

Christianity & Liberalism

Christ (Part II)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

The conception of the "supernatural" is closely connected with that of "miracle"; a miracle is the supernatural manifesting itself in the external world. But what is the supernatural? Many definitions have been proposed.

But only one definition is really correct. A supernatural event is one that takes place by the immediate, as distinguished from the mediate, power of God. The possibility of the supernatural, if supernatural be defined in this way, presupposes two things — it presupposes (1) the existence of a personal God, and (2) the existence of a real order of nature. Without the existence of a personal God, there could be no purposive entrance of God's power into the order of the world; and without the real existence of an order of nature there could be no distinction between natural events and those that are above nature — all events would be supernatural, or rather the word "supernatural" would have no meaning at all. The distinction between "natural" and "supernatural" does not mean, indeed, that nature is independent of God; it does not mean that while God brings to pass supernatural events, natural events are not brought to pass by Him. On the contrary, the believer in the supernatural regards everything that is done as being the work of God. Only, he believes that in the events called natural, God uses means, whereas in the events called supernatural He uses no means, but puts forth His creative power. The distinction between the natural and the super-natural, in other words, is simply the distinction between God's works of providence and God's work of creation; a miracle is a work of creation just as truly as the mysterious act which produced the world.

This conception of the supernatural depends absolutely upon a theistic view of God. Theism is to be distinguished (1) from deism and (2) from pantheism.

According to the deistic view, God set the world going like a machine and then left it independent of Himself. Such a view is inconsistent with the actuality of the supernatural; the miracles of the Bible presuppose a God who is constantly watching over and guiding the course of this world. The miracles of the Bible are not arbitrary intrusions of a Power that is without relation to the world, but are evidently intended to accomplish results within the order of nature. Indeed the natural and the supernatural are blended, in the miracles of the Bible, in a way entirely incongruous with the deistic conception of God. In the feeding of the five thousand, for example, who shall say what part the five loaves and two fishes

had in the event; who shall say where the natural left off and the supernatural began? Yet that event, if any, surely transcended the order of nature. The miracles of the Bible, then, are not the work of a God who has no part in the course of nature; they are the work of a God who through His works of providence is "preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions."

But the conception of the supernatural is inconsistent, not only with deism, but also with pantheism. Pantheism identifies God with the totality of nature. It is inconceivable, then, on the pantheistic view that anything should enter into the course of nature from outside. A similar incongruity with the supernatural appears also in certain forms of idealism, which deny real existence to the forces of nature. If what seems to be connected in nature is really only connected in the divine mind, then it is difficult to make any distinction between those operations of the divine mind which appear as miracles and those which appear as natural events. Again, it has often been said that all events are works of creation. On this view, it is only a concession to popular phraseology to say that one body is attracted toward another in accordance with a law of gravitation; what really ought to be said is that when two bodies are in proximity under certain conditions they come together. Certain phenomena in nature, on this view, are always followed by certain other phenomena, and it is really only this regularity of sequence which is indicated by the assertion that the former phenomena "cause" the latter; the only real cause is in all cases God. On the basis of this view, there can be no distinction between events wrought by the immediate power of God and those that are not; for on this view all events are so wrought. Against such a view, those who accept our definition of miracle will naturally accept the common-sense notion of cause. God is always the first cause, but there are truly second causes; and they are the means which God uses, in the ordinary course of the world, for the accomplishment of His ends. It is the exclusion of such second causes which makes an event a miracle.

It is sometimes said that the actuality of miracles would destroy the basis of science. Science, it is said, is founded upon the regularity of sequences; it assumes that if certain conditions within the course of nature are given, certain other conditions will always follow. But if there is to be any intrusion of events which by their very definition are independent of all previous conditions, then, it is said, the regularity of nature upon which science bases itself is broken up. Miracle, in other words, seems to introduce an element of arbitrariness and unaccountability into the course of the world.

The objection ignores what is really fundamental in the Christian conception of miracle. According to the Christian conception, a miracle is wrought by the immediate power of God. It is not wrought by an arbitrary and fantastic despot, but by the very God to whom the regularity of nature itself is due — by the God, moreover, whose character is known through the Bible. Such a God, we may be sure, will not do despite to the reason that He has given to His creatures; His interposition will introduce no disorder into the world that He has made. There is

nothing arbitrary about a miracle, according to the Christian conception. It is not an uncaused event, but an event that is caused by the very source of all the order that is in the world. It is dependent altogether upon the least arbitrary and the most firmly fixed of all the things that are — namely upon the character of God.

