

Christianity & Liberalism

Doctrine

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

Modern liberalism in the Church, whatever judgment may be passed upon it, is at any rate no longer merely an academic matter. It is no longer a matter merely of theological seminaries or universities. On the contrary its attack upon the fundamentals of the Christian faith is being carried on vigorously by Sunday-School "lesson-helps," by the pulpit, and by the religious press. If such an attack be unjustified, the remedy is not to be found, as some devout persons have suggested, in the abolition of theological seminaries, or the abandonment of scientific the-ology, but rather in a more earnest search after truth and a more loyal devotion to it when once it is found.

At the theological seminaries and universities, however, 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 an appearance of conformity with the past. But such frankness, we are convinced, ought to be extended to the people as a whole. Few desires on the part of religious teachers have been more harmfully exaggerated than the desire to "avoid giving offence." Only too often that desire has come perilously near dishonesty; the religious teacher, in his heart of hearts, is well aware of the radicalism of his views, but is unwilling to relinquish his place in the hallowed atmosphere of the Church by speaking his whole mind. Against all such policy of concealment or palliation, our sympathies are altogether with those men, whether radicals or conservatives, who have a passion for light.

What then, at bottom, when the traditional phrases have all been stripped away, is the real meaning of the present revolt against the fundamentals of the Christian faith? What, 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. The teachings of liberalism, therefore, might be as far removed as possible from the teachings of historic Christianity, and yet the two might be at bottom the same."

Such is the way in which expression is often given to the modern hostility to "doctrine." But is it really doctrine as such that is objected to, and not rather one particular doctrine in the interests of another? Undoubtedly, in many forms of liberalism it is the latter alternative which fits the case. There are doctrines of modern liberalism, just as tenaciously and intolerantly upheld as any doctrines that find a place in the historic creeds.

Such for example are the liberal doctrines of the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man. These doctrines are, as we shall see, contrary to the doctrines of the Christian religion. But doctrines they are all the same, and as such they require intellectual defence. In seeming to object to all the-ology, the liberal preacher is often merely objecting to one system of theology in the interests of another. And the desired immunity from theological controversy has not yet been attained. Sometimes, however, the modern objection to doctrine is more seriously meant. And whether the objection be well-founded or not, the real meaning of it should at least be faced.

That meaning is perfectly plain. The objection involves an out-and-out skepticism. 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 a mere expression of 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 even 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 objects 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 was based, not upon mere feeling, not upon a mere program of work, but upon an account of facts. In other words it was based upon doctrine. Certainly with regard to Paul himself there should be no de bate; Paul certainly was not indifferent to doctrine; on the contrary, doctrine was the very basis of his life. His devotion to doctrine did not, it is true, make him incapable of a magnificent tolerance. One notable example of such tolerance is to be found during his imprisonment at Rome, as attested by the Epistle to the Philippians. Apparently certain Christian teachers at Rome had been jealous of Paul's greatness. As long as he had been at liberty they had been obliged to take a secondary place; but now that he was in prison, they seized the supremacy. They sought to raise up affliction for Paul in his bonds; they preached Christ even

of envy and strife. In short, the rival preachers made of the preaching of the gospel a means to the gratification of low personal ambition; it seems to have been about as mean a piece of business as could well be conceived. But Paul was not disturbed. "Whether in pretence, or in truth," he said, "Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" (Phil. i. 18). The way in which the preaching was being carried on was wrong, but the message itself was true; and Paul was far more interested in the content of the message than in the manner of its presentation. It is impossible to conceive a finer piece of broad-minded tolerance.

But the tolerance of Paul was not indiscriminate. He displayed no tolerance, for example, in Galatia. There, too, there were rival preachers. But Paul had no tolerance for them. "But though we," he said, "or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Gal. i. 8). What is the reason for the difference in the apostle's attitude in the two cases? What is the reason for the broad tolerance in Rome, and the fierce anathemas in Galatia? The answer is perfectly plain. In Rome, Paul was tolerant, because there the content of the message that was being proclaimed by the rival teachers was true; in Galatia he was intolerant, because there the content of the rival message was false. In neither case did personalities have anything to do with Paul's attitude. No doubt the motives of the Judaizers in Galatia were far from pure, and in an incidental way Paul does point out their impurity. But that was not the ground of his opposition. The Judaizers no doubt were morally far from perfect, but Paul's opposition to them would have been exactly the same if they had all been angels from heaven. His opposition was based altogether upon the falsity of their teaching; they were substituting for the one true gospel a false gospel which was no gospel at all. It never occurred to Paul that a gospel might be true for one man and not for another; the blight of pragmatism had never fallen upon his soul. Paul was convinced of the objective truth of the gospel message, and devotion to that truth was the great passion of his life. Christianity for Paul was not only a life, but also a doctrine, and logically the doctrine came first.¹

But what was the difference between the teaching of Paul and the teaching of the Judaizers? What was it that gave rise to the stupendous polemic of the Epistle to the Galatians? To the modern Church the difference would have seemed to be a mere theological subtlety. About many things the Judaizers were in perfect agreement with Paul. The Judaizers believed that Jesus was the Messiah; there is not a shadow of evidence that they objected to Paul's lofty view of the person of Christ. Without the slightest doubt, they believed that Jesus had really risen from the dead. They believed, moreover, that faith in Christ was necessary to salvation. But the trouble was, they believed that something else was also

¹ See *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, 1921, P. 168, It is not maintained that doctrine for Paul comes temporally before life, but only that it comes *logically* first. Here is to be found the answer to the objection which Dr. Lyman Abbott raised against the assertion in *The Origin of Paul's Religion*. See *The Outlook*, vol. 132, 1922, pp. 104f.

necessary; they believed that what Christ had done needed to be pieced out by the believer's own effort to keep the Law. From the modern point of view the difference would have seemed to be very slight. Paul as well as the Judaizers believed that the keeping of the law of God, in its deepest import, is inseparably connected with faith. The difference concerned only the logical - not even, perhaps, the temporal - order of three steps. Paul said that a man (1) first believes on Christ, (2) then is justified before God, (3) then immediately proceeds to keep God's law. The Judaizers said that a man (1) believes on Christ and (2) keeps the law of God the best he can, and then (3) is justified.

