

LIBERALISM or CHRISTIANITY?

Introduction

J. Gresham Machen(1881-1937), U.S. Presbyterian theologian and one of the most eloquent spokesmen for the conservative position in the theological controversies of the 1920s and 1930s. He fought the good fight against the inroads of liberal theology and the hypocrisy of those Presbyterian ministers who vowed on their ordination to uphold the divine authority of the Word of God in Holy Scripture, and then spent the rest of their lives preaching doctrines contrary to the Word of God.

J. Gresham Machen was born at Baltimore on July 28, 1881. Educated at Johns Hopkins and Princeton universities, Princeton Theological seminary and the Universities of Marburg and Göttingen, he taught at Princeton seminary from 1906 until its reorganisation in 1929. Then he left to help found Westminster Theological seminary in Philadelphia, where he served as professor of New Testament until his death on Jan. 1, 1937.

Machen's leading contribution to the conservative cause in the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy was his book "Christianity and Liberalism" (1923), which contended that theological liberalism could not call itself Christian in any Biblical or historic sense at all. The following tract was a preliminary article for that important work. in the Princeton Theological Review of 1922.

Machen's most scholarly books were "The Origin of Paul's Religion" (1921) and "The Virgin Birth of Christ," 1930. His publications also included numerous pamphlets and articles, in addition to several other books, many of a popular nature.

Refusing to resign from the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions on the ground that the mandate, of the general assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA, ordering its members to do so was unconstitutional. Machen was suspended from the ministry. When his appeal was not sustained, he left in 1936 to join in forming the Presbyterian Church in America, later known as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Machen also enjoyed a world-wide reputation as a Greek scholar and learned Christian apologist. His theological position, he was wont to emphasise, was not fundamentalist, but the Reformed Faith of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

This article, written a year before he wrote his book against liberalism, is an excellent introduction against the liberal apostasy of our own times, and may it

prove helpful to those who see, as Machen clearly did, that liberalism is “another gospel,” and has no rightful place in the Church of our Lord.

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LIBERALISM or CHRISTIANITY?

by J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)

The attack upon the fundamentals of the Christian faith is not a matter merely of theological seminaries and universities. It is being carried on vigorously by Sunday School “lesson-helps,” by the pulpit, and by the religious press. The remedy, therefore, is not to be found in the abolition of theological seminaries, or the abandonment of scientific theology, but rather in a more earnest search after truth and a more loyal devotion to it when once it is found.

At the seminaries and universities, the roots of the great issue are more clearly seen than in the world at large; among students the reassuring employment of traditional phrases is often abandoned, and the advocates of a new religion are not at pains, as they are in the Church at large, to maintain a pretence of conformity with the past. In discussing the attack against the fundamentals of Christianity “from the point of view of colleges and seminaries,” therefore, we are simply discussing the root of the matter instead of its mere superficial manifestations. What, at bottom, when the traditional phrases have all been stripped away, is the real meaning of the present revolt against historic Christianity?

That revolt, manifold as are its manifestations, is a fairly unitary phenomenon. It may all be subsumed under the general head of “naturalism”—that is, the denial of any entrance of the creative power of God (in distinction from the ordinary course of nature) in connection with the origin of Christianity. The word “naturalism” is here used in a sense somewhat different from its philosophical meaning. In this non-philosophical sense it describes with fair accuracy the real root of what is called, by a common degradation of an originally noble word, “liberal” religion. What then, in brief, are the teachings of modern liberalism, as over against the teachings of Christianity?

At the outset, we are met with an objection. "Teachings," it is said, are unimportant; the exposition of the teachings of liberalism and the teachings of Christianity, therefore, can arouse no interest at the present day; creeds are merely the changing expression of a unitary Christian experience, and provided only they express that experience they are all equally good. Whether this objection be well-founded or not, the real meaning of it should at least be faced. And that meaning is perfectly plain. The objection involves an out-and-out scepticism. If all creeds are equally true, then since they are contradictory to one another, they are all equally false, or at least equally uncertain. We are indulging therefore in a mere juggling with words. To say that all creeds are equally true, and that they are based upon experience, is merely to fall back upon that agnosticism which fifty years ago was regarded as the deadliest enemy of the Church. The enemy has not really been changed into a friend merely because he has been received within the camp. Very different is the Christian conception of a creed. According to the Christian conception, a creed is not based upon Christian experience, but on the contrary it is a setting forth of those facts upon which experience is based.

But, it will be said, Christianity is a life, not a doctrine. The assertion is often made, and it has an appearance of godliness. But it is radically false, and to detect its falsity one does not need to be a Christian. For to say that "Christianity is a life" is to make an assertion in the sphere of history. The assertion does not lie in the sphere of ideals; it is far different from saying that Christianity ought to be a life, or that the ideal religion is a life. The assertion that Christianity is a life is subject to historical investigation exactly as is the assertion that the Roman Empire under Nero was a free democracy. Possibly the Roman Empire under Nero would have been better if it had been a free democracy, but the historical question is simply whether as a matter of fact it was a free democracy or no. Christianity is an historical phenomenon, like the Roman Empire, or the Kingdom of Prussia, or the United States of America. And as an historical phenomenon it must be investigated on the basis of historical evidence.

