

Christianity and Liberalism

Christianity and Liberalism is the title of a famous book that I want to speak about in a few minutes. It was written by J. Gresham Machem, professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary in the early twentieth century. The prayer I am going to open with is also from Dr. Machem. Let us pray.

“Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we give Thee thanks for the wonder of Thy grace and the gift of Christ, our Lord and Savior. How can we ever find words that shall not seem vain as we think of His love for us? How can we, without shame, try to give Thee thanks for the gift of Christ, our Savior, who died for us—the just for the unjust? And how can we think, without shame, of the ill way in which we have requited Thee for Thy Love? But, we rejoice in the knowledge that in Thy Holy Spirit we have been united to Christ through faith. We are His forever. We pray, Thee, that thus we may be kept safe by One stronger than we are. We pray with all our souls for those who have not found Christ as Savior that they may be led through the midst of error and doubt into the clear shining of the light of faith. And when they have sought other saviors and their souls are still restless, we pray that they may, through Christ, find their rest in Thee. All that we ask is in the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.”

In the last lesson there was a doleful refrain that kept coming through. I expect you noticed it because I said it again and again while surveying the history of the Reformed faith and Christianity in various countries of the world. We focused especially on the history of Presbyterians and Reformed people in those countries. The refrain that kept coming through was “In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, these churches fell away from historic Christianity into a kind of liberalism.” Why did that happen? I am sure that a lot of answers could be given to that question. But, I want to emphasize one in this lesson, and that is the importance of ideas. In the fall of 1912, Dr. Machem gave Princeton Seminary’s open address on Christianity and culture. These are some words he spoke to the students and faculty on that occasion:

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the Gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a Reformer and yet only succeed in winning a straggler here and there if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas, which by the resistless force of logic prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root. Many would have the seminaries combat error by attacking it as it is taught by its popular exponents. Instead of that, seminaries confuse their students with a lot of German names unknown outside the walls of the universities. That method or procedure is based simply upon a profound belief in the pervasiveness of ideas. What is today a matter of academic speculation begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires.

At Princeton, they did study the German theologians, and they tried to keep up with the latest critical thought that was coming from Germany and from other places because of the importance of ideas and the importance of being able to answer false ideas. As we think about liberalism and its rise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I would like to do that by speaking briefly about five influential books that are full of ideas that will significantly impact culture in the Western world. These five books did indeed begin to move armies and pull down empires. Of course, this movement of theological liberalism did not begin with these five books. The roots of theological liberalism can certainly be traced back at least as far as the Enlightenment and in some ways all the way back to the Renaissance and even earlier. However, these five books were very significant in moving many people away from historic Christianity into a new way of looking at the Bible, God, and the church.

The first of these books was called *On Religion: Speeches to its Culture's Despisers*, published in 1799 by Friedrich Schleiermacher. The German Schleiermacher is often called the “father of modern theology.” He was brought up among the Moravians. He had an evangelical, Pietistic beginning. In college, he was very influenced by the thinking of the Enlightenment. He accepted a rational, critical view of the Scriptures. He was also influenced by Romanticism with its great stress on the importance of subjective understanding and feeling. Schleiermacher wrote his famous book on religion in order to find some way in which he could make Christianity seem relevant again to people who had long since given up on it—cultured-thinking, rational people in the university world who despised Christianity. You see the problem that Schleiermacher was up against. It is a problem that we are up against today as we think of how to present the Gospel to modern, secular humanists or how to present Christianity to postmodern people. Schleiermacher was trying to find a way to present the Christian faith to modern, Enlightenment people. He said, “Christianity is not ideas, not creeds, not propositions, and not a book like the Bible. It is not in knowledge or ethics. It is not simply in being good. Christianity—religion—is located in religious consciousness or in the feelings, not in the head or in outward conduct. The heart and core of Christianity is what one feels deep within his or her own being.” Schleiermacher put it this way: “The consciousness of being absolutely dependent or which is the same thing of being in relation to God. Somewhere, somehow, a person has a feeling of dependence, not being autonomous, and that means being in relations to God, which is the heart, seat, and core of religion.” You can find something similar to this in nineteenth-century revivalistic piety, which in a song asks the question, “You asked me how I know he lives”—and the answer in that song is—“He lives within my heart.” It is not a wrong answer, but something else needs to be said before that, after that, and with that. With Schleiermacher, religion moved from the area of history, confessions, and even propositional revelation in the Bible to this inner, subjective feeling. This idea of religion being subjective and based on feelings had a tremendous impact on people throughout the nineteenth century.

