The Controversy Surrounding the Ministry of Harry Emerson Fosdick in the First Presbyterian Church of New York City, 1922-1925

Harold H. Vences

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THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING THE MINISTRY
OF HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK
IN THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF NEW YORK CITY, 1922-1925

by

Harold H. Vences

A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in the Field of History

June 1972
Each person whose signature appears below certifies that he has read this thesis and that in his opinion it is adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.

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The "Fosdick Controversy" was a theological clash between the fundamentalists and the modernists in which each group championed its respective position. This historical account of that controversy, although recognizing the close interaction existing between the theological and historical aspects of the controversy, does not attempt to assess the theology of the positions. Thus, it should be emphasized that the main concern of this paper is not as much the content of the fundamentalist or modernist positions as the method which each used to advance and defend its position. The treatment given to the Fosdick Controversy in this paper rests on the assumption that it is the task of the theologian, and not of the historian, to judge the theological soundness of fundamentalism or modernism.

In part this paper deals with the dialectic between conservatism and liberalism. Undoubtedly it is difficult to give a precise definition of these positions since they are elusive and different depending on varying circumstances and periods. We might nevertheless observe that in general the conservative is characterized by a desire to uphold tradition and maintain the status quo as well as established institutions while the liberal, on the other hand, is not bound by tradition, orthodoxy, or authoritarianism. The Fosdick Controversy emerged from the confrontation that took place between these opposing viewpoints.

To be more specific, however, a distinction must be made between theological conservatism and fundamentalism. The latter varied not so much in theology as in the method by which it defended orthodoxy. Thus, it is of great importance to remember that the conclusions reached in this paper can be better understood in the light of the fact that the
controversy under discussion took place between a militant conservatism (fundamentalism) and a moderate liberalism (Fosdick's modernism).

It is the thesis of this paper that in their attempt to defend Christian orthodoxy against Fosdick's modernism, the fundamentalists overreacted. Of greater ultimate significance than the conduct of either side was the fact that the Fosdick Controversy exposed the major differences that had long since existed between conservative and liberal theological positions and brought them into greater focus.
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Chapter 1

A BACKGROUND ON FOSDICK AND THE LARGER CONTROVERSY

On Sunday morning, March 1, 1925, the Rev. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick preached his "Farewell Sermon" to the congregation of the First Presbyterian Church of New York City. The events which led up to his final sermon at the First Church were dramatic and filled with controversy. Almost three years before, Fosdick had preached another sermon entitled "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" which had set off a prolonged controversy that raged within the Northern Presbyterian Church. During those three years of controversy Fosdick became one of the most discussed preachers in America. It is this "Fosdick Controversy" with which the present paper will deal. But prior to our analysis of that controversy it seems necessary that a brief background be given to Fosdick's youth and early ministry as well as to the larger fundamentalist-modernist controversy that occurred simultaneously.

Harry Emerson Fosdick was born on May 24, 1878, in Buffalo, New York. His ancestors, who lived in the "burnt-over district" of New York, were not only a very religious people but were also deeply involved in the social issues of their day. Fosdick's grandfather had been a most
vigorous campaigner against alcoholic intemperance, had agitated for penal reform, had been involved with the underground railroad, and had been a strong supporter of Horace Mann's crusade for public education in Massachusetts. His grandmother had also championed similar crusades but most notably the feminist movement in the 1840s. Indeed, from both sides of his family Fosdick had been generously endowed with the spirit of social concern and independence. Samuel R. Weaver stated it well when he observed that "the spirit of revolt was in his blood."¹

But the facet of Fosdick's home life which primarily concerns us was its vital concern in matters of religion. Like many people of that day, the Fosdicks interpreted religion in quite a conservative manner. Young Fosdick was deeply affected by the stern religious outlook of his parents. Although his family life provided a "natural, practical, and livable" spirit concerning religion in general, Fosdick mentions in his autobiography that "the main source of unhappiness for me in early school days was my religion." Despite this uneasiness in religious matters, Fosdick took religion seriously and later stated, "I judge that from the beginning I was predestined to religion as my predominant interest and major vocation, for from the time I

¹Samuel R. Weaver, "The Theology and Times of Harry Emerson Fosdick" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1960), p. 34.
overrode all objections and joined the church when I was seven, I was always struggling with it."\(^2\)

Fosdick was indeed sensitive and by his own admission, "morbidly conscientious." He described the effect of "hell-fire-and-brimstone preaching" upon him as "deplorable." While endeavoring not to over-emphasize his early religious bewilderment, Fosdick offered the following account of his childhood religion:

I vividly recall weeping at night for fear of going to hell, with my mystified and baffled mother trying to comfort me. Once, when I was nine years old, my father found me so pale that he thought me ill. The fact was that I was in agony for fear I had committed the unpardonable sin, and reading that day in the book of Revelation about the horrors of hell, I was sick with terror...

Such morbidity was sporadic but nevertheless, he later wrote, "The iron entered my soul and the scene was set for rebellion against the puerility and debasement of a legalistic and terrifying religion."\(^3\)

After graduating from high school at the head of his class Fosdick continued his studies at Colgate University. The freshman year passed without much consequence but the next school year he was unable to continue college because of financial difficulties. It was

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\(^2\)Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 33. At the outset it should be noted that Fosdick's papers are not available for research at this time. They are located at the Library of Union Theological Seminary and will not be ready for research purposes for several years due to a process of de-acidification which they are undergoing.

\(^3\)Ibid., pp. 35-6.
during that year that the nineteen-year-old Fosdick began to question the whole structure of religion in which he had been reared. During that year he worked in a bookstore and read "voraciously" on the side. The consequence was a deep intellectual crisis which entered young Fosdick's life and with which he was to struggle for several years.  

Prior to his nineteenth year Fosdick had taken for granted the inerrancy of the Bible and the literal story of creation. Gradually thereafter he developed serious doubts regarding the religious attitudes, such as his grandmother's, which held that if the whale's swallowing of Jonah were not true the whole Bible would have to be surrendered. He became aware of certain inconsistencies in his family's religion. Why, Fosdick asked himself, should the story of Samson be held as infallibly true and that of Hercules be regarded as a myth? How could one story be held sacred and inerrant and the other treated as a legend?

Fosdick states that he answered these "naive" questions by acknowledging that there was no more reason for believing Hebrew than Greek folklore. He demanded the freedom to use his rational capacities in determining the truth. The alternative became clear:

I did not have to believe anything simply because it was in the Bible. How stunning that conclusion was, it is not easy now for an educated mind to understand. For me, as for many others in my time, it was revolutionary. The old basis of authority was gone. Truth was an open field to be explored. What one believed had to be discovered. Nothing could be settled by text.

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4Howard Minges, "Fosdick, Liberal Preacher," World's Work, L (October, 1925), 646.

5Ibid.

6Fosdick, The Living, p. 52.
Thus Fosdick had entered a period of rebellion against the religion of his youth. He explained, "I no longer believed the old stuff I had been taught. Moreover, I no longer merely doubted it. I rose in indignant revolt against it." Fosdick remarked years later that the fundamentalists "hated me plentifully" but, he declared, "I started as one of them." It was during this period of rebellion that he abandoned the entire concept of Biblical inerrancy and soon thereafter embraced the tenets of the theory of evolution.7

The rebellion that characterized the greater part of Fosdick's college years was followed by a gradual renewed interest in religion. Dr. William Newton Clarke, a noted theologian at Colgate University, was a significant influence in Fosdick's return to religion. Clarke, a liberal theologian, assisted his reinterpretation of religion into terms that he could understand. Binding creeds and inerrant scriptures were no longer the central aspects of religion for Fosdick; he now became convinced that it was possible to be "intelligently religious." The anthropomorphic deity of his childhood was banished and a rational faith in God replaced it.8

To the bewilderment of his fellow students and teachers, Fosdick decided to become a minister during his senior year in college. Even though he was still struggling with religion and was uncertain as to direction, he made the decision on the encouragement of his father and Dr. Clarke. Although he was through with "orthodox dogma" and he did not have the "faintest interest in any sect or denomination," he was

7Mingos, "Fosdick, Liberal Preacher," p. 646.
8Ibid.
nevertheless interested in making a contribution to the spiritual life of his generation. 9

After graduating from Colgate, at the head of his class, Fosdick attended the divinity school at the same university. Once again he fell under the tutelage of Dr. Clarke and during that year was introduced to the "new theology." Later commenting on the theological "revolt" that not only he, but his teachers were involved in, Fosdick declared that it was done "in the interest of a deeper, more vital, more transforming Christian experience..." and he stated, "The result for many of us was not alone a new theology but a new spiritual life."10

Having spent one year at Colgate Divinity School, Fosdick was then lured to Union Theological Seminary in 1901. He was granted a full scholarship by the institution and during the summer of 1901 he became engaged to Florence Whitney, a recent graduate of Smith College. Despite the scholarship he had received, Fosdick worked very hard during the summer and when his studies began in the fall he maintained a very rigorous schedule. Not only was he taking a full load at Union, but he was also taking a philosophy class at Columbia and helped run lodging houses on the Bowery in New York.

Overwhelmed by the demands of his schedule, Fosdick underwent a profound nervous breakdown during the latter part of his first year at Union which he referred to as "the most hideous experience of my life." His studies had to be given up and he was forced to spend the next four months recuperating in a sanitarium. It was not until he took a

9 Ibid., pp. 646-7.
six-week trip to Europe that he made a full recovery. This nervous breakdown made so great an impact on Fosdick that he cited it as "one of the most important factors in my preparation for the ministry. For the first time in my life, I faced, at my wit's end, a situation too much for me to handle. I went down to the depths where self-confidence becomes ludicrous."  

Despite this break into his studies, Fosdick was able to graduate with his class in 1904. The previous year he had been ordained into the ministry after assisting Dr. George C. Lorimer of the Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York. In July, 1904, Fosdick accepted a pastorate at the First Baptist Church in Montclair, New Jersey, and in August he married Florence Whitney. The limited preaching experience he had on the Bowery served him well as he faced a conservative congregation at Montclair. Even though there was some objection to his "liberal theology," Fosdick won the confidence of the church as he developed a highly successful method of preaching in which he spoke directly to the needs of the congregation. 

Fosdick and his wife remained at the Montclair church for eleven years. During that time the congregation increased in size and a new building was erected. It was during this period that Fosdick's fame as a preacher increased, demonstrated by repeated invitations to speak

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11 Ibid., pp. 74-5.

12 Fosdick counted it as the most valued experience of his academic career when Union Theological Seminary graduated him with a summa cum laude despite his breakdown and outside work.

13 A book has been written in which Fosdick's method and style of preaching is analyzed. Edmund Holt Linn, Preaching As Counseling (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1966).
on university campuses such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. It was also during those years at Montclair that he began his activities as an author and wrote such popular religious books as *The Meaning of Prayer, The Assurance of Immortality, and The Manhood of the Master*. His books became so widely circulated that even Mahatma Gandhi read the last mentioned book.\(^\text{14}\)

The early 1900s was a time of significant social reform and at this time Fosdick became interested in the problems facing organized labor. Feeling that he needed more knowledge in the social sciences he received a masters degree in 1908 from Columbia. By 1912, Fosdick had gotten deeply involved in the labor-management difficulties facing the nation and became a supporter of the social gospel which had been started decades earlier by such men as Washington Gladden, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Rufus Jones.

In 1915, after a successful ministry at Montclair, Fosdick accepted a position at Union Theological Seminary as Morris K. Jessup Professor of Practical Theology. He had always been interested in teaching religion and so he gladly accepted this opportunity. Shortly after this appointment as full-time professor at Union, the United States entered the First World War. In 1918, Fosdick was sponsored by the Y.M.C.A. to go as an itinerant speaker to the American troops in France. During these years he became a staunch supporter of the war and wrote articles and preached sermons defending the allies. Years later he was ashamed of this conduct for he became a strong opponent of war. (After the war ended not only did he favor the League of Nations, but

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\(^{14}\) Fosdick, *The Living*, p. 91.
he preached the opening sermon at its first session at Geneva.)

Commenting on the impact of his activities as an itinerant speaker to the troops Fosdick stated, "I took up life and my professorship again as though nothing had happened--but something had. My preaching before the war never had the drive it had afterward."15

The next stage in Fosdick's illustrious life was not only important to him, but is also the main concern of this paper--his ministry at the First Presbyterian Church of New York City and, more specifically, the controversy that took place during that period. The facts surrounding Fosdick's acceptance of the position of "special preacher" at the First Church are of importance to the controversy that followed. Too often the terms and agreements under which Fosdick was asked to become minister of the "Old First" were forgotten or, in some cases, not even known.

In May of 1918, three downtown Presbyterian churches in New York--the First Church, the University Place, and the Madison Square--decided to combine. They were all in the same general neighborhood and all three pastors of these churches had decided to retire. For these reasons it was agreed that the opportune time had come for the three churches to unite.16

The proposed resignations of all three ministers made it necessary that a new minister be found and during this search Fosdick was asked to preach for four Sunday mornings at the newly organized church.

15 Ibid., p. 132.
16 The First Presbyterian Church of New York and Dr. Fosdick, pp. 5-6. (No facts of publication. A pamphlet found at the New York Public Library.)
Because the search for a new minister remained unfruitful, Fosdick continued his stay. Concerning his acceptance to preach on those four Sundays Fosdick later wrote, "it never occurred either to me or to them [the First Church] that we were stepping into trouble when I promised those four Sundays as an interim supply."\(^\text{17}\)

The problem of finding a minister persisted and so the Session (the highest administrative committee within a local Presbyterian church) of the First Church found itself in an odd situation. An adequate minister could not be found and at the same time the newly formed church was on the verge of disintegration. Under these circumstances the Session of the First Church asked Fosdick to become its new minister. The difficulty with this plan was that Fosdick was not an ordained Presbyterian minister; he was instead a Baptist minister. Henry Tifft, who was then the clerk of the Session of the First Church, explained that it was "force of circumstances" which led the church to ask Fosdick to be its minister.\(^\text{18}\)

Fosdick immediately declined this offer because, he explained, "I could not make the creedal subscription necessary to be a Presbyterian clergyman, and had no desire either to leave my professorship or to change affiliation from a comparatively free to a very stiff denominational system of ecclesiastical control."\(^\text{19}\)

After Fosdick refused the invitation to become the church's full-time minister, the Session formulated an alternate plan. In the new

\(^{17}\) Fosdick, The Living, p. 132.

\(^{18}\) The First Church and Fosdick, p. 11.

\(^{19}\) Fosdick, The Living, pp. 132-3.
plan, Fosdick would simply be the "Guest Preacher," with the official designation of associate minister, and Dr. George Alexander, along with an assistant, would be primarily in charge of the administrative duties of the church. Fosdick later stated that the new proposal had been "very attractive" since he had not had a church for four years and he would have the opportunity of having his own congregation. Furthermore, he greatly welcomed the opportunity to combine the two vocations of teaching and preaching. For these reasons, Fosdick decided to accept the proposal but in doing so warned the church that he was a Baptist and later explained, "I told the church that I knew nothing about Presbyterian law, that they must take full responsibility on that score, but that if such an arrangement as they suggested were permissible, I would accept."\(^\text{20}\)

The Session of the First Church realized that its actions were unusual, especially since Fosdick would not be under the jurisdiction of the Presbytery of New York. For this reason, explained Henry Tifft, the Session "took pains to have the plan, which had been widely publicized, submitted in all its details to the Presbytery of New York before the relation was consummated." Tifft stated:

> With hesitation and after earnest prayer for guidance it was decided to make the venture of a plural ministry, with the preaching function largely dissociated from the pastoral and administrative service. This method would not have been adopted had it not been an era of good feeling in the Presbyterian Church and of longing for Christian unity as evidenced in the General Assembly of that year when its members, by a unanimous and rising vote, declared their "profound conviction that the time had come for organic union of the evangelical churches of America."
Therefore, when the Presbytery of New York had given its unanimous approval and when the Synod also approved, the Session of the First Church went ahead with its "plural ministry" plan assuming that there were no irregularities. 21

At the age of forty, Fosdick began his ministry at the First Church. His stay at the First Church would last almost six years, and Fosdick declared that they were among the happiest in his life.

It was the growth of the Fundamentalist movement and its upcoming clash with "modernism" that brought storm clouds not only to the Presbyterian church but to most of the Protestant churches in the United States. The next section will be a background analysis of the larger controversy during the 1920s in which an attempt will be made to define the protagonists--fundamentalists and modernists.

II

A head-on collision between two theological outlooks within the Protestant churches of America during the 1920s shattered the complacency of religious orthodoxy. On one side were the fundamentalists who were determined to recapture the pure orthodoxy of the past. On the other side were the modernists who were equally determined to reinterpret religion in terms of the new conditions that industrialization, science, technology, and urban living had thrust upon twentieth century man. The controversy that resulted from the encounter of these opposing groups has been analyzed by a host of historians who have offered various interpretations for its origins and significance. This section

21 The First Church and Fosdick, p. 12.
will give a brief survey of what historians have written about the wider Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in the hope that the narrower "Fosdick Controversy" might be put in perspective.

Despite the fact that observers differ on the origins of the controversy in the twenties, there is almost unanimous agreement that the First World War played a significant role in explaining its immediate origins. It has been suggested that the shock of war and the "nervous overstrain" which it created were responsible for the subsequent positions that many people took. According to this view, liberals became more liberal and reactionaries more reactionary. Others suggest that the fighting spirit of the war was responsible for the spread of a "great fear, with a craving for something sold and a return to normalcy." Ernest R. Sandeen offers his own views on the subject:

The problem of the twenties, in fact, can be reduced to seeking the explanation for the unexpected and disproportionate reaction of the twenties to forces that had been present in American life since the 1870s. Concentration upon the religious history of the 1920s may have obscured the fact that the Fundamentalist controversy represented only a part of a general American intellectual crisis which probably stemmed in large part from the exaggerated and artificially sustained optimism of the First World War and the frustration, depression, and paranoia produced by the collapse of those dreams and the widespread social turmoil of the postwar era.

The war contributed significantly to the intolerance that characterized the 1920s. During the war it had become common to slander the "enemy" by means of overzealous propaganda. This spirit continued

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after the war and was demonstrated in the fundamentalists' attitude towards higher criticism, the theory of evolution, and the "new theology" in general. In some instances these concepts were considered, by fundamentalists, as originating in the defeated German materialistic philosophy. Modernism in religion was not only considered to be a part of a German plot to overthrow American society but was also frequently equated with socialistic communism.\textsuperscript{24}

Probably the most important factor which provoked controversy was the whole subject of the authority of the Bible and the development of higher criticism in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Norman Furniss has pointed out that a greater part of the religious outlook of fundamentalism rested on the inerrant Bible and any attempt to reinterpret or analyze the weaknesses of that infallible foundation would send the whole structure crashing to the ground.

One of the subjects that provoked much conflict during the twenties was evolution. Because the modernists had accepted the theory of evolution, the fundamentalists considered it their duty to safeguard the literal interpretation of creation and of the whole Bible which was being attacked by modernism. It was the opinion of many fundamentalists that if the theory of evolution was not actively refuted, their entire religious outlook would be in jeopardy.\textsuperscript{25}


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., pp. 15-6.
H. Richard Niebuhr has advanced a standard interpretation of the controversy. He sees the conflict as a clash between two cultures—rural versus urban—and emphasizes the fact that the rise of fundamentalism coincided with the depression of agricultural values after the war. Niebuhr further explains his interpretation:

...it [fundamentalism] achieved little strength in the urban and industrial sections of the country but was active in many rural states. The opposing religious movement, modernism, was identified on the other hand with bourgeois culture, having its strength in the cities and in the churches supported by the urban middle classes. Furthermore, fundamentalism in its aggressive forms was most prevalent in those isolated communities in which the traditions of pioneer society had been most effectively preserved and which were least subject to the influence of modern science and industrial civilization.26

Another interpretation argues that one of the significant factors in the development of fundamentalism was the widespread financial support that many large industrialists gave to the movement. This interpretation contends that wealthy business interests used the fundamentalist movement to block the "Social Gospelers'" close investigation of their business methods. The fundamentalists were trusted by large financial interests to maintain industrial stability.27

Robert T. Handy has advanced still another interpretation. He


27 Furniss, The Fundamentalist Controversy, p. 26. Furniss mentions that it was the liberal Harvard theologian, Kirsopp Lake, that advanced this thesis. But he cites two other historians who held the same view—Andre Siegfried, America Comes of Age, A French Analysis (1927), and D. L. Dumond, America in Our Times, 1839-1946 (1947).
views the emergence of fundamentalism as a culmination of long-standing tendencies in American society and culture. He interprets the controversy in the twenties as "one consequence of the dichotomy between faith and reason," and between the pietism and rationalism in American Protestantism. Handy maintains that the Puritans, as well as other colonial protestants, managed to keep faith and reason in creative tension. However, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the two separated into opposing movements of rationalism and evangelical pietism. When evangelical liberalism emerged in the late nineteenth century in order to restore the creative interchange between faith and reason, a gap was created that became hard to bridge.²⁸

Ernest R. Sandeen, a careful student of fundamentalism, recognizes that most of the above interpretations have some validity. However, as a corrective to these interpretations, especially the rural versus urban and that of large industrialists maintaining the status quo, he offers his own interpretation. Sandeen thinks that insufficient attention has been given to fundamentalism prior to the 1920s. He argues that the religious outlook that characterized fundamentalism had existed for many decades prior to the 1920s and consequently the key to understanding the later controversy is to be found in the "roots" of the movement.²⁹

²⁸Robert T. Handy, "Fundamentalism and Modernism in Perspective," Religion in Life, XXIV (Summer, 1955), 393.