Is it true, then, that Christianity is not a doctrine but a life? The question can be settled only by an examination of the beginnings of Christianity. Recognition of that fact does not involve any acceptance of Christian belief; it is merely a matter of common sense and common honesty. At the foundation of the life of every corporation is the incorporation paper, in which the objects of the corporation are set forth. Other objects may be vastly more desirable than those objects, but if the directors use the name and the resources of the corporation to pursue the other ob-

jects they are acting “ultra vires” of the corporation. So it is with Christianity. It is perfectly conceivable that the originators of the Christian movement had no right to legislate for subsequent generations; but at any rate they did have an inalienable right to legislate for all generations that should choose to bear the name of “Christian.” It is conceivable that Christianity may now have to be abandoned, and another religion substituted for it; but at any rate the question what Christianity is can be determined only by an examination of the beginnings of Christianity.

The beginnings of Christianity constitute a fairly definite historical phenomenon. The Christian movement originated a few days after the death of Jesus of Nazareth. It is doubtful whether anything that preceded the death of Jesus can be called Christianity. At any rate, if Christianity existed before that event, it was Christianity only in a preliminary stage. The name originated after the death of Jesus, and the thing itself was also something new. Evidently there was an important new beginning among the disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem after the crucifixion. At that time is to be placed the beginning of the remarkable movement which spread out from Jerusalem into the Gentile world—the movement which is called Christianity.

About the early stages of this movement definite historical information has been preserved in the Epistles of Paul, which are regarded by all serious historians as genuine products of the first Christian generation. The writer of the Epistles had been in direct communication with those intimate friends of Jesus who had begun the Christian movement in Jerusalem, and in the Epistles he makes it abundantly plain what the fundamental character of the movement was.

But if any one fact is clear, on the basis of this evidence, it is that the Christian movement at its inception was not just a way of life in the modern sense, but a way of life founded upon a message. It is perfectly clear that the first Christian missionaries did not simply come forward with exhortation; they did not say: “Jesus of Nazareth lived a wonderful life of filial piety, and we call upon you our hearers to yield yourselves as we have done to the spell of that life.” Certainly that is what modern historians would have expected the first Christian missionaries to say, but it must be recognized at least that as a matter of fact they said nothing of the kind. They came forward, not merely with an exhortation or with a program, but with a message,—with an account of something that had happened a short time before. “Christ died for our sins,” they said, “according to the Scriptures; he was buffed; he has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

This message, even the small excerpt from it quoted by Paul in 1 Cor. 15:3ff., contains two elements—it contains (1) the facts and (2) the meaning of the facts (“for our sins”). The narration of the facts is history; the setting forth of the meaning of the facts is doctrine. These two elements are always contained in the Christian message. “Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried”—that is history. “He loved me and gave himself for me”—that is doctrine. Without these two elements, inextricably intertwined, there is no Christianity.

The character of primitive Christianity, as founded upon a message, is summed up in the words of the eighth verse of the first chapter of Acts—“Ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” It is entirely unnecessary, for the present purpose, to argue about the historical value of the Book of Acts or to discuss the question whether Jesus really spoke the words just quoted. In any case the verse must be recognized as an adequate summary of what is known about primitive Christianity. From the beginning Christianity was a campaign of witnessing. And the witnessing did not concern merely what Jesus was doing within the recesses of the individual life. To take the words of Acts in that way is to do violence to the context and to all the evidence. On the contrary, the Epistles of Paul and all the sources make it abundantly plain that the testimony was primarily not to inner spiritual facts but to what Jesus had done once for all in His death and resurrection.

Christianity is based, then, upon an account of something that happened, and the Christian worker is primarily a witness. But if so, it is rather important that the Christian worker should tell the truth. When a man takes his seat upon the witness stand, it makes little difference what the cut of his coat is, or whether his sentences are nicely turned. The important thing is that he tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If we are to be truly Christians, then, it does make a vast difference what our teachings are, and it is by no means aside from the point to set forth the teachings of Christianity in contrast with the teachings of the chief modern rival of Christianity.

The chief modern rival of Christianity is “liberalism.” An examination of the teachings of liberalism will show that at every point the liberal movement is in

opposition to the Christian message. That examination will now be undertaken, though necessarily in a summary and cursory way.¹

Christianity, it has already been observed, is based upon an account of something that happened in the first century of our era. But before that account can be received, certain presuppositions must be accepted. These presuppositions consist in what is believed first about God, and second about man. With regard to the presuppositions, as with regard to the message itself, modern liberalism is diametrically opposed to Christianity.

It is opposed to Christianity, in the first place, in its conception of God. But at this point we are met with a particularly insistent form of that objection to doctrinal matters which has already been considered. It is unnecessary, we are told, to have a "conception" of God; theology, or the knowledge of God, is the death of religion; we should not seek to know God, but should merely feel His presence.