The next book that I would like to mention of these five influential books is a famous one called *Origin of Species*, which appeared in 1859. It is the work of the English Botanist, Charles Darwin, who developed the modern theory of evolution. He was not the first person to think of this, but the modern theory with its operational principal of natural selection comes from Darwin. In time, this book made a tremendous impact on “thinking people,” as they were called, and still does. Some Orthodox Christians immediately responded very negatively to Darwin’s book. For instance, Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary wrote a book a few years later called *What is Darwinism?* He answered the question very simply by saying, “Darwinism is Atheism.” But, not all Orthodox Christians responded that way. Even Hodge’s son, A. A. Hodge and the Princeton professor, B. B. Warfield were much more cautious in their treatment of evolution. They did insist, of course, that there was a personal Creator and that that Creator was working out everything in creation according to His own design. Within those parameters, there were some Orthodox Christians who were able to take a wait-and-see attitude as far as evolution was concerned. Many people—Orthodox Christians as well as other Christians—believed and were convinced about Darwinism. They believed it not only as an understanding of the physical world but also as a principle for everything. They believed that everything moves upward into a higher and more profound level of existence. So, many people began to find in Darwinism an explanation for almost everything—a place that God had previously held in people’s minds.

The third book is called *Essays and Reviews*, which came out a year after Darwin’s book but was not as well known. *Essays and Reviews*, at the time, appeared to be a much more serious challenge to Christianity than Darwin. It is a book with a rather harmless-sounding title, but it was a liberal manifesto by seven clergymen of the Church of England who actually had taken German higher critical views of the Bible and expressed those views in English. This meant that these essays basically said that the Bible is an ordinary book, just like any other book. They said it has many good things in it, some not-so-good

things in it, and some bad things in it, and people should read the Bible like any other book. By 1860, the Church of England was not a liberal church. So, 11,000 clergymen signed a protest against this book written by seven ministers in the church. These 11,000 clergymen declared their belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures and in the doctrine of eternal punishment, which was denied in this book. The book itself was condemned in 1864. However, those ideas did not really go away. It was just the first of many books that would be written undermining the authority of the Scriptures. Sooner or later, those books took their toll.

The fourth book was written by a German theologian named Albrecht Ritschl. The title of the book is *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, which sounds like a good title, but when you read what Ritschl had to say, there is not much there of Orthodox understanding of justification or reconciliation. Ritschl said, “Christianity is not doctrine.” Then, he disagreed with Schleiermacher when he said, “Christianity is not feelings either. Christianity is ethics. It is how one lives. It is what one does, particularly in society. Everything else is underpinnings and not essential to ethical, moral conduct.” Ritschl’s book was very influential especially in America. America was a practical-minded country. Well, it was supposed to be at that time. Americans took up Ritschl’s ideas with a vengeance, and out of that came what we call “the social gospel.” They thought that the real Gospel is not a Gospel of personal, individual salvation but of redeeming society through ethics, morality, and good works. The slogan for all of this was “The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Men.” This theme could be heard from the major pulpits of America and other countries in the early twentieth century. Somebody has summarized it this way: “The liberal preaching at this time can be summed up with the sentence, ‘Let me suggest that you try to be good.’” This was not a very powerful message, but it was a message that was repeated over and over again. The social gospel did some good things. Much had to be done and still has to be done in Christianizing society. The social gospel was not the Gospel—not all of the Gospel. The social gospel was the implications of the Gospel, we might say. But, in the hands, minds, and voices of the preachers of the social gospel, like Walter Rauschenbusch, that was all there was. So, Ritschl’s theology of ethics came through loud and clear.

The last of these five books that I want to talk about is also by a German theologian, Adolf Harnack. In its English translation, the book is called *What is Christianity?* It appeared in 1900. Harnack was a professor at the University of Berlin. In the winter of 1899 through 1900, he gave lectures on the essence of Christianity to students at the university. There were 600 students who listened to him give these lectures. Finally, they were translated into English and published as the book called *What is Christianity?* Harnack tried to discover what is truly essential in Christianity. One of the themes throughout all of this is that Christianity has added so much that it is really not Christianity, so we have to get back to the essence or kernel. So, Harnack stripped off all the husks. Almost the first things to go were the creeds, then the ecclesiastical organization, and then monastic aestheticism in order to find that one essential kernel or element of Christianity. Not surprisingly, he came to Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity as He is described in the Synoptics. Right away Harnack dropped out the Gospel of John. There is too much theology and all sort of things in John that are extraneous. But, in the Synoptics—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—there is the picture of Christ, who is the heart of the Christian faith. However, as Harnack studied the Synoptics, he realized there was a great deal there also that he could not allow to remain. There were miracles, angels, demons, and all sorts of apocalyptic elements, so all of that had to be stripped out. Eventually, he had a kind of core Gospel from the Synoptics, and what he ended up with was the personality of Jesus and His teaching. Harnack said, “This is the real heart of Christianity. Jesus’ words breathe peace, joy, and certainty. He lived in the continual consciousness of God’s presence. His eyes rested kindly upon the whole world. He ennobled it by His presence, and He recognized everywhere the hand of the living God.” Archbishop William Temple once remarked that