The difference would seem to modern "practical" Christians to be a highly subtle and intangible matter, hardly worthy of consideration at all in view of the large measure of agreement in the practical realm. What a splendid cleaning up of the Gentile cities it would have been if the Judaizers had succeeded in extending to those cities the observance of the Mosaic law, even including the unfortunate ceremonial observances! Surely Paul ought to have made common cause with teachers who were so nearly in agreement with him; surely he ought to have applied to them the great principle of Christian unity.

As a matter of fact, however, Paul did nothing of the kind; and only because he (and others) did nothing of the kind does the Christian Church exist to-day. Paul saw very clearly that the difference between the Judaizers and himself was the difference between two entirely distinct types of religion; it was the difference between a religion of merit and a religion of grace. If Christ provides only a part of our salvation, leaving us to provide the rest, then we are still hopeless under the load of sin. For no matter how small the gap which must be bridged before salvation can be attained, the awakened conscience sees clearly that our wretched attempt at goodness is insufficient even to bridge that gap. The guilty soul enters again into the hopeless reckoning with God, to determine whether we have really done our part. And thus we groan again under the old bondage of the law. Such an attempt to piece out the work of Christ by our own merit, Paul saw clearly, is the very essence of unbelief; Christ will do everything or nothing, and the only hope is to throw ourselves unreservedly on His mercy and trust Him for all.

Paul certainly was right. The difference which divided him from the Judaizers was no mere theological subtlety, but concerned the very heart and core of the religion of Christ. "Just as I am without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me" — that was what Paul was contending for in Galatia; that hymn would never have been written if the Judaizers had won. And without the thing which that hymn expresses there is no Christianity at all. Certainly, then, Paul was no advocate of an undogmatic religion; he was interested above everything else in the objective and universal truth of his message. So much will probably be admitted by serious historians, no matter what their own personal attitude toward the religion of Paul may be. Sometimes, indeed, the modern liberal preacher seeks to produce an opposite impression by quoting out of their context words of

Paul which he interprets in a way as far removed as possible from the original sense. The truth is, it is hard to give Paul up. The modern liberal desires to produce upon the minds of simple Christians (and upon his own mind) the impression of some sort of continuity between modern liberalism and the thought and life of the great Apostle. But such an impression is altogether misleading. Paul was not interested merely in the ethical principles of Jesus; he was not interested merely in general principles of religion or of ethics. On the contrary, he was interested in the redeeming work of Christ and its effect upon us. His primary interest was in Christian doctrine, and Christian doctrine not merely in its presuppositions but at its centre. If Christianity is to be made independent of doctrine, then Paulinism must be removed from Christianity root and branch.

But what of that? Some men are not afraid of the conclusion. If Paulinism must be removed, they say, we can get along without it. May it not turn out that in introducing a doctrinal element into the life of the Church Paul was only perverting a primitive Christianity which was as independent of doctrine as even the modern liberal preacher could desire?

This suggestion is clearly overruled by the historical evidence. The problem certainly cannot be solved in so easy a way. Many attempts have indeed been made to separate the religion of Paul sharply from that of the primitive Jerusalem Church; many attempts have been made to show that Paul introduced an entirely new principle into the Christian movement or even was the founder of a new religion.² But all such attempts have resulted in failure. The Pauline Epistles themselves attest a fundamental unity of principle between Paul and the original companions of Jesus, and the whole early history of the Church becomes unintelligible except on the basis of such unity. Certainly with regard to the fundamentally doctrinal character of Christianity Paul was no innovator. The fact appears in the whole character of Paul's relationship to the Jerusalem Church as it is attested by the Epistles, and it also appears with startling clearness in the precious passage in I Cor. XV. 3-7, where Paul summarizes the tradition which he had received from the primitive Church. What is it that forms the content of that primitive teaching? Is it a general principle of the fatherliness of God or the brotherliness of man? Is it a vague admiration for the character of Jesus such as that which prevails in the modern Church? Nothing could be further from the fact. "Christ died for our sins," said the primitive disciples, "according to the Scriptures; he was buried; he has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." From the beginning, the Christian gospel, as indeed the name "gospel" or "good news" implies, consisted in an account of something that had happened. And from the beginning, the meaning of the happening was set forth; and when the meaning of the happening was set forth then there was Christian doctrine.

² Some account of these attempts has been given by the present writer in *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, 1921.

"Christ died" — that is history; "Christ died for our sins" - that is doctrine. Without these two elements, joined in an absolutely indissoluble union, there is no Christianity.

It is perfectly clear, then, that the first Christian missionaries did not simply come forward with an 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 that as a matter of fact they said nothing of the kind. Conceivably the first disciples of Jesus, after the catastrophe of His death, might have engaged in quiet meditation upon His teaching. They might have said to themselves that "Our Father which art in heaven" was a good way of addressing God even though the One who had taught them that prayer was dead. They might have clung to the ethical principles of Jesus and cherished the vague hope that the One who enunciated such principles had some personal existence beyond the grave. Such reflections might have seemed very natural to the modern man. But to Peter, James and John they certainly never Occurred. Jesus had raised in them high hopes; those hopes were destroyed by the Cross; and reflections on the general principles of religion and ethics were quite powerless to revive the hopes again. The disciples of Jesus had evidently been far inferior to their Master in every possible way; they had not understood His lofty spiritual teaching, but even in the hour of solemn crisis had quarreled over great places in the approaching Kingdom. What hope was there that such men could succeed where their Master had failed? Even when He had been with them, they had been powerless; and now that He was taken from them, what little power they may have had was gone.³

