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Theological debate has always been an inherent part of the Christian tradition. Indeed, Christianity as a distinct religious tradition grew out of such debate, as the first followers of the risen Christ argued with their fellow Jews about the nature of God's redemption of humanity and the role of Jesus of Nazareth in that redemption. Since then, Christians over the last two millennia have continually tried to define these two central issues, in an effort to understand and explain the characteristics of God, the work of Jesus Christ, and the significance of this for his church. Needless to say, Christians have not always arrived at identical conclusions concerning these issues,and bitter debates and divisions have ensued.

One such extended debate took place within American Protestantism around the end of the nineteenth century, continuing on into the beginning of the twentieth. During this time, a movement emerged among some Protestant clergymen with the purpose of rethinking the meaning of what it meant to be Christian, in light of modern knowledge and modern modes of thinking. This movement, called "liberal" or "modernist" Christianity, involved coming to a new understanding of several key Christian doctrines, such as the Incarnation and Atonement. These new understandings, however, comprised only one element of the modernist agenda, which involved a reassessment of the importance of doctrine itself in the Christian experience,and a renewed emphasis on the importance of individual and social morality. Modernists claimed that this program was a credible vehicle for bringing the essence of Christianity into the modern world, unlike the current dogmatic Protestantism which, modernists insisted, insulted modern intelligence and gave insufficient motivation for social ethics. However, in the eyes of their opponents, who became collectively known as "conservatives," this modernist program was simply an abandonment of genuine Christianity.

Conservatives insisted upon the importance of adhering to correct doctrine, and considered confession of certain doctrinal formulations (such as the Inerrancy of Scripture and Substitutionary Atonement) to be the defining characteristic of true Christianity. In the eyes of conservatives, the religion of the modernists could not legitimately be called "Christian."

In this debate, Protestantism in America was split into two opposing camps, each with a fundamentally different idea of what it meant, in essence, to be Christian. The debate went far deeper than a simple disagreement over which doctrines of the Christian tradition were believable or important. It involved a clash of worldviews--different assumptions about the nature of religious truth, and the relation of truth to the natural process of human history. While the modernist and conservative camps were by no means homogeneous in regard to theological particulars, each group did share certain assumptions about how God operates in the world and these assumptions determined how they each viewed the nature of Scripture, and the nature of the Christian life itself and the role of doctrine in it. The following discussion will analyze the different emphases and beliefs of the modernist/conservative debate, and explore in detail how these differences derived from the worldviews and basic theological presuppositions of the respective movements. In essence, the task is to learn just how deeply the differences between modernist and conservative Protestants actually ran. First, however, a brief sketch of the basic differences between the two groups is necessary, in order to establish exactly what they were fighting over.

The modernist movement in American Protestantism grew gradually, beginning around the 1880's and reaching its full stride by around 1920. During the latter decades of the

nineteenth century, certain Protestant ministers from all denominations began criticizing certain doctrines of Reformed orthodoxy. Early attempts to stop the movement, whether by dismissing ministers or trying them for heresy, failed to slow the modernists' momentum. Central to the movement was the idea that Christianity needed to be adjusted, or understood afresh, in light of the discoveries of modern natural science and the methods of modern critical history.[1] By the 1920's, modernism had been around long enough that attempts were being made to define and explain it comprehensively, in order to better defend it against its critics. One of the ablest attempts to do this was made by Shailer Mathews, Dean of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago from 1908 to 1933. In 1924 Mathews wrote The Faith of Modernism, and in it he defined modernism as "the use of the methods of modern science to find, state and use the permanent and central values of inherited orthodoxy in meeting the needs of a modern world."[2]

The most visible result of this process was the redefining or, in some cases, outright abandoning of what had been fundamental beliefs of Protestant Christianity, particularly those which involved supernatural events. The reasons for this were explained at length in the writings of Harry Emerson Fosdick, a Baptist who became a modernist Presbyterian minister and one of modernism's most visible spokesmen in its latter decades. Fosdick, who in his later years spent much time criticizing certain aspects of the liberal movement, nevertheless was consistent in his belief that orthodox doctrine must adapt to what modern science and

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[1]For a much more thorough analysis of the development of modernism than can be given here, see William R. Hutchison, The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism (Harvard University Press, 1976).

[2]Shailer Mathews, The Faith of Modernism, (New York: AMS Press, 1924), p. 23.

critical history determined about the world. The virgin birth, for example, was categorically dismissed as unhistorical. "To believe in virgin birth as an explanation of great personality is one of the familiar ways in which the ancient world was accustomed to account for unusual superiority." Fosdick explained in his (in)famous pamphlet, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" published in 1922. While modernists could affirm, along with ancient Christians, a belief in Christ's superior status as a revelation of God, they could not follow the early Christians when they "phrased it in terms of a biological miracle that our modern minds cannot use."[3] Modern Christians need not hold a belief in accounts which modern science had made highly unlikely, if not impossible.

The bodily resurrection of Christ fell under similar critical scrutiny, although the modernist attitude toward this miracle tended toward a comfortable agnosticism rather than outright dismissal. Fosdick asked, in The Modern Use of the Bible (published at nearly the same time as Mathews' work), "What shall we say about the physical aspects of the resurrection of Christ? We believe that he is not dead but is risen; that we have a living Lord. And yet we may not know what to make of narratives about his eating fish after his resurrection, passing through closed doors, and offering his hands and feet to the inquiring touch of Thomas."[4] Mathews shared Fosdick's cautious approach; he asserted only that "Whether [Jesus'] body came out of the tomb or his appearances to his disciples are explicable only by abnormal psychology, he is still living personally in whatever may be the

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[3]Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" in American Protestant Thought: the Liberal Era, ed. William Hutchison, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 174-75.

[4]Fosdick, The Modern Use of the Bible, (New York: MacMillan, 1924), p. 164.

conditions in which the dead now are."[5] While Mathews, and indeed all modernists, affirmed a "supernatural" realm, there remained a refusal to accept any traditional doctrine or miraculous claim at face value, without holding it up first to the searching eye of modern science and critical thinking.

