Would ye also go away?” said the Master to the twelve, and Simon Peter gave the answer that has been characteristic of Christianity at its best ever since: “Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we have believed and know that thou art the Holy One of God.”

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Does that attitude make any difference? Is Christ indispensable? Is Dr. Burkitt, the Christian scholar, right when he says, "Christianity stands or falls, lives or dies, with the personality of Jesus Christ"? We may well face that question and make our answer as clear and convincing as we can, because to-day many people are disturbed in their estimate of Jesus.

There are no barriers that keep out any questions now, no sacred preserves where people are afraid to push inquiries home. That kind of critical questioning arose with enthusiasm and effect at the time of the Reformation. Folk then asked questions about the church and they were not afraid to push them to radical conclusions. But such critical inquiry could not stop with the church. It turned next to the Bible. People might shrink from investigating the Book, might cry, This is sacred ground and you must keep off! But the answer came back with a will: Nothing that can be thought about is too sacred to be investigated by thought. They searched the Old Testament first, then the New Testament, and, last of all, the life and person and significance of Jesus.

I am sure that this critical questioning is not only necessary to the intellectual integrity of our faith, but that it is salutary. Never fear the consequences

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in the end. That which is true need not dread investigation. The Bible will emerge at last, seen in a new light, to be sure, reunderstood, reinterpreted, but with its central meanings and messages set free for a larger service than the church has ever known. And Christ can stand investigation—one may be sure of that. Only, while the disturbing process is afoot there are some things we may well take note of. An intelligent Unitarian layman recently said to me with indignation: "Those people are trying to take the halo away from Jesus." Sometimes it does seem so, and if Unitarians may be concerned about it, surely we may be.

Obviously this is true that, so far as organized Christianity is concerned, the personality of Jesus is central. Some of us, for example, deeply desire the progressive unification of Christianity. Christianity does not mean one thing to-day, but many things. It is all split up; it cannot speak with united voice about anything. How many different kinds of folk call themselves Christian! There are Roman Catholics and Protestants a long sea mile apart; high-church Episcopalians and Quakers with a deep gulf between; modernists and fundamentalists with serious divergencies. One wonders sometimes what it is that holds Christianity together anyway.

To be sure, diversity of religious temperament

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was in evidence long before the Gospel came. There were literalists leaning for salvation on a text, and mystics feeling religion to be the life of God lived out in the soul of man. There were ecclesiastics thinking of religion in terms of an authoritative organization, and ethicists thinking of religion in terms of a moral and serviceable life. There were individualists valuing chiefly the inward and transforming experiences of the soul, and social reformers valuing religion for its power to remake the world. These differences of religious temperament have not only split up Christianity; they have split up Buddhism in the same way. The sun shines through many panes of colored glass and is changed by each. So has it been with the Gospel. As in Shelley's famous lines:

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity.

Nevertheless, with all these diversities, if you present Christ himself to any Christian, he will kneel. Catholics and Protestants are a long way apart, but when the Catholic sings the praise of Jesus the Protestant sings it too. High-church Episcopalians and Quakers do not speak the same language in religion, but when the Quaker sings Whittier's hymns to Christ the liturgist sings them too. Fundamentalist and

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modernist do not see eye to eye, but when a modernist sings, "O Master, let me walk with thee," the fundamentalist sings it too. Christ is the magnet that holds this varied mass together. Christ is the mountain down which these divided streams flow. There is one thing we have in common: we all do stand before him and say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." If anybody is interested then in the unifying of Christianity, Jesus is central. There is only one place where we ever can hope to get Christians together, and that is around Christ.

Again, there are some of us profoundly concerned about the reformation of Christianity. It needs it. To be sure, there are some who still try to think of Christianity as a finished article, its dogmas defined, its duties formulated, its institutions and rituals complete and infallible, a finished article merely to be accepted. But I do not see how they do it. The Gospel of Christ came, an ideal thing, into an unideal world and, in Shakespeare's figure, has been subdued like a dyer's hand to the stuff it works in.