Yet those same weak, discouraged men, within a few days after the death of their Master, instituted the most important spiritual movement that the world has ever seen. What had produced the astonishing change? What had transformed the weak and cowardly disciples into the spiritual conquerors of the world? Evidently it was not the mere memory of Jesus' life, for that was a source of sadness rather than of joy. Evidently the disciples of Jesus, within the few days between the crucifixion and the beginning of their work in Jerusalem, had received some new equipment for their task. What that new equipment was, at least the outstanding and external element in it (to say nothing of the endowment which Christian men believe to have been received at Pentecost), is perfectly plain. The great weapon with which the disciples of Jesus set out to conquer the world was not a mere comprehension of eternal principles; it was an historical message, an account of something that had recently happened, it was the message, "He is risen."⁴

³ Compare *History and Faith*, 1915 (reprinted from *Princeton Theological Review* for July, 1915), pp. 10f.

⁴ Compare *A Rapid Survey of the Literature and History of New Testament Times*, published by the Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work, Student's Text Book, pp. 42f.

But the message of the resurrection was not isolated. It was connected with the death of Jesus, seen now to be not a failure but a triumphant act of divine grace; it was connected with the entire appearance of Jesus upon earth. The coming of Jesus was understood now as an act of God by which sinful men were saved. The primitive Church was concerned not merely with what Jesus had said, but also, and primarily, with what Jesus had done. The world was to be redeemed through the proclamation of an event. And with the event went the meaning of the event; and the setting forth of the event with the meaning of the event was doctrine. These two elements are always combined in the Christian message. The narration of the facts is history; the narration of the facts with the meaning of the facts is doctrine. "Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried" that is history. "He loved me and gave Himself for me" — that is doctrine. Such was the Christianity of the primitive Church.

"But," it may be said, "even if the Christianity of the primitive Church was dependent upon doctrine, we may still emancipate ourselves from such dependence; we may appeal from the primitive Church to Jesus Himself. It has already been admitted that if doctrine is to be abandoned Paul must be abandoned; it may now be admitted that if doctrine is to be abandoned, even the primitive Jerusalem Church, with its message of the resurrection, must be abandoned. But possibly we can still find in Jesus Himself the simple, non-doctrinal religion that we desire." Such is the real meaning of the modern slogan, "Back to Christ."

Must we really take such a step as that? It would certainly be an extraordinary step. A great religion derived its power from the message of the redeeming work of Christ; without that message Jesus and His disciples would soon have been forgotten. The same message, with its implications, has been the very heart and soul of the Christian movement throughout the centuries. Yet we are now asked to believe that the thing that has given Christianity its power all through the centuries was a blunder, that the originators of the movement misunderstood radically the meaning of their Master's life and work, and that it has been left to us moderns to get the first inkling of the initial mistake. Even if this view of the case were correct, and even if Jesus Himself taught a religion like that of modern liberalism, it would still be doubtful whether such a religion could rightly be called Christianity; for the name Christian was first applied only after the supposed decisive change had taken place, and it is very doubtful whether a name which through nineteen centuries has been so firmly attached to one religion ought now suddenly to be applied to another. If the first disciples of Jesus really departed so radically from their Master, then the better terminology would probably lead us to say simply that Jesus was not the founder of Christianity, but of a simple, non-doctrinal religion, long forgotten, but now rediscovered by modern men. Even so, the contrast between liberalism and Christianity would still appear.

But as a matter of fact, such a strange state of affairs does not prevail at all. It is not true that in basing Christianity upon an event the disciples of Jesus were departing from the teaching of their Master. For certainly Jesus Himself did the same thing. Jesus did not content Himself with enunciating general principles of religion and ethics; the picture of Jesus as a sage similar to Confucius, uttering wise maxims about conduct, may satisfy Mr. H. G. Wells, as he trips along lightly over the problems of history, but it disappears so soon as one engages seriously in historical research. "Repent," said Jesus, "for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The gospel which Jesus proclaimed in Galilee consisted in the proclamation of a coming Kingdom. But clearly Jesus regarded the coming of the Kingdom as an event, or as a series of events. No doubt He also regarded the Kingdom as a present reality in the souls of men; no doubt He represented the Kingdom in one sense as already present. We shall not really succeed in getting along without this aspect of the matter in our interpretation of Jesus' words. But we shall also not get along without the other aspect, according to which the coming of the Kingdom depended upon definite and catastrophic events. But if Jesus regarded the coming of the Kingdom as dependent upon a definite event, then His teaching was similar at the decisive point to that of the primitive Church; neither He nor the primitive Church enunciated merely general and permanent principles of religion; both of them, on the contrary, made the message depend upon something that happened. Only, in the teaching of Jesus the happening was represented as being still in the future, while in that of the Jerusalem Church the first act of it at least lay already in the past. Jesus proclaimed the event as coming; the disciples proclaimed part of it at least as already past; but the important thing is that both Jesus and the disciples did proclaim an event. Jesus was certainly not a mere enunciator of permanent truths, like the modern liberal preacher; on the contrary He was conscious of standing at the turning-point of the ages, when what had never been was now to come to be.

But Jesus announced not only an event; He announced also the meaning of the event. It is natural, indeed, that the full meaning could be made clear only after the event had taken place. If Jesus really came, then, to announce, and to bring about, an event, the disciples were not departing from His purpose, if they set forth the meaning of the event more fully than it could be set forth during the preliminary period constituted by the earthly ministry of their Master. But Jesus Himself, though by way of prophecy, did set forth the meaning of the great happening that was to be at the basis of the new era.

