

Christianity & Liberalism

Salvation (Part III)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

In exalting faith, we are not immediately putting ourselves in contradiction to modern thought. Indeed faith is being exalted very high by men of the most modern type. But what kind of faith? There emerges the difference of opinion.

Faith is being exalted so high to-day that men are being satisfied with any kind of faith, just so it is faith. It makes no difference what is believed, we are told, just so the blessed attitude of faith is there. The undogmatic faith, it is said, is better than the dogmatic, because it is purer faith — faith less weakened by the alloy of knowledge.

Now it is perfectly clear that such employment of faith merely as a beneficent state of the soul is bringing some results. Faith in the most absurd things sometimes produces the most beneficent and far-reaching results. But the disturbing thing is that all faith has an object. The scientific observer may not think that it is the object that does the work; from his vantage point he may see clearly that it is really the faith, considered simply as a psychological phenomenon, that is the important thing, and that any other object would have answered as well. But the one who does the believing is always convinced just exactly that it is not the faith, but the object of the faith, which is helping him. The moment he becomes convinced that it is merely the faith that is helping him, the faith disappears; for faith always involves a conviction of the objective truth or trustworthiness of the object. If the object is not really trustworthy then the faith is a false faith. It is perfectly true that such a false faith will often help a man. Things that are false will accomplish a great many useful things in the world. If I take a counterfeit coin and buy a dinner with it, the dinner is every bit as good as if the coin were a product of the mint. And what a very useful thing a dinner is! But just as I am on my way downtown to buy a dinner for a poor man, an expert tells me that my coin is a counterfeit. The miserable, heartless theorizer! While he is going into uninteresting, learned details about the primitive history of that coin, a poor man is dying for want of bread. So it is with faith. Faith is so very useful, they tell us, that we must not scrutinize its basis in truth. But, the great trouble is, such an avoidance of scrutiny itself involves the destruction of faith. For faith is essentially dogmatic. Despite all you can do, you cannot remove the element of intellectual assent from it. Faith is the opinion that some person will do something for you. If that person really will do that thing for you, then the faith is true. If he will not do it, then the faith is false. In the latter case, not all the benefits in the

world will make the faith true. Though it has transformed the world from darkness to light, though it has produced thousands of glorious healthy lives, it remains a pathological phenomenon. It is false, and sooner or later it is sure to be found out.

Such counterfeits should be removed, not out of a love of destruction, but in order to leave room for the pure gold, the existence of which is implied in the presence of the counterfeits. Faith is often based upon error, but there would be no faith at all unless it were sometimes based upon truth. But if Christian faith is based upon truth, then it is not the faith which saves the Christian but the object of the faith. And the object of the faith is Christ, Faith, then, according to the Christian view, means simply receiving a gift. To have faith in Christ means to cease trying to win God's favor by one's own character; the man who believes in Christ simply accepts the sacrifice which Christ offered on Calvary. The result of such faith is a new life and all good works; but the salvation itself is an absolutely free gift of God.

Very different is the conception of faith which prevails in the liberal Church. According to modern liberalism, faith is essentially the same as "making Christ Master" in one's life; at least it is by making Christ Master in the life that the welfare of men is sought. But that simply means that salvation is thought to be obtained by our own obedience to the commands of Christ. Such teaching is just a sublimated form of legalism. Not the sacrifice of Christ, on this view, but our own obedience to God's law, is the ground of hope.

In this way the whole achievement of the Reformation has been given up, and there has been a return to the religion of the Middle Ages. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, God raised up a man who began to read the Epistle to the Galatians with his own eyes. The result was the rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith. Upon that rediscovery has been based the whole of our evangelical freedom. As expounded by Luther and Calvin the Epistle to the Galatians became the "Magna Charta of Christian liberty." But modern liberalism has returned to the old interpretation of Galatians which was urged against the Reformers. Thus Professor Burton's elaborate commentary on the Epistle, despite all its extremely valuable modern scholarship, is in one respect a mediæval book; it has returned to an anti-Reformation exegesis, by which Paul is thought to be attacking in the Epistle only the piecemeal morality of the Pharisees. In reality, of course, the object of Paul's attack is the thought that in any way man can earn his acceptance with God. What Paul is primarily interested in is not spiritual religion over against ceremonialism, but the free grace of God over against human merit.