With regard to this objection, it ought to be observed that if religion consists merely in feeling the presence of God, it is devoid of any moral quality whatever. Pure feeling, if there be such a thing, is non-moral. What makes affection for a human friend, for example, such an ennobling thing is the knowledge which we possess of the character of our friend. Human affection, apparently so simple, is really just bristling with dogma. It depends upon a host of observations treasured up in the mind with regard to the character of our friend. But if human affection is thus really dependent upon knowledge, why should it be otherwise with that supreme personal relationship which is at the basis of religion? Why should we be indignant against slanders directed against a human friend, while at the same time we are patient about the basest slanders directed against our God? Certainly it does make the greatest possible difference what we think about God.

In the Christian view of God as set forth in the Bible, there are many elements. But one attribute of God is absolutely fundamental in the Bible; one attribute is absolutely necessary in order to render intelligible all the rest. That attribute is the awful transcendence of God. From beginning to end the Bible is concerned to set forth the awful gulf that separates the creature from the Creator. It is true, indeed, that according to the Bible God is immanent in the world. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without Him. But he is immanent in the world not because He is iden-

¹ The principal divisions of what follows were suggested by the Rev. Paul Martin, of Princeton.

tified with the world, but because He is the free Creator and Upholder of it. Between the creature and the Creator a great gulf is fixed.

In modern liberalism, on the other hand, this sharp distinction between God and the world is broken down, and the name "God" is applied to the mighty world process itself. We find ourselves in the midst of a mighty process, which manifests itself in the indefinitely small and in the indefinitely great—in the infinitesimal life which is revealed through the microscope and in the vast movements of the heavenly spheres. To this world-process, of which we ourselves form a part, we apply the dread name of "God." God, therefore, it is said in effect, is not a person distinct from ourselves; on the contrary our life is a part of His. Thus the Gospel story of the Incarnation, according to modern liberalism, is sometimes thought of as a symbol of the general truth that man at his best is one with God.

It is strange how such a representation can be regarded as anything new, for as a matter of fact, pantheism is a very ancient phenomenon. And modern liberalism, even when it is not consistently pantheistic, is at any rate pantheizing. It tends everywhere to break down the separateness between God and the world, and the sharp personal distinction between God and man. Even the sin of man on this view ought logically to be regarded as part of the life of God. Very different is the living and holy God of the Bible and of Christian faith.

Christianity differs from liberalism, then, in the first place, in its conception of God. But it also differs in its conception of man. Modern liberalism has lost all sense of the gulf that separates the creature from the Creator; its doctrine of man follows naturally from its doctrine of God. But it is not only the creature limitations of mankind which are denied. Far more important is another difference. According to the Bible, man is a sinner under the just condemnation of God; according to modern liberalism, there is really no such thing as sin. At the very root of the modern liberal movement is the loss of the consciousness of sin.²

The consciousness of sin was formerly the starting-point of all preaching; but today it is gone. Characteristic of the modern age, above all else, is a supreme confidence in human goodness; the religious literature of the day is redolent of that confidence. Get beneath the rough exterior of men, we are told, and we shall dis-

² For what follows, compare "The Church in the War," in *The Presbyterian*, for May 29, 1919, pp. 10 f.

cover enough self-sacrifice to found upon it the hope of society; the world's evil, it is said, can be overcome with the world's good; no help is needed from outside the world.

What has produced this satisfaction with human goodness? What has become of the consciousness of sin? The consciousness of sin has certainly been lost. But what has removed it from the hearts of men?

In the first place, the war has perhaps had something to do with the change. In time of war, our attention is called so exclusively to the sins of other people that we are sometimes inclined to forget our own sins. Attention to the sins of other people is, indeed, sometimes necessary. It is quite right to be indignant against any oppression of the weak which is being carried on by the strong. But such a habit of mind, if made permanent, if carried over into the days of peace, has its dangers. It joins forces with the collectivism of the modern state to obscure the individual, personal character of guilt. If John Smith beats his wife nowadays, no one is so old-fashioned as to blame John Smith for it. On the contrary, it is said, John Smith is evidently the victim of some more of that Bolshevistic propaganda; Congress ought to be called in extra session in order to take up the case of John Smith in an alien and sedition law.

But the loss of the consciousness of sin is far deeper than the war; it has its roots in a mighty spiritual process which has been active during the past seventy-five years. Like other great movements, that process has come silently, so silently that its results have been achieved before the plain man was even aware of what was taking place. Nevertheless, despite all superficial continuity, a remarkable change has come about within the last seventy-five years. The change is nothing less than the substitution of paganism for Christianity as the dominant view of life. Seventy-five years ago, Western civilization, despite inconsistencies, was still predominantly Christian; today it is predominantly pagan.

In speaking of "paganism," we are not using a term of reproach. Ancient Greece was pagan, but it was glorious, and the modern world has not even begun to equal its achievements. What, then, is paganism? The answer is not really difficult. Paganism is that view of life which finds the highest goal of human existence in the healthy and harmonious and joyous development of existing human faculties. Very different is the Christian ideal. Paganism is optimistic with regard to unaided human nature, whereas Christianity is the religion of the broken heart.