The possibility of miracle, then, is indissolubly joined with "theism." Once admit the existence of a personal God, Maker and Ruler of the world, and no limits, temporal or otherwise, can be set to the creative power of such a God. Admit that God once created the world, and you cannot deny that He might engage in creation again. But it will be said, the actuality of miracles is different from the possibility of them. It may be admitted that miracles conceivably might occur. But have they actually occurred?

This question looms very large in the minds of modern men. The burden of the question seems to rest heavily even upon many who still accept the miracles of the New Testament. The miracles used to be regarded as an aid to faith, it is often said, but now they are a hindrance to faith; faith used to come on account of the miracles, but now it comes in despite of them; men used to believe in Jesus because He wrought miracles, but now we accept the miracles because on other grounds we have come to believe in Him.

A strange confusion underlies this common way of speaking. In one sense, certainly, miracles are a hindrance to faith but who ever thought the contrary? It may certainly be admitted that if the New Testament narrative had no miracles in it, it would be far easier to believe. The more commonplace a story is, the easier it is to accept it as true. But commonplace narratives have little value. The New Testament without the miracles would be far easier to believe. But the trouble is, it would not be worth believing. Without the miracles the New Testament would contain an account of a holy man - not a perfect man, it is true, for He was led to make lofty claims to which He had no right — but a man at least far holier than the rest of men. But of what benefit would such a man, and the death which marked His failure, be to us? The loftier be the example which Jesus set, the greater becomes our sorrow at our failure to attain to it; and the greater our hopelessness under the burden of sin. The sage of Nazareth may satisfy those who have never faced the problem of evil in their own lives; but to talk about an ideal to those who are under the thrall of sin is a cruel mockery. Yet if Jesus was merely a man like the rest of men, then an ideal is all that we have in Him. Far more is needed by a sinful world. It is small comfort to be told that there was goodness in the world, when what we need is goodness triumphant over sin. But goodness triumphant over sin involves an entrance of the creative power of God, and that creative power of God is manifested by the miracles. Without the miracles, the New Testament might be easier to believe. But the thing that would be believed would be entirely different from that which presents itself to us now. Without the miracles we should have a teacher; with the miracles we have a Saviour.

Certainly it is a mistake to isolate the miracles from the rest of the New Testament. It is a mistake to discuss the question of the resurrection of Jesus as though that which is to be proved were simply the resurrection of a certain man of the first century in Palestine. No doubt the existing evidence for such an event, strong as the evidence is, might be insufficient. The historian would indeed be obliged to say that no naturalistic explanation of the origin of the Church has yet been discovered, and that the evidence for the miracle is exceedingly strong; but miracles are, to say the least, extremely unusual events, and there is a tremendous hostile presumption against accepting the hypothesis of miracle in any given case. But as a matter of fact, the question in this case does not concern the resurrection of a man about whom we know nothing; it concerns the resurrection of Jesus. And Jesus was certainly a very extraordinary Person. The uniqueness of the character of Jesus removes the hostile presumption against miracle; it was extremely improbable that any ordinary man should rise from the dead, but Jesus was like no other man that ever lived.

But the evidence for the miracles of the New Testament is supported in yet another way; it is supported by the existence of an adequate occasion. It has been observed above that a miracle is an event produced by the immediate power of God, and that God is a God of order. The evidence of a miracle is therefore enormously strengthened when the purpose of the miracle can be detected. That does not mean that within a complex of miracles an exact reason must be assigned to every one; it does not mean that in the New Testament we should expect to see exactly why a miracle was wrought in one case and not in another. But it does mean that acceptance of a complex of miracles is made vastly easier when an adequate reason can be detected for the complex as a whole.

In the case of the New Testament miracles, such an adequate reason is not difficult to find. It is found in the conquest of sin. According to the Christian view, as set forth in the Bible, mankind is under the curse of God's holy law, and the dreadful penalty includes the corruption of our whole nature. Actual transgressions proceed from the sinful root, and serve to deepen every man's guilt in the sight of God. On the basis of that view, so profound, so true to the observed facts of life, it is obvious that nothing natural will meet our need. Nature transmits the dreadful taint; hope is to be sought only in a creative act of God.

And that creative act of God — so mysterious, so contrary to all expectation, yet so congruous with the character of the God who is revealed as the God of love — is found in the redeeming work of Christ. No product of sinful humanity could have redeemed humanity from the dreadful guilt or lifted a sinful race from the slough of sin. But a Saviour has come from God. There lies the very root of the Christian religion; there is the reason why the supernatural is the very ground and substance of the Christian faith.

