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The Faith and Contemporary Theology

J. D. Thomas

(Editor's Note: The following lecture was delivered as a part of the Lectures at Lubbock Christian College and has been published as a part of the volume of those lectures for 1957. It is printed here with consent of the publishers of that volume in order to give it the widest possible circulation.)

People that we designate at "Modernists" honestly feel that their challenge cannot be met by anyone who takes the Bible as literal religious authority. They all feel that "Fundamentalists," as they would designate us, were beaten down in the great Fundamentalist-Modernist debates of a few decades ago. Particularly they feel that the ground has been cut out from under us by what they call "the assured results of Biblical criticism." They feel that the idea of an inerrant Bible is no longer possible—that scientific facts have been demonstrated which destroy it as a religious authority and, therefore, they seek their religious authority through other channels. In view of these facts it is easy to understand why a Modernist feels that any person who accepts the Bible as religious authority is obscurantist, unscientific and outmoded, and they even count us difficult to talk to because they really feel that we are unwilling to face what they consider to be demonstrated facts.

The History of Modernism

Several factors combined during the periods of the Renaissance and Reformation to destroy the faith of many people in the Bible as religious authority. The Medieval view of the universe was that God was personally instrumental in all of the activities of nature—he sent the rain, each stroke of lightning, and controlled all of the great natural events according to his specific desire of the moment. There was no thoroughgoing concept of "natural law" as we know it today. The discovery that the world was round; the new Copernican theory that the sun was the center of the universe and that the several planets moved about the sun and about each other with regularity, thus establishing the view of the uniformity of nature and of the universe as one grand organized system; the development of scientific thinking under Galileo to the point where a scientific hypothesis could be proved or disproved by empirical observation; the philosophical arguments between the rationalists and the empiricists as to the correct procedure of arriving at truth; and the particular argument between the Roman Catholics and Martin Luther over what constitutes true religious authority, caused the searchlight to be turned on the Bible in a way that no one had ever thought of looking at it before. The Humanists and Freethinkers of that day began to point out what appeared to be problem areas within the Bible, and since man in general came to accept the universe as operating by a uniform natural law and that God's constant providential ac-
tivity was thus not necessary, many people were willing to look now at the Bible as though it were an ordinary human production and they accepted the criticisms about it as true, even though they were quite limited in Biblical knowledge and were seeing it from a restricted viewpoint.

The philosophy of this day was strongly concerned not only with problems of Metaphysics, or what actually constitutes reality, and such problems as the existence and the nature of God, but they were concerned primarily with the epistemological problems of knowledge —how true knowledge might be determined, whether by rationalism, empiricism, intuition, or other, or through a combination of methods. In short, it was a willingness, brought about by a combination of circumstances, to have a new look at everything that had been formerly accepted, with the demand that truth prove itself. The coup de grace (in the thinking of these people) was delivered in the 19th century by Charles Darwin with his theory of evolution, and many who had not lost their faith before did so at this time.

Largely out of the 17th and 18th centuries there developed a systematic criticism of the Bible along the lines of Hegelian Philosophy, which argues for natural development, even of ideas, so that supernatural conclusions were now not even considered possible and the Bible was looked upon as a purely human book. The Biblical criticism thus started was developed later to cover practically every phase of Biblical study, and theories were evolved which attempted to explain such things as the origin of the Pentateuch; the origin of the Synoptic Gospels and their relationship to each other; the work of the prophets; the work of Paul; and the history of the early church, as all being on a naturalistic basis.

Schools of Modernism

Modernism has been designated as "a crowd, rather than an army." Certainly there is no unifying principle that governs it in an overall way, and probably its only point of unity is the discounting of any real authority that the Bible itself has.

The crux of the development of Modernism came at the close of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries in what might now be called Old Liberalism. This school of thought dominated the entire field of Modernism. They had formulated many systematic doctrines and had pretty well come to accept a somewhat philosophically-based outlook. They were strong on empirical science and were almost humanist in their elevation of man to the center of the stage. They were quite optimistic about human achievements and really believed that with a little more time man would evolve a "kingdom of God on earth" through his educational and scientific accomplishments.