In saying that Christianity is the religion of the broken heart, we do not mean that Christianity ends with the broken heart; we do not mean that the characteristic Christian attitude is a continual beating on the breast or a continual crying of “Woe is me.” Nothing could be further from the fact. On the contrary, Christianity means that sin is faced once for all, and then is cast, by the grace of God, forever into the depths of the sea. The trouble with the paganism of ancient Greece, as with the paganism of modern times, was not in the superstructure, which was glorious, but in the foundation which was rotten. There was always something to be covered up; the enthusiasm of the architect was maintained only by ignoring the disturbing fact of sin. In Christianity, on the other hand, nothing needs to be covered up. The fact of sin is faced resolutely once for all, and is removed by the grace of God. But then, after sin has been removed by the grace of God, the Christian can proceed to develop joyously every faculty that God has given him. Such is the higher Christian humanism—a humanism founded not upon human pride but upon divine grace.

But although Christianity does not end with the broken heart, it does begin with the broken heart; it begins with the consciousness of sin. Without the consciousness of sin, the whole of the gospel will seem to be an idle tale. But how can the consciousness of sin be revived? Something no doubt can be accomplished by the proclamation of the law of God, for the law reveals transgressions. The whole of the law, moreover, should be proclaimed. It will hardly be wise to adopt the suggestion (recently offered among many suggestions as to the ways in which we shall have to modify our message in order to retain the allegiance of the returning soldiers) that we must stop treating the little sins as though they were big sins. That suggestion means apparently that we must not worry too much about the little sins, but must let them remain molested. With regard to such an expedient, it may perhaps be suggested that in the moral battle we are fighting against a very resourceful enemy, who does not reveal the position of his guns by desultory artillery action when he plans a great attack. In the moral battle, as in the Great European War, the quiet sectors are usually the most dangerous. It is through the “little sins” that Satan gains an entrance into our lives. Probably, therefore, it will be prudent to watch all sectors of the front and lose no time about introducing the unity of command. But if the consciousness of sin is to be produced, the law of God must be proclaimed in the lives of Christian people as well as in word. It is quite useless for the preacher to breathe out fire and brimstone from the pulpit, if at the same time the occupants of the pews go on taking sin very lightly and being

content with the moral standards of the world. The rank and file of the Church must do their part in so proclaiming the law of God by their lives that the secrets of men's hearts shall be revealed.

All these things, however, are in themselves quite insufficient to produce the consciousness of sin. The more one observes the condition of the Church, the more one feels obliged to confess that the conviction of sin is a great mystery, which can be produced only by the Spirit of God. Proclamation of the law, in word and in deed, can prepare for the experience, but the experience itself comes from God. When a man has that experience, when a man comes under the conviction of sin, his whole attitude toward life is transformed; he wonders at his former blindness, and the message of the gospel, which formerly seemed to be an idle tale, becomes now instinct with light. But it is God alone who can produce the change.

Only, let us not try to do without the Spirit of God. The fundamental fault of the modern Church is that she is busily engaged in an impossible task—she is busily engaged in calling the righteous to repentance. Modern preachers are trying to bring men into the Church without requiring them to relinquish their pride; they are trying to help men avoid the conviction of sin. The preacher gets up into the pulpit, opens the Bible, and addresses the congregation somewhat as follows: “You people are very good,” he says; “you respond to every appeal that looks toward the welfare of the community. Now we have in the Bible—especially in the life of Jesus—something so good that we believe it is good enough even for you good people.” Such is modern preaching. It is heard every Sunday in thousands of pulpits. But it is entirely futile. Even our Lord did not call the righteous to repentance, and probably we shall be no more successful than He.

Modern liberalism, then, has lost sight of the two great presuppositions of the Christian message—the living God, and the fact of sin. The liberal doctrine of God and the liberal doctrine of man are both diametrically opposite to the Christian view. But the divergence concerns not only the presuppositions of the message, but also the message itself.

According to the Christian view, the Bible contains an account of a revelation from God to man, which is found nowhere else. It is true, the Bible also contains a confirmation and a wonderful enrichment of the revelations which are given also by the things that God has made and by the conscience of man. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handywork”—these words

are a confirmation of the revelation of God in nature; “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”—these words are a confirmation of what is attested by the conscience. But in addition to such reaffirmations of what might conceivably be learned elsewhere—as a matter of fact, because of men’s blindness, even so much is learned elsewhere only in comparatively obscure fashion—the Bible also contains an account of a revelation which is absolutely new. That new revelation concerns the way by which sinful man can come into communion with the living God.

The way was opened, according to the Bible, by an act of God, when, almost nineteen hundred years ago, outside the walls of Jerusalem, the eternal Son was offered as a sacrifice for the sins of men. To that one great event the whole Old Testament looks forward, and in that one event the whole of the New Testament finds its centre and core. Salvation then, according to the Bible, is not something that was discovered, but something that happened. Hence appears the uniqueness of the Bible. All the ideas of Christianity might be discovered in some other religion, yet there would be in that other religion no Christianity. For Christianity depends, not upon a complex of ideas, but upon the narration of an event. Without that event, the world, in the Christian view, is altogether dark, and humanity is lost under the guilt of sin. There can be no salvation by the discovery of eternal truth, for eternal truth brings naught but despair, because of sin. But a new face has been put upon life by the blessed thing that God did when he offered up his only begotten Son.