But the acceptance of the supernatural depends upon a conviction of the reality of sin. Without the conviction of sin there can be no appreciation of the uniqueness of Jesus; it is only when we contrast our sinfulness with His holiness that we appreciate the gulf which separates Him from the rest of the children of men. And without the conviction of sin there can be no understanding of the occasion for the supernatural act of God; without the conviction of sin, the good news of redemption seems to be an idle tale. So fundamental is the conviction of sin in the Christian faith that it will not do to arrive at it merely by a process of reasoning; it will not do to say merely: All men (as I have been told) are sinners; I am a man; therefore I suppose I must be a sinner too. That is all the supposed conviction of sin amounts to sometimes. But the true conviction is far more immediate than that. It depends indeed upon information that comes from without; it depends upon the revelation of the law of God; it depends upon the awful verities set forth in the Bible as to the universal sinfulness of mankind. But it adds to the revelation that has come from without a conviction of the whole mind and heart, a profound understanding of one's own lost condition, an illumination of the deadened conscience which causes a Copernican revolution in one's attitude toward the world and toward God. When a man has passed through that experience, he wonders at his former blindness. And especially does he wonder at his former attitude toward the miracles of the New Testament, and toward the supernatural Person who is there revealed. The truly penitent man glories in the supernatural, for he knows that nothing natural would meet his need; the world has been shaken once in his downfall, and shaken again it must be if he is to be saved.

Yet an acceptance of the presuppositions of miracle does not render unnecessary the plain testimony to the miracles that have actually occurred. And that testimony is exceedingly strong.¹ The Jesus presented in the New Testament was clearly an historical Person - - so much is admitted by all who have really come to grips with the historical problems at all. But just as clearly the Jesus presented in the New Testament was a supernatural Person. Yet for modern liberalism a supernatural person is never historical. A problem arises then for those who adopt the liberal point of view — the Jesus of the New Testament is historical, He is supernatural, and yet what is supernatural, on the liberal hypothesis, can never be historical. The problem could be solved only by the separation of the natural from the supernatural in the New Testament account of Jesus, in order that what is supernatural might be rejected and what is natural might be re-tained. But the process of separation has never been successfully carried out. Many have been the attempts — the modern liberal Church has put its very heart and soul into the effort, so that there is scarcely any more brilliant chapter in the history of the human spirit than this "quest of the historical Jesus" - but all the attempts have failed. The trouble is that the miracles are found not to be an excrescence in the New Testament account of Jesus, but belong to the very warp and woof. They are intimately connected with Jesus' lofty

¹ Compare *History and Faith*, 1913, pp. 6-8.

claims; they stand or fall with the undoubted purity of His character; they reveal the very nature of His mission in the world.

Yet miracles are rejected by the modern liberal Church, and with the miracles the entirety of the supernatural Person of our Lord. Not some miracles are rejected, but all. It is a matter of no importance whatever that some of the wonderful works of Jesus are accepted by the liberal Church; it means absolutely nothing when some of the works of healing are regarded as historical. For those works are no longer regarded by modern liberalism as supernatural, but merely as faith-cures of an extraordinary kind. And it is the presence or absence of the true supernatural which is the really important thing. Such concessions as to faith-cures, moreover, carry us at best but a very short way — disbelievers in the supernatural must simply reject as legendary or mythical the great mass of the wonderful works.

The question, then, does not concern the historicity of this miracle or that; it concerns the historicity of all miracles. That fact is often obscured, and the obscuration of it often introduces an element of something like disingenuousness into the advocacy of the liberal cause. The liberal preacher singles out some one miracle and discusses that as though it were the only point at issue. The miracle which is usually singled out is the Virgin Birth. The liberal preacher insists on the possibility of believing in Christ no matter which view be adopted as to the manner of His entrance into the world. Is not the Person the same no matter how He was born? The impression is thus produced upon the plain man that the preacher is accepting the main outlines of the New Testament account of Jesus, but merely has difficulties with this particular element in the account. But such an impression is radically false. It is true that some men have denied the Virgin Birth and yet have accepted the New Testament account of Jesus as a supernatural Person. But such men are exceedingly few and far between. It might be difficult to find a single one of any prominence living to-day, so profoundly and so obviously congruous is the Virgin Birth with the whole New Testament presentation of Christ. The overwhelming majority of those who reject the Virgin Birth reject also the whole supernatural content of the New Testament, and make of the "resurrection" just what the word "resurrection" most emphatically did not mean — a permanence of the influence of Jesus or a mere spiritual existence of Jesus beyond the grave. Old words may here be used, but the thing that they designate is gone. The disciples believed in the continued personal existence of Jesus even during the three sad days after the crucifixion; they were not Sadducees; they believed that Jesus lived and would rise at the last day. But what enabled them to begin the work of the Christian Church was that they believed the body of Jesus already to have been raised from the tomb by the power of God. That belief involves the acceptance of the supernatural; and the acceptance of the supernatural is thus the very heart and soul of the religion that we profess.