Perhaps the most influential result of this modern critical approach was its effect on how modernist Christians used the Holy Bible. Modernists embraced wholeheartedly the results of modern historical scholarship trained upon the Scriptures. While the Bible was revered as a record of people's experience with God, and the source of the Christian tradition, any claim for its historical or doctrinal inerrancy was vigorously denied. Rather, as Mathews insisted, "The mere fact . . . that a belief has been recorded in the Bible accurately does not guarantee its permanency or accuracy. That must wait upon other literary tests."[6] The specific assertions contained in the Scripture were not to be taken at face value as eternal truths, but were to be understood as products of human thought, reflective of the cultural situation of the biblical authors. This did not mean that the Bible was to be taken lightly or ignored. "The Bible . . . is of incalculable worth to a modern Christian. He draws inspiration from its pages." The inspiration derived from the Scriptures, however, did not come from accepting all of its specific doctrines or the worldview(s) of the biblical writers. Modernists like Mathews believed that "the true attitude toward God and the true experience of his presence are possible and discernible in the midst of imperfect and even mistaken scientific

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[5]Mathews p. 154.

[6]Mathews p. 48.

and other views,"[7] and it was this true attitude and experience which he believed were valuable, and of which he believed modernists were legitimate heirs.

Therefore modernists did not view the Bible as a collection of eternal truths to draw from, but rather as a set of documents which contained expressions of truth, amidst many errors of fact and belief (this distinction between "eternal truth" and "expression of truth" will be developed more fully later on). The task of deciding just what in the Bible reflected a "true experience of God's presence" and what passages were simply "imperfect" or "mistaken views" then went to the modernist scholars and theologians. An example of how this process operated in the practice of modernist theologians is found in the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the most widely known proponents of Christian social morality at the time. In 1907, Rauschenbusch published his most important work, Christianity and the Social Crisis, in which he expounded his understanding of the doctrine of the "kingdom of God," and the implications which this idea had for Christian social ethics. In his chapter of "The Social Aims of Jesus," he set out to connect his ideas with Jesus' teaching concerning this kingdom. In the context of the discussion, the question arose as to whether Christ's conception of the kingdom of God was eschatological, looking toward a divine catastrophe, or whether it was seen by Jesus as a fully present reality. Rauschenbusch noted that, in the synoptic Gospels, "there is material for both views in [Jesus'] sayings." He then went on to explain, however, how the biblical record must be understood in order to arrive at the truth of Jesus' view:

> It is important here to remember that the sayings of Jesus were handed down

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[7]Mathews pp. 50-51.

> by oral repetition among Christians for thirty or forty years before they were recorded in our gospels. . . . we must allow that it is wholly probable that the Church which told and retold the sayings of Jesus insensibly moulded them by its own ideas and hopes. And if that is true, then no part of the sayings of Christ would be so sure to be affected as his sayings about his return and the final consummation of the kingdom.[8]

In attempting to discern Christ's understanding of the kingdom of God, one cannot simply take every recorded statement of Jesus as historically authentic material, in light of the conclusions of modern historical study of the gospels. Instead, according to the modernists, one must decide which sayings in the biblical record reflect the thought of Jesus (or the truer reflection of God, as the case may be) and use those, in order to arrive at the modern understanding of any Christian belief. Rauschenbusch, for his part, had no hesitation in declaring that, concerning the idea of the kingdom of God, "any modifications on this question [by the disciples] would all be likely in the direction of the catastrophic hope." This hope was "the form most congenial to cruder minds," so the passages which support the "present kingdom" conception were more likely to represent the authentic thought of Jesus. Such a formulation of the kingdom idea also happened to fall more in line with modern ideas of progress and organic development. Rauschenbusch left little doubt of his preference for the "present kingdom" concept when he said, "It is thus exceedingly probable that the Church spilled a little of the lurid colors of its own apocalypticism over the loftier conceptions of the Master."[9] Modernists consistently used the Bible in this fashion, basing their theology on a critical and selective reading of its contents, a reading informed by science, modern historical

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[8]Walter Rauschenbusch, "The Social Aims of Jesus," in Issues in American Protestantism, ed. Robert L. Ferm, (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 248.

[9]Rauschenbusch p. 249.

scholarship, and the intellectual currents of the time.

While this approach to traditional doctrine and the Scriptures grew rapidly in popularity, many Protestant theologians would have none of it. The conservative reaction to the modernist movement also spanned many denominations, and was centered around two premises. First, conservative Protestants held that adherence to traditional doctrine was an essential feature of authentic Christianity. Secondly, they firmly believed that the Holy Bible was the true word of God and an accurate record of facts, and therefore was a completely reliable source of such doctrine.

The issues of the truthfulness and historical reliability of the Bible were particularly important for conservatives. While modernists emphasized the human nature of Scripture, maintaining that it contained a record of people's experience of God, conservatives found this conception woefully incomplete. The Bible was not simply the teachings of men; it was also, in its entirety, the authoritative word of God. This belief was clearly articulated in the early period of the debate by Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield, who wrote for the most part in the 1880's and 90's (including his classic essay, "Inspiration," which he co-wrote with A. A. Hodge). In his essay entitled "The Divine and Human in the Bible," Warfield declared that "the whole Bible is recognized as human, the free product of human effort in every part and word. And at the same time, the whole Bible is recognized as divine, the Word of God, his utterances, of which he is in the truest sense the Author." This divine authorship of Scripture gave it a preeminent status as "our constant law and guide."[10] While the conservative camp

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[10]Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, "The Divine and Human in the Bible," in The Princeton Theology, ed. Mark Noll (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), p. 279.

represented a wide array of interpretations of various passages of Scripture, these theologians and scholars were united in their attitude toward the Bible. The historical claims and theological formulations found therein were not simply products of human experience, to be accepted or rejected as modern man saw fit. The words of Scripture came directly from the mind of God, and therefore held absolute authority over Christian belief and practice.

