LATE PROPHETS SPEAK

These sermon biographies deal with three influential ministers who spoke eloquently and bravely to the needs of their time. They were prophetic voices because they spoke out of their faith both the word of criticism and the word of hope to the church and the world. In varying ways they represent happenings and ideas that have gone into the making of our present situation in the church and the wider world.

These figures were quite diverse. They entered into controversy with each other. Yet they possessed certain features in common. They all tried to communicate what they felt was the heart of the Christian message in terms of contemporary ways of thinking; they all were engaged in applying their religious insight to vigorous social reform; they all were powerful preachers. They represent varying motifs in the broad theme of liberal American Protestantism during the first half of this century. I was privileged to hear all of them speak, though in the case of Fosdick, only once and then after his retirement. I was a student at Union Seminary when Niebuhr was teaching there, although he was out of action a large part of that time due to a heart attack. But I shall never forget an open house in his apartment that I attended during the opening weeks of my seminary days. I cannot recall the day when I was not aware of John Haynes Holmes. My parents met in his church; he took part in both their funerals and in my wedding, and after his retirement my mother assisted him for a time as private secretary.

For the idea of delivering these sermons in the first person I thank a great prophet of our own day, Reverend Robert W. Moon of St. Mark's Methodist Church, Sacramento, California. I have indicated by quotation marks where I have used the exact words of the man who is addressing us. The quotations from Fosdick come mainly from his autobiography, The Living of These Days. The words of Holmes are mainly from his autobiography, I Speak for Myself, his early book, The Revolutionary Function of the Modern Church, and Rabbi and Minister, and A Summons Unto Men by Carl Voss. The quotations by Niebuhr come from a variety of his writings, indicated in the text, plus Reinhold Niebuhr, by Ronald Stone and Courage to Change by June Bingham.

It is always difficult to get a clear picture of the people who populated the point in history just behind us. It is even more difficult to guess what they might say to us now. But I think that the lives of these men still speak in ways that ought to command our attention.

Royal F. Shepard, Jr.