The grace of God is rejected by modern liberalism. And the result is slavery — the slavery of the law, the wretched bondage by which man undertakes the impossible task of establishing his own righteousness as a ground of acceptance with God. It may seem strange at first sight that "liberalism," of which the very

name means freedom, should in reality be wretched slavery. But the phenomenon is not really so strange. Emancipation from the blessed will of God always involves bondage to some worse taskmaster.

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

The liberty of the gospel depends upon the gift of God by which the Christian life is begun — a gift which involves justification, or the removal of the guilt of sin and the establishment of a right relation between the believer and God, and regeneration or the new birth, which makes of the Christian man a new creature.

But there is one obvious objection to this high doctrine, and the objection leads on to a fuller account of the Christian way of salvation. The obvious objection to the doctrine of the new creation is that it does not seem to be in accord with the observed fact. Are Christians really new creatures? It certainly does not seem so. They are subject to the same old conditions of life to which they were subject before; if you look upon them you cannot notice any very obvious change. They have the same weak-nesses, and, unfortunately, they have sometimes the same sins. The new creation, if it be really new, does not seem to be very perfect; God can hardly look upon it and say, as of the first creation, that it is all very good.

This is a very real objection. But Paul meets it gloriously in the very same verse, already considered, in which the doctrine of the new creation is so boldly proclaimed. "It is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me" that is the doctrine of the new creation. But immediately the objection is taken up; "The life which I now live in the flesh," Paul continues, "I live by the faith which is in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." "The life which I now live in the flesh" - there is the admission. Paul admits that the Christian does live a life in the flesh, subject to the same old earthly conditions and with a continued battle against sin. "But," says Paul (and here the objection is answered), "the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith which is in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." The Christian life is lived by faith and not by sight; the great change has not yet come to full fruition; sin has not yet been fully conquered; the beginning of the Christian life is a new birth, not an immediate creation of the full-grown man. But although the new life has not yet come to full fruition, the Christian knows that the fruition will not fail; he is confident that the God who has begun a good work in him will complete it unto the day of Christ; he knows that the Christ who has loved him and given Himself for him will not fail him now, but through the Holy Spirit will build him up unto the perfect man. That is what Paul means by living the Christian life by faith.

Thus the Christian life, though it begins by a momentary act of God, is continued by a process. In other words — to use theological language — justification and regeneration are followed by sanctification. In principle the Christian is already

free from the present evil world, but in practice freedom must still be attained. Thus the Christian life is not a life of idleness, but a battle.

That is what Paul means when he speaks of faith working through love (Gal. v. 6). The faith that he makes the means of salvation is not an idle faith, like the faith which is condemned in the Epistle of James, but a faith that works. The work that it performs is love, and what love is Paul explains in the last section of the Epistle to the Galatians. Love, in the Christian sense, is not a mere emotion, but a very practical and a very comprehensive thing. It involves nothing less than the keeping of the whole law of God. "The whole law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Yet the practical results of faith do not mean that faith itself is a work. It is a significant thing that in that last "practical" section of Galatians Paul does not say that faith produces the life of love; he says that the Spirit of God produces it. The Spirit, then, in that section is represented as doing exactly what in the pregnant words, "faith working through love," is attributed to faith. The apparent contradiction simply leads to the true conception of faith. True faith does not do anything. When it is said to do something (for example, when we say that it can remove mountains), that is only by a very natural shortness of expression. Faith is the exact opposite of works; faith does not give, it receives. So when Paul says that we do something by faith, that is just another way of saying that of ourselves we do nothing; when it is said that faith works through love that means that through faith the necessary basis of all Christian work has been obtained in the removal of guilt and the birth of the new man, and that the Spirit of God has been received - the Spirit who works with and through the Christian man for holy living. The force which enters the Christian life through faith and works itself out through love is the power of the Spirit of God.