Whatever decision is made, the issue should certainly not be obscured. The issue does not concern individual miracles, even so important a miracle as the Virgin Birth. It really concerns all miracles. And the question concerning all miracles is simply the question of the acceptance or rejection of the Saviour that the New Testament presents. Reject the miracles and you have in Jesus the fairest flower of humanity who made such an impression upon His followers that after His death they could not believe that He had perished but experienced hallucinations in which they thought they saw Him risen from the dead; accept the miracles, and you have a Saviour who came voluntarily into this world for our salvation, suffered for our sins upon the Cross, rose again from the dead by the power of God, and ever lives to make intercession for us. The difference between those two views is the difference between two totally diverse religions. It is high time that this issue should be faced; it is high time that the misleading use of traditional phrases should be abandoned and men should speak their full mind. Shall we accept the Jesus of the New Testament as our Saviour, or shall we reject Him with the liberal Church?

At this point an objection may be raised. The liberal preacher, it may be said, is often ready to speak of the "deity" of Christ; he is often ready to say that "Jesus is God." The plain man is much impressed. The preacher, he says, believes in the deity of our Lord; obviously then his unorthodoxy must concern only details; and those who object to his presence in the Church are narrow and uncharitable heresy-hunters.

But unfortunately language is valuable only as the expression of thought. The English word "God" has no particular virtue in itself; it is not more beautiful than other words. Its importance depends altogether upon the meaning which is attached to it. When, therefore, the liberal preacher says that "Jesus is God," the significance of the utterance depends altogether upon what is meant by "God." And it has already been observed that when the liberal preacher uses the word "God," he means something entirely different from that which the Christian means by the same word. God, at least according to the logical trend of modern liberalism, is not a person separate from the world, but merely the unity that pervades the world. To say, therefore, that Jesus is God means merely that the life of God, which appears in all men, appears with special clearness or richness in Jesus. Such an assertion is diametrically opposed to the Christian belief in the deity of Christ.

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

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

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

It may well be doubted, however, whether the assertion, “I believe that Jesus is God,” or the like, on the lips of liberal preachers, is strictly truthful. The liberal preacher attaches indeed a real meaning to the words, and that meaning is very dear to his heart. He really does believe that “Jesus is God.” But the trouble is that he attaches to the words a different meaning from that which is attached to them by the simple-minded person to whom he is speaking. He offends, therefore, against the fundamental principle of truthfulness in language. According to that fundamental principle, language is truthful, not when the meaning attached to the words by the speaker, but when the meaning intended to be produced in the mind of the particular person addressed, is in accordance with the facts. Thus the truthfulness of the assertion, “I believe that Jesus is God,” depends upon the audience that is addressed. If the audience is composed of theologically trained persons, who will attach the same meaning to the word “God” as that which the speaker attaches to it, then the language is truthful. But if the audience is composed of old-fashioned Christians, who have never attached anything but the old meaning to the word “God” (the meaning which appears in the first verse of Genesis), then the language is untruthful. And in the latter case, not all the pious motives in the world will make the utterance right. Christian ethics do not abrogate common honesty; no possible desire of edifying the Church and of avoiding offence can excuse a lie.

At any rate the deity of our Lord, in any real sense of the word “deity,” is of course denied by modern liberalism. According to the modern liberal Church, Jesus differs from the rest of men only in degree and not in kind; He can be

divine only if all men are divine. But if the liberal conception of the deity of Christ thus becomes meaningless, what is the Christian conception? What does the Christian man mean when he confesses that "Jesus is God"?

The answer has been given in what has already been said. It has already been observed that the New Testament represents Jesus as a supernatural Person. But if Jesus is a supernatural Person He is either divine or else He is an intermediate Being, higher indeed than man, but lower than God. The latter view has been abandoned for many centuries in the Christian Church, and there is not much likelihood that it will be revived; Arianism certainly is dead. The thought of Christ as a super-angelic Being, like God but not God, belongs evidently to pagan mythology, and not to the Bible or to Christian faith. It will usually be admitted, if the theistic conception of the separateness between man and God be held, that Christ is either God or else simply man; He is certainly not a Being intermediate between God and man. If, then, He is not merely man, but a supernatural Person, the conclusion is that He is God.