This "high" view of Scripture was a major factor in the conservative belief in the miraculous events recounted in it. Conservatives believed that the Virgin Birth was a historical occurrence because the bible recorded it as such. The same held for the miracles performed by Jesus, such as his feeding the five thousand or walking on water, both of which were often rejected as history and treated as legend by modernists. Additionally, the attitude of the conservatives toward the bible enabled them to use its words as a source for formal teaching. In order to justify a certain belief or practice which conservative churches held, all that was needed was an appeal to some Scripture text which supported it. For example, while modernists might attack the notion of eternal punishment of the damned, the conservative needed only to refer to II Thessalonians 1: 9 ("These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" [NRSV]) to consider the matter closed. Contrary to Mathews, who insisted that propositions could not be regarded as permanently true simply because they were recorded in the Bible, conservatives followed the lead of earlier Reformed theologians like Charles Hodge, who believed that "the Bible contains all the facts or truths which form the contents of theology,

just as the facts of nature are the contents the natural sciences."[11]

In addition to viewing the statements in the Bible as an authoritative and essential factor in true Christianity, conservatives accorded the same status to the formal teachings which had been developed to organize and explain the Bible's contents. For the majority of American conservatives, the formal teachings which carried the weight of absolute authority were those in the Catholic and Protestant traditions. Doctrines such as the Deity of Christ or the Substitutionary Atonement were understood to be accurate distillations of the biblical material. Warfield explicitly stated this view of the western theological tradition, maintaining that "the ever struggling Christologies of the earlier ages were forever set aside by the Chalcedon Fathers; Augustine determined for all time the doctrine of grace; Anselm the doctrine of the atonement, Luther the doctrine of forensic justification."[12] Since conservatives represented a broad spectrum of denominations, they did not always agree with Warfield (or with each other) upon specific doctrines. However, as George Marsden relates in his book, Fundamentalism and American Culture, a consensus did grow among this camp concerning which doctrines of the Christian tradition were non-negotiable elements of the religion. In 1910, the Presbyterian General Assembly decided upon five essential (or "fundamental") doctrines, which included: the Inerrancy of Scripture, the Virgin Birth of Christ, the Substitutionary Atonement, the Bodily Resurrection, and the authenticity of Christ's

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[11]Charles Hodge, "Introduction to Systematic Theology," in The Princeton Theology, p. 131.

[12]Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," in The Princeton Theology, p. 258.

miracles.[13] This list was not exhaustive for all conservatives (premillennialists substituted the Immanent Return of Christ for the final item concerning his miracles), but it did serve as a rallying point for the movement as a whole. Responding directly to modernist attacks upon the reliability of Scripture and the truth of Christian theological teaching, conservatives insisted that belief in these classic doctrines, and in the words of Scripture which supported these teachings, was a defining element of genuine Christianity.

These disagreements constituted one level of the modernist/conservative debate. One side honored certain doctrines of the faith as fundamental; the other rejected those doctrines, insisting that genuine Christianity was not found in them. These basic differences, however, were only the outward manifestation of different underlying assumptions and worldviews. These different assumptions concerned the nature of religious truth itself, and how truth is related to the development of the Christian religion over the course of history. The positions of the two groups can clearly be seen in their respective attitudes toward Christian doctrine. Not only did modernists and conservatives disagree on what doctrines they could believe, they fundamentally disagreed on what a doctrine actually was. For the conservative, a doctrine, whether found in the Bible or in an established church confession, was a statement of metaphysical truth. While human language was inadequate to describe God and his truth with complete accuracy, doctrines were nevertheless true propositions, which reflected eternal realities in the metaphysical realm. Modernists, on the other hand, refused to accept any

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[13]George Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 117.

proposition as eternal truth. Doctrines were simply products of the historical process, as Christians through the ages sought to formulate their convictions about God in way which made sense in light of their cultural situations. For the modernist, therefore, what was "correct doctrine" for one age was not necessarily true or useful for another.

In fact, modernists were generally loathe to give systematic theological teaching any important place in the Christian life. What interested them were what they called Christian "convictions" or "abiding experiences" which were expressed in the ways Christians lived their lives. "Modernism is concerned with the historical method of discovering the *permanent values* of Christianity," Mathews wrote, "and the religious rather that the theological test of religion. It is not aiming at a system of theology but at organizing life on a Christian basis."[14] It was these "permanent values," or Christian convictions, which could be transmitted to different generations of Christians, and could be held onto in the modern world, while the doctrines of ages past could be rejected in light of modern knowledge. Modernists insisted, in the words of Mathews, that "To understand [Christianity] is to distinguish between its permanent and temporary elements."[15]

Harry Emerson Fosdick expanded upon this idea in The Modern Use of the Bible, in his chapter on "Abiding Experiences and Changing Categories." Fosdick examined certain doctrines such as the resurrection of the dead and the Second Coming of Christ, and explained how those specific beliefs arose out of the worldviews of New Testament-era people, worldviews which people in the modern world no longer share. It was foolish,

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[14]Mathews p. 22; emphasis added.

[15]Mathews p. 54.

according to Fosdick, to hold onto categories of thought which the process of the natural development of ideas had left behind. Concerning the Second Coming, Fosdick explained, "I believe in the victory of righteousness upon this earth, in the coming kingdom of God whereon Christ looking shall see the travail of his soul and be satisfied, but I do not believe in the physical return of Jesus."[16] Such a belief was merely a product of the first century Christian community. It made sense in light of Jewish apocalyptic hopes of the time, but it was not a necessary vehicle for the Christian hope in "the victory of God's purposes on earth"[17] which modern Christians shared. The experience of this hope was eternal, for Fosdick, but the doctrine of Christ's return which expressed the hope was not. Doctrine expressed Christian experience of truth through the filter of obsolete worldviews; doctrine was not truth in itself.

This claim of the modernists was directly challenged by the conservatives, and was criticized at length by their most visible spokesperson, J. Gresham Machen. Machen, who studied under B. B. Warfield at Princeton, entered the debate in the early twenties, spending most of his energy attempting to explain why modernism was not truly Christian. His 1923 manifesto, Christianity and Liberalism, was the most extensive of the critiques which Mathews and Fosdick were defending themselves against. Machen maintained, contrary to these modernists, that "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

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[16]Fosdick, Modern Use of the Bible, p. 104.

