

Lecture 35 – “Christianity & Liberalism”

“I do believe some things, of course, and therefore, of course, I don’t believe other things.” Father Brown

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.” Galatians 1:6, 7

Background Reading

Gonzalez, chs. 25, pp. 253-61; 28, pp. 282-89 and 291-93; 34, and 35

Prayer

From Gresham Machen (after a radio talk on “What the Bible teaches about Jesus,” in *What is Christianity?*)

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

“Christianity & Liberalism”

I. Liberalism

A. The importance of ideas

B. Five influential books

1. *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799) by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)

Charles Hodge on Schleiermacher’s theology: “Deprived...of the historical Christ, or at least deprived of the ordinary historical basis for faith in Christ, he determined to construct a Christology and a whole system of Christian theology from within; to weave it out of the materials furnished by his own religious consciousness. He said to the Rationalists that they might expunge what they pleased from the evangelical records; that they might demolish the whole edifice of Church theology, he had a Christ and a Christianity in his own bosom. In the prosecution of the novel and difficult task of constructing a system of Christian theology out of the facts of Christian experience, he designed to secure for it a position unassailable by philosophy. Philosophy being a matter of knowledge, and religion a matter of feeling, the two belonged to distinct spheres, and therefore there need be no collision between them” (*Systematic Theology* 2: 441).

Karl Barth on Schleiermacher’s theology: “In the very places where the theology of the Reformation had said ‘the Gospel’ or ‘the Word of God’ or ‘Christ,’ Schleiermacher, three hundred years after the Reformation, now says, ‘Religion’ or ‘Piety’” (*Protestant Theology*, 458).

2. *Origin of Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin (1809-82)
“Did you ever long for a miracle, Bowler?”

‘No, sir,’ said Bowler, who was an evolutionist, and had been carefully brought up”
 (*The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, G. K. Chesterton).

3. *Essays and Reviews* (1860)

4. *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (1874) by Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89)

“Those who start at the social end never seem to get to the Gospel, whereas those who start with the Gospel sometimes accomplish, without knowing or intending it, the social revolution” (Stephen Neill).

5. *What is Christianity?* (1900) by Adolf Harnack (1851-1930)

“A wonder-working thing is this preservation of the ‘kernel,’ while the husk is discarded; and in this century, as well as in the last, it has served as a notable device for retaining the prestige of the Christian name and phraseology for a purely natural religion” (B. B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Works* 2: 683-84).

“The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a dark well” (George Tyrrell).

C. Failure of liberalism in life and doctrine: World War I

1. Paul Tillich (after the Battle of Champagne of World War I): “All that horrible long night I walked along the rows of dying men, and much of my German classical philosophy broke down.”

2. Friedrich Nietzsche: “They would have to sing better songs to me that I might believe in their redeemer: his disciples would have to look more redeemed!”

3. H. Richard Niebuhr: Liberalism taught that “a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”

II. Orthodoxy

When showing Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones the original manuscript of a book he had written, D. R. Davies said, “I am thinking of calling it ‘Back to Orthodoxy.’” “No,” Dr. Lloyd-Jones replied, “that gives the impression of a retrograde step. Call the book ‘On to Orthodoxy.’”

A. Two Sermons of 1922

1. “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” by Harry Emerson Fosdick (“Relevant Morality”)

2. “Shall Unbelief Win?” by Clarence Edward Macartney

B. *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) by J. Gresham Machen (1891-1937) (“A Return to Bondage”) William Shea, Chairman, St. Louis University Department of Theological Studies, in a note to Jim Pakala, August 15, 1995: “What strikes me once again, as it has for the past decade whenever I have read Machen, is the directness and simplicity of his intellectual and faith stance—no ambiguity, with full realization of its running against the liberal and secular mainstreams. At once an extraordinary man and a man who suffered. If he were a Catholic I would put him up for canonization.”

1. Introduction

“The great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology” (2).

2. Doctrine

“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” (19).

3. God and man

“The Gospel story of the Incarnation, according to modern liberalism, is sometimes thought of as a symbol of the general truth that man at his best is one with God.... Very different is the living and holy God of the Bible and of Christian faith” (63).

4. The Bible

“The Christian doctrine of inspiration...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’” (73).

5. Christ

“Jesus was not for Paul merely an example for faith; He was primarily the object of faith. The religion of Paul did not consist in having faith in God like the faith which Jesus had in God; it consisted rather in having faith *in Jesus*” (81).

6. Salvation

“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....Liberalism finds salvation...in man; Christianity finds it in an act of God” (47, 117).

7. The church

“The greatest menace to the Christian Church today comes not from the enemies outside, but from the enemies within; it comes from the presence within the Church of a type of faith and practice that is anti-Christian to the core” (159-60).

III. Neo-orthodoxy

A. Karl Barth (1886-1968)

1. Trained as a liberal
2. Crisis
3. Rediscovery of the Bible

Commentary on Romans: “As I look back at my pathway I look like a man who, groping his way in a darksome church tower, unwittingly took hold of a rope that was, in fact, a rope for a church bell, and then to his own shock heard the bells resounding over him—and far beyond.”

