

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
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## ***Christianity: What Does It Mean?***

When the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was brewing, one of Christianity's greatest minds, J. Gresham Machen, wrote a book entitled *Christianity and Liberalism* which was published in 1921. In my judgment, it remains one of the most important books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is relevant today for it reminds all of us who name the name of Christ, that the Christian faith is not only a faith commitment to Jesus Christ, but is also a set of doctrinal beliefs. In fact, one of the themes of the Apostle Paul's writings in the New Testament is that "sound doctrine" produces godly living. This is why Machen was so deeply concerned about what was happening in the 1920s. His central argument was that Christianity and Liberalism were in fact two different religions. Liberalism, born in the seminaries and universities of 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, posited a deep-seated antisupernaturalism, which denied all the major doctrines of biblical Christianity. Machen wrote that "The chief modern rival of Christianity is 'liberalism.' Modern liberalism, then, has lost sight of the two great presuppositions of the Christian message—the living God and the fact of sin. The liberal doctrine of God and the liberal doctrine of man are both diametrically opposed to the Christian view. But the divergence concerns not only the presuppositions of the message, but also the message itself." He argued in fact that "naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all."

Today, theological liberalism is mainstreamed in all the major Protestant denominations and is taught in mainline denominational colleges and seminaries. Theological liberalism today has deepened the antisupernaturalism conviction of its 20<sup>th</sup> century brand. Here are a few examples:

- Moses did not write the first five books of the Old Testament (the Torah). Instead, a cluster of anonymous authors wrote parts of the Torah, which were then redacted together. It is very doubtful that Genesis 1-11 is a reliable account of anything these chapters cover; they are certainly not valid history. Legend, myth, narratives to teach something are generally the phrases or terms used to describe these important chapters, but you cannot rely on these accounts as valid accounts of events that actually occurred (e.g., Creation, a historical Adam and Eve, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, etc.).
- Daniel most certainly did not write the book bearing his name. There are too many prophecies that are amazingly accurate. Therefore, they could not be predictions of the future; they were written after the events occurred but portrayed as prophecy.

- The writers of the Gospel accounts did not write accurate, historical accounts of Jesus. These are accounts of what the early church wanted to believe about Jesus. Jesus' death was not a substitutionary death to pay the price for sin. At best, it was an act of moral courage. He most certainly was not resurrected from the dead. This is what the early church wanted to believe, but it was not an objective historical event.
- Since we cannot be certain of the details of Jesus' actual teachings, one of the current theories is that Paul significantly departed from what Jesus taught and over time his views actually triumphed over the simpler message of Jesus, which at its core was love.
- Theological liberalism rejects the authority of Scripture and does not regard the Bible as a valid basis for ethics. Because the Bible contains error and does not contain trustworthy accounts of Creation, the Flood, many of the events of Jesus' life, etc., it cannot be trusted to construct a valid set of ethical standards. Culture is the greatest source for establishing ethical standards—and culture is always changing. Therefore, understandably so do ethical standards for sexuality, marriage and the value of human life in all stages of life.

In short, with the Bible now abandoned as a reliable source of doctrine and theology and as a reliable source for absolute ethical standards, postmodern theological liberalism is firmly anchored in mid-air!! Think with me about the following items:

- First, this summer The Presbyterian Church (USA) approved a full endorsement of same-sex marriage. Most significantly, the PCUSA assembly approved an amendment to the Book of Order, changing the definition of marriage from “a woman and a man” to “two people.” Abandoning the crystal-clear teaching of the Bible about sexuality and marriage, the PCUSA assembly is merely reflecting the logic of its “Confession of 1967,” which declared that “The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times to which they were written. . . . The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding.” As one alarmed Presbyterian wrote, “The PCUSA has set itself as an authority above the Scriptures in determining for herself what is and what is not sin. She has sided with those who want the liberty to live as they so choose and in so doing, she has set herself in opposition to the revealed will of the Holy God.”
- Second, in 2013, the British newspaper, *The Telegraph*, reported on the church of England training ministers to create “a pagan church where Christianity [is] very much in the center” to attract spiritual believers. For example, one group of Anglican leaders would like to focus upon the pagans who often worship at the famous Stonehenge site. Andrea Campenale of the Church Mission Society argues that “Nowadays people, they want to feel something; they want to have some sense of experience. We live in reflective England where there's much more of a focus on ourselves. I think that is something we can bring in dialogue with

the Christian society.” Note terms such as “experience,” “want to feel something,” and a “focus on ourselves.” Christian doctrine is absolutely irrelevant!

- Finally, consider what is even occurring within the broad evangelical movement in America. One of the most prominent faces of Christianity today are those of Joel and Victoria Osteen. Recently, Victoria Osteen told their huge Houston congregation that their devotion to God is not really about God, but about themselves. She said, “I just want to encourage every one of us to realize [that] when we obey God, we’re doing it for God—I mean, that’s one way to look at it—we’re [actually] doing it for ourselves. Because God takes pleasure when we are happy. . . . That’s the thing that gives Him the greatest joy. . . .” She went on: “So, I want you to know this morning—Just do good for your own self. Do good because God wants you to be happy. . . . When you come to church, when you worship Him, you’re not doing it for God really. You’re [also] doing it for yourself, because that’s what make God happy. Amen?” Theologian Albert Mohler correctly observes that “The Osteen message does not differentiate between believers and unbelievers—certainly not in terms of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In their sermons, writings, and their media appearances, the Osteens insist that God is well-disposed to all people and wills that all flourish, but there is virtually no mention of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. No reference to sin as the fundamental issue. No explanation of atonement and resurrection as God’s saving acts; no clarity of any sort on the need for faith in Christ and repentance of sin.” The Osteens are a perfect fit for the shallow, superficial Christianity of America’s consumer culture. But their message is not the message of the Bible. Their message bears absolutely no resemblance at all to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their message is not the message of theological liberalism, which rejects the supernatural as a given of faith; they just have no meaningful message at all, for their God is not the God of the Bible. It is a God of their own contrivance.

See Albert Mohler’s essays at [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com) (8 October 2012 and 3 September 2014); W. Scott Lamb and Paula R. Kincaid in *World* (12 July 2014); and [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk) (24 June 2013).