In the second place, it has already been observed that in the New Testament and in all true Christianity, Jesus is no mere example for faith, but the object of faith. And the faith of which Jesus is the object is clearly religious faith; the Christian man reposes confidence in Jesus in a way that would be out of place in the case of any other than God. It is no lesser thing that is committed to Jesus, but the eternal welfare of the soul. The entire Christian attitude toward Jesus as it is found throughout the New Testament presupposes clearly, then, the deity of our Lord.

It is in the light of this central presupposition that the individual assertions ought to be approached. The individual passages which attest the deity of Christ are not excrescences in the New Testament, but natural fruits of a fundamental conception which is everywhere the same. Those individual passages are not confined to any one book or group of books. In the Pauline Epistles, of course, the passages are particularly plain; the Christ of the Epistles appears again and again as associated only with the Father and with His Spirit. In the Gospel of John, also, one does not have to seek very long; the deity of Christ is almost the theme of the book. But the testimony of the Synoptic Gospels is not really different from that which appears everywhere else. The way in which Jesus speaks of my Father and the Son — for example, in the famous passage in Matt. xi. 27 (Lk. x. 22): "All things have been delivered unto me of my Father, and no man knoweth the Son but the Father, neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son and He to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him" — this manner of presenting Jesus' relation to the Father, absolutely fundamental in the Synoptic Gospels, involves the assertion of the deity of our Lord. The Person who so speaks is represented as being in mysterious union with the eternal God.

Yet the New Testament with equal clearness presents Jesus as a man. The Gospel of John, which contains at the beginning the stupendous utterance, "The

Word was God," and dwells constantly upon the deity of the Lord, also represents Jesus as weary at the well and as thirsty in the hour of agony on the Cross. Scarcely in the Synoptic Gospels can one discover such drastic touches attesting the humanity of our Saviour as those which appear again and again in the Gospel of John. With regard to the Synoptic Gospels, of course there can be no debate; the Synoptists clearly present a Person who lived a genuine human life and was Himself true man.

The truth is, the witness of the New Testament is everywhere the same; the New Testament everywhere presents One who was both God and man. And it is interesting to observe how unsuccessful have been all the efforts to reject one part of this witness and retain the rest. The Apollinarians rejected the full humanity of the Lord, but in doing so they obtained a Person who was very different from the Jesus of the New Testament. The Jesus of the New Testament was clearly, in the full sense, a man. Others seem to have supposed that the divine and the human were so blended in Jesus that there was produced a nature neither purely divine nor purely human, but a *tertium quid*. But nothing could be more remote from the New Testament teaching than that. According to the New Testament the divine and human natures were clearly distinct; the divine nature was pure divinity, and the human nature was pure humanity; Jesus was God and man in two distinct natures. The Nestorians, on the other hand, so emphasized the distinctness of divine and human in Jesus as to suppose that there were in Jesus two separate persons. But such a Gnosticizing view is plainly contrary to the record; the New Testament plainly teaches the unity of the Person of our Lord. By elimination of these errors the Church arrived at the New Testament doctrine of two natures in one Person; the Jesus of the New Testament is "God and man, in two distinct natures, and one Person forever." That doctrine is sometimes regarded as speculative. But nothing could be further from the fact. Whether the doctrine of the two natures is true or false, it was certainly produced not by speculation, but by an attempt to summarize, succinctly and exactly, the Scriptural teaching.

This doctrine is of course rejected by modern liberalism. And it is rejected in a very simple way - by the elimination of the whole higher nature of our Lord. But such radicalism is not a bit more successful than the heresies of the past. The Jesus who is supposed to be left after the elimination of the supernatural element is at best a very shadowy figure; for the elimination of the supernatural logically involves the elimination of much that re-mains, and the historian constantly approaches the absurd view which effaces Jesus altogether from the pages of history. But even after such dangers have been avoided, even after the historian, by setting arbitrary limits to his process of elimination, has succeeded in reconstructing a purely human Jesus, the Jesus thus constructed is found to be entirely unreal. He has a moral contradiction at the very centre of His being — a contradiction due to His Messianic consciousness. He was pure and humble and strong and sane, yet He supposed, without basis in fact, that He was to be the final Judge of all the earth! The liberal Jesus, despite all the efforts of modern

psychological reconstruction to galvanize Him into life, remains a manufactured figure of the stage. Very different is the Jesus of the New Testament and of the great Scriptural creeds. That Jesus is indeed mysterious. Who can fathom the mystery of His Person? But the mystery is a mystery in which a man can rest. The Jesus of the New Testament has at least one advantage over the Jesus of modern reconstruction - He is real. He is not a manufactured figure suitable as a point of support for ethical maxims, but a genuine Person whom a man can love. Men have loved Him through all the Christian centuries. And the strange thing is that despite all the efforts to remove Him from the pages of history, there are those who love Him still.

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.

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