

Jesus in North America (3)

The Mainline Liberal Protestant Jesus

Who is the Jesus of liberal Protestantism? By the 1920s, and for some decades before, science (scientism) had become prominent as the oracle of truth, and moulder of minds. Science was not to be argued with. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution marched from victory to victory. Many theologians, philosophers, and social reformers accepted this theory as "gospel truth". Evolution was no longer God's rival, but only the method for development in an ever-changing world. When liberal Protestantism, a new theological movement, said "yes" to Charles Darwin and the European higher critics of Scripture, it began the process of disregarding the heart of the Gospel. It tried to adapt to the challenges of modernity by stressing the goodness of humanity, the inevitability of progress, the necessity of good works and the indwelling of God in nature and culture. They were far more interested in recovering the historical Jesus than in the Christ of the Scripture. Their thinking was Jesus-centric. They no longer focussed on the Triune God, but on a Jesus-focussed ministry. Jesus became an exemplary human being rather than a miracle-working God. They said, "Let no theology call itself Christian which has not its centre and source in Him."

After the American Civil War, liberal Protestants boldly overthrew the Bible as the key source of their authority. The creeds and sacraments also came under attack. None of the liberals regarded the Bible as the literal Word of God. They argued it was not Scripture but Jesus. He was at the centre of the Christian life - inside individuals and society, and leading both onward and upward to the kingdom of God on earth. And since nothing happens in a vacuum, I will briefly mention three prominent nineteenth century personalities who influenced liberal Protestantism.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Emerson was a son of an eminent Boston minister. He attended Harvard University to prepare for the Unitarian ministry. He became a pastor (1829-32) of the Second Congregational Church, Boston. After resigning from the church, he emerged as one of the chief critics of his denomination. And through his writings his views greatly affected liberal theology for the rest of the century. For Emerson, nothing was sacred but the integrity of divine reason indwelling in every person. His view of Jesus was far from orthodox. He rejected the deity of Jesus Christ. He said that Jesus was not a final authority any more than Scripture, churches, or creeds. He pointed to Jesus as the early example of vibrant moral truth.

Emerson considered Jesus as a *Poet of the Spirit*. He said that Jesus alone in all history estimated the greatness of man. According to Emerson, the man Jesus said, in a moment of sublime emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think." Emerson went on to say, "it is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake."

Horace Bushnell (1802-1876)

Bushnell, a Congregational minister and a theologian, has been called "the father of American theological liberalism," and "the Christian's answer" to Emerson. He had an unusual ability to reconcile competing theological ideas. Although he may not have intended it, his works were an open invitation to reinterpret historic Christianity. In *Nature and the Supernatural* (1858) he suggested that all things natural and supernatural, shared a common spiritual character. In his classic, *The Character of Jesus* (1861), Jesus was first and foremost an exemplar of Christian virtues. In his *The Vicarious Sacrifice* (1866) he declared that Christ's atonement was an illustration of love rather than a satisfaction by which God was reconciled to man. Christ's death produced a change in human beings, not in the mind of God. Bushnell's views led other thinkers to emphasize morality and social progress instead of Jesus' atoning work on the cross.

Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887)

Beecher, a Congregational clergyman and writer, was known for his dramatic oratory. He was never really interested in theology and thought a sermon effective only if it created an emotional atmosphere that touched the vital experiences of those who heard it. He minimized theological differences. Most of his socio-political opinions were based in a peculiarly American confidence in freedom, progress and the possibilities that human nature could attain in a free society. He anticipated the culture of personality when he insisted on preserving the charm of Jesus in the *Life of Jesus, the Christ*.