Thus the revelation of which an account is contained in the Bible embraces not only a reaffirmation of eternal truths—itsself necessary because the truths have been obscured by the blinding effect of sin—but also a revelation which sets forth the meaning of an act of God.

The contents of the Bible, then, are unique. But another fact about the Bible is also important. The Bible might contain an account of a true revelation from God, and yet the account be full of error. Before the full authority of the Bible can be established, therefore, it is necessary to add to the Christian doctrine of revelation the Christian doctrine of inspiration. The latter doctrine means that the Bible not only is an account of important things, but that the account itself is true, the writers having been so preserved from error, despite a full maintenance of their habits of thought and expression, that the resulting Book is the “infallible rule of faith and practice.” The Christian, then, if he make full use of his Christian privileges,

finds the seat of authority in the whole Bible, which he regards as the very Word of God.

Very different is the view of modern liberalism. The modern liberal rejects the unique authority of the Bible. But what is substituted for the Christian doctrine? What is the liberal view as to the seat of authority in religion?

The impression is sometimes produced that the modern liberal substitutes for the authority of the Bible the authority of Christ. He cannot accept, he says, what he regards as the perverse moral teaching of the Old Testament or the sophistical arguments of Paul. But he regards himself as being the true Christian because, rejecting the rest of the Bible, he depends upon Jesus alone.

This impression, however, is utterly false. The modern liberal does not really hold to the authority of Jesus. Even if he did so, he would be impoverishing very greatly his knowledge of God and of the way of salvation. The words of Jesus, spoken during His earthly ministry, could hardly contain all that we need to know about God and about the way of salvation; for the meaning of Jesus' redeeming work could hardly be fully set forth before that work was done. It could be set forth indeed by way of prophecy, and as a matter of fact it was so set forth by Jesus even in the days of His flesh. But the full explanation could naturally be given only after the work was done. And such was actually the divine method. It is doing despite, not only to the Spirit of God, but also to Jesus Himself, to regard the teaching of the Holy Spirit, given through the apostles, as at all inferior in authority to the teaching of Jesus.

As a matter of fact, however, the modern liberal does not hold fast even to the authority of Jesus. Certainly he does not accept the words of Jesus as they are recorded in the Gospels. For among the recorded words of Jesus are to be found just those things which are most abhorrent to the modern liberal Church, and in His recorded words Jesus also points forward to the fuller revelation which was afterwards to be given through His apostles. Evidently, therefore, those words of Jesus which are to be regarded as authoritative by modern liberalism must first be selected from the mass of the recorded words by a critical process. The critical process is certainly very difficult, and the suspicion often arises that the critic is retaining as genuine words of the historical Jesus only those words which conform to his own preconceived ideas. But even after the sifting process has been completed, the liberal scholar is still unable to accept as authoritative all the sayings of

Jesus; he must finally admit that even the historical Jesus said some things that are untrue.

So much is usually admitted. But, it is maintained, although not everything that Jesus said is true, His central “life-purpose” is still to be regarded as regulative for the Church.³ But what then was the life-purpose of Jesus? According to the shortest, and if modern criticism be accepted, the earliest of the gospels, the Son of Man “came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Here the vicarious death is put as the “life-purpose” of Jesus. Such an utterance must of course be pushed aside by the modern liberal Church. The truth is that the life-purpose of Jesus discovered by modern liberalism is not the life-purpose of the real Jesus, but merely represents those elements in the teaching of Jesus—isolated and misinterpreted—which happen to agree with the modern program. It is not Jesus, then, who is the real authority, but the modern principle by which the selection within Jesus’ recorded teaching has been made. Certain isolated ethical principles of the Sermon on the Mount are accepted, not at all because they are teachings of Jesus, but because they agree with modern ideas.

It is not true at all, then, that modern liberalism is based upon the authority of Jesus. It is obliged to reject a vast deal that is absolutely essential in Jesus’ example and teaching—notably His consciousness of being the heavenly Messiah. The real authority, for liberalism, can only be “the Christian consciousness” or “Christian experience.” But how shall the findings of the Christian consciousness be established? Surely not by a majority vote of the organized Church. Such a method would obviously do away with all liberty of conscience. The only authority, then, can be individual experience; truth can only be that which “helps” the individual man. Such an authority is obviously no authority at all; for individual experience is endlessly diverse, and when once truth is regarded only as that which works at any particular time, it ceases to be truth. The result is an abysmal skepticism.

The Christian man, on the other hand, finds in the Bible the very Word of God. Let it not be said that dependence upon a book is a dead or an artificial thing. The Reformation of the sixteenth century was founded upon the authority of the Bible, yet it set the world aflame. Dependence upon a word of man would be slavish, but

³ Compare “For Christ or Against Him,” in *The Presbyterian* for January 20, 1921, p. 9.

dependence upon God's word is life. Dark and gloomy would be the world, if we were left to our own devices, and had no blessed Word of God.