one of the greatest mysteries in church history is why anybody would have taken the trouble to crucify the Christ of liberal Protestantism.

Those were five books that exerted great influence and still do. Theological liberalism, which seemed poised in 1900, was going to suffer a very serious setback. We call that setback World War I. Perhaps this does tell us something about the providence of God in allowing even very evil things to accomplish something good. With all of this moving toward a kind of evolutionary, optimistic humanism, the last thing you would expect would be that in Western culture—even in the heart of Western culture—in Germany there would emerge all that happened in World War I. Liberalism in this context then appeared weak and ineffective in the face of real evil. It appeared superficial. The war to end all wars did not end all wars, but it did end much of evolutionary, optimistic humanism, at least for a time in Western Europe and in the Protestant world. However, the problem with liberalism was that it failed to provide real answers, as Tillich points out.

Paul Tillich was a product of this. He talks about walking along the rows of dying men after the Battle of Champaign in World War I. He said, “Much of my German classical philosophy broke down”—that means his theology, because that is all that he had, broke down. He could not put this tragedy within the scope of what he had been taught. Another problem with liberalism is that it failed to produce real Christians. I do not say that in a triumphalistic manner as though evangelicals are always producing real Christians and nobody else is. We have often failed to produce real Christians, too. But liberalism produced people who were nominally Christian—Christian by cultural definitions. So, you could have a critic like Friedrich Nietzsche saying that he could not be a Christian and move into a death-of-God philosophy because he said, “I just do not see much in the Christians I see. Their songs would have to be better songs, and they would have to look more redeemed for me to believe in their redeemer.” The Christians he was looking at were not evangelical Christians but liberal Christians I have described in the evolution of Christianity through the nineteenth century. The whole movement of liberal theology is best summed up by H. Richard Niebuhr. I cannot quote Niebuhr without at least mentioning that he was a Missourian. He was born very close to Saint Louis, as was his famous brother, Reinhold Niebuhr. They were both educated at Eden Seminary in Webster Groves. They were very critical of the old liberalism without fully espousing conservative theology. Richard Niebuhr’s critique of the old liberalism is a classic one that you undoubtedly know: “Liberalism taught that a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” Well, I cannot add to that or improve on it so we will let that be the last word on liberalism from a man who was a liberal and later was identified more in the category of the theology of crisis that I will talk about in a moment.

We will move onto Orthodoxy. It was not that liberalism was first and Orthodoxy was next. Orthodoxy was always there from the very beginning. Liberalism developed from the Enlightenment through the nineteenth century. The question I want to ask is what was Orthodoxy doing during this time? Orthodoxy was struggling mightily to stay the tide of liberalism. There is a chapter in volume two of my Princeton history that I call “A Mighty Battle,” and that was the fight at Princeton over these issues. We could take that title and apply it to the entire period in history because there was indeed a mighty battle.

Let me sum up that mighty battle by referring briefly to two sermons in 1922 in America, which will set the issues before us in a very graphic way. The first was called “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?,” preached by Harry Emerson Fosdick. He was a Baptist, but for seven years he was the guest minister at the First Presbyterian Church in New York City. This says something about the Presbyterians as well as the Baptists. In this famous sermon, Fosdick ridiculed the five fundamentals: the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, the miracles of Christ, the blood atonement, and the bodily resurrection. These

are elements of Christianity that have long been believed to be the very essence of the faith. You cannot jettison these without jettisoning Christianity, but Fosdick said you could. Fosdick was one of many liberals at this time who felt that doctrine was really not important. (Fosdick went to Riverside Church, which was built for him in New York City, after the First Presbyterian Church in New York City finally removed him from the pulpit.) The liberals had no love for dogma or doctrine. The sermon by Fosdick was answered in another sermon by Clarence Edward McCartney called “Shall Unbelief Win?” McCartney was a Princeton-trained pastor at the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and a very good friend of Gresham Machem’s.

