The Implications of Harry Emerson Fosdick's Life-Situation Preaching for African-American Preachers

by

Willie J. Newton, Jr.

Date: August 9, 2016

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This study discusses the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of the Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick’s life-situation preaching for young preachers in mainline churches in general and African Americans in particular. Contemporary preaching in mainline churches does not get at the personal and social problems that people face. Ineffective and irrelevant preaching has plagued today’s preaching enterprise. Life-situation preaching addresses this problem by giving the preacher an approach that starts with listeners’ urgent practical needs and offers a practical solution.

This study consults Fosdick’s major works and that of select life-situation proponents. His writings on sermon composition and delivery are indispensable to this study. Although different perspectives are considered in this study, the primary focus has been on Fosdick’s thinking regarding life-situation preaching and personal counseling as a means to address the issues that are disrupting lives, troubling minds, and burdening consciences. This study concluded that life-situation preaching has some weaknesses but it is nevertheless an effective approach to preaching for contemporary young practitioners in general and preachers of African-American listeners in particular when used intelligently and creatively.
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Introduction

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969) was an iconic figure in American religious and cultural life, and arguably the most eminent and controversial preacher of his day. A liberal Christian pastor, radio personality, author and professor, Fosdick’s preaching attracted large crowds. He founded the Riverside Church in New York City, a nondenominational, nonsectarian church, where he remained for forty years, preaching on every Sunday to three thousand from morning to night. People were spellbound by his oratorical prowess, puzzled by his unorthodox theology, and fascinated by his vast literary interests. Martin Luther King, Jr., regarded Fosdick as “the greatest preacher of this century.”1 At the heart of Fosdick’s successful ministry was his practical approach to preaching, which was the result of his personal and religious experiences, his endless quest for knowledge, and his personal consultation practices, all of which contributed immeasurably to his theory of preaching and pastoral identity.

Discontented with the prevailing expository and topical sermons of his day, Fosdick experimented with life-situation preaching. He rejected the expository sermon because it proceeded on the assumption that people are interested in the meaning of what a passage means. He dismissed the topical approach because of its preoccupation with present-day themes, not the concrete problems people face. He found a middle road between the “doctrinal excesses of expository preaching and the overly secularized strategy of topical preachers.”2 He called his approach “project preaching” or the “project method.” Contemporary preachers refer to Fosdick’s preaching as “life-situation,” although he himself never used this language. This study uses the term “life-situation” in its description and analysis of Fosdick’s preaching. Fosdick

1 Fosdick to King, 17 November 1958, in Papers 4:536-537.
structured his sermons according to the problem-solution format, wherein he stated a problem or need, advocated a solution, and aimed at actuation. He truly desired to help people. The point of departure for Fosdick’s life-situation preaching is that it starts with the needs of the people. He started his sermon with the present-day experience of everyday people, attempting to better understand, interpret, and preach to their life situations. Exploring all available resources, especially the Bible, Fosdick’s directed his preaching toward people’s personal and social problems.

A salient theme in Fosdick’s published works was his message to young preachers in mainline churches, urging them to address the needs of their people creatively and intelligently. This study discusses Fosdick’s approach to preaching, noting its strengths and weaknesses, in order to consider its implications for young preachers in mainline churches generally and African Americans particularly. The point of departure for this study is that it brings Fosdick’s thought into dialogue with contemporary preaching and present-day African-American issues. No historical or contemporary work has endeavored to do this. This study intends to address this vacancy in scholarship.

It is not expected that the contemporary reader will know much about Fosdick’s life, the factors that guided him to Christian ministry, or the factors that led him to life-situation preaching. Chapter 1 will provide a discussion on such matters. Chapter 2 provides a description of life-situation preaching and its relationship with pastoral counseling. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on Fosdick’s theory and practice of preaching and its strengths and weaknesses. Chapter 5 considers Fosdick’s advice to young Christian ministers and the implications of life-situation preaching for contemporary practitioners. Chapter 6 discusses the benefits of life-situation preaching for African-American listeners.
Chapter 1

Fosdick’s Life and Life-Situation Preaching

Fosdick’s Organic Ingredients

Every preacher has significant personal and religious experiences that contribute to the preacher’s personality and pastoral identity. If it is true, as Phillips Brooks has said, that preaching is “truth through personality,” then it must follow that personality is the sum total of vital personal and religious experiences through which proclamation comes forth. These organic ingredients are the personal and religious experiences—successes and failures, hopes and disappointments, blessings and curses, fortune and misfortune, confession of faith or repudiation of doctrine—that confronts the preacher, unsummoned. These varied and vital experiences constitute the background out of which preaching springs. Every preacher has a personal story that speaks to the preacher’s path to ministry, and to the emotional, intellectual, experiential influences on the preacher’s life and ministry. It is, to be sure, without a doubt the preacher’s story of God’s saving grace amidst the vicissitudes and challenges of life.

A survey of Fosdick’s life reveals that he is by no means an exception to this rule. Such vital experiences for Fosdick provided the essential substance of his personality and set the trajectory for pastoral ministry. Edmund Holt Linn could not have been more accurate in his analysis of the effect of early personal and religious experiences on the life of the preacher when he reasoned that such experiences set the pattern for a lifetime of preaching. This study now

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3 Edmund Holt Linn, Preaching as Counseling: The Unique Method of Harry Emerson Fosdick (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1966), 42-43. In regard to Fosdick’s early religious experiences, Linn keenly observed: “In the case of young Harry Fosdick, his decision to be baptized, his mortal fear of hell, his moments of mystical exaltation, his revolt against orthodoxy and biblical literalism, his slow discovery of an intelligent faith, and a nervous collapse which destroyed his intellectual deceit all combined to lay a groundwork for ministry” (Ibid).
turns to the important personal and religious experiences that contributed to Fosdick’s personality and pastoral identity.

Harry Emerson Fosdick was born in Buffalo, New York, on May 24, 1878, and died in Bronxville, New York, on October 5, 1969. Fosdick was born into a family of public school educators and devout Christians. Fosdick’s paternal grandparents and his father were schoolteachers. His grandfather, John Spencer Fosdick, was a Baptist minister, and his grandmother’s father was a Baptist minister. Grandfather Fosdick was a schoolteacher in Buffalo for twenty-seven years, and Fosdick’s father, Frank, was a schoolteacher for fifty-four years. Fosdick’s mother, Amie, was, as Fosdick tells it, “gay and gracious” but “never physically sturdy and strong.”

Fosdick’s recollections of early childhood present the picture of a happy, friendly household. At age five, young Fosdick’s twin brother and sister, Raymond and Edith, were born. At age six, a neighbor’s son bullied Fosdick. When Fosdick came whimpering home, his father instructed him to go retaliate by going out to “thrash” his assailant. That is exactly what the young Fosdick did, thrashing the bully with “unforgettable satisfaction.” Frank and Amie were deeply Christian and always active in church service. Amie played the piano and Frank the flute. The entire family sang together, as music was for the Fosdicks a source of therapeutic joy. They read books and played games together.

Happiness proved to be an ephemeral for the Fosdick household. Another child was born, Ethel, who died from diphtheria. Fosdick revealed that his family expected him to die of diphtheria also. Young Fosdick’s father was, in Fosdick’s own words, “watching the signs of

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death creep over me and looking for the end to come before he laid me down.”

His maternal grandfather and grandmother were divorced because of irreconcilable differences. An exiguous income and growing family made life difficult. At age seven, Fosdick’s mother “collapsed in nervous prostration.” She was never physically robust. Busied with housekeeping responsibilities, consumed by maternal duties, and worried over financial debt, Fosdick’s mother suffered a nervous breakdown. This anxiety disorder, unfortunately, haunted the Fosdick household. One of the most notable personal experiences of Fosdick’s life happened at age seven. His pastor, Elder Tennant, preached an inspiring sermon on foreign missions. Responding to the sermon, young Fosdick determined to be a Christian. Despite his family’s inquiries and protestations (“How could such a young boy know what it means to join the church?”), Fosdick made a confession of faith and was baptized into the Baptist Church on February 12, 1886. Life got better for the Fosdicks. His mother’s health returned.

Fosdick’s recollections of events from eight to eighteen are sketchy at best. Humorously, he relates the story of his recitation blunder. After his first recitation event, he was praised profusely for his superb performance. At his next event, he was humbled in front of a packed church; he could not get past the second stanza of the poem. In his own words, he “ignominiously sat down, and afterward went home to weep bitterly.” Perhaps this is why in later years Fosdick devoted such long hours every week to sermon composition.

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5 Ibid., 17.
6 Ibid., 18.
7 Ibid., 22.
8 Ibid., 30.
Deaths and sicknesses challenged the serenity and stability of the Fosdick home. The young Fosdick experienced the deaths of his aunt Florence and his uncle Albert, which had a profound impact on his life. Fosdick recounts the tragic ordeal quite descriptively:

My mother’s sister, Florence, at age twenty-eight years of age, died in our home of tuberculosis, and her brother, Albert—thirty years old—returned from a vain search for health in California to die of the same disease four months later. I saw him die. I often wonder that that sight was permitted me, but I recall clearly the pathetic skeleton of that dying man, gasping for breath in his last hour and crying, “Air!”

At age ten, Fosdick’s father pulled him aside and told him the physician’s prediction that his mother would probably not live another year. Despite the prognosis, she did not die. Fosdick said he never viewed his mother as an invalid. It is reasonable to conclude that her condition was such that it limited her spousal and maternal responsibilities. In any event, the Fosdick family had to struggle with death, sickness, disorders, and financial problems constantly.

A democratic family, the Fosdicks convened meetings when important issues or decisions surfaced. Young Fosdick and his siblings were taught to be independent. “Independence,” he said, “was the end and aim of our upbringing—to throw us on our own and enable us to handle ourselves.” The fear of letting down their parents was more burdensome than any other kind of childhood discipline. Religion was the preeminent source of discord for young Fosdick. Putting the matter forthrightly, Fosdick said, “I judge that from the beginning I was predestined to religion as my predominant interest and major vocation, for from the time I overrode all objections and joined the church when I was seven, I was always struggling with it.” He goes on to confess: “But some of the most wretched hours of my boyhood were caused by the

9 Ibid., 31.
10 Ibid., 32.
11 Ibid., 33.
pettiness and obscurantism, the miserable legalism and terrifying appeals to fear that were associated with the religion of the churches. It may be that the fear of hell began earlier in my childhood than I now recall.”

It is clear that Fosdick developed a morbid fear of hell, as he recounts: “I was a sensitive boy, deeply religious, and, as I see it now, morbidly conscientious, and the effect upon me of hell-fire-and-brimstone preaching was deplorable. I vividly recall weeping at night for fear of going to hell, with my mystified and baffled mother trying to comfort me.” Religious thoughts such as these undoubtedly contributed to Fosdick’s repudiation of orthodoxy.

The Fosdicks enjoyed reading. Books were one of the most unforgettable aspects of Fosdick’s childhood. In high school, Fosdick was introduced to the ancient classics. He attempted public speaking. Stage fright bested him. A shy, embarrassed Fosdick was paralyzed on stage. As vice president of the debating society, Fosdick was forced into public speaking, and was able to overcome most of his stage fright. The stage fright, “while always present, was not the whole of the experience, for once in a while I got something across and liked it.”

It is difficult to imagine an eminent pastor of a megachurch as a shy, awkward teenager, but that was Fosdick. Somewhat humorously, he wrote: “I was clumsy and ill at ease, unsure of the proper thing to do, embarrassed in conversation, sensitive and self-conscious about my awkwardness, and unhappy at not being able to put my best foot forward. Doubtless all youths go through this stage; I suspect that I had more than my share of it.”

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 35-36.
14 Ibid., 42.
15 Ibid.
After high school, Fosdick matriculated at Colgate University in Hamilton where he was introduced to some mind-stimulating personalities. His first year went well for the most part. At the end of his freshman year, however, his father suffered a nervous breakdown, which significantly impacted the family’s income. He later returned to good health. The pivotal point of Fosdick’s life occurred when he was nineteen. Burning questions about the faith of his upbringing seared his mind. Fosdick concluded that he did not have to believe something simply because it was in the Bible. The final blow to his system of belief in biblical inerrancy came while reading Andrew D. White’s two-volume *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology and Christianity*. “Here were the facts,” declared Fosdick, “shocking facts about the way the assumed infallibility of the Scriptures had impeded research, deepened and prolonged obscurantism, fed the mania of persecution, and held up the progress of mankind.”  

16 In response to White’s repudiation of fundamentalist views, Fosdick revolted against bibliolatry and theology. Disrobed of the garments of biblical inerrancy and stripped naked of his religion, Fosdick was much disturbed inwardly and outwardly. His whole life and being were steeped in religion. Accordingly, he wrote: “Religion has been to me the center of my personal life; the church had had my devoted loyalty; and in the family religion had been real and vital. When my religion was disturbed, I was disturbed from the ground up. Others might pass through the phase of questioning and doubt and take it easily. I took it hard.”  

17 Fosdick grappled seriously with the intellectual credibility of the Christian faith. He pondered whether it was possible to be both intelligent and Christian. Eventually, Fosdick’s rebellion came full circle and he started

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16 Ibid., 52.
17 Ibid., 53.
questioning his questions, doubting his doubts. A return to old orthodox positions was not an option; “seeing the possibility of new positions—old spiritual values in new mental categories” was very attractive.\(^\text{18}\) By the end of his senior year at Colgate, Fosdick had decided upon Christian ministry as a vocation. He did not have any interest in denominational affiliation or sectarian Christianity. Nor did he come to definitive conclusions about Christian doctrine. He did know, however, that he wanted to contribute to the spiritual life of his generation.

After a short stint at Colgate Divinity School, Fosdick matriculated at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He also attended Columbia University. He took a summer job in New York City, working in the Vacation Daily Bible Schools. He worked hard the summer before attending Union, neglecting to take care of himself physically. When the academic year began, Fosdick studied theology at Union and philosophy at Columbia. In addition, he helped run the Mission at Mariners’ Temple on the Bowery, where he conducted as many as nine meetings in Bowery lodging houses on a single Sunday. The Bowery hosted a notable homeless population, especially Civil War veterans, who migrated to New York in search of occupational prospects. Fosdick’s ministry began with the experience of the Bowery, in the slums of the inner city. He explained: “This experience also was a significant part of my preparation for the ministry. I was seeing America’s slums at first-hand. My name is now associated with the Riverside Church, but my ministry began in the raw filth, poverty, and degradation of the Bowery, worse then than is easily imaginable now.”\(^\text{19}\) Fosdick was exposed first-hand to the debauchery of city life. Rare is it that Fosdick’s early ministry experience is associated with the

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 54.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 71.
slums of New York. Therefore, Fosdick reminds his reader that his ministry started in the slums of New York City and not the high society of the posh Riverside Church.

Amidst the debauchery and immorality of city life, Fosdick discovered endless opportunities for ministry. City life proved to be a breeding ground for fertile ministry. He found ministry exhilarating yet exhausting. His work obligations and academic coursework proved too much. Tragedy struck. Fosdick, like his mother and father, suffered a nervous breakdown. Reminiscing that tragic ordeal, he deduced: “I suppose I had a nervous breakdown coming to me. High-strung and sensitive, I was built for one, and the experience was not unfamiliar to my family.”

Noting the gravity of the matter, he wondered if he really would have cut his throat with a razor if his father had not been there shouting, “Harry! Harry!” It is unclear whether this statement reflects a mental image or an actual event. What is clear is that experience taught him an invaluable lesson in preparation for ministry. He wrote:

> In that experience I learned some things about religion that theological seminaries do not teach. I learned to pray, not because I had adequately argued out prayer’s rationality, but because I desperately needed help from a Power greater than my own. I learned that God, much more than a theological proposition, is an immediately available Resource; that just as around our bodies is a physical universe from which we draw all our physical energy, so around our spirits is a spiritual Presence in living communion with whom we can find sustaining strength.

As one can see, this event had significant personal and spiritual consequences for Fosdick. The result was that God became unquestionably real to him, prayer became necessary for him, and spirituality awakened within him. This event was indeed one of the most

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20 Ibid., 72.

21 Ibid., 75.

22 See Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching, eds. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), s.v. “Spirituality of the Preacher.” Perhaps it is true, as J. Oswald Sanders stated in Spiritual Leadership (Chicago: Moody Publisher, 2007), “Spirituality is not easy to define, but you can tell when it is present” (32). Spirituality is a term with varieties of definitions and expressions. Fosdick’s spirituality was evidenced in the way he lived out his “conviction of who he was in relation to God, self, others, and creation” (448-449). His spirituality was centered in how he understood religion, relevant truth, and care and concern for people. If
significant experiences in his development and preparation for ministry. Although Fosdick received inpatient psychiatric treatment for only a few weeks in Elmira, New York, his full recovery took many years, and the effects of his breakdown were permanent. “It took years to surmount the effects of my breakdown,” Fosdick disclosed, “and some scars have never left me, but still I can handle the situation now.” This harrowing experience motivated Fosdick to want to help people face their problems, as he did. He truly believed that this experience gave him insight into his own human nature and that of others. Suffice it to say, this event motivated Fosdick to become a devoted student of human nature and psychology.

In the same way that the nervous breakdown contributed immensely to Fosdick’s spiritual life, studies at Union Theological Seminary contributed immensely to the development of his mental faculties. Fosdick was able to liberate his mind from fundamentalism without forfeiting his faith. While a student, Fosdick served as pastor of a rural church during the summer, marking his first “pastoral” experience. He was officially ordained on November 18, 1903. His mother attended the ceremony. This was the last time he and his mother saw each other. She died from pneumonia in the spring of 1903. His second parish was the First Baptist Church of Montclair, New Jersey (1904-1914). Here it was that Fosdick had his initial experience with personal counseling. In addition, he had the freedom to preach liberal sermons and practice open

\[\text{it is true, as theologian Anne Carr has said, “that spirituality can be described as the whole our deepest religious beliefs, convictions, and patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior in respect to what is ultimate, to God,” then it is true that Fosdick had a deep spirituality that was rooted in God and authenticated in his relations with others (49). Anne Carr, “On Feminist Spirituality,” in Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development, ed. Joanne Wolski Conn (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 49. When Fosdick discusses spiritual problems, he is referring to the difficulty of reconciling one’s religious convictions with everyday life.}\]

\[\text{Fosdick, Autobiography, 75. This event had life-changing consequences for Fosdick. In later years he was intentional about taking care of both his mind and his body. In Autobiography, related that he used his summer resort for the body and winter resort for the mind (117). He also played squash, tennis, and golf to stay physically active (114).}\]
communion (open to all believers, not just Baptist). Here, too, he grappled with effectively applying the gospel to people’s personal and social problems. He left Montclair to teach at Union Theological Seminary. He was a faculty member at Union from 1908 until his retirement in 1946. He was appointed lecturer on Baptist Principles and Polity and instructor in homiletics. In 1915, he became the Morris K. Jessup Professor of Practical Theology. The professorship provided Fosdick the opportunity to travel abroad and preach itinerantly at universities such as Yale and Harvard. There is one other notable event that is worthy of this study’s survey of Fosdick’s organic ingredients.

During World War I (WWI), the Y.M.C.A. extended to Fosdick an opportunity as an itinerant minister to soldiers in France. Fosdick responded with alacrity. Ministry with the soldiers permanently transformed Fosdick’s life and ministry. “No theological course,” notes Fosdick, “no suburban pastorate, no professorship could have ever taught me what I learned with the troops in wartime.” Fosdick lived with and moved among the soldiers, providing ministry as the opportunity arose. He saw first-hand the effects of chemical agents on soldiers, which was a catalyst for his volte-face on war. Fosdick, an erstwhile supporter of the war, vehemently opposed it. Neither he nor his preaching was quite the same. His preaching had a new persuasive power and purpose to it; it was more practical. He explains: “The effect of my experiences during the war was evident in my preaching. It was much less theological and much more practical than it had been. Not so much apologetics as personal and social ethics became my

24 Linn, 42.

25 Fosdick, Autobiography., 124. In Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010), Leonora Tubbs Tisdale notes that Fosdick’s experience of war and his pastoral care of Soldiers in its midst changed him in a major way (31). She observed, “When he saw firsthand what war did to people—not only to those civilians who were caught in its crossfire but also to those soldiers that he sent off to battle with a hymn and a prayer, he did a complete about-face” (Ibid.).
chief concern.”26 In essence, preaching to soldiers during combat gave Fosdick an opportunity to experiment with “kindling the sentiments of his listeners” by preaching sermons that were “less theological and apologetic and more centered upon practical personal and social ethics.”27 This insistence upon practicality is what distinguishes Fosdick’s preaching ministry. To say that he insisted upon practicality is to say that he believed that the main business of a sermon was the head-on constructive meeting of some problem or real human difficulty that was puzzling minds, burdening consciences, and distracting lives. Fosdick was intentional about preaching sermons that addressed the problems on the minds and hearts of listeners instead of preaching about a biblical text or personality.28

Fosdick preached his first sermons in 1903 in college pulpits and as a student in the Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City. He was able to extend his influence beyond the academy and church through his books and radio ministry. He graduated from Colgate University in 1900 and completed his Bachelor of Divinity degree at Union in 1904. Fosdick served the First Baptist Church of Montclair, New Jersey, for ten years, 1904-14. He was a special preacher in the First Presbyterian Church, New York City, 1919-25, and in 1926 became pastor of the Park Avenue Baptist Church, later the Riverside Church of New York City. Fosdick’s first broadcast was in 1926, from the studio of WEAF in New York City. The National Vespers radio program began on October 2, 1927, and ran for twenty years until his retirement.

26 Ibid., 134.
27 Linn, 43.
28 Ibid., 94. Fosdick said: “The preacher’s business is not merely to discuss repentance but to persuade people to repent; not merely to debate the meaning and possibility of Christian faith, but to produce Christian faith in the lives of his listeners; not merely to talk about the available power of God to bring victory over trouble and temptation, but to send people out from their worship on Sunday with victory in their possession” (99). This quote best explains Fosdick’s postwar preaching. Fosdick adamantly believed that the sermon’s business was to have both a positive and tangible impact on the lives of its listeners.
His radio ministry ran alongside his pulpit ministry. He retired from his professorship and active ministry at the Riverside Church in 1946 at age 67, after twenty years as pastor, and preached his last sermon in 1955 as minister emeritus.\textsuperscript{29}

If it is true, as Fosdick posited after his nervous breakdown, that personal experience is the solid ground for assurance, then it must follow that his personal experiences were the solid ground on which he stood and from which he preached. Fosdick’s disdain for orthodoxy and denominationalism can be traced to various periods of religious turmoil in his life. Similarly, his desire to help people can be traced to personal experiences such as his nervous breakdown and his ministry in France during WWI. His practical approach to preaching can be traced to his first ministry in the slums, his preaching ministry during the war, and his frustration with sermon composition during his first pastorates.

In sum, Fosdick’s views on life can be traced to the organic ingredients here noted. These ingredients contributed indisputably to Fosdick’s personal and pastoral identity. This is not a biographical sketch as such, but rather a chronological account of the prominent personal and religious experiences that helped to form Fosdick’s pastoral identity. It is difficult to understand who a preacher is and why a preacher does the things that he or she does without knowing and understanding the preacher’s positive and negative formative experiences. Fosdick’s early life was fraught with many challenges, setbacks, hiccups, and disappointments. Without a doubt, these events shaped Fosdick’s approach to people, ministry, and preaching. This study now turns to the factors that prompted Fosdick to jettison the prevailing sermon types of his day for life-situation preaching.

\textsuperscript{29} Henry Sloane Coffin, \textit{A Half Century of Union Theological Seminary: An Informal History} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), 90.
Necessity of a New Approach to Preaching

Pastoral ministry can be difficult for young preachers in so-called mainline churches. Observing the ministry of the young preachers of his day, Fosdick said, “I have seen many a young minister so maltreated by his first parish, so twisted by criticism and disheartened by meanness and coldness, that irreparable damage was done him.”

Pastoral ministry is not for the faint of heart, to be sure, as it demands the preacher’s whole being—body, mind, and soul. The fact is, no part of the tripartite nature—body, mind, and soul—of the preacher remains untouched by ministry. Effective preaching is no less demanding as it demands, if done correctly, rigorous study, voracious reading, intense brainstorming, continuous prayer, and mastery of homiletic approach. The preacher who lacks discipline in these areas will encounter difficulty in composing sermons that are fit for spiritual and intellectual consumption.