Certainly He did so, and grandly, if the words attributed to Him in all of the Gospels are really His. But even if the Fourth Gospel be rejected, and even if the most radical criticism be applied to the other three, it will still be impossible to get rid of this element in Jesus' teaching. The significant words attributed to Jesus at the Last Supper with regard to His approaching death, and the utterance of Jesus in Mk. x. 45 ("The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many"), have indeed been the subject of vigorous de-bate. It is difficult to accept such words as authentic and yet

maintain the modern view of Jesus at all. Yet it is also difficult to get rid of them on any critical theory. What we are now concerned with, however, is something more general than the authenticity even of these precious words. What we are now concerned to observe is that Jesus certainly did not content Himself with the enunciation of permanent moral principles; He certainly did announce an approaching event; and He certainly did not announce the event without giving some account of its meaning. But when He gave an account of the meaning of the event, no matter how brief that account may have been, He was overstepping the line that separates an undogmatic religion, or even a dogmatic religion that teaches only eternal principles, from one that is rooted in the significance of definite historical facts; He was placing a great gulf between Himself and the philosophic modern liberalism which today incorrectly bears His name.

In another way also the teaching of Jesus was rooted in doctrine. It was rooted in doctrine because it depended upon a stupendous presentation of Jesus' own Person. The assertion is often made, indeed, that Jesus kept His own Person out of His gospel, and came forward merely as the supreme prophet of God. That assertion lies at the very root of the modern liberal conception of the life of Christ. But common as it is, it is radically false. And it is interesting to observe how the liberal historians themselves, so soon as they begin to deal seriously with the sources, are obliged to admit that the real Jesus was not all that they could have liked Jesus to be. A Houston Stewart Chamberlain,⁵ indeed, can construct a Jesus who was the advocate of a pure, "formless," non-doctrinal religion; but trained historians, despite their own desires, are obliged to admit that there was an element in the real Jesus which refuses to be pressed into any such mould. There is to the liberal historians, as Heitmüller has significantly said, "something almost uncanny" about Jesus.⁶

This "uncanny" element in Jesus is found in His Messianic consciousness. The strange fact is that this pure teacher of righteousness appealed to by modern liberalism, this classical exponent of the non-doctrinal religion which is supposed to underlie all the historical religions as the irreducible truth remaining after the doctrinal accretions have been removed - the strange fact is that this supreme revealer of eternal truth supposed that He was to be the chief actor in a world catastrophe and was to sit in judgment upon the whole earth. Such is the stupendous form in which Jesus applied to Himself the category of Messiahship.

It is interesting to observe how modern men have dealt with the Messianic consciousness of Jesus. Some, like Mr. H. G. Wells, have practically ignored it. Without discussing the question whether it be historical or not they have practically treated it as though it did not exist, and have not allowed it to disturb them at all in their construction of the sage of Nazareth. The Jesus thus reconstructed may be useful as investing modern programs with the sanctity of

⁵ Mensch und Gott, 1921. Compare the review in *Princeton Theological Review*, xx, 1922, pp. 327-329.

⁶ Heitmüller, *Jesus*, 1913, P. 71, See *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, 1921, p. 157.

His hallowed name; Mr. Wells may find it edifying to associate Jesus with Confucius in a brotherhood of beneficent vagueness. But what ought to be clearly understood is that such a Jesus has nothing to do with history. He is a purely imaginary figure, a symbol and not a fact.

Others, more seriously, have recognized the existence of the problem, but have sought to avoid it by denying that Jesus ever thought that He was the Messiah, and by supporting their denial, not by mere assertions, but by a critical examination of the sources. Such was the effort, for example, of W. Wrede,⁷ and a brilliant effort it was. But it has resulted in failure. The Messianic consciousness of Jesus is not merely rooted in the sources considered as documents, but it lies at the very basis of the whole edifice of the Church. If, as J. Weiss has pertinently said, the disciples before the crucifixion had merely been told that the Kingdom of God was coming, if Jesus had really kept altogether in the background His own part in the Kingdom, then why when despair finally gave place to joy did the disciples not merely say, "Despite Jesus' death, the Kingdom that He foretold will truly come"? Why did they say rather, "Despite His death, He is the Messiah"?⁸ From no point of view, then, can the fact be denied that Jesus did claim to be the Messiah — neither from the point of view of acceptance of the Gospel witness as a whole, nor from the point of view of modern naturalism.

And when the Gospel account of Jesus is considered closely, it is found to involve the Messianic consciousness throughout. Even those parts of the Gospels which have been regarded as most purely ethical are found to be based altogether upon Jesus' lofty claims. The Sermon on the Mount is a striking example. It is the fashion now to place the Sermon on the Mount in contrast with the rest of the New Testament. "We will have nothing to do with theology," men say in effect, "we will have nothing to do with miracles, with atonement, or with heaven or with hell. For us the Golden Rule is a sufficient guide of life; in the simple principles of the Sermon on the Mount we discover a solution of all the problems of society." It is indeed rather strange that men can speak in this way. Certainly it is rather derogatory to Jesus to assert that never except in one brief part of His recorded words did He say anything that is worth while. But even in the Sermon on the Mount there is far more than some men suppose. Men say that it contains no theology; in reality it contains theology of the most stupendous kind. In particular, it contains the loftiest possible presentation of Jesus' own Person. That presentation appears in the strange note of authority which pervades the whole discourse; it appears in the recurrent words, "But I say unto you." Jesus plainly puts His own words on an equality with what He certainly regarded as the divine words of Scripture; He claimed the right to legislate for the Kingdom of God. Let it not be objected that this note of authority involves merely a prophetic consciousness in Jesus, a mere right to speak in God's name as God's Spirit might lead. For what prophet ever spoke in this way?

⁷ *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*, 1901.

⁸ J. Weiss, "Das Problem der Entstehung des Christentums," in *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, xvi, 1913, p. 456. See *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, 1921, p. 156.