But the Christian life is lived not only by faith; it is also lived in hope. The Christian is in the midst of a sore battle. And as for the condition of the world at large — nothing but the coldest heartlessness could be satisfied with that. It is certainly true that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. Even in the Christian life there are things that we should like to see removed; there are fears within as well as fightings without; even within the Christian life there are sad evidences of sin. But according to the hope which Christ has given us, there will be final victory, and the struggle of this world will be followed by the glories of heaven. That hope runs all through the Christian life; Christianity is not engrossed by this transitory world, but measures all things by the thought of eternity.

But at this point an objection is frequently raised. The "otherworldliness" of Christianity is objected to as a form of selfishness. The Christian, it is said, does what is right because of the hope of heaven, but how much nobler is the man who because of duty walks boldly into the darkness of annihilation!

The objection would have some weight if heaven according to Christian belief were mere enjoyment. But as a matter of fact heaven is communion with God and with His Christ. It can be said reverently that the Christian longs for heaven not only for his own sake, but also for the sake of God. Our present love is so cold, our present service so weak; and we would one day love and serve Him as His love deserves. It is perfectly true that the Christian is dissatisfied with the present world, but it is a holy dissatisfaction; it is that hunger and thirst after righteousness which our Saviour blessed. We are separated from the Saviour now by the veil of sense and by the effects of sin, and it is not selfish to long to see Him face to face. To relinquish such longing is not unselfishness, but is like the cold heartlessness of a man who could part from father or mother or wife or child without a pang. It is not selfish to long for the One whom not having seen we love. Such is the Christian life — it is a life of conflict, but it is also a life of hope. It views this world under the aspect of eternity; the fashion of this world passeth away, and all must stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

Very different is the "program" of the modern liberal Church. In that program, heaven has little place, and this world is really all in all. The rejection of the Christian hope is not always definite or conscious; sometimes the liberal preacher tries to maintain a belief in the immortality of the soul. But the real basis of the belief in immortality has been given up by the rejection of the New Testament account of the resurrection of Christ. And, practically, the liberal preacher has very little to say about the other world. This world is really the centre of all his thoughts; religion itself, and even God, are made merely a means for the betterment of conditions upon this earth.

Thus religion has become a mere function of the community or of the state. So it is looked upon by the men of the present day. Even hard-headed business men and politicians have become convinced that religion is needed. But it is thought to be needed merely as a means to an end. We have tried to get along without religion, it is said, but the experiment was a failure, and now religion must be called in to help.

For example, there is the problem of the immigrants; great populations have found a place in our country; they do not speak our language or know our customs; and we do not know what to do with them. We have attacked them by oppressive legislation or proposals of legislation, but such measures have not been altogether effective. Somehow these people display a perverse attachment to the language that they learned at their mother's knee. It may be strange that a man should love the language that he learned at his mother's knee, but these people do love it, and we are perplexed in our efforts to produce a unified American people. So religion is called in to help; we are inclined to proceed against the immigrants now with a Bible in one hand and a club in the other offering them the blessings of liberty. That is what is sometimes meant by "Christian Americanization."

Another puzzling problem is the problem of industrial relations. Self-interest has here been appealed to; employers and employees have had pointed out to them the plain commercial advantages of conciliation. But all to no purpose. Class clashes still against class in the destructiveness of industrial warfare. And sometimes false doctrine provides a basis for false practice; the danger of Bolshevism is ever in the air. Here again repressive measures have been tried without avail; the freedom of speech and of the press has been radically curtailed. But repressive legislation seems unable to check the march of ideas. Perhaps, therefore, in these matters also, religion must be invoked.

Still another problem faces the modern world - the problem of international peace. This problem also seemed at one time nearly solved; self-interest seemed likely to be sufficient; there were many who supposed that the bankers would prevent another European war. But all such hopes were cruelly shattered in 1914, and there is not a whit of evidence that they are better founded now than they were then. Here again, therefore, self-interest is insufficient; and religion must be called in to help.