Sermon preparation is much like preparation for a surgical procedure in that it demands thoughtful consideration of the patient, duteous care of surgical instruments, respect for written procedures and practices, and the experience and intelligence of a trained medical professional who can address health problems and facilitate healing. Similarly, the preacher must preach with surgical precision, diagnosing and treating the listeners’ problems. She must weigh her congregation’s needs intelligently, respect the Bible, tradition, and doctrine; and patiently and intelligently meet the vital spiritual needs of the congregation. Fosdick had a difficult time

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30 While the focus of this study is on “mainline” churches, most, if not all, of these problems adversely affect non-mainline churches as well. Fosdick, like most people of his era, used the term “mainline” in reference to white mainline churches, e.g., Disciples, Presbyterians, United Methodists, Episcopalians, etc. In The Black Church in the African American Experience (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya operational definition of “the black church” is limited to seven independent, historic denominations or mainline churches: three Methodists, three Baptists, and the Churches of God in Christ (COGIC).

preparing sermons in first parish, First Baptist Church of Montclair. Sermon preparations proved to be an infinitely frustrating chore. In a telling statement, Fosdick disclosed, “I used to burn the logwood in the morning and the chips at night, and the first sometimes made a slow blaze and the latter a thin one.” 32 To make matters worse, his contemporaries’ sermons only seemed to exasperate and perplex him further. Fosdick took issue with both the mechanics of these approaches and the way in which they were used. His problem was compounded by the fact that his seminary courses in homiletics proved impracticable, not producing practical results in the lives of listeners. 33 He concluded that a new approach to preaching was necessary to free him from this homiletical conundrum and pastoral malaise. He was not content with the topical and expository sermons because they did not achieve the results he sought. He sought a more effective way to compose meaningful sermons that produced tangible results. Put another way, he sought a practical approach to preaching that would deliver practical results. For Fosdick, the sermon ought to do more than talk about the Bible or a present-day theme; it should bring about transformation of personality; it should do something, prompt a decision or action, in the lives of its listeners. One can only surmise that he would not have lasted long as a preacher if he was forced to continue preaching ineffective sermons. Nor would he have lasted long if he could not find a different approach to sermon composition. As Fosdick saw it, sermon composition was all the more difficult because the prevailing approaches produced sermons that did not connect with listeners. He viewed such approaches as ineffective and futile. Linn notes this truth in relation to

32 Fosdick, Autobiography, 87.

33 In Autobiography Fosdick stated that as a student in seminary he listened to informative lectures on preaching that did not have relevance to actual experience. He believed that the teaching of an art such as preaching had to be a practical. As a professor at Union Theological Seminary, he helped to make the teaching of homiletics a practical affair. Each student preached in chapel to peers and professors, receiving both critique and encouragement. He longed for such an experience: “That kind of training would have saved me a protracted struggle in my first pastorate, but in those days theologues had little or nothing of such discipline” (83).
Fosdick’s observation of colleagues in ministry: “Fosdick noticed that there was an appalling number of fed-up, fatigued, bored preachers, to whom preaching had long since become a vexing chore. They had their backs to the wall, constantly under the pressure of ‘getting up’ weekly sermons, and they struggled desperately to do so.”\(^{34}\) Fosdick’s criticism of the preaching methods of his day exposes the weaknesses of their theory and practice, not to say that Fosdick’s approach is free of such weaknesses, as it is certainly not.

It is critically important to understand expository and topical preaching independent of Fosdick’s critique. Such an understanding will provide an unbiased description of these two types of sermons. The word “exposition” means to bring out what is there. In Latin, the word *exposition* means “setting forth” or making “accessible.”\(^{35}\) The objective of such a sermon is to faithfully bring a message out of scripture and make that message accessible to contemporary hearers. There are two central principles in expository preaching. First, the authority of scripture in the pulpit is foremost. That is to say, the preacher’s message must be faithful to and consistent with the scripture; “authorized” by scripture. The preacher or expositor strives to understand the biblical text on its own terms, apart from personal biases or doctrinal creeds. Second, the preacher’s message must be expressed in clear language and simple logic, accessible to all minds. There are two principle types of expository preaching: verse-by-verse exposition and thematic exposition.

In verse-by-verse expository preaching, the preacher selects a pericope and divides it into smaller consumable units of thought, and then proceeds with an exposition of each verse in systematic fashion. Exposition of each verse speaks to a coherent biblical theme or spiritual truth

\(^{34}\) Linn, 43.

\(^{35}\) *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, eds. Willimon and Lischer, s.v. “Expository Preaching.”
through the interlinking and application of ideas. In thematic expository preaching, the preacher derives the sermon theme from the biblical text but unfolds that theme in whatever way seems necessary or appropriate to the task of making the message assessable to the hearer. It is distinguishable from verse-by-verse exposition in that the expositor moves in and out of the biblical text in a manner that is not necessarily verse-by-verse. As is true with every method, expository preaching has strengths and weaknesses. While the strength of expository preaching is that it reinforces the authority and centrality of scripture in the life of the church, the weaknesses are that it can constrict a preacher’s engagement with culture and human experience from the pulpit, and it can lend itself to authoritarianism, resulting in the identification of biblical authority with the preacher’s authority.

Fosdick categorized expository sermons as futile and dull. The problem with this method, he concluded, was that it assumed that people were deeply concerned about what the passage means. Rhetorically, Fosdick inquired into the practical usefulness of the expository sermon:

“Who seriously supposes that as a matter of fact, one in a hundred of the congregation cares, to start with, what Moses, Isaiah, Paul, or John meant in those special verses or came to church deeply concerned about it?” Of such a method, he observed: “Only the preacher proceeds still upon the idea that folk come to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites.” Fosdick notes that all the great writers of scripture were interested in and concerned with human living, which, he argued, should be the starting place for modern preachers. The point of departure for Fosdick was that practical application suffused his sermons, not as material appended to the end thereof. The expository preachers, as he observed them, appended practical

37 Ibid.
application to the end of their sermons. Fosdick, however, believed that the sermon, from start to finish, was a practical drill. He advised: “Let them not end but start with thinking of the auditors’ vital needs, and then let the whole sermon be organized around their constructive endeavors to meet those needs.”

Whereas the expository sermon is authorized by scripture and is preached in clear terms, the topical sermon gives a systematic or integrated treatment of a theme considered worthy of discussion. Such a sermon may or may not be biblical. Its key element is its integrative nature. That is, the sermon reaches out in all relevant directions for substance and form in order to make the best possible case for the matter under consideration. According to the Encyclopedia of Preaching, the “problem or issue that gives impetus to a topical sermon may begin at a great distance from the Bible and be led ultimately, almost inevitably, to the scriptures.” The Encyclopedia notes further that “personal problems of the hearers, controversial issues in the local community, ethical issues of national and international scope, denomination debates, matters of cultural and aesthetic concerns, and congregational challenges—any and all of the fields of inquiry suggest proper topics for preaching.” The strength and weakness of the method is that it is “truth through personality” (to use the apt phrase of Phillips Brooks). The topical sermon has the potential to either invoke God’s Word for use on a topic or become a discourse on a contemporary issue of importance to the preacher.

The only thing Fosdick deplored more than the expository sermon was the topical. Such a sermon is predominantly concerned with present-day themes. In an explanation of Fosdick’s

38 Ibid., 31.


40 Ibid.
repudiation of the topical sermon, Robert Moats Miller argued: “Fosdick refused to buy stock in this homiletical bubble, correctly seeing that no man is sufficiently omniscient to speak intelligently on such a wide range of specialized topics and that, above all, worshippers do not come to church to hear opinions on themes that editors, columnists, and radio commentators have been dealing with throughout the week.”

The topical preacher, observed Fosdick, searches contemporary life in general and the newspaper in particular for subjects. “Instead of starting with a text,” explains Fosdick, “they start with their own ideas on some subject of their choice, but their ideas on that subject may be much farther away from a vital interest of the people than great text from the Bible.”

Such preachers turned their “pulpits into platforms and their sermons into lectures, straining after some new, intriguing ideas about it.”

For Fosdick, both the expository and topical sermons were organized with the wrong principle in mind. Edifyingly, Fosdick remarked, “He is organizing his sermon around the elucidation of his theme, whereas he should organize it around the endeavor to meet his people’s need. He is starting with a subject, whereas he should start with an object. His one business is with the real problems of these individual people in his congregation.”

Suffice it to say, what

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43 Ibid., 32.

44 Ibid. In Fosdick’s theory of preaching, an object is distinguishable from a subject. He believed that every sermon should have a definite “object” that speaks to a “subject.” He sought to get an object for a sermon rather than a subject. The difference, he noted, is that a lecture is chiefly concerned with a subject to be elucidated, whereas a sermon is chiefly concerned with an object to be achieved (99). Linn said that Fosdick thought first about people (objects) and then about ideas (subjects). See Edmund H. Linn, “Harry Emerson and the Techniques of Organization,” in *Harry Emerson Fosdick’s Art of Preaching: An Anthology*, ed. Lionel Crocker (Illinois: Charles C Thomas Publisher, 1971), 186.
matters most in Fosdick’s thought and practice is the preacher’s ability to make vital contact with
the practical life and daily thinking of listeners.

It is important to note that Fosdick did not believe that his approach to preaching
diminished the Bible, as is often the claim of life-situation critics, which will be noted in this
study’s discussion on the weaknesses of life-situation preaching. To the contrary, he believed in
the Bible’s indispensability for contemporary problems. “I had been suckled on the Bible, knew
it and loved it, and I could not deal with any crucial problem in thought and life without seeing
text after text lift up its hands begging to be used,”

45 stressed Fosdick. The Bible was the
sourcebook for answers to the people’s problems. Fosdick did not have an issue with the Bible
per se, but rather the way in which the Bible was being used in preaching. The status quo of
selecting “texts from the Bible and then proceed[ing] to give their historic setting, their logical
meaning in the context, their place in theology of the writer, with a few practical reflections
appended”

46 was neither attractive nor practical to Fosdick. In simple terms, Fosdick liked using
the Bible, just not in the same way that his contemporaries did.

In advocating Fosdick’s life-situation preaching, Linn asserts: “The writers of the Bible
themselves were interested in such human problems as unbelief, perplexity, sin, and desire, and
the preacher honors them by starting, as they did, with some such real need.”

47 The expository
method, for the preacher of a life-situation sermon, Linn notes, “is a gross misuse of the Bible.”

48 Fosdick believed that the Bible was an “amazing compendium of experiments in human life

45 Fosdick, Autobiography, 95.
47 Linn, 54.
48 Ibid.
under all sorts of conditions, and he used the Bible practically, relevantly, and intelligently to address the contemporary problems of his day. Eugene May maintains that Fosdick did not use the Bible merely to justify his own ideas or as an apologist, but rather to relate its truths to contemporary moral and spiritual issues. In his analysis of Fosdick’s use of the Bible, May maintained: “He holds that some of the Bible simply is not relevant to life today and some is outgrown by moral and spiritual progress; but, when he uses it, one has the sense that he is using it fairly and according to the best interpretation possible.” To clarify, Fosdick used the Bible resourcefully and practically, although he did not see the relevance of some of its material.

Using the Bible intelligently, for Fosdick, was not the same as believing something or everything in the Bible. One could use the Bible intelligently without subscribing to the unscientific claims like biblical miracles therein; such claims, as he rationalized them, were incompatible with modern science. The fact of the matter is, Fosdick used the Bible differently from his contemporaries because his aim was different, that is, he aimed at practical results. Critics of life-situation preaching question its merits because it, as they see it, diminishes the importance of the Bible. The matter of Fosdick’s use of the Bible in preaching will be discussed later in this study. Having presented the factors that motivated Fosdick to experiment with a different approach to preaching, this study will now discuss life-situation preaching.

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Chapter 2
Life-Situation Preaching

Life-Situation Preaching Described

Fosdick had an exigent need for a new approach to preaching. He desired an approach that took seriously people’s personal, social, and spiritual problems and not obscure biblical texts or, as he saw it, outmoded orthodox doctrine. Disenchanted with the prevailing homiletics of his day, and discouraged by, as he saw it, an ineffective preparation-of-sermon process, for which his courses in homiletics had done little, Fosdick tried his hand at life-situation preaching. To date, he is considered the master of life-situation preaching. He has influenced generations of preachers with his life-situation preaching, most notable of which is Martin Luther King, Jr. While it is true that no other preacher has done as much as he to influence and promote this approach to preaching, it is also true that this approach predates Fosdick.

In his published dissertation on Fosdick, Harry Black Beverly discovered that Henry Ward Beecher, Albert Edward Day, Walter Russel Bower, Charles S. Horne, Wm. J. Tucker, Ch. D. Williams, Charles E. Jefferson, John Brown, and Phillips Brooks discussed life-situation preaching in their respective Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching at Yale University. He notes further that Fosdick was neither the sole advocate nor the sole practitioner of this approach. Although this approach is not as popular as it was once, it is still used in preaching circles. Suffice it to say that life-situation preaching predates and postdates Fosdick.

Contemporary practitioners of preaching face difficulty when trying to answer definitional questions about life-situation preaching. What is life-situation preaching and is it

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considered a type of preaching? Why do authors of histories on preaching, encyclopedias on preaching, and introductory works on preaching intentionally omit life-situation preaching?

There is, to be sure, a paucity of literature on the subject. The fact is, life-situation preaching has never held the same status as other types of preaching. Preachers and homileticians alike view life-situation preaching with suspicion, if not disdain. Describing the ministry of Jesus, Fosdick said that “the Master, far from being interested only in men’s souls, was immensely concerned about their day-by-day, practical, mundane needs.” This principle is critical to Fosdick’s life-situation preaching. He notes further that Jesus’ final test at judgment was whether “we [sic] had fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, and clothed the naked.” Life-situation preaching, especially in Fosdick’s case, is concerned with the practical aspects of everyday life.

“Everywhere in the Gospel,” explains Fosdick, “Jesus is presented as wanting us to have what we naturally want to have—physical well-being, economic security, food, clothes, health.”

In his analysis of life-situation preaching, Harold Ruopp wrote that “life situation preaching…is not so much a method or type of preaching, like textual, expository or topical, as it is an approach to preaching.” Regardless of what we call it, life-situation preaching has had and will have a presence and audience in Christian ministry. If life-situation preaching lacks a definition, let a description suffice. By way of description, life-situation preaching is an approach to preaching that starts with people’s social, personal, and spiritual problems and attempts to

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53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

bring the Bible and relevant truths to bear on such problems in order to prompt a decision or decisive action from the listener. Ruopp notes:

In this approach the preacher begins not with his own subjective interests and desires nor even necessarily with a text, but with some concretized question, problem, difficulty or ‘life situation’ which people are facing (whether they can always articulate it clearly or not) and then with that situation constantly in mind he works in the direction of a ‘solution’ of the problem, a solution which will help them face life more steadily, realistically, creatively, courageously, and redemptively.56

The life-situation preacher is helping people to understand life more deeply. To that end, insight into life and human nature are critical. The reader does well to understand life-situation preaching as an approach to preaching and not necessarily a method that demands pulpit fidelity. Preachers are unique. Congregations are unique. Problems are unique to individual personalities. The dynamics of these things may be such that this approach is ineffective in meeting their congregation’s real needs, and, as a result, a different approach may be warranted. Life-situation preaching does not presume that everyone who comes to church has major problems, that the church is saturated with nothing but people who have difficult problems. Nor does it presume that the life-situation preacher has all the answers to humanity’s profound universal problems. It does presume, though, that preaching at its best should respond thoughtfully and practically to the voiced and unvoiced concerns of the congregation; it should connect with vital human interest.

In his treatment of life-situation preaching, Charles Kemp explained that this approach rests on the supposition that there are people in the church who are in need of the preacher’s practical understanding of their needs and how to meet them homiletically. Explanatorily, Kemp writes:

56 Ibid.
This does not mean that everyone who comes to church has a major problem. It does not mean that they all find life a burden or are neurotic or maladjusted. Far from it! Many of them are well adjusted, triumphant, Christian personalities. It does mean, however, that there is probably no congregation in America, of any size whatever, that does not include some people who are in need of real help.\footnote{Charles F. Kemp, \textit{Life-Situation Preaching} (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1956), 13.}

Kemp’s point is that there are people sitting in the pews who are in desperate need of answers to their perplexing problems. To fully understand and respond to the people needs, the shrewd preacher understands that no problem concerns an individual more than his or her own problem. The percipient preacher understands this and responds with incisive and decisive life-situation preaching. The expectation, then, is that something relevant will be said from the pulpit that will help people live more faithfully and tenaciously in the face of their problems.

Edgar N. Jackson, a student of Fosdick, takes up the case of human needs and what is implied in preaching to meet such needs. Jackson maintains that the ministry of Jesus provides the quintessential example of life-situation preaching. He notes: “From the example of Jesus there can be drawn certain requisite presuppositions for preaching as a form of group soul-healing.”\footnote{Edgar N. Jackson, \textit{How To Preach People’s Needs} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 12.} The ministry of Jesus, he notes, was a ministry that gave people courage to face their weaknesses, to understand their situations, to show love and concern for others, and the opportunity for growth in their understanding of and relationship with God. Along the same lines, Jackson maintains that there have always been the recognition of problems and the possibility of solutions, with the emphasis on helping the individual to face the future in contrast to condemning past behavior. “At the core of the ministry of Jesus,” Jackson remarked, was a
sense of concern, even compassion, that made the individual in the group feel that there was a friend to be trusted and followed.”

Fosdick’s influence on Jackson is clearly seen when he argues that “preaching to human needs demands the ability to visualize the congregation, even while the sermon is being prepared.” That is to say, a critical part of sermon composition is the visualization of those to whom the sermon is directed. The preacher should not only recall faces within the congregation, she or he must be attuned to the vital concerns and problems that afflict such faces. The life-situation preacher should be conscious of the soul needs of his people and capable of meeting them through the medium of preaching. Such a preacher must “speak from a soul that knows the meaning and power of God’s healing love.” Jackson notes that Harold Ruopp once compiled data taken from a survey of congregants’ needs, which speaks tellingly to the indispensability of the life-situation approach to preaching. Citing Ruopp’s data, Jackson notes:

In response to specific questions nearly four thousand replies indicated that about half of the persons felt the major problems of their lives to be such personal matters as futility, insecurity, loneliness, marriage problems, sex, alcoholism, false ideas of religion and morals, inferiority, suffering, illness, frustrations, and guilt feelings. Nearly a quarterly of the persons were concerned about family problems, child training, infidelity, separation, divorce, poor adjustment to marriage, religious differences in the home, and other problems that are symptoms of personal problems as they touch the lives of others. The remaining fraction were concerned with social community, and national problems, or the more traditional religious concerns.

The preacher who is able to identify such needs and see people in terms of such needs has taken a very important step toward situationally-enlightened preaching that gets at the heart of people’s problems. Jackson cautions against unrealistic expectations when preaching to people’s

60 Ibid., 13.
61 Ibid., 14.
needs, as such preaching can exacerbate matters. He explains: “A sermon may set false goals, stimulate unhealthy resentments, promise a security that is unreal, encourage submissiveness, on the one hand, or aggressiveness, on the other, that could easily lead to more acute personality difficulties.”62 To this end, a life-situation sermon “should face the reality of life honestly, proceed creatively toward goals that are reasonable and challenging to the best in life.”63 In the final analysis, the aim of the life-situation sermon is to meet life-disrupting forces with soul-healing preaching.

Robert J. McCracken succeeded Fosdick as pastor at Riverside Church. His comments on life-situation preaching have been sparse. What he did say, however, adds value to our discussion. In The Making of the Sermon, McCracken notes that the point of departure for the life-situation preacher is a live issue of some kind; personal, social, ethical, or theological. He argues that the preacher must make it his business to “get at the core of the problem, and, that done, he goes on to work out the solution, with the biblical revelation, and the mind and spirit of Christ, as the constant points of reference and direction.”64 In a very real sense, then, life-situation preaching is solution-oriented preaching. It speaks to the core of what is ailing the listener. McCracken advised preachers to “start your sermon by sketching the problem,” which is “practical, living, urgent.”65 The problem is where people need help, he says. Even if the problem is not relevant to a particular listener, the listener will feel the impact of the words on his neighbors. The urgent need today, he wrote, is to bring preaching close to life, regardless of

62 Ibid., 15.
63 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 63.
one’s homiletic approach. Concluding his comments, he said: “Yes, whether expository, ethical, devotional, theological, apologetical, social, psychological, evangelical, topical, bring preaching close to life.” 66 The point here is that one’s method or approach to the preparation and delivery of a sermon is subordinate to meeting the urgent needs of listeners by bringing biblical revelation and practical counsel to bear on their problems.

In BUILDING SERMONS TO MEET PEOPLE’S NEEDS, Harold T. Bryson and James C. Taylor posit that a sermon will be people oriented when the preacher thinks about the various needs of the people. The preacher assesses and addresses the needs of the community, in each person’s particular situation, with the word of God. Understanding the community’s needs, they argue, heightens the preacher’s sense of building and delivering sermons to meet human needs. 67 Critical to meeting such needs is a basic understanding of human needs and human behavior. Bryson and Taylor note Abraham Maslow’s seven different categories of human need: aesthetic; knowing and understanding; self-actualization; esteem; love, affection, belonging; safety; and physiological. These basic needs have to be met. Period. Understanding Maslow’s concept of “hierarchy of needs,” they propound, will provide the preacher with insight into needs. Perceptively, they note: “Until these basic needs are met in a reliable, continuing manner, a person’s life will be dominated by them. He will not be interested deeply in other things while this domination lasts.” 68 Therefore, it is important that the preacher is able to discern people’s personal problems with insights from Maslow’s concept.

66 Ibid.


68 Ibid., 44.
People come to worship with all kinds of problems—financial distress, broken relationships, pressing deadlines, and unmet spiritual and physical needs, and other factors—for which they are seeking answers. Preaching at its best, according to life-situation proponents, speaks to these unmet needs with the power of the gospel. Now, it should be noted that not all life-situation preaching suggests that the starting place for the sermon is human needs or people’s problems. Bryson and Taylor maintain that the building and delivery of a sermon has both a human and dynamic element. They admonish preachers to “resolve to study carefully the Bible so that the foundation for your sermons will be a word from God rather than a human opinion.”

They use the analogy of a builder to help the preacher understand that the quality of a building, i.e., the sermon, is going to be determined by the character and skill of the builder. “If you were going to build a house,” they reason, “the quality of the house would be determined greatly by the character and skill of the builder. You need to think of yourself as a builder of sermons to meet people’s needs.” For Bryson and Taylor, the foundation of any sermon should be the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The preacher should be skilled in the tools of the preacher’s trade. Without such skill, the preacher’s product, the sermon, is going to be substandard. The point here is that the preacher as a builder of sermons must possess knowledge of God’s word in order to compose sermons that will truly meet people’s needs. It is also true that the preacher must understand people’s life situations so that she can bring the gospel to bear on human needs and problems. It is as important for preachers to know and understand what is happening in the lives of their people as it is for them to know and understand the Bible. Preachers who lack insight into human nature

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69 Ibid., 13.
70 Ibid., 15.
can benefit from pastoral counseling. Fosdick believed that preaching and pastoral counseling were one inseparable function of the preacher. In fact, Fosdick put pastoral counseling foremost in his ministry. In the next section, this study will consider the relationship between Fosdick’s life-situation preaching and pastoral counseling.

Life-Situation Preaching and Pastoral Counseling

Young preachers can benefit from life-situation preaching, although the lack of life experiences and maturity presents a problem for many young preachers. “Personal counseling,” Fosdick explains, “does not begin full force in the experience of a young minister fresh from seminary.” The problem, as Fosdick put it, is that young preachers are too inexperienced and immature, which prevents older adults from seeking the young preacher’s advice. In 1952, Fosdick published an article in Pastoral Psychology entitled “Personal Counseling and Preaching.” This article represents his most definitive remarks on the two disciplines. Here Fosdick discusses the relationship between personal counseling and preaching.