[17]Fosdick p. 110.

which experience is based."[18] For Machen, adherence to traditional doctrine was indispensable for genuine Christianity, since doctrine represented divine truth in propositional form. The miracles of Christ, including the virgin birth and resurrection from the tomb, were true in that they were actual historical events. Doctrine recorded in the Scriptures was true because it was a direct revelation from God, explaining the meaning of the events. Finally, the formal teaching of the church (in Machen's case, the Reformed Protestant tradition) was true insofar as it accurately organized and expounded the inspired teachings of Scripture. More to the point, the Christian religion is dependent on the truth of the doctrines which are professed. Machen was insistent:

> But if any one fact is clear . . . it is that the Christian movement at its inception was not just a way of life in the modern sense, but a way of life founded upon a message. It was based, not upon mere feeling, not upon a mere program of work, but upon an account of facts. In other words it was based on doctrine.[19]

Machen's use of the word "facts" in the preceding passage is instructive, because it points to fundamental presuppositions which Machen and like-minded Christians followed. These presuppositions included the notion that eternal truth exists, and that it can be known; and the belief that the Scriptures were a divine revelation of this truth, as well as an infallible record of past events. These views constituted a paradigm--a set of assumptions which determined both how conservatives read the Bible, and how they understood history. In both cases, conservatives had a completely different attitude toward modern currents of thought than their liberal counterparts. Historical criticism of the Bible, for example, was not seen as

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[18]J. Gresham Machen, Christianity and Liberalism, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), p. 19.

[19]Machen p. 21.

a legitimate attempt to locate a Christian religious experience. It was instead a process of subjecting the God-given facts of Scripture to the unreliable authority of human thinking, as scholars simply selected those statements and accounts in the Bible which they found consistent with their beliefs. In this process, according to Machen, "The only authority, then, can be that which 'helps' the individual man. Such an authority is obviously no authority at all . . . Liberalism . . . is founded upon the shifting emotions of sinful men."[20] Conservatives regarded the Bible as an authoritative revelation of truth, which exists outside of the natural process of history. Therefore, it was fallacious for modernists to subordinate its authority to modern ways of thinking.

The conservatives' emphasis on authority, and their insistence upon the importance of doctrine, were dependent upon the underlying assumption that truth is objective and can be known, and that the primary enterprise of the Christian religion is the discerning of this truth. This focus did not mean that conservatives denied the practical, moral dimension of Christianity. "From the beginning," Machen asserted, "Christianity was certainly a way of life; the salvation that it offered was a salvation from sin, and salvation from sin appeared not only in a blessed hope but also in an immediate moral change."[21] However, conservatives were equally insistent that this dimension of the Christian life was inexorably linked to orthodox teaching about Christ (by "orthodox teaching," conservatives usually had in mind the five fundamentals, or other doctrines of the protestant confessions, depending upon who one talked to). In other words, the Christian life hinged upon a correct understanding of divine

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[20]Machen pp. 78-79.

[21]Machen p. 47.

truth. In the conservative view, divine truth is objective and unchanging, and the primary task of the theologian is to examine all available evidence in order to approach a full understanding of it. The proper object of the study of theology was truth itself, not simply human expressions of truth.

When a conservative read the Bible, therefore, or studied the creeds and confessions of the Christian tradition, he found a set of truths about God and the world. While these teachings were produced by human beings operating in their own historical context, they were also divine revelation, eternal and incontrovertible. They therefore must be taken into account when formulating a view of God and the world. This idea was the basis for the oft-voiced conservative claim that theirs was the only Christian theology which was truly "scientific." The claim was based on two primary presuppositions: 1) that true science (in this case, the science of theology) involved, in Baconian fashion, an assimilation of all known facts, and 2) that the Bible (and Protestant Doctrine) constituted not merely a set of human perceptions, but a body of such facts, which any theological scheme must take into account.[22] When modernists doubted the historicity of the biblical miracles in the light of modern science, Warfield accused them of simply denying essential facts, namely, the miraculous Christ events: "Are the facts that are to be permitted to occur in the universe to be determined by our precedently [sic] conceived worldview or is our worldview to be determined by a due consideration of all the facts that occur in the universe?"[23] Any worldview or modern mode of thinking stood under the judgement of the revealed facts of Scripture, not the other way

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[22]See Marsden, pp. 111-117, for a thorough discussion of the Baconian philosophical roots of the conservative position.

[23]quoted in Marsden p. 116.

around.

Modernists took exactly the opposite position. They believed that the intellectual fruits of modern culture were indeed adequate to evaluate the contents of the Bible, and to formulate new understandings of divine truth. This conviction was grounded in the modernist understanding of how divine truth, or doctrine, was related to the development of history. "Theology was no longer viewed as a fixed body of eternally valid truths," Marsden explains. "It was rather seen as an evolutionary development that should adjust to the standards and needs of modern culture."[24] Not only are specific doctrines and biblical documents simply products of human thought in history, but truth itself is found only in the historical process. Therefore no theological proposition could be regarded as eternal, unchanging truth:

> Thus religion was not based on static or standardized objective knowledge of God, but rather could best be understood as a social or historical development. [Modernist] Christians had faith that God indeed was acting in history, but they knew of him only through human religious experience which changed as society changed.[25]

Since divine truth is known only through the changing religious experiences of people, accepting any particular formulation of truth as normative and eternal was foolhardy, according to the modernist. Propositional truth is not static; it changes over time, expressing Christian convictions about God in new ways. "The common divisor of Christian groups is their attitude toward God as revealed in and by Jesus," Mathews said. "The theological patterns in which this has been expressed have repeatedly changed as new social needs give

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[24]Marsden p. 25.