²⁹Sandeen, "Introduction: Fundamentalism in Context," p. xiii. Sandeen also develops the thesis that the fundamentalist movement "ought to be understood partly if not largely as one aspect of the history of millenarianism."
And finally, Norman Furniss has summarized his views concerning the factors behind the controversy:

The principal cause for the rise of the fundamentalist controversy was the incompatibility of the nineteenth-century orthodoxy cherished by many humble Americans with the progress made in science and theology since the Civil War... Many of the people in the pews had been at best only dimly aware that a dispute over theology had taken place, and they were no party to any attempt at reconciling science and theology through concession and the reinterpretation of creeds. When in the years after the World War they came to realize that the doctrines they had accepted as eternal truths were in fact no longer held by their pastors, they energetically set about defending their beliefs. The belated assertion of inherited views, clashing with seemingly antithetical affirmations, thus lay at the base of the fundamentalist controversy.\(^3^0\)

Having briefly summarized various interpretations of the controversy and its origins, it is important that an obvious aspect of the conflict not be overlooked. During the 1920s American Protestantism was passing through an agonizing period in its history. Changes in many areas of society were affecting the churches and along with this change came the strife over religious matters that characterized the twenties. Willard B. Gatewood, a church historian of this period, has summarized it succinctly when he observed, "In a sense Americans were in the throes of their first major confrontation with the twentieth century."\(^3^1\)

The next two sections of this chapter will attempt to define fundamentalism and modernism, respectively, and analyze their basic positions. After accomplishing this, the stage will be set to pursue our analysis of the "Fosdick Controversy."

\(^{30}\)Furniss, The Fundamentalist Controversy, p. 15.

\(^{31}\)Gatewood, Controversy in the Twenties, p. 5.
In 1920 Dr. Curtis Lee Laws, editor of the Watchman-Examiner, coined the word "fundamentalism" and defined it merely as a movement which had arisen to defend supernaturalism against modern naturalism. No doubt the word had been used sporadically before this time, but it was after 1920 that it came into popular usage. It seems probable that Dr. Laws got the idea for the word after the World Conference on Christian Fundamentals which was held in 1919 at Philadelphia. During this conference it was charged that the churches had failed because of their departure from the "Fundamentals" of Christianity and because they had embraced "modernism."\(^3\)

However, the year 1910 is generally recognized as the starting point of the fundamentalist movement because of two factors. The first was the publication and circulation of The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth which contained twelve pamphlets made up of 135 articles. Nearly three million copies of The Fundamentals, financed by two wealthy residents of Los Angeles, Milton and Lyman Stewart, were sent free of charge to as many ministers, evangelists, missionaries, and theological students as addresses of these could be obtained. The Fundamentals set forth five doctrines which were considered essential and insisted that any person who did not accept those doctrines was "no Christian."

The second factor in the growth of the movement was the Presbyterian General Assembly's declaration that the "five points" of doctrine were the fundamentals of Christianity. (The "five points" in both cases

were identical and are enumerated below.)

Formulation of a precise definition of fundamentalism is difficult. Although it was more united than modernism, it is important to note that fundamentalism was never a monolithic movement and is therefore hard to define exactly. A definition of fundamentalism proposed during the latter part of the 1930s stated that it was "the name applied to the outlook of those Christians who believed that the Bible was inspired by God in such a way that there is no error in it. A fundamentalist is a Christian who interprets the Bible literally and does not accept the findings of historical criticism."

Obviously this definition is inadequate in its failure to identify the other aspects of fundamentalism coexisting with its opposition to historical criticism and its belief that the Bible was inerrant. However, it does make a very valid point by mentioning that the issue of the authority of the Bible was a central difference between fundamentalists and modernists. Consequently, there were five distinguishing beliefs that characterized most fundamentalists although others also existed. They were: (1) the divinely inspired Scriptures which were inerrant in the original writing; (2) Christ's virgin birth and deity; (3) Christ's


35Many historians have conveyed the impression that during the 1920s there was a single creed of five points which all fundamentalists accepted and all modernists rejected. Ernest R. Sandeen has strongly challenged this view. He holds Stewart Cole's The History of Fundamentalism (1931) primarily responsible for the perpetuation of this misconception because of its error regarding the creedal declaration of the Niagara Conferences in the late nineteenth century in which fourteen points were decided upon, and not five.
substitutionary atonement; (4) Christ's resurrection; and (5) Christ's personal, premillennial, and imminent second coming.36

In 1878 the Niagara Conference had adopted a fourteen-point declaration and in 1919 the World Conference on Christian Fundamentals met and it affirmed a nine-point statement. However, it was in 1910 that the first five-point "creed" (the five points mentioned above) was adopted by the Presbyterian General Assembly and reaffirmed in 1916 and 1923. Whatever the number of points in doctrinal statements issued by the fundamentalists, the "famous five" were common to practically all.37

Despite their hostility towards modernism, the fundamentalists never adequately organized until 1919. Before the war they had been loosely organized and often fragmented into rival groups which were held together by a few men such as William Bell Riley of Minneapolis, John Roach Straton of New York, and Paul Rader of Chicago. But as the World Conference on Christian Fundamentals met in 1919, much of the discord died down. More than 6,500 fundamentalists attended the conference whose motto was "God Hath Spoken." The conference took on a militant nature when its leaders stated that all forms of religious modernism should be eliminated. At the conference, William Bell Riley stated that the "infidelity" known as modernism was inimical to the churches and to Christ and proposed a mighty crusade to destroy it.38

38 Ibid., p. 18.
It was the plan of the fundamentalists to disseminate orthodoxy by distributing literature, holding public debates with modernists, further developing Bible Institutes, and conducting Bible conferences throughout the country. Through these methods they expected to re-capture their position of uncontested superiority. Thus it became necessary to exclude anything which might obstruct this goal. In 1923, the Rev. J. Frank Norris, a Baptist pastor and prominent fundamentalist leader of that church, characterized this attitude when he stated that it was his purpose "to bring about either conversion or expulsion of Baptists who will not accept the theory of the Fundamentalists." 39

Although such men as Riley, Straton, and Norris played important roles in the fundamentalist movement, probably the most important fundamentalist was William Jennings Bryan. Bryan entered the controversy in the churches in March of 1922 when he issued a book entitled In His Image: An Answer to Darwinism. It was Bryan, more than any other single individual, that brought unity to a fragmented movement and gave it popular support. 40 Not only did Bryan play a significant role in the nation-wide controversy, but he also was an important figure in the "Fosdick Controversy" as we shall discover in the third chapter.

Before concluding this analysis of fundamentalism, it should be observed that the 1920s was a decade which witnessed fanaticism and

40 Rollin Lynde Hartt, "The War in the Churches," The World's Work, XLVI (September, 1923), 469.
extremism in several areas of American society. Andrew Sinclair has labeled the twenties the "era of excess" and gives clear indication of the parallel development of various fanatical movements in social, political, moral, and religious facets of American society. In particular, Sinclair notes that there was a curious mixture of religious, social, and political extremism in the age of prohibition. Thus we see that fundamentalism thrived in a decade where extremism such as Greenwich Village bohemianism, artistic absurdity, and annihilistic literature were common. 41

It was under these circumstances that a few fundamentalists gravitated into positions of leadership within the movement; however, it would be a mistake to label all adherents of fundamentalism as extremists. More correctly, it was a small group of individuals who led crusades against anyone who deviated from their interpretation of religion. William Hordern has pointed out that a major portion of American Protestants during the 1920s fell under the fundamentalist category and they gave more time and money to their religion than adherents to any other alternative position. It is true that fundamentalism can be understood as a threatened movement which had to tighten its defenses, but it undoubtedly displayed many beneficial traits in the process of preserving the "old-time religion." 42


Even more difficult to define than fundamentalism, is modernism. Unlike their theological opponents, the modernists failed to achieve even partial unity in organization or in outlook. Thus, any attempt to define modernism must be general since its fluid theology, with ever-changing emphases, could scarcely be contained in creedal statements. Before formulating a definition it is important to remember that during the twenties, the words modernism and liberalism were often considered synonymous.

Perhaps the most obvious common denominator among modernists was their attempt to reconstruct orthodox Christianity in terms of the intellectual and scientific knowledge of the early twentieth century. Drawing from the heritage of liberal protestantism, which had its roots in such European movements as the Enlightenment, Deism, Schleiermacher's theology, and Biblical criticism, modernists argued that the world had changed radically since the early creeds of Christendom were formulated and consequently there needed to be an adjustment so that "modern" man could incorporate Christianity into his daily life. Despite the fundamentalist charge that such modernist reinterpretations not only reduced Christianity to little more than "humanism" and threatened its very existence, the modernists insisted that they could not use Christianity without such reinterpretations.43

Shailer Mathews, Dean of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago and one of the foremost exponents of modernism, endeavored to

explain its principal elements. Mathews observed that the main aspect of modernism "is the use of the methods of modern science to find, to state, and to use the permanent and central values of inherited orthodoxy in meeting the needs of the modern world." It was the modernists' endeavor to reach beliefs in the area of religion "in the same way that chemists or historians reach and apply their conclusions." Mathews continues his explanation:

Its [modernism's] theological affirmations are the formulation of results of investigation both of human needs and the Christian religion. The dogmatist starts with the doctrines, the modernist with the religion that gave rise to doctrines. The dogmatist relies on conformity through group activity; the modernist upon inductive method and action in accord with group loyalty... In brief, then, the use of scientific, historical, and social method in understanding and applying evangelical Christianity to the needs of living persons, is modernism.44

The motivation which prompted modernists to use the scientific method as a standard in determining religious truth was the fact that for them science and religion could not be kept in separate mental compartments. They saw no sharp distinction between the secular and the spiritual. In Fosdick's words, "All truth is God's truth and great discoveries, like evolution and the reign of law, if they are true for science are true for religion also."45

Furthermore, modernists refused to accept religious belief on authority alone. They held that reason and experience played an integral role in religious thinking, and furthermore did not believe that theology was as important as the religious experience behind it.

45 Quoted in Gatewood, Controversy in the Twenties, p. 50.
They saw theology as an intellectual definition of religion which was subject to change and readjustment as man's experience widened. One modernist referred to theology in the following manner, "It bears out the same relation to religion that a map bears to the country it describes or astronomy to the movement of the stars." 46

The modernists saw God as immanent and present in contrast to the fundamentalist concept of a transcendent God. They maintained that God existed in all aspects of life and not merely in a few spectacular events. In addition, they thought that God worked through progressive change and natural law. This concept owed much to the influence of science and especially Darwinian evolution. 47

A prominent feature of modernism was its sympathy for the Social Gospel. Modernists were opposed to the gospel of individualism which was championed by many conservatives because they believed that the real test of religion was not so much what a person believed but, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these..." Often they fell back on the pragmatic proof of their religion in which the validity of religion was determined, in great measure, by whether it made the world a more ideal place in which to live. 48

Modernism was composed of several groups and contained a wide spectrum of beliefs: there were the left wing modernists who eventually came to be known as humanists, the empirical school that insisted that

47 Hordern, A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology, p. 81. 
48 Ibid., p. 87.
religion rests entirely upon the scientific method, and a third group to which the majority of modernists belonged. While the former two groups demanded a radical break from orthodox Christianity, the latter group was more moderate and called itself "Evangelical Liberalism." Although members of this moderate position called for a reinterpretation of Christianity, they also desired to retain the main elements of the Christian gospel. It was to this group that Fosdick, W. A. Brown, Rufus Jones, and H. S. Coffin belonged. Referring to the moderate modernists, William Hordern has observed:

These men were dedicated to reason, an open mind, and the currents of modernity, but they were also rooted firmly in the Bible and Christian tradition. They were certain of the reality of God, and while they preached his immanence they believed that he transcended the natural world. They found uniqueness in Jesus and the Christian religion and, if they could not go all the way with orthodox creeds, they could stand with the orthodox in accepting Jesus as Lord of their lives.49

Having given a brief survey of Fosdick's life prior to the controversy in which he became involved and having discussed some of the factors behind the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy, we now turn to the first stage of the "Fosdick Controversy"—his sermon of May 21, 1922, in which he asked the significant question, "Here in the Christian Church to-day are two groups...Shall one of them drive the other out?"50 We shall then analyze the fundamentalist reaction.

49 Ibid., p. 96.
Chapter 2

FOSDICK, HIS "FAMOUS SERMON," AND THE FUNDAMENTALIST REACTION

I

On the Sunday morning of May 21, 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick delivered a sermon at the First Presbyterian Church of New York City entitled, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" One commentator said of the sermon, "Dr. Fosdick has fired a shot which will be heard round the world." ¹ It was Fosdick's "famous sermon" that ignited the flames of controversy within the Presbyterian church in the United States. Although it seems improbable that a single sermon could provoke such a heated and prolonged conflict, this is in fact what happened. Because all the circumstances were right for the conflict to begin, it took only a relatively minor incident to spark the "Fosdick Controversy." Due to the critical role this sermon played in the ensuing controversy, it is necessary to relate its background, main points, and significance.²

As has already been pointed out, the fundamentalists began consolidating their forces during the first decade of the twentieth century. At the World Conference on Christian Fundamentals (1919) the fundamentalists of several denominations agreed to begin a campaign that would not only spread orthodoxy, but would also endeavor to eliminate all modernists from important positions of church administration, educational institutions and church pulpits.³ To facilitate this objective many

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²The text of the sermon can be found in Appendix A.
³Noyes, Henry Sloane Coffin, p. 163.
organizations were formed such as the National Federation of Fundamentalists, the National Bible Institute, the Baptist Fundamental, all of which made it their goal to oust the "sworn enemies of God" from the churches.4

This fundamentalist campaign was not limited to the United States but also spread into the mission fields throughout the world. It was while Fosdick and his wife visited China and Japan in the summer of 1921 that they came into close contact with the fundamentalist attitude described above. Commenting on his trip to the Far East, Fosdick stated, "It was one of the most informing and revealing experiences I ever had." He added, "For one thing, I saw fundamentalism for the first time in its full intensity. The missionary community was split wide open--on one side, some of the largest personalities and most intelligent views one could meet anywhere; on the other, such narrowness and obscurantism as seemed downright incredible."5

As a result of this trip, Fosdick began to sense the significance of the controversy that was beginning to take shape. While on the trip he had been especially alarmed by the "intolerance" of the Bible Union of China (a fundamentalist organization sponsored by Baptists) and its attacks on missionaries with modernist theological outlooks. Thus, the fundamentalist campaign at home and abroad, combined with the clamoring of liberals that someone speak out, prompted Fosdick to preach the


5 Fosdick, The Living, p. 135.
sermon to which we now turn. 6

Fosdick began the sermon by describing the current attitude of the fundamentalists. He stated that it was their intention to drive out of the evangelical churches men and women of liberal opinions. This, he observed, was especially the case in the Baptist and Presbyterian churches. At the beginning of the sermon he clarified the statements he was to make by explaining, "All Fundamentalists are conservatives, but not all conservatives are Fundamentalists." He continued, "The best conservatives can often give lessons to the liberals in true liberality of spirit, but the Fundamentalist program is essentially illiberal and intolerant." 7

As Fosdick saw it, much "new knowledge" had come into man's possession and this knowledge could not be kept in one compartment of the mind and religion in another. While claiming that many sincere Christians were endeavoring to incorporate the conditions of the "modern" world into the traditional Christian faith, Fosdick readily admitted that there were some "reckless radicals" who, lacking spiritual depth, had gone too far. Despite this lack of moderation, he maintained that the enterprise seemed indispensable to the church. Fosdick declared, "We must be able to think our modern life clear through in Christian terms and to do that we must be able to think our Christian

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6 Furniss, The Fundamentalist Controversy, p. 181. An example of the Unitarian demand for Fosdick to speak out can be found in "The Religious Ku-Klux," The Christian Register, CI (February 23, 1922), 171.

7 Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" p. 296.
According to Fosdick there was nothing new in the attempt to readjust Christianity to scientific progress; the process of religious readjustment had been taking place for centuries and would continue to take place. The people who stimulated this readjustment were the modernists but, exclaimed Fosdick, "the Fundamentalists are out on a campaign to shut against them the doors of the Christian fellowship. Shall they be allowed to succeed?" 9

Fosdick then outlined the fundamentalist course of action as "driving in their stakes to mark out the deadline of doctrine around the Church, across which no one is to pass except on terms of agreement," a statement obviously referring to the repeated efforts by fundamentalists to impose doctrinal tests on the modernists. Such doctrines as the virgin birth, belief in an inerrant Bible, a "special theory" of the atonement, and the second coming of Christ were stressed by fundamentalists as the essentials to which all "true" Christians had to subscribe. This, stated Fosdick, was quite unfortunate since he did not consider these points as the fundamentals of Christianity. 10

While allowing certain people the freedom of interpreting those doctrines as the most important features of Christianity, Fosdick questioned the right of the fundamentalists to "shut the door of Christian fellowship" on those who placed a different emphasis on religion. This was what was being done, declared Fosdick, and he

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., pp. 296-7.
After this doctrinal examination Fosdick made a plea to the fundamentalists for tolerance. He asked whether the Christian Church were not large enough to "hold within her hospitable fellowship people who differ on points like this and agree to differ until the fuller truth be manifested..." for not only fundamentalists but also liberals should learn the lessons of tolerance. To his congregation he mentioned that it should not be forgotten that some of the noblest characters and most memorable service in Christian history had been rendered by people who believed in the "old opinions." Despite this fact, Fosdick exclaimed, "the Fundamentalists are giving us one of the worst exhibitions of bitter intolerance that the churches of this country have ever seen."  

The sermon ended as Fosdick emphasized that the doctrinal controversy in which the churches were engaged was such that a deep sense of shame should overwhelm them for quarreling over "little matters when the world is dying of great needs." His conclusion was an eloquent and pointed appeal:

So now, when from the terrific questions of this generation one is called away by the noise of the Fundamentalist controversy, he thinks it almost unforgivable that men should tithe mint and anise and cummin, and quarrel over them, when the world is perishing for the lack of the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy, and faith... The present world situation smells to heaven! And now, in the presence of colossal problems, which must be solved in Christ's name...the Fundamentalists propose to drive out from the Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration. What immeasurable folly!

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13 Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" p. 298.  
14 Ibid., p. 300.  
15 Ibid.
This, then, was the sermon that ignited the formal controversy. Church historian H. Shelton Smith has observed of the Fosdick sermon, "Far from cooling tempers, it set off the hottest controversy that ever raged about any sermon in American history. For at least two years, it was headlined in the leading newspapers across the nation." 16

In his autobiography Fosdick reveals some insight into the sermon which we have just reviewed. He mentioned that the sermon was intended to be "a plea for tolerance, for a church inclusive enough to take in both liberals and conservatives without either trying to drive out the other." He also explained that, even though he was liberal in his theology, in stating the position of the modernists he had not necessarily expressed his own views on the doctrinal points in question, but instead had simply described the extreme positions on both sides and had asked that there be room for both. 17

Despite the sermon's intention it failed in its goal of reconciliation. Fosdick admitted that his plea for good will had ironically brought an explosion of ill-will. Analyzing the reasons for this result, Fosdick explained that the trouble had come when he had defined the liberal and fundamentalist positions while standing in a Presbyterian pulpit, while not being an ordained minister of that denomination. 18

It is interesting to note that there might have been no unusual reaction from the sermon had it not been for the activities of a


17 Fosdick, The Living, p. 145.

18 Ibid.
prominent Presbyterian layman by the name of Ivy L. Lee. Lee, the head of one of the nation's leading publicity organizations, was so impressed by Fosdick's sermon that he had it published in pamphlet form. He changed the title of the sermon to "New Knowledge and the Christian Faith" and distributed it through the country. This was done with the consent, but not on the initiative, of Fosdick.19

The introductory note inserted by Lee in the pamphlet added more fuel to the fire. In it he stated that one of the factors which was causing strife in the church was "the insistence by so many upon standards of orthodoxy..." and then proceeded to hail Fosdick as the most successful and popular minister in New York City. The most irritating remark made by Lee, in the eyes of the fundamentalists, was his statement, "It set a landmark in the progress of religion that such a sermon should be preached in the Old First Presbyterian Church of New York."20

The significance of Fosdick's sermon clearly lies in its being the first well-publicized and articulately expressed statement of the differences that existed between opposing factions within the American protestant churches. In addition, the sermon itself was a significant event in the nationwide religious controversy of the twenties. Ernest R. Sandeen called it "the second most celebrated event in the Fundamentalist controversy..."21

19 Ivy L. Lee, New Knowledge and the Christian Faith, p. 1. (No facts of publication. A pamphlet found at Firestone Library, Princeton, New Jersey.)
20 Ibid.
21 Sandeen, The Roots of Fundamentalism, p. 249.
The sermon played another important role in publicizing and calling attention to the religious controversy that was emerging in the country. Robert Hastings Nichols, a professor at Auburn Theological Seminary and a contemporary observer, in commenting on the impact of the sermon stated that "It was thus that fundamentalism first became a matter of newspaper publicity and general discussion. Thus also the storm-center of the fundamentalist controversy was moved into the Presbyterian Church." In connection with the last statement it should be recognized that in view of the fact that Fosdick was later forced out of the Presbyterian Church primarily on the basis of this sermon, it plays a crucial role in this paper.