Fosdick believed that preaching and pastoral counseling were not two distinct functions, but rather one inseparable function of the preacher. “It is not a question of which is the more important, preaching or pastoral work; both must be done well,” writes Kemp. Preaching and personal counseling were two “indispensable offices of one vocational task;” inseparably conjoined in one office. In fact, Fosdick often said that he approached the pulpit as though he

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73 Kemp, 20.

74 Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 346.
was beginning a personal consultation.\textsuperscript{75} As Fosdick explains it, personal counseling helps the preacher to develop effective sermons. For Fosdick, personal counseling is as beneficial to preaching as preaching is to personal counseling.\textsuperscript{76} The hours spent in personal counseling provides insight into human nature that translates into insight for preaching. He said that the “right kind of preacher is coerced to become a personal counselor, and the right kind of personal counselor gains some of the most necessary ingredients of preaching.”\textsuperscript{77} For Fosdick, personal counseling was central in his ministry: “I am commonly thought of as a preacher, but I should not put preaching central in my ministry. Personal counseling has been central. My preaching at its best has itself been personal counseling on a group scale."\textsuperscript{78} He approached the pulpit as if he was undertaking a counseling session. This should not be underestimated or understated. The centrality of personal counseling in Fosdick’s ministry is important because everything he did in ministry, with an audience or individual, centered on the dignity and worth of the individual. His preaching, although addressed to a group, was a direct address to the individual within the group. The effect of such an approach is that the individual within the congregation feels as though the preacher is talking directly to him or her.

Fosdick’s hortative counseling regarding the importance of personal counseling for the preaching ministry is worthy of consideration. What is ultimately at stake is the decentralization of the individual. Individuals, not preaching, should be central in ministry, according to Fosdick.

\textsuperscript{75} Fosdick, “Personal Counseling and Preaching,” 55. This is evidence of Fosdick’s personalism. He was familiar with the work of the personalist, Borden Parker Bowne, the Boston University personalist and “father of American personalism.” Fosdick notes in \textit{Autobiography} that early in his ministry he was strongly attracted to Bowne’s personalism (64).

\textsuperscript{76} “Personal counseling” and “pastoral counseling” are used interchangeably throughout this study. Fosdick referred to the pastoral function of counseling as “personal counseling.”

\textsuperscript{77} Fosdick, \textit{Autobiography}, 51.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 215.
Fosdick constantly admonished his staff at Riverside to focus on the individual. Emphasizing this cardinal principle, Fosdick advised: “Keep your eyes on individuals; nothing in the long run matters in this church except what happens to them.” The relationship of personal counseling to preaching is that each function informs and enhances the other. The pulpit and the counseling room are both places in which help-seekers find help for their problems. Both activities center on the individual. Fosdick explains that the creative center of his ministry has been the firsthand dealing with individuals, which in turn has been a fruitful source of his preaching.

There are a few things to ponder when considering the effect of personal counseling on preaching. First, in the personal consultation room, the preacher is confronted with myriad issues and concerns. The preacher gains insight into parishioner’s lives. “Personal counseling imparts to the preacher a practical familiarity with human structure which he would not otherwise obtain, according to Linn.” As a result, ever once and again a real problem is presented and is solved with the power of the gospel. Fosdick affirmed as much in his experiences with personal counseling: “The Gospel works. One sees a miracle take place before one’s eyes. A life is made over, a family is saved, a valuable youth turns about in his tracks and heads right, a potential suicide becomes a happy and useful member of society…” Such experiences are the results of effective pastoral counseling.

Second, personal counseling deepens the preacher’s confidence in the gospel. Watching the transformation of human personality through the gospel breeds hope and faith in the preacher.

79 Ibid., 212.
80 Ibid., 218.
81 Linn, 24.
82 Ibid., 52
and listener alike. Such an experience can propel the preacher into the pulpit with mountain-moving, results-producing sermons. Third, personal counseling tends to shift the preacher’s mind from an obsession with his sermon’s subject to a purposeful concern about its subject. A sermon, Fosdick teaches, should not be a harmless discussion on a subject. A sermon, as noted previously, should have a definite objective, a purpose. Fosdick offers a point of clarification: “We are not saying that personal counseling by itself can make a good preacher. Obviously it cannot. But it can give tone and direction and significance to preaching which our generation critically needs.”

Fosdick counseled and preached to real people with real problems. He did so “using whatever biblical, topical, illustrative material could be marshaled to accomplish the transformation of persons.” Such sermons,” Linn observed, “suggest rather than command, explain rather than exhort, and discuss rather than dictate.” The point here is that personal consultation and preaching have an interdependent relationship in which one informs and contributes to the other, thereby bringing the gospel to bear on people’s real problems in a practical, person-centered way. Fosdick went as far as to claim that personal counseling was central in his ministry, and that he never could have preached for twenty years without the creative experience of personal counseling. Fosdick was an exceptional life-situation preacher

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83 Fosdick, “Personal Counseling and Preaching,” 53-54.

84 Linn, 25.

85 Ibid.

86 It is not difficult to see why this approach was appealing to Fosdick. Many people who are in the counseling field are people who have had a nervous breakdown, an ongoing psychological issue, or some other counseling related problem themselves. After his breakdown, Fosdick disclosed that he wholeheartedly wanted to help ordinary people get through their problems. To this end, he wrote: “One effect of it [nervous breakdown] on me was to make me want to get at folks—ordinary, everyday folks—and try to help them” (Autobiography, 78).
and counselor. For Fosdick, the consultation room was a laboratory in which to study and experiment with human nature in order to treat the maladies of his day. The advantages of personal counseling were so apparent to Fosdick’s ministry that he identifies pastoral counseling as the mainstay of his lengthy ministry.

Most contemporary preachers and homileticians alike understand the importance of preaching sermons that are close to life. Although they do not discuss life-situation preaching as an approach to preaching, they do, however, understand and stress the importance of preaching to life situations, as knowing and understanding the existential life situations of listeners is critical to any homiletical method or approach.

**Contemporary Homileticians’ Life-Situational Perspectives**

Contemporary homileticians understand the importance of preaching that takes seriously the life situations of listeners. In *Delivering the Sermon*, Teresa L. Fry Brown, an African-American woman,\(^87\) says, “preaching must involve an intimate, personal identification with the existential situation of the listeners, event to the point of gut-level emoting.”\(^88\) In her treatment of preaching, Fry Brown does not mention where she believes the sermon should start. She does, however, note that preaching “is communication in the concrete, filled with language and images from day-to-day details—dynamics, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, texture, and life scenes.”\(^89\) In

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\(^87\) The words “black” and “African American” are used interchangeably throughout this study. The major factor that indicates which one of the two words is preferred over the other is the way in which the words are used and referenced by the authors quoted in this study. The same is true for the words “white,” “European American,” or “of European descent.”


\(^89\) Ibid.
such communication, it is important that the preacher recognizes and identifies with the listener’s environment. There are two elements of Fry Brown’s theory of preaching that are important to this study.

First, Fry Brown notes that preaching involves personal identification with the existential situation of the listeners. Thus, knowing and understanding the existential situation of listeners plays an important role in preaching. Second, preaching addresses day-to-day details of life. Her description of preaching fits squarely with life-situation preaching, although she does not define preaching as such, but neither does Fosdick. For Fry Brown, the efficacy of the sermon lies in its ability to reinforce, correct, or transform “the convictions the listeners have as the speaker and the listener are invited to think again about beliefs.”\textsuperscript{90} In the final analysis, for Fry Brown, a sermon should speak to existential situations and transform the convictions of listeners.

Leonora Tisdale, a white female homiletician, describes Fosdick’s life-situation preaching as prophetic preaching. In \textit{Prophetic Preaching}, Tisdale defines prophetic preaching not as the type of preaching that predicts the future or deals with the end time, but rather as preaching that addresses public and social concerns.\textsuperscript{91} She identifies Fosdick as a prophet because he had a pastoral heart. He modeled how to be prophetic while being hospitable. The more deeply he came to know his flock, says Tisdale, the more deeply he became aware of their suffering.\textsuperscript{92} What’s more, she adds, Fosdick reminds that “it is possible to advocate strongly for a cause without at the same time condemning those who disagree” with us, and that it “is possible to speak up boldly for peace without at the same time condemning those who are caught up in

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{91} Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, \textit{Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach} (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010), 3.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 30.
the complexities of war.” He displayed a concern for the personal and social dynamics of people’s lives—a concern that he addressed through prophetic preaching.

Fosdick understood and valued the individual in the community. His concern for and love for the individual makes him a “courageous prophetic witness.” “Because Fosdick cared passionately about individuals,” writes Tisdale, “he also cared about the systems that affect a person’s life—be they theological (as in the fundamentalist/modernist debate) or political (as in his stance on pacifism).” He performed exegesis of the human person. He was skilled at exegeting persons in their contexts so that he could apply the gospel in relevant ways to their personal and social context. Tisdale argues that the church needs more “contextual preaching,” which she defines as, “preaching which not only gives serious attention to the interpretation of biblical texts, but which gives equally serious attention to the interpretation of congregations and their sociocultural contexts; preaching which not only aims toward greater ‘faithfulness’ to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but which also aims toward greater ‘fittingness’ (in content, form and style) for a particular congregational gathering of hearers.” Tisdale advocates a balanced approach to preaching that takes congregational context as seriously as biblical exegesis and denominational doctrine.

Whether it is personal identification with the existential situation of the listeners, a sermon that addresses public and social concerns, or exegesis of persons in their contexts, preaching must take seriously the life situations of listeners. Although different ethnic groups

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93 Ibid., 31.
94 Ibid., 37.
95 Ibid.
96 Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, Preaching as Local Folk Art (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 33.
face unique challenges in life, life-situation preaching effectively addresses their personal and social problems. The sociocultural context for African Americans is quite different from, say, Jewish or Irish people, and vice versa. Much of black preaching is life-situation preaching, as it speaks to the social, economic, political, and physical wellbeing of America’s black masses. Life-situation preaching and African-American preaching have many indistinguishable similarities.

**Life-Situation Preaching and Black Preaching**

As described, life-situation preaching is an approach to preaching that starts with people’s social, personal, and spiritual problems and attempts to bring the Bible and relevant truths to bear on such problems in order to prompt a decision or decisive action from the listener. In *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, the authors consider three principles of black preaching: (1) the centrality of the Bible, (2) picture painting and narration of the Bible, and (3) a close observation of life known as existential exegesis.\(^97\) Regarding the third principle, a close observation of life, one author notes that the African-American preacher desires relevance and that the preacher’s sermons will “help the hearer at points of need, not just reach them as abstract doctrine.”

In addition to the three principles noted, the authors note four classifications of homiletics: *social activist preaching*, which provides the spiritual, moral, and cultural underpinnings for liberation struggles; *black identity preaching*, which seeks to reconstruct blacks’ humanity, dignity, and self-esteem; *cultural survival preaching*, which constructs and maintains black culture; and *empowerment preaching*, which provides an unequivocal message.

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of wealth and success through change in consciousness as a liberation strategy. Each of these classifications concerns existential life situations—intracommunity violence and police brutality against black boys and men, which will be discussed in chapter 6, are specific to black life.

African-American homiletician Cleophus J. LaRue maintains that the distinctive power of black preaching is a matter “extraordinary experiences that have, among other results, forged a unique way of understanding the Bible and applying those insights in very practical ways.”

African Americans’ historical and contemporary experiences in American are unique, and, as a result, they interpret scripture differently from traditional understandings of Christianity. It is true that the centrality of the Bible is unmistakable in black preaching. It is also true that the existential life situation of African-American listeners is also critically important. Any preaching, especially black preaching, that fails to take seriously the lived experiences and existential context of its listeners is missing the homiletical mark. To be sure, LaRue maintains that African-Americans’ sociocultural experiences have a profound effect on their interpretation and understanding of who God is and how God works.

The point of departure for black preaching is the historical and contemporary experiences of African Americans. They have been subjected to a biased judicial system, debilitated schools, inadequate or no health care, low-paying jobs, inferior housing, racial discrimination, police brutality, inequality in education and employment, and social, economic, and political oppression. These experiences provide an interpretive lens through which African Americans view scripture and life. “It is,” writes LaRue, “that vital interpretive encounter between scripture and the struggles of the marginalized that the search for distinctiveness in black preaching should

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98 Ibid., 8-9.
begin.”\textsuperscript{100} In black preaching, the preacher, according to LaRue, believes that God is involved in the everyday affairs and circumstances of the marginalized, and that “God acts in very concrete and practical ways in matters pertaining to their survival, deliverance, advancement, prosperity, and overall well-being.”\textsuperscript{101}

LaRue further maintains that black preaching must emphasize what “blacks believe about God, scripture, and the life situations of those who hear black preaching on a consistent basis [author’s Italics].”\textsuperscript{102} The motif of a sovereign God that takes up the cause of the marginalized is salient in black preaching. LaRue remarks: “The God of the black church is conceived by the black religious tradition as being a responsive personal being with unquestioned, and unlimited, absolute power. Marginalized blacks have historically believed that a God who does not care does not count. Thus, a mighty God who takes up the cause of disposed African Americans is the major premise that undergirds powerful black preaching.”\textsuperscript{103} African-Americans’ interpretation of scripture and understanding of God is derived from their unique sociocultural context.

LaRue maintains that black preaching takes seriously God’s concern for and involvement in the everyday affairs of African Americans. Black preaching, as an art form, has been a potent force of social change, political empowerment, and spiritual renewal and transformation for the African-American community. To fully understand and appreciate black preaching, the reader must understand that African Americans’ interpretation and understanding of scripture is colored by their unique historical and contemporary experiences—oppression, discrimination, and

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 5.
marginalization—in America. Explanatorily, LaRue writes: “As a direct result of their struggle against oppression, blacks have historically derived from scripture a central truth that there is a God of infinite power who can be trusted to act mightily on their behalf. This understanding comes out of almost four centuries of oppression and struggle.” Consequently, African-Americans’ “life situations determine what blacks find redemptive in the scriptures, as opposed to some genre-specific [e.g., biblical narrative] partiality.” In the final analysis, the black homiletic tradition seeks to interpret and explain scripture on behalf of marginalized and powerless African Americans, and, in light of their social, economic, and political struggles, apply the gospel.

Black preaching addresses the black condition and is strongly committed to changing it. A hermeneutic principle articulated by Henry H. Mitchell in Black Preaching is that the gospel must speak to people’s current needs. “The Black ancestors felt no compulsion to be orthodox or accepted. They showed no inclination to follow literalistic interpretations such as those devised to justify slavery. On the contrary, they looked without vested bias for answers to Black people’s needs,” elucidates Mitchell. Black preaching seeks to carve out a black hermeneutic that is faithful to the unique thoughts and interpretations of the Bible that grow out of the black religious experience. As Mitchell shrewdly notes, “There is a radical difference between

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104 In Black Preaching: The Recovery of A Powerful Art (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), Henry H. Mitchell calls African Americans’ approach to scripture the “Black hermeneutic,” which is the “unique thoughts and interpretations of the Bible that grow out of the Black religious experience…” (17).

105 LaRue, 14-15.

106 Ibid., 15.


108 Ibid., 21.
listening to an essay designed to enlighten and listening to a Word desperately needed to sustain life.” Black congregations benefits from preaching that is down-to-earth and not pseudosophisticated or pseudointellectual.

Black preaching has distinguishable qualities. It is relevant to black listeners, practical in its delivery and theological application, applicable to black life situations, and actionable, that is, it has practical value in that it necessitates action (social, political, humanitarian, philanthropic). It is also practical in the sense that it is unencumbered by pretentious academic jargon. Mitchell acknowledges as much when he says that the black preacher must declare the gospel in the vernacular of people and resist the temptation to sound learned and proper.\(^\text{109}\) In a real sense, the black preacher faces a bicultural linguistic dilemma, explains Mitchell. He expounds:

> They must be fluent in Black language, for this is fundamental to their calling, and yet they must also be fluent in standard English, because they must communicate beyond their congregation. Their language must be black enough to generate rapport with the congregation by means of an identity which is perceived as close. They must be able to touch the souls of Black folk with soul language, putting them at ease and gaining greatest access by avoiding the linguistic signals of social distance.\(^\text{110}\)

Thus, the black preacher must be bicultural and bilingual to reach the black congregation and to communicate with nonblack folks outside the congregation. The best preachers from the black homiletical tradition—Martin Luther King, Jr., Gardner C. Taylor, Prathia L. Hall, James Alexander Forbes, Jr., Cheryl Sanders, Teresa L. Fry Brown, Charles E. Booth, Carolyn Ann Knight\(^\text{111}\)—have been able to communicate effectively to both black and white audiences.

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\(^{109}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 81.

In proclaiming the gospel to African-Americans’ life situations, black preaching is centered in the authority of the Bible. Noting the exception to the rule, Mitchell noticed that occasionally a black congregation would entertain black preaching that is topical in nature. The best of black preaching, as observed by Mitchell, is based on biblical authority and biblical insights.\textsuperscript{112} Mitchell qualifies this statement by noting that African Americans are not oblivious to scientific insights regarding literalism in biblical interpretation such as “bibliolaters,” “idolaters,” or “inerrantists.” Unlike the modernist-fundamentalist controversy that ensued in Fosdick’s day, black preaching is not in the mode of either “modernists” or “fundamentalist,” notes Mitchell.\textsuperscript{113} For African Americans, the word of God, Mitchell explains, filled the void once occupied by an authoritative oral tradition.

In the black preaching enterprise, the preacher is concerned with the existential problems of black people. “The Black preacher,” says Mitchell, “has had to give strength for the current day’s journey, the guidance and vision for extended survival in an absurdly trying existence.”\textsuperscript{114} The black congregation wants to know what the gospel says about their struggles and hardships. Regarding the congregation’s sermonic expectations, Mitchell remarks: “The Black worshipper is seeking the answers to visceral questions on which life itself depends. The solution of abstract problems can wait. The important questions are more pragmatic and immediate.”\textsuperscript{115} There is a distinctive difference between sermons that are designed to help people live godly lives, spiritual

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\item\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 56.
\item\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 57.
\item\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 105.
\item\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 127.
\end{enumerate}
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formation and character development, and sermons that are designed to help people stay alive, human preservation and survival. The latter has a sense of urgency that is unmistakably palpable.

Mitchell notes that the introduction of a black sermon consists of an important issue with which listeners can identify immediately. This observation speaks directly to the similarities of black and life-situation preaching. Although a black sermon may not start with the Bible, it is Bible-centered. The observation that the black sermon starts with an important issue may cause some to doubt black preaching’s fidelity to scripture. This particular element of the black sermon in no way diminishes the importance or centrality of the Bible in black preaching. Similar to Fosdick’s life-situation preaching for white people, black preaching gives primary emphasis to the immediate needs of black people.\(^\text{116}\)

In *Designing the Sermon*, James Earl Massey says that real preaching is rooted in God’s concern for persons.\(^\text{117}\) He maintains that real preaching is concerned with helping listeners to experience grace and the divine help that deals with “human sin and crippling experiences.”\(^\text{118}\) Real preaching, Massey argues, is more than the proclamation of biblical statements; it is, to be sure, a “probe into the prevailing assumptions and beliefs which have determined the major problems of our time.”\(^\text{119}\) This means that the preacher must be cognizant of the problems and thoughts of those to whom she preaches. Real preaching challenges the status quo, not uphold it. Massey explains it this way, “So we design our sermons and preach them—not to preserve a world or protect it, but to create a new order through announcing hope for change and bidding all

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 128.


\(^{118}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 17.
to accept and act upon that hope and need.” In Massey’s line of thought, real preaching is vital; that is, it deals with real people’s needs and offers help from a real God. In terms of sermon design, Massey is less rigid than most homileticians and preachers. For him, a sermon can be preached to offer a solution to a problem, to teach doctrine, to address spiritual or social ills, to support a cause, or to sustain listeners.

Massey notes that the central goal in preaching is to relate the gospel to the listener’s life. “Any sermon,” writes Massey, “will have increased appeal when an increased understanding of the listener and his or her personal world informs the planning behind it.” One of Massey’s guiding homiletical principles for shaping a sermon plan and procedure is to begin the sermon with a human issue or divine claim—“some human condition to which one must speak or some divine concern to which one must point the hearer’s attention.” Unlike Fosdick who maintained that every sermon should have for its main business the solving of some vital problem, Massey advocated an either-or approach to sermon design. The take away here is not so much the importance of the design or structure of the sermon as it is the purpose and goal of the sermon. Regardless of whether the preacher starts with a human issue or divine claim, the primary goal is to relate the gospel to the listener’s life.

As is the case in Fosdick’s life-situation preaching, Massey explains that ideas for sermons can come from something read, from some visit, from a congregational need, or from counseling experiences. Such activities and experiences for Massey provide insight into

120 Ibid., 17.
121 Ibid., 17.
122 Ibid., 25.
123 Ibid., 30.
124 Ibid., 30.
human concerns and needs, as it did for Fosdick, in that his counseling experiences enriched his preaching ministry. His ministry, as discussed, was the product of life-situation preaching and pastoral counseling. Both Massey and Fosdick agree that pastoral counseling is the supreme activity to gain insight into human nature and personality. Perhaps it is true, as Barbara Brown Taylor has said, that if the preacher is also the congregation’s priest and pastor, then the “quality of their life together—the memories, conversations, experiences, and hopes they share—is the fabric from which the sermon is made.”

The Reverend Gardner Calvin Taylor has never been identified as a life-situation preacher, though the similarities in homiletical theory between his and Fosdick’s are unmistakably clear. After forty years of preaching, Taylor still believes that “a sermon usually has a better chance in our biblically illiterate time if it begins with a ‘cool introduction’ in which the secret, or purpose, of the sermon is suggested but not exposed.” He also believed that the introduction to a sermon “ought to touch the hearers at a point of concern or interest in their lives.” In Taylor’s homiletics, the issues that concern the structuring of a sermon includes the preacher’s own faith about scripture, the preacher’s personality, and the intent and type of passage chosen for the text, each of which is briefly discussed below.

With respect to the preacher’s faith about scripture, one’s theological belief about scripture affects one’s understanding and interpretation of the Bible. Therefore, the preacher has to strike the right balance between fundamentalism and liberalism, according to Taylor. The fundamentalist stance relies too much on the authority of scripture and tradition while the

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127 Ibid.
liberalist stance relies too much on human thought. Taylor exposes the weaknesses of each approach. On one hand, “If one sees Scripture as being word for word, accent by accent, incident by incident, genealogy by genealogy, the precise word of God, then the sermon is likely to take on a quality of ex cathedra pronouncement.”128 The point is, a sermon can be so textually focused that it fails to establish a vital connection with its listeners’ lives. On the other hand, “If the preacher believes that sermons are only the most elevated human literature, then the sermon is likely to ignore the mysteries of God’s self-disclosures which are the very kernel of biblical material.”129 Exploring both sermon options, Taylor maintains that a sermon has the greatest chance of accomplishing its purpose when it arises out of the preacher’s own faith. 

Regarding the preacher’s personality, Taylor notes that a preacher’s personality affects the interpretation and delivery of a sermon. The fact is, some texts are simply better suited for some than for others. The beauty of the preaching enterprise is that various preachers with distinct personalities can each preach the same text with ingenuity of interpretation and presentation. “It is the glory of preaching that one text can be given as many different nuances, all of them loyal to the Scriptures, as there are preachers dealing with them,”130 notes Taylor. The sermon is as much a reflection of the preacher’s personality as the preacher’s personality is a reflection of the sermon. The two are inextricably linked. Taylor notes that Fosdick’s pulpit work reflects a “deep piety and great loyalty” that never would have been possible if he did not suffer a nervous breakdown and spend three months in an Elmira sanitarium. This experience and the sensitivity that caused it had much to do with the great preaching gift of Fosdick and his capacity

128 Ibid., 43.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid., 44.
to reach people at their depths, observes Taylor. The preaching event is in essence a matter of the preacher communicating the truth and relevance of the Bible for the life situations of the diverse personalities occupying the pews. Therefore, Taylor cautions, “the preacher needs to consider himself or herself in relation to the text, whatever it may be, in order to guard against attempting, on the one hand, what is unnatural, and on the other hand, what is merely eccentric.”