Succeeding the Old Liberals in the period immediately following the first World War, were the group now commonly known as Neo-Orthodox or "new orthodox." This group came about as a result of
the application of existential philosophy (largely in the place of Hegelian philosophy) in the minds of those who had been Liberals. Because of the terms used by the Neo-Orthodox, some of their conclusions might seem to be the same conclusions as those of the Old Orthodox, or Protestant Conservatives of the Reformation period, and thus they were designated as "Neo-Orthodox." In reality, however, their theological views were far removed from anything that could rightly be called Orthodox, because theologically they are an extension of Liberalism, and since they use Orthodox terms with different meanings they are not really orthodox at all. Neo-Orthodoxy, however, has a "message of salvation" for the "predicament of modern man" which the Liberal found himself without; and that is why many Liberals of the past thirty to forty years have left Liberalism. At the present moment, therefore, many consider Liberalism to be outmoded, old-fashioned, and even naive. However, quite a few Modernist theologians of the present day still hold that there were distinctive gains made in Liberalism and they want to cling onto such values as long as they possibly can.

Important names in Neo-Orthodoxy include such men as Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the Danish philosopher who "invented" existentialist philosophy; Karl Barth, who in 1919, in the preface to his Commentary on Romans, issued a blistering indictment against Liberal scholarship, charging them with utter failure in getting the meaning of the Bible because of their extremely objective, scientific approach; Emil Brunner, an early companion of Barth in this movement but who separated from him because Brunner favored a more "natural theology," and he differed from Barth somewhat as to the place of the Bible, and on other views; Rudolf Bultmann was also an early friend of Barth and an existential theologian, but he has held to a higher appreciation of Biblical criticism than the other important men in Neo-Orthodoxy; and the important American Neo-Orthodox theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr of Union Seminary in New York, who has probably made a greater contribution to the overthrow of Liberal theology than any other single man, and Paul Tillich, formerly at Union Seminary but now at Harvard and who is counted by some as the world's foremost theologian of the present time. Although Tillich holds to Neo-Orthodoxy, he is probably more independent in this respect than the others and might be said to hold his own personal theology. However, this could really be said of all of them because they differ a great deal from each other.

In the wake of the struggles between Neo-Orthodoxy and Liberalism, as the former wrested the center of the stage from the latter, there have arisen certain "clusters" of theological thought somewhere between these two major groups, which might be considered as the Post-Liberals, or Neo-Liberals; the Modern Orthodox; and the "Kerygmatic" group, which probably gives a higher evaluation to the Bible itself than any of these other groups, but which interprets it "mythologically" and therefore is still quite modernistic in outlook.
Doctrines of Modernism

Man's ultimate source of values, from a philosophical point of view, are three: Supernaturalism, Humanism, and Naturalism. No one of the three could be empirically proved as the correct one; and we find that men select one of the three as their ultimate source of values, depending upon which one they feel gives the best overall explanations in a total world view. Liberalism has accepted Naturalism, as far as the Bible is concerned, and although many Liberals do believe in God, as a sort of Cosmic Power, there is no Liberal who holds to the supernatural personal God, in the same sense that the Bible presents Jehovah to be. Their interest in objective, scientific epistemology precludes their acceptance of anything that might be called miraculous, and this fact would work against their chances of ever arriving at a definite Bible outlook. The Neo-Orthodox, on the other hand, accept the Supernatural as a part of their original presuppositions but as far as the Bible and Biblical criticism is concerned, they hold the same pre-suppositions as the Liberals, so that the Bible is not authoritative for them either, according to ordinary methods of interpreting language.

Religious authority to the Liberal is religious-experience. This means that "Revelation" does not need to have "truth content." It cannot be stated in a proposition, or communicated completely in words to others. Since the authority of Revelation is not "propositional" to a Liberal, then the Bible is not authority to him and has value only incidentally, in whatever way its use might cause him to have religious experiences. The Liberal is hard put, however, when he is confronted with such religious "experiences" as orgiastic rites, child sacrifice, or temple prostitution, as have been experienced by religious people of the past. Authority for the Neo-Orthodox thinkers would also be religious experience, of a miscellaneous type, but usually in what they consider to be a definite "confrontation of the individual by God" at the "existential" moment, or at the moments of one's life when he seriously ponders the meaning of existence and major problems that he has to face in life. The Existentialist believes that God confronts man in an immediate, direct way at such moments and makes possible for him a choice or a commitment. This subjective experience is to the Neo-Orthodox at once: faith, revelation, and authority; and also here the Bible has value only as it assists the individual in coming into "confrontation with God."