The title of the sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" was undoubtedly a provocative one. Even the Session of the First Church was later to admit that the title of the sermon had been "ill-chosen and provocative," and the Session also found that "It sounded more like a challenge to battle than a plea for harmony and peace." But this was understandable, declared the Session, if it were viewed in the light of the contemporary developments surrounding the church.

In order to put the sermon in perspective it should be pointed out that Fosdick never preached such a controversial sermon, at the First Church, after May 21, 1922. The sermon was an exception in that his preaching was usually uncontroversial and devoid of sensationalism, and

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23 The First Church and Fosdick, p. 14.
can be viewed as an isolated incident which took place under tense circumstances.  

Before analyzing the fundamentalist reaction to Fosdick's sermon it seems necessary to briefly explain Fosdick's religious outlook. Although Fosdick emerged from the controversy as a well known minister, before that conflict he had received little public notice and as a result his theological position was not widely known. Despite having a limited knowledge of Fosdick's position many fundamentalists hurriedly attacked him after the sermon. It thus becomes necessary to clarify Fosdick's religious position in order to facilitate our understanding of subsequent events.

II

For Fosdick, Christianity was a great adventure and a vital experience which he felt should permeate every aspect of life. The major function of the Christian religion was to supply a worthy interpretation of life in which the human spirit could find a sense of dignity, joy, and hope. Religion for him was far more than organizations and creeds; instead it should be a practical application of the principles that Christ exemplified while on earth.

Fosdick frequently stated that there were two kinds of Christianity. The first kind was the religion of Jesus—the religion He lived and

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practiced. The second kind of Christianity was the religion about Jesus—theories of his pre-existence, miracles, resurrection, and return. Although he held that there was room for a blending of these two views since "no thoughtful man can come under the spell of Jesus and surrender to his influence without wanting to think about Him," he nevertheless felt there was a danger lurking in such a combination in that a religion about Jesus always threatened to crowd out and destroy the religion of Jesus. Denying the possibility of a dualism in the religion of Jesus, he maintained that this type of religion, though sometimes uncomfortable, should enter into all aspects of life such as business practices, the home, the government, and education.

According to Fosdick the central task and "crowning privilege" of the Christian preacher was the presentation of Christ. Despite the fundamentalists' opinion to the contrary, Fosdick fully subscribed to the idea that Christianity would "stand or fall, live or die, with the personality of Jesus Christ." On this subject he observed:

The theologian may be tempted to reduce the gospel to its implied philosophical postulates and to present a scheme of logically interrelated abstract ideas as the essence of Christianity. But when the preacher stands before his people he knows that this will never do. His task is to win them to a new kind of living whose norms he finds in Christ. His perpetual endeavor, therefore, must be to keep fresh in his own mind and vital in his own life the experience of the experiences of the New Testament, all of which center in Christ.

27 Ernest Hamlin Abbott, "Dr. Fosdick's Religion, " The New Outlook, CXXXIX (January-April, 1925), 364-5.
Fosdick believed that the divinity of Christ could only be approached by way of His humanity. The first disciples had not been impressed by a philosophical and abstract doctrine of Christ's divinity but had followed Christ on the basis of His humanity. Once captivated by Christ's manhood, the disciples realized that His life pointed to a greater transcendent dimension. Fosdick further explained, "God could come, had come, into human life, and they had seen the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ..." 29

Although Fosdick considered doctrines and intellectual statements of faith useful in some aspects of the Christian experience, he made it clear that "creedalism" had become the "ruination of faith." He believed that an important factor for the indifference to religion upon the part of many was that Christianity had become too cluttered up with "excess baggage." "What the world needs," said Fosdick, "are men and women who will live Christianity..." 30

There were issues facing Christianity which Fosdick considered urgent and pressing, issues such as a materialistic philosophy of life, interracial hatred, war and peace, and a belief in God. It was these issues that Fosdick believed the churches ought to contend with. Significant issues would not be found in "noisy controversies and petty sectarian strife." As he saw it, the problem was that:

...the great issues are crowded into the church's background, and the foreground is littered up with small matters, multitudes of people are indifferent. May God give to his church today the prophetic spirit that will give

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30 Ibid., p. 19.
enable her to brush past these insignificant superficialities and once more present to the suffrage of men the great choice between God and Baal. 31

In order to more clearly understand Fosdick's religious outlook it must be observed that he laid strong emphasis on the concept of progress. Much of the idealism of the modernists was connected to the idea of progress. Fosdick considered the idea of progress essential if the transformation of Christianity, its doctrines, its purposes, its social applications, were to be fully appreciated. For him the idea of progress permeated all aspects of life and consequently of great importance to Fosdick was "the endeavor to achieve an intelligent understanding of Christianity's relationship with the idea of progress," in order to, "save the Gospel from being unintelligently mauled and mishandled..." 32

But if Fosdick emphasized the idea of progress and a rational understanding of religion, he was well aware that there were other dimensions to a real religious experience that were often overlooked by modernism. On the subject of progress he declared, "this world needs more than a soft gospel of inevitable progress. It needs salvation from its ignorance, from its sin, its efficiency, its apathy, its silly optimisms and its appalling carelessness." He further stated:

Strange as it may sound to the ears of this modern age, long tickled by the amiable idiocies of evolution popularly misinterpreted, this generation's deepest need is not these dithyrambic songs about inevitable progress, but a fresh sense of personal and social sin. 33

33 Ibid., p. 175.
The rationalistic approach to religion also had its shortcomings according to Fosdick. Although he believed that the findings of science should be honestly confronted by "modern" Christians, he recognized that science was not sufficient to sustain a deep spiritual experience and that beyond all the power and knowledge of science, man still needed "that inward power which comes from spiritual fellowship alone." Clearly, for Fosdick, religion was absolutely indispensable. To build life on any other than a religious foundation would invite ruin and destruction. It is on this basis that not only his sermon should be judged, but his actions throughout the subsequent controversy evaluated.

III

Fundamentalist reaction to the May 21 sermon was prompt. The sermon had been widely distributed in pamphlet form and in the pages of many liberal religious magazines. As the sermon rapidly gained fame for its outspoken character, an increasing number of clergymen made it the object of either praise or attack. The fundamentalists, disregarding the sermon's plea for tolerance, received it as a call to battle in which all "true believers" should contend for the faith.

A common fundamentalist reaction was the charge that the sermon was a treacherous attack on orthodox Christianity since it seemed to question several fundamentalist doctrines. It was regarded not only

34 Ibid., p. 85.
as an attack on the evangelical churches but also on the divine honor and deity of Christ. The fundamentalists saw Fosdick as an exponent of an "apostasy" that was not modern but as old as Christianity itself. Many fundamentalists expressed the hope that Fosdick would awaken from what they considered an inconsistent position and then "return like many another wanderer to the cross of Christ."  

There seemed to be a consensus among the fundamentalists that the sermon was, in effect, a challenge not only to orthodox Christianity but also a challenge for control of the churches by the modernists. The Presbyterians especially considered this to be the case but the Baptists also interpreted it as a threat to their church since Fosdick was an ordained Baptist minister. This attitude, combined with the stated objective of many fundamentalist organizations that all modernists be ousted from high positions in the church, later led to a call for the removal of Fosdick from the pulpit of the First Church.  

The charge of infidelity was most often used by the fundamentalists to describe the sermon. John Roach Straton, minister of the First Calvary Baptist Church in New York and one of Fosdick's most outspoken critics, said of the sermon, "it is really camouflaged infidelity...It hides itself behind a lot of philosophical rubbish and a smoke-screen of learned words, but it is nothing more nor less than infidelity, when seen in its true nature."  


Combined with the charge of infidelity was the standard fundamentalist accusation that what Fosdick had preached was something other than Christianity. One fundamentalist critic stated, "...in our judgment, Dr. Fosdick's Christianity differs so fundamentally from the Christianity of the ages...that if the one is true, the other is false. We do not question Dr. Fosdick's right to preach what he preaches. We do question his right to call it Christianity, however..."\(^{39}\)

The fundamentalists were especially concerned with Fosdick's so-called "rationalism." They repeatedly declared that such preachers as Fosdick were attempting the impossible by trying to rationalize religion, and for many fundamentalists Christianity was a "great mystery" which man could never begin to understand. Indeed, their belief that God's revelation was beyond man's highest reason made it even more attractive to them. Fundamentalists were especially angered that the modernists should discard traditional Christian doctrines because they were not rational. Describing the modernists' "blindness" to the supernatural the Rev. G. W. McPherson, an ardent fundamentalist leader, asked, "Can these religious liberals understand the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement of Christ for man's sins and guilt? Can they understand any supernatural act of God, as revealed in the Bible? No!"\(^{40}\)

The modernists' attempt to reconcile Christianity to scientific discoveries was considered, by most fundamentalists, a forfeiture of true religion and a surrender to the forces of evil. The acceptance of evolution and the "new theology" in general, was viewed as a "blasting

\(^{39}\)Samuel G. Craig, "Christianity According to Dr. Fosdick--Part II," The Presbyterian, LXXXIII (March 8, 1923), 8-9, 11.

\(^{40}\)McPherson, Radicalism Unmasked, p. 17.
at the Rock of Ages." One fundamentalist adequately expressed the attitude of his colleagues when he said, "the whole truth is, and the whole trouble is, that Dr. Fosdick and those who stand with him are so bewitched and besotted with the Darwinian theory in its extremist form... that any kind of miracle is something their 'modern minds cannot use.'"\textsuperscript{41}

Fundamentalists raised the greatest amount of protest over the way Fosdick's sermon had flagrantly questioned several orthodox doctrines—especially the virgin birth. The virgin birth played a central role in the fundamentalists' religious outlook and they were not willing to allow questioning that tended to undermine it. The centrality of the virgin birth is illustrated in the following statement by a fundamentalist, "If there was no miracle in His birth setting aside the law of heredity whereby sin is transmitted, then He inherited sin, and was a sinner, and consequently was not the Savior."\textsuperscript{42}

Other doctrines were equally defended by the fundamentalists. The resurrection of Christ was necessary or Christ would be "as dead as Julius Caesar." Fosdick's statements concerning the inspiration of the Bible were considered "something approaching blasphemy."\textsuperscript{43} The question of the second coming also provoked much fundamentalist comment; J. Frank Norris, an outspoken fundamentalist from Texas, suggested the importance of the doctrine in the controversy by declaring, "...when a man tells me he believes in the literal, personal, bodily, visible, imminent return of the Lord to this earth as King, I know what he

\textsuperscript{41}New York Times, November 23, 1922, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{42}Charles Hillman Fountain, The Case Against Dr. Fosdick, p. 9. (No facts of publication. A pamphlet found at the New York Public Library.)

\textsuperscript{43}James M. Gray, The Deadline of Doctrine around the Church (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1922), p. 13.
believes on every other question. I know that he is not a modernist, and I know that he does not believe in the evolutionary hypothesis."  

While most fundamentalists severely attacked Fosdick's sermon, there were a handful who received it gladly. This latter group welcomed the sermon's frankness and forthrightness concerning the basic points of contention. Clarence Edward Macartney, a leading Presbyterian fundamentalist from Philadelphia, stated, "Both rationalists and evangelicals, therefore, will rejoice that Dr. Fosdick in this sermon leaves no reader or hearer in the least doubt as to what he believes or disbelieves..." Their reaction was not prompted by Fosdick's plea for tolerance and an inclusive church, instead people such as Macartney seized the sermon as the definition of a concrete target at which they could direct their attacks. Another reason for joy was that after the sermon the "religious chaos" of the "rationalistic circles" had been fully exposed for all to see.  

A view of the fundamentalist response to Fosdick's sermon in historical perspective reveals a certain misunderstanding of Fosdick's intent. Fosdick had openly expressed what he considered the major differences of beliefs between fundamentalists and modernists and had then proceeded to ask for tolerance on both sides. The fundamentalists in their interpretation of the sermon as a challenge were thrown on the defensive and the result of this defensive stance was that in most cases extremists took charge of the crusade to "crush the infidels."

John Roach Straton, of New York, anticipated the forthcoming vindictive

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44 Hartt, "The War in the Churches," p. 469.
attitude that extreme fundamentalists were to pursue when he stated, "Dr. Fosdick has raised the question in his sermon, 'Shall the Fundamentalists Win?'... I would like to raise the question, 'Shall the Funnymonkeyists Win?' The Fundamentalists are neither as dangerous nor as amusing to the thought as the Funnymonkeyists." 46

IV

In a sermon entitled "Modernism, Fundamentalism, and the Common People," the Rev. George W. McPherson, superintendent of the Old Tent Evangel, uttered a statement that graphically illustrates the mounting fanatical dimension with which this section deals. The fundamentalist leader proclaimed, "There will be no pussyfooting work done in the Tent Evangel this summer. It is the purpose of this management to expose the 'Bolsheviki' in religion, and those churches and preachers who are dishonest as Sing Sing inmates." 47

Fundamentalists became more and more convinced that the modernists were the "enemy" which had to be defeated. A typical fundamentalist description of a modernist stated, "a modernist in government is an anarchist and Bolshevik; in science he is an evolutionist, in business he is a communist; in art a futurist; in music his name is jazz; and in religion an atheist and infidel." 48 The ardent fundamentalist desire to defeat modernism brought to the forefront certain individuals who became extremists in their defense of orthodoxy.

In reference to modernist leaders such as Fosdick, the Rev. Dr. Thomas T. Shields, President of the Baptist Bible Union of North America, exclaimed, "We have come to see that no man can give the hand of fellowship to an enemy of Christ without dishonoring the Lord. The day that Russia shook hands with Germany the Russian Empire fell." He continued, "I won't sit on the platform. I won't put my feet under his table. I won't break bread with an enemy of Christ." The Rev. Dr. William L. Pettingill, President of the Philadelphia Bible School, was convinced that all those people that denied Christ's virgin birth and resurrection would "go to hell."\(^{49}\)

Fosdick, along with many other modernists, came under vigorous fundamentalist attack. William Jennings Bryan called Fosdick "the most altitudinous higher critic I know of... He \(^{\text{Fosdick}}\) believes that eyes came from light playing on the body and the ears came from the beating on the body of sound waves."\(^{50}\) The fundamentalist attack continued when McPherson called Fosdick and another modernist minister, "Baboon Boosters," and demanded that Fosdick start his own church which should be named "The Church for the Descendants of Apes."\(^{51}\)

The fundamentalists were very fond of comparing Fosdick to such men as Voltaire, Thomas Paine, and Robert Ingersoll. One fundamentalist

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\(^{50}\) Ibid., January 9, 1923, p. 6. To this attack of Bryan's, Fosdick, who seldom replied to criticism, said, "Oh, the poor bean he calls me an altitudinous higher critic and he doesn't know that a higher critic is a specialized scholar. I do not know enough to be a higher critic." Quoted in *New York Times*, January 29, 1923, p. 15.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., July 24, 1922, p. 10.
even wrote a book in which he endeavored to display the "striking likeness" between Paine and Fosdick. The only difference discernible to the fundamentalists between such men as Paine, Ingersoll, and Fosdick was that the first two had withdrawn from the church when advocating their "propaganda" but Fosdick, they said, insisted on remaining inside the church to "fight her by the boring process within her own walls."

A not infrequent fundamentalist charge was that Fosdick was leading a double life of "subversion." On the one hand, they said, he was a professor at Union Theological Seminary and was filling the minds of the students with infidelity, while on the other he would apologize as a preacher for Christianity and exclaim that the students were losing their faith. Straton claimed that Fosdick was a capital illustration of this "peculiar theological Jekyll-Hyde legerdemain." He charged Fosdick with actually catering to the intellectual pride and vanity of the students.

The fundamentalists were intensely contemptuous of educational institutions that did not adhere to a strict conservative line and regarded many colleges, universities, and seminaries as centers of unbelief. Union Theological Seminary was especially singled out as the "spawning place of revolutionary ideas" by fundamentalists such as Straton who accused Union of being "the most dangerous institution in


53 "The Lawlessness of the Thing," The Presbyterian, LXXXII (September 7, 1922), 6.

54 New York Times, June 18, 1923, p. 5.
New York. He considered Union to be potentially far more dangerous to New York than "the backrooms where Bolsheviki hatch their plots and anarchists prepare the bombs." On the whole, fundamentalists displayed an attitude of anti-intellectualism as demonstrated by William Jennings Bryan's statement, "I had rather have my boy unable to read and write and honest than an inmate of a penitentiary and a scholar."

Fosdick was repeatedly singled out as a "seducer" of the minds of American students and not only was he accused of seducing the minds of the young, but also of destroying the faith of many Christians. Referring specifically to Fosdick one fundamentalist proclaimed, "...let it be remembered that no man is contributing more to the destruction of the evangelical faith, to the unsettling of thousands, to the spread of skepticism among the young, and to the disintegration of Protestantism."

Not only was Fosdick supposedly causing the spiritual death of thousands, but he was also credited with "sowing the seeds of skepticism...that may not only wreck the church but wreck our American civilization." The Presbyterian lashed out against Fosdick's "lawlessness" and asked, "How does this violence against the constitution of the church differ in nature from the violence of the bootleggers against the Constitution of the United States...?"

56 Ibid., December 8, 1923, p. 18.
58 Ibid., p. 18.
One of the most extreme statements made by a fundamentalist against Fosdick was that of McPherson. Speaking of "Fosdick's school of rationalism," McPherson declared:

They have produced our political criminals that would wreck our trains, burn our factories, murder our peaceful citizens, turn our country that protects them into a charnel house of death, and replace the Stars and Stripes, the emblem of liberty and justice, with the dyed-in-hell red rag of an army of fiends incarnate. That is what Dr. Fosdick's school of rationalism, evolution, and a subtle denial of the fundamentalist truths of the Bible has contributed to our modern civilization.60

In the midst of these hostile fundamentalist attacks, criticism suddenly came from an unexpected quarter—the Unitarians. Many Unitarians had fully welcomed Fosdick's sermon and his modernism; they had even hoped that Fosdick would lead a new reformation to free Christianity from many "outdated" dogmas and shackles of the past. But when Fosdick demonstrated that he was not willing to go as far as the Unitarians would have liked him to, he became the object of Unitarian criticism until the controversy ended in 1925.61

From a misunderstanding of Fosdick's position on the deity of Christ, the fundamentalists had repeatedly accused Fosdick of being a Unitarian. The Unitarians, realizing that Fosdick would not subscribe to their position, said of him "...we think he makes his theological position colorless and innocuous, by a laissez-faire attitude which he calls 'tolerance' and which means nothing at all so far as clearcut

61 "Since February 23, 1922," The Christian Register, CIII (October 23, 1924), 1014.
doctrine is concerned." The fundamentalists, then, considered Fosdick too liberal and the Unitarians assessed him as too conservative. This was the predicament in which Fosdick found himself for several years of the controversy.

In conclusion, it should be observed that the fundamentalist response to Fosdick's sermon and his modernist position was in many cases extreme and unjustified. The fundamentalists claimed that their object was to protect true Christianity, but in so doing many of them had often resorted to unchristian methods. In exaggerating any threat that Fosdick might have posed to orthodox Christianity, the fundamentalists not only drove many to Fosdick's defense but also found that it later became increasingly difficult to remove him from the pulpit of the First Church.

The next chapter of this paper brings us to the actual proceedings within the Presbyterian Church which ultimately precipitated Fosdick's departure from the First Church. Although fundamentalists of many churches had called for his ouster, we shall now focus our attention specifically on the Presbyterian fundamentalists' attack on Fosdick.

\[62\text{"A Remarkable Action," } \text{The Christian Register, CII (October 18, 1923), 987.}\]
Chapter 3

THE "FOSDICK CONTROVERSY" WITHIN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I

"Wake up, Presbyterians! Wake up, presbyteries! Wake up, ministers, and especially wake up, elders! If you do not want your church to become Unitarian while we sleep! Wake up, no compromise; but put truth in the first place."¹ This quotation vividly illustrates the attitude of a considerable number of restive fundamentalists within the Presbyterian Church in the months following Fosdick's "famous sermon." They maintained that for too long heresy and infidelity had gone unchecked within the church. While prior to Fosdick's sermon the question that many fundamentalists were debating was where they should strike first, after May 21, 1922, the answer was clear. It was Fosdick that the fundamentalists within the Presbyterian Church would have to eliminate. They were resolute in their determination to halt the preaching of modernism in the pulpit of the historic First Church.²

In an attempt to understand the fundamentalist attitude in a historical perspective, it should be recognized that the Presbyterian Church had historically been a creedal denomination. Stewart Cole has stated that the Presbyterian Church had subscribed to the "most elaborate set of doctrines of any ecclesiastical body in America." The three distinctive principles of Presbyterian Church government were doctrinal authority, parliamentary polity, and direct supervision of

¹John Fox, "Shall We Compromise with Dr. Fosdick?" The Presbyterian, LXXXIII (May 3, 1923), 9.
theological education. This Calvinist system had prompted many doctrinal controversies and in the history of the Presbyterian Church in America ecclesiastical trials had been frequent.  