As regards the intent and type of passage chosen for the text, Taylor says that a sermon must stay true to the intent and meaning of the passage in its original setting. A discussion of Taylor’s hermeneutics is beyond scope of this project. Suffice it to say that for Taylor the conscientious preacher will avoid misinterpreting and misapplying a text. Dealing with the text contextually does not mean that the preacher cannot exercise imaginative intelligence in interpreting and preaching the text. It does mean, however, that the preacher’s sermon ought to be authorized by and faithful to the biblical text. It is bad when a sermon lacks scriptural underpinnings and even worse when it takes a text out of context and uses it wrongly.

Taylor hints at the application of *eisegesis* in interpreting and misusing the text. Eisegesis is the process of interpreting a text by “reading into” the text in such a way that it exposes one’s predispositions and presuppositions. Essentially, the interpreter imposes his or her on meaning onto and into the text, despite the context and original intent of the author. What Taylor advises, simply put, is sound exegesis—a critical explanation or interpretation of a text based on its social-historical context and authorial intent, observing the setting and surroundings thereof.


Taylor cites an anonymous preacher who phrases the exegetical process creatively, all the while asking thought-provoking, sermon-enhancing questions:

A wise preacher of another generation suggested that one ought to “walk up and down the street on which a text lives.” The surrounding terrain ought to be taken into account. What is the block like on which the text is located? Is it a rundown section, or does it sparkle with a neat tidiness? Is the sky overhead leaden or gray, or is it bright and sunlit? Does one hear light and merry music in the neighborhood of the text, or are there solemn cadences of some sad and mournful time? One need not get lost in the atmosphere, but a sense of climate will greatly aid the sermon in breathing with life and having, therefore, an interest for living people.¹³³

I need not explicate the obvious. I should say, though, that Taylor is encouraging preachers to be faithful to exegesis, as it yields certain benefits. First, the movement of the text itself can determine the structure of the sermon. Second, even more suggestive, the movement of the text can provide an outline and structure for those who would like to preach without a manuscript. In Taylor’s theory of preaching, “the structure, design, and delivery of the sermon ought to breathe with the awareness that it is doing business in the supreme matters of human life.”¹³⁴ He explains further, “It ought not be trivial or fancy or syrupy or mean or truckling to any human pride or pretense.”¹³⁵ For Taylor, the task and purpose of the sermon ought to be intelligible. The task is to bring the gospel to bear on the issues and concerns of human life while the purpose is to reach the hearts and minds of listeners, bringing them before the transformative presence of God.

Therefore, it is the preacher’s responsibility to bring the word of God to the people of God and to have them intersect. Describing the preacher’s responsibility, Taylor says, “Our responsibility is to bring that which is given to that which is happening and to have them

¹³³ Ibid., 46.
¹³⁴ Ibid., 48.
¹³⁵ Ibid.
intersect.” For African-Americans, this means bringing the gospel into dialogue with the profound problems and social conditions of black existence that affect their lives, livelihood, neighborhoods, and communities. Despite the greatness of American society, America is still a nation torn and divided. “This country, with all of the incalculable resources, the immeasurable riches, natural and human, and with a political creed among the most hallowed with which the mind of man has ever dealt and the societies of man have ever wrestled, blessed in countless ways, still is a nation torn and divided,” notes Taylor. What makes for decisive preaching in the face of such conditions is “a willingness to forsake skimming the surface and to look into the abyss of our human situation, to deal with the splendor and the squalor of our humanity, the grandeur and the grime, always with a glance up at him who connects these two.” A case in point is racism, as Taylor explains: “Racism is set against the one-blood tie which God ordained in our creation. Racism, whether it is the rapacity of a majority position or the reactionary toughness and terrorism of an outraged minority, assaults the mandate of our creation that we human beings are to have dominion over…every living creature that crawls on the earth (paraphrase of Genesis 2:26), not over each other.”

Preaching at its best confronts the destructive sins of our society while challenging the community’s delinquencies and derelictions. Taylor, like Fosdick, was concerned to show the relevance of the gospel for a particular listener who was struggling with specific issues.

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point of homiletical intersection for both preachers is the belief that at the heart of preaching is the preacher’s ability to establish a vital connection with listeners by understanding and addressing their issues, interests, and concerns through the medium of preaching. Taylor and Fosdick share many affinities and similarities as it relates to their respective homiletical theories. Both preachers have inspired many an earnest preacher to excellence in preaching. A superb study, which is beyond the purpose of this study, is a comparison of both preachers’ homiletics. In the next chapter, this study will explore the theoretical foundation of Fosdick’s sermon composition practice, provide insights into his life-situation preaching, and discuss his understanding of the purpose of a sermon.

Chapter 3
Fosdick’s Preaching Theory and Practice

Fosdick’s Theory of Preaching

In Building a Sermon, Gardner Calvin Taylor stated that preaching in mainline churches is too flat, too horizontal, too colorless, and too unimaginative.\textsuperscript{140} Taylor’s critique of preaching rings true today. All too often what is heard from the pulpit is recapitulations of topics or issues that have been thoroughly exhausted, or recycled common sense—the rehashing of practical matters in an unimaginative way. John Killinger also recognized this problem when he wrote that, “instead of appearing in the pulpit with cut-and-dried homilies, we need to come before people in common humanity and work with them toward the conclusions.” He stated further that, once done, “the conclusions will be personal and inescapable to them.”\textsuperscript{141} One can conclude from both preachers’ comments that preaching should be imaginative, personal, and relevant to the lives of listeners. This is exactly what Fosdick sought to do. Given his success as a preacher, his theory and practice of preaching is worth revisiting.

Fosdick’s words on his theory and practice of preaching have been economical. Although a prolific writer, he did not publish a book on preaching as such. Much to the dismay of professional homileticians and clergy alike, Fosdick declined to write a book length account of his theory of preaching. This is unfortunate. Fortunately, however, we have enough sources to get a sense of the theoretical foundation of his sermon preparation and preaching practices. A synthesis of published articles and autobiographical remarks help to provide insight into Fosdick’s theory of preaching. Particularly helpful is Fosdick’s chapter in his autobiography

\textsuperscript{140} Gardner Calvin Taylor, “Building A Sermon,” 172.

\textsuperscript{141} John Killinger, Fundamentals of Preaching, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 35.
entitled “Learning How to Preach.” Helpful also are articles such as “What Is the Matter With Preaching?”; “How I Prepare My Sermons”; and “Personal Counseling and Preaching.” Taken together these sources distill the essence of Fosdick’s theory and practice of preaching. Each of these sources are consulted in order to develop a coherent picture of Fosdick’s approach to preaching.

Published in 1952, Fosdick’s autobiography provides insights into the development of his life-situation preaching. Recollecting his preaching ministry at Montclair, Fosdick confessed that he was “an ignoramus about the effective preparation of a sermon.” He compared his experience to “a boy thrown into deep water and told to swim when he does not know how.” His critique of his seminary’s lectures in homiletics is that, first, they lacked relevance to actual experience, and, second, the information was soon forgotten because it was not implemented in practice. What saved Fosdick, in his own assessment, was his training in public speaking:

My greater difficulty during my years at Montclair was not with others but with myself. I did not know how to preach. Doubtless part of the trouble was due to my still unsteady nerves, but much of it was still downright ignorance of how to tackle the preparation of a sermon. What saved me, I suspect, was the fact that I had been trained to stand up and talk in public, so that, however little I had to say, I could at least say it.

The effective preparation of a sermon proved inordinately difficult for Fosdick. The process of composing meaningful and purposeful sermons was tortuously painful for the young Fosdick, as he revealed in his autobiography: “I recall vividly the tormented weeks I spent during the first year and more in Montclair, often distraught myself and fairly driving my wife to

142 Fosdick, Autobiography, 83.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
distraction, trying to prepare sermons that would be worth preaching."\(^{145}\) Frustrated and discontented with the prevailing expository and topical sermons, which we have already discussed, Fosdick found himself in a stalemate. He dare not continue his rote and he dare not give up the pastorate. The gist of the issue is that the essence of what he wanted to say was at odds with the traditional method of sermon preparation and the prevailing approaches to preaching. As a result, a new approach to preaching was a nonnegotiable desideratum for the struggling young preacher.

On his journey to effective preaching, Fosdick thought through the purpose of a sermon and concluded: “People come to church on Sunday,” Fosdick said, “with every kind of personal difficulty and problem flesh is heir to. A sermon was meant to meet such needs; it should be personal counseling on a group scale.”\(^{146}\) He believed that the sermon should have a practical objective—it should meet the needs of people. To do this, Fosdick ingeniously incorporated personal counseling into pastoral ministry in order to keenly understand and intelligently address practical matters regarding people’s problems with life-situation preaching. Personal counseling was the medium through which he gleaned insight (“clairvoyance” as he called it) into human nature:

If one had clairvoyance, one would know the sins and shames, the anxieties and doubts, the griefs and disillusionments, that filled the pews, and could by God’s grace bring the saving truths of the gospel to bear on them as creatively as though he were speaking to a single person. That was the place to start—with the real problems of the people. That was a sermon’s specialty, which made it a sermon, not an essay or a lecture.\(^{147}\)

\(^{145}\) Ibid., 84.

\(^{146}\) Ibid., 94.

\(^{147}\) Ibid.
The person, the individual, although in a crowd, was the object of Fosdick’s approach to preaching. His silent prayer each Sunday was for the individual, as he prayed: “O God, some one person here needs what I am going to say. Help me to reach him!”

In protest against the topical and expository methods, Fosdick’s approach started with the real problems of the people. Fosdick was convinced that the Gospel should be brought to bear on some problem that afflicted people. A sermon, then, as he saw it, was designed to meet such needs:

Every sermon should have for its main business the head-on constructive meeting of some problem which was puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives, and no sermon which so met a real human difficulty, with light to throw on it and help to win a victory over it, could possibly be futile.

Although the paragraph above is taken from Fosdick’s autobiography, it is a restatement from an article published in Harper’s Magazine, 1928. In his homiletical experimentation, Fosdick discovered that the congregation was responding to his preaching because he was handling a subject of interest to them. A preacher is “functioning,” according to Fosdick, if the preacher is helping folk to solve their real problems. He explains “functioning” in this manner: “Any preacher who, with even moderate skill, is thus helping folk to solve their real problems is functioning. He never will lack an audience. He may have little learning or eloquence but he is doing the one thing that is a preacher’s special business. He is delivering the goods which the community has a right to expect from the pulpit.”

This approach was palatable to Fosdick because he was genuinely concerned about people and their problems. In light of this, it is not surprising that Fosdick started his sermon with “life situations.” For Fosdick, preaching was a person-centered undertaking. The person and

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148 Ibid., 100.
149 Ibid.
150 Ibid., 95.
the person’s attendant problems provided the content for and of Fosdick’s preaching. For Fosdick, a sermon was not merely a discussion on a topic. It was more than that. A sermon, he theorized, should create in the congregation the thing the preacher is talking about. What does Fosdick mean by this? He explains:

My own major difficulty sprang from the fact that starting a sermon with a problem, however vital and urgent, suggests a discussion, a dissertation, a treatise. A sermon, however, is more than that. The preacher’s business is not merely to discuss repentance but to persuade people to repent; not merely debate the meaning and possibility of Christian faith, but to produce Christian faith in the lives of his listeners; not merely to talk about the available power of God to bring victory over trouble and temptation, but to send people out from their worship on Sunday with victory in their possession.¹⁵¹

Thus, the sermon should do something significant and tangible in the lives of congregants. It should achieve results. It should meet real needs. It should bring about the transformation of human personality from a troubled soul to a victorious person. Fosdick’s experimentation with life-situation preaching became exhilarating. He discovered that preaching need not fail to make a transforming difference in someone’s life if the preacher is dealing with the “profoundest concerns of personality, with incalculable possibilities dependent on what is said that day.”¹⁵² Fosdick was convinced that preaching should speak to the deepest problems and communicate how the gospel can be brought to bear on those problems to bring about spiritual transformation and rejuvenation.

Fosdick's approach to preaching does not presuppose expertise in the art of preaching. On the contrary, it is universally applicable to preachers of modest ability. In an eye-opening assessment of the preaching of his day, Fosdick remarked that sermons were uninteresting, inconsequential, and disconnected from the congregation. He explains: “One obvious trouble

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 98
¹⁵² Ibid., 100.
with the mediocre sermon, even when harmless, is that it is uninteresting. It does not matter. It could as well be left unsaid. It produces this effect of emptiness and futility largely because it establishes no connection with the real interests of the congregation.”  

However well intended the sermon, however genuine the preacher, however thorough the method, if the preacher, Fosdick exclaims, takes for granted the thinking and concerns of people, he or she is not functioning. To this end, he writes: “It is pathetic to observe the number of preachers who commonly on Sunday speak religious pieces in the pulpit, utterly failing to establish real contact with the thinking or practical interests of their auditors.” Pathetic and unnecessary are the uncharitable words Fosdick employs to describe preachers who fail to establish a vital connection with listeners because their homiletical gauge did not accurately display the interests and concerns of the congregation.

Fosdick notes further that, all things being equal (a capable preacher, an appropriate text, and a well-chosen and well-developed sermon), the effect of a sermon is contingent upon the preacher’s ability to make something transformative happen in people’s lives. Pointedly, Fosdick said: “The subject was well chosen and well developed, but for all that, nothing happened. The effect was flat. So far as the sermon was concerned, the congregation might as well have stayed home.” In stern criticism of the topical and expository methods, Fosdick notes what he sees as the limitations of these methods and their unfortunate consequences: “The reason for this [ineffectiveness of the sermon] can commonly be traced to one cause: the preacher started his sermon at the wrong end. He made it the exposition of a text or the elucidation of a subject.

154 Ibid.
155 Ibid., 33.
instead of a well-planned endeavor to help solve some concrete problems in the individual lives before him.”\textsuperscript{156} Whatever the case, the preacher’s method of preparation has dire consequences for the composition and preaching of a sermon.

The problem that Fosdick notes is not that the preacher lacks intelligence or character but rather the preacher’s method is flawed. A flawed method only produces flawed sermons, as it corrupts the integrity of the sermon composition process, thereby producing sermons that are of little to no interest to listeners. It is not an exaggeration to say that, For Fosdick, everything comes down to method, i.e., the preacher’s approach to sermon composition and preaching. As Fosdick saw it, the problem was threefold. First, the preacher lacked a worthwhile method of sermon preparation; second, the training received in seminary lacked a practical element that enabled the preacher to connect with listeners; third, the preacher did not see clearly the aim of the sermon. He believed that the only justifiable aim of the sermon was to help people solve their problems. Thus, an interesting sermon is one that helps people in a practical way to understand and overcome their problems.

Making unambiguously clear the aim of the sermon, Fosdick asserted: “Every sermon should have for its main business the solving of some problem—a vital, important problem, puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives—and any sermon which thus does tackle a problem…and help some individual practically to find their way through it cannot be altogether uninteresting.”\textsuperscript{157} The preacher arouses the congregation’s interest when the sermon is a practical affair in which the preacher is “handling a subject they are puzzled about, or way of living they have dangerously experimented with, or an experience that has bewildered them, or

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 29.
an ideal they have been trying to make real, or a need they have not known how to meet.”

When the preacher fails to address a practical concern or fails to connect with the people, the preacher’s earnest endeavor amounts to a futile liturgical exercise. If it is true, as Fosdick has said, that people are interested in themselves, their own problems, and the way to solve their problems, then it is also true that any approach to ministry that takes seriously the needs of people is going attract the listener’s keen interest.

As Fosdick saw it, the final test of a sermon’s effectiveness was how many individuals sought the preacher for personal consultation after the preaching event. He addressed the matter explicitly when he said that his “ideal of a sermon is an animated conversation with the audience concerning some vital problem of the spiritual life.” Effective preaching for Fosdick was an “animated conversation” in which the preacher was able to connect with and solve problems for listeners. An animated conversation for Fosdick was a preaching event in which the preacher established vital contact with the problems and concerns of listeners through vibrant preaching. As Fosdick said, “The more a preacher can make his sermon an elevated and animated rendition of the sort of thing he would do for an individual soul, when he was at his best, the better the sermon is likely to be.” The preacher is not concerned with preaching a sermon solely for the purpose of edification or indoctrination, although this can certainly be a part of it, but rather for the sole purpose of helping people solve their real problems.

Gardner C. Taylor once related that Dr. Paul Scherer once said that preaching is 10 percent genius and 90 percent firm application of the pants to a chair. This is incontestably

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158 Ibid.
159 Fosdick, “Animated Conversation,” 47.
160 Ibid., 48.
true in the case of Fosdick. As far as Fosdick was concerned, nothing could make preaching easy. He believed that preaching involved “drenching a congregation with one’s lifeblood.”162 A consummate craftsman, Fosdick worked hard to produce sermons. His method of sermon composition took an entire week. In fact, Fosdick worked about sixteen hours every week on a sermon that lasted about one-half hour. He displayed discipline, diligence, creativity, and intelligence in sermon composition. He worked through various parts of his sermon Monday through Thursday, finishing the final manuscript on Friday noon. On Saturday mornings, he rethought the matter as if his congregation were visibly before his eyes, meticulously editing and rewording his manuscript. Invariably, Fosdick’s sermon was ready for the pulpit by noontime Saturday. The fact is, no method will produce the desired results of effective preaching if a preacher is unwilling to surrender self to systematic reading, discipline in writing, and critical theological reflection. The time spent in study will pay dividends during sermon delivery. Having established a fundamental grounding in Fosdick’s theory of preaching, this study now turns to the mechanics of Fosdick’s approach to preaching.

**The Mechanics of Fosdick’s Life-Situation Preaching**

In 1928, Fosdick published an article entitled “How I Prepare My Sermons” in *Harper’s Magazine*.163 This article explicates his approach to the preparation of a sermon. Foremost for Fosdick was the practical usefulness of a sermon. The thesis of this article is that every sermon’s central motive should be the achievement of some definite objective; that is to say, every sermon


should have a specific intent, an aim. Although succinct, the article provides keen insight into Fosdick’s preparation of a sermon, delivery, and techniques.

For Fosdick, there were two factors involved at the origin of a sermon—a definite objective (purpose of the sermon) and relevant truth (an implement or resource to serve a definite intent). Fosdick’s approach to the preparation of a sermon began with intense mentation regarding what he hoped the sermon would achieve once preached. Fosdick brainstormed what he hoped to achieve in a sermon (the aim) and what he hoped the sermon would achieve (the results). In “Animated Conversation,” Fosdick explains this process clearly, when he said:

No sermon seems to me to get well under way until I have clearly in mind some difficulty that people are facing, some question that they are asking, some sin they are committing, some possibility they are missing, some confused thinking they are doing, so that I have before me rather a goal toward which I aim than simply a subject or a text from which I talk.  

Having a clear picture of the sermon’s objective was the first critical step for Fosdick. Edifyingly, he wrote:

It may be to help individuals in facing some personal problem, or the answering of a puzzling question in theology, or the persuasion of tempted souls to abandon some popular sin, or the confrontation of some public evil with the Christian ethic, or the winning of wavering minds and consciences to a definite decision for Christ, but I, for one, cannot start a sermon until I clearly see what I propose to get done on Sunday morning.  

The object of Fosdick’s sermon always involved a subject. For Fosdick, an analysis of listeners’ needs during personal consultation provided a wealth of information and new ideas for a sermon. The subject of Fosdick’s life-situation sermon is derived from congregational needs. In this regard, Linn notes: “Thus the sermon subject is not merely the whim of the preacher, nor a late item from the newspaper, nor an exposition of a Bible passage, but is the satisfaction of

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164 Fosdick, “Animated Conversation,” 47.
165 Fosdick, “How I Prepare My Sermons,” 43.
some personal need of one or more of the congregation.”166 Fosdick was in touch with the way in which the forces of life—individual, social, economic, and international—aFFECTED individuals. In *On Being a Real Person* Fosdick notes that people faced fears, confusions, sins, prejudices, hates, loves, successes, doubts, sorrows, failures, despair, conflicts, sicknesses, diseases, and inferiorities.167 Copious ideas emanate from such aspects of life. “The selection of this problem at the beginning,” explains Linn, “is of utmost importance because it becomes the goal which he must aim.”168 Fosdick’s choice of subject was something that was troubling to the vast majority of his listeners.

After the selection of an object and a subject, Fosdick searched for a relevant truth, turning to the Bible invariably. Sometimes a single passage would suffice; other times, multiple passages. The biblical passages were explained in a highly specialized manner that undergirded the sermon. Such passages were relevant to the aim of the sermon or meant to drive home the purpose of the sermon. That is to say, the relevant truth reinforced the aim of the sermon. “The preacher does not tell all that he knows...but he carefully uses its relevant meaning to throw light on the specific purpose.”169 The reason for finding and putting forward a relevant truth in the first place is, in Fosdick’s words, “to drop the truth, like a pile driver, ramming home the impact to achieve a definite result.”170 The relevant truth is a concrete and universally accepted truth that helps the sermon achieve its purpose.

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166 Linn, 27. Some of the general sources of subjects for preaching include the needs of listeners, written correspondence such a personal letter, knowledge of psychology, and reading general literature (28-30).


168 Linn, 28.

169 Ibid., 67.

170 Fosdick, “How I Prepare My Sermons,” 43.
After determining the definite objective and relevant truth, Fosdick practiced free association of ideas, a phrase borrowed from psychology. He wrote down any idea that was directly or indirectly relevant to his sermon. I quote Fosdick at length here because of the way in which he explains this brainstorming process:

At this stage I do not consider how the sermon will begin or end or what its structure is going to be. I give free gangway to my mind and let it pick up anything within the scope of the sermon’s object and subject which it may change to light upon. If an idea is only a vague intimation with no development or application evident, I do not labor it. If an idea branches out into consecutive suggestions, I briefly note them. I observe no logical continuity in accepting any suggestion that may come but jot it down. This process may go on for hours—one awakening another and all of them unorganized jumble and potpourri, without order or logical connection; but, not infrequently, when this stage is finished, I have the basic material, the loose bricks, with which the sermon will be built.\(^ {171}\)

Fosdick gave his mind complete freedom to consider any idea that traversed his mental highway. Subsequent to determining the definite objective and relevant truth and brainstorming, Fosdick worked on the organization of his sermon. This was a creative process. Fosdick asked four specific research questions to help him communicate the matter at hand. A quick survey of the research questions suggests four different areas of inquiry, such as literature, personal counseling, the Bible, and personal experience. The questions are as follow:

1. What have I ever read in general literature—biography, history, novels, poetry—that throws light upon my theme?

2. What have I ever run upon in personal counseling that illustrates the human need with which I am dealing and the resources to meet it?

3. Where, beyond the passages I have already thought of, does the Bible—that vast storehouse of experience—illumine the sermon’s problem and the way to treat it?

4. What, in my own personal experience, has this intimately meant to me, and what—honest to goodness!—does it really mean now in my own life?\(^ {172}\)

\(^{171}\) Ibid.

\(^{172}\) Ibid., 44.
Once researched, the answers provide the structural outline of the sermon. Fosdick did not deliberately build the sermon’s structure; it emerged from the research. None of his sermons developed in the same way. Each was different. Fosdick arranged his thoughts psychologically, not logically. This is not to say that he was inclined to writing illogical sermons. Certainly not! The rationale for this structure is simple. The preacher, he wrote, “is after his audience to create a change in them, and therefore his primary endeavor must be to arrange his thought in a psychological fashion, so that he may start where they are in their thinking…”\textsuperscript{173} As it relates to the psychological arrangement of the sermon, the practical application was foremost, as it could make or break a sermon. Fosdick wrote: “I often find that this contrast between a merely logical and a vitally psychological arrangement of thought can make or unmake a sermon.”\textsuperscript{174} When the psychological outline did not emerge, Fosdick commenced writing until the outline became clear. This process was tedious at times.

Fosdick spent sixteen hours or more each week composing his sermons. He noted that sometimes the entire organization was clear; other times, he only saw where to begin; other times, he started with the relevant truth; other times, he began with an illustration or the conclusion. Suffice it to say that the sermon’s structure was a creative process that emerged while thinking, reading, and writing. Writing was an important part of sermon composition for Fosdick. Of course, when writing, one needs not always begin at the beginning or even in the middle; one can actually begin at the end, as many a writer-preacher does. But with persistence and perseverance all of the parts eventually begin to come together. So Fosdick’s experience is

\textsuperscript{173} Fosdick, “How I Prepare My Sermons,” 43.

not all that unusual, but it is good to know what he sometimes experienced when writing the sermon.