Such considerations have led to a renewed public interest in the subject of religion; religion is discovered after all to be a useful thing. But the trouble is that in being utilized religion is also being degraded and destroyed. Religion is being regarded more and more as a mere means to a higher end.¹ The change can be detected with especial clearness in the way in which missionaries commend their cause. Fifty years ago, missionaries made their appeal in the light of eternity. "Millions of men," they were accustomed to say, "are going down to eternal destruction; Jesus is a Saviour sufficient for all; send us out therefore with the message of salvation while yet there is time." Some missionaries, thank God, still speak in that way. But very many missionaries make quite a different appeal. "We are missionaries to India," they say. "Now India is in ferment; Bolshevism is creeping in; send us out to India that the menace may be checked." Or else they say: "We are missionaries to Japan; Japan will be dominated by militarism unless the principles of Jesus have sway; send us out therefore to prevent the calamity of war."

The same great change appears in community life. A new community, let us say, has been formed. It possesses many things that naturally belong to a well-ordered community; it has a drugstore, and a country club, and a school. "But there is one thing," its inhabitants say to themselves, "that is still lacking; we have no church. But a church is a recognized and necessary part of every healthy community. We must therefore have a church." And so an expert in community church-building is summoned to take the necessary steps. The persons who speak in this way usually have little interest in religion for its own sake; it has

¹ For a penetrating criticism of this tendency, especially as it would result in the control of religious education by the community, and for an eloquent advocacy of the opposite view, which makes Christianity an end in itself, see Harold McA. Robinson, "Democracy and Christianity," in *The Christian Educator*, Vol. V, No. 1, for October, 1920, pp. 3-5.

never occurred to them to enter into the secret place of communion with the holy God. But religion is thought to be necessary for a healthy community; and therefore for the sake of the community they are willing to have a church.

Whatever may be thought of this attitude toward religion, it is perfectly plain that the Christian religion cannot be treated in any such way. The moment it is so treated it ceases to be Christian. For if one thing is plain it is that Christianity refuses to be regarded as a mere means to a higher end. Our Lord made that perfectly clear when He said: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother... he cannot be my disciple" (Lk. xiv. 26). Whatever else those stupendous words may mean, they certainly mean that the relationship to Christ takes precedence of all other relationships, even the holiest of relationships like those that exist between husband and wife and parent and child. Those other relationships exist for the sake of Christianity and not Christianity for the sake of them. Christianity will indeed accomplish many useful things in this world, but if it is accepted in order to accomplish those useful things it is not Christianity. Christianity will combat Bolshevism; but if it is accepted in order to combat Bolshevism, it is not Christianity: Christianity will produce a unified nation, in a slow but satisfactory way; but if it is accepted in order to produce a unified nation, it is not Christianity: Christianity will produce a healthy community; but if it is accepted in order to produce a healthy community, it is not Christianity: Christianity will promote international peace; but if it is accepted in order to promote international peace, it is not Christianity. Our Lord said: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." But if you seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness in order that all those other things may be added unto you, you will miss both those other things and the Kingdom of God as well.

But if Christianity be directed toward another world, if it be a way by which individuals can escape from the present evil age to some better country, what becomes of "the social gospel"? At this point is detected one of the most obvious lines of cleavage between Christianity and the liberal Church. The older evangelism, says the modern liberal preacher, sought to rescue individuals, while the newer evangelism seeks to transform the whole organism of society: the older evangelism was individual; the newer evangelism is social.

This formulation of the issue is not entirely correct, but it contains an element of truth. It is true that historic Christianity is in conflict at many points with the collectivism of the present day; it does emphasize, against the claims of society, the worth of the individual soul. It provides for the individual a refuge from all the fluctuating currents of human opinion, a secret place of meditation where a man can come alone into the presence of God. It does give a man courage to stand, if need be, against the world; it resolutely refuses to make of the individual a mere means to an end, a mere element in the composition of society. It rejects altogether any means of salvation which deals with men in a mass; it brings the

individual face to face with his God. In that sense, it is true that Christianity is individualistic and not social.

But though Christianity is individualistic, it is not only individualistic. It provides fully for the social needs of man.