That brings us to the famous book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, written the next year in 1923 by Dr. Machem. Dr. Machem had been a New Testament professor at Princeton since 1906. Machem knew liberalism firsthand. He was not a conservative writing about something he knew nothing about. He went to Germany. He studied with Wilhelm Herrmann, who had studied with Harnack. As Machem studied with Herrmann at Marburg, liberal teaching captivated him. He had come from a conservative, evangelical home in Baltimore. He had roots in the Southern Presbyterian Church. He was swept off of his feet by the piety of this liberal German theologian, and he almost moved away from his Orthodox beliefs into liberalism. It was his mother’s prayers back home that kept him on track. In order to get his bearings again, he had a practice of going to his room and reading through the Gospel of Mark after he had listened to Harnack lecture. So, he knew liberalism. The title of the book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, is very important because it sets forth Machem’s thesis, and that is that it is not fundamentalism and liberalism; it is Christianity and liberalism. Machem said there are two religions here. Liberalism is not a variety of Christianity. It is something different. It may be something noble or something that does some good things. It teaches some great ideas, but it is not Christianity. It should be called something else. It is a distinct religion, entirely different from historic Christianity. I really think Machem’s *Christianity and Liberalism* is one of the truly great books of the twentieth century. It is a book that we should read as we approach the end of the twentieth century because it is still relevant in so many ways.

As modernism, liberalism, and Orthodoxy clashed and as that battle was going on, something new appeared in Switzerland. We sometimes called it Neo-Orthodoxy. Karl Barth and Emil Brunner were teaching and preaching the Christian faith, but as people listened to what they said, they heard something new. It was not liberalism. They heard something old too, but it was not Orthodoxy. I want to talk about Barth in the next few minutes. Brunner is important, too, but as the century moved on and as we move into the next century, the great and important name in theology for this century will probably be Karl Barth.

Barth was trained in the liberal tradition. In fact, he was trained with the same teacher who so captivated Machem, Wilhelm Herrmann. Barth, having bought into all of the liberal theology, faced a crisis early in his ministry. He became a pastor first in the year 1909, serving first in Geneva. As a pastor of a church he faced a problem that all pastors face and that is, “What am I going to preach about on Sunday morning? What am I going to say to these people?” As Barth tried to preach, he discovered that all of his critical knowledge of the Bible was not something that he could preach—no message came through. In the crisis of trying to discover how to preach, Barth did something that seemed quite unusual to a lot of people. He started to preach the Bible. He wrote a commentary on the book of Romans, which helped orient him toward preaching the Bible. His commentary, which came out in 1918, shocked the theological world because here was a man who was seemingly taking the Bible seriously once again. And he was not a fundamentalist or a conservative but a member of the Swiss Reformed Church. As he looked back over this event in his life, Barth later wrote, “As I look back at my pathway, I look like a man who broke in his way in a darksome church tower, unwittingly took hold of a rope, which was, in

fact, a rope for a church bell, and then to his own shock, heard the bells resounding over him and far beyond him.” People began to hear what Barth had to say because of what had happened to him as a young pastor in Switzerland. He had rediscovered the Bible. What was this shocking method that so alarmed and captivated European theologians? The Dutch theologian, G. C. Berkouwer put it this way: “This is what Barth began to preach: the majesty, the holiness, and the sovereignty of God set over against all human pretensions to greatness, over against all deification of man or of anything in the created world. In short, it spoke of the infinite, qualitative difference between God and man.” There are echoes of Kierkegaard there that you might detect. Basically, it was a message of God’s sovereignty; let God be God.

Some years later, Barth became a professor of theology in 1921, and he faced another question: “How do you teach theology to seminary students? What do you teach?” By this time, he was convinced that his old, classical, liberal, German education was not what should be taught. Amazingly, Barth returned to the old, Reformed Orthodoxy. He found a book by Heinrich Heppe on Reformed Orthodoxy in which Heppe had brought together brief quotations from 40 or 50 of the old Orthodox—Turretin, the Lutherans, and the whole list. Under theological topics like election, providence, and God, there would be short snippets of Orthodox theology. Barth said he found that volume of Heppe, and it was “out-of-date, unattractive, almost like a table of logarithms, dreary to read, stiff and eccentric on almost every page I opened.”—If you study Heppe, you will have some sympathy for those comments from Barth—“Inform and content pretty accurately corresponding to what I, like so many others, had described to myself decades ago as the old Orthodoxy.” Barth said, “I had the grace not to be so slack. I read, I studied, I reflected and found that I was rewarded with the discovery that, here at last, I was in the atmosphere in which the road by way of Reformers to holy Scripture was a more sensible and natural one to tread than the atmosphere now only too familiar to me of the theological literature determined by Schleiermacher and Ritschl.” So, Barth went back to the Bible, back to the Protestant, Orthodox tradition. He directed many theologians and many people back to the Scriptures and toward the great tradition of the church, especially toward the tradition of the Reformation and post-Reformation, Protestant theology and so back toward an understanding of the utter transcendence of God and His grace in the incarnation and in redemption. Simply stated, Barth’s theology was “God is God.”