As regards preaching and writing, the two practices have an interdependent relationship in Fosdick’s mind. Candidly, he writes: “I do not see how a man can preach without writing. I always have thought with my pen in hand. My preaching naturally began to turn into books.”175 Every sermon preached by Fosdick was written in full by hand. In his critical observation of preachers who do not write, Fosdick noticed “monotonous style, a limited vocabulary with few synonyms, repetitious ruts of thought, and finally a quick change of pastorate to find a congregation unfamiliar with the preacher’s now well-worn clichés.”176

Writing sermons has its benefits, to be sure. Writing, explains Fosdick, “forces careful consideration of phraseology, makes the preacher weigh his words, compels him to reread what he has written and criticize it without mercy, constrains him to clear up obscurities in thought and language, begets discontent with repetitious mannerisms, and allows the preacher, before he mounts the pulpit, to listen, as it were, to his own sermon as a whole and judge whether it would hit his nail on the head were he an auditor.”177 Hence, writing is indispensable to effective preaching. Fosdick’s sermons eventually turned into books. As one writer put it, “After the success of his early books, he must have realized he could reach two audiences. With one compositional effort, he concomitantly addressed the spiritual needs of his immediate listeners

175 Fosdick, Autobiography, 89.
176 Fosdick, “How I Prepare My Sermons,” 44.
177 Ibid., 44-45.
and reached his reading public.”

Suffice it to say, Fosdick encouraged the preachers of his day to write their manuscripts in full to avoid the aforementioned pitfalls.

Writing a sermon for listeners can be a challenging undertaking, as preaching from a manuscript can be a monotonous and somnolent experience for the congregation, especially if the preacher lacks enthusiasm and controlled animation. To this, Fosdick responded, “No sermon need be so written that it lacks spontaneity.” Fosdick overcame this problem by learning to write for listeners and not readers. He had a gift for writing conversational-styled sermons. When done well, the listeners, Fosdick notes, will neither know nor care that the preacher reads from a manuscript. As Halford R. Ryan observed: “The nexus of Harry Emerson Fosdick’s career was his ability to write for preaching and to preach in writing.” Fosdick maintained a writing-for-speaking routine throughout his professional ministry, Ryan notes. Writing for listeners necessitates a different approach to the composition of a sermon. Fosdick discovered that he could preach from a manuscript as though he were not reading but talking. Moreover, he discovered that he could do so with “just as much freedom, spontaneity, colloquial directness, and person-to-person impact as though no manuscript were on the pulpit.”

Fosdick’s sermons were such that he wrote as though “he were speaking, with the direct impact of work on the ear always in mind.” Fosdick’s direct, colloquial discourse used in his

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179 Ibid., 45.

180 Ibid., 7.

181 Fosdick, “How I Prepare My Sermons,” 45. Fosdick experimented with all three methods of sermon delivery: memorizing the manuscript, speaking from an outline, and reading from a manuscript. He concluded that the best way to deliver a sermon, at least for him, was to read it as though he were talking.

182 Ibid.
sermons and lectures presupposed listeners and envisioned a particular group to whom he spoke. He used his imagination in the composition of a sermon. As he composed his sermon, he imagined that the congregation was present before him, especially the specific type of person whose mind and conscience he proposed to reach, and wrote as though the two of them were face-to-face. The upshot, according to Fosdick, “ought to be one of talk—plain, straightforward, illuminating, helpful talk—between the preacher and his congregation.” Linn notes two crucial factors of Fosdick’s conversational-styled writing. He says, first, the sermon must be written in an oral style that is clear, and, second, the preacher must use insight and experience into the speaking environment so he can adapt the sermon to the listeners’ attitudes and reactions.

Fosdick eschewed pulpit theatrics. For him, the sermon was to be conversational in tone and free of “all manner of pulpit tricks designed merely to do stunts with a congregation.” The sermon, an “animated conversation,” was a helpful talk between the preacher and the congregation, just as the preacher would talk, plainly, to an individual. To achieve maximum effect, Fosdick introduced opposing personalities in his preaching, thus creating a dialogue as oppose to a monologue. One author named this tactic “adversative sermonizing.” He employed such phrases as “to point out a contrast” and “let us consider a contrary thought” to


184 Linn, 147.

185 Fosdick, Animated Conversation, 48.

introduce opposing objections. Fosdick did this to address “objections, difficulties, and contradictory experiences that would occur to the person listening to any discourse.”  

Linn noted that Fosdick’s approach followed a discernable, although not uniform, organizational structure: (1) choose a problem, (2) define the specific purpose, (3) choose the relevant truth, (4) free association of ideas, (5) ask exploratory questions, (6) ask radical questions, (7) write the opening section, (8) phrase the specific purpose and the relevant truth to achieve it, (9) write the main points, (10) write the sermon in full, (11) revise the manuscript. Often times, these steps overlapped. Linn has done a marvelous job in articulating the mechanics of Fosdick’s approach to preaching. This study need not repeat what he has done so superbly well. What is helpful to our study, however, is Linn’s contention that the need of the listener affects nearly everything about preaching—method, content, organization, language, and delivery.” Thus, there is no aspect of the preparation of a life-situation sermon that is untouched by the listener’s needs. Having explored Fosdick’s theory of preaching and the mechanics of his life-situation preaching, this study now considers the strengths and weaknesses of his life-situation preaching.

187 Ibid., 49.
188 Linn, 72-73.
189 Ibid., 27.
190 Ibid.
Chapter 4

Weaknesses of Fosdick’s Life-Situation Preaching

Weaknesses of Fosdick’s Life-Situation Preaching

Preaching is central in Protestantism. It is the medium through which the gospel is promulgated and salvation is achieved. However foolish or flippant one’s views on preaching, the fact remains that it is the constitutive act of the church. Paul speaks emphatically to this point in his contention that God decisively chose preaching to achieve God’s salvific purpose: “God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21).

Prior to exploring the strengths and weaknesses of Fosdick’s life-situation preaching, it is important to have a working definition of preaching that is nearly consistent across mainline churches. This is a sort of homiletical measuring stick, if you will, for Fosdick’s life-situation preaching.

In Power in the Pulpit, Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix define preaching as “the oral communication of biblical truth by the Holy Spirit through a human personality to a given audience with the intent of enabling a positive response.” Preaching in this sense has a specific activity (oral communication), a specific message (biblical truth), a specific medium (Holy Spirit), a specific recipient (the audience), and a specific motive (positive response from the people). If this definition has even the slightest merit, then Fosdick’s life-situation preaching should be used cautiously and prudently, because it, similar to any homiletical method, has weaknesses.

Fosdick once presented his homiletical approach to a group of experienced ministers and received some critical feedback. Many of them, for various reasons, were unsuccessful in their use of his method. One objection from the group was that they overstated their opposing argument and then failed to answer the objections. They misused or overused adversative sermonizing. The preacher expended too much time on counterarguments to the extent that the sermon concluded with those arguments and not the practical solution. Another objection was that the preacher was so practical in the preacher’s thinking about some definite problem that the preacher became trivial, thereby neglecting to bring the gospel to bear on the issue. These preachers failed to respond to the felt needs of their people with the power of the gospel, leaving the congregation without a biblical response to their human problem. An additional objection was that the preacher was so anxious to deal with felt needs in the congregation that the preacher forgot to arouse listeners’ consciousness regarding the unfelt but real need. Thus the preacher dealt with the felt need unintelligently and unskillfully in the sermon.

Fosdick attributes such objections not to the method but rather to the preachers’ unskilled handling of the method. Any method, as he saw, could be wrecked if the preacher lacked skill. This method, he wrote, “can be offensively personal, argumentatively unconvincing, practically trivial, and narrowed to the conscious needs of mediocre people.”

The danger that Fosdick saw most clearly was the fact that the word “problem” suggested merely a debate and the presentation of helpful ideas. A sermon that was merely a discussion was ineffective in his eyes. Hence, preachers who used this method to discuss a problem with no biblical insights or relevant truths were using it inefficaciously.

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Linn also speaks to this matter in a helpful way. Linn notes five temptations of preachers that can lead to an unskilled handling of life-situation preaching. He cautions that such temptations can ruin any homiletical method. First, the preacher can embarrass listeners. If the preacher discloses a notable experience or confidential information during the sermon, listeners could perceive it as a breach of confidential communication, as though the preacher is publically disclosing a congregant’s personal business. Second, the preacher can overlook the needs of listeners. In haste to find the problem that is troubling most folks, the preacher can unintentionally overlook a listener’s important problem and fail to address it from the pulpit, leaving the listener wondering when the preacher is going to say something relevant to her problem.

Third, the preacher can overstate objections, expending too much pulpit time trying to answer objections that the preacher fails to do anything else in the sermon. Such an experience can have disappointing, even disastrous results. Fourth, the preacher may slant the sermon or preach on a subject *ad nauseam*, becoming narrow in preaching, speaking to specific problems or issues or groups at the expense of reaching the entire congregation. Fifth, the preacher can fail to apply the gospel, neglecting to communicate the redeeming quality of the gospel.

The weaknesses here noted are by proponents of life-situation preaching—proponents who are aware of the disastrous consequences of using life-situation preaching unskillfully. Scholars and preachers alike take issue with life-situation preaching because it deemphasizes the importance of the Bible; fails to acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit in sermon preparation and preaching; it is disconnected from the doctrine of the church; and it does not take into consideration the life-situation nonwhite listeners. Each of these criticisms will be examined in more detail.
The first criticism of Fosdick’s life-situation preaching is that it deemphasizes the importance of the Bible, although Fosdick, as noted, would disagree. There is no concrete connection to scripture in much of life-situation preaching. In Fosdick’s preaching, generally speaking, the Bible is used as a resource and not the source of the message. Of course, this is not true for all of his sermons. One author highlights the ambiguity of Fosdick’s preaching when he said that his preaching is neither biblical nor unbiblical. He illustrates the dilemma, saying:

Fosdick’s life-situation preaching is not necessarily unbiblical preaching even though it begins theoretically with a problem rather than a text, but, on the other hand, it is not necessarily biblical or bound in principle to use a text for the solution to the situation… 193

The problem is that Fosdick’s preaching is biblically indistinguishable. The Bible should be foremost and salient in his preaching, as it is the community’s book. The Bible is the source and foundation of the Christian message. Biblical writers believed that the Bible is the God-breathed word of God. The writer of the Gospel of John recorded as much when he explained:

“In the beginning was the Word [logos], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1). 194 Christian preaching is, or at least should be, steeped in biblical truth, i.e., the word of God. John Killinger observed: “The greatest preachers have always been lovers of the Bible. Those who have based their preaching on other texts—on the poets, current events, the media, their own opinions—have passed quickly from the scene, as though their ministries were established in quicksand.” 195 Hence preaching that fails to take seriously the word of God is situated on precarious ground.

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193 Beverly, 83.

194 Unless noted otherwise, all scripture is taken from the New King James Version® (NKJV). Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson.

195 Killinger, 13.
As a result of a long systematic self-study, Fosdick published *A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, in which he traces the development of six major themes—God, man, right and wrong, suffering, fellowship with God, and immortality—using the liberal approach to the Bible. What this study reveals is that Fosdick, although liberal in his interpretation, was committed to studying the Bible, and that he believed in the “central ideas” of the Bible.¹⁹⁶ Be that as it may, Fosdick’s life-situation preaching is not rooted in the symbolism, images, themes, and narratives of the Bible but rather in human problems. Preaching that is not rooted in the Bible is like “cut flowers that will fade before the evening comes.”¹⁹⁷

The Bible is the book that unites Christians of various denominations; the common denominator in the spiritual and religious life of the church. Our understanding of Christianity originates in and is derived from the Bible. As the universal tool for Christian problems, the Bible touches nearly all aspects of life, either directly or indirectly. Killinger counsels wisely in his summation of the importance of the Bible: “It is simply that the Bible is a book about life, and all important subjects, regardless of how modern or technical, are reducible to matters of life and how it should be lived.”¹⁹⁸ Thus, the Bible speaks to life and addresses life’s problems, for it is an inexhaustible resource.

In *Integrative Preaching* William Willimon observes that “Fosdick’s life-situation preaching used the Bible as a secondary appendage to a sermon taking its cue from life rather than from the text, its problem-solving approach, and so on.”¹⁹⁹ That is to say, Fosdick used the

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¹⁹⁷ Killinger, 14.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 15.

Bible as a reference in his presentation of a “relevant truth,” and not as the ground from which truth springs. The Bible is not supplemental material. It is, rather, the source of the preacher’s message, and the substance and content of Christian preaching. Willimon notes that the Bible is a historically situated and contextualized book, and that “the exegetical and hermeneutical skills a preacher acquires are skills in uncovering and rediscovering the originating and continuing interpretive context for the text.” Willimon argues that all preaching from the Bible is life-situation preaching in the sense that the preacher speaks to and out of the life-situation of the preacher’s context and to the life-situation of God’s people. He explains his theory of life-situation preaching in this fashion:

So, in one sense, all preaching from the Bible is “life-situation” preaching—not only preaching to the life-situation of the twentieth century but also preaching out of the life-situation of the centuries before us when God spoke to the life-situation of God’s people then. To deny or overlook that context, within the text or within the church today, is to be most unbiblical in overlooking the incarnational, historically contextualized nature of Scripture."

Lest the reader miss the point, Willimon states that preaching from the “Bible” relates the life-situation of the text to the life-situation of people. In this sense, life-situation preaching is not unbiblical. Willimon disagreed with Fosdick regarding the starting place of a sermon. For Willimon, the place to begin is with the word, the Bible, with the tradition and Scripture of the church. According to Willimon, a Christian sermon is such because the sermon speaks from a biblical standpoint, not because it addresses the needs of people (although such a sermon should address the relevance of the Bible for people’s needs).

So what is the preacher’s business in the pulpit? Willimon responds: “In the pulpit we first speak of God’s deeds rather humanity’s needs. Without God’s ceaseless activity and striving

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200 Ibid., 17.
201 Ibid., 17.
after us, we know neither our true needs nor our true selves.” Willimon seems to have a mono-
or either-or approach, rather than a both-and approach, which, so it seems, tends to get us closer
to truth. Surely there is truth in Fosdick’s approach, as there is truth in what Willimon proposes.
Fosdick, in contrast to Willimon, starts his sermon on the opposite preaching spectrum,
humanity’s needs. Christian preaching is more than good advice; it is the good news of Jesus. It
could be said, of course, that whatever else preaching is or is not, it is also good advice, or ought
to be. This is the kind of problem either-or approaches gets one into. In any event, Willimon
maintains that a Christian sermon ought to be firmly rooted in the Bible.

While in France during WWI as an itinerant preacher with the Y.M.C.A, a sergeant
responded to Fosdick preaching by saying, “I don’t know what religion he belongs to, but he has
a hell of a lot of sense.” The proclamation of the gospel is more than practical wisdom or
“good sense.” To the contrary, in Willimon’s words, “the proclamation of the gospel is that God,
in Jesus Christ, has acted and continues to act to save the same humanity that, time and again,
has demonstrated it cannot save itself.” Preaching, therefore, is not about practical advice or
quick fixes to humanity’s problems, but rather the eternal truths of the Bible that speaks to God’s
love for humanity, relating Scripture to human problems. Thus, Willimon affirms “the biblical
text as the place to begin a sermon, the place from which the preacher’s metaphors, concepts,
and truth must be derived.”

202 Ibid., 19.
203 Fosdick, Autobiography, 129.
204 Willimon, 19.
205 Ibid., 22.
In a very real sense, then, Willimon makes clear that the preacher’s sermon must be derived from biblical theology, as this is the starting place for a right understanding of God, the church, and what God requires of humanity. Willimon is only partially right; there is something to Fosdick’s starting point in the sermon. That is to say, congregational needs must be weighed properly as it relates to where a preacher begins her sermon. Whether the sermon’s focus is on a human need or divine claim is a matter of its importance and relevance to the congregation. What’s more, a sermon is more than practical wisdom or good sense, but, on the other hand, it cannot be less than practical wisdom or “good sense.”

Homiletician Marvin A. McMickle teaches that every sermon should be focused on a specific message or lesson that is anchored in scripture. In his estimate, Christian sermons “should speak of Christ, elevate Christ, and point people to the teachings and blessings that reside in Christ.”\(^{206}\) In his study of Fosdick, Beverly says that God is both subject and object of genuine Christian preaching. He criticizes Fosdick’s preaching because it is disconnected from the authority of scripture. Fosdick was more concerned with establishing vital contact with listeners than he was with establishing a connection to scripture. “Fosdick’s theology of preaching, because it severs itself from the authority and hence promises of scripture concerning preaching, fails to incorporate the promises of God upon which Christian preaching must ever take its stand, and claim for its basis of authority and existence in the life of the Church of Christ,” explains Beverly.\(^{207}\)

The issue for Beverly is that the life-situation sermon depends entirely on the preacher for its success. Fosdick was an industrious minister, prolific writer, and extraordinary rhetorician.

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\(^{207}\) Beverly, 72.
His words mesmerized his listeners. It is not every day that one hears such beautiful, poetic phrases such as “a volcano was preparing to erupt; one could feel the ominous tremors...” Yet, as beautiful a phrase as this is, it pales in comparison to the beauty and power of the word of God. In his letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul acknowledges the temptation to use eloquent speech at the expense of preaching the gospel powerfully and clearly: “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (1:17). It would seem as though Fosdick’s work ethic supplanted any kind of divine revelation in terms of access to God’s veiled truths in the Bible.

One can study any subject studiously or write about any subject prolifically, but that does not mean that the finished product was inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is accurate to say, then, that time spent in study is not the same as time spent in God’s presence, being guided in preparation by the Holy Spirit. It is not the same, but it is greatly important, just as much as being guided by the Holy Spirit. It’s still the case in too much contemporary preaching that the preacher has ostensibly been guided by the Holy Spirit, but has failed to spend much time in her study for sermon preparation. Perhaps it is more easy to discern when the Holy Spirit is not present than it is to discern when it is. One thing is for certain concerning the Holy Spirit, it brings life, transformation, and renewal to the church.

Beverly’s analysis of Fosdick reveals that his life-situation preaching failed to relate preaching to the Word of God, thus exhibiting a gross failure to understand the importance of the Bible for the art of preaching. For Beverly, Fosdick’s departure from the Bible represents an attempt to radically alter the Christian message of preaching. Beverly describes such preaching

\footnote{Fosdick, Autobiography, 138.}
as “an attempt to define preaching as a message to man from man about himself rather than as an attempt to be faithful exegetically and theologically to the Biblical witness to the Grace of God in Jesus Christ on man’s behalf.”

The fact of the matter is, whenever a Christian sermon loses its distinctive message, its solid biblical base of authority, and its organic connection to scripture and the tradition of the Church, it ceases to be a sermon. Where else can a preacher derive the preacher’s message on God except from God? A counterpoint to Beverly’s argument is that he misunderstood Fosdick’s use of the Bible. Fosdick was preeminently concerned with using the Bible intelligently, unencumbered by Biblicist principles. Fosdick took the Bible seriously, just not literally.

The second criticism of Fosdick’s life-situation preaching is that it fails to acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit in sermon preparation and preaching. In Protestantism, the role of the Holy Spirit is particularly important, as it is constitutive of the church. Sophisticated contemporary preachers, shaped by the presuppositions of the postmodern ethos, do not speak very often about the Holy Spirit. In the case of Fosdick, it is important to remember that he was a liberal preacher, a modernist much in tuned with the scientific discoveries and advances of his day, especially new knowledge in biblical criticism. A veritable modernist, Fosdick rejected the virgin birth as historic fact, repudiated the literal inerrancy of scripture, and disbelieved the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Christianity for Fosdick had to be harmonized with the

209 Ibid., 81.

210 Liberal Protestantism arose out of a need to relate the Christian faith to the human situation and modern knowledge. In England, Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection (popularly known as the “Darwinian theory of evolution”) challenged traditional Christian theology. Liberalism sought to bridge the gap between Christian faith and modern knowledge. The result was that liberals exercised freedom in relation to the Christian doctrine and traditional methods of biblical interpretation in order to achieve synthesis. To achieve synthesis, a number of Christian beliefs were abandoned (outdated or mistaken presuppositions) or reinterpreted (in line with cultural norms). Liberalism was a compromise between fundamentalism and the total rejection of the Christian faith. See Alister E. McGrath’s Christian Theology: An Introduction (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) for a succinct introduction to “Liberal Protestantism” (82-84). Regarding Fosdick’s belief, Cauthen notes: “Liberalism made that
established truths and intellectual progress of modern culture. This being the case, one is hard
pressed to find any kind of spirituality or doctrine of pneumatology in Fosdick’s writing or
theory of preaching. A close reading of As I See Religion reveals that Fosdick believed that
spiritual power was inwardly released. Much influenced by William James, he believed that the
resource of spiritual power comes up through the subconscious into consciousness to release
power for daily living. Such a vital experience, he claims, is the very essence of religion.211
Nothing in Fosdick’s thought suggests a belief in the Holy Spirit. He did not believe in
unscientific miracles, which may account for the absence of pneumatology in his writings and
sermons, which is not to say that he did not believe in God’s spiritual presence.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit, pneumatology, is central to Christianity. The
pneumatological dimension is inseparable from all communication from God, and preaching that
is not accompanied by pneumatological empowerment is mere human speech.212 The Holy Spirit
is the very life of God that accompanies the Word of God, permitting the response for which God
calls. God remains active within creation through the Holy Spirit. Christian preachers are called
and ordained by Jesus Christ to preach in his name. Life-situation preaching fails to relate the
Holy Spirit to Christian preaching. “In failing to relate preaching to the witness of the word,” one
author notes, “Fosdick has not adequately related preaching to the work of the Holy Spirit as the
dynamic presence of God in Jesus Christ who alone can open the Word, open the minds and

[“an intelligent modern and a serious Christian] possible by providing the only way that he could be a Christian at
all. It was not a choice, he says, of liberalism or the traditional faith. It was a choice between liberalism and no faith
at all. He could not honestly believe in an inerrant Bible, the virgin birth, the traditional views of miracle,
substitutionary atonement, Jesus as the second hypostasis of the Trinity, a fiery hell, the second coming of Jesus
from the clouds, and all the other staple beliefs of traditional orthodoxy” (67).

211 Fosdick, As I See Religion, 25.

212 Whatever else we call it, it is all human speech. It is human speech influenced by the Holy Spirit, or it is human
speech that is not influenced by the Holy Spirit. But both are human speech.
hearts of the congregation, and make the sermon to be the very Word of God addressed to the contemporary congregation.”213 The Holy Spirit opens the Word to the preacher and the preacher to the Word. Without the Holy Spirit, the preacher’s spiritual eyes are blind to God’s biblical truths. Life-situation preaching for Fosdick required “clairvoyance on the preacher’s part into the thinking” of the people.214 This “clairvoyance” (insight) supplants the role of the Holy Spirit in Fosdick’s theory of preaching. The Holy Spirit works in and through the preacher to meet the spiritual needs of people.

James Alexander Forbes, Jr., senior minister emeritus of the Riverside Church in the New York City, served as pastor for 18 years, 1989-2007. Forbes was the first African American to serve in this capacity at Riverside. Forbes, of the Pentecostal tradition, reminds us that Jesus came preaching in the power of the Spirit, which is still a requirement for contemporary preaching. Forbes believes that effective preaching requires the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. He writes:

I do not know a conscientious preacher anywhere who would claim to preach without at least some acknowledgement of the aid of the Spirit, even if the minister did not tend to speak of it in that way. There are many preachers who are waiting for and depending on the power from beyond themselves – and there are many who are aware that if that power is not present, the preaching will not be effective.215

Preaching from day-to-day and week-to-week requires the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit. “We need some sense of the Spirit accompanied by power sufficient to interrupt a decline in the sense of the reality of God,” explains Forbes.216 His reference to “a decline in the sense of

213 Beverly, 73.
214 Fosdick, Autobiography, 97.
216 Ibid., 25.
the reality of God” speaks to modernists’ repudiation of the Holy Spirit for scientific verification.\textsuperscript{217} He contends that the Spirit is at work or should be at work in every aspect of the preaching event, from communication to reception of the word of God.

