



REV. HENRY E. DOSKER, D. D.

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A SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF REV. HENRY ELIAS  
DOSKER, D. D., LL. D., L. H. D.

*(Professor of Church History, Louisville Presbyterian  
Theological Seminary, 1903-1926).*

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For those not well acquainted with Dr. Dosker, it may be well, before my expression of appreciation of him, to give, in a few words, the data of his life.

He was born in the Netherlands in February, 1855, at Bunschoten. His father was the Rev. Nicholas Herman Dosker, pastor of the Christian Reformed Church at Bunschoten, and his mother was Wilhelmina De Ronden. Henry Elias, for that was the name given him, was educated in the Dutch Gymnasium, a school of secondary education that corresponds roughly to our academy or high school. The family came to this country in 1870, the Rev. Nicholas Dosker having accepted a call to take the ministry of the Second (Dutch) Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Henry E. was sent to Hope College, Holland, Michigan, from which he graduated and of which he was one of the most distinguished alumni. He then entered McCormick Seminary without, of course, leaving the membership of the Dutch Reformed Church in America. His first church was a country pastorate in Ebenezer, near the city of Holland, Michigan. His second church was the First Reformed Church of Grand Haven, Michigan,

and his third church the Third Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan.

Meanwhile, he had been lecturing in Church History with such success in the Western Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church, in Holland, Michigan, that upon the establishment of a Chair in Church History, he was called to be the first incumbent. Presently his reputation as a Church historian and teacher began to spread and the Presbyterian Seminary at Louisville besought him to accept the Professorship of Church History there. He at first declined, but later accepted and took up his work with the Louisville Seminary in October, 1903. Twice after that he was called to occupy the same Chair in McCormick Theological Seminary, but declined to leave. Princeton honored him by making him the Stone Lecturer, and his own alma mater, Hope College, last spring conferred upon him the degree of L. H. D. He died on December 23, 1926, after having undergone a drastic operation on December 20th.

I do not think there is any one that knew Dr. Dosker even a little but perceived at once that he was an unusually talented man.

There were four nationalities that contributed to the making of him. From the line of his paternal ancestors Germany had poured something of its genius for industry and erudition into his veins. From his mother's ancestry France had added the quick and vivid imagination and the religious fervor of the Huguenots. The Netherlands furnished the base of common sense in which these elements were blended and supplied beside a bit of practical thrift. And America had still further enriched the rich complex with a deal of dash and humor and a goodly measure of frankness. The whole redeemed, illuminated by the supernatural grace of God and yielded to God's service was Dr. Dosker.

We are wont, psychologically, to speak of three phases or functions or departments of the human soul: the intellect, the emotions and the will. There are men who are brilliantly gifted in the one who may yet be totally lacking in either or

both of the other two. Dr. Dosker was gifted in them all. A little analysis will make that plain.

The two great talents of the intellect are the reason and the imagination. The first makes the philosopher; the second the poet. The two together make the great scientist, the great artist, the great historian and the great preacher. Dr. Dosker possessed both these major endowments of the intellect. On the shelves of his library, on his table, in his hands there were the great thinkers of the past and present. He knew the great theologians and their doctrines. He knew the specious arguments by which modern destructive critics and philosophers as well as ancient heretics sought to overthrow the faith once delivered to the saints. He could present, both with learning and originality, the reasons for the defense. He had a mind to those portions of the Bible that appeal to thought and could expound the deep things of God.

Yet, though he possessed both the gift of thought and of the imagination, it was in the latter that he most excelled his fellows. It gave wings to his thinking always, and made him supremely interesting to others, both in public speech and in private conversation. Ofttimes in our Faculty discussions, by a single striking metaphor or other figure of speech, he would end a whole discussion and win his point. He was himself mentally the most picturesque figure on our staff. It was this never failing fountain of imagery that made him both the preacher and the teacher he was. I shall have more to say of this presently. I wish here merely to indicate what intellectual endowment was his. If he was something of a philosopher, he was more of a poet.

Now the gift of the imagination is a more wonderful gift than that of thought for this reason—that it blesses the emotional as well as the intellectual life. No man can either sympathize much with men or love God much who does not have the power of imaging the concrete whatever he may be able to do in thinking the abstract. So it happens that the mere philosopher is often a Stoic in temperament, while the poet is as rich on his heart side as on his head side. And Dr. Dosker

was a man of quick and rich emotions. It has often been noted how close together in the soul lie the two, at first blush seemingly opposite qualities of humor and pathos. He who can make men laugh has almost surely the ability to make men cry and then stay their tears, too. No man had a keener sense of humor nor the ability to move others to it than Dr. Dosker. But by the same token his gifts were in demand on occasions when men's hearts were cut wide open with grief. I know personally of some he saved from despair by interpreting or justifying the ways of God at such a time and so setting their feet upon a rock. He could not have done it without a quick and understanding sympathy. So it was, too, that he could lift men up in prayer to God. Coleridge's ancient lines, forever true, were also true of him:

"He prayeth best who loveth best  
All things, both great and small.  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all."