It became the belief of fundamentalist Presbyterians that Fosdick could no longer legitimately occupy the pulpit of the First Church because, they pointed out, the Presbyterian Church was a constitutional church that required all of its ministers, without exception, to preach and teach in accordance with the system of doctrine taught in its Confession of Faith. Expressing the characteristic attitude of fundamentalists, one minister stated, "The Doctor [Fosdick] must either publically repudiate what he has taught in this sermon ["Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"] and preach unequivocally the doctrine and fact of the Virgin Birth, or the Presbytery must withdraw its permission for him to occupy the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church any longer."  

Independent of the desire to uphold the creed and orthodoxy, there were other reasons why the fundamentalists wanted to eliminate Fosdick. First of all, they were fully convinced that the modernists were trying to take control of the Presbyterian Church. Although prior to Fosdick's sermon the modernists within the church had been relatively quiet, after that event it became obvious to the fundamentalists that modernism was threatening their position. The Presbyterian observed, "But the gentleness is all past, and boldness and persistence are everywhere manifest... even the babes in Christ need not now be deceived."  

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3 Cole, The History of Fundamentalism, p. 98.
4 Fountain, The Case Against Dr. Fosdick, p. 10.
5 "The Real and Defined Conflict," The Presbyterian, LXXXII (July 6, 1922), 4.
An important pretext behind the fundamentalist call for Fosdick's resignation was that of finances. It was a common complaint against Fosdick that he was improperly taking his pay from a church whose creed he did not support. In the words of one prominent fundamentalist, "Dr. Fosdick is not a Presbyterian, but he stands in a Presbyterian pulpit and gets his bread from a Presbyterian congregation."6

Thus the fundamentalists were determined to preserve orthodoxy, guard against "improper" use of finances, and counteract modernist "aggression." With these objectives in mind, it became extremely difficult for the fundamentalists to heed Fosdick's plea for tolerance. Indeed, rather than view their actions as intolerance, they were inclined to look upon their conduct as "an exhibition of loyalty to their Lord and Savior...." The fundamentalists were certain that there was a legitimate type of Christian intolerance and that Fosdick's plea could not be honored.7

In fact, there was a repeated insistence that modernism and fundamentalism could not coexist since the former was bringing about the destruction of the evangelical church. In his pamphlet, The Deadline of Doctrine Around the Church, James M. Gray argued, "it is not as to whether they [fundamentalists] shall withhold the Christian name from, and shut the door of Christian fellowship against deniers of such doctrines, but the question rather is whether they can consistently and conscientiously do otherwise?"8


7 "A Significant Omission," The Presbyterian, LXXXII (June 29, 1922), 6.

The fundamentalists reiterated their belief that the "rationalists" had the right to believe and speak what they wanted but not within the Presbyterian Church. They believed that there was no room for the modernists within the evangelical church where they could "openly antagonize those who hold the cardinal truths of historic Christianity." A common fundamentalist injunction stated, "If there is any manhood left in the rationalists now hiding in the church, let them follow the example of their kind outside, and let them constitute their own organization...." 

Using this argument, fundamentalist Presbyterians throughout the country, but especially those from the Philadelphia area, began insisting that something be done to silence Fosdick. The individual who finally rose up to defend orthodoxy was the Rev. Dr. Charles Edward Macartney who was not only the minister of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church, but also Moderator of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, the stronghold of conservatism.

In the early stages of the controversy Macartney had displayed a moderate attitude toward Fosdick and other modernists. Although he considered Fosdick's position "inconsistent," he had often stated that there were better methods than "excision and excommunication as a means of preserving the church from false teaching." While at first Macartney also believed that it would be relatively simple to remove Fosdick from

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11 "The Presbyterian Attack on Dr. Fosdick," The Literary Digest, LXXV (November 18, 1922), 36-7.
the pulpit of the First Church, as time passed it became increasingly apparent that such would not be the case.\textsuperscript{12}

By 1922, a theological shift was beginning to take place in the Presbyterian Church as more and more conservatives were moving toward liberal positions. Lefferts A. Loetscher explains that by 1922 "theological opinion in the Presbyterian Church was noticeably changing." This was especially true of the Presbytery of New York where liberal theological views were widely accepted. It was in recognition of the growth of liberalism that Macartney and other fundamentalist leaders became apprehensive about Fosdick's continued presence at the First Church.\textsuperscript{13}

Feeling that direct intervention had become a necessity, Macartney wrote a letter to Fosdick on October 10, 1922, asking him to clarify his position. In the letter Macartney informed Fosdick that much discussion had arisen in the Presbytery of Philadelphia after the wide circulation of printed copies containing the sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" Macartney was seeking Fosdick's verification that in his earlier pamphlet, "Shall Unbelief Win?" he had correctly quoted and presented the thoughts of Fosdick's sermon.\textsuperscript{14}

Fosdick replied in a letter to Macartney on October 13, 1922, which

\textsuperscript{12}Macartney, "Shall Unbelief Win?" p. 10.


\textsuperscript{14}"The Correspondence Between Dr. Fosdick and Dr. Macartney," The Presbyterian, LXXXII (December 7, 1922), 6. We will dwell on this correspondence extensively for two reasons. First, Macartney became the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in 1924 thus making him the most important Presbyterian fundamentalist who opposed Fosdick. Secondly, the "correspondence" contains the main arguments for the position of both sides.
began with an expression of appreciation that Macartney had contacted him directly before making a final judgment, although he thought it would have been much better had they been able to meet personally. Fosdick then immediately stated, in reference to the sermon of May 21, 1922, "I said what I thought, and I think what I said." He then briefly explained that he had had nothing to do with the wide circulation of the sermon and, in fact, had been informed of its publication only a few days before it was circulated.\textsuperscript{15}

Commenting on whether Macartney had been fair to him in the pamphlet, "Shall Unbelief Win?" Fosdick spoke with all frankness:

\begin{quote}
I know that you are a Christian gentleman, that you wanted to make your reply fair, and that you tried to make it fair. But in all honesty I must say that, so far from being fair, you have drawn a picture of me which anyone who knows me, what I really think and what I really teach, would surely regard as a caricature.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Primarily Fosdick considered Macartney's pamphlet unfair because he had neglected the real purpose of the sermon. "It was a plea for tolerance," Fosdick explained, although no "soft and sentimental" plea as was then common; it was not founded on the "fallacious basis" that no real differences existed between Christians. With this in mind, Fosdick explained that he had taken pains to present a brief and sketchy outline of extreme conservative and liberal theological positions "in order that I might say that even when people are as far apart as these two positions represent, we must still strive to keep them within the fellowship of the family of Christ...until the fuller truth comes to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[15]Ibid.
\item[16]Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
light." Fosdick then wrote that although he had left himself open to misunderstanding by outlining the two extreme theological positions, Macartney had portrayed him in a "preposterous" way. However, this distorted representation could have been avoided had there been a careful reading of the sermon. 18

In his letter, Fosdick briefly summarized his stance on several church doctrines. Concerning the virgin birth he declared that he had no desire to be dogmatic on the historical question. Whatever the ultimate decision on the question, the important consideration for him was that he believed in the divinity of Christ and, in his estimation, that belief was "the very center of the Gospel." In Christ he found God and God could find him. Fosdick emphatically declared "You may be sure that if ever I should come to doubt our Lord's deity, which I could not do without uprooting my whole Christian experience and thought, I should at once leave the evangelical pulpit...." 19

Regarding the doctrine of Biblical inspiration, Fosdick mentioned that while he did not consider the Bible inerrant, it did nevertheless exercise authority over him. For him the Bible was the Book of God, "the record of the unfolding of his whole purpose, character, and spirit to the children of men, and the relative ideas of the Book are the means of my thinking and my life." 20

After affirming his belief in the vicarious sacrifice of Christ

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., p. 7.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
as the only means for salvation, but denying any "theory of substitutionary punishment," Fosdick once again referred to the unfortunate impression his sermon had made. He stated that those people who heard his sermons every week had "listened in amazement" to the sort of attack that Macartney and other fundamentalists had made upon him. Fosdick later observed that what had happened was that the fundamentalists had drawn a caricature of him and then had gotten angry at it. 21

The letter ended as Fosdick once again thanked Macartney for his courtesy and then proposed that they meet personally in order to better understand each other. In his autobiography, Fosdick refers to his correspondence with Macartney and describes that fundamentalist leader as "personally fair-minded...decent and dignified in his attitude." 22

In a reply dated October 15, 1922, Macartney asserted that he was perplexed since he could not understand how Fosdick could speak so devoutly about Christ's deity and at the same time "preach such a sermon as that over which the present controversy has arisen?" He thought that Fosdick had been too vague, for instance, on the question of the virgin birth which he considered a central doctrine of the Presbyterian Confession of Faith. 23

Macartney explained that he had no objection to Fosdick being a Baptist while preaching in a Presbyterian pulpit; in fact, he would allow a Christian of any church to preach in his pulpit as long as he

21 "Correspondence Between Fosdick and Macartney," p. 7.
22 Fosdick, The Living, p. 146.
23 "Correspondence Between Fosdick and Macartney," p. 7.
taught the "Christ of the New Testament." But, he warned, "if I believe him to preach any other Christ than the Christ of the New Testament, I feel it to be my duty to cry out against him." Macartney further clarified his attitude by stating:

From the Presbyterian point of view...your delivering such a message in a Presbyterian church is an open affront. Our indignation, however, is not with you, for if you hold these views I admire your courage in presenting them wherever you can, but with the Session of the First Presbyterian Church and with the Presbytery of New York, pledged in the most solemn vows of ordinations to maintain and defend that interpretation of Christianity which is set forth in the Confession of Faith.\

Macartney observed that a possible reason for the friction between the Presbyterian Church and Fosdick was that he might have become accustomed to the congregational polity of the Baptist Church, but the Presbyterian Church was administered in a different manner. A further explanation might have been that "disloyal Presbyterians" had encouraged Fosdick to disregard the Confession of the Church. In any case, Macartney declared that a majority of Presbyterians considered his sermon "an injustice and affront."\

After recognizing that Fosdick had been "altogether courteous" toward those who differed with him, Macartney questioned his theological position on the doctrines of the virgin birth and the atonement on which he strongly disagreed with Fosdick. As for the matter of tolerance, Macartney said that he had recognized it as the main purpose of Fosdick's sermon but that he could not tolerate a violation of the New Testament.

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
After congratulating Fosdick for his skill and courage in leading "the whole rationalistic and naturalistic movement in the Protestant Church," Macartney asserted that Fosdick had so many friends and sympathizers in academic circles that the New Testament was rarely presented any longer. Although he admitted that the "tide of rationalism and naturalism" had greatly invaded the Protestant churches and that the movement would undoubtedly gain momentum, Macartney, nevertheless, was convinced that "the tide will turn...like the prodigal in the matchless parable of our divine Lord...."27

Because Fosdick's Christ was not the same Christ that he preached, Macartney asserted that there would be no benefit in having a face to face conference since they had "irreconcilable views" and too much "easy-going conference" had already taken place in the controversy. Finally, Macartney informed Fosdick that the Presbytery of Philadelphia would meet the following Monday and that he would read their correspondence before discussing a proposed resolution concerning the Presbytery of New York.28

On October 16, 1922, Macartney presented a paper to the Presbytery of Philadelphia calling attention to the unsound doctrine that was being preached at the First Church of New York. Since Presbyterian law made it illegal for one presbytery to send a protest directly to another presbytery, Macartney proposed that a protest, in the form of an overture,29

27 "Correspondence Between Fosdick and Macartney," p. 8.
28 Ibid.
29 An "overture" is an initiative which a presbytery takes in order to bring action against, or make a proposal concerning, an ecclesiastical matter. It is sent directly to the General Assembly and decided upon there.
should be sent to the General Assembly to be considered at its May, 1923, Session. It was not until October 18, however, that the overture of the Presbytery of Philadelphia was adopted at a Session which witnessed several hours of heated debate between the conservatives, who were in the majority, and the liberals. The final vote showed seventy-two in favor of Macartney's action and twenty-one opposed.  

Briefly summarized, the overture declared that there had recently been a "public proclamation" in the pulpit of the First Church of New York which "appears to be in denial of the essential doctrines of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A." Because Fosdick was a Baptist and not personally subject to the jurisdiction of the Church, the overture never referred to him by name but rather to the "pulpit." After quoting Fosdick's sermon of May 21, 1922, at length, the overture declared it was not in harmony with the standards of the church. The overture then concluded:

The Presbytery of Philadelphia hereby respectfully overtures the General Assembly to direct the Presbytery of New York to take such action as will require the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian Church of New York City to conform to the system of doctrine taught in the Confession of Faith.

Ending with a veiled threat, the overture reminded the General Assembly that in 1916 the Presbytery of New York had come close to being removed from the Church over questions of doctrine and hinted that such might again be the case if the irregular conditions in New York were not corrected. The overture left no doubt that the Presbytery

31 Quoted in Loetscher, The Broadening Church, pp. 109-10.
of Philadelphia considered the matter to be extremely serious. 32

The Philadelphia overture drew mixed reactions from the presbyteries around the country. By the time that the General Assembly took action against the "pulpit" of New York, five had either favored Fosdick or at least considered it improper for the Presbytery of Philadelphia to get involved in the affairs of another presbytery (New York). 33

Pressure on the Presbytery of New York increased tremendously during the months following the adoption of the Philadelphia overture. Not only was there pressure from several outside presbyteries, but within the Presbytery of New York there was a small nucleus of ministers who demanded Fosdick's ouster. In response to this pressure, the Presbytery of New York, on January 8, 1923, decided overwhelmingly to support Fosdick. The Session of the First Church also indicated its unanimous support for the "special preacher." 34

In retrospect, we can see that during the period of one year, from the day of Fosdick's sermon until the General Assembly of 1923, a controversy of major proportions had developed within the Presbyterian Church. It was this critical problem which the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church had to resolve. We now turn to the General Assembly to see how it handled the "Fosdick Case."

II

The 135th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church met in Indianapolis in 1923. First on the agenda was the problem of selecting

32 Ibid., p. 110.
34 Ibid., January 9, 1923, p. 1.
a moderator for the Assembly. Both the fundamentalists and the modernists were eager to get a person of their liking in the position of moderator. The two leading contenders were William Jennings Bryan and Dr. Charles F. Wishart, president of Wooster College. Although for a long time Bryan had let it be known that he would welcome the nomination to the moderatorship and just prior to the opening of the Assembly had actively campaigned for the position, in the opinion of a majority of delegates Bryan was too extremely conservative to be entrusted with a position that demanded less dogmatism and more impartiality. When the vote was taken, Dr. Wishart, a moderate, was selected to be moderator.35

Despite this loss, Bryan played an important role in the proceedings of the Assembly. Shortly after the defeat, he almost disrupted the Assembly when he introduced a measure which would have cut off financial support to any Presbyterian school that taught the theory of evolution, and thus for a second time Bryan faced defeat as his measure was rejected by the Assembly. This second rejection affected Bryan deeply and he took defeat with a lack of grace.36 However, these defeats did not deter Bryan from once again entering the battle when the Assembly got around to considering the "Fosdick Case."

Although there were many other matters confronting the Assembly in 1923, the Philadelphia overture, concerning Fosdick, commanded considerable attention. A few days before the Assembly started,

35 "General Assembly Proceedings," The Presbyterian, LXXXIV (May 24, 1923), 12.
36 Furniss, The Fundamentalist Controversy, p. 133.
Macartney, author of the Philadelphia overture, had attempted to explain the forthcoming proceedings. "Dr. Fosdick is not on trial, and there is no heresy trial before the Church," declared Macartney. He also mentioned that there would be no attempts to divide the church. According to him, the only concern of the fundamentalists was to preserve the "integrity" of the creed.37

The "Fosdick Case," as it came to be called, went directly to the Committee on Bills and Overtures. This committee was entrusted with the responsibility of recommending what actions should be taken on the Philadelphia overture. After much discussion, the committee submitted two reports—a majority and a minority report. The majority report was endorsed by twenty-two members and was rejected by one. It recommended that the Presbytery of New York be given freedom to decide what would be the best action to take regarding Fosdick's preaching. The majority report stated, in part:

Therefore we would recommend to the 135th General Assembly that it reply to the petitioners that it deems it to be needless, if not unfavorably intrusive, to transmit to the Presbytery of New York any instructions as to the manner and methods of this now pending investigation. Still less would the Assembly assume to indicate the conclusion to be reached by this inquiry.38

The majority report was greatly assailed by the fundamentalists who favored the minority report. The minority report had been presented by a single member of the committee—the Rev. A. Gordon MacLennan. It concurred with the Philadelphia overture and expressed its "profound


sorrow" that doctrines contrary to the standards of the Presbyterian Church had been proclaimed in the pulpit of the First Church of New York.

It concluded:

[The 135th General Assembly] would direct the Presbytery of New York to take such action, (either through its present committee or by appointment of a special commission) as will require the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian Church of New York to conform to the system of doctrine taught in the Confession of Faith; and that said Presbytery report its actions in a full transcript of its records to the 136th General Assembly of 1924.39

From the Committee on Bills and Overtures, the two reports went to the General Assembly for the final vote on which of the two reports should be accepted. Although the Committee on Bills and Overtures had approved the majority report by a margin of twenty-two to one, the prospects for the success of the majority report became very limited as the fundamentalists campaigned vigorously for adoption of the minority report. Bryan, MacLennan, and especially Macartney fought spiritedly for the adoption of the minority report.40

The resultant debate on the Assembly floor became very prolonged and heated. The Christian Register, a Unitarian periodical, reported, "the shouts of 'Yes' and 'No' were so mingled that the moderator could not continue the vote." The Register observed that as the roll was called "Mr. Bryan and his cohorts shouted applause as victory perched upon their banners." Bryan supposedly said "This is worth losing the moderatorship...Dr. Fosdick is called upon to change his convictions

39Ibid., p. 253.
or lose his job.\footnote{41} Macartney was the chief defender of the minority report and as debate continued his appeals became increasingly impassioned. After comparing Fosdick to Thomas Paine, Macartney called the majority report "a masterpiece of whitewash" and declared, "the storm is coming, and you can't keep it back with pusilanimous compromises. If you adopt this majority report you allow the New York Presbytery to escape on a tecnicality \textit{sic}\footnote{42}.

Macartney believed that anything but acceptance of the minority report would be an evasion of the issue. For him the question boiled down to whether or not the Presbyterian Church would remain a "New Testament Church." The decision would determine whether the Church would be a "Total Toleration society" or a church "set for defense of the truth." He presented the matter squarely to the delegates as he concluded, "You must decide whether or not the Presbyterian pulpit is a Cave of Adullam where theological wanderers and adventurers can take refuge and preach a message which is derogatory to the Lord Jesus Christ.\footnote{43}

Despite the fact that a majority of the delegates were conservative and notwithstanding the inflamed oratory of the fundamentalists, the Assembly took several hours to decide which report to accept. It was at this latter part of the debate that Bryan played a significant role as he moved that the vote be taken by roll call. Not only did he ask

\footnote{41} Frank S. C. Wicks, "How the Presbyterians Impressed A Unitarian," \textit{The Christian Register}, CII (June 14, 1923), 558.


\footnote{43}"Excerpts from Dr. Macartney's Closing Argument at the Assembly," \textit{The Presbyterian}, LXXXIV (June 7, 1923), 8-9.
for a roll call but also inserted a clause in the minority report that would put the Assembly of 1923 on record as holding that five doctrines were essential to Presbyterian teaching. Finally as the vote was taken by roll call, it was decided that the minority report be adopted. The vote was 439 to 359. Undoubtedly this was a great victory for the fundamentalist forces within the Church.

Consequently, as a result of the vote the General Assembly condemned the pulpit utterances of Fosdick and specifically directed the Presbytery of New York to take action that "would require the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian Church of New York to conform to the system of doctrines taught in the Confession of Faith."

A full report of the findings of the Presbytery of New York would also be required at the 1924 General Assembly.

An analysis of the final vote on the "Fosdick Case" is quite revealing. Nearly every man who was in any way associated with the offices and boards of the church voted against the minority report. The foreign missionaries, who of all persons might have been expected to cast a ringing vote for the minority report, voted against it. The moderator and ex-moderator voted against it. An article in The Presbyterian revealed, "Whenever the name of a man connected with the

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44 The five doctrines were: the virgin birth of Christ, the atonement, the inerrancy of the Scriptures, Christ's miracles, and the resurrection of Christ and His ascension.


46 Minutes of the 1923 General Assembly, p. 253.
offices and Boards and organized activities of the church was called, a defiant 'No' was the response."

Of forty-three synods, twenty-four voted for the minority report and nineteen against it. Of the twelve largest synods, the minority report carried seven and its enemies five. The large-city presbyteries were quite evenly divided with those of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Rochester, and Columbus voting for the minority report while the Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Cleveland presbyteries voted against it. Thus, although the fundamentalists had won a victory, there was a considerable portion of the church that viewed their activities with much disfavor.