Fosdick criticized his contemporaries because their approaches to scripture resembled lectures. A criticism of equal weight can be levied against Fosdick’s life-situation preaching and its failure to acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching. Devoid of the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and the tradition of the church, life-situation preaching is simply a practical exercise or motivational talk about people’s problems. The Holy Spirit empowers the preacher to preach God’s word. The efficacy of Christian preaching is contingent upon the Holy Spirit’s participation in the saving work of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the believing heart. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christian preaching effects conviction, repentance, and salvation. Sermon composition is doable when the Holy Spirit is at work to guide the process:

\begin{quote}
The Spirit works in sermon preparation and delivery to discern the heart and the situation of those who hear preaching and to guide their spiritual walk. This includes not only bringing persons to faith but also nurturing and deepening faith, which itself is a gift of the Spirit imparted through preaching.\textsuperscript{218}
\end{quote}

As noted above, Christian preaching relies on the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in every aspect of sermon preparation and delivery, and in every aspect of Christian ministry and living. Hence, any theory of preaching that does not consider or take seriously the work of the Holy Spirit is indeed an inchoate, if not ineffective, theory. The problem, of course, is that it is difficult to determine with absolute certainty if a sermon is or is not the product of divinely inspired truths. At best, one hopes to feel the presence of God hovering over and permeating in

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[217]{\textit{Ibid.}}
\footnotetext[218]{Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching, eds. Willimon and Lischer, s.v. “Holy Spirit and Preaching.”}
\end{footnotes}
the ecclesial community during the preaching event. Even in such a case, the preacher could be inspired by the Holy Spirit and the church may not. One thing is for certain, though, whenever the Holy Spirit is present, something happens, transformation takes place. However favorable or unfavorable the sermon, something happens in the lives of listeners. In the face of such criticism, it should be noted that, although Fosdick did not discuss the Holy Spirit as such, he did believe “that just as around our bodies is a physical universe from which we draw all our physical energy, so around our spirits is a spiritual Presence in living communion with whom we can find sustaining strength.”

Fosdick believed wholeheartedly in God’s spiritual presence.

The third criticism of Fosdick’s life-situation preaching is that it is disconnected from the doctrine of the church. The church has a history and theology to which it belongs, even as these also belong to the church. Fosdick revealed in his autobiography that both his friends and foes had difficulty defining his theological position. He believed that no “existent theology can be a final formulation of spiritual truth.” Accused of taking theology lightly, Fosdick responded:

I take theology so seriously that whenever in the Christian tradition I see doctrine persistently struggling over some central issue, displaced by new doctrine but still tussling with the same old problem, I am sure that the truth is really there, and that the combined transiency and persistence of doctrine in dealing with it is a testimony to its importance. So ideas of God change and ought to, but that fact does not mean that anything has happened to God.

Fosdick believed that theologies were psychologically and sociologically conditioned, and that dogmatism in theology is ridiculous. No scholar, if truth be told, has the whole truth about God, as human beings are finite and limited in intellectual capacity. For Fosdick, the individual was more important than the theology to which she subscribed, as such theologies

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220 Ibid., 230.

221 Ibid., 231.
were psychologically and socially conditioned; as such, they change or ought to change as humanity evolves. He believed that his ministry was most useful to those persons who were religiously ruined by dogmatism, taught to identify the Christian gospel with some form of orthodoxy. Their Christian experience, as was his, was at war with their intelligence. The problem for Fosdick was how to reconcile the Christian faith with modernity. To remedy this quandary, he disrobed himself of orthodox garbs, thus severing his ties to the theology and doctrine of the church. The role of theology for Fosdick was to formulate, clarify, and interpret religious experience.

In *The Modern Use of the Bible*, Fosdick, in typical liberal fashion, explicates the way in which theology should operate in interpreting experience. The critical approach to biblical theology, says Fosdick, does not try to harmonize the Bible with itself or apologize for the more immature portions of the Bible. Most important, Fosdick notes, the Bible restores the whole book in its unity as a progressive revelation of God. Fosdick wrestled with how the Bible could be useful to modern humanity. The phrase “abiding experiences and changing categories” speaks to his conclusion. By this, he meant: “There are certain basic human experiences which are ever the same, but the mental framework in which these experiences are expressed changes from one time and place to another.” Therefore, the task of the theologian is “to search out the abiding experiences which lie underneath the categories of the Bible and then to reinterpret and restate the meaning of these experiences in modern terms.”

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223. Ibid. In “The Significance of Dr. Fosdick in American Religious Thought” (*Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 8, no. 4: 3-6. *ATLA Religion Database*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 14, 2016), Reinhold Niebuhr, Fosdick’s colleague at Union, stated that Fosdick’s *Modern Use of the Bible* “embodies Fosdicks conviction that it is not necessary to exempt the historical elements of the Bible from a scrupulous historical scholarship to guard the faith” (4). Niebuhr said that book brought about “emancipation from biblicism and biblically-based obscurantism.” He also noted that Fosdick “understood how to make the biblical message relevant to the whole range of human problems” (Ibid). This
Despite Fosdick’s views about theology and dogma, the doctrine of the church is critically important for the life of the church. It helps the church establish and defend its beliefs for all generations, as is the case of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Protestant Reformation led to the development of theological positions and literature (catechisms, confessions of faith, and works in systematic theology) to defend its ideas. The reformers were convinced that the Catholic Church had lost sight of its doctrine. Generally, protestant theologians recognize three levels of authority: scripture, the creeds of Christendom, and the confessions of faith. The sixteenth century marked a period of critical reflection on the nature and identity of the church. Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin argued for the need to return to scripture—“by scripture alone” (sola scriptura)—as the primary and critical source of Christian theology. This new emphasis upon scripture had important implications for the church such as the rejection of beliefs not grounded in scripture, and a new emphasis upon the public status of scripture within the church.

Martin Luther proclaimed the doctrine of justification by faith alone (sola fide). While Luther, a first generation reformer, made important contributions to the doctrine of grace—the center of the Christian gospel, John Calvin, a second-generation reformer, made important contributions to the development of Protestant understandings of the church. For Calvin, the marks of a true church were that the word of God is preached and that the sacraments are rightly administered. This statement by Calvin represents the first attempt at a coherent and systematic Protestant ecclesiology. According to Calvin, the church is an institution that God uses to sanctify human beings and to work out the salvation of the elect. The point here is that the

speaks tellingly to Fosdick’s use of the Bible in preaching.

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224 McGrath, 58.
church has a long history of trying to understand its identity and purpose in light of contemporary life.

It is important to understand the history of the church in order to get a better sense of the church’s purpose for our present day. As Beverly has well stated: “A Church that has forgotten its purpose and its message may desire to help people solve their problems but it has lost its ability. A Church that looks at man in his contemporary dilemma before it looks at God and His Grace and Victory over the world has insight into neither the Word nor the World.”

To be fair, Fosdick’s goal was to be both “an intelligent modern and a serious Christian” and to make a spiritual contribution to the spiritual life of his generation. He wanted a credible faith with which to help people. This is respectable. The problem, however, is that his approach and writings do not reveal an organ link to the doctrine and theology of the church. For Fosdick, it was either Christian liberalism or no faith at all, as was stated previously in our discussion of Fosdick’s organic ingredients. He concluded that liberalism allowed him to have a credible faith, notwithstanding that he did not subscribe to staple beliefs of traditional orthodoxy.

Preaching is essential to the identity of the church. Preaching that caters to people’s need as the starting point of the sermon is lacking something vital. “But to begin with a problem and attempt to help people solve it through constructive faith and mystical experience is to base preaching on the preacher’s insight into society and human nature,” argues Beverly. Fosdick’s preaching was derived from the problems of his day without any discernable connection to the doctrine of the church. It was prudent of Fosdick to use the available knowledge of his day to

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225 Beverly, 83.


227 Beverly, 83.
meet people’s needs; it was imprudent, however, to sever all ties with the source and historical significance of preaching, doctrine, and theology for the life and development of his congregation. Again, Beverly’s counsel is helpful: “Any concept of preaching which leads to a lessening of the importance of preaching in the Church is not only an inadequate concept but it is a dangerous concept; for the preaching of the Word is one of the marks of the true Church and to eliminate it is to ultimately eliminate the existence of the Church itself.”228 Thus preaching is an integral part of the life of the Christian church, and preaching that does not take seriously the doctrine and theology of the church is lacking its historical roots in Christianity.

Fosdick’s thoughts on and understanding of the church are scattered throughout his writings. What one detects, however, is that Fosdick believed in an individualistic and voluntaristic institution grounded in Christian experience, rather than in dogma or tradition, and oriented largely toward ethical concerns.229 What this means is that the “sacramental, ritualistic, institutional, and doctrinal aspects of church life are necessarily subordinated to ethical matters.”230 Fosdick’s view of the church is one of inclusivity, where the basis for membership is Christian experience. In Christianity and Progress Fosdick describes his idea of an inclusive church as a church that is the organizing center for all the Christian life of a community (such was the case at the Riverside Church). He expounded further that his idea of an inclusive church is not based upon theological conformity but upon the devotion to the Lord Jesus.

An inclusive church as Fosdick envisioned it is a church that harnesses the untapped good-will and moral power of American communities. Fosdick believed that all Christians

228 Ibid., 84.


should work together for the Lord for the good of humanity. His idea of an inclusive church is best understood as a church that desired to “be the point of incandescence where, regardless of denominationalism or theology, the Christian life of the community bursts into flame.”

Fosdick stretches his idea of an inclusive church even further: “The achievement of a worthy idea of God involves, therefore, the ability to discover God in all life, outside the Church as well as within, and in people who do not believe in him nor recognize him as well as in those who do.” He explains that God is too magnanimous to minister to people only after they have “confessedly receive[d] him.” Although Fosdick held unconventional views about the purpose and doctrine of the church, he nevertheless recognized the church’s importance, as is evident when he writes:

Many today think that they are getting on very well without the church, but have they ever pictured realistically what getting on without the church would mean? Let the church die, let generation after generation rise that never knew it, let Jesus become a myth, the Bible’s message forgotten, faith in God vague and nebulous, worship finished, no more sacred music—only secular, no more religious education of the children—only secular, a literature from which have been deleted the ideas and ideals that have their rootage in the Christian, and all the leaven gone which the prophets implanted in our race—then we could live without the church. Who wants to try?

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231 Harry Emerson Fosdick, Christianity and Progress (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, © 2007), 138. Christianity and Progress is a compilation of lectures Fosdick delivered in 1922 for the Cole Lectureship at Vanderbilt University, School of Religion. The object of the lectureship was to present lectures in support of Christian religion. Here one finds a more extensive analysis of Fosdick’s Christianity. The motivation for Christianity and Progress can be traced to a statement made by George William Knox, Professor of the Philosophy and History of Religion at Union Theological Seminary to his class. Fosdick told Henry Sloan Coffin that Knox once said: “Be very careful how you baptize the modern belief in progress into the Christian faith.” This for Fosdick was an eye-opener. See Henry Sloane Coffin, A Half Century of Union Theological Seminary: An Informal History (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), 45.

232 Fosdick, Christianity and Progress, 139.

233 Ibid., 141.

The thought of a churchless society is not worth thoughtful consideration for Fosdick. Nevertheless, the church is rooted in a doctrinal history and theology that must be interpreted anew for each generation, not heedlessly discarded or overlooked.

Richard Lischer considered the question of the importance of theology for church in *A Theology of Preaching*. His conclusion was that much of what passes for theology does not draw its life from the gospel and is therefore utterly incapable of transforming lives or teaching and leading the church. He goes on to say that “only the preacher who is rooted (not buried) in the church’s constitutive principles, its doctrine, will be free to address the concerns of living people.”235 Then, he says, because preaching “is rooted in those truths that touch humankind at its deepest levels—creation, identity, love, fulfillment, sin, hope, peace, forgiveness—becomes relevant without losing its soul.” For Lischer, the first step toward regaining the ever-elusive relevance of preaching is accepting the doctrines of the church for their truth-value rather than their use-value. The preacher’s theological faculty enables the preacher to relate the human situation to the gospel, which makes the question of sermon-mechanics (where to start a sermon?) less important:

Where shall the preacher begin? With the contemporary, here-and-now? Or the biblical, then-and-there? When the preaching begins with the contemporary situation, it views that situation through the lens of the eternal gospel.236 When the preaching begins with the biblical situation, it never offers it as exegetical “background,” as though, in Fosdick’s famous quip, people really come to church with a burning interest in the Jebusites, but rather it always associates the biblical situation with contemporary needs.237

Whether the preacher starts with the contemporary situation or the biblical situation, the infinite relevance of the gospel bridges the distance between these two worlds. Whatever the

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236 Ibid., 21-22.

237 Ibid., 21.
case, the fact of the matter is that preaching is the first and final expression of theology, for the
Christian movement was born in preaching. Fosdick’s life-situation preaching did not have the
parameters of theology and doctrine to help contain it, to keep it in line with the church.
Consequently, his preaching was, at times, theologically light, and, at other times, theologically
vacuous. When preaching becomes weak and watered-down, theology and doctrine are there to
revivify it. When preaching loses sight of the gospel, theology and doctrine are there to shine
new light on the mystery of the gospel. Hence it is imperative for the preacher to understand and
accept the doctrine and theology of the church as a schoolmaster to help guide the preacher in
relating the eternal gospel to the contemporary “mind and milieu of the listener.”\footnote{Ibid., 20.}

A notable weakness of Fosdick’s life-situation preaching is that it does not take into
consideration the life-situation nonwhite listeners, specifically African Americans. Whereas
Fosdick maintained that the aim of the sermon was to help people solve their real problems, the
African-American sermon aims to present scriptural evidence of God’s sovereignty, justice, and
presence amid oppression, marginalization, and injustice. The African-American homiletic is
unique because it originated in and shaped by the unique sociocultural experience of African
Africans. Fosdick’s life-situation preaching was centered in the “life-situations”—values,
interests, problems, and experiences—of upper middle-class and upper class liberal, white
listeners. As noted, Fosdick maintained that the only justifiable aim of a sermon was to help
people solve their problems. Needless to say, his intended audience was not society’s oppressed
and marginalized African Americans; a close reading of his sermons and books indicate as much.
Nor did his definition of “problems” take into consideration the unique problems of African

\footnote{Ibid., 20.}
Americans. The fact is, Fosdick’s life-situation preaching reflected the life-situations of white listeners, all of which had and have markedly different life-situations from African Americans.

Although Fosdick’s homiletic has its distinctive qualities, it represents the white homiletic tradition. The African-American homiletic, with its elements of life-situation preaching, originated in and speaks to the unique sociocultural context of African Americans. This is the point of departure for African-American preaching. It is rooted in and true to the black experience in America. Every preacher seeks to understand and interpret scripture in light of both the preacher’s and listeners’ sociocultural experience. This is the norm. To be sure, no homiletic—white, black, or other—is without subjectivity, implied assumptions, or theories regarding sermon composition, delivery, and expectation. The variety and diversity of African-American preaching theories and styles notwithstanding, the African-American preacher’s goal is to convince and remind African-American listeners that there is a sovereign God who acts mightily on behalf of the marginalized, oppressed, disinherit, and powerless people in our society and world.

The unique experience of African Americans is the starting place for the African-American sermon. From beginning to end, the sermon presents indisputable scriptural evidence of God historical and contemporary presence with the oppressed in their struggle for liberation from oppressive sociocultural realities. The African-American preacher is experientially and viscerally attuned to the unique aspects of the African-American experience, and thus qualified to speak to oppressed people on behalf of God. Whereas Fosdick’s life-situation preaching emphasized people’s problems, the African-American homiletic emphasizes survival, first, and matters of life, second, all while conveying that God is unmistakably present to effect both
personal and societal transformation. No message is more critical and urgent than this in the African-American preaching event.

African-Americans have had to deal with the repudiation of their humanity, the disaffirmation of their blackness, and the deprivation of basic civil and human rights. In light of this, heightened attention is called to what the Christian gospel says to the “least of these.” Given the profundity of African Americans’ sociocultural context, Fosdick’s mere problem-solution formulaic is inadequate. In a very real sense, the African-American preacher knows that the oppressive conditions and unique experiences of African Americans have their origin and staying power in cultural, social, political, and economic forces that suffocate and destroy black life. Unlike many of the problems that Fosdick addressed in his preaching, these forces warrant a different approach to preaching, for there is no easy solution or quick fix to these enduring, debilitating problems. The African-American sermon, therefore, must imbue its listeners with hope that an all-powerful God is acting in concrete and practical ways to transform their lives. In the final analysis, Fosdick’s understanding and interpretation of life-situations, and thus the benefits of life-situation preaching, is colored by and limited by his own parochial, ethnic understanding of people, his sociocultural and socioeconomic status, and his experiences as an educated, white liberal preacher in America. It is true, nevertheless, that Fosdick’s life-situation preaching has enduring homiletic value for contemporary preachers.

**Strengths of Fosdick’s Life-Situation Preaching**

Although critics argue that Fosdick’s life-situation preaching deemphasizes the importance of the Bible as a community book, failed to acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit in sermon preparation and preaching, and is disconnected from the doctrine of the church, it has
some strengths. Young preachers new to ministry or discontent with the prevailing approaches to preaching can learn from Fosdick’s life-situation preaching. Given that Fosdick’s life-situation preaching has been addressed, this section will briefly highlight some of the strengths of Fosdick’s preaching.

The obvious advantage of life-situation preaching is that it speaks directly to people’s needs and attempts to solve their problems. It seeks to touch the deepest layer of existence and to speak to the universality of human experience. At the center of life-situation preaching and everything that the church does is people—people who have unique physical, mental, spiritual, economical, and practical needs to name a few. Therefore, preaching that addresses people’s needs has enduring power and pertinence. Fosdick once said that a sermon should meet the needs of the people who come to church on Sunday with every kind of personal difficulty. The genius of this approach is that the sermon immediately attracts people’s attention because the issues addressed through preaching are relevant to listeners’ lives. Put another way, the life-situation sermon starts with the needs of the individual because this is the individual’s utmost concern. Life-situation preaching has an enduring popularity because it is rooted in, and draws its ingredients from, the lives of people.239

First, life-situation preaching at its best takes seriously the personal problems of people. Such a sermon forces the preacher to plumb the depths of human existence, to take a trek through the inner lives of the congregants, and to face the uncensored human personality in the raw. Superficiality has no place in preaching or counseling. The natural corollary of superficial

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239 A notable example of life-situation preaching’s enduring popularity is the preaching of Joel Scott Osteen. He is an American preacher, televangelist, author, and the Senior Pastor of Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, the largest Protestant church in the United States. His televised ministry reaches over 7 million viewers weekly and over 20 million viewers monthly in over 100 countries. Five of Osteen’s books were named New York Times Best Sellers. Osteen’s life-situation preaching does not align with traditional Christian beliefs. For a fuller account of Osteen’s beliefs, refer to his first published book, Your Best Life Now (New York: Faith Works, 2004).
ministry is superficial preaching and superficial results. A mere concern for people is insufficient. In Fosdick’s life-situation preaching, one is dealing with the profoundest concerns of human personality. Such an approach encourages the preacher to become intimately concerned with personalities and what goes on inside them—the inner dynamics and source of discord. With his approach, the preacher is not just preaching a sermon on a subject. To the contrary, the preacher is attempting to solve people’s spiritual problems, to make them spiritually whole.

Second, Fosdick’s life-situation preaching is helpful to young preachers with little or no ministry experience. With this approach to preaching, there is the hope of relevance and purpose even for young preachers or preachers with moderate skills. Moreover, this approach is useful to preachers of all varieties: educated and uneducated, eloquent or ineloquent, young or old, mainline or nondenominational. Regardless of the preacher’s credentials, she will have an audience because she is helping people to solve their real problems. She is, in the words of Fosdick, “delivering the goods which the community has a right to expect from the pulpit.”

This approach is effective because the preacher does not begin the sermon with the preacher’s own subjective interests but with some important question, difficult problem, or troubling ‘life-situation’ that the preacher must help his congregation live with or through. Doubtless, young preachers will encounter problems that they feel professionally ill equipped to handle ably. Dealing with such problems is difficult. Preaching on such problems is even more difficult. Life-situation preaching brings people’s problems into dialogue with the Bible in order to facilitate healing through the proclamation of the word of God. In the end, the young preacher will be “functioning,” to use Fosdick’s apt phrase, because she is performing a vital task for the church.

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240 Fosdick, Autobiography, 95.
Third, Fosdick’s life-situation preaching is practical preaching. The life-situation preacher is engaged in a practical endeavor to highlight a problem or felt need, to wrestle with it in the pulpit intelligently and carefully, and to shed light on it with the gospel. This approach encourages the young preacher to conduct an exposition of human personality in order to help people think through and live through their real problems. Yes, mechanics is important. What is most important, however, is that the preacher understands and is able to offer a practical solution to the perplexing problems of people. A distinctive feature of Fosdick’s preaching that is often overlooked is its insistence on a practical result, which gives the sermon its purpose and direction.

One advantage of life-situation preaching noted by Fosdick is its emphasis on preaching that produces transformation of its listeners. With respect to this advantage, Fosdick remarked: “It [life-situation preaching] actually brings to pass in the lives of the congregation the thing it talks about. So, to tackle the problem of joy so that the whole congregation goes out more joyful than it came in—that is the mark of a genuine sermon.” Fosdick’s preaching was an appeal for a decision. One may credit this to Fosdick’s seminary speech professor, Francis Carmody, a Roman Catholic layman with a legal background. He taught at the seminary from 1903 to 1928. He trained his students to preach for a verdict, to marshal their arguments, and to give their evidence tellingly. This is quite different from merely preaching about joy. Joy is to be produced in the lives of the congregation. The sermon, Carmody instructed, must be

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242 Coffin, A Half Century of Union Theological Seminary, 72. Carmody, Instructor in Vocal Interpretation and Public Speaking, taught at Union from 1903 to 1928. He was once a professor at the University of Notre Dame. He also taught at the Law School of Fordham University. Fosdick’s colloquial-styled written sermons owe their facility of delivery to Carmody. Coffin noted that Carmody “could take a monotonous voice and get variety into it” (Ibid.). “Without making men theatrical,” Coffin continued, “he could render them much more effective in speaking what they had written” (Ibid.).
compellingly delivered so as to convince listeners to act or live in a certain way. Young preachers being introduced to this method should understand that insight into human nature is an indispensable part of life-situation preaching.

Fosdick’s life-situation preaching requires clairvoyance into the people’s thinking. This point is unequivocally clear in Fosdick’s thought. So much so, he argues that “any man who lacks this [clairvoyance] has no business to preach anyway.” 243 He said:

A preacher, even in his youth, gifted with some clear convictions about the meaning of personal and social life at their best can approach in a straightforward fashion the questions which people are asking, the problems they are facing, and the experiences that perplex them in private life or social situations. 244

Personal counseling deepens the preacher’s clairvoyance by teaching the preacher about human nature. The preacher gains an invaluable insight into the lives of folks. Not abstract knowledge that is the result of limited personal experiences or untested hypotheses, but rather first-hand knowledge of hurt, pain, loss, distress, despair and the like. One preacher put it in explicit terms when he said that the “great sine qua non of effective preaching is insight into life; not simply knowledge of the facts of life, but insight into the nature of life.” 245 Young men and women can gain such insights into preaching through a direct encounter with human nature and personality through personal counseling, which will undoubtedly help to develop personal and professional relationships with members, especially those who are facing difficult problems. Unbreakable bonds are forged between the pastor and the help-seeker in the crucible of personal crises.

243 Fosdick, Autobiography, 97.


Personal counseling gradually led Fosdick to life-situation preaching, which, in his own words, made preaching “an exciting adventure.”\(^{246}\) In Fosdick’s thought, the young preacher who practices personal counseling is going to find that his or her sermons, in content and form, are profoundly affected. The relationship between personal counseling and preaching is one of interdependence. This interactional process contributes to the preacher’s ability to compose and preach relevant and purposeful sermons. Fosdick believed that the right kind of preacher is coerced to become a personal counselor, and the right kind of personal counselor gains some of the most necessary ingredients of preaching.\(^{247}\)

The ultimate test of a sermon for Fosdick is the number of people who seek the preacher’s counsel after the sermon. The young preacher does well to remember that personal counseling can and does inform preaching, but, if not handled judiciously, can have disastrous consequences. Fosdick likened personal counseling to a marriage in that it is “not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly.”\(^{248}\) His aim was to help people, especially young people. Sympathetic to young men and women entering Christian ministry, Fosdick hoped to help them avoid and overcome the malaise associated with the preaching ministry. He desired to share his knowledge and years of experience with young people in order to help them navigate the turbulent waves of ministry. In the chapter that follows, this study will explore Fosdick’s message to young people regarding Christian ministry.