Neo-Liberals and Modern Orthodox groups would modify the views of Liberalism and Neo-Orthodoxy to a degree, with respect to the authority of the Bible, but the Kerygmatic group, represented perhaps best by Bultmann in matters of authority and interpretation, believes in allowing the Bible to have more value than do other groups of Modernists. We will discuss Bultmann's view of interpretation later, but we note that he does believe that every part of the Bible has authority, although he would hold this to be true only when it is "existentially" interpreted or, to use his term, "de-mythologized."
All Modernists hold that the church developed somewhat naturally, with revelation being more in historical events than in words, and none of them believe that Jesus planned to build the church, with any idea of its being a permanent on-going institution, but they hold that a development of the early church was the result of ideas of the early Christians, who rewrote the accounts of Jesus’ life in a way that made it appear that he said that he was going to build the church, and that he established the Lord’s Supper, commanded baptism, etc. Strictly speaking, to them the first century church had no “organization”; and indeed it had several different origins, based on the different emphases of different groups that composed it. One man, for instance, finds eight separate religions in the New Testament. Eventually, however, the Petrine Christians and the Pauline Christians came to be the major divisions, and the generally accepted Modernist view of early church history is, then, that the real church was not formed until about 180 A.D., and it came about as a “blending” of these two movements, in the work of Irenæus. Orthodoxy was thus brought into being as a result of the conflicts of early Christians with the second century heretical movements, and it did not exist until late in the second century. In short, in the Modernist viewpoint, there was no such thing as a standard, orthodox Christianity; no standard organization of the church; no pattern of doctrines before 180 A.D., and the church that was thus founded with this “rise of Orthodoxy,” they count to be the “Old Catholic church.”

As to Modernistic views of the person of Jesus Christ, we might point out that old Liberals are interested only in the “historical Jesus,” the son of Mary, who lived in Nazareth, whom they really believe to be but an ordinary man, whose own personal religion or piety is worthy of being an example for us. Jesus is thus not the transcendental Saviour of the sinner, but simply the first Christian. The authority of Jesus to the Liberal is not in his words or his deeds nor in his claim to divinity, but in the fact that he personally had religious experiences of high quality and his life is able to prompt unusually deep religious insight in others. He is not really “Christ,” but that term is simply a fictitious invention of the early church.

The Neo-Orthodox view of Christ in general rejects the “historical Jesus” as having any particular value but they consider the “Christ of Faith” concept, which the church came to have later, as being the most wonderful religious idea that men have ever known. They also do not believe that Jesus of Nazareth is to be identified with this “Christ of Faith”; thus they are not particularly interested in the historical Jesus, but they “go all out” for the “Christ of Faith,” which concept they feel God caused in the minds of the early Christians through historical events, and which, for existential interpretation, has some revelatory value. Bultmann and the Kerygmatic school again would give more consideration to the possibility of relationship between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith than the others, as we shall see in the next paragraph.
As to Interpretation, the Liberals hold the Bible simply to be a record of the religious experiences of people who lived in the Jewish-Christian tradition, and thus is a wonderful record, but it definitely is human in its production, and therefore fallible. Its interpretation is to be made along lines that allow for its humanness and for the understanding that religious ideas evolve on a naturalistic basis. The miraculous and the supernatural must be subtracted at every point. The Neo-Orthodox holds further that the Bible has more revelation “between the lines” than perhaps the Liberals hold, although they also insist that it is humanly produced and is only a record of religious experiences; but in general they would allow for more validity in the Bible than would the Liberals. They interpret important sections with what we might call “symbolic” interpretation, for instance, Niebuhr would say that the Garden of Eden story has validity when it is symbolically interpreted. It is not literally true, but he would not throw it away altogether and classify it as mere legend, as the Liberal does. Bultmann’s view of interpretation, which has been gaining adherents from all of the Modernist camps in the recent past, is that the Bible was written in terms of “myth.” By this he does not mean something that is merely legendary or untrue, but something which he believes to have been written in the thought-forms and in the highly symbolic language of a former day, when people thought differently from what they do today. For instance, he would not “throw away” any part of the Bible but simply says that with our 20th-Century outlook and thought forms, our minds are not able to penetrate to the real meaning of such matters as demons; Jesus coming on the clouds; heaven above and hell below, making a “three-story universe”; and similar matters. He says this is all mythological expression, which serves as a garment, clothing the true message of “salvation,” but which actually hides it from the modern mind, since it had meaning for the people of its own day but it cannot have the same meaning for us today and thus should not be taken literally. We, of course, understand that a great deal of the Bible is written in figurative language and we also understand that proper Biblical interpretation requires that we distinguish between what is only temporal, and those principles in scripture which are enduringly valid, but Bultmann’s demand that in interpretation the message must be “de-mythologized” calls for far more drastic treatment than anything yet proposed, because he does not limit “myth” to only the highly figurative or symbolic parts of the Bible, rather he makes the bulk of the gospel message to be that way. Such central terms as the Cross, the Resurrection, Miracles, the Holy Spirit—central matters, which all men have heretofore considered to be permanent and abiding principles of Biblical teaching, Bultmann now tells us are mythological and have to be existentially interpreted. For instance, he says we cannot “throw out” the Resurrection from the gospel story since it has much validity for the Christian of today; however, he does not believe that there was a literal resuscitation of
the physical body of Jesus. The existential interpretation of the Resurrection account means simply that the Christian of today "comes alive in Christ."