It is no wonder, then, that liberalism is totally different from Christianity, for the foundation is different. Christianity is founded upon the Bible. It bases upon the Bible both its thinking and its life. Liberalism on the other hand is founded upon the shifting emotions of sinful men.

Three points of difference between liberalism and Christianity have now been noticed. The two are different (1) in their view of God, (2) in their view of man, and (3) in their choice of the seat of authority in religion. A fourth difference concerns the view of Christ. What does modern liberalism believe about the person of our Lord?

At this point a puzzling fact appears—the liberal preacher is often perfectly ready to say that “Jesus is God.” The plain man is much impressed. The preacher, he says, believes in the deity of our Lord; obviously then his unorthodoxy must concern only details; and those who object to his presence in the Church are narrow and uncharitable heresy-hunters. But unfortunately language is valuable only as the expression of thought. The English word “god” has no particular virtue in itself; it is not more beautiful than other words. Its importance depends altogether upon the meaning which is attached to it. When, therefore, the liberal preacher says that “Jesus is God,” the significance of the utterance depends altogether upon what is meant by “God.” But it has already been observed that when the liberal preacher uses the word “God,” he means something entirely different from that which the Christian means by the same word. “God,” at least according to the logical trend of modern liberalism, is not a person separate from the world, but merely the unity that pervades the world. To say, therefore, that Jesus is God means merely that the life of God, which appears in all men, appears with special clearness or richness in Jesus. Such an assertion is diametrically opposed to the Christian belief in the deity of Christ.

Equally opposed to Christian belief is another meaning that is sometimes attached to the assertion that Jesus is God. The word “God” is sometimes used to denote simply the supreme object of men's desires, the highest thing that men know. We have given up the notion, it is said, that there is a Maker and Ruler of the universe. Such notions belong to “metaphysics,” and are rejected by the modern man. But the word “God,” though it can no longer denote the Maker of the universe, is convenient as denoting the object of men's emotions and desires. Of some men, it can

be said that their God is mammon—mammon is that for which they labor, and to which their hearts are attached. In a somewhat similar way, the liberal preacher says that Jesus is God. He does not mean at all to say that Jesus is identical in nature with a Maker and Ruler of the universe, of whom an idea could be obtained apart from Jesus. In such a Being he no longer believes. All that he means is that the man Jesus—a man here in the midst of us, and of the same nature as ours—is the highest thing we know. It is obvious that such a way of thinking is far more widely removed from Christian belief than is Unitarianism, at least the earlier forms of Unitarianism. For the early Unitarianism no doubt at least believed in God. The modern liberals, on the other hand, say that Jesus is God not because they think high of Jesus, but because they think desperately low of God.

In another way also, liberalism within the “evangelical” Churches is inferior to Unitarianism. It is inferior to Unitarianism in the matter of honesty. In order to maintain themselves in the evangelical churches and quiet the fears of their conservative associates, the liberals resort constantly to a double use of language. A young man, for example, has received disquieting reports of the unorthodoxy of a prominent preacher interrogating the preacher as to his belief, he receives a reassuring reply. “You may tell everyone,” says the liberal preacher in effect, “that I believe that Jesus is God.” The inquirer goes away much impressed.

It may well be doubted, however, whether the assertion, “I believe that Jesus is God,” or the like, on the lips of liberal preachers, is strictly truthful. The liberal preacher attaches indeed a real meaning to the words, and that meaning is very dear to his heart. He really does believe that “Jesus is God.” But the trouble is that he attaches to the words a different meaning from that which is attached to them by the simple-minded person to whom he is speaking. He offends, therefore, against the fundamental principle of truthfulness in language. According to that fundamental principle, language is truthful, not when the meaning attached to the words by the speaker, but when the meaning intended to be produced in the mind of the particular person addressed, is in accordance with the facts. Thus the truthfulness of the assertion, “I believe that Jesus is God,” depends upon the audience that is addressed. If the audience is composed of theologically trained persons, who will attach the same meaning to the word “God” as that which the speaker attaches to it, then the language is truthful. But if the audience is composed of old-fashioned Christians, who have never attached anything but the old meaning to the word God (the meaning which appears in the first verse of Genesis), then the language is untruthful. And in the latter case, not all the pious motives in the world

will make the utterance right. Christian ethics do not abrogate common honesty; no possible desire of edifying the Church and of avoiding offence can excuse a lie.

At any rate, the deity of our Lord, in any real sense of the word “deity,” is of course denied by modern liberalism. To the modern preacher Jesus is an example for faith, and Christianity consists in having the same faith in God that Jesus had. To the Christian, on the other hand, Jesus is the object of faith, and upon Him alone depends the eternal welfare of the individual soul and of humanity.⁴

Finally, liberalism differs from Christianity in the account which is given of the way of salvation. The two give exactly opposite answers to the question, “What must I do to be saved?” Liberalism finds salvation in man; Christianity finds it only in an act of God.