\(^{247}\) Fosdick, “Personal Counseling and Preaching,” 51.

\(^{248}\) Fosdick, *On Being A Real Person*, xiii.
Chapter 5

The Christian Vocation and Life-Situation Preaching

Fosdick’s Advice to Young Aspirants to Ministry

Fosdick had an enduring concern for young people. He preached in chapels around the nation, leaving an indelible imprint on young minds. College students were attracted to his ministry. He talked at conferences and retreats for college students. He had a vested interest in young men and women because the future of the church was theirs.\(^\text{249}\) In *The Atlantic Monthly* Fosdick candidly addressed young men and women considering and entering Christian ministry. In his introductory remarks, he discussed the need for Protestant churches to expand their thinking regarding diversified opportunities in ministry.\(^\text{250}\)

Highlighting the contrast between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, Fosdick argued that the latter can learn from the former. It was his observation that Roman Catholicism developed and trained young ministers according to their special gifts and then placed them in various types of roles, from administrators to preachers, to scholars in accordance with their special gift. Whereas Roman Catholicism trained and developed young men and women for various types of roles, Protestant ministry, however, has been more narrowly defined, offering two forms of service, pastoral ministry and preaching. In particular, notes Fosdick, the Protestant minister has been expected to preach, which is the center of the worship service. The call to be a Protestant clergyman has always been a call to preach, observes Fosdick. He noticed a

\(^{249}\) John B. Macnab, “Fosdick at First Church,” in *A Preaching Ministry: Twenty-One Sermons by Harry Emerson Fosdick At the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 1918-1925*, David Pultz, ed. (New York: The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 2000), 33.

paradigmatic shift afoot in Protestant circles; young men and women were beginning to specialize in a particular area of ministry. Despite the expectation for ministers to be multifunctional experts (janitor, fundraiser, religious educator, civic leader, administrator), Protestant churches were selecting young men and women for specialized service in the church according to their abilities.

Fosdick saw presciently how centralized populations equated to fewer but larger churches, with more diversified functions and with staffs of clergy representing abilities that are more varied. The momentum for this phenomenon was transportation and rapid communication—automobiles and public transportation, and the radio—that forced small local congregations to combine into more centralized churches with diversified ministries. Fosdick cited church statistics by an expert who estimated that in a year there was an increase in church members of 573,723 and a decrease in the number of churches of 1470. The centralization of ministry meant more diversified ministry opportunities for young men and women. This, for Fosdick, was a hopeful sign.

As a result, men and women preparing for ministry in theological seminaries had experience in preaching. They had a different specialty. Protestant churches, Fosdick maintained, were unprepared to absorb and use the abilities of these young men and women. Nevertheless, the situation, as Fosdick tells it, was hopeful for young men and women preparing for ministry:

Many youths who feel neither the ability nor the wish to preach are going, as they supremely desire to go, into the service of their generation’s spiritual life. They will be ministers of religion and servants of the church. The result will be a far richer and more varied leadership for the forces of organized faith and a far more satisfying career for many young men and women who, not commercially minded, desire above all else to make a contribution to religion.251

As Fosdick saw it, diversified opportunities are attractive to young people who are considering ministry but are reluctant because they have to preach when they do not want to. Others, who do want to preach will be saved from “an immeasurable quantity of midweek religious talk.”\(^{252}\) This is not to say that the role of the preacher will change. Rather, preachers will be selected for ministry in their area of interest. In Fosdick’s assessment, Protestantism emphasized and relied too much on preaching to the unintended neglect of other ministry opportunities. The need of the Protestant church for Fosdick was young men and women who were motivated to change and not serve the “ecclesiastical status quo”: “No one has any business to go into the ministry who is satisfied with the churches as they are. We have too many complacent ministers now.”\(^{253}\) This, for Fosdick, was a clarion call for young potential ministers to exercise leadership in Protestant churches, even if such leadership meant going against the grain of traditional Protestant leadership.

To the young minister considering the preaching ministry, Fosdick counsels to “aim first at recovering the accent of reality in the pulpit.”\(^{254}\) Long gone is the day when the preacher was the leading expert in education and information, Fosdick explains. The preacher no longer holds this dominant position. The preacher’s dilemma is that people in the pews are just as educated and have as much, if not more, knowledge and education. This, according to Fosdick, is a godsend, for it “forces the wise preacher to quit his reliance on ecclesiastical authority, to cut out cant, bombast, hokum, or whatever represents the cheap substitution of wordiness for genuineness, and to make of his sermons a forthright endeavor to deal in a real way with the real

\(^{252}\) Ibid., 61.

\(^{253}\) Ibid., 61.

\(^{254}\) Ibid.
problems of real people.”255 In a word, the dominant place of the minister in education and information is no longer a reality and, as a result, young men and women preparing for the preaching ministry should endeavor to compose sermons that address the way in which people think about their personal and spiritual problems. No preacher can be an expert in every field; therefore, the preacher does well to be skilled in the tools of the homiletical trade. The young preacher’s main business in the pulpit is to compose thought-provoking and life-transforming sermons that speak intelligently and intelligibly to life situations.

Not only should the young minister endeavor to preach well, but also endeavor to serve as a director of public worship. Protestant churches have overemphasized preaching and deemphasized the public worship, in Fosdick’s estimate. Roman Catholics go to church to worship, and the center of the worship is the sacrament. The sacrament symbolizes inclusiveness, as all sorts of people participate in the worship together. Worship is inclusive, whereas a sermon is selective; “it appeals to a certain mental stratum; it automatically excludes from its range of interest other types of mind than the kind from which it comes.”256 This accounts for, in Fosdick’s thinking, the class organization of churches. All this is not to say that preaching should be diminished in worship, but rather that the beauty of worship should be taken seriously alongside the sermon. Fosdick attributes the decline of interest in and concern for public worship to the way in which it has been conducted. Public worship does business in human souls, notes Fosdick. What is this business? “It causes people who have been looking down to look up. It

255 Ibid., 62.
256 Ibid., 63.
reorients life, redirects energy, freshens ideals, restores equilibrium, and liberates spiritual resources.”

In addition to preaching well and serving well as a director of public worship, the young preacher should take advantage of the opportunity for intellectual leadership. The distaste of university ministries, the abstention of students from religious practices, the agnosticism on campuses, and the contemporary waywardness of our day all constitute an opportunity for the preacher. “If he is alive to the situation,” Fosdick remarks, “he will quit his reliance on creedal authority, and instead of standing outside the turmoil and confusion of this generation’s endeavor to find an intelligible religion, he will get inside it.”

Such problems are but an opportunity for the intelligent and adventurous preacher to exhibit leadership and present the way to a more credible faith. The problem is not one of irreligiosity but rather creedal conventionality: “This generation is not irreligious; it is intensely concerned with religion; but it will not, in its intelligent areas, be content with creedal conventionality. It cannot patiently harbor a modern worldview on one side and on the other a formulation of religions which contradicts it.”

In sum, Fosdick believed that the urgent need of the church is first-rate intellectual leadership to help clarify and reconstruct the thinking of Protestant churches.

The final word on this matter is that young women and men entering ministry should have a clear intent to help harness the spiritual power of the church to help solve our social problems. The church is an enormous resource of spiritual power. The young preacher can be instrumental in helping church members think through the major problems of our economic and

257 Ibid., 64.
258 Ibid., 65.
259 Ibid.
international life, for the church has been slow to recognize and understand the relationship of these problems and their religious convictions. According to Fosdick, the preacher is the most qualified person to help church members understand the application of Christian ethics to the problems of our day. If ignorance and bigotry imperils the church, then how can American society remain untouched? The importance of the preacher’s cognizance regarding resources of spiritual power is to instruct the church therein and to save American society from irreparable loss.

In “To Those Interested in the Profession of the Ministry” Fosdick argued that the Christian ministry cannot reasonably appeal to soft minds desiring a conventional profession. He surmised the collapse of traditional ecclesiastical organization. Such a collapse, he maintains, “is going to be uncomfortable to formal and stereotyped clergymen.” As regards the collapse among mainline Protestant churches, Fosdick spoke prophetically:

> Personally, I think that there is bound to be a great mortality among sectarian churches in the next twenty-five to fifty years. The old type of church, centered denominationally in the peculiarities of some sect, has outlived its usefulness and cannot minister to the deepest needs of the American people. As the old type of church dies out, however, a new type comes in.

Fosdick underestimated denominationalism and overestimated nondenominationalism. He was correct, however, in his forecast concerning the burgeoning of nondenominational churches. For Fosdick, the religious problem in America boils down to intellectual and religious leadership. A leader, in Fosdick’s assessment, is a person with intelligence, character, and insight into the religious problems of our day. Taking a reflective page from his own ministry, especially

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261 Ibid., 69.

262 Ibid., 71.
during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, Fosdick explains that Christian ministry needs leaders who are not afraid of conflict. “He who continually shrinks from conflict, writes John A. Broadus, “should stir himself up to faithfulness; he who is by nature belligerent should cultivate forbearance and courtesy.”

To young women and men considering the Christian ministry for salary, respectability, and professional routine or occupation, Fosdick sternly advises, “Stay out.” In response to a highly secularized, materialistic society, Fosdick says that the challenge of Christian ministry, which is also its opportunity, is to help society recover the abiding spiritual values of life. Such an undertaking is reserved for the intelligent Christian leader who understands the religious problem in America and is prepared to address the problem with a mind untrammeled by conventional wisdom and unrestricted of sectarian shackles. Notwithstanding Fosdick’s critique of Protestant churches, Fosdick insists that “the living gospel is too much alive for any church’s failures utterly to deaden it.”

When at their best, churches are institutions where “lives are transformed, character is built, courage is renewed, faith is strengthened, ideals of personal and social conduct which otherwise would die are kept alive, public-spirited devotion is engendered, and God’s kingdom of righteousness on earth is made a living hope.”

In the end, Fosdick believed that young men and women considering Christian ministry faced unique challenges, awesome opportunities, and endless possibilities. This holds true for contemporary ministry as well. There are unprecedented challenges facing the church. In the face


264 Fosdick, “To Those Interested in the Profession of Ministry,” 70.

265 Fosdick, A Faith for Tough Times, 77-78.

266 Ibid.
of such challenges, the church is in dire need of young, intelligent, and courageous leaders who can bring the church’s collective spiritual resources, intellectual power, and physical energy to bear on the multifarious, multifaceted problems of our day. This calls for young women and men of vision who can help the church better understand and respond to the religious, social, economic, and political forces that impact the church, society, culture, community, and our world. The Christian pulpit is and has been one of the most powerful forces of change in American social, religious, and cultural life. The transformation of the world is but one event away, and the church, with God as its navigator and courageous leadership at its helm, can lead the transformation.

**Contemporary Life-Situation Preaching**

Fosdick witnessed the decline of white mainline churches in America and the increase of nondenominational, nonsectarian churches. To discuss whether Fosdick was right or wrong is beyond the scope of this study. This crisis, as he saw it, called for intellectual Christian leadership. Prominent in his writings and speeches is a clarion call to young preachers to exercise Christian leadership. He believed that the young preachers of his day could make a spiritual contribution to the church and society. Fosdick’s advice to the clergy of his day stemmed from his knowledge and personal experiences. His preeminent concern was to relate the gospel to the concrete needs of his people. This is evident in his books, sermons, and speeches.

Nothing mattered more to Fosdick than to meet the urgent spiritual needs of those to whom he preached with the intellectual resources at his disposal. Fosdick once said in a lecture to clergy: “Generations differ in their most urgent needs. History could be written in terms of the varied intellectual and spiritual problems which, from age to age, have pressed up into the crucial
focus of attention; and in our time, tottering with worldwide convulsions, this problem which we are considering the impermanent, the durable amid the fugitive, is now a matter of life and death.”\(^{267}\) Our contemporary context is much different from Fosdick’s context. Still, the problems that vexed people then are the problems that vex people today. Although the context has changed dramatically, people’s psychological, physical, spiritual, social, and emotional needs remain the same. As one author pointed out, “It’s not so much that needs have changed but how people perceived them.”\(^{268}\) In light of this, life-situation preaching has a future in American Protestant churches even though old ways of doing ministry are no longer viable. Young preachers in white and black mainline churches today are going to have to wrestle with the cultural shifts and their implications for ministry. Congregations today consist of younger Christians who are generally distrustful of authority in its various forms: ecclesiastical, biblical, theological, or hierarchical.\(^{269}\) Therefore, it is important for preachers “to have an awareness of the ambiguities and uncertainties that are in the hearts of many Christians” in the pews.\(^{270}\) As long as life-situation preaching continues to address the felt needs of listeners, there is going to be an audience for the life-situation preacher.

Fosdick’s practical approach to preaching has implications for young men and women considering the ministry. This is not to say that the preacher has to start the sermon with a felt

\(^{267}\) Ibid., 14.


\(^{269}\) Jim Kitchens, *The Postmodern Parish: New Ministry for a New Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 57. Kitchens has been influential on my thinking regarding postmodern Christian leadership. Commenting on the differences between moderns and postmoderns, he observed: “They aren’t necessarily pressing for us to drop our commitment to an educated clergy. They are not as willing as Christians before them were, however, to accept the pastor’s authority unquestioningly or to accept the clergy’s interpretation of scripture without an opportunity for other voices and points of view to be heard and considered by community” (57).

need in the same way that Fosdick did. No, not at all. It is to say, though, that the practice that undergirded Fosdick’s approach to preaching provides young preachers with a paradigm for sermon composition that helps them connect with their audience. People get bored when the sermon does not involve them, speak to them, or move them. The fact of the matter is that people process information better when it directly affects their lives. Life-situation preaching seeks to effectively involve the listener in the communication process by creating an atmosphere where it seems as though the preacher is speaking directly to the individual—an atmosphere that is conducive to the receptivity of the proclamation of the gospel. In what follows, this study will discuss the implications of Fosdick’s life-situation preaching for young men and women.

In the first place, young preachers must understand the needs of their listeners. If the preacher is going to take advantage of life-situation preaching, she or he has to be able to speak directly to people’s needs and attempt to solve their problems. This can prove to be quite difficult. Acquiring insight into human nature takes time. Yet, it is the preacher’s responsibility to grapple with the profound problems of the preacher’s day and provide biblical insight to help facilitate healing and restoration. Young preachers do well to become students of human nature. They must study people empirically, for there is epistemological value in human experience that cannot be learned from inorganic material. Such an endeavor is best done through pastoral counseling. In the consultation room, confidential information is divulged that provides insight into human nature and reveals the deepest issues that beset human beings. People come to minister in the hope that the minister can help them in some spiritual or practical way or both. Analyzing people’s needs is one thing, brainstorming practical solutions is another thing. This process necessitates constant consultation with books, advice from other more experienced ministers and professionals, and quiet reflection. To say to a young preacher that he or she is to
solve other people’s problems induces a strong disinclination toward Christian ministry. Truly, that is a tall order for even the experienced pastor. Nevertheless, Fosdick’s preaching ministry gives us hope and encouragement that it can be done, and done well. Is it the minister’s job to “solve the people’s problems?” What about the ekklesia, the church, a communal group? It’s not just the preacher but the ekklesia working together to solve the problems. The minister is not in it by herself. The entire church community is obligated to aid in such problem solving.

Fosdick had routines that helped him to become and stay an effective preacher. He was a voracious reader. It is said that Fosdick read multiple books simultaneously. He kept a book in his desk drawer in his office at work, another book with him on the train, and another book in his home office. Fosdick was in constant search of resources to bring to bear on people’s needs. That the preacher should read her or his Bible daily for spiritual sustenance goes without saying. That the young preacher should read his or her Bible for spiritual resources to meet the people’s needs also goes without saying. What should be said, however, is that the preacher must read more than the Bible if the preacher is to provide both spiritual and intellectual leadership to people.

Fosdick had an affinity for biography, but he also surveyed biblical theology, history, economics, and psychology. He was fed intellectually on a diet of biography, as this genre gave him keen insight into people’s lives—their high hopes and disillusionments, problems and solutions, handicaps and strengths, fears and courage, successes and failures. Many of Fosdick’s sermon illustrations were derived from biography. It is safe to say, then, that perennial engagement with intellectual resources made Fosdick an organic intellectual and an effective preacher. Notwithstanding that Fosdick was more concerned with intellectual development than spiritual formation, he was masterful in his use of life-situation preaching. The young preacher
determined to pursue a Christian vocation should seek to immerse himself or herself not only in people’s lives but also in books, historical and contemporary, for professional development.

In the second place, young preachers do well to understand that their lack of experience does not mean that they cannot make a meaningful spiritual contribution to contemporary ministry and society. Life-situation preaching gives hope to the novice preacher. Even the talented preacher, confident in her abilities and sure of her calling, will find value in life-situation preaching as a means to address questions that people are asking, problems that people are facing, and experiences that are troubling them privately or professionally. In any event, regardless of one’s credentials (or the lack thereof), the life-situation preacher can bring about the transformation of personality through effective preaching and ministry. Diffidence dissipates; confidence emerges. Such a preacher will connect with the preacher’s audience because the preacher is showing an interest in the concrete problems that are the sources of discord in people’s lives. The young preacher’s sermons will be relevant, timely, and will have a meaningful impact on the listeners.

It is true that young preachers determined to be Christian ministers are met with entrenched skepticism because of their immaturity and inexperience. It is also true that such skepticism is inextricably linked to preconceived notions about young people. Changing people’s perception and challenging conventional wisdom is difficult but not impossible. The way in which a young minister conducts herself or himself in preaching (handling the Word), teaching (handling information), and counseling (handling people) helps the congregation to develop a clear picture of the preacher’s maturity and potential. No young preacher need feel inadequate for ministry as long as the preacher is willing to invest in his or her spiritual and intellectual development. It has been said by preachers of old that God desires the human being’s heart.
While this is true, it is also true that God desires the mind. Both the mind and the heart have to be unlocked from the inside.

The young preacher, as was the case for Fosdick, must seek to be a serious Christian and intellectual leader. Fosdick came into his own after years of preaching. He suffered many disappointments and setbacks in life. As a neophyte preacher, he spent many a long day in frustration over sermon composition. It was not until he was utterly fed-up that he experimented with an approach to preaching that he found meaningful and indispensable. If nothing else, the young preacher does well to study various approaches to preaching and use the approach that is best suited for the preacher’s ministry. Regardless of the approach, extreme care must be taken to ensure that the gospel of Jesus Christ is brought to bear on the concrete problems of the congregation. The life-situation approach only becomes a message to people’s self-centeredness when the sermon both begins and ends with a human need, excluding the role of the Bible and Holy Spirit in the process. Be that as it may no resource, however enlightening, is as relevant and as potent and as transformative as the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the third place, life-situation preaching helps young preachers understand the relationship between pastoral counseling and preaching as means to provide life to, and insight for, the preacher’s sermon. At the heart of ministry is the need for the preacher and ecclesial community to effectively deal with and handle the urgent needs of troubled personalities. This is what makes the pastoral calling different from other callings. Preaching that speaks from an in-depth understanding of beliefs, values, and assumptions gives the preacher instant credibility, for the preacher will be able to connect with the hearts and minds of the congregation. Fosdick once said that he envied young ministers who were trained in pastoral psychology. He regretted not having such training.
Young ministers today have a pastoral advantage because they have an opportunity to receive training that makes personal counseling effective. The application of psychology to the pastoral vocation provides an ideal situation where the pastor is able to provide professional counseling and the counselee is able to receive quality pastoral counseling, thereby addressing counselee’s urgent needs. “No minister,” affirms Fosdick, “who practices personal counseling can long remain in an ivory tower.”

Personal counseling allows the preacher to share vicariously in the struggles of human beings with every kind of problem known to humanity. This study need not belabor this previously addressed point. The point here is that personal counseling provides insight into people’s lives and better equips the young preacher to address today’s listener with clarity and relevance.

The young preacher has to take it upon self to think deeply about the context in which he or she provides ministry and begin to experiment with approaches to preaching that consists of fidelity to the Word of God, spiritual substance and intellectual pabulum to listeners, and practical feasibility in sermon composition for the preacher. What is more, the young preacher must seek to make the God of yesterday and yesteryear attractive to the technologically-oriented, social media-engrossed minds of today.

Notwithstanding the fact that over six decades separate us from Fosdick’s preaching ministry, his method of preaching has qualities that are important for and relevant to contemporary preaching. This is not to say that one should accept wholesale each aspect of Fosdick’s method of preaching, but rather that contemporary preaching can benefit from Fosdick’s approach to preaching. While it is true that the situation for preaching has changed drastically, especially given the technological revolution, it is also true, as Fosdick has noted,

that people are still concerned with their problems and how to understand and interpret their problems in light of the Gospel. Human nature is still the same, to be sure. And the Gospel is as relevant today as it was in Fosdick’s time.

Effective preaching harmonizes the problems of the people and the gospel in an imaginative way that helps to shed light on and provide answers to people’s real problems. Fred Craddock said it best when he wrote, “Some older volumes on preaching could profitably be reissued, not as a sentimental return to old paths but as a confession that part of the malaise in the discipline is due not to a stubborn refusal to move beyond tradition but to a thoughtless failure to listen carefully to that tradition.”272 To revisit Fosdick’s method is not to repudiate contemporary, casual forms of preaching, but rather to reassess the effectiveness of Fosdick’s method in light of unimaginativeness in contemporary preaching. This is certainly not a comprehensive analysis of all the implications of life-situation preaching for the contemporary young preacher in a mainline church. It is, however, a discourse on some of the salient advantages of life-situation preaching. The emphasis in the study has been on young people. However, the information herein is universal in that any preacher can benefit from this approach to preaching, including preachers of African-American listeners.

Chapter 6

African-American Life-Situation Preaching

Life-Situation Preaching for African Americans

Fosdick denounced racial discrimination. The Riverside Church, with its interdenominational, nonsectarian character, was an interracial fellowship, although I suspect that not many blacks attended in relation to the number of whites.\(^{273}\) Members were accepted on the basis of their Christian faith and not race, color, or nationality. Fosdick did not believe that one’s racial or national background served as a proper test of membership in a Christian church. On the contrary, he believed that racial and national variety enriched the Christian fellowship.

Fosdick did not expand upon his convictions regarding African Americans except to say that he abhorred racial discrimination and injustice. He hoped that his grandchildren would participate in the fight against racial prejudice and discrimination. Yet Fosdick was removed, so it seems, from the perilous plight and egregious social conditions of African Americans, for he said that the most critical and contentious social problem of his generation was WWII.\(^ {274}\) In any event, Fosdick never communicated personally or publically the implications of his life-situation preaching for nonwhites.

The uniqueness of the black experience in America warrants an analysis of the benefits of life-situation preaching for African Americans. The critical question is whether young African


\(^{274}\) Ibid., 292. Insightfully, a reader of this study noted that when one is not the immediate victim of a social problem like racism, such a one can identify some other social problem as “the most contentious” of his generation. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated in 1968, and yet there are white Americans who remember the record of the USC football team as being the most important event that year. Fosdick, like so many white liberals of his day knew full well that racism was a sin, but their “whiteness” prevented them from seeing it as a more serious social evil than war.
American preachers and the black church can benefit from Fosdick’s life-situation preaching. What, for example, does life-situation preaching say to the existential social problems that continue to plague the African-American community, such as intracommunity and intraracial (black-on-black) violence, and police brutality? Such exclusive American social issues adversely affect the spiritual, mental, and psychological wellbeing of America’s black masses. There is no doubt that Fosdick’s life-situation preaching is relevant to the African-American church and community today. Fosdick tailored his preaching for the ears of white, middle-class Americans. He was, after all, a white, middle-class pastor who served predominantly upper- and middle-class white, sophisticated congregations. Needless to say, Fosdick’s white audiences benefited from his preaching ministry and so can the African-American listeners. Better yet, young African-American preachers can apply the best that life-situation preaching has to offer to the existential life-situations of their community. How do young, motivated African-American preachers get at this vital task?