An excellent description of Bultmann's views are contained in the following quotation. (The work from which it is taken has just been issued and is the clearest description of Bultmann's theology that is available in a short compass.)

In our generation, Bultmann and his allies have discovered a similar rejection among modern unbelievers of a supernaturally focused Christianity; that is, of a Christianity looking for invasions from the supernal regions above and the demonic regions below. Such occurrences simply do not take place in the kind of a universe in which we live. Here Bultmann stands with the scientifically-minded man of today. He holds that it is true for anyone "old enough to think for himself," that God does not live "in a local heaven. There is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense of the word. The same applies to hell in the sense of a mythical underworld beneath our feet. And if this is so, we can no longer accept the story of Christ's descent into hell or his Ascension into heaven as literally true. We can no longer look for the return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven or hope that the faithful will meet him in the air (1 Thess. 4:15ff)."

The result of this scientific point of view is that modern man can tolerate no traffic with those views and practices which stress the mediation of supernatural endowment through religious rite and miracle. Hence it is incomprehensible to him that "baptism in water can convey a mysterious something which is henceforth the agent of all his decisions and actions," that physical food (in the Lord's Supper) conveys spiritual strength, that the unworthy receiving of the bread and wine can result in spiritual sickness and even death (1 Cor. 11:30), that one can be baptized for the dead (1 Cor. 15:29), and that a dead body can rise again. Modern man's difficulties with such conceptions arise from the fact that his "view of the world which has been moulded by modern science and the modern conception of human nature (is that of) a self subsistent unity immune from the interference of supernatural powers." With these objections of modern man Bultmann is in strongest sympathy. He feels that something should be done for him by setting the supernatural elements in the Bible in their proper perspective. He proposes to do this through what he calls "ent-mytthologisierung" (demythologizing), thereby relieving modern man of the burden of the mythological elements in the Bible, of which there are many, by interpreting them existentially that he may live by them rather than their being an offense to him.

The fact of the matter is that the Christ-event, so important to him who reads the New Testament, is surrounded by myth: the preexistent Logos: the heaven-descended Messiah; the conception by the Holy Ghost; the birth from a virgin; the resurrection; the ascension; the one yet to come. The important thing about all these declarations, however, is neither their facticity nor non-facticity, but what they mean for our living here and now. Uninterpreted, these mythological elements surrounding the life and activity of Jesus are incredible to the
scientifically trained man who is committed to the rigid cause-effect world of modern science. Struggle as he may to do so, he cannot cast off the world of reliable structure and determinable causation, which is his rightful inheritance, for the surprising, miracle-upsetting world of the first century. Nor indeed does Bultmann think he should be asked to do so. What he should be asked to do is to discern the existential meaning (significance for our life), which these ancient mythological accounts seek to present.¹

There is, thus, much greater danger in Neo-Orthodoxy and even in Bultmann's views than there ever was in Liberalism because they use normal Biblical terms but with existential meanings, which are far removed from truth. The Old Liberals made no bones about telling us that the Bible is full of mistakes and much of it has to be thrown away—that it was purely naturalistic, that man came by evolution and that there were no real answers for man's serious problems. The newer Modernist, however, can preach with the Bible's words and offer what they call a "salvation to sinsick man." They make him think, in the name of modern scholarship, that they are giving him the real answers for his needs, but actually they are even further from the truth of God's will than man has ever been before.