The fact that a significant percentage of influential Presbyterians were apprehensive about the fundamentalist activities is revealed by the comments of the Rev. Dr. Calvin C. Hays of Pennsylvania, who had been moderator of the 1922 General Assembly. At the opening sermon of the 1923 Assembly, the retiring moderator, Hays, had called for an attitude of toleration in the church. Hays strongly denied that modernist forces were out to take over the church and cautioned, "the charge that rationalism and unbelief are widespread among us, and are even creeping into many of our pulpits, is a charge that cannot be sustained." Hays declared that those who had an overall knowledge of the church had found no evidence to support the "sweeping assertion" of a threatened modernist takeover. The real trouble, as he saw it, was that minor

48 Ibid.
points had been overemphasized while "the cardinal truths" of religion had been neglected. Hays concluded:

    And how shall we meet accusations such as this, which are more or less a reflection on us all? By going out to fight our accusers, or by having a quarrel among ourselves in the matter? Not at all. The remedy is not controversy.... Nothing will heal our woes like grace, and there is nothing like light to deliver us from darkness. No appeal to force, no recourse to law, no ecclesiastical bull, will drive out heresy where heresy appears.50

The fundamentalists, however, would have none of this attitude. Even after the apparent fundamentalist victory Macartney would not rest. In referring to the conflict that had surrounded the adoption of the minority report he warned, "This is a faint skirmish of a great conflict." That the controversy was far from over could be deduced from Macartney's rallying call: "The trumpet has been sounded loud and clear. Let Israel hear! The opening battle has been won. Let us see to it that it shall be no Pyrrhic victory."51

The liberal elements within the Presbyterian Church were naturally upset by the outcome of the 1923 Assembly. Not only were they grieved at the adoption of the minority report, but also were disturbed at the hostile and intolerant attitude of the fundamentalists. As the Assembly came to a close, the modernists began a demonstration of protest that did not subside until the end of the 1924 Assembly. It is to an examination of the modernist reaction that we now turn.

50 Ibid.

On May 24, the last day of the 1923 General Assembly, the modernists within the Presbyterian Church decided that it was time to articulate their grievances. Considering the fact that twenty-two out of twenty-three members of the Committee on Bills and Overtures had favored a more lenient policy towards solving the "Fosdick Case," the modernists felt that some sort of protest was in order.

There were three points of protest. First, the modernists protested the action taken by the Assembly because it was "based on allegations made by one Presbytery in regard to conditions in another Presbytery." These "allegations," according to the modernists, were not substantiated by evidence. Secondly, there was opposition to the action taken on the Philadelphia Overture because "it passes judgment on a matter which is not now, and never has been, before the Assembly by orderly process, and condemns without proper hearing." And thirdly, the action of the Assembly was protested because of the "doctrinal test" of five points, which the Assembly was seeking to impose upon the "office bearers of the Church." In their opinion the doctrinal test was extra-constitutional and therefore illegal.52

The protest was signed by sixty-six persons and was officially presented to the Assembly by the Rev. Dr. William P. Merrill who was the pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church of New York City. Merrill was a modernist who denied that the five doctrines set forth by the Assembly were essential. He expressed the sentiments of his fellow protesters when he asserted that the Assembly had "said what was not true, did what was

52Minutes of the 1923 General Assembly, pp. 338-9.
not fair, and attempted to put a yoke on our necks which I, for one, will never wear." Merrill concluded by warning that the Assembly's action was very unfortunate not only for the First Church but also for the Assembly. 53

The Rev. Dr. Henry Sloane Coffin, another Presbyterian liberal who was pastor of the Madison Avenue Church of New York, also vigorously protested the Assembly's action. Coffin, who later became the leading spokesman for liberal Presbyterians, had long been a stout defender of Fosdick. On May 24, he issued an independent statement to the press proclaiming that he could no longer remain silent about the recent developments. "...I feel that I owe it to my own congregation and to the Presbytery," Coffin explained, "to state plainly that if any action is taken which removes Dr. Fosdick from the pulpit of the First Church, on account of his interpretation of the Christian Gospel, I cannot honestly be allowed to remain in the pulpit of the Madison Avenue Church, for I share fully his point of view." 54

It was becoming apparent that an ever-increasing number of Presbyterian clergymen were prepared to take similar stands since in matters of theology the liberals could not go along with the five "essentials" that the Assembly had decided upon. Because of this situation many influential Presbyterians such as Coffin were beginning to fear that the denomination was about to be split apart as it had divided into the

53 New York Times, May 28, 1923, p. 1. As the General Assembly drew to a close, and for several days after it had ended, the developments of the controversy were making front page headlines. On the 28th, for example, the headline on the front page of the New York Times read, "Pastors Denounce New Doctrine Yoke."

54 Ibid., May 25, 1923, p. 10.
New School and Old School Assemblies in 1837. If mutual toleration was not given by both sides, the split seemed certain.  

Many other Presbyterian ministers came to the defense of Fosdick after the close of the Assembly, repeatedly pointing out that Fosdick was one of the greatest religious forces in New York City whose church had to turn scores of people away Sunday because of insufficient seating. The Rev. Dr. Stuart L. Tyson, president of the Tyson Lectureship Foundation, Inc., overstated his case in Fosdick's defense when he asserted that Fosdick was "doing for the twentieth century what St. Paul did for the first, what St. Augustine did for the fifth century, and what Thomas Aquinas did for the thirteenth century. He is interpreting Christian truths in terms which his contemporaries can understand."  

Throughout the controversy the congregation of the First Church stood unanimously behind Fosdick. It was with "great astonishment" that they had witnessed the "unwarranted attacks" on their pastor. This support became more evident a few days after the General Assembly when on June 12, the First Church held a dinner in honor of Fosdick as a demonstration of its support of the kind of religion that he was preaching. When a toast praised Fosdick, those present "jumped quickly to their feet, and every man raised both hands. Then they applauded."  

One of Fosdick's most spectacular sources of support came from a great number of colleges and universities. A letter from 560 students

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57 Ibid., October 19, 1922, p. 10.
58 Ibid., June 13, 1923, p. 5.
and teachers of Columbia University expressed confidence in him and gratitude for his "leadership in the religious world," and appreciation for the way Fosdick had understood the doubts and difficulties of the student mind. Confident that there was nothing "subversive" in Fosdick's teaching, these students and teachers promised their "loyal support." 59

In a similar letter from several hundred students and faculty members of Cornell University, Fosdick was assured of their complete confidence. Expressing an awareness of the "world-wide significance of the battle which is being waged against you, against freedom of speech in the Christian pulpit," the letter concluded, "We unite in solemn protest against the misinformed and unchristian attacks and in pledging our unqualified loyalty to you as the leading American interpreter of the Christian religion for men and women of scientific training...." 60

Perhaps one of the most significant developments in the one-year period between the General Assemblies of 1923 and 1924 was the appearance of a document, issued on December 26, 1923, entitled "An Affirmation Designed to Safeguard the Unity and Liberty of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America." This declaration came to be called The Auburn Affirmation (referred to as the Affirmation from here on) because it was issued from Auburn Theological Seminary. It appeared initially with 150 signatures, but when it was reissued in May of 1924, it contained the signatures of 1,274 Presbyterian ministers from all parts of the country. 61

59 Ibid., June 9, 1923, p. 11.
60 Ibid., May 29, 1923, p. 19.
In June of 1923, several Presbyterian ministers, alarmed at the conservatives' show of strength at Indianapolis, circulated among liberals an invitation to meet for the purpose of discussing the current theological controversy in the church. Coffin, Merrill, and other prominent ministers considered it of utmost importance that a public declaration be drawn up that would stress the two concepts of unity and liberty within the church. The product of this conference was the Affirmation. 62

Briefly summarized, the Affirmation expressed loyalty to the denomination's Westminster Confession, but emphasized the fact that the church had always permitted freedom in interpretation of both the Confession and the Bible. The Affirmation claimed that the ruling at Indianapolis concerning the "pulpit" of the First Presbyterian Church and the Presbytery of New York had violated the traditional form of interpretation. It also specifically censured the General Assembly for having passed judgment on the First Church without fully investigating the facts of the case and stated that it could find no authority to support the recently enacted five-point test of orthodoxy. The concluding statement read:

Some of us regard the particular theories contained in the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1923 as satisfactory explanations of these facts and doctrines. But we are united in believing that these are not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of these facts and doctrines, whatever theories they may employ to explain them, are worthy of all confidence and fellowship. We do not desire liberty to go beyond the teachings of evangelical Christianity. But we maintain that it is our constitutional right and our Christian duty

62Noyes, Henry Sloane Coffin, p. 166.
with these limits to exercise liberty of thought and teaching.  

Thus the Affirmation called for liberty but like Fosdick's sermon it also called for toleration for varying interpretations. The significance of the document rested not only on the large number of signers but also, according to one historian, on its role in "settling the controversy in the Presbyterian denomination on the basis of mutual toleration and an inclusive church."  

The fundamentalists were quick to respond to the Affirmation. In their opinion it was a "disgraceful document" which "unbelievers" and "pagans" had engineered in an effort to destroy Christianity. The most outspoken critic of the Affirmation was the Rev. Dr. John Greshem Machen, professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. Machen considered the Affirmation an anti-Christian statement and characterized it as being "opposed not only to the creed of the Presbyterian Church, but to everything that is really distinctive of historic Christianity." For Machen, the declaration was a "deplorable attempt to obscure the issue," for he saw it as a "plain fact" that two mutually exclusive religions were being proclaimed in the pulpits of the Presbyterian Church. Machen contrasted the two "mutually exclusive" religions as follows:

One is the great redemptive religion known as Christianity—a religion founded upon certain supernatural events in the first
century of our era; the other is a naturalistic or agnostic Modernism, anti-Christian to the core, which is represented by Dr. Fosdick and by some of the signers of the declaration. 66

If the Affirmation caused fundamentalist rebuke, another matter led to an equal amount of criticism—the actions of the Presbytery of New York. In accordance with the decision of the 1923 General Assembly, the Presbytery of New York appointed a special committee to investigate the "preaching and teaching" at the First Church. Because the committee considered the matter under investigation to be of great importance, it proceeded slowly and cautiously in its assigned task. However, the fundamentalists expected prompt action to correct the situation in New York; they had expected Fosdick to be removed quickly but such had not been the case. 67

It was not until January 14, 1924, that the Presbytery of New York issued its report, the contents of which inflamed the fundamentalists. The report exonerated Fosdick of all charges and implications that he had preached heretical sermons. Granting that "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" was a provocative title and that in certain portions the sermon was open to misunderstanding, the report expressed confidence in "the character of the preaching and teaching of the First Church...." 68

The report of the special committee also mentioned that the actions of the General Assembly were open to inquiry. There were many questions of constitutional order which it thought could not be ignored and it

67 "Law and Order in the Church," The New Republic, XXXIX (October 29, 1924), 215-16.
68 The First Church and Fosdick, p. 28.
expressed concern "that the liberties to which we have long been accustomed shall not be abridged." In order to resolve the questions of constitutional order, the special "Fosdick Committee" suggested to the General Assembly that "it would be wise...to seek the appointment of a commission to investigate the powers of the General Assembly in relation to doctrine...." 69

By January 14, the "Fosdick Case" had generated considerable interest in the New York area. It was reported that so many people had come to the meeting of the Presbytery of New York that for the first time in seventeen years it had to be held in the First Church itself rather than in the chapel. Approximately 200 ministers and fifty elders participated as voters while around 150 persons, mostly ministers from neighboring presbyteries, sat in the galleries. 70

Because of the fact that the report of the "special committee" had aroused so much interest and emotions had overwhelmed many, it was unanimously adopted that the final vote on the report be postponed until February 4. When on that date the Presbytery of New York again met, a mood of contention was in the air. For several weeks prior to this meeting, the fundamentalists of the New York area, who were in the minority, had harshly attacked the earlier report of the "special committee." A. Gordon MacLennan, author of the minority report in the preceding Assembly, exemplified the typical fundamentalist attitude towards Fosdick when he proclaimed in a sermon:

69 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
Dr. Fosdick is a foreigner within our gates, without standing or credentials that have been considered: one who is considered a usurper and whom the Supreme Court of our Church has told very plainly he was not welcome. I have heard of men who tried to hide behind their wife's skirts but I never before knew a man—a Christian minister—who tried to hide behind his friends.71

Amid such tense circumstances, the final vote on the report of the "special committee" took place. The results showed 111 in support of the report, which virtually vindicated Fosdick, and twenty-eight opposing it. Immediately after the vote, the Rev. Walter D. Buchanan, fundamentalist pastor of the Broadway Church in New York, filed a protest on behalf of the minority. Buchanan's "complaint" stated in part, "We protest this action in which our Presbytery seems to give an ecclesiastical standing to ministers of other denominations, not recognized by our standards."72 The protest went to the General Assembly of 1924 and became the basis upon which the "Fosdick Case" eventually reached the Permanent Judicial Commission of the Church for final decision.

As the next General Assembly approached, the fundamentalists prepared for a "showdown" with the modernists. Norman Furniss, a historian of this period, described the situation by writing, "As if making ready for a political convention, they the fundamentalists circulated propaganda to urge the election of orthodox commissioners and held 'loyalty' rallies in a number of key cities."73

A retrospective glance at the one-year period between the Assemblies of 1923 and 1924 discloses the intensification of the controversy in

71 Ibid., January 19, 1924, p. 2.
72 Ibid., February 5, 1924, p. 25.
the Presbyterian Church. The modernists had rejected the decisions of
the 1923 Assembly and asked that their theological position be tolerated.
On the other hand, the fundamentalists saw no need to tolerate the
"heretical" modernists and thus the stage was set for one of the most
turbulent General Assemblies in Presbyterian history.74

IV

The General Assembly of 1924 met at Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the
midst of the widely publicized "fundamentalist-modernist" controversy
that was raging throughout the country. On its docket was the "Fosdick
Case" which was also attracting national attention. It was clear to
all that this Assembly would be a critical one as demonstrated by the
fact that forty reporters from newspapers throughout the United States,
in addition to representatives of the press associations, were present.75

The preliminary contest in the struggle between modernists and
fundamentalists in the Assembly was over the election of a moderator.
Two main candidates emerged: Macartney, the fundamentalist champion,
and Dr. Charles R. Erdman, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary.
Although Erdman was quite conservative in his theology, he had shown an
attitude of moderation and tolerance towards varying theological inter­
pretations and thus was backed by the liberal Presbyterians.76

Soon after the opening meeting on May 22, it became apparent that

74Loetscher, The Broadening Church, p. 121.
75Ibid.
76Nolan R. Best, "As Moderator, Unpartisan," The Continent, LV
(November 6, 1924), 1337.
the fundamentalists had the upper hand. Having failed to get elected as moderator in 1923, William Jennings Bryan nominated Macartney as moderator with the words, "It was his [Macartney's] vigilance that detected the insidious attack upon our doctrine. I appeal to you to vote for one whose name is a guarantee that he will not yield to modern thought...." Following his election by a close vote of 464 to 446, Macartney nominated Bryan as vice-moderator and proceeded to appoint fundamentalists to head every major committee.

When the Assembly began to organize the administrative committees, tempers began to flare. Trouble soon occurred in section five of the Assembly (composed of the Presbyteries of Philadelphia, Philadelphia North, Baltimore, Newcastle, and Washington City). When it began to elect its chairman and secretary, Dr. J. M. T. Finney, a Baltimore surgeon, accused the delegates from Philadelphia of "packing" the committees with fundamentalists. Finney charged that A. Gordon MacLennan was "playing ward politics." According to the New York Times, Finney and MacLennan shook their fists at each other and a crowd gathered. Although apologies were later exchanged, the incident illustrates the tense atmosphere at the Assembly.

As the Assembly began its business on May 23, the newly elected moderator, Macartney, offered some explanations and comments on the controversial "Fosdick Case." Macartney went out of his way to explain that regardless of what many people were thinking, the action that had

77 Noyes, Henry Sloane Coffin, p. 167.
79 Ibid.
been brought against Fosdick was based on the fact that he had preached a sermon that was doctrinally irregular and not because he was a Baptist preaching in a Presbyterian Church. In his opinion, Fosdick's teaching "was not in harmony with the view of the Gospel as defined by the Scriptures," and therefore he had to be eliminated.80

Having made this statement, Macartney was confronted with the "problem" that there were many Presbyterian ministers who held similar views to Fosdick's. What was to be done with them? On this point Macartney said that he considered Fosdick to have rendered a real service to the Church for "it [Fosdick's sermon] may serve to awaken the Presbyterian Church to its peril." If it were true that many Presbyterian ministers shared Fosdick's views, Macartney thought that the Church should "look the facts in the face" and take action against them as well. Although the action against Fosdick had brought "much trouble," Macartney felt that such activities must continue in order to protect "the foundations of evangelical Christianity."81

The modernists, of course, reacted strongly to Macartney's pronouncements, believing that as moderator he should have maintained a greater degree of impartiality. Nolan Best, editor of The Continent, a liberal Presbyterian periodical, voiced the attitude of many when he stated that Macartney had too easily yielded "to the temptation to speak from his high office as the mouthpiece of a party...." and that, "though his utterances may be sincere...he fails to contribute to the unity and

80 "Dr. Fosdick's Refusal to be a Presbyterian," The Literary Digest, (October 25, 1924), 32-3.
81 Ibid.
solidarity which he is properly expected to further." In short, many modernists felt that Macartney had no power to declare the attitude of the church and that there was no justification for the implication that the church as a whole was unsympathetic toward the First Church or to Fosdick.  

On Sunday, May 25, the Assembly did not meet and many prominent delegates spoke at various churches in the Grand Rapids area. Speaking at the Congregationalist Church, Coffin once again stated that a "separation of the Presbyterian Church into two parts, due to a divergence in views between Fundamentalists and Modernists, would be a calamity." Coffin feared that there was a real danger of such a split, but maintained that if tolerance prevailed this might be avoided.

The "Fosdick Case" had been referred to the Judicial Business Committee on May 23, but because of its importance the case eventually went to the Permanent Judicial Commission, the "Supreme Court" of the Church. Not until the 27th of May did the Commission take up the "Buchanan Complaint" of the New York City fundamentalists against the Presbytery of New York. Both parties were represented by prominent lawyers, who were members of the church and served without pay. Representing the Presbytery of New York was an aspiring Wall Street lawyer by the name of John Foster Dulles. Representing the New York

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84 Dulles' father, at this time a professor at Auburn Seminary, was himself under attack on account of his liberal theological views. Dulles was the nephew of Robert Lansing and grandson of John W. Foster, both of whom had served in the position of Secretary of State. Ibid., May 28, 1924, p. 12.
fundamentalists was James L. Rankin.\(^85\)

After hearing arguments from both sides, the Judicial Commission rendered its decision on May 28. In referring to the fundamentalists' complaint against the Presbytery of New York, the Commission found that that Presbytery had made a careful investigation of the "preaching and teaching" in the First Church and thus had not only acted in accordance with the Confession of Faith, but also "the action of the committee of the Presbytery and the Presbytery itself was taken in all good faith."\(^86\)

Having expressed confidence in the Presbytery of New York, the Commission went on to discuss in greater detail Fosdick's personal role in the controversy. Although the Commission acknowledged that "extended correspondence" had taken place between Fosdick and the Presbytery, it thought that Fosdick had not been as "clear and unequivocal" on the subject of his theological views as the Commission would have preferred. Therefore, they declared, "We are unable to determine just how far that sermon ["Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"] indicates Dr. Fosdick's personal belief as to the serious and important questions raised by his sermon." "We regard," stated the Commission, "that Dr. Fosdick did not in his communication say frankly whether or not he believes what is regarded as essential under our Confession of Faith."\(^87\)

At this point the Commission shifted its concern from the doctrinal to the ecclesiastical irregularities of the "Fosdick Case." Suggesting

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\(^{85}\) Ibid.