The prophets said, "Thus saith the Lord," but Jesus said, "I say." We have no mere prophet here, no mere humble exponent of the will of God; but a stupendous Person speaking in a manner which for any other person would be abominable and absurd. The same thing appears in the passage Matt. vii. 21-23: "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many shall say to me in that day: Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name cast out demons, and in thy name done many mighty works? And then I shall confess to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work lawlessness.'" This passage is in some respects a favorite with modern liberal teachers; for it is interpreted — falsely, it is true, yet plausibly — as meaning that all that a man needs to attain standing with God is an approximately right performance of his duties to his fellow-men, and not any assent to a creed or even any direct relation to Jesus. But have those who quote the passage so triumphantly in this way ever stopped to reflect upon the other side of the picture — upon the stupendous fact that in this same passage the eternal destinies of men are made dependent upon the word of Jesus? Jesus here represents Himself as seated on the judgment-seat of all the earth, separating whom He will forever from the bliss that is involved in being present with Him. Could anything be further removed than such a Jesus from the humble teacher of righteousness appealed to by modern liberalism? Clearly it is impossible to escape from theology, even in the chosen precincts of the Sermon on the Mount. A stupendous theology, with Jesus' own Person at the centre of it, is the presupposition of the whole teaching.

But may not that theology still be removed? May we not get rid of the bizarre, theological element which has intruded itself even into the Sermon on the Mount, and content ourselves merely with the ethical portion of the discourse? The question, from the point of view of modern liberalism, is natural. But it must be answered with an emphatic negative. For the fact is that the ethic of the discourse, taken by itself, will not work at all. The Golden Rule furnishes an example. "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" — is that rule a rule of universal application, will it really solve all the problems of society? A little experience shows that such is not the case. Help a drunkard to get rid of his evil habit, and you will soon come to distrust the modern interpretation of the Golden Rule. The trouble is that the drunkard's companions apply the rule only too well; they do unto him exactly what they would have him do unto them — by buying him a drink. The Golden Rule becomes a powerful obstacle in the way of moral advance. But the trouble does not lie in the rule itself, it lies in the modern interpretation of the rule. The error consists in supposing that the Golden Rule, with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, is addressed to the whole world. As a matter of fact the whole discourse is expressly addressed to Jesus' disciples; and from them the great world outside is distinguished in the plainest possible way. The persons to whom the Golden Rule is addressed are persons in whom a great change has been wrought - a change which fits them for entrance into the Kingdom of God. Such persons will have pure desires; they, and they only, can

safely do unto others as they would have others do unto them, for the things that they would have others do unto them are high and pure.

So it is with the whole of the discourse. The new law of the Sermon on the Mount, in itself, can only produce despair. Strange indeed is the complacency with which modern men can say that the Golden Rule and the high ethical principles of Jesus are all that they need. In reality, if the requirements for entrance into the Kingdom of God are what Jesus declares them to be, we are all undone; we have not even attained to the external righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, and how shall we attain to that righteousness of the heart which Jesus demands? The Sermon on the Mount, rightly interpreted, then, makes man a seeker after some divine means of salvation by which entrance into the Kingdom can be obtained. Even Moses was too high for us; but before this higher law of Jesus who shall stand without being condemned? The Sermon on the Mount, like all the rest of the New Testament, really leads a man straight to the foot of the Cross.

Even the disciples, to whom the teaching of Jesus was first addressed, knew well that they needed more than guidance in the way that they should go. It is only a superficial reading of the Gospels that can find in the relation which the disciples sustained to Jesus a mere relation of pupil to Master. When Jesus said, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," he was speaking not as a philosopher calling pupils to his school; but as One who was in possession of rich stores of divine grace. And this much at least the disciples knew. They knew well in their heart of hearts that they had no right to stand in the Kingdom; they knew that only Jesus could win them entrance there. They did not yet know fully how Jesus could make them children of God; but they did know that He could do it and He alone. And in that trust all the theology of the great Christian creeds was in expectation contained.

At this point, an objection may arise. May we not — the modern liberal will say — may we not now return to that simple trust of the disciples? May we not cease to ask how Jesus saves; may we not simply leave the way to Him? What need is there, then, of defining "effectual calling," what need of enumerating "justification, adoption and sanctification and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them"? What need even of rehearsing the steps in the saving work of Christ as they were rehearsed by the Jerusalem Church; what need of saying that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures"? Should not our trust be in a Person rather than in a message; in Jesus, rather than in what Jesus did; in Jesus' character rather than in Jesus' death?

Plausible words these are — plausible, and pitifully vain. Can we really return to Galilee; are we really in the same situation as those who came to Jesus when He was on earth? Can we hear Him say to us, "Thy sins are forgiven thee"? These

are serious questions, and they cannot possibly be ignored. The plain fact is that Jesus of Nazareth died these nineteen hundred years ago. It was possible for the men of Galilee in the first century to trust Him for to them He extended His aid. For them, life's problem was easy. They needed only to push in through the crowd or be lowered through some Capernaum roof, and the long search was over. But we are separated by nineteen centuries from the One who alone could give us aid. How can we bridge the gulf of time that separates us from Jesus? Some persons would bridge the gulf by the mere use of the historical imagination. "Jesus is not dead," we are told, "but lives on through His recorded words and deeds; we do not need even to believe it all; even a part is sufficient; the wonderful personality of Jesus shines out clear from the Gospel story. Jesus, in other words, may still be known; let us simply — without theology, without controversy, without inquiry about miracles — abandon ourselves to His spell, and He will heal us."

There is a certain plausibility about that. It may readily be admitted that Jesus lives on in the Gospel record. In that narrative we see not merely a lifeless picture, but receive the impression of a living Person. We can still, as we read, share the astonishment of those who listened to the new teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. We can sympathize with the faith and devotion of the little band of disciples who would not leave Him when others were offended at the hard saying. We feel a sympathetic thrill of joy at the blessed relief which was given to those who were ill in body and in mind. We can appreciate the wonderful love and compassion of Him who was sent to seek and to save that which was lost. A wonderful story it is indeed - not dead, but pulsating with life at every turn.