The difference with regard to the way of salvation concerns, in the first place, the basis of salvation in the redeeming work of Christ. According to Christian belief, Jesus is our Saviour, not by virtue of what He said, not even by virtue of what He was, but by what He did. He is our Saviour not because He has inspired us to live the same kind of life that He lived, but because He took upon Himself the dreadful guilt of our sins and bore it instead of us on the Cross. Such is the Christian conception of the Cross of Christ. It is ridiculed as being a subtle “theory of the atonement.” In reality, though it involves mysteries, it is itself so simple that a child can understand it. “We deserved eternal death, but the Lord Jesus because He loved us died instead of us on the cross”—surely there is nothing so very intricate about that. It is not the Bible doctrine of the atonement which is difficult to understand—what are really incomprehensible are the elaborate modern efforts to get rid of the Bible doctrine in the interests of human pride.

To modern liberalism the Cross of Christ is an inspiring example of self-sacrifice. But since there have been many acts of self-sacrifice in the history of the world, why should we pay such exclusive attention to this one Palestinian example? We are perfectly ready, men say in effect, to admit Jesus into the noble fellowship of those who have sacrificed themselves in a noble cause. But further we will not go. Men used to say with reference to Jesus, “There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.” They say so no longer. On the contrary, every man is now re-

⁴ For the distinction between Jesus as an example for faith and Jesus as the object of faith, see Denney, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 1909.

garded as plenty good enough to pay the price of sin if he will only go bravely over the top in a noble cause.

It is no wonder that men adopt this patronizing attitude toward the Cross; for the liberal conception of the Cross follows naturally from the liberal conception of man and the liberal conception of Christ. If there be no such thing as sin, no such thing as the just condemnation of God's law, then of course we can get along perfectly well without a sacrifice for sin. And if Jesus be a man like the rest of men, then of course His death cannot possibly be a sacrifice for the sins of others. One mere man cannot possibly pay the penalty of another man's sin. But it does not follow that the Son of God cannot pay the penalty of the sins of men. When we come to see that it was no mere man, but the Lord of glory who suffered on Calvary, then we shall be willing to say, as men used to say, that the precious blood of Jesus alone—and not all the rivers of blood that have flowed on the battlefields of history—is of value as a ground for our own salvation and for the hope of the world.

With the liberal view of the basis of salvation goes the liberal view of the application of salvation to the individual man, and that also is entirely different from the teaching of the Bible. According to the Bible, salvation is applied to the individual man by the Spirit of God. The work of the Spirit is mysterious. But the human accompaniment of the Spirit's action is a very simple thing—it is faith. Faith means simply receiving a gift. To have faith in Christ means to cease trying to win God's favor by one's own character; the man who believes in Christ simply accepts the sacrifice which Christ offered on Calvary. The result of such faith is a new life and all good works; but the salvation itself is an absolutely free gift of God.

Liberalism, on the other hand, seeks the welfare of men by urging them to "make Christ Master in their lives." In other words, salvation is to be obtained by our own obedience to the Commands of Christ. Such teaching is just a sublimated form of legalism. Not the sacrifice of Christ, on this view, but our own obedience to God's law is the ground of hope.

In this way the whole achievement of the Reformation has been given up, and there has been a return to the religion of the Middle Ages. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, God raised up a man who began to read the Epistle to the Galatians with his own eyes. The result was the rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith. Upon that rediscovery has been based the whole of our evangelical

freedom. As expounded by Luther and Calvin the Epistle to the Galatians became the “Magna Carta of Christian liberty.” But modern liberalism has returned to the old interpretation of Galatians which was urged against the Reformers. Thus Professor Burton’s elaborate commentary on the Epistle, with all its valuable modern scholarship, is at bottom a thorough mediaeval book; it has returned to an anti-Reformation exegesis, by which Paul is thought to be attacking in the Epistle only the piecemeal morality of the Pharisees. In reality, of course, the object of Paul’s attack is the thought that in any way man can earn his acceptance with God. What Paul is primarily interested in is not spiritual religion over against ceremonialism, but the free grace of God over against human merit.

The grace of God is rejected by modern liberalism. And the result is slavery—the slavery of the law, the wretched bondage by which man undertakes the impossible task of establishing his own righteousness as a ground of acceptance with God. It may seem strange at first sight that “liberalism,” of which the very name means freedom, should in reality be wretched slavery. But the phenomenon is not really so strange. Emancipation from the blessed will of God always involves bondage to some worse task-master.

Thus it may be said of the modern liberal Church, as of the Jerusalem of Paul’s day, that “she is in bondage with her children.” God grant that she may turn again to the liberty of the gospel of Christ!

Such is the present situation. It is a great mistake to suppose that liberalism is merely a heresy—merely a divergence at isolated points from true Christian teaching. On the contrary it proceeds from a totally different root. It differs from Christianity in its view of God, of man, of the seat of authority, of Christ, and of the way of salvation. Christianity is being attacked from within by a movement which is anti-Christian to the core.

What is the duty of laymen at such a time? What is the duty of the ruling elders in the Presbyterian Church?