\(^{87}\) Ibid.
that one of the important reasons for the problem was Fosdick's unprecedented position as an unordained minister of the church (a status which they categorized "an anomaly"), the Commission recalled that Fosdick had entered the First Church as a "guest" and had remained in that position for over five years. Although the First Church had regarded Fosdick's continuing presence to be in its best interest, the Commission declared that from the standpoint of the whole Church, "the existing relations should not continue longer." But, they explained, this did not mean that the First Church would necessarily be deprived of Fosdick's services:

We do think, however, that if he desires to occupy a Presbyterian pulpit for an extended time he should enter our Church through the regular method and become subject to the jurisdiction and authority of the Church. If this is done, much of the cause of irritation would be removed. If he can accept the doctrinal standards of our Church, as contained in the Confession of Faith, there should be no difficulty in accepting him. If he cannot, he ought not to continue to occupy a Presbyterian pulpit.88

The judgment of the Judicial Commission ended with the recommendation that the Presbytery of New York, through its committee and through the Session of the First Church, ask Fosdick whether he would be willing to enter into a regular relationship with the Church by taking its vows.89

The fundamentalists were not at all satisfied with the decision of the Permanent Judicial Commission. Although the proceedings at the beginning of the Assembly had indicated considerable fundamentalist strength, especially the election of Macartney, subsequent developments showed that a majority of delegates had abandoned the extreme fundamentalist position. Aside from the election of Macartney, the fundamentalists

88 Ibid. 89 Ibid.
had achieved only one other victory—the removal of William P. Merrill from the Board of Foreign Missions, an office he had held for twelve years. Not only were the fundamentalists disillusioned with the decision of the Permanent Judicial Commission, but they lost in their bid to have the Assembly review the "Fosdick Case," by a vote of 504 to 311.90

What the fundamentalists objected to most was the fact that the Commission had side-stepped the theological aspects of the case and had simply paid attention to aspects of church law which did not provide for an interdenominational ministry. The fundamentalists had expected a decision which, once and for all, would have eliminated Fosdick from the First Church. It became increasingly clear, however, that from the fundamentalist viewpoint the whole case was greater than just Fosdick; it was his modern theology that they held in contempt and it was the whole modernist movement that they wanted to defeat, symbolically, by removing him on theological grounds. This the Commission had refused to do.91

In an attempt to disguise their defeat, some fundamentalists proceeded to give the impression that, in actuality, they had won. Bryan proclaimed a fundamentalist victory and declared, "We have won on every point."92 Other fundamentalist leaders were more realistic, however. J. Greshem Machen, of Princeton Seminary, forthrightly stated, "Yet we did suffer a great defeat at the end of the Assembly; and I

91 "Mr. Fosdick and the Presbyterians," The Nation, CXIX (October 22, 1924), 433.
92 "The Olive Branch for Fosdick," The Literary Digest, LXXXI (June 21, 1924), 33.
think that if we represent it as a victory, or if we give the impression that we regard the battle as over, we are traitors to our cause...we were suddenly plunged from joy to grief."\textsuperscript{93}

The modernists were naturally overjoyed with the final decision. It was their opinion that "reason and fraternity conquered" and they considered the outcome to have been fair and just. In this connection Coffin commented, "I do not see how a more happy and orderly decision could have been reached." Despite the favorable decision rendered in their behalf, the modernists acted with restraint. "This is a day in which we must not provoke one another by controversial statements," Coffin warned, "the unity of the Church has been maintained during a period of intense excitement when a single misstep might have brought on a calamitous break."\textsuperscript{94}

In conclusion, during the two-year period between May 1922 and May 1924, the Presbyterian Church had experienced a disruptive controversy. Oddly enough, it was a Baptist minister around which the stormy Presbyterian controversy had centered. Although the fundamentalists had sincerely contended in "defense of true Christianity," they had often drifted towards extreme positions and in the end the excesses of the fundamentalists had proved to be ineffective.

The "Fosdick Controversy" did not, however, end in May of 1924. The next decision was up to Fosdick; he alone could decide whether to join the Church or leave it. Although The Christian Register, in June


\textsuperscript{94}New York Times, June 2, 1924, p. 10.
of 1924, proclaimed "...the evidence in this case is good enough to persuade most people that the fundamentalists have lost," we shall see that this was a premature prediction. The story had one more chapter.
"Both as a gentleman and as a Christian I found myself in a difficult position. I was a guest in a denomination to which I did not belong and was causing trouble in the household of my host.\textsuperscript{1} With these words Fosdick summarized the predicament which he found himself in after the developments of the 1923 Assembly, and determined to withdraw from the conflict in the hope of bringing peace.

On May 24, 1923, Fosdick wrote a letter to the Session of the First Church in which he submitted his resignation from the position of associate minister. In the letter Fosdick recognized that the action of the just concluded Assembly had created a "perplexing problem." He expressed a deep desire to avoid any possible "obstacle to the best interests of the church." Declaring that the interests of the Church were his "paramount" consideration in severing relations with the "Old First," Fosdick explained:

\begin{quote}
My sole reason in presenting this resignation is the welfare of the Church. I wish my relations with you handled solely with that in view, and at any time when it will ease your perplexity or conduce to the better solution of your problem I wish you freely and without hesitation to accept this resignation.
\end{quote}

Although he considered his resignation necessary, Fosdick concluded by mentioning that he personally did not desire severance of relations

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\textsuperscript{1}Fosdick, \textit{The Living}, p. 148.
\end{flushright}
for he had "ties of close affection" with the officers and members of the First Church.²

The Session of the church immediately replied to Fosdick. Henry N. Tifft, the clerk of the Session, informed Fosdick that his "unselfish motives" were greatly appreciated but that the Session expressed "the mind of the congregation when they decline to release you." The Session considered the "plural ministry" plan to have been successful and noted that Fosdick had expanded the vision of the Church and "kindled in our hearts a warmer desire to advance the Kingdom of our Divine Redeemer..." Furthermore, they felt that he had greatly benefitted the Church by helping to consolidate the union of three churches and had helped a "multitude of educated youth" to find its way back into the Church. Therefore, the Church would not let him go.³

Following the refusal of the First Church to accept Fosdick's resignation, the controversy took a different turn. Although many fundamentalists continued their personal attacks on him, the more observant fundamentalists became aware that their real struggle was not so much with Fosdick as with the Presbytery of New York and especially the First Church who were determined to retain him. Even before Fosdick handed in his resignation, The Presbyterian pointed out that, in justice to the "special preacher," it would be unfair to find fault with him since it had been church officials that had asked him to join. "He is there not only by invitation of the officers of that church," declared The Presbyterian, "but with the cordial approval of the Presbytery of

³Ibid.
New York. Hence in taking him to task, his critics should remember that the presbytery which endorses him is the chief offender...."4

Consequently, there was much pressure on the Presbytery of New York. There were those who repeatedly suggested that the General Assembly had made a mistake in not removing the Presbytery of New York from the Church when the subject came up in 1916. But there was even more pressure on the First Church. One fundamentalist called it the "hot-bed of heresy" and proclaimed, "That church is altogether responsible for the infidelity taught from its pulpit; and the proper authorities should at once give attention to the church and remedy the evil."5

As the controversy intensified, Fosdick came to realize that he was being attacked not so much on a personal level, but because of his capacity as a representative of liberal Christianity. It became clear that the fundamentalist attack on Fosdick was part of a greater battle that was being waged on a nation-wide basis. The First Church and Fosdick realized these broader implications and thus Fosdick wrote, "...I had an obligation not to leave my fellow liberals in the lurch with a defeat on their hands when patience and persistence might yet win a victory."6 It was for these reasons that the First Church asked him to remain.

4"Dr. Fosdick in the Role of Gamaliel," The Presbyterian, LXXXII (September 21, 1922), 9.

5"Who Is to Blame?" The Presbyterian, LXXXII (November 9, 1922), 27.

6Fosdick, The Living, p. 149.
In his decision to continue at the First Church, Fosdick was not aware of the even more unpleasant experiences that awaited him. He later commented on subsequent events that he experienced: "That next church season, 1923-24, was one of the most strenuous I ever spent."
The aspects of the controversy that he disliked the most were the "political maneuvering" and the "drafting and redrafting" of statements. Fosdick questioned the many compromises that were made in preparation for the following Assembly and in looking back on those developments he observed, "I found myself caught in a long process of ecclesiastical intrigue which I thoroughly disliked."7

The "intrigue" to which Fosdick was referring resulted from the relationship that existed between himself, the First Church, the Presbytery of New York, and the General Assembly. In 1923, the Assembly had entrusted the Presbytery of New York with the responsibility of investigating Fosdick's pulpit utterances and reporting their findings to the next Assembly. In the intervening year, the Presbytery had asked Fosdick to give a statement concerning his theological position but as he fulfilled this responsibility, difficulties arose. The problem, according to Fosdick, was that the Presbytery had assumed a policy of "appeasement" in order to retain him in the pulpit. Commenting on the attitude of the Presbytery's leadership, Fosdick explained, "...they saw that it [his ministry] could not go on unless they won over a majority of the next Assembly; and so they began painting my portrait in as orthodox outlines as possible...."8

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., p. 150.
Under these circumstances Fosdick had a difficult time trying to accommodate the committee of the Presbytery and at the same time remain loyal to his avowed modernist theological position. In correspondence with Dr. Edgar Whitaker Work, chairman of the investigating committee for the Presbytery of New York, Fosdick explained that even if he had wanted to give the impression that he was orthodox theologically, his friends, congregation, and readers would have realized that such was not the gospel that he preached.9

On December 28, 1923, Fosdick wrote a letter to the committee of the Presbytery of New York in which he explained his position in the controversy. He reminded the committee that he had previously resigned as associate minister but had been persuaded to stay on. Fosdick expressed regret regarding the developments after his first resignation and stated that he was "profoundly sorry" that so much "uproar" had surrounded his ministry. In addition, he was "surprised at the misinterpretation of my position..." and proclaimed himself an evangelical Christian. Fosdick found it hard to believe that he had been "rated as against things I really am for and for things I am really against."

Then he wrote a concise statement of his beliefs:

Personally I have no patience with an emasculated Christianity that denudes the Gospel of its superhuman element, its redeeming power and its eternal hopes. I believe in the personal God revealed in Christ, in his omnipresent activity and endless resources to achieve his purposes for all men; I believe in Christ, his deity, his sacrificial saviorhood, his resurrected and triumphant life, his rightful Lordship, and the indispensableness of his message to mankind. In the indwelling Spirit I believe, the forgiveness of sins, the redeemed and victorious life, the triumph of righteousness on earth and the life everlasting.

9 The First Church and Fosdick, p. 41.
This, declared Fosdick, was of supreme importance to him and it was this "Gospel" that he was attempting to proclaim to the "oncoming generation." 10

Many would have preferred that Fosdick be more specific in his statements. The fundamentalists accused him of vagueness, but what they truly desired was a repudiation of his modernist theology. 11 Despite the absence of orthodox phraseology, Fosdick's "creed" had a sobering effect on many of the more moderate Presbyterians. Although there were other factors involved, the final action of the 1924 Assembly revealed that few Presbyterian leaders, aside from the fundamentalists, found it reasonable to remove Fosdick on theological grounds. Thus, it will be recalled, the Permanent Judicial Commission had asked him to correct the anomalous situation by becoming a Presbyterian minister. 12

Before continuing with an analysis of Fosdick's decision on the Assembly's invitation, it should be emphasized that aside from the correspondence he had with the First Church and the Presbytery of New York, Fosdick seldom made public comments concerning the attack upon him. In spite of all the unjust accusations that were flung at him, he refused to resort to the methods of his fundamentalist and Unitarian critics. Sunday after Sunday, fundamentalist preachers sounded an attack against the "infidel" Fosdick, but he consistently avoided comment on the controversy. In his autobiography he wrote, "I did my best not to

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10Ibid., p. 20.
11"Mr. Fosdick and the Presbyterians," p. 433.
let the controversy dominate my ministry or make me forget what preaching was really meant to accomplish."  

II  

After the final decision of the Judicial Commission in 1924, Fosdick once again found himself in an awkward position. During the time of the 1924 Assembly, he had purposely left the country in order to escape the turmoil that would inevitably come. Upon his return to the United States after a very successful speaking tour of England and Scotland, Fosdick was faced with responding to the Presbyterian invitation that he become a minister within its fold.

Commenting on the invitation Fosdick wrote, "Certainly that invitation was pressed upon me with persuasive vigor by my Presbyterian friends. Never before or since have I been under such pressure." Although many of his loyal Presbyterian supporters (such as Coffin and Merrill) saw in his acceptance an end to the controversy, Fosdick was convinced that any acceptance on his part would mean only the beginning of an even larger controversy.

The committee of the Presbytery of New York explained to Fosdick that the Assembly's invitation to him was a "sincere and profound desire upon the part of the Presbyterian Church to find a way...out of a situation that has produced no little anxiety." Fosdick, however, was

13 Fosdick, The Living, p. 156.
14 "Dr. Fosdick's Refusal to be a Presbyterian," p. 32.
16 The First Church and Fosdick, p. 34.
not equally certain about the sincerity of all involved in extending it. Although he knew that many liberals and large numbers of moderates would welcome his entry into the Church, he suspected that the fundamentalists had other motives in endorsing the invitation:

The reason for Mr. Bryan's satisfaction in the Assembly's decision was only too evident. Once within the regular ranks of the Presbyterian ministry I could be tried for heresy the first time I uttered a liberal conviction, and obviously many irritated and watchful men were itching for the chance.17

In short, what many fundamentalist Presbyterians wanted was jurisdiction over Fosdick. The Rev. Mark Matthews of Seattle, minister of the largest Presbyterian church in the country and a leading fundamentalist, had specifically said so and Bryan was reported to have said, "We will not have any preacher in our church who is not within reach of our stick."18

There were many modernists, in and out of the Presbyterian Church, that thought that the Assembly of 1924 had not really extended a courteous invitation to Fosdick but had cleverly formulated a plan to dispose of him with as little commotion as possible. In a pamphlet entitled Fosdick and the Fundamentalists, Vincent Godfrey Burns charged: "They [the 1924 Assembly] held over his head [Fosdick's] a camouflaged club with a hidden statement which Dr. Fosdick could well read; 'Conform or get out!' Before him was no open door of hospitality with a welcoming and friendly hand...but a veiled trap with a hidden fist behind it

17 Fosdick, The Living, p. 171.
18 Quoted in Ibid.
ready to strike should Dr. Fosdick accept."\textsuperscript{19}

Under these circumstances, Fosdick decided not to accept the Assembly's invitation and on October 6, 1924, he submitted his resignation to the Presbytery of New York and the Session of the First Church. In his letter to the Presbytery, Fosdick wrote that his "disinclination" to become a Presbyterian minister was not due to denominational reasons since he had no "sectarian loyalties." His main objection to the proposal was his "long standing and assured conviction that creedal subscription to ancient confessions of faith is a practice dangerous to the welfare of the church and to the integrity of the individual conscience."\textsuperscript{20}

Having reminded the Presbytery that there were many Presbyterian ministers who had the same opinions as his own in matters of theology, Fosdick expressed confidence that the Church would have accepted him. But, he declared, "after two years of vehement personal attack from a powerful section of the Presbyterian Church, I face now an official proposal which calls on me either to make a theological subscription or else leave an influential pulpit." He frankly stated, "Any subscription made under such circumstances would be generally and, I think, truly interpreted as a moral surrender. I am entirely willing that my theology should be questioned; I am entirely unwilling to give any occasion for the questioning of my ethics."\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19}Vincent Godfrey Burns, \textit{Fosdick and the Fundamentalists}, pp. 8-9.
\textsuperscript{20}The First Church and Fosdick, pp. 38-9.
\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., p. 40.
In concluding his letter, Fosdick made a final important point. He reminded the Presbytery of New York that prior to his acceptance of the associate ministry of the First Church, he had warned that he was ignorant of Presbyterian law and on that basis he had agreed to go along with the plan. While he had in good faith taken up the offer thinking that there was no "taint of irregularity," subsequent developments had proved that assumption to be erroneous.

Furthermore, Fosdick emphasized that it had been the "interdenominational character" of the arrangement that had originally attracted him. In his estimation the proposal of the Assembly had completely reversed any ecumenical progress in the church and suggested a precedent which Fosdick thought would encourage "a return to the principle of a denominationally 'closed shop.'" "It represents," warned Fosdick, "a retrograde sectarian movement." As a confirmed interdenominationalist, he was thus unable to accept the Presbyterian invitation.22

Fosdick's resignation was met with a wide assortment of reactions. Some were naturally glad that he was departing, while others were very disappointed. The liberal religious periodical, The Christian Century, exclaimed, "The incredible has happened. Just as before 1914 our thoughts had become lulled to unbelief with respect to another war, so until today we have been unable to imagine the revival of the inquisition in modern religion." Furthermore, observed the periodical, "The sacrifice of the most conspicuously successful ministry in America to the assumptions of creedal and ecclesiastical conformity is a commentary on

22Ibid., p. 41.
the character of our religion which should make the whole church blush." 23

The fundamentalists were overjoyed to see Fosdick go at last. Shortly after the decision, Macartney repeated his fear that had Fosdick not resigned, the "foundations of evangelical Christianity" would have been in danger. 24 Straton expressed his regret that it had taken Fosdick so long to depart and then caustically called on the "infidel" to return to the "faith of his fathers." 25 But the most common sentiment among the fundamentalists was that at last the problem was ended and the controversy would pass into history.

The fundamentalists, however, had not counted on the final and desperate rally which the First Church staged to retain their "special preacher." Although many prominent Presbyterian modernists were disappointed that Fosdick had not joined the Church, it was the congregation of the First Church that was most saddened by the resignation. For several years Fosdick had attracted overflow crowds to the Church and had endeared himself to the people. A statement of the congregation declared, "the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick has the unreserved confidence and affection of our people. We regard him as the foremost preacher in our own time in his ability to meet the religious difficulties and aspirations of the new generation." 26

23 "Dr. Fosdick's Punishment," The Christian Century, XLI (October 16, 1924), 1326.

24 New York Times, October 7, 1924, p. 3.

25 Ibid., October 13, 1924, p. 19.

26 The First Church and Fosdick, pp. 48-9.
The leadership of the First Church had pleaded with Fosdick that he accept the Assembly's invitation, but after he made it crystal clear that he would not reconsider the resignation, the Session of the church came up with a new proposal. The church reluctantly accepted his resignation but they then went on to invite Fosdick to make it his custom to preach at the church on Sunday mornings, "when not otherwise engaged." "We cannot believe," stated the angered congregation, "that this is in opposition to the mind of the Presbyterian Church."\(^{27}\)

In his reply to the First Church, Fosdick while deeply appreciative of the loyalty of the church, expressed regret that he could not go on with the church indefinitely, even under the terms of their new proposal. As he saw it, the General Assembly had intended that he either become a regular Presbyterian minister or else cease to occupy the pulpit. The only conditions, therefore, under which he would stay in a Presbyterian pulpit would be "such as would promise a ministry undisturbed to the denomination." According to Fosdick, such conditions were at the time "impossible of fulfillment."\(^{28}\)

With this in mind Fosdick set a specific date after which his connections with the First Church would be completely severed. After March 1, 1925, his relation with the Church would come to a permanent end. Thus, he wrote to the Session of the First Church:

...I will occupy your pulpit, when I am able, on Sunday mornings after my resignation as associate minister takes effect, which should be very soon, but I must, however

\(^{27}\) Ibid., pp. 50-1.

\(^{28}\) "Fosdick Case: Now History," *The Continent*, LVI (May 21, 1925), 587.
regretfully terminate even this new arrangement on or before
the close of the church year.29

As we have noted, the fundamentalists had expected a prompt
departure by Fosdick after his resignation. When they became aware of
the persistence of the First Church and the lengthening of Fosdick's
stay until March of 1925, the fundamentalists lashed out with an even
greater degree of severity than previously. John Roach Straton, who was
labeled the "fundamentalist pope" of New York City, harshly attacked
Fosdick:

We are driven, therefore, to the conclusion that Dr.
Fosdick is not only a Baptist Bootlegger, but that he is
also a Presbyterian outlaw; without the slightest personal
ill will and with no desire to injure him personally, I
nevertheless declare, in the light of Bible teaching, and
in the name of eternal truth, the Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick
is a religious outlaw—he is the Jesse James of the theolo-
gical world.30

During the months prior to Fosdick's final departure from the First
Church, there had been wild talk that Fosdick would lead a movement to
split the church. Such ideas were no doubt generated by the determined
attitude of a large group of church officers to retain Fosdick come
what may. It was reported that some of these men were considering with-
drawing from the church, forming an independent congregation, hiring a
large hall, and inviting Fosdick to be the regular preacher. Fosdick
reacted to such ideas by stating that he would have nothing to do with
such a plan.31

On November 17, 1924, the Presbytery of New York had a special

29 The First Church and Fosdick, p. 54.
31 Ibid., October 7, 1924, p. 1.
meeting which dealt with Fosdick's resignation. It was voted that his resignation should take effect on March 1, 1925, and that during that period he be allowed to preach at the First Church. During the course of the meeting the Rev. Walter D. Buchanan, a leader of the New York fundamentalists, led a protest against the presbytery's decision. Buchanan then proposed a resolution stating that Fosdick should leave immediately. The resolution lost by a vote of sixty-three to nineteen and after the vote Buchanan threatened he would once again protest to the Assembly in 1925.  

As the date for his final departure neared, Fosdick did his best to promote a feeling of harmony within the church. He successfully cooled down the heated tempers of church elders who had threatened to revive the whole matter before the next Assembly. On February 8, 1925, Fosdick asked his congregation to disregard the controversy that had engaged their attention and give their loyalty and financial support to the Church.  Fosdick later observed that during the last months of his stay his major aim was "...to leave the parish harmonious, vigorous, and united in its determination to continue without a break its important ministry to the city."  

On March 1, 1925, Fosdick's last Sunday in the pulpit of the First Church arrived. The New York Times described the event in the following terms:

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32 Ibid., November 18, 1924, p. 27.
33 Ibid., February 9, 1925, p. 20.
34 Fosdick, The Living, p. 175.
A great wave of religious emotion swept over the crowded congregation of the First Presbyterian 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.35

Having analyzed Fosdick's relations with the Presbyterian Church and his decision to resign his position, we now turn to Fosdick's evaluation of his ministry and his reaction to the controversy.

