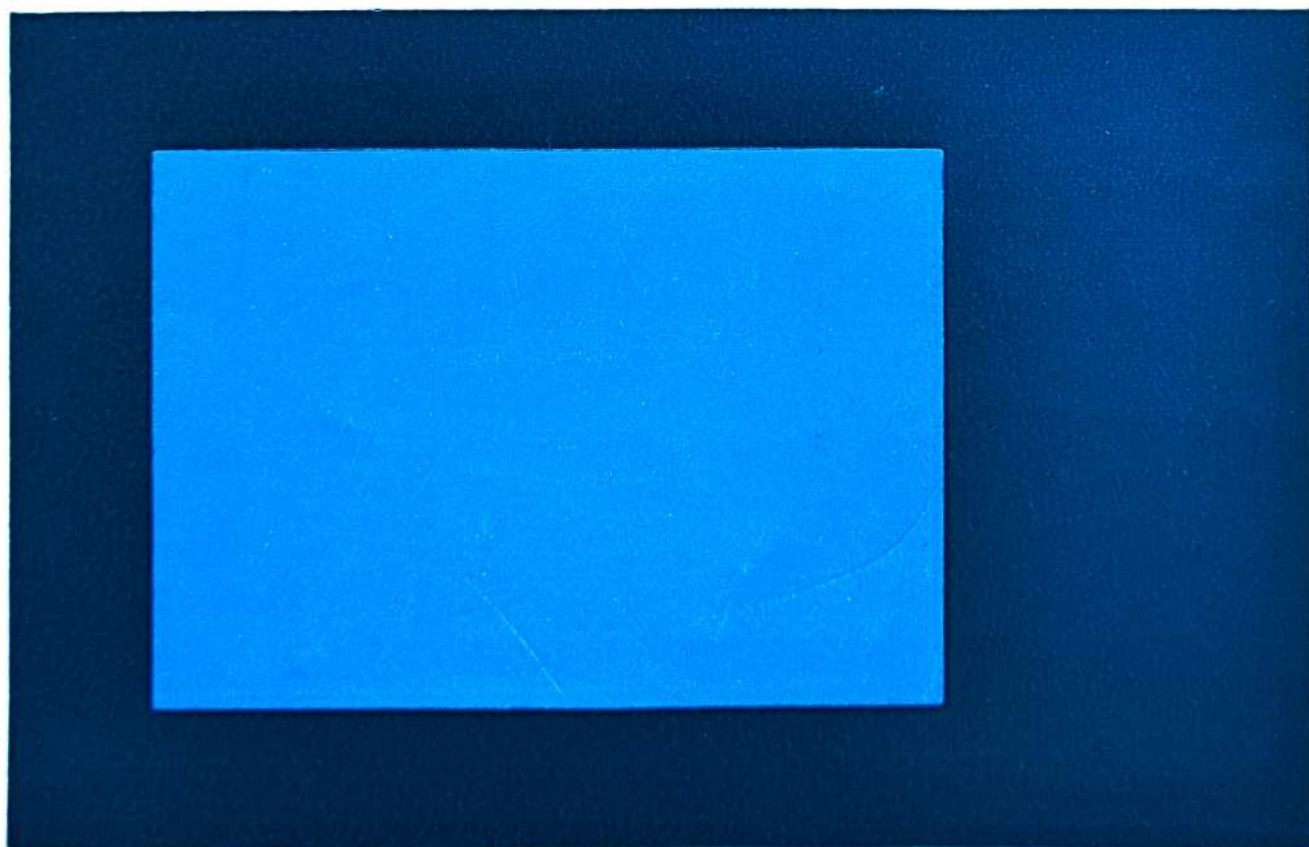


# THE PLACE OF THE BIBLE IN MODERN THEOLOGY

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FREDERICK S. LEAHY



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*Frederick S. Leahy*<sup>1</sup>

The Christian message has come to us through a book, the Bible. Therefore what we think of this book is of vital importance. The Bible makes exclusive claims for itself, and these claims are inseparable from the Christian message as a whole. In the Apostolic age, and the early sub-Apostolic age, the Church found it sufficient to appeal to the Scriptures, mainly the Old Testament, and to the Apostolic tradition, as its objective authority: 'Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.' [2 *Thess* 2.15]. The early Christians were not aware of any conflict between the Scriptures and the Apostolic tradition, nor was there any. They were regarded as one and the same. With the emergence of the Gnostic controversy in the first and second centuries, the Church was compelled to formulate its doctrine of authority, and soon the unique authority of the Scriptures was clearly asserted. For the historic Christian Church the Bible has always been the norm of belief and behaviour. In this sense Christianity may be said to be founded upon the Bible. But this very doctrine of Scripture and its unique authority was, in turn, to become controversial, and eventually it was to become one of the burning issues in the modern Church. Broadly, we may trace the stream of thought regarding the Bible until we reach our own day and the attitude of modern theologians to the Bible.