Think what this world would be if all the Christians were really Christian! One-third the population of the planet nominally Christian—what if they were really Christian? Forty million people in the United States nominally Christian—what if they

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were really Christian? Nobody who cares for mankind's future could pray for a better cause than the reformation of Christianity. But remember this! Whenever in history there has been a real reformation of Christianity, which even for a little while lifted up the church to be a cleansing and transforming force in society, at the heart of it somebody had rediscovered Christ.

It may be Savonarola in the fifteenth century anticipating the Reformation, cleaning up Florence and hurling his challenge at the gross corruption of the church, but you could not listen to him for five minutes in the Duomo without knowing that what had happened to that man was the rediscovery of Christ.

It may be John Wesley, rebelling against the dry-as-dust formalism and dead apathy of English Christianity in his day, leaving behind the stately edifices of the English Church to preach to multitudes on the open hillside, but you could not listen to him, starting that reform whose consequences are not yet done, without seeing that what had happened to him was the rediscovery of Jesus Christ.

When, a few years ago, men like Rauschenbusch called us to a social reformation, reminding us that in our social life we were doing six days in the week

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things which denied what we said on Sunday, at the center of that movement, the secret of its passion and its power, was the rediscovery of Christ.

Young men who ought to go into the ministry, come, help us to reform Christianity! Only be sure of this: the only kind of reformation that will be real must spring from the rediscovery of the message, meaning, purpose, and spirit of Jesus.

From the standpoint of organized Christianity, therefore, the personality of the Master is central. We never will get Christians together except around Him. We never will reform the church except by the rediscovery of Him. And, one might add, we never will propagate Christianity unless, beyond our theologies and our churches with their western histories and provincialisms, we primarily present him.

There are many of you this morning who will take this centrality of Jesus for granted and gladly will accept those estimates of him in which the historic church has voiced its faith. Very well! Your minds are clear about that. One need not talk to you. But there are others here who will be thinking otherwise.

Let us see if we can state what their thoughts will be. They will be saying that Jesus lived a long time ago, that he was a Jewish teacher sixty generations behind us, who walked in Galilee, and that all this

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talk about rediscovering him, organizing people around him, presenting him, sounds strange.

Dim tracts of time divide
Those golden days from me;
Thy voice comes strange o'er years of change;
How can I follow Thee?

Comes faint and far Thy voice
From vales of Galilee;
Thy vision fades in ancient shades;
How should we follow Thee?

And these people will be saying further that Lowell spoke truth when he remarked that every man is the prisoner of his date, that is, every man is limited by the ways of thinking of his generation. So was it with Jesus, they say. He did not know our modern science; he had other ways of thinking of the universe, of disease, of the consummation of the age. If he had not thought the way his generation thought he never could have been understood by his generation at all. But that fact takes him a long way from our generation. He does not belong to our time. How shall we follow him?

And some minds here will go further and say that those terms which the first century used about Jesus—"Messiah," that the Jewish Christians employed, and "Logos," or "Lord," that the Greek Christians

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used—were terms perfectly familiar in the first century, but familiar to us no more. They were in existence before Jesus came; they had been used upon other people before they were used on him; and if we are going to have the facts, they say, we must go back behind these categories of understanding, which the first century used and recover in our imagination the individual human figure of the Man of Nazareth. When we do that, they think, we will find an engaging and delightful personality but, after all, a Jewish teacher of the first century concerning whom there is no use fooling ourselves that he is anything more.

I need not tell you such thoughts are going through the minds of this generation, not born of irreverence, but of desire to be honest with the facts. That is what my Unitarian friend meant when he spoke of folks who take the halo from Jesus.

Now, I accept that challenge this morning. I accept it without denying any of these facts we have been rehearsing. Jesus did live a long time ago, and it is amazing that one who lived so long ago should make himself indispensable to our spiritual life. It is true that he thought as his generation thought about many things and could not have been understood by his generation had that not been so. And it is true that if we are to get at the facts we

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must recover the human figure of the Man of Nazareth. As a teacher in a theological seminary it is my business to know what is being found out about problems like this. But the more I know the more sure I am that in the personality of the Man of Nazareth we are dealing not with a mere Jewish teacher of the first century, but with the transcendent gift of God to the spiritual life of man.