III

Perhaps the source which best expressed Fosdick's evaluation of his ministry at the "Old First" and his reaction to the controversy was his "Farewell Sermon." In that sermon he considered his ministry to have been an "adventuresome experiment." The experiment had involved an attempt to have an interdenominational ministry and have a "house of prayer for all people." But, said Fosdick, "Now that experiment comes to its conclusion, not because it has failed, but because ecclesiastical decree engineered from a distance so dictates...."36

In his final sermon to the First Church, Fosdick summarized what he, and the church, had stood for during his ministry. First of all, they had stood for tolerance. Secondly, the church had striven to be "inclusive." In Fosdick's estimation the "tragedy of Protestantism" was its historic tendency toward fragmentation; this "lamentable problem," the church had attempted to overcome. Thirdly, the church had stood for "the right of people to think the abiding verities of Christianity

36Ibid., p. 5.
through in modern terms." Fourthly, the church had striven to help the younger generation develop a sensible and intelligent religion. Fifthly, the church had concerned itself with the "social application of the principles of Jesus." And finally, the church had proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ.37

These, declared Fosdick, were the important points of emphasis in his ministry and in the final sermon he challenged the congregation to show him anyone whose faith had been upset on account of him. "Folk at a distance may say that we have betrayed the Lord," he asserted, "but those of you who have walked with us in this sanctuary know with what reverence we have adored Him..."38

In conclusion, Fosdick insisted that if in emphasizing the above points he were labeled a heretic, he was proud of it. "I wouldn't live in a generation like this," exclaimed Fosdick, "and be anything but a heretic." In the final statement he emphasized:

I do not want to leave my 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 church work for a better day, and may the God of all grace keep you everyone in his sustaining hands.39

This then, was Fosdick's immediate reaction to the controversy as it came to a close in 1925. Years later when he wrote his autobiography, he once again analyzed the controversy, but this time with a different perspective and with more objectivity.

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
In retrospect, Fosdick believed that the controversy had not suddenly appeared during the 1920s but that the conflict had been brewing for many years before it finally reached its zenith. At the beginning of the controversy, Fosdick believed that the overriding problem was the fundamentalists' insistence in driving the modernists out of the churches. On the other hand, he claimed that the modernists had no intention of driving out the fundamentalists. Because of this basic problem he had preached "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" In that sermon he attempted to plead for an inclusive and tolerant church--one in which the liberals and conservatives could live harmoniously.  

Having seriously misinterpreted the sermon, the fundamentalists within the Presbyterian Church made it their goal to remove him at all costs. As the controversy developed Fosdick saw that the issues involved were bigger than himself or any single individual. Thus, observed Fosdick, ". . . I was only by chance thrust into a representative position, standing for a kind of Christian liberty that all liberals had to stand for if they were not to be driven from the evangelical churches."  

Hoping that "victory" would eventually come to the modernists if he endured with persistence, Fosdick decided to remain in the church after his first resignation since he did not want to see a split over "marginal" issues. However, subsequent events proved that his hopes were not within the immediate grasp of the modernists. "My mind and conscience were thus on the side of conciliation," wrote Fosdick, ". . .
in the end it involved more than I had bargained for.\textsuperscript{42}

When commenting on the participants in the controversy, Fosdick refused to consent to the idea that the membership, or the leadership, of the evangelical churches was sharply divided between "liberals and militant reactionaries." In his view, such a dichotomy was a gross misrepresentation of the facts. "There were all sorts of liberals and all sorts of fundamentalists; and many more who were neither one nor the other regarded the whole controversy with mystification and distaste."\textsuperscript{43}

In the final analysis Fosdick considered the controversy an "ephemeral affair." He believed that both sides had committed faults. As he saw it, the controversy had been over matters of slight importance. "The questions in dispute," asserted Fosdick, "were not the great matters that confronted modern Christianity; they were trivial in comparison with the real issues of the day; and the whole uproar was not the noise of the main battle but the flare-up of a rear guard action."\textsuperscript{44}

As we look back on the significant question that Fosdick asked at the beginning of the controversy--"Here in the Christian Church to-day are two groups...Shall one drive the other out?"\textsuperscript{45}--we see that the fundamentalist answer was a resounding yes. Although the fundamentalists successfully engineered Fosdick's ouster, in the final analysis it was

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{42}Ibid., p. 149.
    \item \textsuperscript{43}Ibid.
    \item \textsuperscript{44}Ibid.
    \item \textsuperscript{45}Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" p. 298.
\end{itemize}
but a pyrrhic victory for the reactionary elements within the Presbyterian Church were never again to gain control of the Church.  

Loetscher, The Broadening Church, p. 123. Loetscher explains how the fundamentalists lost control of Princeton Theological Seminary and how J. Greshem Machen not only founded the Westminster Theological Seminary, but also established an independent Presbyterian Church (in 1935) that was later plagued with rivalry and strife between various fundamentalist factions.
For almost three years the Fosdick controversy raged within the Northern Presbyterian Church and as soon as it began to subside much speculation emerged about its effect on the church. Some considered the conflict to be a sign of vitality within the church while others regarded the whole episode as unfortunate and detrimental. In addition there were those who were indifferent in spite of the fact that the controversy had been making the headlines of leading newspapers for several years.

An important observation that needs re-emphasis is that the Fosdick controversy was by no means unique in the country or even within New York City. Although it was a significant episode within a larger conflict, similar events were simultaneously taking place. In Arkansas, William Montgomery Brown became the first Episcopal Bishop to be tried and condemned for "heresy." In New York, Percy Stickney Grant, an Episcopal clergyman, became the object of a prolonged controversy that did not end until his death in 1925. Thus, while the Fosdick controversy was raging, New York City was actually the battleground for many similar occurrences.

The most heated period of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in New York City came during the month of December in 1923. It was during that month that most of the highly publicized "Straton-Potter" debates took place. The debates, dealing with such subjects as the

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1Gatewood, *Controversy in the Twenties*, p. 31.
virgin birth, evolution, and the inerrancy of the Bible, were deemed important enough that Supreme Court justices and many other prominent individuals served as judges. In addition to distribution in the written form, the debates reached the living rooms of thousands via the radio.  

The controversy in New York became so intense towards the end of December that on the twentieth of that month Bishop William T. Manning of the Episcopal Church proposed a "Christmas Truce." Although Manning's proposal was partially heeded, on December 31, the front page headline of the New York Times read: "Christmas Truce Ends: Both Sides to Reopen Bible Controversy."  

Amid these developments it undoubtedly became difficult for many people to remain indifferent. Those who argued that the controversy had been profitable usually emphasized the following points. First, they believed that many people had become interested in the religious issues under dispute. Another point was that the churches had gotten much free publicity in newspapers and magazines which they could not have paid for otherwise. In addition, the controversy was considered a positive sign that people still felt strongly about religious matters. There were prominent New York Presbyterians that considered the controversy to have been profitable. The Rev. Dr. Howard Duffield, who was moderator of the Presbytery of New York, stated: "It is not to be lamented that men prize religion so deeply that they discuss it with so much profundity. Agitation is better than stagnation. Out of these


3Ibid., December 31, 1923, p. 1. On this day more than half of the New York Times' front page was directly related to the religious controversy raging in the city.
discussions truth will advance shining and glowing." 4

On the other hand, there were many who considered the controversy to have been profitless. They believed that the internal dissension in the Presbyterian Church (as well as in other churches) had destroyed former ecumenical feelings and that the real meaning and purpose of Christianity had been side-stepped. The Rev. Henry Van Dyke of New York expressed this attitude when he exclaimed, "This great city wants the bread of life. Don't give it the stone of controversy instead:" 5

Following a similar line of argument, The Continent reported that many people were becoming tired of contention. The liberal Presbyterian periodical stated, "Many ministers and laymen are asking, Does a controversy necessarily have no end? They are tired of it all." 6

As the Fosdick controversy was drawing to an end there were many Presbyterian fundamentalists who believed that Fosdick's preaching had been a significant factor in the slump in membership within the church. On September 24, 1924, the General Council of the Church (Presbyterian) met and discussed why there had been no increase in membership. In a summary report the Rev. Dr. H. C. Weber, the official statistician for the council, read a study in which he noted the important reasons for the lack of growth in membership and as the most important he singled

6 "When Does a Controversy End?" The Continent, LV (November 6, 1924), 1357.
out Fosdick and the controversy that he had allegedly caused.  

The following day the Rev. Dr. Harlan G. Mendenhall, clerk of the Presbytery of New York, questioned the accuracy of the "Weber Report" and stated that in his opinion there was no connection between the controversy in the church and the slump in membership. Mendenhall refuted Weber's accusations and observed that the churches of the Presbytery of New York had a larger addition in membership, per church, than in the more conservative presbyteries.

Arguments concerning the effect of the Fosdick controversy upon the church persisted for a long time. There were those that hailed Fosdick as a fallen martyr who had attempted to awaken the church to its shortcomings and conversely there were many who accused Fosdick of being the cause of the church's troubles and were joyous at his departure. It is without doubt difficult to accurately evaluate the effect of the controversy on the church. Despite this fact, it is the conclusion of this writer that when the controversy is seen in perspective, it was not beneficial to the Church and, in fact, was in many respects detrimental. The commotion, anger, and excess that were part of the controversy weakened the church and its duty to champion the Christian message.

II

In this section we turn to an appraisal of the fundamentalists' conduct during the controversy. At this juncture it is important to recall Fosdick's observation that not all conservatives were

8 Ibid., September 26, 1924, p. 10.
fundamentalists, but all fundamentalists were conservative. While there were certainly a great many conservatives who viewed the excesses of the controversy with disfavor and kept their criticisms of modernism at a dignified level, it cannot be overlooked that a significant number of fundamentalists were reactionary and frequently intolerant towards those who differed with their theological interpretation. Thus, it is this militant fundamentalism which will be analyzed here.

One of the faults of the fundamentalist campaign was its lack of tolerance. An important factor that accounts for this attitude was the strong fundamentalist demand for uniformity. From the fundamentalist viewpoint any individual that did not interpret religion in fundamentalist terms was suspect and frequently attacked; Fosdick fell victim to this attitude after his sermon of May 21, 1922, when he raised the issue of diversity within the church.

Unlike Fosdick, the fundamentalists did not regard it in the best interests of the church to tolerate diversity. Instead, they reacted by refusing to accommodate the modernists within their fold. Such an accommodation they would have considered a compromise with the "world." Instead of recognizing that moderate modernists such as Fosdick were making a valid attempt to reconcile Christianity to the contemporary world, the fundamentalists interpreted their diversity as heresy and infidelity.

This defensive reaction leads one to the conclusion that many fundamentalists viewed themselves as a threatened group. Not only did they consider their ecclesiastical dominance threatened but also their absolute certainties. Living in an age in which revolutionary
developments were rapidly changing the established order, the fundamentalists were frantically clinging to those simple truths which would bring certainty into their lives. They demanded an absolute authority to direct them in perilous times.

When modernists began questioning traditionally held certainties the fundamentalists reacted by demonstrating an intolerant and narrow attitude. Reinhold Niebuhr accurately summed up the problem when he noted, "Frantic orthodoxy is never rooted in faith but in doubt. It is when we are not sure that we are doubly sure. Fundamentalism is, therefore, inevitable in an age which has destroyed so many certainties by which faith once expressed itself and upon which it relied." 9

Perhaps one of the most questionable activities of the fundamentalists was their misrepresentation of Fosdick. In their eyes he not only was a potential destroyer of evangelical Christianity but also a subversive individual whose ideas would ultimately bring the ruin of the American civilization. In the following statement John Roach Stratton illustrates that characteristic fundamentalist position: "I believe that such teaching as Dr. Fosdick has given is one of the main fountainheads of the stream of error, unbelief, immorality, and anarchy that is increasingly menacing the good order of society, the stability of our homes and the very foundations of civilization itself." 10

The fundamentalists did not realize, or at least overlooked the fact, that the real problems facing society and the Christian in the

9 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Shall We Proclaim Truth or Search for IT?" The Christian Century, XLII (March 12, 1925), 345.

The 1920s were not caused by modernism in religion. It was not Fosdick, or even Union Theological Seminary, that was causing the afflictions confronting the church and the country. Instead of singling out such problems as economic injustice, rampant materialism, racial discrimination, a decline in morality, and a general hostility towards all types of religion, the fundamentalists chose to focus on and concentrate their attacks upon modernism.

A possible explanation for such a fundamentalist attitude to many of the real problems facing the church and society was their dualistic world view. For many generations orthodox Christians had generally accepted as fact the dualism between soul and body. They grew up with a dualistic outlook which enabled them to be in the world but not of the world. "They lived in two worlds," explains American church historian Herbert Schneider, "the temporal and the eternal; so that religious seriousness was separate from secular seriousness as church was from state. There was no conflict, but simply duality." After this observation Schneider points out the consequences of such an outlook as it confronted the "modern" world:

But when, during the twentieth century, the world encroached upon the spirit and the two were hopelessly confused in fact as well as in theory, it was necessary to be militant and defiant in order to maintain the familiar distinction between affairs of the body and the salvation of the soul. To recover a faith in their separateness implied a conscious purification of religion itself. The primary object, therefore, against which these reactionary faiths had to fight was modernized or worldly religion.11

When Fosdick and a considerable number of liberals within the

Presbyterian Church made it clear that they could no longer accept the
dualistic world view of orthodox Christianity, the fundamentalists
responded aggressively. In defending their faith the fundamentalists
showed little inclination to reevaluate their position: theirs was an
absolute truth that needed no reexamination. In defending orthodox
Christianity, the fundamentalists too often used unchristian methods.
One observer rightfully observed, "Not one note of the humility of Jesus
is found in the speeches of these Fundamentalists. Not one note of
charity. Not one note of forgiveness. Not one note of gentleness." 12

As we shall see in the following section there were valid reasons
for opposition to certain modernist ideas. Even Fosdick admitted that
he was willing that his theology be questioned, but he was "entirely
unwilling" that his ethics and integrity be questioned. However, the
fundamentalists went beyond his theology and indeed attacked his ethics
and integrity. It should also be noted that the fundamentalists had a
perfect right to bring the "Fosdick Case" before the General Assembly
but it was the immoderate methods they used that should be questioned
as well as their persistence once it became apparent that a substantial
portion of the church did not favor their approach.

To conclude this section we will note that by the late 1920s
extreme fundamentalism began to disintegrate. The mobilization of the
opposition, the Scopes Trial, and the deaths of such stalwarts as
Bryan, Straton, and Dixon (by 1925) dealt the extremist elements a
severe blow. Another important factor in their decline was the realiza­
tion on the part of the moderate conservatives that the fundamentalists'

sensationalism and inclination to tamper with such hallowed principles as religious liberty and separation of church and state was bringing ill-repute upon the defenders of orthodox Christianity. However, even though militant fundamentalism subsided during the 1930s and early 1940s, after World War II the movement reemerged having undergone a considerable transformation in organization, education, scholarship, and sophistication.\textsuperscript{13}

III

An appraisal of Fosdick's role in the controversy is by no means a simple task, but despite the fact that there are paradoxes and dilemmas that cannot be easily solved, this appraisal will begin by commending Fosdick on several points.

After viewing the entire controversy in retrospect one cannot help but praise Fosdick for his conduct during an episode in which excess was typical. Despite the fact that he was frequently maligned and attacked by his opponents, Fosdick exercised self-control. Unlike the fundamentalists, Fosdick seldom used his pulpit to retaliate and lash out at his accusers. Nor did he ever use any other means to seek publicity or the status of martyrdom. Indeed, it is difficult to refute the statement of one individual who observed, "his conduct during the whole episode has reflected the very highest type of Christian character, while frequently that of his opponent has been anything but Christian."\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} Gatewood, Controversy in the Twenties, p. 45.

\textsuperscript{14} Burns, Fosdick and the Fundamentalists, p. 7.
Not only was Fosdick's conduct admirable but his preaching also deserves commendation. The fact that multitudes came to hear him preach at the First Church and that his congregation faithfully supported him in spite of great pressures from the hierarchy of the church, demonstrates that his message had made a deep impression on those who heard him. Although some argued that the reason for his ability to attract so many people could be explained by an eager anticipation for another controversial utterance, this argument breaks down when closely analyzed. The May, 1922, sermon was an "occasional utterance" after which he refrained from preaching on controversial topics while at the First Church.

However, Fosdick's preaching was not only admired by many in this country for when he went to England and Scotland in the summers of 1924 and 1925 his preaching was praised in those countries as well. The *Yorkshire Observer* declared in regard to Fosdick, "not since the visit of the late Henry Ward Beecher has any American so touched the imagination of England," and added that he was doing much to strengthen the bonds of friendship between the two countries. The *Manchester Guardian* was perplexed as to why Fosdick had drawn so much fire in America and exclaimed, "Fosdick stands where nearly all theologians in England stand today."15

Another point in Fosdick's favor was his realization that many people within the church, especially the younger generation and the educated, were having legitimate problems trying to incorporate orthodox Christianity into their lives. The fundamentalists often attributed

such intellectual difficulties to a simple lack of faith, but Fosdick realized that religion could not remain stagnant in an age of rapid change. Because he had personally undergone similar difficulties, Fosdick was conscious that those people who were having trouble adjusting to orthodox Christianity could not be simply expelled from fellowship of the church.

Having briefly listed the auspicious aspects of Fosdick's role in the controversy, we now turn to some of the less favorable aspects. Oddly enough, it was Fosdick himself who in many instances later pointed out deficiencies in his position, illustrating a not infrequent trait of the modernists--their willingness to reexamine their own positions.

If Fosdick acted with decency during the controversy the same cannot be said of other modernists. It becomes apparent that the extreme fundamentalist had his counterpart within the modernist ranks. Overreaction and exaggeration were often indulged in by some modernists. They demanded that the controversy be understood in their terms as exemplified by one modernist who exclaimed, "It is absolutely fundamental that the war in the church be understood in these terms. The Fundamentalist outlaws intelligence, throws away knowledge and denies liberty. He seeks to carry our religious world straight back into the dark ages." Not contenting himself with such an overstatement, he claimed, "The Modernist is fighting the battle of life and seeks therefore to save the Church from the doom of death which hangs upon it."16

Too often modernists made disparaging remarks about certain elements of the Christian faith that many considered crucial. Not only

16 Ibid., January 14, 1924, p. 19.
were traditional Christian views ridiculed but at the same time science and the laboratory were elevated to a position of highest prominence:

Whatever be the form or substance of the doctrines advanced, be sure that this intellectual life will recognize only such leadership as is prepared to employ the same methods and spirit of inquiry which prevails in the classrooms and laboratories... A religious program or a theology which offers salvation by the cheaper device of "faith," or any other such sort which supplants that freedom /intellectual freedom/ will certainly not prove interesting, and may be met with opprobious denial.17

One of the standard accusations which the fundamentalists made against the modernists was that the latter were not really liberal in considering ideas other than their own. That this accusation has some validity is suggested by an observation of Fosdick: "Many of us who call ourselves liberal are not liberal; we are narrow rather, with that most fatal bigotry of all: we can understand nothing except contemporary thought."18

Indeed, as the years passed it became obvious that certain aspects of the modernist outlook had been limited and distorted. Subsequent world developments tended to bring into question some of the assumptions upon which the modernist position had been based during the 1920s.

The depression, the rise of tyrannical dictators in various countries of the world, and the brutality of another World War dealt a final blow to the concepts of inevitable progress and romantic view of

17 Joseph Ernest McAfee, "Who Wins--Fundamentalists or Fosdick?" The Christian Century, XLI (October 2, 1924), 1269.

human nature that modernists and liberals had long espoused. The optimistic faith of many modernists had survived the First World War because they had convinced themselves, as had Woodrow Wilson, that it had been "a war to end war." But for reasons already mentioned, such optimism became increasingly difficult to maintain. Herbert Schneider points out, "the sermons of liberal preachers and the efforts of social reformers were a voice of the past. The world had changed and needed a different gospel."\(^{19}\)

The "gospel" that replaced other theological positions was called Neo-orthodoxy. Led by such theologians as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, neo-orthodoxy attempted to reemphasize traditional Christian doctrines while acknowledging the validity of higher criticism and scientific discoveries. Advocates of neo-orthodoxy were convinced that the heart of Christianity had been destroyed by liberal theology and were determined to reinstate it. Fosdick himself explained the rise of neo-orthodoxy as a reaction to the terrible effects of World War II. Referring to the time of war, Fosdick declared, "...if one was to be an honest-to-goodness Christian and stand his ground, especially in Europe, one had to possess more than tolerance; one desperately needed resolute convictions.... Definite, positive religious convictions became a life-and-death matter."\(^{20}\)

The American theologian that has perhaps provided the most penetrating analysis of the limitations of modernism was Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr had come to neo-orthodoxy by way of liberal theology


and thus provided insights into the faults of his earlier position. Essentially, Niebuhr believed that modernism had not adequately concerned itself with the moral and ethical in theology. In his estimation modernism was a "weak religion;" it had been so busy adjusting itself to the modern mind that according to Niebuhr, "it can find no energy to challenge the modern conscience." Just as fundamentalism had its limitations such as reliance on dogmatism, so also, noted Niebuhr, modernism was deficient in its "connivance with naturalism." 21

Not only did modernism have to confront neo-orthodoxy but in the late 1920s and early 1930s another movement developed which caused modernists to adjust their theological position. This movement was largely made up of humanists who attacked modernism for not having gone far enough. The humanists claimed that the logical conclusion of modernism was their own philosophy which opposed all supernaturalism and in which God became the world, man and his dreams. In 1933, Harry Elmer Barnes, John Dewey, and thirty others, joined together and issued the "Humanist Manifesto" which rejected the "half way reform" of modernism. It concluded that human reason and science provided the only meaningful alternative for the betterment of the world. 22

Under attack from so many directions, Fosdick and his modernist colleagues began to adjust their position without giving in to either traditional orthodoxy or humanism. Fosdick offered significant illustration that he was making a change in his theological position when in 1928 he preached a sermon entitled "Beyond Reason" and in 1935 he

21 Quoted in Gatewood, Controversy in the Twenties, pp. 42-3.

22 Ibid., p. 44.
preached an even more important sermon—"Beyond Modernism." Thus, a majority of modernists shifted to a more theological and doctrinal message in which they attempted "to keep the God of Jesus Christ and to keep Jesus as the revelation of God."\(^2\)

In an important sermon preached at the Riverside Church in 1935 entitled "Beyond Modernism" Fosdick emphasized four areas in which modernism had been deficient. First of all, modernism had paid too much attention to science and other intellectual concerns, at the expense of the deeper spiritual experiences within the human soul. Secondly, modernism had been too sentimental and romantic in its view of human nature and consequently sin had not been sufficiently emphasized. Thirdly, modernism had "thinned out" the central message of the gospel and its man-centered outlook had not properly stressed the reality of God. And finally, modernism had "too commonly lost its ethical standing-ground and its power of moral attack." In the same sermon Fosdick concluded:

I should confess that often the modernist movement, adjusting itself to a man-centered culture has...watered down the thought of the Divine and, may we be forgiven for this, left souls standing, like the ancient Athenians, before an alter to an unknown God!... We have at times gotten so low down that we talked as though the highest compliment that could be paid to the almighty God was that a few scientists believed in him. Yet all the time, by right, we had an independent standing-ground, and a message of our own in which alone there is hope for human-kind.\(^2\)

It should be acknowledged that Fosdick met the intolerance and dogmatism of the fundamentalists by overreacting and thus swinging the

\(^2\)Hordern, A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology, p. 98.

pendulum to the other side. Having mentioned this fact, however, it needs to be reemphasized that Fosdick made distinctive contributions not only by his Christian deportment but more specifically his reminder to the Church that the Gospel must be translated and reinterpreted in every age if it is to retain its power over the lives of men.