## I PAPAL DECLENSION

The Church of Rome is a growth, a continuing development. It did not emerge on the stage of history fully formed, with its present doctrine, worship and government. It developed into its present form from germs of error and superstition that contained Jewish and Pagan elements. These elements are still plainly discernible in the life and teaching of the Papacy. The peculiar dogmas and so-called 'sacraments' of Rome are the accumulation of more than twelve centuries; but it is probably safe to date the rise of the Papacy in the sixth century, when in 533, the Emperor Justinian published an edict, and sent a letter to the Bishop of Rome acknowledging him to be the head of the churches. In 606 the Emperor

<sup>1</sup>The opening lecture delivered in the Theological Hall of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland on 17 October 1968 by the Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics.



Phocas confirmed this by granting the Bishop of Rome the title 'Universal Bishop'. In 741 the Pope acquired towns and lands and was recognised as a temporal as well as spiritual sovereign, and this position was steadily strengthened during the next century.

With the emergence and development of the Papacy, there came a corresponding drift, not only from the teaching of the Bible, but from its unique and final authority. Among the Schoolmen of the Middle Ages [e.g., Aquinas, Anselm, Peter Lombard] we find a new emphasis being placed on reason and the need for rational proof for received doctrine, and towards the end of this period there developed a fresh emphasis on creeds and on the Church which formulated the creeds. Gradually and inevitably the point was reached where the Church was placed above the Bible as its only reliable interpreter. The Church became the judge of Scripture and of what constituted Christian truth. As Papal dogma developed, the Bible was robbed of its historic position as the sole rule of faith and practice. The perspicuity of the Bible was denied; it needed the Church as interpreter. The sufficiency of the Bible was denied; tradition, the Apocrypha, and decrees of Councils were added, and later, in 1870, the infallibility of the Pope was proclaimed by the Vatican Council. This became the composite norm of the Papacy, as it still is, and the Bible, in practice, fell into a relatively minor position. Renewed Biblical studies within the Papacy today have been conducted within this framework, and so far have not led to any known criticism of it. Consequently, Roman dogma has developed in ever increasing variance with the doctrines of Scripture, and the current trend in Roman Catholic theological speculation is *away from* rather than *towards* a Biblical theology. When, for example, Rome prays for unity, it is not merely the unity of all professing Christian Churches, but of all religions and of all men within the Papal dominion. An Irish Roman Catholic teacher, Seamus Grace, is by no means alone when he writes: 'In the world of today we [i.e., the R.C. Church] are the ones most favoured by God; we have his revelation, his sacraments, his Church . . . . On the last day will it not be our shame to see how little we have done with all that we have received, while beside us we will, no doubt, see Mahommedans, Hindus, pagans fed only from the crumbs of our table who will surpass us in faith and in generosity.' He continues: 'God wills the salvation of every man. Through and in Christ he has given us all one common destiny: the beatific vision hereafter and its anticipation by faith and charity here and now. No soul therefore enters this world and comes to the use of reason without receiving from God grace sufficient to lead him to faith – at least to that minimum of faith that will be necessary for his salvation . . . . We believe that among all the religions of the world and even among



apparent unbelievers there must be many – we hope very many – who have given their assent to the crumbs of revelation which have reached them.’ Such theology is quite clear, and it is clearly at variance with the *exclusiveness* of the Christ Who said, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.’ [*John* 14.6]. This viewpoint is just as forcefully expressed by radical Romanist thinkers like Hans Küng, Karl Rahner and Y. M. J. Congar. Congar in his book, ‘Principles of Catholic Ecumenism’ states – ‘We are no longer dealing with denying this or that doctrine or of a return, but of a gigantic movement determined to include everything without any exceptions.’

