

Christianity & Liberalism

The Bible

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

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

The Christian message has come to us through the Bible. What shall we think about this Book in which the message is contained?

According to the Christian view, the Bible contains an account of a revelation from God to man, which is found nowhere else. It is true, the Bible also contains a confirmation and a wonderful enrichment of the revelations which are given also by the things that God has made and by the conscience of man. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handywork" - these words are a confirmation of the revelation of God in nature; "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" - these words are a confirmation of what is attested by the conscience. But in addition to such reaffirmations of what might conceivably be learned elsewhere — as a matter of fact, because of men's blindness, even so much is learned elsewhere only in comparatively obscure fashion — the Bible also contains an account of a revelation which is absolutely new. That new revelation concerns the way by which sinful man can come into communion with the living God.

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

new face has been put upon life by the blessed thing that God did when He offered up His only begotten Son.

An objection is sometimes offered against this view of the contents of the Bible. Must we, it is said, depend upon what happened so long ago? Does salvation wait upon the examination of musty records? Is the trained student of Palestinian history the modern priest without whose gracious intervention no one can see God? Can we not find, instead, a salvation that is independent of history, a salvation that depends only on what is with us here and now?

The objection is not devoid of weight. But it ignores one of the primary evidences for the truth of the gospel record. That evidence is found in Christian experience. Salvation does depend upon what happened long ago, but the event of long ago has effects that continue until today. We are told in the New Testament that Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of those who should believe on Him. That is a record of a past event. But we can make trial of it to-day, and making trial of it we find it to be true. We are told in the New Testament that on a certain morning long ago Jesus rose from the dead. That again is a record of a past event. But again we can make trial of it, and making trial of it we discover that Jesus is truly a living Saviour to-day.

But at this point a fatal error lies in wait. It is one of the root errors of modern liberalism. Christian experience, we have just said, is useful as confirming the gospel message. But because it is necessary, many men have jumped to the conclusion that it is all that is necessary. Having a present experience of Christ in the heart, may we not, it is said, hold that experience no matter what history may tell us as to the events of the first Easter morning? May we not make ourselves altogether independent of the results of Biblical criticism? No matter what sort of man history may tell us Jesus of Nazareth actually was, no matter what history may say about the real meaning of His death or about the story of His alleged resurrection, may we not continue to experience the presence of Christ in our souls?

The trouble is that the experience thus maintained is not Christian experience. Religious experience it may be, but Christian experience it certainly is not. For Christian experience depends absolutely upon an event. The Christian says to himself: "I have meditated upon the problem of becoming right with God, I have tried to produce a righteousness that will stand in His sight; but when I heard the gospel message I learned that what I had weakly striven to accomplish had been accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ when He died for me on the Cross and completed His redeeming work by the glorious resurrection. If the thing has not yet been done, if I merely have an idea of its accomplishment, then I am of all men most miserable, for I am still in my sins. My Christian life, then, depends altogether upon the truth of the New Testament record."

Christian experience is rightly used when it confirms the documentary evidence. But it can never possibly provide a substitute for the documentary evidence. We know that the gospel story is true partly because of the early date of the documents in which it appears, the evidence as to their authorship, the internal evidence of their truth, the impossibility of explaining them as being based upon deception or upon myth. This evidence is gloriously confirmed by present experience, which adds to the documentary evidence that wonderful directness and immediacy of conviction which delivers us from fear. Christian experience is rightly used when it helps to convince us that the events narrated in the New Testament actually did occur; but it can never enable us to be Christians whether the events occurred or not. It is a fair flower, and should be prized as a gift of God. But cut it from its root in the blessed Book, and it soon withers away and dies.

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

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

This doctrine of "plenary inspiration" has been made the subject of persistent misrepresentation. Its opponents speak of it as though it involved a mechanical theory of the activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, it is said, is represented in this doctrine as dictating the Bible to writers who were really little more than stenographers. But of course all such caricatures are without basis in fact, and it is rather surprising that intelligent men should be so blinded by prejudice about this matter as not even to examine for themselves the perfectly accessible treatises in which the doctrine of plenary inspiration is set forth. It is usually considered good practice to examine a thing for one's self before echoing the vulgar ridicule of it. But in connection with the Bible, such scholarly restraints are somehow regarded as out of place. It is so much easier to content one's self with a few opprobrious adjectives such as "mechanical," or the like. Why engage in serious criticism when the people prefer ridicule? Why attack a real opponent when it is easier to knock down a man of straw?¹

¹ It is not denied that there are some persons in the modern Church who do neglect the context of Bible quotations and who do ignore the human characteristics of the Biblical writers. But in an entirely

As a matter of fact, the doctrine of plenary inspiration does not deny the individuality of the Biblical writers; it does not ignore their use of ordinary means for acquiring information; it does not involve any lack of interest in the historical situations which gave rise to the Biblical books. What it does deny is the presence of error in the Bible. It supposes that the Holy Spirit so informed the minds of the Biblical writers that they were kept from falling into the errors that mar all other books. The Bible might contain an account of a genuine revelation of God, and yet not contain a true account. But according to the doctrine of inspiration, the account is as a matter of fact a true account; the Bible is an "infallible rule of faith and practice."