In the first place, they should encourage those who are engaging in the intellectual and spiritual struggle. They should not say, in the sense in which some laymen say it, that more time should be devoted to the propagation of Christianity, and less to the defence of Christianity. Certainly there should be propagation of Christianity. Believers should certainly not content themselves with warding off attacks, but

should also unfold in an orderly and positive way the full riches of the gospel. But far more is usually meant by those who call for less defence and more propagation. What they really intend is the discouragement of the whole intellectual defence of the faith. And their words come as a blow in the face of those who are fighting the great battle. As a matter of fact, not less time, but more time, should be devoted to the defence of the gospel. Indeed, truth cannot be stated clearly at all, without being set over against error. Thus a large part of the New Testament is polemic; the enunciation of evangelical truth was occasioned by the errors which had arisen in the churches. So it will always be, on account of the fundamental laws of the human mind. Moreover, the present crisis must be taken into account. There may have been a day when there could be propagation of Christianity without defence. But such a day at any rate is past. At the present time, when the opponents of the gospel are almost in control of our church, the slightest avoidance of the defence of the gospel is just sheer unfaithfulness to the Lord. There have been previous great crises in the history of the Church, crises almost comparable to this. One appeared in the second century, when the very life of Christendom was threatened by the Gnostics. Another came in the Middle Ages when the gospel of God's grace seemed forgotten. In such times of crisis, God has always saved the Church. But He has always saved it not by pacifists, but by sturdy contenders for the truth.

In the second place, ruling elders should perform their duty as members of presbyteries. The question, "For Christ or against him?", constantly arises in the examination of candidates for licensure or ordination. Attempts are often made to obscure the issue. It is often said: "The candidate will no doubt move in the direction of the truth; let him now be sent out to learn as well as to preach." And so another opponent of the gospel enters the councils of the Church, and another false prophet goes forth to encourage sinners to come before the judgment seat of God clad in the miserable rags of their own righteousness. Such action is not really "kind" to the candidate himself. It is never kind to encourage a man to enter into a life of dishonesty. The fact often seems to be forgotten that the Presbyterian Church is a purely voluntary organization; no one is required to enter into its service. If a man cannot accept the belief of the Church, there are other ecclesiastical bodies in which he can find a place. The belief of the Presbyterian Church is plainly set forth in the Confession of Faith, and the Church will never afford any warmth of communion or engage with any real vigor in her work until her ministers are in whole-hearted agreement with that belief. It is strange how in the interests of an

utterly false kindness to men, Christians are sometimes willing to relinquish their loyalty to the crucified Lord.

In the third place, the ruling elders of the Presbyterian Church should show their loyalty to Christ in their capacity as members of the individual congregations. The issue often arises in connection with the choice of a pastor. Such and such a man, it is said, is a brilliant preacher. But what is the content of his preaching? Is his preaching full of the gospel of Christ? The answer is often evasive. The preacher in question, it is said, is of good standing in the Church, and he has never denied the doctrines of grace. Therefore, it is urged, he should be called to the pastorate. But shall we be satisfied with such negative assurances? Shall we be satisfied with preachers who merely “do not deny” the Cross of Christ? God grant that such satisfaction may be broken down! The people are perishing under the ministrations of those who “do not deny” the Cross of Christ. Surely something more than that is needed. God send us ministers who, instead of merely avoiding denial of the Cross shall be on fire with the Cross, whose whole life shall be one burning sacrifice of gratitude to the blessed Saviour who loved them and gave Himself for them!

A terrible crisis has arisen in the Church. In the ministry of evangelical churches are to be found hosts of those who reject the gospel of Christ. By the equivocal use of traditional phrases, by the representation of differences of opinion as though they were only differences about the interpretation of the Bible, entrance into the Church was secured for those who are hostile to the very foundations of the faith. And now there are some indications that the fiction of conformity to the past is to be thrown off, and the real meaning of what has been taking place is to be allowed to appear. The Church, it is now apparently supposed, has almost been educated up to the point where the shackles of the Bible can openly be cast away and the doctrine of the Cross of Christ can be relegated to the limbo of discarded subtleties.

Yet there is in the Christian life no room for despair. Only, our hopefulness should not be founded on the sand. It should be founded, not upon a blind ignorance of the danger, but solely upon the precious promises of God. Laymen, as well as ministers, should return, in these trying days, with new earnestness, to the study of the Word of God.

If the Word of God be heeded, the Christian battle will be fought both with love and with faithfulness. Party passions and personal animosities will be put away, but on the other hand, even angels from heaven will be rejected if they preach a gospel different from the blessed gospel of the Cross. Every man must decide upon which side he will stand. God grant that we may decide aright! God grant that instead of directing men, as modern liberalism does, to the village of Morality, where dwells a gentleman whose name is Legality, said to have skill in easing men of their burdens, we may direct them on the old, old way, through the little wicket gate, to a place somewhat ascending, where they shall really see the Cross, that when at that sight the burden of their sin has fallen away, they may press on past the Hill Difficulty, past the Valley of Humiliation and the Valley of the Shadow of Death, past the allurements of Vanity Fair, up over the Delectable Mountains, and so, at length, across the last river, into the City of God.