[25]Marsden p. 176.

rise to new religious needs."[26]

One conviction which united all modernists was the belief that the post-Darwinian world was a time with new religious needs, which required new theological patterns shaped in light of modern knowledge. The doctrines of the past did not stand in judgement on the knowledge and modes of thinking of the modern world. Rather, modernists saw new scientific knowledge, and the notion of the progressive development of religious thought, as providing an understanding of divine truth superior to past ages. The editors of the Andover Review, a liberal publication of the late 1800's, declared decisively in 1885 that "The church of today has a fuller knowledge of the purpose of God respecting the expansion of Christianity, a better conception of the dispensation of the Spirit and of the relation of Christianity to human history, that it was possible to communicate to the early church."[27] Mathews echoed the sentiment when he observed that "the Modernist starts with the assumption that scientists know more about nature and man that did the theologians who drew up the Creeds and Confessions." The modern scientific method of obtaining information was implicitly trusted by modernists as a way of shaping modern understanding of divine truth. "Believing that all facts, whether they be those of religious experience or those of the laboratory, can fit into the general scheme of things, he welcomes new facts as rapidly as they can be discovered."[28]

This sentiment was shared, in principle, by conservatives. The difference between the

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[26]Mathews p. 76.

[27]quoted in Hutchison p. 100.

[28]Mathews p. 29.

two camps lay primarily in what sorts of information each was willing to consider "facts." This difference was particularly evident in the modernist consideration of Scripture. When Mathews spoke of wanting to find "the facts concerning the Bible,"[29] he meant something quite different than J. Gresham Machen did when he spoke of the same thing. For Mathews, the "facts" concerning the Bible were the results of modern historical scholarship. These conclusions, whether they concerned the authorship of the Pentateuch or the historicity of the sayings of Jesus, constituted the storehouse of facts in regard to the Bible which modernists used in forming their theological understanding. This dependence on scholarship was based upon the belief that the Bible was a collection of human documents, not a divine, inerrant record of truths. Any truth which the Scriptures might yield could be found only by studying these documents critically, not by believing everything written in them.

Conservatives and modernists, then, operated with completely different ideas concerning the nature of divine truth, and where it was found. Mathews phrased the problem succinctly: "The Modernist and the Dogmatist are not debating on quite the same plane; one is interested in theological regularity; the other with religious development and scientific method."[30] The conservatives' interest in objective truth turned them toward the study of doctrine, while modernists regarded doctrine as a transitory element of the Christian life. One side found eternal truth in the words of Scripture; the other found truth only in a critical scientific understanding of the Scriptures. This distinction can best be illustrated by the different views of Jesus presented by Mathews and Machen, and how they each saw the role

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[29]Mathews p. 37.

[30]Mathews p. 19.

of doctrine in his life. In Machen's view, the Christian emphasis on doctrine, or at least propositional truth, began with Jesus himself. Specifically, Jesus' teaching was "rooted in doctrine because it depended upon a stupendous presentation of Jesus' own Person."[31] According to the Scriptures, which constitute a body of theological (and other) facts, Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, and that he would be killed and rise again--all of these claims were propositional in nature. The conservative view of truth is inherent in every element of this view of Jesus. The importance of doctrine in conservative theology is justified because Jesus spoke propositional truth, and we know Jesus spoke such truth because of the witness of the Scriptures, which are an inerrant divine revelation and are therefore trustworthy.

Mathews, on the other hand, drew a completely different conclusion about Jesus, based upon a reading of the Bible informed by his view of truth. "If we examine the earliest records of [Jesus'] life we find no dogma. He did not demand belief in the inerrant Bible, his virgin birth, his atoning death . . . his physical resurrection, or his physical return."[32] By referring to the "earliest records" of Jesus' life, Mathews drew from the results of critical scholarship, which held that the statements attributed to Jesus concerning his Messiahship and his resurrection were not authentically his. The mark of authenticity was instead usually given to statements of Jesus which did not specifically involve propositional truth (such as, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" [Mark 3: 35, NRSV]). Mathews, true to his stated method for discerning divine truth, accepted the modern historical conclusions concerning the gospels as the clearest view of the truth of Jesus and his message.

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[31]Machen p. 33.

[32]Mathews p. 78.

And under this lens, perhaps not surprisingly, Jesus turned out to be less than interested in propositional truth. In the cases of both men, their assumptions about the nature of truth were both used and found in the course of their study of Christianity, as different sayings and episodes in Scripture were emphasized in their respective arguments.

The disagreements between modernist and conservative Christians over specific doctrines involved different views of how to use the Bible, which were in turn based upon different beliefs concerning how truth is known in relation to history. The central issue for both camps was whether or not these differences represented variants within the Christian tradition, as modernists insisted, or whether the modernist movement had, in Machen's words, "really relinquished everything distinctive of Christianity."[33] Whether or not it is possible definitively to answer this question, it is instructive to look at one other crucial distinction between the two groups of Christians. Their different ideas concerning divine truth were intimately tied to different beliefs concerning the nature of God, and the nature of the relationship between God and his creation. Broadly, modernists based their views on an immanent view of God, while conservatives held to a belief in God's transcendence over his creation. These core theological beliefs were inherent in every other area of their respective programs. In particular, these presuppositions informed their different beliefs concerning the nature of revelation, the existence of miracles, and the nature of God's salvation of sinful humanity. The different convictions of the two camps concerning these issues lay at the center of much of the controversy between them, and these convictions were built upon

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[33]Machen p. 7.

different understandings of God.

It has been explained above that modernists saw doctrine as a product of natural development in history, and that they believed that the intellectual currents of their age brought genuine advancement in theological understanding. Part of the reason for this enthusiastic trust in the thought of the time was the belief in God's immanence in all creation, including all people. As Fosdick eloquently proclaimed, "This upwelling of reliance on and joy in an indwelling, spiritual presence, this rebirth of confidence in the rights of immediate experience to be considered a revelation of eternal reality, was so wide-spread, so deep-seated . . . that no realm of thought and life in the nineteenth century escaped it."[34] God was understood by modernists to be inherently present in the human person, expressing himself in human thought and experience. This belief in the indwelling presence of God was extended to the culture as a whole. In a sense, modernists baptized human cultural development and intellectual progress. Marsden explains that to modernists, "the progress of Christianity and the progress of culture were always considered together . . . When the modernists affirmed the immanence of God, they characteristically meant that God was revealed in cultural development."[35] Therefore, if the modern mind was uncongenial to doctrines such as the existence of demonic spirits, or a final judgement at the end of time, this was taken as a revelation that these doctrines did not accurately reflect divine truth. The modernist belief that Christians need not embrace all biblical formulations (particularly those involving the supernatural) involved an affirmation of the presence of God in human intellectual

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[34]Fosdick p. 264.