Certainly the Jesus of the Gospels is a real, a living Person. But that is not the only question. We are going forward far too fast. Jesus lives in the Gospels - so much may freely be admitted - but we of the twentieth century, how may we come into vital relation to Him? He died nineteen hundred years ago. The life which He now lives in the Gospels is simply the old life lived over and over again. And in that life we have no place; in that life we are spectators, not actors. The life which Jesus lives in the Gospels is after all for us but the spurious life of the stage. We sit silent in the playhouse and watch the absorbing Gospel drama of forgiveness and healing and love and courage and high endeavor; in rapt attention we follow the fortunes of those who came to Jesus laboring and heavy laden and found rest. For a time our own troubles are forgotten. But suddenly the curtain falls, with the closing of the book, and out we go again into the cold humdrum of our own lives. Gone are the warmth and gladness of an ideal world, and "in their stead a sense of real things comes doubly strong." We are no longer living over again the lives of Peter and James and John. Alas, we are living our own lives once more, with our own problems and our own misery and our own sin. And still we are seeking our own Saviour.

Let us not deceive ourselves. A Jewish teacher of the first century can never satisfy the longing of our souls. Clothe Him with all the art of modern research,

throw upon Him the warm, deceptive calcium-light of modern sentimentality; and despite it all common sense will come to its rights again, and for our brief hour of self-deception - as though we had been with Jesus - will wreak upon us the revenge of hopeless disillusionment.

But, says the modern preacher, are we not, in being satisfied with the "historical" Jesus, the great teacher who proclaimed the Kingdom of God, merely restoring the simplicity of the primitive gospel? No, we answer, you are not, but, temporally at least, you are not so very far wrong. You are really returning to a very primitive stage in the life of the Church. Only, that stage is not the Galilean springtime. For in Galilee men had a living Saviour. There was one time and one time only when the disciples lived, like you, merely on the memory of Jesus. When was it? It was a gloomy, desperate time. It was the three sad days after the crucifixion. Then and then only did Jesus' disciples regard Him merely as a blessed memory. "We trusted," they said, "that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel." "We trusted" - but now our trust is gone. Shall we remain, with modern liberal-ism, forever in the gloom of those sad days? Or shall we pass out from it to the warmth and joy of Pentecost?

Certainly we shall remain forever in the gloom if we attend merely to the character of Jesus and neglect the thing that He has done, if we try to attend to the Person and neglect the message. We may have joy for sadness and power for weakness; but not by easy half-way measures, not by avoidance of controversy, not by trying to hold on to Jesus and yet reject the gospel. What was it that within a few days transformed a band of mourners into the spiritual conquerors of the world? It was not the memory of Jesus' life; it was not the inspiration which came from past contact with Him. But it was the message, "He is risen." That message alone gave to the disciples a living Saviour; and it alone can give to us a living Saviour to-day. We shall never have vital contact with Jesus if we attend to His person and neglect the message; for it is the message which makes Him ours.

But the Christian message contains more than the fact of the resurrection.⁹ It is not enough to know that Jesus is alive; it is not enough to know that a wonderful Person lived in the first century of the Christian era and that that Person still lives, somewhere and somehow, to-day. Jesus lives, and that is well; but what good is it to us? We are like the inhabitants of far-off Syria or Phœnicia in the days of His flesh. There is a wonderful Person who can heal every ill of body and mind. But, alas, we are not with Him, and the way is far. How shall we come into His presence? How shall contact be established between us and Him? For the people of ancient Galilee contact was established by a touch of Jesus' hand or a word from His lips. But for us the problem is not so easy. We cannot find Him by the lake shore or in crowded houses; we cannot be lowered into any room where He sits amid scribes and Pharisees. If we employ only our own methods of

⁹ For what follows compare *A Rapid Survey of the History and Literature of New Testament Times*, published by the Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work, Teacher's Manual, pp. 44f.

search, we shall find ourselves on a fruitless pilgrimage. Surely we need guidance, if we are to find our Saviour.

And in the New Testament we find guidance full and free — guidance so complete as to remove all doubt, yet so simple that a child can understand. Contact with Jesus according to the New Testament is established by what Jesus does, not for others, but for us. The account of what Jesus did for others is indeed necessary. By reading how He went about doing good, how He healed the sick and raised the dead and forgave sins, we learn that He is a Person who is worthy of trust. But such knowledge is to the Christian man not an end in itself, but a means to an end. It is not enough to know that Jesus is a Person worthy of trust; it is also necessary to know that He is willing to have us trust Him. It is not enough that He saved others; we need to know also that He has saved us.

That knowledge is given in the story of the Cross. For us Jesus does not merely place His fingers in the ears and say, "Be opened"; for us He does not merely say, "Arise and walk." For us He has done a greater thing — for us He died. Our dreadful guilt, the condemnation of God's law — it was wiped out by an act of grace. That is the message which brings Jesus near to us, and makes Him not merely the Saviour of the men of Galilee long ago, but the Saviour of you and me.

It is vain, then, to speak of reposing trust in the Person without believing the message. For trust involves a personal relation between the one who trusts and him in whom the trust is re-posed. And in this case the personal relation is set up by the blessed theology of the Cross. Without the eighth chapter of Romans, the mere story of the earthly life of Jesus would be remote and dead; for it is through the eighth chapter of Romans, or the message which that chapter contains, that Jesus becomes our Saviour to-day.