Sometimes it would even happen when there was some special situation or occasion that the Seminary students would express the desire that Dr. Dosker be asked to pray. It is because a man prays mostly with his heart. He had sometimes a teacher's impatience with stupidity and especially with idleness. But if any one of them was in trouble, no one was so quick to spring to their championship.

But once more I may not linger any longer here, for I must add that if Dr. Dosker had rare talent both in his intellectual and in his emotional life, these were further complimented and completed by the gifts of the will. There is no man that knew him but realized very soon that he was a man of pronounced convictions. He was not a man that could not come to a conclusion. Perhaps sometimes he reached his conclusions too soon, for the impulsiveness of boyhood had never quite left him, but he had at least the ability to come to a conclusion. Some men have not. I have, myself, sat at the feet of professors who never seemed able to reach a decision even in things

fundamental. They seemed to be always tight-rope walking intellectually in an eternal balance betwixt two. Such a failure comes when a man's intellect has developed at the expense of his will. Professor William James once wrote an illuminating essay on "The Will to Believe". And Dr. Phillips Brooks never said a finer thing than this: "Not from particular intellect to particular intellect but from total life to total life comes the revelation of God to men." Dr. Dosker was a man who could reach conclusions and the great conviction of his life he did not reach too soon. He had thought on it long and well. He had considered it from every angle, but he could say without wavering and with great firmness, "I know in whom I have believed". For that great conviction was the conviction of the supernatural Gospel of the supernatural Christ.

What every theologian should have to make him a really great theologian is three things: a philosophic grasp, the historic sense, and a personal experience of Christ. There are professors in Seminaries who have the first but haven't the second; there are those that have the first and second and still do not have the third. They are not safe guides for men in training for the ministry. Dr. Dosker had them all. His religious convictions sprang chiefly, as it should, out of his personal experience of Christ. No man can speak truly and well here but the real empiricist. This experience lay back of his conviction, but that, without the gift of the will, would still have lacked point with which to penetrate the mind of others.

And then he had that other gift of the will—persistence. Whether it was in his loves and friendships or whether his ideals and tasks, he had the loyalty of carrying on. He was impulsive, but beneath all these impulses, like ripples on the surface of a stream, there was the great current of it that never dried up and flowed steadily on to its determined end.

And these gifts of the will were completed by the shining gift of courage. He was an outspoken man. He dared say what he thought. Some may possibly think that he did this too much, and, perhaps, for this reason, too, it was that God gave him two gentle inhibitions with it: one was his gentle

wife; and the other was the grace of God. But with all it was a shining gift. Personally, I think that it is a virtue that has never yet been sufficiently evaluated in this world—the virtue of moral courage, of daring to have convictions and to express them. There are so many cowards in the world hiding their cowardice under the all too thin and transparent cloak of tact. The world needs moral courage more than almost anything else, and the cause of Christ needs it supremely. It was, we read, when those Jerusalemites saw the boldness of Peter and John that they took note of them that they had been with Jesus and had learned of Him. “And ye shall be my witnesses”, Christ commanded His disciples. It took courage. It does still, and it was an outstanding virtue of Dr. Dosker that in whatever company he was, whether of friends or foes of the supernatural Christ, he was an unafraid and unashamed witness of his Lord.

#### HIS SERVICE AS A TEACHER OF CHURCH HISTORY.

The service Dr. Dosker rendered the Church was twofold. If the first was his preaching—the second was his teaching.

It could hardly have been expected beforehand that a man so qualified to preach, while never abandoning that, would, nevertheless, turn to teaching instead as his great life work. But that was what happened in the providence of God, for there was a crisis in belief at hand and God had called Dr. Dosker to the kingdom for such a time as this.

The teaching of history, most of all Church History, is not an easy task. The men that can do it well are rare indeed; rarer than the men that can teach most every other subject well in the Seminary curriculum. The teaching of Church History in some of the Seminaries of our land has not been a distinguished success.

Nor is it easier in this day, when the passion of the age is to be up to the latest, no matter how rootless and mushroomlike that latest may be, destined, like Jonah's gourd, to grow in a night and perish in a night.