It is true that, in the words of Samuel R. Weaver, "Fosdick's theology must be thought of as 'theology in transition'," and that he had not arrived at a statement of faith that was in all respects consistent with the facts of Christianity. Nevertheless, he did inspire and guide many a confused person who was seeking the meaning of Christianity in a turbulent and complex era. Reinhold Niebuhr appropriately summed up Fosdick's contribution in the controversy when he wrote, "he challenged theological obscurantism as a basis for faith and made it possible for the cultured classes to appreciate the 'intellectual responsibility of the Christian faith.'"

In conclusion, this writer would suggest that Fosdick was aware of the overpowering problems facing modern man and his religious experience. Fosdick stands out as a significant figure in modern American church history. The following statement is offered as a valid estimate of Fosdick's ministry, not only at the First Church but also at the Riverside Church of New York where he served with much distinction: "Whether one is willing to accept Dr. Fosdick's theological

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position...it is impossible to deny his influence in the American Church. He must be recognized as the ideal of many future and present ministers and as a continuing force in preaching in North America and abroad."27

IV

What then should be said of the significance of the Fosdick Controversy as a whole? First of all, it is suggested that although the controversy was part of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, it was a very important facet of that larger conflict. W. W. Sweet calls the Fosdick Controversy the second most advertised event of the larger controversy, the first being the Scopes trial.28 Ernest R. Sandeen similarly labels it "the second most celebrated event in the Fundamentalist controversy..."29

Secondly, the Fosdick Controversy is a significant event in the recent history of the Northern Presbyterian Church. Of all the churches involved in the larger controversy during the twenties, the Presbyterian Church was the most deeply affected. So important were the issues in the Fosdick controversy that the Presbyterian Church was almost split over them. It should also be mentioned that the controversy was something of a turning point in the development of the Presbyterian Church. Not only was the controversy followed by a gradual shift

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27Harry B. Beverly, Harry Emerson Fosdick's Predigtweise, its Significance (for America), its Limits, its Overcoming (Winterthur, Switzerland: Verlag P. G. Keller, 1965), p. 3.


29Sandeen, The Roots of Fundamentalism, p. 249.
toward a more liberal theology, but it is also possible to detect a greater social concern in the Church after the controversy.

Thirdly, the controversy elevated Fosdick into a position of fame and prominence because of the extensive publicity given to it. For several years the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church of New York attracted a relatively large degree of attention in leading newspapers and in both secular and religious periodicals. The increase in Fosdick's prominence is illustrated by the fact that in 1924, at the height of the conflict, The Christian Century polled the ordained clergymen of all the Protestant denominations in America asking them to select the twenty-five preachers in American "whose message seems most vitally to interpret the mind of Christ." Fosdick was selected among these twenty-five and it is interesting to note that he was one of the youngest.30 It is true that Fosdick will be remembered not so much for his ministry at the First Church as for his ministry at the famous Riverside Church of New York. However, the conflict which centered around him in the twenties did much to elevate him to a position of "perhaps the largest influence of any preacher of his generation in America."31

Fourthly, the Fosdick Controversy attracted prominent individuals such as William Jennings Bryan and John Foster Dulles. But it was especially Bryan, the recognized leader of the fundamentalist movement, who considered the controversy important enough to devote considerable time and effort to it.

And finally, the Fosdick Controversy is significant because it exposed and brought into focus the major differences that had long existed between conservative and liberal theological positions in the protestant churches of America. In the final analysis the controversy emerges as a microcosmic manifestation of the social upheaval which characterized the early twentieth century in America for it was clearly symptomatic not only of the turbulent state of American protestantism but also of the tumultuous American society in which it developed.
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APPENDIX A

"Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"

This morning we are to think of the Fundamentalist controversy which threatens to divide the American churches, as though already they were not sufficiently split and riven. A scene, suggestive for our thought, is depicted in the fifth chapter of the Book of the Acts, where the Jewish leaders hale before them Peter and other of the apostles because they had been preaching Jesus as the Messiah. Moreover, the Jewish leaders propose to slay them, when in opposition Gamaliel speaks: "Refrain from these men, and let them alone; for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God ye will not be able to overthrow them; lest haply ye be found even to be fighting against God." . . .

Already all of us must have heard about the people who call themselves the Fundamentalists. Their apparent intention is to drive out of the evangelical churches men and women of liberal opinions. I speak of them the more freely because there are no two denominations more affected by them than the Baptist and the Presbyterians. We should not identify the Fundamentalists with the conservatives. All Fundamentalists are conservatives, but not all conservatives are Fundamentalists. The best conservatives can often give lessons to the liberals in true liberality of spirit, but the Fundamentalist program is essentially illiberal and intolerant. The Fundamentalists see, and they see truly, that in this last generation there have been strange new movements in Christian thought. A great mass of new knowledge has come into man's possession: new knowledge about the physical universe, its origin, its forces, its laws; new knowledge about human history and in particular about the ways in which the ancient peoples used to think in matters of religion and the methods by which they phrased and explained their spiritual experiences; and new knowledge, also, about other religions and the strangely similar ways in which men's faiths and religious practices have developed everywhere. . . . The new knowledge and the old faith cannot be left antagonistic or even disparate, as though a man on Saturday could use one set of regulative ideas for his life and on Sunday could change gear to another altogether. We must be able to think our modern life clear through in Christian terms, and to do that we also must be able to think our Christian faith clear through in modern terms.

There is nothing new about the situation. It has happened again and again in history, as, for example, when the stationary earth suddenly began to move and the universe that had been centered in this planet was centered in the sun around which the planets whirled. Whenever such a situation has arisen, there has been only one way out: the new knowledge and the old faith had to be blended in a new combination. Now, the people in this generation who are trying to do this are the liberals, and the Fundamentalists are out on a campaign to shut against them the doors of the Christian fellowship. Shall they be allowed to succeed?

It is interesting to note where the Fundamentalists are driving in their stakes to mark out the deadline of doctrine around the Church, across which no one is to pass except on terms of agreement. They insist that we must all believe in the historicity of certain special miracles, pre-eminently the virgin birth of our Lord; that we must
believe in a special theory of inspiration—that the original documents of the Scripture, which of course we no longer possess, were inerrantly dictated to men a good deal as a man might dictate to a stenographer; that we must believe in a special theory of the atonement—that the blood of our Lord, shed in a substitutionary death, placates an alienated Deity and makes possible welcome for the returning sinner; and that we must believe in the second coming of our Lord upon the clouds of heaven to set up a millennium here, as the only way in which God can bring history to a worthy denouement. Such are some of the stakes which are being driven to mark a deadline of doctrine around the Church.

If a man is a genuine liberal, his primary protest is not against holding these opinions, although he may well protest against their being considered the fundamentals of Christianity. This is a free country and anybody has a right to hold these opinions or any others, if he is sincerely convinced of them. The question is, Has anybody a right to deny the Christian name to those who differ with him on such points and to shut against them the doors of the Christian fellowship? The Fundamentalists say that this must be done. In this country and on the foreign field they are trying to do it. They have actually endeavored to put on the statute books of a whole State binding laws against teaching modern biology. If they had their way, within the Church, they would set up in Protestantism a doctrinal tribunal more rigid than the Pope's. In such an hour, delicate and dangerous, when feelings are bound to run high, I plead this morning the cause of magnanimity and liberality and tolerance of spirit. I would, if I could reach their ears, say to the Fundamentalists about the liberals what Gamaliel said to the Jews, "Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God ye will not be able to overthrow them; lest haply ye be found even to be fighting against God."

That we may be entirely candid and concrete and may not lose ourselves in any fog of generalities, let us this morning take two or three of these Fundamentalist items and see with reference to them what the situation is in the Christian churches. Too often we preachers have failed to talk frankly enough about the differences of opinion which exist among evangelical Christians, although everybody knows that they are there. Let us face this morning some of the differences of opinion with which somehow we must deal.

We may well begin with the vexed and mooted question of the virgin birth of our Lord. I know people in the Christian churches, ministers, missionaries, laymen, devoted lovers of the Lord and servants of the Gospel, who, alike as they are in their personal devotion to the Master, hold quite different points of view about a matter like the virgin birth. Here, for example, is one point of view: that the virgin birth is to be accepted as historical fact; it actually happened; there was no other way for a personality like the Master to come into this world except by a special biological miracle. That is one point of view, and many are the gracious and beautiful souls who hold it. But, side by side with them in the evangelical churches is a group of equally loyal and reverent people who would say that the virgin birth is not to be accepted as an historic fact. . . . So far from thinking that they have given up anything vital in the New Testament's attitude toward Jesus, these Christians
remember that the two men who contributed most to the Church's thought of the divine meaning of the Christ were Paul and John, who never even distantly allude to the virgin birth.

Here in the Christian churches are these two groups of people and the question which the Fundamentalists raise is this, Shall one of them throw the other out? Has intolerance any contribution to make to this situation? Will it persuade anybody of anything? Is not the Christian Church large enough to hold within her hospitable fellowship people who differ on points like this and agree to differ until the fuller truth be manifested? The Fundamentalists say not. They say that the liberals must go. Well, if the Fundamentalists should succeed, then out of the Christian Church would go some of the best Christian life and consecration of his generation—multitudes of men and women, devout and reverent Christians, who need the Church and whom the Church needs.

Consider another matter on which there is a sincere difference of opinion between evangelical Christians: the inspiration of the Bible. One point of view is that the original documents of the Scripture were inerrantly dictated by God to men. Whether we deal with the story of creation or the list of the dukes of Edom or the narratives of Solomon's reign or the Sermon on the Mount or the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, they all came in the same way, and they all came as no other book ever came. They were inerrantly dictated; everything there—scientific opinions, medical theories, historical judgments, as well as spiritual thought and insight—is infallible. That is one idea of the Bible's inspiration. But side by side with those who hold it, lovers of the Book as much as they, are multitudes of people who never think about the Bible so. Indeed, that static and mechanical theory of inspiration seems to them a positive peril to the spiritual life...

Here in the Christian Church to-day are these two groups, and the question which the Fundamentalists have raised is this, Shall one of them drive the other out? Do we think the cause of Jesus Christ will be furthered by that? If He should walk through the ranks of this congregation this morning, can we imagine Him claiming as His own those who hold one idea of inspiration and sending from Him into outer darkness those who hold another? You cannot fit the Lord Christ into that Fundamentalist mold...

Consider another matter upon which there is a serious and sincere difference of opinion between evangelical Christians: the second coming of our Lord. The second coming was the early Christian phrasing of hope. No one in the ancient world had ever thought, as we do, of development, progress, gradual change, as God's way of working out His will in human life and institutions. They thought of human history as a series of ages succeeding one another with abrupt suddenness. The Graeco-Roman world gave the names of metals to the ages—gold, silver, bronze, iron. The Hebrews had their ages, too—the original Paradise in which man began, the cursed world in which man now lives, the blessed Messianic Kingdom some day suddenly to appear on the clouds of heaven. It was the Hebrew way of expressing hope for the victory of God and righteousness. When the Christians came they took over that phrasing of expectancy and the New Testament is aglow with it. The preaching of the apostles thrills with the glad announcement, "Christ is coming!"

In the evangelical churches to-day there are differing views of this matter. One view is that Christ is literally coming, externally, on the
clouds of heaven, to set up His Kingdom here. I never heard that teaching in my youth at all. It has always had a new resurrection when desperate circumstances came and man's only hope seemed to lie in divine intervention. It is not strange, then, that during these chaotic, catastrophic years there has been a fresh rebirth of this old phrasing of expectancy. "Christ is coming!" seems to many Christians the central message of the Gospel. In the strength of it some of them are doing great service for the world. But, unhappily, many so overemphasize it that they outdo anything the ancient Hebrews or the ancient Christians ever did. They sit still and do nothing and expect the world to grow worse and worse until He comes.

Side by side with these to whom the second coming is a literal expectation, another group exists in the evangelical churches. They, too, say, "Christ is coming!" They say it with all their hearts; but they are not thinking of an external arrival on the clouds. They have assimilated as part of the divine revelation the exhilarating insight which these recent generations have given to us, that development is God's way of working out His will. . . . And these Christians, when they say that Christ is coming, mean that, slowly it may be, but surely, His will and principles will be worked out by God's grace in human life and institutions, until "He shall see of the travail of His soul and shall be satisfied."

These two groups exist in the Christian churches and the question raised by the Fundamentalists is, Shall one of them drive the other out? Will that get us anywhere? Multitudes of young men and women at this season of the year are graduating from our schools of learning, thousands of them Christians who may make us older ones ashamed by the sincerity of their devotion to God's will on earth. They are not thinking in ancient terms that leave ideas of progress out. They cannot think in those terms. There would be no greater tragedy than that the Fundamentalists should shut the door of the Christian fellowship against such.

I do not believe for one moment that the Fundamentalists are going to succeed. Nobody's intolerance can contribute anything to the solution of the situation which we have described. If, then, the Fundamentalists have no solution to the problem, where may we expect to find it? In two concluding comments let us consider our reply to that inquiry.

The first element that is necessary is a spirit of tolerance and Christian liberty. When will the world learn that intolerance solves no problems? This is not a lesson which the Fundamentalists alone need to learn; the liberals also need to learn it. Speaking, as I do, from the viewpoint of liberal opinions, let me say that if some young, fresh mind here this morning is holding new ideas, has fought his way through, to novel positions, and is tempted to be intolerant about old opinions, offensively to condescend to those who hold them and to be harsh in judgment on them, he may well remember that people who held those old opinions have given the world some of the noblest character and the most rememberable service that it ever has been blessed with, and that we of the younger generation will prove our case best, not by controversial intolerance, but by producing, with our new opinions, something of the depth and strength, nobility and beauty of character that in other times were associated with other thoughts. It was a wise liberal, the most adventurous man of his day--Paul the Apostle--who said, "Knowledge puffeth up, but love buildeth up."
Nevertheless, it is true that just now the Fundamentalists are giving us one of the worst exhibitions of bitter intolerance that the churches of this country have ever seen. As one watches them and listens to them he remembers the remark of General Armstrong of Hampton Institute, "Cantankerousness is worse than heterodoxy." There are many opinions in the field of modern controversy concerning which I am not sure whether they are right or wrong, but there is one thing I am sure of; courtesy and kindliness and tolerance and humility and fairness are right. Opinions may be mistaken; love never is.

The second element which is needed, if we are to reach a happy solution of this problem, is a clear insight into the main issues of modern Christianity and a sense of penitent shame that the Christian Church should be quarreling over little matters when the world is dying of great needs. If, during the war, when the nations were wrestling upon the very brink of hell and at times all seemed lost, you chanced to hear two men in an altercation about some minor matter of sectarian denominationalism, could you restrain your indignation? You said, "What can you do with folks like this who, in the face of colossal issues, play with the tiddledywinks and peccadillos of religion?" So, now, when from the terrific questions of this generation one is called away by the noise of this Fundamentalist controversy, he thinks it almost unforgivable that men should tithe mint and anise and cummin, and quarrel over them when the world is perishing for the lack of the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy, and faith.

The present world situation smells to heaven! And now, in the presence of colossal problems, which must be solved in Christ's name and for Christ's sake, the Fundamentalists propose to drive out from the Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration. What immeasurable folly!

Well, they are not going to do it; certainly not in this vicinity. I do not even know in this congregation whether anybody has been tempted to be a Fundamentalist. Never in this church have I caught one accent of intolerance. God keep us always so and ever increasing areas of the Christian fellowship; intellectually hospitable, open-minded, liberty-loving, fair, tolerant, not with the tolerance of indifference, as though we did not care about the faith, but because always our major emphasis is upon the weightier matters of the law.  

THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING THE MINISTRY
OF HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK
IN THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF NEW YORK CITY, 1922-1925
by
Harold H. Vences

An Abstract of a Thesis
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Master of Arts
in the Field of History

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ABSTRACT

The 1920s in America was a decade of turbulence. During that period several facets of American society such as politics, education, culture and religion went through a period of rapid change which saw many hallowed traditions and customs challenged. One of the most affected areas of American society, during the twenties, was religion. It was during that period that the fundamentalist-modernist controversy took place. The two protagonists were the fundamentalists, who organized to maintain and defend traditional Christian orthodoxy, and the modernists, who drew from the heritage of European and American liberal protestantism and insisted upon reinterpretting Christianity in order to reconcile it to the extensive scientific and social developments which American society had undergone in the early twentieth century.

The "Fosdick Controversy" and the wider fundamentalist-modernist controversy took place simultaneously and both contested over many of the same issues such as the authority of the Bible, doctrinal questions, and the theory of evolution. It is the smaller Fosdick Controversy with which this thesis deals and in which the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick emerged as the leading figure.

It would be well to give a brief summary of the main events in the controversy. Beginning in his college years Fosdick began to question orthodox Christianity and his theological education at Colgate and Union Theological Seminaries provided the environment of liberal Christianity. By 1918 Fosdick had become a popular preacher as well as an author of religious books. In that year the First Presbyterian Church of New York City
invited Fosdick, an ordained Baptist, to become its minister. After much hesitation Fosdick accepted the invitation and began his ministry at the First Church.

As the fundamentalist-modernist controversy began to emerge in the twenties Fosdick preached a sermon at the First Church (on May 21, 1922) entitled "Shall The Fundamentalists Win?" in which he outlined the major differences which existed between conservative and liberal protestants in America. After citing those differences he asked for an inclusive church that would tolerate varying theological points of view and thus avoid much contention within the church. However, instead of bringing harmony, the sermon provoked a long and bitter controversy within the Presbyterian Church.

The fundamentalists immediately responded to the sermon of May, 1922 by calling for Fosdick's ouster and by labelling him as a destroyer of evangelical Christianity. Fundamentalists insisted that in effect Fosdick's sermon had been a challenge to battle and thus they began a crusade to eliminate him from the pulpit of the First Church. It became evident that a major conflict had developed in the Presbyterian Church and in 1923 the General Assembly made the decision that Fosdick should be silenced and corrected. The modernists in the church complained bitterly and protested the Assembly's action. It was in the General Assembly of 1924 that the heated conflict concerning Fosdick came to a head. After much deliberation it was decided that it would be impossible for him to subscribe to the Presbyterian creed and thus, for the second and final time, resigned as the associate minister of the First Church.

The controversy over Fosdick's position in the church lasted for almost three years. During that time it became evident that Fosdick had become the
representative of religious modernism and the fundamentalists treated accordingly. The conflict provoked anger and excess and witnessed much vindictiveness by the fundamentalists who went beyond questioning Fosdick's theology and proceeded to attack his character and integrity.

This thesis develops the argument that the fundamentalists overreacted to Fosdick's modernism and thus were largely responsible for causing an extended controversy which, when considered as a whole, was detrimental to the church. However, going beyond the conduct of either side, this thesis argues that the Fosdick Controversy was significant in that it exposed and brought into focus the differences that had long-since existed between conservative and liberal protestants in America.

The writer of this thesis contends that the Fosdick Controversy is important, and a study of it is justified, for the following reasons. Firstly, the controversy has gotten a disproportionate amount of attention considering the extensive publicity which it received. Secondly, the conflict was a significant part of the larger fundamentalist-modernist controversy ranking only below the Scopes trial in importance. Thirdly, the controversy was an important incident in the recent history of the Presbyterian Church for it not only marked the turning point in that denomination's gradual shift toward a more liberal theology but also sparked a greater degree of social concern within the church. Fourthly, the controversy witnessed the involvement of such important figures as John Foster Dulles, and importantly, William Jennings Bryan. And finally, the Fosdick Controversy can be seen as a microcosmic manifestation of the turbulent state not only of religion during the twenties but also of the society in which it developed.