This continued swing of the Papacy away from Biblical theology is accelerated by the steadily growing modernistic movement within its borders. Condemned in 1907 and 1910 by two encyclicals issued by Pius X, ‘liberalism’ within the Papacy went underground, only to emerge as the ‘new theology’. The ‘new theology’ links up with radical Protestant thought at a number of points, particularly on the doctrine of Scripture. Many Romanist teachers now hold to Bultmann’s ‘demythologising’ of the Gospel records, while others would not go so far. The ‘liberal’ movement is now sweeping through the Roman Catholic Church and a stiff fight is being put up by conservative Roman Catholic scholars.

The ecumenical implications of all this are obvious. Liberal Roman Catholics are reaching out their hands to liberal Protestants, who, in turn, welcome the ‘changes’ that are taking place within the Roman communion – changes indeed! It was not surprising, therefore, to see nine Roman Catholic theologians appointed to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches at the Uppsala assembly. Such policy is consistent with the avowed aim to absorb every religion and philosophy in some future syncretic Papalism. The fact that Bibles are now displayed for sale in most Roman Catholic countries, must be viewed against this background. W. Harvey Woodson of the L’Abri Fellowship in Italy, in his excellent lecture on the New Roman Catholicism, delivered in 1967 to the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Evangelical Workers in Italy, stated: ‘. . . the Bible is being introduced for the first time in the Italian state schools through the “hour of religion”, which might seem marvellous on the surface but the young people tell me that the young priests are trying to remove the “supernatural” from the Biblical narrative.’ When we see the Bible read at all by Roman Catholics, we must be prayerful and hopeful, but we must not be naive. Both the Council of Trent and the first Vatican Council confessed that the Bible was the inerrant Word of God, albeit they did not take it as their sole rule of faith and practice. There was no conflict at the Reformation regarding the inerrancy of Scripture; that was accepted by all. Now, the position is



radically different, and the place of the Bible today in Roman Catholic theology has fallen almost to the lowest possible level. Rome has become badly infected by the rationalism which raised its head within Protestant circles last century, and to look at that rationalism we will now retrace our steps.

## II HIGHER CRITICAL ONSLAUGHT

Inscribed on many pulpits in Germany is the text [Gottes Wort bleibt ewig], 'God's Word stands forever.' Yet a young German pastor remarked recently: 'During our theological training our professors plucked the Bible to pieces – no one can put it together again for us. We ourselves can no longer believe in the Bible as the Word of God; so how can we bring its message home to others?' A professor of secular history recently said to a professor of theology, 'If we treated our historical sources as you theologians treat your Biblical sources, there would be no history at all – for there is far less evidence for our sources than for yours.' [E. H. Robertson in *The Bible in Outline*, p 39]. How did the break with the Bible come about in Europe? It happened in Germany. The rise of Pietism, a 17th-century movement in the German Lutheran Church with the aim of infusing new life into the official Protestantism of the day, weakened the control of orthodoxy; for Pietism was largely a reaction to and protest against a cold and formal dogmatism. When, therefore, deistic influences from France, where Voltaire and Rousseau had popularised an originally English heresy, found their way into German Lutheranism, they quickly became dominant. From the very start Deism, denying as it did God's interest in His creation, attacked the idea of revelation. Freedom of thought was considered sufficient for the discovery of truth, and so the term 'freethinker' became popular. A new critical approach to the Bible developed, influenced largely by the philosopher Immanuel Kant [1724–1804], who reduced the ideas of God and immortality to terms of conscience and duty, religion simply being the recognition of all our duties as Divine commands. In Kant's view of things there was no room for mystical experience, no need for a personal Saviour and no place for the historical. Some of Kant's ideas were developed into a system by G. W. F. Hegel [1770–1831], the distinguished German philosopher whose influence has been immense. He expounded an essentially evolutionary view of the universe, and his doctrines were developed in a materialist direction by Karl Marx. But it was the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher [1768–1834], who was influenced by the work of Kant, who made the greatest impact upon the Church in Germany, and who became known as 'the father of modern theology.' He laid strong emphasis on feeling as the basis of religion, and his liberal



views were taught by such scholars as Ritschl, Wellhausen and Harnack in Germany, and by a long list of British scholars led by Robertson Smith in Aberdeen and S. R. Driver in Oxford.

Schleiermacher reinterpreted Christianity in terms of man's experience. Christianity was the best religion so far; thus the antithesis between Christianity as the only true religion and all others as false was removed.