Liberal Theology

By the 1880's, liberal Protestants had left the evangelical fold. At the turn of the century, they began to take over mainline Protestant denominations. They argued that human beings were created good, in the image of God, not sinful, in the image of a fallen Adam. As for God, He dwelled in the world, rather than standing aloof from it. The liberal Jesus was not restricted to the church or even to the heart. He could be found in novels and nations, science and society. He came to earth not to satisfy a legal judgment or to pay a debt owed to an angry Father but to reveal the loving character of God, and to prompt people everywhere to develop that same character in themselves. Liberals no longer believed in hell. Jesus' death saved sinners not from hell but from selfish solitude. "The spirit of benevolence, and even of evangelization, is no longer confined to the Church of God," the Episcopalian Alexander Crummell wrote. "It is the spirit of the age. Our Lord Jesus Christ has put his spirit into assurance companies, and mercantile ventures. It stimulates adventure. It prompts geological research. It vitalizes science. It gives coloring and tone to literature." It should not be surprising that liberal Protestants shaped Jesus into their own image. Liberals saw in Jesus a moralist. They argued that His moral teaching is the heart of the gospel message, especially where poverty and injustice are perceived as the most important moral and social issues facing human beings. "In life and death," wrote the Baptist theologian William Newton Clarke, "Jesus is the supreme illustration of the truth that God is served in serving men." Liberal Protestantism had been Jesus-centric for decades, but during the so-called Progressive era it became even more obsessed with Jesus. By 1925, conservative Protestants had become religious pariahs.

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969)

Fosdick was a renowned pulpiteer and for years preached to millions of listeners via a radio program entitled *National Vespers*. He had been ordained as a Baptist, and for eleven years was a pastor in a New Jersey Baptist Church. He taught practical theology at Union Theological Seminary, and served as a "special preacher" at New York's First Presbyterian Church. He ran all his theology through Jesus. He even refused to recite the historic creeds, preferring to pledge his spiritual allegiance to Jesus alone. He said that the "key to the understanding of life is the value of personality."

Fosdick had been an influential figure for years; yet it was not until May 21, 1922, when he delivered a sermon entitled "*Shall the Fundamentalists Win?*". In this sermon he pushed Christianity more boldly away from its roots than ever before. His main argument was that conservatives care more about "the tiddledywinks and peccadillos of religion" than they do about the person of Jesus. Although for Fosdick love was more important than doctrine, he was not very loving toward conservative Christians. He called them mean-spirited and intolerant instead of having the character of Jesus.

"Whenever I say 'God'," Fosdick wrote, "I think Christ." He placed individual experience above doctrine. He could not accept the virgin birth of Jesus as an historic fact. He said that the literal inerrancy of the Scriptures is incredible. Modernist Christians view Scripture not as a historical account but as "the record of the progressive unfolding of the character of God to his people from early primitive days until the great unveiling in Christ." And he called the second coming of Christ from the sky an outmoded phrasing of hope. The main business of Christianity should be not to discuss details of theology, but to minister to human misery.

For Fosdick the centre of Christian preaching is the life of Jesus. It "primarily consists in the presentation of the personality, the spirit, purpose principles, life, faith, and Saviorhood of Jesus." "For Jesus," Fosdick wrote, "has given the world the most significant idea of God." "The spirit and quality of Jesus were meant to be reproduced in his followers." In 1931, Fosdick began preaching at New York's interdenominational Riverside Church, which John D. Rockefeller (a liberal Baptist) had built for him. He became a national celebrated minister and author, preaching on social justice and his vision of Christianity.

J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)

What was the reaction of conservative Protestants? The conservative Presbyterian theologian, J. Gresham Machen, New Testament scholar and educator, was disgusted with Fosdick's views. In a letter in 1916, Machen commented on a sermon preached by Fosdick, "And he is dreadful! Just the pitiful modern stuff about undogmatic Christianity." In his *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), Machen commented that liberal preachers reveal only too clearly what is in their minds. They speak with disgust, referring to Fosdick's views, of those who believe "that the blood of our Lord, shed in a substitutionary death, placates an alienated Deity and make possible welcome for the returning sinner." In a vigorous defence of miracles and biblical inerrancy, he called liberal Protestantism pretense Christianity. "What the liberal theologian has retained after abandoning to the enemy one Christian doctrine after another is not Christianity at all," he wrote, "but a religion which is so entirely different from Christianity as to belong in a distinct category."

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(To be continued)