How do we test anything in the long run anyway? Do we not ask what it does, what purposes it serves, what differences it makes to life? What is electricity? I don't know; you don't know; nobody knows. Change the question then. What does electricity do? What are the differences that electricity makes to life? One can grow eloquent about that. Electricity does this and this and this—these manifold and marvelous differences it makes to men. Very well, I answer, then you have discovered something very significant about what electricity is, for electricity must be the kind of force that can do what it does.

Will you approach Christ like that? Who is Christ? You may be puzzled. You may share the uncertainties of your day. You may even fear that time will show that he is just a Jewish teacher of the first century. Very well! Change the question. What has Jesus done? What difference has he made

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to human life? That is an historic matter. You can get your hands on that. You can state that. And as I sketchily state it the recurring theme of our argument is this: he must be the kind of person who can do what he has done.

For one thing, he has given man his loftiest idea of God, not so much by what he said as by what he was. That is an amazing thing to have done. In day dreams one may imagine all sorts of wild, incredible things he might achieve, but one thing I cannot imagine: that one of us could live a life of such self-authenticating spiritual grandeur that nineteen centuries from now a man like Browning would be saying about us:

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too.

I cannot imagine that. Jesus did it. In a world where multitudes have groped after God, guessed about God, philosophized about God, he lived a life of such self-authenticating spiritual grandeur that increasing multitudes of people when they try to think about God can say nothing so true, so satisfying, so adequate, as to say that God is like Christ. That is an amazing thing. He did it. He must have been the kind of person who could do what he has done.

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Again, he gave the world its loftiest estimate of man. That is an amazing thing too. For it is not easy to hold high estimates of man. There are so many of us—

The Eternal Saki from that Bowl has poured
Millions of Bubbles like us, and will pour.

Human life so often, too, is sordid, unlovely, ignoble; we display our low estimates of men in our cruelty to each other in personal relationships, in industry, in war. It is not easy to hold high estimates of man. But Jesus taught that personality in every man or woman, in every king or child, is infinitely precious. And, what is more, he lived as though that were true. He taught men to believe in their divine origin, their spiritual nature, their boundless possibilities. He sent men out saying about themselves what men had never said about themselves before: "Now are we children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be." That is an amazing thing to have done. Christ's idea of human value haunts us continually. We have tried to work out a little of it in democracy, giving every personality a chance. We have tried to take out of human life sins, like slavery, which desecrate human souls. We hate war because it debauches personality. And in philanthropy we are trying to open doors

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that handicapped personalities may have a chance. Wherever Jesus goes he lifts immeasurably man's estimate of his own worth. That is a most astonishing thing! He must be the kind of person who could do what he has done.

Once more, the Master has given the world its loftiest ethical ideals. That is strange, because ethical ideals change. They are subject to the flux of time, the alteration of circumstance. As was said long ago, what is right on one side of the Pyrenees is wrong on the other. It is not easy to make a statement about duty in terms of to-day that will hold good a hundred years to come, to say nothing of a thousand. Yet it was not a preacher, it was Glenn Frank, the editor of the *Century Magazine*, who told us the other day that if we Christians would only go back behind our controversies to the ethical teachings of Jesus, we would find something timeless and eternal. As a matter of fact, whenever we do think about what is right, we find Jesus not behind us; he is ahead of us, rallying us, challenging us, alluring us to an adventure toward himself.

And when one thinks of what his teaching has meant to personal character—of all the strong men like Chinese Gordon who wished that they were as strong as Christ; of all the pure women like St. Catherine who wished they were as pure as Christ; of

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all the adventurous spirits like Livingstone who wished they were as daring as Christ; of all the patient souls like Stevenson who wished they were as patient as Christ; of all the unselfish men like Booth who wished they were as unselfish as Christ—it is amazing! And he must have been the kind of person who could do what he has done.