4. Rediscovery of the Reformers and the Protestant orthodox theologians—“Foreword” to a reprint of Heinrich Heppes’ *Reformed Dogmatics*

B. Evangelical concerns

1. The nature of the Bible
2. The matter of history
3. The issue of universalism

For Further Study

A. John Updike’s seventeenth novel and forty-sixth book, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, spans four generations of a specific family over a space of eighty years. (*In the Beauty of the Lilies* by John Updike [1996], 3-24, 48-54, 71-83.) In the spring of 1910, during the filming of *The Call to Arms* in the sweltering heat of Paterson, New Jersey, the seventeen-year-old star, Mary Pikford, fainted dead away, and just at that moment, as Updike relates it, the Reverend Clarence Wilmont, standing in the manse of the Fourth Presbyterian Church, “felt the last particles of his faith leave him.” Updike’s description of the minister’s loss of faith presents the issues facing churches and ministers in the early 20th century as higher criticism and theological liberalism made its impact and took its toll (pages 3-24).

There follows a frustrating meal and meeting with the members of the church’s Building Requirements Committee, during which Clarence attempts to moderate the conversation, reconcile opposing viewpoints,

and produce some sort of resolution, all the while thinking of what he used to believe and no longer does—“‘Done unto one of the least of these,’ Clarence remembered. Ah, but there is no God” (33).

The next day Clarence visits a sick church member, Mr. Orr. He tries to comfort the old man with some theologically liberal platitudes, but is rebuffed by Mr. Orr’s hardheaded belief in predestination (he believes that he is one of the damned). “Take away damnation,” the old man tells his pastor, and “a man might as well be an atheist. A God that can’t damn a body to an eternal Hell can’t lift a body up out of the grave either” (48).

After Clarence’s dramatic breakdown in the pulpit (pages 48-54), his wife Stella completes the service and sends the people home. Clarence confesses to his incredulous wife: “My faith, my dear, seems to have fled. I not only no longer believe with an ideal fervor, I consciously disbelieve. My very voice rebelled, today, against my attempting to put some sort of good face on a doctrine that I intellectually detest. Ingersoll, Hume, Darwin, Renan, Nietzsche—it all rings true, when you’ve read enough to have it sink in; they have not just reason on their side but simple humanity and decency as well. Jehovah and his pet Israelites, that bloody tit-for-tat of the Atonement, the whole business of condemning poor fallible men and women to eternal Hell for a few mistakes in their little lifetimes, the notion in any case that our spirits can survive without eyes or brains or nerves...” (61).

To demit the ministry, Clarence must meet with the smooth-talking moderator of his presbytery, Dreaver, a graduate of Union Theological Seminary, who suspects that Clarence’s troubles stem from his attending Princeton! Dreaver’s liberal theology is exposed when he tells Clarence that God’s speaking “in sundry times and divers manners” (according to Hebrews chapter one) includes “Darwin and Marx, when the evidence bears out what they say.”

B. To read a brilliant statement of orthodox Reformed theology of Princeton contrasted with the prevailing liberal teaching of the early twentieth century, read Gresham Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism*. 17-53. Better than most theologians and Bible scholars, J. Gresham Machen of Princeton Seminary understood the issues at stake in the so-called modernist—fundamentalist controversy and the implications of higher criticism and liberal theology (set forth with wicked humor but with accuracy and perception by John Updike in Clarence Wilmot’s theological collapse). Trained in Germany under the leading liberal theologians of the day, Machen felt the power and pull of much of what they said, but, sustained by his Bible reading and his family’s prayers, he emerged with a fresh understanding of the strength and truth of traditional Christian orthodoxy.

In *Christianity and Liberalism* he contrasted the views of two religious systems—“the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity” and “a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology” (2). In *Christianity and Liberalism* Machen brilliantly described the teachings of historic Christianity and the views of liberalism in the areas of doctrine, God and man, the Bible, Christ, salvation, and the church. Read especially the chapter on doctrine (pages 17-53).

*What (in a sentence) is the basic disagreement between historic Christianity and liberalism concerning the role of doctrine?

*How does Machen answer the assertion that “Christianity is a life, not a doctrine”?

*Complete: “The Christian movement at its inception was not just a way of life in the modern sense, but _____.”

*Why does Machen say that Paul was marked by “a magnificent tolerance”?

*According to Machen, does doctrine or life come first?

C. G. C. Berkouwer titled his book on Karl Barth *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*. The centrality of grace for Barth is clearly seen in this sermon, originally preached to prisoners. From *The Living Testament: The Essential Writings of Christianity Since the Bible*, ed. M. Basil Pennington, Alan Jones, and Mark Booth (Harper & Row, 1985), 353-56.

*What is your evaluation of Barth's sermon? Is it completely biblical?

*What do you see as its strong points? Are there any weak points?