But what looked like a new Orthodoxy—a Neo-Orthodoxy—to some it looked like a new modernism because Barth did not go completely back to the Orthodox tradition or to the Scriptures. Cornelius Van Til wrote the famous book about Barth called *The New Modernism*. It was not one of Barth’s favorite books but Van Til thought that he had discovered in Barth not Neo-Orthodoxy but neo-modernism. How do we understand Barth?

When I was studying at Covenant Seminary in the 1960s, my professors told me that Barth was a dangerous liberal. When I went to do doctoral studies at Princeton in the 1970s, my professors told me that Barth was a dangerous conservative. In fact, he was almost a fundamentalist. Well, I was confused. Let me try to say, very briefly, how I think we ought to approach the study of Barth. There is great value in studying Barth. He is a great theologian, and he can add much to our understanding of the Christian tradition and challenge us in many ways. Bruce McCormack, who is now a professor of theology at Princeton and who did part of his work for his Master of Divinity at Covenant, has written the most important book on Barth to come out in recent years. It is called *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*. It was published by Oxford University Press in 1995. Well, even the title indicated that it would not be easy to understand Barth because it took three words to modify the noun “theology.” Barth used a dialectical method in theology. He used opposing ideas to try to find truth in the tension that those ideas present, which means that Barth will always say what appears to be contradictory. For instance, God’s revelation is both veiled and unveiled at the same time.

Now, I know that my time is up, but bear with me for a few more minutes because I do not want to leave the impression that I am urging us all to become Barthians. I have three quick points about some serious problems with Barth. The first is the nature of the Bible. Barth spoke against the liberals when he said, “God has indeed spoken supernaturally in His Word. The Bible is the Word of God. God has spoken in this book. God has spoken to us directly and supernaturally, not merely indirectly through historically conditioned cultural movements.” So far, what he said sounds good. Then, against the conservatives (like people at Princeton Seminary—Hodge, Warfield, and the others) Barth said, “Scripture is veiled in human language”—we could accept that but not the corollary—“so that we cannot say that this book, these propositions, are directly the Word of God and so are inerrant and authoritative as they stand.” The Barthian does not say, “Listen to the Word of God as the Bible is written.” The Barthian says, “Listen for the Word of God. Somewhere in all of this humanness, God, through the Spirit, will bring a word to you, but it cannot be equated with that word which stands written in the book.”

The second evangelical concern about Barth is his understanding of history. Did the things the Bible says happened really happen in time, space, and history? On one occasion, Barth was lecturing to some students in Amsterdam, and he was lecturing on Genesis. The Dutch students asked him, “Was there really a snake in the garden?” Barth’s answer was, “It is not important whether there was a snake or not. What is important is what the snake said.” Well, Barth escaped the question of history there as he did when Carl Henry, the editor of *Christianity Today*, asked him a question after one of his lectures at Princeton University. Henry asked, “If a person could be present with a tape recorder or video camera at the resurrection of Christ, what would he have seen?” Barth’s reply was to say sarcastically, “Did you say that you represented *Christianity Today*? It sounds more like *Christianity Yesterday*.” He did not deal with the historical question, which of course, was unsatisfying to conservatives. It was why Francis Schaeffer had to talk about “true truth.” It was also unsatisfying to real liberals. It was why Paul Tillich said, “We have to ask of the historical meaning of the biblical writings.” Was there a snake in the garden? Schaeffer would say yes. Tillich would say no. Barth would say, “It is not important.”

Finally, there was an issue of universalism. Barth’s view of election is such that it is hard to separate his view from some kind of universalism. He believed that Christ is the elect person, and we are elect in Christ—that is, all mankind is elect in Christ. God has chosen for us, and all are chosen in Him. This has to mean either absolute universalism, which Barth refused to directly affirm, or a kind of hesitant admission that some may opt out of this election, which indicates how far Barth had wandered from listening to the Word of God.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:8).