[35]Marsden p. 146.

development, as well as a rejection of the outdated thought forms of the past.

It must be pointed out that modernists, despite rejecting some biblical formulations (such as calling Christ's death a sacrifice of atonement),[36] nevertheless often cited other biblical teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. However, modernists also believed that God is revealed in current human experience just as much, if not more so, as he is revealed in the experience of the biblical authors. This view of how God operates in history reflected an essential feature of any theology of divine immanence: the notion that God's exclusive *modus operandi* is through the process of natural development, whether this development be biological (in the case of Darwinian evolution) or theological (throughout Christian history). God's immanence in the world meant, in part, that he acted through general laws and natural process, and did not reveal himself exclusively in any one body of texts or in a specific supernatural event. This conviction was articulated early in the controversy by Alexander V. G. Allen, one of the primary expounders of the theology of immanence and its significance for modern Christianity. In his 1884 book, The Continuity of Christian Thought, Allen spoke of God as "the infinite indwelling Spirit, whose action is not arbitrary, but uniform as the laws of nature."[37] This basic principle of uniformity was the basis for ascribing the status of revelation to the progression of theological thought through history. Since God operates, as a rule, in accordance with laws of development and natural progress, it was illogical to seek any specific revelation (such as the Bible) as an authority for all time, as the conservatives insisted upon doing.

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[36]Mathews p. 156.

[37]from A. V. G. Allen, The Continuity of Christian Thought, in American Protestant Thought: the Liberal Era, p. 66.

This tendency to view God as operating regularly through laws affected other theological issues as well. Mathews' belief in immanence was instrumental in his denial of the existence of miracles. Insisting that "The belief in miracles is a pre-scientific exposition of the relations of God and the world," he explained that the modern belief in God's immanent working in the world effectively replaced the need for any belief in the miraculous. "As men's knowledge of the uniformity of nature becomes enlarged, and they begin to speak of laws, the appeal of miracle disappears." Mathews operated under a paradigm which simply did not include the existence of divine action outside of the natural laws of the universe. "It is the unity of the cosmic order, discoverable law and evolution that argue the divine presence rather than some inexplicable violation of accustomed experience." He hastened to add that this view did not rule out *a priori* the historicity of the fantastic accounts in the Bible, but "if the evidence is strong enough to warrant belief in their having taken place, [the modernist] at once regards them as belonging to a class of phenomena which have been or will be described by some law. . . . Only he cannot think for a moment that God is lawless, breaking into his universe from without."[38]

The influence of the modernists' worldview, in which God governed exclusively by uniform divine laws, also extended to their understanding of the truth expressed by the life and death of Jesus Christ. Since their theology precluded the notion of God "breaking into his universe from without," modernists tended to view the events of Christ's life only as images of eternal truths, not as actual supernatural events. The clearest example of this is the way in which modernists treated the crucifixion of Christ. True to modernist form, all

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[38]Mathews pp. 113-114.

previous formulations which viewed Christ's death as an atonement for human sin or as a ransom were rejected as merely the product of earlier ages. Rather, the suffering of Jesus was to be seen primarily as an example of sacrifice for the sake of another (a biblical idea--see John 15: 13: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends"). This self-giving sacrifice was believed to be inherent in the nature of the immanent God and therefore inherent in the world. The modern understanding of the significance of Christ's crucifixion was eloquently expressed by Fosdick:

> Vicarious sacrifice is not new in man's life. Gravitation is no more deeply built into the structure of the physical universe than is vicarious sacrifice into the *essential nature of the moral world.* Save when some one who need not do it voluntarily assumes the burden of man's misery and sin, there is no salvation from any want or tragedy that mankind knows.[39]

The death of Jesus, then, illustrated a truth about God and his creation which is inherently built into the cosmos as a moral law, but it did not effect any objective change in the relation between God and his creation. Mathews echoed this sentiment when he stated that "[Christ's] death is an element in the revelation of the way of salvation," and "only since Jesus died as the victim of those whom he would save, have men felt that the law of sacrifice for ideals is a part of the divine will that is love."[40] Mathews thus shared with Fosdick the belief that Christ's sacrifice was a revelation primarily in the sense that it gave humanity a true picture of divine moral law. It was this belief that enabled Fosdick to refer to the cross of Christ as an experience "like every other abiding element in man's life." It had a special status as God's revelation of his saving nature, but it was not a supernatural event which

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[39]Fosdick p. 230, emphasis added.

[40]Mathews pp. 155, 161.

made salvation effective.

Conservatives found this view of the crucifixion inadequate, just as they found the modernist view of revelation and miracle inadequate. In fact, conservatives fundamentally disagreed with the modernists' entire worldview. What most frustrated conservatives in the modernist reconstruction of Christianity was, in Machen's words, "the denial of any entrance of the creative power of God (as distinguished from the ordinary course of nature) in connection with the origin of Christianity."[41] Conservatives were united in their belief that God did indeed "break into his universe from without," in a unique way, in and as the person of Jesus Christ, and in the composition and compiling of the Christian scriptures. This belief, as well as the conservative belief in objective eternal truth, stemmed from an understanding of the nature of God which was quite different from the immanence paradigm that modernists operated on. Conservatives affirmed the transcendence of God over his creation. Machen, in particular, was adamant in holding to this truth and its significance for Christian theology:

> But one attribute of God is absolutely fundamental in the Bible . . . That attribute is the awful transcendence of God. From beginning to end the Bible is concerned to set forth the awful gulf that separates the creature from the creator. It is true, indeed, that according to the Bible God is immanent in the world . . . But he is immanent in the world not because He is identified with the world, but because He is the free Creator and Upholder in it. Between the creature and creator a great gulf is fixed.[42]

It is rather difficult to state precisely in metaphysical terms the difference between this view and that of the modernists. Conservatives, as Machen acknowledges, did affirm that God was

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[41]Machen p. 2.