The central points of their doctrines and their final conclusions are arrived at by subjective thinking and not by any objective basis whatever. It is understandable to want to be able to supply answers for man's many needs, but since these people had already ruled the Bible out of court, they had no other place to turn than to existential philosophy for answers. Yet all the while the Bible itself, when understood from the point of view of the plain man of the street, will furnish all of the answers that man needs and even better ones than these men are able to provide, and there is no cause for thinking that the Bible is unscientific or contradicts any known truth today when it is properly interpreted.

Meeting the Challenge

As is evident from the above discussion Modernism in religion might be likened somewhat to radio-active materials in the scientific world—they are quite dangerous to handle. Proper educational background to know where, when, and how to take hold of them, is certainly the only way to meet the challenge of Modernism. It is somewhat saddening when occasionally one hears or reads of an uninformed gospel preacher calling almost any and everything "Modernism," when in reality all that he is communicating to you is that he does not like the thing in question. For a minister to spend much time talking about Modernism when really he does not know enough about it to definitely recognize it in one of its many forms, is really for him to advertise to the world that he is not a dependable religious adviser.

At the local level, the gospel preachers should somehow learn enough about philosophy and Modernistic theology and their inter-relationships that they can carry on an intelligent conversation with people of college level concerning them. This does not mean that one should preach these matters from the pulpit necessarily, but it does mean he should be able to give a firm and meaningful answer to people who are troubled with these matters, so that he can maintain their respect. To try to discuss them with anything short of this ability would probably result in driving the prospect into Modernism.

On the theological and philosophical level we need to have sound teachers on the faculties of our colleges who are thoroughly enough acquainted with these views and their implications to ground our young preaching brethren adequately before they go out into a world that is filled with such ideas. At the top level we can hope some day to have brethren write books, in the terms and at the level that the deepest thinkers of Modernism write, and pointing up in a scholarly way the weaknesses of their views and how that the simple Biblical faith is the one and only answer.

The general starting point of Modernist pre-suppositions has been to reject the supernatural, particularly as it concerns the Bible. We should realize that in the whole outlook of things the supernatural is definitely possible and man has no real right to reject it. He should indeed consider such a possibility, specifically in view of the fact that the Bible claims to be supernatural, and more especially in view of the fact that the Bible is such a wonderful book. Indeed the origin of the Bible and its influence in all the two thousand years of Church History cannot possibly be explained on a purely naturalistic basis. There are many other factors concerning the Bible and the Christian religion that are best explained by considering the supernatural, yea even miracles, as possible.

Modernists reject the Bible because they feel that the "assured results of Biblical criticism" have destroyed its infallibility and inerrancy. The true Christian need not fear any known fact, or fact that may ever be known. Before we grant that Biblical criticism has produced embarrassing facts, we need to study the case of each particular argument completely to see whether the things are so. The basic conclusion of Biblical criticism concerning the Old Testament is the Documentary Hypothesis of the origin of the Pentateuch; and for the New Testament is their solution of the Synoptic problem, where they consider that Matthew and Luke copied from Mark and from "Q," a supposed document brought into use merely to supply this need. Many modernists themselves, however, have already given up the Documentary Hypothesis and are seeking some other naturalistic solution, and it is interesting to note that within the past year a question has now been publicly raised about the existence of "Q." There is no "assured result of Biblical criticism" that might be embarrassing to us; but which upon careful and detailed examination will prove to be founded upon subjective reasoning only.

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The roots of Modernism are grounded in human philosophy and if Modernists would be willing in all humility to hunger and thirst after righteousness sufficiently to study the Bible thoroughly considering the possibility that it is the inspired and authoritative word of God, presenting a unified and systematic presentation of his scheme of redemption, seeking at all problem points to resolve the difficulties, they would be amazed to find deep and meaningful answers to their problems of life and to the basic philosophical questions that men have pondered. Biblical answers for the human predicament, which allow a meaningful purpose for creation and human existence where man is expected to glorify God, furnishes a better method for getting the total truth than any human philosophy has ever done or can do.

“For seeing that in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom knew not God, it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. Seeing that Jews ask for signs and Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto Jews a stumbling block, and unto Gentiles foolishness; but unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.” (I Cor. 1:21-24)

“Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:32)