With the rise of rationalism within the Church, the attack on the veracity and authenticity of the Scriptures steadily increased. The age of German 'Higher Criticism' had dawned, and it was to have a bitter harvest in the subsequent history of Europe and of the world.

There were those in Germany who defended the orthodox view of the Bible, such as E. W. Hengstenberg of Berlin, and Theodore Christlieb of Bonn, but they were heavily outnumbered, and modernism spread rapidly and soon made its impact on most branches of Protestantism throughout the world. The Church began to sink in the quicksands of subjectivism. Rationalism and anti-supernaturalism were rampant. Turning away from the authority of the Word of God, the modern Church began to lose its own authority, and the drift away from the Churches began. The Church had largely lost its message. This state of affairs prevailed into the early part of this century.

There is a legitimate Biblical Criticism which seeks,

- (a) to establish the text which is nearest to the original autographs of Scripture,
- (b) to establish the authorship, date, theme and design of the books of the Bible.

The former is known as Textual or Lower Criticism; the latter as Literary or Higher Criticism. The fault in Germany last century, as Professor A. H. Sayce has pointed out, 'lay not with the "higher criticism" but with the "higher critic".' A perfectly legitimate field of Biblical study was used for the advancement of modernistic views of Scripture, views which simply ignored a most important source of evidence, that of archaeology. In this respect the German 'Higher Criticism' was unscientific in its method.

The end of last century and the commencement of this century saw the 'Higher Critical' position firmly entrenched in the majority of Protestant theological colleges and seminaries. There were some notable exceptions and some able defenders of historic Christianity. In America men like the Hodges, R. L. Dabney, J. A. Alexander, B. B. Warfield, Robert Dick Wilson, Francis L. Patton and J. G. Machen did much to maintain a scholarly conservative witness. In Scotland such men as Thomas Chalmers, William Cunningham, R. S. Candlish and John Duncan rendered valuable service in contending for the Reformed Faith based on



the infallible Word. In Ireland, the most notable defender of orthodoxy was Professor Robert Watts, who taught Systematic Theology in Assembly's College, Belfast. Dr Watts, who attracted a number of students from Scotland, wrote several excellent books on the down-grade in criticism and theology. He lived from 1820 to 1895.<sup>2</sup>

The scene was set for the down-grade in theology which was to gather such momentum in the Twentieth Century. Schleiermacher had replaced the authority of Scripture with human experience as the source of theology. Subjective theology was soon to give birth to subjective morality, the 'new morality' as it is called.

### III TWENTIETH-CENTURY NIHILISM

By nihilism we mean a total rejection of traditional beliefs in religion and morals, a scepticism which under the guise of religion denies the very existence of God, a negative theology which has nothing to defend and nothing to give to mankind. This is the present position of the radical theologians; but first of all there came a strong reaction to the old liberalism of last century with its watery subjectivism and virtual abandonment of the authority of the Bible. By the close of the First World War, P. T. Forsyth in England and Karl Barth in Switzerland had protested against the old modernism and exposed the hollow optimism of an arrogant school of criticism, an optimism which the war had completely shattered. On the continent Doctors Barth and Brunner now championed a theology of the Word, gave to Scripture a certain authority and did battle with the old rationalism. Once again theologians began to look for authority from without. The weakness of these theologians was that they retained the critical approach to Scripture and failed to rid themselves entirely of subjectivism. Barth taught that Scripture was the *medium* through which the Word of God came to the soul; it derived its authority from the personal encounter that God made with man through the Bible. Barth was really substituting an inspired *experience* for an inspired *Word*; and when he stated that the Bible was the Word of God, he meant something altogether different from the traditional meaning of that term.

Barthianism spread rapidly in Europe and throughout the world; it used the old orthodox phraseology with new meanings and became known as neo-orthodoxy or dialectical theology, because of the prominence given by it to the divine-human encounter and Barth's modern philosophical

<sup>2</sup>When the late Principal John Macleod, D.D., of the Free Church of Scotland, an eminent theologian, was a student, he took a year of his theological study at Assembly's College in order to attend Dr Watt's classes. When studying in Belfast he often occupied the pulpit in Botanic Avenue Church, then connected with the Eastern Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church [1840]. One lady who heard him preach said, 'I would rather be the mother of that young man than the mother of the Prince of Wales.'