In the first place, even the communion of the individual man with God is not really individualistic, but social. A man is not isolated when he is in communion with God; he can be regarded as isolated only by one who has forgotten the real existence of the supreme Person. Here again, as at many other places, the line of cleavage between liberalism and Christianity really reduces to a profound difference in the conception of God. Christianity is earnestly theistic; liberalism is at best but half-heartedly so. If a man once comes to believe in a personal God, then the worship of Him will not be regarded as selfish isolation, but as the chief end of man. That does not mean that on the Christian view the worship of God is ever to be carried on to the neglect of service rendered to one's fellow-men - "he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, is not able to love God whom he hath not seen" — but it does mean that the worship of God has a value of its own. Very different is the prevailing doctrine of modern liberalism. According to Christian belief, man exists for the sake of God; according to the liberal Church, in practice if not in theory, God exists for the sake of man.

But the social element in Christianity is found not only in communion between man and God, but also in communion between man and man. Such communion appears even in institutions which are not specifically Christian.

The most important of such institutions, according to Christian teaching, is the family. And that institution is being pushed more and more into the background. It is being pushed into the background by undue encroachments of the community and of the state. Modern life is tending more and more toward the contraction of the sphere of parental control and parental influence. The choice of schools is being placed under the power of the state; the "community" is seizing hold of recreation and of social activities. It may be a question how far these community activities are responsible for the modern breakdown of the home; very possibly they are only trying to fill a void which even apart from them had already appeared. But the result at any rate is plain — the lives of children are no longer surrounded by the loving atmosphere of the Christian home, but by the utilitarianism of the state. A revival of the Christian religion would unquestionably bring a reversal of the process; the family, as over against all other social institutions, would come to its rights again.

But the state, even when reduced to its proper limits, has a large place in human life, and in the possession of that place it is supported by Christianity. The support, moreover, is independent of the Christian or non-Christian character of the state; it was in the Roman Empire under Nero that Paul said, "The powers that be are ordained of God." Christianity assumes no negative attitude,

therefore, toward the state, but recognizes, under existing conditions, the necessity of government.

The case is similar with respect to those broad aspects of human life which are associated with industrialism. The "other-worldliness" of Christianity involves no withdrawal from the battle of this world; our Lord Himself, with His stupendous mission, lived in the midst of life's throng and press. Plainly, then, the Christian man may not simplify his problem by withdrawing from the business of the world, but must learn to apply the principles of Jesus even to the complex problems of modern industrial life. At this point Christian teaching is in full accord with the modern liberal Church; the evangelical Christian is not true to his profession if he leaves his Christianity behind him on Monday morning. On the contrary, the whole of life, including business and all of social relations, must be made obedient to the law of love. The Christian man certainly should display no lack of interest in "applied Christianity."

Only — and here emerges the enormous difference of opinion — the Christian man believes that there can be no applied Christianity unless there be "a Christianity to apply."² That is where the Christian man differs from the modern liberal. The liberal believes that applied Christianity is all there is of Christianity, Christianity being merely a way of life; the Christian man believes that applied Christianity is the result of an initial act of God. Thus there is an enormous difference between the modern liberal and the Christian man with reference to human institutions like the community and the state, and with reference to human efforts at applying the Golden Rule in industrial relationships. The modern liberal is optimistic with reference to these institutions; the Christian man is pessimistic unless the institutions be manned by Christian men. The modern liberal believes that human nature as at present constituted can be molded by the principles of Jesus; the Christian man believes that evil can only be held in check and not destroyed by human institutions, and that there must be a transformation of the human materials before any new building can be produced. This difference is not a mere difference in theory, but makes itself felt everywhere in the practical realm. It is particularly evident on the mission field. The missionary of liberalism seeks to spread the blessings of Christian civilization (whatever that may be), and is not particularly interested in leading individuals to relinquish their pagan beliefs. The Christian missionary, on the other hand, regards satisfaction with a mere influence of Christian civilization as a hindrance rather than a help; his chief business, he believes, is the saving of souls, and souls are saved not by the mere ethical principles of Jesus but by His redemptive work. The Christian missionary, in other words, and the Christian worker at home as well as abroad, unlike the apostle of liberalism, says to all men everywhere: "Human goodness will avail nothing for lost souls; ye must be born again."

² Francis Shunk Downs, "Christianity and Today," in *Princeton Theological Review*, xx, 1922, P. 287. See also the whole article, *ibid.*, pp. 287-304.

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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