The truth is that when men speak of trust in Jesus' Person, as being possible without acceptance of the message of His death and resurrection, they do not really mean trust at all. What they designate as trust is really admiration or reverence. They reverence Jesus as the supreme Person of all history and the supreme revealer of God. But trust can come only when the supreme Person extends His saving power to us. "He went about doing good," "He spake words such as never man spake," "He is the express image of God" — that is reverence; "He loved me and gave Himself for me" — that is faith.

But the words "He loved me and gave Himself for me" are in historical form; they constitute an account of something that happened. And they add to the fact the meaning of the fact; they contain in essence the whole profound theology of redemption through the blood of Christ. Christian doctrine lies at the very roots of faith.

It must be admitted, then, that if we are to have a non-doctrinal religion, or a doctrinal religion founded merely on general truth, we must give up not only Paul, not only the primitive Jerusalem Church, but also Jesus Himself. But what is meant by doctrine? It has been interpreted here as meaning any presentation of the facts which lie at the basis of the Christian religion with the true meaning of the facts. But is that the only sense of the word? May the word not also be taken in a narrower sense?

May it not also mean a systematic and minute and one-sidedly scientific presentation of the facts? And if the word is taken in this narrower sense, may not the modern objection to doctrine involve merely an objection to the excessive subtlety of controversial theology, and not at all an objection to the glowing words of the New Testament, an objection to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and not at all to the first century? Undoubtedly the word is so taken by many occupants of the pews when they listen to the modern exaltation of "life" at the expense of "doctrine." The pious hearer labors under the impression that he is merely being asked to return to the simplicity of the New Testament, instead of attending to the subtleties of the theologians. Since it has never occurred to him to attend to the subtleties of the theologians, he has that comfortable feeling which always comes to the churchgoer when someone else's sins are being attacked. It is no wonder that the modern invectives against doctrine constitute a popular type of preaching. At any rate, an attack upon Calvin or Turretin or the Westminster divines does not seem to the modern churchgoer to be a very dangerous thing. In point of fact, however, the attack upon doctrine is not nearly so innocent a matter as our simple churchgoer supposes; for the things objected to in the theology of the Church are also at the very heart of the New Testament. Ultimately the attack is not against the seventeenth century, but against the Bible and against Jesus Himself.

Even if it were an attack not upon the Bible but only upon the great historic presentations of Biblical teaching, it would still be unfortunate. If the Church were led to wipe out of existence all products of the thinking of nineteen Christian centuries and start fresh, the loss, even if the Bible were retained, would be immense. When it is once admitted that a body of facts lies at the basis of the Christian religion, the efforts which past generations have made toward the classification of the facts will have to be treated with respect. In no branch of science would there be any real advance if every generation started fresh with no dependence upon what past generations have achieved. Yet in theology, vituperation of the past seems to be thought essential to progress. And upon what base slanders the vituperation is based! After listening to modern tirades against the great creeds of the Church, one receives rather a shock when one turns to the Westminster Confession, for example, or to that tenderest and most theological of books, the "Pilgrim's Progress" of John Bunyan, and discovers that in doing so one has turned from shallow modern phrases to a "dead orthodoxy" that is pulsating with life in every word. In such orthodoxy there is life enough to set the whole world aglow with Christian love.

As a matter of fact, however, in the modern vituperation of "doctrine," it is not merely the great theologians or the great creeds that are being attacked, but the New Testament and our Lord Himself. In rejecting doctrine, the liberal preacher is rejecting the simple words of Paul, "Who loved me and gave Himself for me," just as much as the homoousion of the Nicene Creed. For the word "doctrine" is really used not in its narrowest, but in its broadest sense. The liberal preacher is really rejecting the whole basis of Christianity, which is a religion founded not on aspirations, but on facts. Here is found the most fundamental difference between liberalism and Christianity — liberalism is altogether in the imperative mood, while Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative; liberalism appeals to man's will, while Christianity announces, first, a gracious act of God.

In maintaining the doctrinal basis of Christianity, we are particularly anxious not to be misunderstood. There are certain things that we do not mean. In the first place, we do not mean that if doctrine is sound, it makes no difference about life. On the contrary, it makes all the difference in the world. From the beginning, Christianity was certainly a way of life; the salvation that it offered was a salvation from sin, and salvation from sin appeared not merely in a blessed hope but also in an immediate moral change. The early Christians, to the astonishment of their neighbors, lived a strange new kind of life — a life of honesty, of purity and of unselfishness. And from the Christian community all other types of life were excluded in the strictest way. From the beginning Christianity was certainly a life.

But how was the life produced? It might conceivably have been produced by exhortation. That method had often been tried in the ancient world; in the Hellenistic age there were many wandering preachers who told men how they ought to live. But such exhortation proved to be powerless. Although the ideals of the Cynic and Stoic preachers were high, these preachers never succeeded in transforming society. The strange thing about Christianity was that it adopted an entirely different method. It transformed the lives of men not by appealing to the human will, but by telling a story; not by exhortation, but by the narration of an event. It is no wonder that such a method seemed strange. Could anything be more impractical than the attempt to influence conduct by rehearsing events concerning the death of a religious teacher? That is what Paul called "the foolishness of the message." It seemed foolish to the ancient world, and it seems foolish to liberal preachers to-day. But the strange thing is that it works. The effects of it appear even in this world. Where the most eloquent exhortation fails, the simple story of an event succeeds; the lives of men are transformed by a piece of news.

It is especially by such transformation of life, to-day as always, that the Christian message is commended to the attention of men. Certainly, then, it does make an enormous difference whether our lives be right. If our doctrine be true, and our lives be wrong, how terrible is our sin! For then we have brought despite upon the truth itself. On the other hand, however, it is also very sad when men use the

social graces which God has given them, and the moral momentum of a godly ancestry, to commend a message which is false. Nothing in the world can take the place of truth.

In the second place, we do not mean, in insisting upon the doctrinal basis of Christianity, that all points of doctrine are equally important. It is perfectly possible for Christian fellowship to be maintained despite differences of opinion.