[dialectic] method; it was properly termed the Theology of Crisis. While on the continent Barthianism represented a swing to the right, in other parts of the world its influence was precisely the opposite, as institutions which had previously been orthodox yielded to the subtle persuasion of the Barthian school: perhaps the most notable example of this is seen in Princeton Seminary, which had long been a bastion of orthodoxy, where men from every continent had been taught by the Hodges, B. B. Warfield, J. G. Machen and men of equal renown, but which in the 'forties succumbed to Barthianism and by the 'sixties had become quite modernistic.

The last decade has seen rapid change in the theological world. Barth and Brunner began to lose ground to Rudolf Bultmann, who stormed to the fore with his demand that the New Testament be 'demythologised' of its miraculous content. Eventually Barth and Brunner had to concede that 'Bultmann is king'. Bultmann's approach to the Bible was drastic and consistent. To make the Gospel intelligible and acceptable to modern man it must be freed from its mythological framework, and only its vital message retained. The Gospel, on Bultmann's view, must be detached from the historical account given in the New Testament, which he regards as mythological in character. By this process he eliminates such Christian doctrines as the sinlessness of Christ, the sacrificial death of Christ, the resurrection, ascension and coming again of Christ. This means the total elimination of the supernatural from Christianity. A similar line was followed by Paul Tillich, whose views were popularised in this country by Dr J. A. T. Robinson's book, 'Honest to God.' Tillich and Robinson affirm that 'God' is simply a religious symbol, a product of myth, and we should think of God as the ground of being. God does not *exist*, on this view; He is the ground of all *existence*. As Tillich puts it, 'The being of God is being-itself' [*Systematic Theology*, vol 1, p 261]. God, he says, must not be considered as 'a being alongside others or above others.' In that sense, according to Tillich, there is no God. So it came to pass that the 'God is dead' school of theology raised its head and we began to hear about 'secular Christianity' and the 'new morality' based on love. God, we were told, was 'dead' in the sense that man was not conscious of God and had no need of God. Today, the best known exponents of 'secularised Christianity' are J. A. T. Robinson, Thomas Altizer and Paul van Buren. Van Buren informs us that 'the word "God" is dead;' what remains is the man Jesus, his life and values which are available to others. We must, on this view, dispense with all 'God-talk' if we are to be relevant and intelligible to modern man.

What has all this to do with the place of the Bible in modern theology? A great deal. The break with the Bible in modern Protestantism has led



inevitably to the present tragic situation in Europe, where nihilism has gripped the Church by the throat. Books are written by modern theologians on the 'problem of God'; indeed the Church is seen by the modern world as obsessed with problems and uncertain of its way. The radical theologians cannot agree on the norm or standard for faith and morals. As Dr Carl Henry points out – 'European theologians no longer confidently confess what the norm is but rather assert what "the norm is for me".'

There are almost as many norms as there are European theologians. They range from 'the Absolute confronting me' to 'what strikes me absolutely'! The term 'Word of God' in this setting is quite meaningless. Tillich, for example, states that the 'Word of God' includes 'all religious and cultural documents, that is, the whole of human literature – not only that which is sublime, great, and dignified, but also that which is average, small and profane – if it hits the human mind in such a way that an ultimate concern is created.' [*Systematic Theology*, vol 3, p 133]. Thus the experience of man is made the reference point of meaning, and Friedrich Schleiermacher retains his unenviable position as 'the father of modern theology.' His child is confused. Modern theology is now at the end of its tether and knows not where to turn. The quest for authority continues, but to no avail. The abandonment of an inerrant Word of God led surely to the abandonment of Christian Theism, which in turn can only lead to atheism; and some have stayed on the train and reached the end of the line, still clutching a few tattered pages of a book they refused to believe.

What we have witnessed is not the death of God, but the death, in some quarters, of Protestant theology. As someone has remarked, 'there is a confusion of corpses; it is man who is dead, not God.' Protestantism in Europe today is in a chaotic condition. There is a Babel of conflicting voices. Some say that we can only be certain that there was a man called Jesus – why, they do not tell us. Others say we cannot be certain even of that! With the Bible and its message set aside, the gap between pulpit and people daily widens. It has been said that 'while 95 per cent of European Church leaders are increasingly occupied with ecumenical concerns, 95 per cent of the Church members couldn't care less.' [Quoted by Dr Carl Henry, *Frontiers in Modern Theology*, p 93]. In Germany and Switzerland only 4 or 5 per cent of Church members attend church. The man in the street considers modern theological speculation as irrelevant to his present needs. Dr Carl Henry indicates the impotence of modern theology when he writes: 'How irrelevant to the great commission can theologians get? Where do modern men – and there are multitudes of them – flock around Bultmann or Tillich or the linguistic theologians or