[42]Machen pp. 62-63.

immanent in his creation in at least some sense, and the modernist belief in immanence stopped short of pantheism. However, whenever their respective views were applied to theological issues, it was clear that they were operating with different conceptions.

The understanding of the "great gulf" between God and his creation was foundational to the conservative reliance on the Scriptures as a uniquely authoritative revelation. Warfield, while acknowledging that the natural world and Christian experience are "true and valid sources . . . to be received by us as revelations of God," nevertheless insisted that the Bible was a revelation of a distinctly different nature. "The superior lucidity of this revelation," he wrote, "makes it the norm of interpretation for what is revealed so much more darkly through the other methods of manifestation."[43] The Bible was a specific, inerrant revelation, which therefore took precedence over any other "natural revelation" in human experience, including modern culture. The fundamental separation between God and human beings forbade any implicit trust in human religious ideas which were not strictly tied to God's uniquely revealed word. Warfield's belief that "the Holy Scriptures are the source of theology not only in a degree, but also in a sense which nothing else is,"[44] was informed by this distinction between supernatural revelation, which is infallible, and other, natural forms of revelation, which are ultimately untrustworthy due to the separation between the creator and the creation.

The conservative belief in miracles was similarly dependent on this distinction between the natural and supernatural. The very definition of a miracle, in Machen's conception, was an event outside of the natural laws of God's creation: "The believer in the

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[43]Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," pp. 248-249.

[44]Warfield p. 250.

supernatural . . . believes that in the events called natural, God uses means, but in the events called supernatural He uses no means, but puts forth His creative power."[45] The transcendent God, in the minds of conservatives, is not limited to operating uniformly throughout creation by means of laws, or in accordance with accustomed experience, but can ordain specific unique events (i.e. miracles) when he so chooses. "He is alive, He is sovereign, He is not bound by His creation or His creatures, He can perform wonders."[46] One such unique occurrence was the Incarnation. Modernists, in accordance with their understanding of divine immanence, tended to view the Incarnation as a matter of degree: Christ was the fullest human expression of the indwelling Spirit of God. Conservatives, consistent with their theology of transcendence, saw Christ as a supernatural person, unique in all of history. Conservative Christians therefore insisted upon a view of the nature of Christ which was actually precluded by the modernist theological paradigm. As Machen explained, "[Christ] is supernatural, and yet what is supernatural, on the liberal hypothesis, can never be historical."[47]

Conservatives believed that a transcendent God could act uniquely in specific historical instances, in way which were qualitatively different from his uniform everyday actions in the world. Therefore those historical instances, such as the Incarnation and Christ's Atonement on the cross, were fundamentally important, not just the universal ideas associated with them. The Atonement was particularly important in this regard. Christ's death on the cross was not simply a picture of the redemptive nature of God, it was also a specific event

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[45]Machen p. 99.

[46]Machen p. 134.

[47]Machen p. 107.

which made effective God's redemption of human beings. Machen explained, "The Christian gospel means, not a presentation of what always has been true, but a report of something new--something that imparts a totally different aspect in the situation of mankind."[48] Modernists also proclaimed the importance of the crucifixion, and its saving power, but the way in which the cross of Christ saved was perceived in a different way. Fosdick asserted that when the divine characteristic of sacrifice was exhibited in Jesus' death, "it becomes uniquely significant. To multitudes it has meant alike a revelation of the divine nature and a challenge to sacrificial living of their own which they could in no wise escape."[49] As in the case of the Incarnation, the "uniqueness" of Christ's sacrifice was a matter of degree: modernists believed that Christ's example was peerless, and perfectly illustrated the law of sacrificial love. The act was not, however, supernatural, in the sense that it was an act of divine intervention, fundamentally different from God's uniform work in the world. For modernists, then, Christ saved primarily by offering an example of the way to love people and love and follow God, while conservatives also held that his death brought salvation in a unique and supernatural way.

The modernist and conservative conceptions of salvation were therefore dependent upon the way in which each camp conceived of the nature of the relation between God and his creation. Modernists emphasized God's uniform work within his creation, while conservatives emphasized his prerogative to act specifically, outside of the general natural order. This difference between immanence and transcendence also had other ramifications for

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[48]Machen p. 121.

[49]Fosdick p. 231.

their views concerning human sin and God's salvation. It must be emphasized that both modernists and conservatives spoke at length and with all seriousness of the problem of human sin, and the need for divine salvation. However, the different theological paradigms within which they operated gave them a different sense of what sin actually was, and the kind of salvation which was necessary to solve the problem.

The conservatives' view of transcendence extended to their notion of human sin as a fundamental separation between God and human beings. "According to the Christian view, as set forth in the Bible," Machen explained, "mankind is under the curse of God's holy law, and the dreadful penalty includes the corruption of our whole nature . . . Nature transmits the dreadful taint; hope is to be sought only in a creative act of God."[60] Conservatives were adamant that the situation of mankind was hopeless, outside of God's favor, except for this "creative act," which included Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Holding to orthodox Protestant tradition, Machen said that the atoning death of Christ was necessary in order to erase human guilt before God. "The situation of mankind was desperate because of sin; but God has changed the situation by the atoning death of Christ."[61] The other part of this supernatural transaction was the resurrection, and subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit, which brought the Christian into a new life with God: "Jesus rose from the dead into a new life of glory and power, and into that life He brings those for whom He died. The Christian, on the basis of Christ's redeeming work, not only has died unto sin, but also lives unto God."[62]

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[50]Machen p. 105.

[51]Machen p. 121.

[52]Machen p. 136.

Those who believe and accept the truth of Christ's atoning death and resurrection therefore exist in communion with God in a way which was made possible only because this supernatural transaction took place.