One such difference of opinion, which has been attaining increasing prominence in recent years, concerns the order of events in connection with the Lord's return. A large number of Christian people believe that when evil has reached its climax in the world, the Lord Jesus will return to this earth in bodily presence to bring about a reign of righteousness which will last a thousand years, and that only after that period the end of the world will come. That belief, in the opinion of the present writer, is an error, arrived at by a false interpretation of the Word of God; we do not think that the prophecies of the Bible permit so definite a mapping-out of future events. The Lord will come again, and it will be no mere "spiritual" coming in the modern sense—so much is clear — but that so little will be accomplished by the present dispensation of the Holy Spirit and so much will be left to be accomplished by the Lord in bodily presence - such a view we cannot find to be justified by the words of Scripture. What is our attitude, then, with regard to this debate? Certainly it cannot be an attitude of indifference. The recrudescence of "Chiliasm" or "premillennialism" in the modern Church causes us serious concern; it is coupled, we think, with a false method of interpreting Scripture which in the long run will be productive of harm.

Yet how great is our agreement with those who hold the premillennial view! They share to the full our reverence for the authority of the Bible, and differ from us only in the interpretation of the Bible; they share our ascription of deity to the Lord Jesus, and our supernaturalistic conception both of the entrance of Jesus into the world and of the consummation when He shall come again. Certainly, then, from our point of view, their error, serious though it may be, is not deadly error; and Christian fellowship, with loyalty not only to the Bible but to the great creeds of the Church, can still unite us with them. It is therefore highly misleading when modern liberals represent the present issue in the Church, both in the mission field and at home, as being an issue between premillennialism and the opposite view. It is really an issue between Christianity, whether premillennial or not, on the one side, and a naturalistic negation of all Christianity on the other.

Another difference of opinion which can subsist in the midst of Christian fellowship is the difference of opinion about the mode of efficacy of the sacraments. That difference is indeed serious, and to deny its seriousness is a far greater error than to take the wrong side in the controversy itself. It is often said that the divided condition of Christendom is an evil, and so it is. But the evil consists in the existence of the errors which cause the divisions and not at all in the recognition of those errors when once they exist. It was a great calamity

when at the "Marburg Conference" between Luther and the representatives of the Swiss Reformation, Luther wrote on the table with regard to the Lord's Supper, "This is my body," and said to Zwingli and Oecolampadius, "You have another spirit." That difference of opinion led to the breach between the Lutheran and the Reformed branches of the Church, and caused Protestantism to lose much of the ground that might otherwise have been gained. It was a great calamity indeed. But the calamity was due to the fact that Luther (as we believe) was wrong about the Lord's Supper; and it would have been a far greater calamity if being wrong about the Supper he had represented the whole question as a trifling affair. Luther was wrong about the Supper, but not nearly so wrong as he would have been if, being wrong, he had said to his opponents: "Brethren, this matter is a trifle; and it makes really very little difference what a man thinks about the table of the Lord." Such indifferentism would have been far more deadly than all the divisions between the branches of the Church. A Luther who would have compromised with regard to the Lord's Supper never would have said at the Diet of Worms, "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me, Amen." Indifferentism about doctrine makes no heroes of the faith.

Still another difference of opinion concerns the nature and prerogatives of the Christian ministry. According to Anglican doctrine, the bishops are in possession of an authority which has been handed down to them, by successive ordination, from the apostles of the Lord, and without such ordination there is no valid priesthood. Other churches deny this doctrine of "apostolic succession," and hold a different view of the ministry. Here again, the difference is no trifle, and we have little sympathy with those who in the mere interests of Church efficiency try to induce Anglicans to let down the barrier which their principles have led them to erect. But despite the importance of this difference, it does not descend to the very roots. Even to the conscientious Anglican himself, though he regards the members of other bodies as in schism, Christian fellowship with individuals in those other bodies is still possible; and certainly those who reject the Anglican view of the ministry can regard the Anglican Church as a genuine and very noble member in the body of Christ.

Another difference of opinion is that between the Calvinistic or Reformed theology and the Arminianism which appears in the Methodist Church. It is difficult to see how any one who has really studied the question can regard that difference as an unimportant matter. On the contrary, it touches very closely some of the profoundest things of the Christian faith. A Calvinist is constrained to regard the Arminian theology as a serious impoverishment of the Scripture doctrine of divine grace; and equally serious is the view which the Arminian must hold as to the doctrine of the Reformed Churches. Yet here again, true evangelical fellowship is possible between those who hold, with regard to some exceedingly important matters, sharply opposing views.

Far more serious still is the division between the Church of Rome and evangelical Protestantism in all its forms. Yet how great is the common heritage

which unites the Roman Catholic Church, with its maintenance of the authority of Holy Scripture and with its acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own Church. The Church of Rome may represent a perversion of the Christian religion; but naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all. That does not mean that conservatives and liberals must live in personal animosity. It does not involve any lack of sympathy on our part for those who have felt obliged by the current of the times to relinquish their confidence in the strange message of the Cross. Many ties — ties of blood, of citizenship, of ethical aims, of humanitarian endeavor — unite us to those who have abandoned the gospel. We trust that those ties may never be weakened, and that ultimately they may serve some purpose in the propagation of the Christian faith. But Christian service consists primarily in the propagation of a message, and specifically Christian fellowship exists only between those to whom the message has become the very basis of all life.

The character of 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 tell 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 in comparison with those of Christianity will show that at every point the two movements are in direct opposition. That examination will now be undertaken, though merely in a summary and cursory way.

John Gresham Machen (1881-1937) was an American Presbyterian New Testament scholar, who led a revolt against modernist theology at Princeton, and founded Westminster Theological Seminary as well as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He wrote Christianity & Liberalism in 1923 as an answer to the controversies of his day.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).