But for that reason all the more the teaching of Church History is so essential. No man can know and understand either the great human movements or the great movements of God in the world without knowing their historic background. One cannot tell the general direction in which a train is going nor guess its ultimate goal by simply seeing a mile of its track. For that may be, for a time, in quite a different—indeed, if it has to cross over a mountain or through a city—in quite an opposite direction. So it is that an age, self-confident though it may seem to be and independent both of its past and its future, often little understands itself. What it needs for its intelligent cooperation in the onward movement of society, especially in the coming of the kingdom of God in it, is to know those historical movements and impulses of which it is in large part the creature or the child.

Nor is that the whole story. There is something else and more vital. For the Church of Christ is committed to the fact that there has been no mere evolution of human society in the world, that there has been and is a supernatural redemption intervening from above and centering in the incarnation and atonement of the Son of God on earth, prepared for by events both supernatural and natural and carried on since by events and influences of supernatural grace as well as by God's providence in the natural.

Now our age, carried away to obsession by its discovery of the unsuspected marvels of the purely natural, has been tempted in its thinking to eliminate the supernatural altogether. And the great battle ground of faith during the past fifty years that cover the career of Dr. Dosker has been whether or not, in these great historic roots out of which the Church and Christianity have grown, men should find and admit and believe and frankly accept the supernatural.

It all has made the teaching of Church History in our training schools for the Gospel ministry an exceedingly difficult but an exceedingly vital task. What sort of a man has it demanded for such a task? Well—it has demanded, first of all, a man who should so combine the acquisition of erudition with the



gifts of the imagination that he would not only know the facts, but would make them live again before the minds of this very unhistorically minded age. It has demanded, secondly, a man whose eyes have not been blinded by the obsession of mere ritualism; who, on the contrary, would have a sort of instinct for the supernatural. In my knowledge of the Presbyterian Seminaries of our country—and I have learned something of most of them—there has been one man who, during these past fifty critical years, has possessed the combination supremely without a superior. That man was Dr. Dosker.

And so he gave to the Church a supreme service. He had seen the battle line of faith waver both in Europe and also in America, but through it all he not only stood like a rock in the midst of the storm himself, but from his strategic position as a teacher in the Seminary, he sent forth one company of young men after another, year after year, profoundly impressed with the same conviction and with the same attitude, to hold the line until the attack should pass.

In addition to all this, he achieved the dear ambition of a teacher to win the affection, as well as the confidence, of his students. Not once during the six years I have been president of the Louisville Seminary have I heard any student criticize him adversely. When the news came of his death it was as if a black shadow had fallen athwart all their hearts. Very tenderly did six young men, all of them now ministers in the Presbyterian ministry in Louisville, all of them his former students, too, bear his body from the Seminary Chapel, where he had so often spoken and led in prayer, to the Warren Memorial Presbyterian Church of this city; and from there to the train which took the body to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where the final funeral services were conducted. Very tenderly did others guard what had been his earthly temple while it lay in state. He had won not merely their heads, but he had won their hearts, too.

Well, thus he had discharged to the Lord of the talents the very remarkable gifts that had been entrusted to him as a teacher.

Finally, the Lord of the talents came to receive an account of His servant and to call him up to higher service. And when He came, there happened an exceedingly beautiful manifestation of the Lord's grace. It is a sore trial for a man to leave the few things over which he has been faithful here, even if it is to be a ruler over many things there. It is hard to bid farewell to the tasks and loves of time even for those of eternity, since the former are those we know well and the latter have to be taken on faith. It requires much tearing of the heartstrings, not only, but a courage more than we possess to pass into the valley of the shadow, when the lights go out forever on this side and those on the other side do not yet shine and we must go, for the first time, without a single human companionship.

But more than once, as I have seen the pilgrim of earth draw near to that other shore, I have noticed that something of the transforming glory of that other world seems to reach down to enfold them and lift them up and glorify them.

It was so now. All the gifts that God had given Dr. Dosker were still in evidence, for when Christ comes, He always comes not to destroy, but to fulfill. There was the same thirst for knowledge; the same industry; the same humor. He was just the same Dr. Dosker, but, also, he was already being glorified. All that hindered was falling away. As I climbed the stairs to his study the last time I ever saw him in life, a day or two before his operation, I found him working on an article which he had promised to write. I asked him how he felt as I came in, and he almost shouted the word "happy". He added, "God has been very good to me; He has let me live a long and useful life, my children are all grown and my wife is in heaven. I should be glad to serve Him further upon earth, but if He wants me to go now, I am ready".