Modernists, on the other hand, did not see the need for such a supernatural salvation based upon one event, for sin, while certainly egregious, did not render people helpless and fundamentally apart from God. Fosdick proclaimed that "the background of abysmal distance between the divine and the human . . . is no longer in our minds. The presupposition of all our thinking is the conviction, not that there is a vast distance between God and man, but that God and man belong together and in each other are fulfilled."[63] Since the natural affinity between God and human beings was assumed as an inherent reality in the universe, human sin could not represent any real break in this connection. Rather, modernists tended to conceive of sin as a failure to recognize the reality of the immanent God, and as the immoral actions which resulted from this error. As William Hutchison points out, modernists "began with the assertion that God is Lord of the world and that man's sin consists in thinking otherwise."[54]

The salvation brought by Christ, therefore, did not involve creating a new relationship with God and human beings that did not exist before, via a supernatural event. Rather, Christ saved by revealing the means of accessing an already present relationship between God and humans. Fosdick, as he frequently did, provided one of the most eloquent presentations of this view:

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[53]Fosdick p. 267.

[54]Hutchison p. 112.

> In himself [Jesus] carried our human nature to such heights, so unveiled in his own character what manhood was meant to be, and by his life of divine sonship so challenged men to claim their spiritual birthright as children of God, that he has created new standards of estimation about mankind's worth and possibilities.[55]

There is little in this passage that conservatives would disagree with, except for the implicit understanding that this "life of divine sonship" constituted in itself the saving work of Jesus. Modernists saw Christ as primarily "the illustration of salvation," in the words of Mathews, not the objective means of salvation. In Mathews' view, Jesus did certainly bring salvation into the world: "Humanity with Jesus in it is not the same as it was before his birth."[66] However, the way in which Jesus brought this salvation into the world was by revealing to the world "that the soul that implicitly believes that God is love, and lives perfectly the sort of life which love dominates, in saved from fear, from despair, sin, the mechanism of life, and even from death itself. [Jesus] is a Savior because he was saved."[67] Jesus, in the modernist conception, was the one who perfectly demonstrated a life which was in communion with God and consistent with God's loving character. His death on the cross was the supreme demonstration of this love, a love perfect enough to forgive those who put him to death. What men and women needed to do to be saved, therefore, was to believe in this God that Jesus knew, and live a life of love as Jesus did. If this were done, then the immanent God, who was never separated in any significant way from humankind, would lend his aid toward the human endeavor to live this way. Thus men and women could grow in a

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[55]Fosdick p. 224.

[56]Mathews p. 151.

[57]Mathews p. 152.

connection with God that was always in some way present, and which Jesus accessed and demonstrated in its pure and complete form.

The notions of trusting in God and following the perfect example of Jesus are part of biblical teaching, and, as suggested before, there was little in these ideas themselves which conservatives could quibble with. They did, however, insist that belief in a supernatural act of salvation was an essential part of the program. The reason for this difference lay in their theological paradigm which assumed the transcendence of God, and the separation between God and humanity caused by sin. While belief in a loving God and following the example of Jesus were wonderful things, they could not mend that separation and produce a divine life of love. Human guilt needs to be erased through an atonement for sin, and this remittance of sins is a prerequisite for the indwelling and regeneration of the Holy Spirit. This, in the conservatives' view, was what was needed for true salvation. Machen and his cohorts were careful to distinguish their view from that of the modernists, who saw sin as a problem, but not as constituting a breach between God and humans which needed supernatural mending. For Machen, this supernatural mending was *the* basis for genuine Christianity:

> The modern liberal church is fond of appealing to experience. But where shall true Christian experience be found if not in the blessed peace that comes from Calvary? That peace comes only when a man recognizes that all his striving to be right with God . . . before he can be saved, is unnecessary, and that the Lord Jesus has wiped out the handwriting that was against him by dying instead of him on the Cross.[58]

For conservatives, then, the peace of communion with God was inherently dependent upon Christ's death on the cross actually doing what the orthodox doctrine of the Atonement said it

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[58]Machen p. 128.

did. To modernists, who had no sense of a divide between humans and God, the doctrine simply made no sense, because the problem which it purported to solve did not exist, according to their theological paradigm. Both modernists and conservatives, therefore, valued a real, vital, and empowering relationship with God as an essential part of Christianity. Modernists, however, spoke of trusting in and acting upon this relationship as an already present reality, while conservatives placed their faith in an event which made this relationship a possibility.

At its core, the controversy between modernist and conservative Protestants in American is an example of what happens when different paradigms collide, and try to debate the same set of issues on two different planes. The two camps could argue *ad infinitum* over the importance of doctrine in the Christian tradition, the nature of the Bible, and the way in which Christ saves people, and never come to any sort of agreement or compromise, because they had fundamentally different beliefs about God and the world, and the relation between the two. These differences in belief lay behind the different emphases of the two groups. The conservatives' rigid insistence upon adherence to doctrine was a natural consequence of their belief in objective, divine truth. Similarly, the modernists' belief that Christianity was primarily a way of life, and that propositional statements of truth were tangential to the real business, derived from their belief in how God operates through natural development in history. Modernists tended to claim that their quarrel was only with specific doctrinal formulations which they considered outdated, and that they shared all the fundamental convictions about God and the world which the conservatives did. This claim, however, was

simply not true. The reason that modernists found the doctrine of the Atonement confusing and irrelevant, while conservatives considered it to be one of the most blessed and liberating truths, was that they fundamentally *differed*, in important ways, in their convictions about God and his relation to humanity.

The different convictions of the two camps permeated every area of their thinking. The modernist belief in natural development as the way in which God (and everything else) worked naturally led to their understanding of Scripture as one step in the process of that development, and it led to their acceptance of modern intellectual currents as a later and superior step. Their belief in God as a naturally indwelling presence also affected these views, as well as influencing their understanding of sin and salvation. The conservatives' belief in transcendence, on the other hand, and the real separation between God and humans, entailed a need for honoring certain historical documents as specific revelation, as well as a need for supernatural salvation. Both views are equally matters of faith--it is just as impossible to empirically prove that God never delivers specific supernatural revelation as it is to empirically demonstrate that he does. Since both views involve faith in Jesus Christ, in some fashion, it would be difficult to deny either one the name "Christian," in a historically sensitive understanding of the term. It would also be difficult, however, to insist that both views are *true*, in any genuine sense of *that* term, since they directly contradict at certain points. Therefore the debate continues, as it undoubtedly will, as long as we continue to see through a glass, dimly.

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