the 'death of God' theologians, crying out: 'You have restored authentic Christianity to us!' The captive theological students in ecumenically minded seminaries are their main 'converts' – Tillich made Tillichians at Harvard, Hamilton makes Hamiltonians at Colgate Rochester, Van Buren makes Van Burenites at Duke, Altizer makes Altizerites at Emory, and Loomer will be making Loomerites at Berkeley Baptist. But modern men hungry for spiritual reality will not be flocking there. They will fill up the Los Angeles Coliseum, or Madison Square Garden, and the other huge modern arenas to hear Billy Graham preach the New Testament evangel – and they give Graham a hearing in Europe and Africa no less than in North America and Latin America.' [ibid., p 153]. Whatever misgivings we may have about Graham's policy today, the fact remains that modern men will listen to his preaching of the Bible, whereas those who are constantly revising the Gospel in order to persuade modern men have totally failed in their task.

#### IV MALIGNANT SOCIAL PHENOMENA

Not only does the nihilism of modern radical theology strike at the very vitals of Christianity, and thus rob its devotees of all certitude and authority, it finally issues in malignant social phenomena. It is hostile to such institutions as marriage and the home; it devalues traditional attitudes to preaching and worship; it revolts against established society and opens the door to lawlessness. It seeps through to art and literature and its defiant tones are often heard on television and radio discussions. It invades our schools and colleges. In its social aspects, modern radical theology is worse than paganism, for the pagan recognised the need for a firm social structure, the importance of justice and the value of law. Modern nihilism rejects all that.

The latest reports from Europe indicate that revolutionary theology and revolutionary politics have commenced to join forces. Theological students often have Marxist sympathies. This is especially the case in Germany where for many divinity students the 'social gospel' and the 'Marxist gospel' have become one. The new 'theology of revolution' is rapidly gaining ground and will probably hold the field for some years to come. The harvest of such a theology will be bitter and disastrous. Such theology will certainly place little value on Biblical studies or on the preached Word. It sees the Church in terms of its role in social revolution, and to the evangelical such revolution, stemming as it does from non-Christian sources and non-Christian philosophies, is wholly different from the social consequences of the Gospel of Christ.

We see, then, that a degraded view of the Bible has led to a degraded view of Christianity itself, and this in turn has had a degrading influence



upon society. *The Shorter Catechism* asks the question, 'What do the Scriptures principally teach?' and gives the reply, 'The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.' Modern radical theology having rejected the first part of that answer cannot possibly speak to man about his duty to God; indeed the very idea of 'duty' is often frowned upon. With the loss of clear moral teaching based on an infallible Word, the way was opened for the present inrush of neo-paganism in the guise of Christianity. That is the position in certain sections of modern Protestantism today, and where it has happened it is due to a departure from the rock upon which the Reformation was founded, 'the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture.' The Reformation was radical, too; nothing could have been more radical. It struck at the roots of error and preached the radical doctrines of Scripture which touch the nerve of man's need and proclaim God's Word of sovereign grace. The modernism which we have considered is radical in its break with historic Christianity, radical in its departure from Scripture, radical in its ethical results, radical in that it replaces hope with despair, good news with speculation and light with darkness. The ultimate clash is between two radicalisms, Christianity and infidelity.

It is with unspeakable relief that we take our stand with orthodox Christians throughout the world, gladly confessing that 'all Scripture is God-breathed,' and as such we take it as our sole rule of faith and practice. We will not take from or add to this God-given rule. We repudiate the theological liberalism which has proved to be subversive of the very foundations of Christianity, rejecting as it does the truth of the claims which the Apostles made on their own behalf. Christianity demands total allegiance and needs an authority that will be effective in the intellectual, moral and spiritual realms. This authority God has given in Scripture, an authority which Scripture clearly claims for itself. The rejection of this authority results in a 'gospel' and religion totally different from that of Jesus Christ, the rise of nihilism and chaotic speculation, the crippling of large sections of the Church and the jeopardising of the very liberty of mankind.



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