The conscientious African-American preacher must be able to speak directly and intelligently to the unique needs and “life situations” of the African Americans. Preaching that takes seriously the life situations of African-American listeners starts with the existential situations that affect the quality of life for those “who stand with their backs against the wall,” to use the apt phrase of Howard Thurman. Arguably, the efficacy of any sermon, especially the life-situation sermon, is the extent to which it brings the timely and timeless truths of the Bible to bear on the existential social, economic, political, and cultural forces that affect listeners. The truth is, the disinherited masses can little care about homiletical correctness, whether the sermon begins with the Bible or the life-situation of listeners, as long as the sermon speaks emphatically

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to their unique lived experiences and existential realities with the gospel. Preaching to socially ostracized, economically deprived, politically powerless, educationally deprived people—the lower class and underclass of society—is radically different from preaching to people in other hierarchical social categories such as upper and middle classes.

There is something to be said, though, for preaching that starts therapeutically where African-American listeners ache the most. If the preacher starts with listeners’ acute pain, then the preacher will have their rapt attention, for the preacher is dealing with issues of critical importance to their short- and long-term survival. For African-American listeners, such preaching is exhilarating because the preaching is addressing their urgent needs and personal and social problems with the power and proclamation of the gospel in relatable terms. In what follows, I will discuss two of the most foremost and formidable problems affecting the black community: black-on-black violence and police brutality. I will give more sustained attention to former than the latter, and then briefly discuss how life-situation preaching can help address these problems.276

**Black-on-Black Violence and Police Brutality**

One of the most critical problems affecting the African-American community is the epidemic of black-on-black violence that is ravaging the lives of young black males in America’s inner cities. The phenomenon of self-destructive behavior and the atrophy of values is nowhere more prevalent than in America’s smothering ghettoes. The general factors associated with black-on-black violence are low socioeconomic background, single parent households,

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276 This study is concerned with the underlying factors of two of the most formidable phenomena—black-on-black violence and police brutality—afflicting the African-American community. I do not address some of the debilitating issues (indolence, irresponsibleness, a sense of entitlement, etc.) that exists among some African Americans.
economically-deprived urban and central-city areas, and higher rates of death in black populations where many are unemployed or have low incomes. This is true for both the victim and the offender. Many of the victims and offenders come from socially and economically oppressed homes. They have difficulty identifying with the larger society. Social disintegration, economic and educational deprivation, unemployment and underemployment all contribute to the dismal social phenomena that exist in America’s African-American communities. James P. Comer says “the more traumatized black families which were unable to secure social and economic well-being or a sense of adequacy through identification with either the larger society or black community institutions and leaders, deteriorated most in the face of a changing economy.” Of such families, he notes that they are the primary site of a disproportionate amount of violence and other social problems.

The conscientious young African-American preacher must understand the general factors associated with black-on-black violence and the intricate dynamics of black existence in America. A life-situation sermon should not only address these factors but it should also discuss how to prevent them and how to live more faithfully as Christians in the face them. God is the divine architect who designed the foundation upon which all preaching rests, and the architectural structure of the black sermon consists of the existential life situations of African-American listeners.

James W. Clarke has observed that since 1964 approximately half of the violent crime committed each year in the United States is attributable to young black males, who represent less


278 Ibid., 60. Palley and Robinson cites James P. Comer.
than 3 percent of the total population. Clarke traces the origins and nature of black-on-black violence to the southern experience and the system of criminal justice that took the place of slavery as a means of social control after emancipation. The fact is, whites cared little about who was murdered, raped, or robbed as long as such crimes did not affect white interests. When blacks victimized whites, allegedly or factually, the consequences involved lynching, burning, bludgeoning, discriminatory capital sentencing, and convict labor. Southern prosecutors and defense attorneys did not take black-on-black crime seriously. “Thus the term ‘Negro law’ emerged after emancipation to describe such judicial indifference and the existence of a different standard of justice,” explains Clarke.

The extent to which a crime was punishable under law was determined by its effect on the white community. The result was that black crimes went unchecked by law enforcement and, as a result, a form of personal law enforcement was established. Clarke notices three enduring consequences of personal law enforcement. First, leniency and often immunity for crimes committed against blacks; second, it encouraged black-on-black violence; third, it contributed directly to the disruption, disunity, and increased rates of violent crimes within the black community and black family. Another factor that Clarke discusses is the ease with which blacks could obtain handguns. In the early twentieth century, “handguns in hardware stores and pawn shops were no more expensive than a pocket watch and were available to anyone who

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280 Ibid., 47.

281 Ibid.

282 Ibid.

283 Ibid., 48.
could pay the few dollars for them.\textsuperscript{284} Handguns provided black males with a sense of empowerment, protection, and security that was denied under the law. Exacerbating matters is the ease with which blacks could obtain liquor. “As probably never before,” asserts Clarke, “alcohol became a way for many blacks to blur the impact of the enormous difficulties they faced.”\textsuperscript{285} Clarke notes that this deadly combination—armed, angry, and drunk—“accounts for more black lives lost in a shorter period of time than lynching and capital punishment combined.”\textsuperscript{286} Thus, there is a salient correlation between social conditions that existed post-emancipation and the existential social conditions prevalent in America’s urban black communities.

David Wilson, in \textit{Inventing Black-on-Black Violence}, argues that the increased violence involving African Americans in U.S. cities after 1980 is perhaps predictable. Debunking the claim that African Americans’ culture is to blame for the violence (although the issue of “black culture” cannot be completely dismissed), Wilson justifies his claim by noting that oppressive living conditions—“loss of decent paying jobs, stigmatized identities and residential settings, institutional withdrawal of resources, and unabated physical decay”—that have spawned hopelessness and violence.\textsuperscript{287} Wilson cites data collected by Michael Tonry of the University of Chicago and Norvel Morris of the University of Maryland that underscore the gravity of the epidemic. Their study concluded that homicide was the leading cause of death for black men and women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four; that black men from twenty-five through

\textsuperscript{284} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{285} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{286} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{287} David Wilson, \textit{Inventing Black-on-Black Violence} (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), ix.
forty-four years old were eleven times more likely to die as homicide victims than were white men in that same age bracket; and that one of every two male murder victims was black, although one of every nine Americans was black.  

Wilson observed that discussants in the black-on-black violence epidemic often focused on black cultural dysfunctionalism and the decline of youth values and attitudes rather than class, poverty, oppression, hopelessness, human denigration, economic deindustrialization, and impacts of globalization. Highlighting the oppressive social conditions in inner cities, he writes:

All [conservatives, liberals, Marxists, black separatists] agreed inner cities suffered from accelerated deterioration reflected in increased drugs (especially crack cocaine), declining living conditions, vanishing jobs, mounting youth frustration, and growing unemployment. Drug selling, drug addiction, lessened job opportunities, and economic instability were universally acknowledged as more prevalent. Selling crack cocaine, the scourge of inner cities, emerged as the new employer of youth and adults. The result was increased crime: purse snatching, car theft, assault, and murder.

No commentary is necessary on this point except to say that black-on-black violence is the result of inextricably intertwined and interrelated social and economic phenomena that have profound consequences for the African-American community, especially youths. It should serve as a reminder, not a surprise, that forces outside of the African-American community have a tangible impact on the quality of life of that community. This is the “life situations” of the African-American community to which the young African-American preacher and the church must respond courageously and creatively. A life-situation sermon that does not connect with or speak to these life situations is better left unsaid. The efficacy of the life-situation sermon for

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289 Wilson, 15. One must focus on both the cultural ethos and the oppressive social and economic conditions in inner cities, thus providing a holistic approach to the problem.

290 Ibid., 15-16.
African Americans is the sermon’s ability to establish vital contact with interests and experiences of its listeners.

Rufus Burrow, Jr., in his article “Martin Luther King, Jr, Personalism, and Intracommunity Black Violence,” notes that much of the intracommunity violence among young African-American males is a reaction to outside forces such as racism, white supremacy, and economic exploitation. Noting the unprecedented levels of lovelessness, hopelessness, aimlessness, and sheer mean-spiritedness among young African American males today, Burrow reminds us that “historically there is nothing in the value system of African Americans that explains the present day low estimate of the worth and value of black personhood among so many young Black males.”

On the contrary, he notes that historically African Americans have had a much greater appreciation for black personhood. Part of the problem, he explains, is that young African American males have so few alternatives or quality life-choices. This means, in Burrow words, “that far too often no matter what choice they make the result is life-threatening rather than life-enhancing.”

He notes further that many young African Americans exhibit low self-esteem and sense of self, which in turn leads to a lack of respect for their peers and other persons in the community.

There is enduring value in Burrow’s analysis, for when one cannot see the worth and value of oneself, one is blind to the worth and value of other persons. Amos N. Wilson underscores this point when he writes that in order for blacks to assault, rape, rob, and murder

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292 Ibid.

293 Ibid., 52.
each other, they must internalize Eurocentric racist hostility toward themselves and internalize European contempt for the color of their skin and the physiognomy of their bodies. In Wilson’s thought, “They must see their bodies as the cause of pain and as their enemy, and consequently subject them to disrespect and murderous mutilation. They will destroy others who are clothed in a body like their own for they must be the enemy too.”

Historically, many whites have valued their lives but not the lives of blacks. But this does not put the argument on its head altogether. What the argument amounts to is our understanding of people and life and the way in which such things have been understood and interpreted historically, which is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that the sense of self-worth and self-value was systematically and violently striped from persons of African descent. With no sense of cultural identity, some blacks capitulated to the relentless and raw attacks on the personhood of African Americans. If, for example, the system of slavery was based solely on an economic concept and not a matter of inferiority, it would not have had the enduring social, economic, cultural, educational, and psychological consequences. But, the system was founded upon the intellectual inferiority of African Americans, which has persisted overtly and covertly since the first African were brought to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, to aid in the production of such lucrative crops as tobacco and, later, cotton.

Whatever the case may be, no preacher, ethnicity notwithstanding, can speak relevantly and intelligently to the African-American listener if the preacher is not fully conversant with the historical and existential sociocultural and socioeconomic conditions that constitute the curtailment of the listener’s quality of human and civil life. Young, African-American life-situation preachers must address the low levels of self-esteem and self-worth that is to blame for

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the thinking and life-choices of many African-American males. Such preaching must get at the underlying causes of black-on-black violence and seek to bring about personal, social, and communal transformation by bringing the gospel to bear on these issues. Fosdick used personal counseling as means to better understand and help people struggling with problems. Young African-American preachers who lack insight into these issues can use personal counseling as means to educate themselves. Then, during the preparation of the sermon, they can visualize the faces—victims, offenders, and families—of those who have been affected by black-on-black violence. Personal counseling is only part of the process that leads to change. The other part, as was the case with Fosdick, was personal counseling on a group scale. The preacher must be able to take the insights gleaned from personal counseling and think through their communal implications and practical solutions.

In addition to the epidemic of intraracial and intracommunity violence, the criminalization of blackness, especially African-American males, is affecting the quality of life for African Americans. It is no surprise that African Americans, especially males, are subjected to the use of excessive force and police brutality more than any other ethnic group in America. To be sure, the media is saturated daily with incidents of police shootings of African-American men and boys like Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, and Tamir Rice; and African-American females like Sandra Bland and Raynetta Turner.

Undergirding this issue is the statistically untenable belief that all black males are hardened criminals and that black males are committing more crime than white males. Socioeconomic status, educational achievement, or professional credentials are not enough to protect blacks from racial profiling and the use of excessive force. So it seems: “Cultural assimilation, Ivy League degrees, and six figure incomes cannot erase the mark of Blackness or
the vulnerability to sudden, unprovoked police brutality and the racist insult which it triggers.  

Police officers are exposed to biased police practices, racial profiling and police brutality, in the academy in that they are taught or already believe that minority males are more dangerous than other males in society. Thus, they leave the academy with justification for their discriminatory and inhumane treatment of minority males and even females, and, figuratively, a license to kill.

In their study of police brutality against black men, Judson L. Jeffries and James N. Upton argue compellingly that the use of excessive force against black men has far-reaching political, social, and economic ramifications for the Black community, as well as for the country as a whole. Highlighting the unforeseeable consequences of police use of excessive force, they note seven ramifications that significantly affect the African-American community, each of which is worth mentioning. First, the death of an African-American male strips the family of its patriarch and breadwinner; second, it shrinks the pool of eligible men from which African-American females can choose; third, it deprives young African-American males of fathers, father figures, and role models; fourth, it produces mental and psychological anguish for African-American men; fifth, it leads to distrust of white police officers; sixth, it has a direct bearing on how women cope with the issue of spousal abuse, making African-American women less likely to call the police for domestic disputes; and seventh, it robs the African-American community of some of its political, spiritual, and community leaders. In sum, police brutality has had and will continue to have profound impact on the African-American community and our country, for it is

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indeed one of the most profound social issues of the twentieth-first century for African-American and minority communities.

In *Race Matters*, Cornel West maintains that white America has failed to acknowledge the widespread mistreatment of black people, especially black, by law enforcement agencies…”

For West, a serious discussion of race in American must begin with the flaws of American society—“flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes”—and not the problems of black people. West points to nihilism as the root cause of the malaise in the African-American community. The situation in black America is such that: “The collapse of meaning in life—the eclipse of hope and absence of love of self leads to the social deracination and cultural denudement of urban dwellers, especially children. We have created rootless, dangling people with little link to the supportive networks—family, friends, school—that sustain some sense of purpose in life.”

West defines nihilism as *the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness.* He goes as far as to say that nihilism is the major enemy of black survival in America. The countermeasure for such profound and pervasive nihilism in West’s argument is hope, “for as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive.”

The affirmation of blackness is critical to the success and survival of black America. He points out that intermediate institutions, “such as Christian churches, Muslim mosques, and character-building

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298 Ibid., 3.
299 Ibid., 5.
300 Ibid., 14.
301 Ibid., 15.
schools have affirmed the humanity of black people and served as beacons of hope in the midst of cultural and moral crisis.”

What does all this mean for the young African-American life-situation practitioner?

**Preaching to African-Americans’ Life-Situations**

Young African American preachers must know and understand their context, namely, the social, political, and economic conditions that affect black life. African-American homileticians agree that the preacher must understand the existential situation of African-American listeners and, as LaRue notes, forge a unique way of understanding the Bible and applying those insights in very practical ways. The definitive purpose of the life-situation sermon for African Americans is the salvation of human personality and the transformation of society. The sermon cannot lose sight of the condition of the soul nor the social conditions in which African Americans live.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., speaks to this dual function of preaching when he says: “I think that preaching should grow out of the experiences of the people. Therefore, I, as a minister, must know the problems of the people that I am pastoring.”

Influenced by Walter Rauschenbusch’s social gospel, King believed that the preaching ministry must show concern for the individual and the society in which the individual lives. There are a number of things for young African-American preachers to consider in order to preach effectively to African-American listeners.

First, the young African-American preacher must be in touch, as was Fosdick, with the way the forces of life—individual, social, economic, and international—affect individuals and communities. The preacher must be cognizant of people’s fears, confusions, sins, prejudices,
hates, loves, successes, doubts, sorrows, failures, despair, conflicts, sicknesses, diseases, and inferiorities. The preacher must also be skilled at exegeting persons in their contexts in order to apply the gospel in relevant ways. Fosdick observes that fundamental to sermon preparation and preaching is the basic fact that people are most interested in themselves, their own problems, and the way to solve them.\textsuperscript{304} This is the paradox of preaching. That is, preachers must preach about a self-sacrificial savior to people who are concerned with their own personal and social problems only. Fosdick was merely stating a truth. This is certainly not the case for all people, but it is too important to overlook nevertheless. Even the most devout Christian has personal questions about her or his living. The preacher’s theological and psychological cognizance regarding such issues is critical to establishing vital contact with African-American listeners and preaching life-transforming sermons.

If, as West maintains, meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness pose the greatest threat to black life, then life-situation preaching must address these destructive phenomena and endeavor to manufacture meaning, hope, and love amongst African-Americans. For many an African American, life is overborne with nihilistic sentiments and profound despair. Effective life-situation preaching must address intracommunity violence and the inner struggle for value, meaning, and hope in a society where African Americans have been divested of such life-forming, life-sustaining, and life-enhancing resources (an individual at peace with self can live peaceably in society).

Second, the young African-American preachers must be aware of and sensitive to the dynamics of social relationships and how the absence of such relationships in the African-American community can disrupt personal efficiency rather than sustain and enhance it. Societal

\textsuperscript{304} Fosdick, “What Is the Matter With Preaching?,” 36.
norms in urban areas can reinforce dysfunctional and destructive behaviors that bring about personal, social, and communal disruption and decimation. Thus, life-situation preaching must speak to the atrophy of values and the absence of self-love, self-respect, and love of neighbor in the African-American community, while denouncing the structural constraints that cause them. Fosdick’s indispensable homiletical advice is that a sermon must bring to pass in the lives of the congregation the thing it talks about. What this suggests for our contemporary setting is that a sermon on African-American life situations should create in its listeners the subject that the preachers is discussing. Thus, the life-situation sermon should not only speak to African-American listeners about self-love, self-respect, and love of neighbor, it should help produce it in them.

A sermon on love—“Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39), for example—should explain, first, self-love, and, second, love of neighbor, as it is difficult, if not impossible, to love one’s neighbor without self-love. Better yet, it should produce self-love and love of neighbor in its listeners. The question that the preacher must ask is what biblical passages and relevant truths speak to the concrete and pervasive problems in the African-American community, and how can the church address these problems creatively. Fosdick’s life-situation preaching is helpful in this regard. As noted, Fosdick searched for a relevant truth, turning to the Bible invariably to reinforce the aim of the sermon.

Seeking to affirm blackness, the young African-American, life-situation preacher, in preparation of her sermon, must ask (1) what have I ever read in general literature—biography,

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305 Ibid., 37.

306 Although this chapter has been preeminently concerned with the issues in the African-American community, these issues are not divorced from the black church, as the black church exists within the African-American community and consists of its people. More importantly, the black church should be as concerned with these issues as the preacher, for these issues have communal and ecclesial implications and consequences.
history, novels, poetry—that throws light upon the problems in the African–American church and community?; (2) what have I ever run upon in personal counseling of African Americans that illustrates the human need with which I am dealing and the resources to meet it?; (3) where, beyond the passages I have already thought of, does the Bible—that vast storehouse of experience—illumine the sermon’s problem and the way to treat it for African Americans?; (4) what, in my own personal experience as an African Americans), has this intimately meant to me, and what—honest to goodness!—does it really mean now in my own life?307 The answers to these questions provide insightful sermonic material for African-American listeners.

Edgar N. Jackson could not be more correct in his contention that “it is well within the bounds of reason to believe that in our day many who come to worship are disturbed by inner conflicts, burdened by a sense of defeat, and threatened by states of depression that can impair their efficiency as persons, though they may not lead to complete destruction.”308 The life-situation sermon, as a didactic instrument, can help African Americans understand how their Christian faith and ethics can help them cope with the harsh realities of their existential context, inspiring a new and more profound sense of hope by helping struggling personalities overcome self-defeat and self-hate. In a word, life-situation preaching at its best applies the principles of the life-situation preaching to African-Americans’ life situations in order to address the multifarious, multidimensional problems that perpetually destroy their lives and community.

Third, the young African-American preacher must understand and respond to the pervasive sense of inferiority, disaffirmation of blackness, and personal inadequacy that African

307 This study does not presume that only African-American preachers preach to African-American audiences or that only white preachers preach to white audiences. The point is that preachers who preach to African-Americans must understand their life situations.

308 Jackson, How to Preach to People’s Needs, 84.
Americans face daily, and attempt to shore up hope and self-affirmation in human personalities so afflicted by life-depriving social forces and white supremacy. The preacher must understand the causes of these psychological and social problems before she can preach effectively to such needs. Most often such feelings are rooted in childhood or adolescent experiences. Early faulty comparisons of black youths to white can often result blacks feeling inadequate because of their skin color, socioeconomic status, lack of material possessions, or educational achievement. The yearning for social recognition and acceptance under such circumstance can be mortifyingly devastating, often resulting in brokenness—broken spirits, broken hearts, broken minds, broken homes, broken families, and broken social relationships. Disconnected from society, young African-Americans facing brokenness are left without support systems that model strong moral character. The life-situation sermons should get at these issues by providing practical biblical knowledge to listeners in order to influence the way they think about themselves and other people, especially other African Americans.

Fourth, the young African-American preacher must be able to deal constructively with injurious and pervasive attitudes and behaviors that contribute to violence and criminal activity. When used effectively, the pulpit can motivate African Americans to believe in themselves, to set high goals, to be persons of integrity and moral character, and to respect their own lives, the lives of their neighbors, and the larger society. While it is true that adolescents go through a period of challenging moral standards and parental instruction, it is also true that the preacher can help guide and encourage adolescents as they go through their psychological odyssey of self-discovery. Early negative adolescent experiences can cause irreparable psychological damage and become an important determinant of future attitudes and actions.
In light of this, the young African-American preacher has a critically important task, as one writer explains: “The preacher can help to encourage the development of the type of maturity that will minimize injurious behavior by giving insights to parents of adolescents, on the one hand, so that this period of growth can be accepted with as much mutual understanding as possible.”\textsuperscript{309} The absence of moral standards, familial support, and social ties can lead to a categorical rejection of American social life. Despised, dejected, and rejected, African American youths find refuge, security, and affirmation in the black underbelly of American society, thus becoming inveterate criminals and troublemakers. The underbelly of society may appear appealing to socially rejected youths, as it provides an opportunity for social acceptance and recognition through a spurious sense of physical courage and respect otherwise denied them.

Finally, the young African-American preacher must help young African-American males better understand how they feel about themselves and why they feel the way they do, thus helping to control their compulsive appetite for violence and crime. Such an attitude is often linked to the need for love, self-affirmation, and emotional support. In addition, the preacher must counter the psychological consequences of crippling social and economic conditions that breed despair and an inferiority complex. Aware of the dynamics of low self-esteem or no self-esteem, parents can be instrumental in shoring up moral standards, ethics, and the affirmation of black humanity in order to breed hope, self-esteem, and self-love.\textsuperscript{310} By preaching sermons that address both the parents and children, the preacher imputes knowledge that facilitates self-love and self-correction of destructive attitudes and behaviors.

\textsuperscript{309} Jackson, 144.

Thus, the life-situation sermon ought to help people see themselves and their possibilities more clearly, helping them to see and understand the inadequacy of their thoughts and feelings about themselves, and better comprehend the dignity and worth of human personality. The life-situation sermon can be instrumental in helping African American listeners understand their importance as children of God created in God's glorious image. Every person is important to God. Thus, the sermon should help persons to see themselves as God sees them, thereby developing an image of self that is compatible with God's. The preacher who is helping African Americans to understand the depths of their attitudes, actions, and behaviors is functioning in that she is performing a vital task. That is, she is helping listeners come to grips with their injurious behavior in order to correct and prevent such behavior.

One's special circumstance and social environment do not by themselves determine the quality or potentiality of one's personality, although they contribute substantively, for what one chooses to be is a matter of discipline, intestinal fortitude, hope beyond visible realities and crippling setbacks, self-affirmation and self-love. The importance of hope is not to be understated. “When man thinks of himself as beyond hope, needing change but fundamentally incorrigible, he drowns himself in despair,”311 notes Samuel M. Shoemaker. Who a woman is and where she is today is not indicative of who she will be or where she will be tomorrow. The life-situation sermon must produce this kind of courageous faith, which is supremely rooted in God's ability to create infinite possibilities for the disadvantaged in the face of seemingly insurmountable life situations. The gospel of Mark informs us that our belief creates unlimited possibilities, for "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes" (9:23).

Life-situation preaching at its best condemns black-on-black violence while calling attention to the social, economic, political, and educational conditions that cause and perpetuate its existence. That is, the preacher condemns the destructive forces, attitudes, and behaviors internal and external to the African-American community. Thus, the preacher is not merely concerned with treating the symptoms, but rather, even more so, the underlying causes of the problems. The effective life-situation sermon helps African-American listeners to overcome the nagging sense of inferiority foisted on them by white America, and face their devitalizing social conditions with unconditional love for God, themselves, their community, and their world. Life-situation preaching is an indispensable homiletical tool to help reshape the spiritual, personal, social, moral, and ethical life of African Americans; as such, it can help bring about resilient and robust personalities who are able to cope with and overcome the problems they face daily.
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Biography

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