Again, he not only presented to man his highest ideal, but he supplied power. That is strange. Wherever the Gospel of Jesus has gone, there men have known that they had access into a great resource of spiritual power. At Marston Moor, when the Puritans and the Cavaliers were lining up against each other and the engagement was about to begin, they say that far over the plain the figure of Oliver Cromwell came riding and that at the sight of him the Puritans set up a great, victorious shout as though their battle already had been won. There has been many a battle for goodness on this planet in individual hearts and in social life where the figure of Christ seemed to come up over the horizon and men sent up a triumphant shout as though their battle already had been won. Paul in the first century cried, "I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me." And just this last week, a young Chinese, taking his advanced degree at Columbia, came to make his first public confession of Christ. He is going

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back to be a superintendent of schools in China, and he said: "I want Christ. I want Christ because I want spiritual power to serve my people in this next generation." Christ has opened innumerable doors to spiritual power. And he must have been the kind of person who could do what he has done.

Once more, as a matter of historical fact, Jesus has given us the transcendent exhibition of trust in spiritual forces. It is not easy for us to trust spiritual forces. We are timid about it. We are like the ancient Sadducee who cried, "My right arm is my god." We understand cynical sayings like "Fortune is always on the side of the largest battalions," or "Trust God, and keep your powder dry." And we smile knowingly when people say that trying to hold humanity together by spiritual forces is like trying to hold the carriages of a railroad train together by relying on the friendly feelings of the engineer for the conductor. It is hard for us to trust spiritual forces. Then Jesus came and did a thing that in range of influence is not simply unique; on a priori grounds it is incredible. It is as though he said, I am going to turn the world upside down; I am going to wield an influence such as no one in history has wielded. Two thousand years from now I am going to hold sway over the imaginations of men and commandeer their allegiance as no emperor nor phi-

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losopher has ever done, and I am going to do it by spiritual forces: truth, persuasion, love, and nothing else. I will trust them to the limit, rely on them even though it cost the Cross, and I will win an influence that never has been won before.

I challenge you. Is there any proposition that on a priori grounds is more essentially incredible? And he has done it. It is history now. This next week more millions of knees will bow at the thought of the Cross than ever in history. But that is not all. The most impressive fact is that he is winning us to his principle. We are beginning to see that only as we take our homes from the régime of violence to the régime of spiritual forces have we good homes, that only as we take our schools from the régime of force to the régime of spiritual forces have we right schools; that only as we carry our international relationships out from the domain of force to the governance of spiritual forces can we have a decent world. He is going to win the consent of mankind to his incredible formula. The future belongs to him. Only in spiritual forces is there any hope for the redemption of the world. It is amazing, and he must have been the kind of person who could do what he has done.

We have not touched the garment's hem of what he really did. We have said these things, not be-

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cause we think them remotely adequate, but because even such a sketchy presentation must make clear that when you go back to that figure in the first century you are not dealing with a diminished rabbi; you are dealing with a transcendent personality, the supreme gift of God to man. Do you really gather up in your imagination what it means to us that he must be the kind of person who could do what he has done—giving the world its loftiest idea of God, its highest estimate of man, its noblest ethical ideals, its deepest spiritual resources, its transcendent exhibition of trust in spiritual power? To be the kind of person who could do that!

I am a liberal. I am not afraid to ask questions about anything. But a personality who is the kind of being that can do that clearly deserves a place at the center of my understanding of God and man. "God was in Christ." What less than that can you say? If you do not find God there, then where will you find him? With Charles Lamb I say that if Shakespeare should come in here now I would stand up; if Christ should come in here I would kneel.

What are you going to do about it? Do you really believe this? Then it means putting Christ at the center of your life. It means taking him in earnest in your private character, in your family, and in all your social relationships. It means saying as Simon

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Peter did long ago, turning his back upon every other way of life: "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we have believed and know that thou art the Holy One of God."