Certainly that is a stupendous claim, and it is no wonder that it has been attacked. But the trouble is that the attack is not always fair. If the liberal preacher objected to the doctrine of plenary inspiration on the ground that as a matter of fact there are errors in the Bible, he might be right and he might be wrong, but at any rate the discussion would be conducted on the proper ground. But too often the preacher desires to avoid the delicate question of errors in the Bible — a question which might give offence to the rank and file — and prefers to speak merely against "mechanical" theories of inspiration, the theory of "dictation," the "superstitious use of the Bible as a talisman," or the like. It all sounds to the plain man as though it were very harmless.

Does not the liberal preacher say that the Bible is "divine" — indeed that it is the more divine because it is the more human? What could be more edifying than that? But of course such appearances are deceptive. A Bible that is full of error is certainly divine in the modern pantheizing sense of "divine," according to which God is just another name for the course of the world with all its imperfections and all its sin. But the God whom the Christian worships is a God of truth.

It must be admitted that there are many Christians who do not accept the doctrine of plenary inspiration. That doctrine is denied not only by liberal opponents of Christianity, but also by many true Christian men. There are many Christian men in the modern Church who find in the origin of Christianity no mere product of evolution but a real entrance of the creative power of God, who depend for their salvation, not at all upon their own efforts to lead the Christian life, but upon the atoning blood of Christ - there are many men in the modern Church who thus accept the central message of the Bible and yet believe that the message has come to us merely on the authority of trustworthy witnesses unaided in their literary work by any supernatural guidance of the Spirit of God. There are many who believe that the Bible is right at the central point, in its account of the redeeming work of Christ, and yet believe that it contains many errors. Such men are not really liberals, but Christians; because they have

unwarrantable manner this defective way of using the Bible is attributed, by insinuation at least, to the great body of those who have held to the inspiration of Scripture.

accepted as true the message upon which Christianity depends. A great gulf separates them from those who reject the supernatural act of God with which Christianity stands or falls.

It is another question, however, whether the mediating view of the Bible which is thus maintained is logically tenable, the trouble being that our Lord Himself seems to have held the high view of the Bible which is here being rejected. Certainly it is another question - and a question which the present writer would answer with an emphatic negative - whether the panic about the Bible, which gives rise to such concessions, is at all justified by the facts. If the Christian make full use of his Christian privi-leges, he finds the seat of authority in the whole Bible, which he regards as no mere word of man but as the very Word of God.

Very different is the view of modern liberalism. The modern liberal rejects not only the doctrine of plenary inspiration, but even such respect for the Bible as would be proper over against any ordinarily trustworthy book. But what is substituted for the Christian view of the Bible? What is the liberal view as to the seat of authority in religion?

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

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

As a matter of fact, however, the modern liberal does not hold fast even to the authority of Jesus. Certainly he does not accept the words of Jesus as they are recorded in the Gospels. For among the recorded words of Jesus are to be found just those things which are most abhorrent to the modern liberal Church, and in His recorded words Jesus also points forward to the fuller revelation which was afterwards to be given through His apos-tles. Evidently, therefore, those words of Jesus which are to be regarded as authoritative by modern liberalism must first be selected from the mass of the recorded words by a critical process. The

critical process is certainly very difficult, and the suspicion often arises that the critic is retaining as genuine words of the historical Jesus only those words which conform to his own preconceived ideas. But even after the sifting process has been completed, the liberal scholar is still unable to accept as authoritative all the sayings of Jesus; he must finally admit that even the "historical" Jesus as reconstructed by modern historians said some things that are untrue.

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

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

The Christian man, on the other hand, finds in the Bible the very Word of God. Let it not be said that dependence upon a book is a dead or an artificial thing. The Reformation of the sixteenth century was founded upon the authority of the Bible, yet it set the world aflame. Dependence upon a word of man would be slavish, but dependence upon God's word is life. Dark and gloomy would be the world, if we were left to our own devices, and had no blessed Word of God. The Bible, to the Christian is not a burdensome law, but the very Magna Charta of Christian liberty. It is no wonder, then, that liberalism is totally different from Christianity, for the foundation is different. Christianity is founded upon the Bible.

It bases upon the Bible both its thinking and its life. Liberalism on the other hand is founded upon the shifting emotions of sinful men.

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](#).